

**Parry, Kyle. *A Theory of Assembly: From Museums to Memes*. Routledge, 2023. 331 pp. ISBN 978-1-5179-1315-1**

*Dávid Papp*

As it is often discussed in cultural theory and philosophy, the link between the “whole” and its constituents is more convoluted and abstract than it seems. Sometimes it cannot even be determined what the smallest unit of a system or structure is, or how the interplay between the elements of the whole affects what we call its meaning. The issue becomes infinitely more complicated as one moves from, for example, the meaning of individual utterances to that of complex structures made of a great many signifiers—such as images—where the question “what does it mean” seems to require a leap of faith across an infinite chasm. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari were thinkers who leapt over many similar conceptual fissures; they often connected unexpected constituents to change the way the whole is viewed. “Assemblage,” “rhizome,” and “deterritorialization” are among their key words used to denote surprising connections between seemingly incompatible elements. As such, they enjoy widespread usage among researchers who wish not just to show what something is made of, but also how revisiting the connection between its elements can change how the whole is perceived. In *A Theory of Assembly: From Museums to Memes*, Kyle Parry sets out to argue in a broadly Deleuzian fashion that there is an organizing force between “plywood and keywords to epoxy, pixels, and people” which makes up art, exhibitions, memes, and even whole communities (47).

An associate professor of history of art and visual culture at the University of California, Santa Cruz, Parry has taught several courses on memes, and encountered the difficulty of establishing a categorical definition for his subject. In his attempt to overcome this difficulty, he has worked out in this ground-breaking and much needed work a theoretical framework that draws heavily on the one outlined in Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*. *A Theory of Assembly* convincingly argues that assembly has become the dominant mode of both making something and sharing its meaning, making it equal to narrative, representation and abstraction. Rather than prescribing the way art should be classified, Parry aims to offer a new perspective that becomes a de-categorization. Starting from museum exhibitions, through internet memes and participatory digital culture, to the generalising effect of media, the five chapters of his book blur the boundaries that separate these seemingly distinct practices and reveal the memetic way in which their roots intertwine. Parry concludes that what seem to be distinct art forms are all instances of selective and configurative practices that work with constituents and positions. His book is, therefore, engaging

material for students who seek entry points to meme studies as well as for experienced researchers looking to broaden their perspective on visual arts.

Perhaps there is no better example featured in the book which highlights the need to understand cultural artefacts as assemblies than Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1540). As Parry describes, the tripartite altarpiece has evaded any coherent interpretation chiefly because it appears to lack a coherent linear narrative. In a way, the overwhelming visual activity depicted on the panels forces the viewer to abandon their sense of scale or proportion; one is coerced into focusing on the connections that the innumerable details establish. "There are couplings; there are gatherings; there are stampedes. Bosch is presenting us with an effervescent catalog of fleshly recombination," writes Parry (103). He argues that assembly becomes the animating principle of the work as it challenges viewers to undertake their own personal interpretation. Also, perhaps even more importantly, Parry demonstrates through analyses like this that the practice of assembly, rather than being the product of the digital realm, has always been present in the arts.

From the above example, it becomes clear that Parry's enterprise is far greater in scope than just an inquiry that traces the movement of images from museums to online spaces. It appears that, strictly speaking, anything can be seen as an assembly. Anticipating the argument that his theory is "just a reinvention of the wheel," Parry dedicates some sections of the book to counter such assertions. While in the *Theory of Assembly* it is indeed suggested that everything is and can be an assembly, which might sound suspiciously similar to claims like "everything is a remix" or "everything is a story," Parry decidedly refuses to take this stance, and says that assembly is but a feature that is ubiquitous but more prominent in some cultural forms than in others. As he puts it in the "Conclusion": "Assemblies are open-ended interpretations of the shapes the world might yet take" (258). Thus, far from a universalizing definition, Parry's theory of assembly becomes a lens or a multitude of lenses that make visible the interconnectedness of cultural products and instances rather than these objects themselves.

The spectrum of the presented cultural instances which take on the feature of assembly, as well as the range of cultural forms, is vast. In the second chapter, Parry begins his analysis with an "art object" titled *Verb List*, which is essentially a thematic list of strategies that artists can employ in their creative processes. In Parry's reading, the work manifests the very attitude that a theory of visual arts needs to adopt in order to abandon the prevailing taxonomies and dominant modes of thinking that predetermine the contexts in which cultural instances are classified as belonging to a certain type of art. This line of thought is followed throughout the whole chapter as Parry's approach is applied to more assembly-based artworks: twenty-two pages later the reader is introduced to a more than impressive "mosaic" made up of ten thousand individual images sourced from Google—each being the result of a search conducted using keywords like: curiosity, knowledge, wisdom, etc.—which come together to depict an interrogation cell at the infamous Guantanamo detention centre. Here, Parry emphasizes the fact that the individually meaningful constituents come to be deterritorialized into a larger whole, where meaning is generated precisely by the relationship of said constituents. As Parry puts it, "What is binding for this

dynamic is the work of breaking down and remaking the constituent elements of something, whether by means of aesthetic (and aestheticized) objects, looping GIFs, or performative action” (122).

Chapter three is the centrepiece of *A Theory of Assembly*. Serving as a separately coherent examination of contemporary meme culture, the chapter also mediates between two others that deal with visual arts action, reaction and questions of media representation during disasters respectively. It traces the steps of Parry’s inquiry into the phenomena that might very well be the most frequently encountered kind of media today: internet memes. As it is immediately revealed, Parry challenges the traditional understanding of memes, refusing to see them only “as funny images with a bit of text on them” or even as “a piece, series, or recognizable use of media, typically humorous, that is easily shared, transformed, or performed via the internet, and that is collectively embraced by specific communities or subcultures” (135, 137). This follows from the consideration that the word “meme” simply no longer functions as just a noun. “To meme” is a verb that not only suggests participation in the online-offline activity of recapitulating certain characteristic features (like specific dance moves, or a well-known figure), but, in Parry’s understanding, presupposes the drive to reconfigure and add something to these elements as well. For this reason, Parry claims, memes are best considered as assemblies, or, more specifically, hyperdistributed media assemblies. This is where a great deal of emphasis falls on the aspect of sharing one’s creation, making it similar to stories being shared through folklore, or public space remade through street art, or the free labelling of data chunks via folksonomy.

Chapter four, “Generative Assembly after Disaster,” which deals with media reaction to natural disasters, may at first seem like a strange inclusion in a book that has so far been concerned with artworks in museum spaces and with memes of the internet—decidedly viewed with their aesthetic and performative properties in mind, not necessarily as discursive units (162). Upon reflection, what becomes most clear in this chapter, although it is constantly present throughout the work, is that Kyle Parry is acutely aware of the ethical implications that his position as theorist entails. It would be far too easy to assume the role of the distant observer “merely documenting” the shifts in latest trends. Therefore, Parry begins by highlighting that the natural disaster Hurricane Katrina was “neither natural nor neutral,” since part of the disaster only unfolded as the media began reporting it, often in a discriminatory manner (180). In a notable instance, as seen on Lisa-Marie Ricca’s contribution to the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank titled “Racism” (180), AFP and AP news agencies released very distinct reports. According to AP, a black survivor was just seen “looting” a grocery store, while in AFP’s report the white survivors who were in a similar situation “found” supplies. According to Parry, such media reports painfully perpetuate the often sexist and racist motifs that underline so-called “edgy” memes as well. Cultural forms seizing on their capacity to counteract and oppose these aforementioned biases, Parry suggests, should be called generative assemblies, since they are not only able, through compilation and configuration, to showcase otherwise suppressed narratives and introduce invisible people, but can also mobilise others to participate in the betterment of the situation.

Chapter five, so to speak, is concerned with concern itself. The tension present in the chapter stems from the possibility of using media assembly either for good or bad. Overall, it is noted that the wider availability of media can help in mitigating violence through visibility and destigmatization. On the other hand, practising power through media always entails the very (un)selection that is inherently present even when deciding which narrative is to be featured on a given platform. The invisible “slow violence” of Rob Nixon is often recalled and re-examined in the section, where according to Parry the question is whether violence, as such, can be conceptualised without residue. Here, Parry stresses the potential inherent in assemblies to foreground cultural forms that reveal information suppressed by dominant modes (thematic counter-mapping) as well as the regularity with which this information is kept on the surface (memetic drip). The emphasis on activism associated with these practices is not accidental either: Parry underscores that assembly has (or always had) its roots in political representation. As such, the mediaspace in which museums, memes, disasters, people, epoxy and plywood come together will always carry an air of artificiality precisely because it is created through action, which in turn always has the potential to become intervention. This idea, due to its simplicity, is less of an all-encompassing, grand conclusion that could be expected from such a work; rather, it follows up on what Parry advocated for, it is a call to action. The conclusion ends with a quote from Judith Butler’s address at a graduation ceremony, emphasizing the need for learning to read well in order to maintain an active and sensible democracy. In an ideal world however, according to Butler, reading well would entail becoming, so to speak, assembly. She said, “. . . we will lose ourselves in what we read, only to return to ourselves, transformed and part of a more expansive world—in short, we become more critical and more capacious in our thinking and our acting” (270).

In conclusion, *A Theory of Assembly: From Museums to Memes* undertakes the prodigious task of establishing a system of several shifting lenses through which many facets of the contemporary mediascape become visible as an interconnected whole. Not only does the work achieve this goal, but it is itself a delightful example of assembly done well—by presenting museums, memes, reaction to disasters, art-making, art sharing and participation in one and the same context, it brings much needed clarity and comprehension to an otherwise overspecialised and fragmented field of knowledge.