

Assemblages (Agencement)

Thinking with Things



What is an Assemblage?

- Key theoretical construct of New Materialist thought
- A relational ontology:
 - Considers how **things** come together & commingle
 - Or should we think about how **matter** / **materials** commingle – what is the smallest component entity?
- Is it distinct from a networks / entanglement?



Problems for the Archaeologist!

- Terminology! Assemblage already has a distinct archaeological definition
- “normative definitions ... [of] artifacts juxtaposed in site-specific configurations within archaeology’ (Witmore 2014, 207)
 - Artefacts from a particular period which typically occur together
 - A collection of materials, e.g. animal bones, from a particular site



Assemblage of crusader pottery

Problems for the Archaeologist!

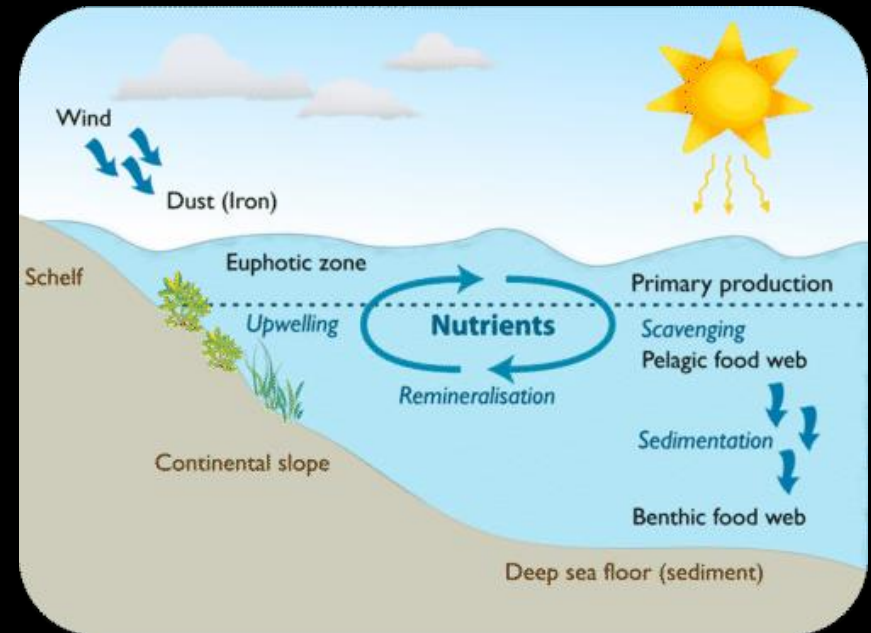
- Think back to **accumulation**:
 - Objects gathered together into groups or set
 - Static; does not recognise emergent properties **& flows of things**
- Layering: artefactual means of creating a second skin
 - This is not static & might recognize matter flows
 - Assemblage theory might be way to explore this?



Tôd treasure

What is an Assemblage?

- The coming together or **ordering** & interactions of a heterogenous & non-hierarchical group of (bounded?) entities
- “a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms which establishes liaisons between them...[its] only unity is that of a co-functioning” (Deleuze & Parnet *Dialogues* II, 69)



Assemblages

- A collection of entities BUT equally, & significantly, **the process of these things coming together**
- “actively links these parts together by **establishing relations between them** (DeLanda 2016, 2)
- Recursive relationship:
 - “the properties of a whole are produced by the ongoing interactions between its parts, while the whole...reacts back on this part” (DeLanda 2016, 83)
- An assemblage is more than the sum of its constituent parts



Becomings

- Assemblages are not static collections or groups of things
- They constantly in flux
 - Or “in a state of becoming” (Harris 2017, 90)
- **Matter flows...**
- Focuses “on the ebb & flow of (im)material interactions & through this to explore relationality in the past” (Steel 2018, 3)



Multiscalarity

- The constituent parts of the assemblage are multiscalar
 - From the micro (e.g. bacteria)
 - To the macro (e.g. the human agent, communities, overarching political systems etc.)
- Assemblages allow us to analyse & integrate materials at different scales:
 - Microscopic environmental data, individual artefacts, archaeological landscapes
- We can consider how these variously interacted with, & were shaped by, the intangible, ephemeral & immaterial, including thoughts, ideas & social structures

Bennett: Assemblages (2006)

- A **collectivity** whose origins are historical & **circumstantial**
- A **living** grouping whose coherence coexists with energies & countercultures that exceed & confound it
- A web (network?) with an uneven topography:
 - Some of the points at which the trajectories of actants cross each other are more heavily trafficked than others
 - Power is not equally distributed across the assemblage.
- Not governed by a central (rational/human) agent power:
- Comprises many types of actants:
 - Humans & nonhumans
 - Animals, plants, minerals
 - Nature, culture, & technology

Agency of Assemblages

- “ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts...living, throbbing confederations” (Bennett 2010, 23)
- Borrows notion from Deleuze & Guattari:
 - Agency situated in a human – non human working group
 - Vitality: tendency of matter to conglomerate, to form **heterogenous groupings**
- A “doing & an effecting by a human-nonhuman assemblage” (Bennett 2010, 28)
- At the same time recognizes that the human agent should not necessarily be recognized as ‘special’ & human agency should not be prioritized

Assemblage or Agencement?

- Problems of translation, terminologies & concepts
- Witmore explicitly equates thing/gathering with assemblage, confusing very different linguistic concepts:
 - German **ding** (a gathering or assembly)
 - French **agencement** (an arrangement or organization)
 - English **assemblage** (a grouping or collectivity)

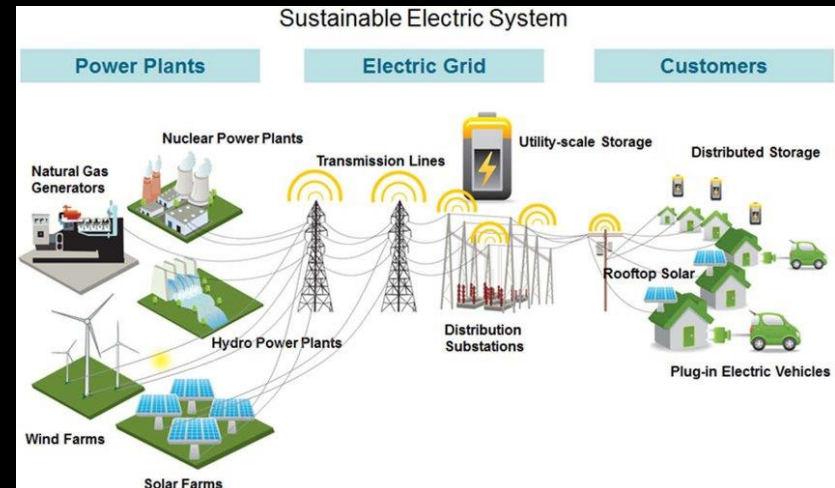


Agency or Agencement?

- “*Agencement* ... is, in fact, the *arrangement* of these *connections* that gives the concepts their sense” (Phillips 2006, 108)
- Emphasises the connection between things
- “very precise correspondence to the notions of *event, becoming & sense*” (Phillips 2006, 109)
- Emphasises the fluidity of Deleuze’s concept rather than the static state potentially implied by assemblage (collection/grouping)

Bennett: Electric Power Grid

- “A material cluster of charged parts that have indeed affiliated, remaining in sufficient proximity & coordination to function as a (flowing) system... the elements of this assemblage... include humans & their constructions, also include some very active & powerful nonhumans: electrons, trees, wind, electromagnetic fields” (2006, 446)



Can a single object be an assemblage?

- How “things are always in the process of becoming something else ... [T]he pot is no longer a fixed object produced as finished article by the imposition of form on to matter by a human agent. Instead it is **a particular moment – an event – in the flow of materials** from clay extraction site, temper source ... the human that helped to bring these things together ... This history continues through fragmentation, deposition, excavation, cataloguing, drawing & analysis. Instead of a bounded object, therefore, it is ... an assemblage” (Harris 2014, 331-2)



Plain ware jug, Arediou

Boat as Assemblage?



White Painted boat
model, Cyprus

Summary

- An approach that has gained traction in the social sciences, most recently in archaeology
- Considers **relationships** between things
 - The ways in which things, come together, co-mingle, interact & co-produce “events”
- A sense of flux; assemblages are not static but are **becomings**
- Remember problems with terminology
- How distinct is this approach from networks?