America and the Art of Assemblage

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MPhil Optional Seminar
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https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/art-in-context/monogram  
http://www.cannupahanska.com/new-gallery-32

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, Rosalie Gascoigne, Noah Purifoy, Phyllida Barlow, Cannupa Hanska). 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 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, for example, 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 that will include 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
J. Hector St John de Crèvecoeur, ‘Letter III: What is an American?’ from Letters from an American Farmer (1782)

2) Assemblage art, poetry and urban waste
John Ashbery and Joe Brainard, Vermont Notebook (1975)
and assemblages: ‘Househunting’, ‘Christ on a clothesline’, ‘Communal Cot’, ‘No Parking’ (online)
Robert Rauschenberg, Monogram, Noah Purifoy, Desert Art Museum
Related: Allen Ginsberg, Frank O’Hara (poems); Simon Rodia (art)

3) Networked Novels and national identity
Mark Danielewski’s House of Leaves (2000)
Herman Melville, Moby-Dick (1851)
Related: The Great Exhibition of 1851, Charles Olson, Call me Ishmael (1947)

4) Boxes and drawers: preserving small things
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)
Emily Dickinson, Emily Dickinson’s Poems as She Preserved Them, ed. Cristanne Miller (2016) and
Box art of Joseph Cornell, Betye Saar and Louise Nevelson

5) Racial politics, melding and mash-up
Lin-Manuel Miranda, Hamilton! The Musical (performance and libretto)
Alexander Hamilton, Federalist Papers 6-9
Phillis Wheatley, Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral (London, 1773)
Related: William Carlos Williams, Paterson Book 2; Lin-Manuel Miranda, In the Heights, Claudia Rankine, Citizen

6) Assembling and performing indigeneity
John Smith, General History of Virginia (1624), Ralph Hamor, A True Discourse (1615) (extracts)
Monique Mojica, Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots (1991)
Rebecca Belmore, Vigil and The Named and the Unnamed (2002)
http://www.rebeccabelmore.com/video/Vigil.html
Cannupa Hanska Luger Every One (2018)
http://www.cannupahanska.com/every-one/ibxu7i3vobw3ktjce61acho1qb780
Related: Thomas King, Green Grass, Running Water (1993)

Further Critical Reading
Bill Brown, Other Things (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019)
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) (Ch on Cornell)
Rachel Farebrother, The Collage Aesthetic in the Harlem Renaissance (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009) intro and Ch. 1
Kornelia Freitag, (ed), Recovery and Transgression: Memory in American Poetry (2015), Ch. on boxes
Ch. on mixed-media art
Gillian Whiteley, Junk: Art and the Politics of Trash (2010) Ch.2 and Ch.3