America and the Art of Assemblage

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MPhil Optional Seminar
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Assemblage is a term used in various disciplines to describe a coalescence of disparate things into a larger entity, vibrant with networked relationships, but resisting the foreclosed identity of a completed whole. This course will consider the literature and culture of the USA as a kind of assemblage, in which the national drive towards unity reflects the country’s relative lack of it—the resistant diversity of its people, ideas, and material environments. It will focus on the ways in which various qualities of assemblage, such as juxtaposition and improvisation, have flourished in American expression in texts dating from the colonial period to the present day.

In the mid-twentieth-century, before ‘assemblage’ became a theory (via translation of Deleuze’s and Guattari’s ‘agencement’ in the 1980s), the term was adopted to describe a kind of sculpture or 3-D collage, inspired by Dada, and increasingly practiced by artists worldwide (e.g. Kurt Schwitters, Robert Rauschenberg, Noah Purifoy, Rosalie Gascoigne, Phyllida Barlow). In this course, ideas from art history will be brought into constructive collision with elements of ‘assemblage theory’ in order to generate new literary critical perspectives. Some of the writers we will discuss experienced twentieth-century assemblage art firsthand, but in other cases the connection is one of perspective. Collage has frequently been used in analogy with writing, but assemblage is equally if not more appropriate in the light of recent literary research, which has emphasised that books are 3-D items, that literary creation involves material processes, and that reading and writing are embodied acts. Reading the manuscript writings of Edward Taylor and Emily Dickinson alongside the sculptural work of Joseph Cornell and Louise Nevelson, for instance, will offer new insights into the relationships between creation and collection, between storage and signification.

The frequent use of readymades in assemblage art offers another point of literary critical comparison, and a potential connection to social theory. Frequently in American history, writers have faced the task of assembling a new identity from a combination of familiar parts: from John Smith’s seventeenth-century accounts—which sought to describe indigenous people as assemblages that his European audience could half-recognize—to the struggle of African American and indigenous writers in the twentieth century to reassemble minority identities by disrupting
stereotypes. In creating *Hamilton! The Musical* in 2016, Lin-Manuel Miranda used principles of assemblage art including juxtaposition, recycling, and embodiment to create a provocative reperformance of the American Revolution onstage, a mashup of racial protest, countercultural music and the readymade myths of the Founding Fathers and the Self-made man. *Hamilton* reflects the historical and sociological impact of assemblage theory in its emphasis on mixedness as catalyzing, but its focus on a historical figure who was a key advocate for federal power in the new nation points to the enduring tension within US culture concerning the balance between unity and pluralism.

From art to poetry to performance, taking in history, theory, and material culture, this course offers an assemblage of genres and critical approaches. Its transhistorical comparisons are designed to stimulate interest in contextual difference, and in the opportunities of anachronism. The course will include a one-day field trip to London, comprising a guided tour of assemblage art at the Tate Modern, and attendance at a performance of *Hamilton!*

Below is an indicative course outline and reading list.

**1) Theories of Assemblage**


Further reading: Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855)

**2) Consumption, Recycling, Waste**


John Ashbery and Joe Brainard, *Vermont Notebook* (1975)

Related: Allen Ginsberg, Frank O’Hara (poems); Simon Rodia, Louise Nevelson, Noah Purifoy (assemblage)

**3) Storage and the materials of memory**

Edward Taylor, Poems and commonplace book

(Daniel Patterson’s 2003 edition of *Preparatory Meditations* is recommended; Donald Stanford’s *Poems of Edward Taylor* will do; commonplace book extracts will be supplied)


Related: Susan Howe, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop (poems); Joseph Cornell, Betye Saar (assemblage).

**4) Hamilton and Hamilton!**


Alexander Hamilton, Federalist Papers 6-9
5) Political Combinations

Related: Robert Hayden (poems); Milton Meltzer, Jacob Holdt (photobooks).

6) Indigenous Parts

John Smith *General History of Virginia* (1624)
Monique Mojica *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* (1991)

Further Critical Reading


Ann Blair, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age* (Yale University Press, 2010)

Rona Cran, *Collage in Twentieth-Century Art, Literature and Culture: Joseph Cornell, William Burroughs, Frank O’Hara, and Bob Dylan* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014)


Rachel Farebrother, *The Collage Aesthetic in the Harlem Renaissance* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009)


Peter Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992)
