

Social Assemblage Emma Cocker

The meaning of singular words – even of individual characters – is often determined in relation to the company that they keep, by the way they interact or socialise with others, according to the terms of the situation in which they find themselves assembled. Words are social creatures in this sense, restlessly moving from one textual gathering to another; endlessly gliding in and out of different conversations, forever facilitating the flow of communication before moving swiftly on. Meaning emerges through an act of assemblage, through the auspicious collision of disparate words into some sort of comprehensible order. Consider the term assemblage. Like the slippery concepts of community or site or even art, there is no single definition for this word, but rather its meaning depends on the perspective from which it is approached or understood, which genealogy of ideas one wishes to follow. Look up any word in a dictionary and you may encounter a range of possible definitions; a sense, even, of how its form and function may have changed or been modified over time. So too, beyond these various authorised and endorsed meanings, pronunciations, etymologies and inflections, there are other ways whereby a word is adopted locally by a particular community of users, where it becomes invested with extra, even unexpected, signification. The meaning of any singular word can therefore never be wholly defined in isolation nor fixed in advance, for meaning is ever contingent, always site-specific in nature.

Similarly perhaps, individual identity can be thought of in such terms, where the way in which a human character operates in the world is determined as much by the context in which they find themselves – by their relationship to an environment and

to others – as by any intrinsic, definable sense of self. Social identity is performed according to the constructed logic and language of a particular set of behavioural rules, codes and conventions. If the authorised and agreed – if often unspoken – grammar or syntax of a social ‘language’ can be thought of in Saussurian terms as the *langue*, then the *parole* might describe the live(d) act – of utterance or of enunciation – whereby such conventions become expressed or practised by the individual.¹ A person might either amplify or dampen certain personal qualities or attributes based upon their proximity to others. Individual personality traits can be brought out or toned down, subtly adjusted or adapted for the ease of a smoother social fit, or else rebelliously left unaffected in a blunt refusal of being made to conform. Lived experience within a hierarchical society involves constant negotiation of the expectations of its many stratified societal layers; of learning to operate according to – by working with, against or else around – the terms of each situation’s coded logic, or of finding new ways to breach or break their rules. FrenchMottershead’s practice explores the *parole* of everyday life, the multiple and localised ways through which the conventions of site-specific situations and relationships are performed or acted out on a daily basis. Their work often questions what constitutes a community or public, by tuning into those delicately honed social practices that demarcate certain kinds of belonging or affiliation; that designate entry into or participation within a specific social grouping or territorialised zone.² Such languages require careful observation, for it is often in the dialect or accent that the capricious logic of social, geographical and cultural placement becomes given away.

Operating like linguists of the social realm, the artists attend to the individual

performances of identity and social ritual within different contexts in order to reveal their grammatical coding, the behavioural etiquette operating therein. However, for FrenchMottershead these various social conventions are not seen as binding or restrictive, but rather become used as raw material through which to create new forms of expression and exchange. Their work pays acute attention to the highly nuanced expectations and behavioural patterns playing out in different environments by different communities, in order to conceive of ways to gently interrupt or disrupt these habitual flows. In this sense, FrenchMottershead’s practice is perhaps more akin to that of the poet, for whom a given language is both a system to study and a territory within which to make creative interventions; an infinitely malleable material for producing unfamiliar proximities and unexpected relations. Or else their work is like that of a playwright, where life itself becomes a script that can be endlessly edited or rewritten. The artists observe selected social situations in order to create tailored performative interventions that self-consciously reveal the presence of habitually unnoticed or unquestioned behavioural expectations and protocol at play. Through these tactical interventions the artists attempt to unsettle or destabilise the situation, wilfully sensitising participants to their daily surroundings just enough to invite them to consider other – new or different – ways of operating within its frame. Evident in a number of projects developed by FrenchMottershead over the last decade, this signature strategy of observation and interruption is further put to use within their extended project, *Shops*.

The origins of *The Shops Project* can be traced back to a work made as part of the ANTI festival in Kuopio, Finland (2005) where the artists worked with *Five Shops*

to invite their customers to participate in the live event of a ritualised group photograph, where the request itself was performed by the shopkeeper as a whisper or surreptitiously stamped on the back of each till receipt. Since then, FrenchMottershead have negotiated a series of international residencies in other cities in Brazil, China, Romania, Slovenia, Turkey and the UK to establish similar collaborations, produce further group photographs. Each instalment or iteration of the project seems to follow a similar pattern: first – the identification of a handful of appropriate shops (often independent, local, a little special); second – close collaboration with each shopkeeper to devise a method of invitation appropriate to their customers and shop; third – the issuing of the invitation itself followed by a period of tentative anticipation; fourth – a live event (the performative production of a collective portrait at the shop); fifth – the ceremonial exhibition of the resulting photograph back at the location of its creation. Individually the photographs record the gathering of a group of persons together in one place, a singular social assemblage united through a common connection or bond, the act of shopping. Yet these communities of consumption are not homogeneous entities, slavishly bound to the highly commodified global marketplace, but instead appear – somewhat paradoxically – to be united in their heterogeneity, by the individual choices they have made. The photographic portraits maintain rather than erode the singularity of each person therein; the images oscillate between a portrayal of similarity and difference, collectivity and individuality, locality and internationality, together and at the same time. Shoppers are revealed in their diversity, where each shop functions as a social hub around which a discrete and self-determining constituency gathers.

The artists focus on very particular facets of shopping: the purchase choices made by individuals and the additional or peripheral activities that take place under the auspices of shopping, the extra and other things that buying facilitates. The work reveals prosaic patterns of convenience and utility, alongside other more complex, fragile, absurd, sentimental, poignant and precarious reasons that foreground the exchange of goods. This 'why' and the 'what else' signal towards the individualised potential of shopping, towards a form of creative consumption. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau proposes the term 'consumer production' to describe the invisible and often unexplored ways by which individuals use 'the products imposed by a dominant economic order'.³ Rather than focusing on the 'proper' or intended use of a consumer product, de Certeau suggests that we should instead attend to what the cultural consumer 'makes' or 'does' while they are perceived to be using it (or perhaps even buying it). He argues that the resourceful ways by which the consumer 'makes do' with what is available or to hand is akin to the practice of bricolage or assemblage, where existing products or languages (those of television, newspapers, the supermarket or city planning) are actively appropriated and then recombined into new arrangements through improvisation or invention – a form of *poiësis*. For de Certeau, consumption can be considered a form of individual enunciation – the *parole* of capitalism's *langue*. FrenchMottershead's practice can be seen to operate in analogous terms: the artists similarly 'use as their material the vocabularies of established languages (and) remain within the framework of prescribed syntaxes' while simultaneously appearing to be 'heterogeneous to the systems they infiltrate and in which they

sketch out the guileful ruses of different interests and desires.'⁴

In contrast to the societal pressure towards ever-increasing speed, efficiency and productivity, the artists reveal certain shops to be spaces for spending and indeed wasting time. A hat boutique or grocer's yard work as community centres as much as sites of commerce, where customers are as likely to shop for conversation as for the latest or freshest goods. A local butcher's shop doubles as safe keeping for a set of keys, or else for errant children while an errand is run. Newspaper kiosks mediate the flow of a community's miscellaneous secrets. Birthdays and anniversaries are duly remembered and reminded; friendships bloom without the need for names. *The Shops Project* functions as a diagramming of connectivity, making visible the relational bonds and unseen networks that determine and give shape to particular configurations of everyday life. Every life plugs into the network of another life; disparate existences separated only by six degrees. For FrenchMottershead, the project is less about mapping the connection between individual shoppers and places of purchase, as an attempt to excavate a sense of the hidden value systems, decision-making processes and social exchanges which underpin the act of shopping itself. *Shops* functions as an antidote to those rather more bleak conceptualisations of shopping, which focus upon the homogenising and alienating experience of contemporary consumerism. Instead, FrenchMottershead present a surprisingly affirming portrait of contemporary shopping, recording and reflecting on the local specificity of each place they visit; how everyday routines observed from city to city demonstrate social similarities while still performing their local difference.

The Shops Project could be compared – or perhaps confused – with other documentary practices and mass observation initiatives; its intimate photographic portraits recording a glimpse of contemporary urban life through the prism of local shops. The project could be considered within a genealogy of image-making that can be traced back to artists such as August Sander whose photographic portraits extensively and unflinchingly captured and categorised various class differences and social hierarchies within German society, in turn revealing the extent to which the population deviated from the narrow gauge of the Aryan template. Or else the project might share the concerns of serial portraiture such as Thomas Struth's photographic exploration of the social dynamics within familial group formations, and of the way in which individuals perform themselves – and their place within the hierarchical order – to camera. When viewed collectively, *The Shops Project* – its serial photographs, audio recordings, text-based testimonies, video interviews and participant-observation – might be approached as an exemplar of visual anthropology; an ever-unfolding documentary archive based on the observation, collection and classification of shoppers in one place after another, city by city. However, if the artists appear to borrow ethnographic methods, the archive of documentation produced by them thwarts any scientific attempt at analysis or comparison, for it refuses to yield meaningful conclusions, instead remaining highly partial. The work is largely fragmentary and incomplete, the documentation anecdotal and often choreographed or constructed at the artists' request. These critical inconsistencies should not be seen as methodological glitches in the process, however, but rather function as deliberate clues that suggest

another logic at work. FrenchMottershead are not anthropologists recording, documenting and analyzing those social assemblages produced through the act of shopping as such, but rather are artists intervening into an existing situation in order to actively perform an act of social assemblage, creating newly formed allegiances and experiences of collectivity through the introduction of a series of performed interventions and social rituals.

Through their interventions into or interruptions of the patterns of everyday behaviour, FrenchMottershead reveal the often unseen or unnoticed mechanisms and networks that underpin how a community functions, at the same time as disrupting them just enough for them to be reassembled differently or considered afresh. Their work thus hovers at the interstice of what is real and what is performed or staged. If community describes a specific form of classification or taxonomy through which to group, order – even control – individuals within a single whole, then FrenchMottershead play with these conventions by creating optional, arbitrary or even playfully absurd filters through which to establish connections or bonds between people. A tightly woven community in Istanbul is unravelled and re woven over and over into different propositional configurations based on individual relationships – whether public, private, prosaic or strange – to Enver, the local butcher. FrenchMottershead's proposed groupings suggest potential affiliation between buyers of his beef sausages; people who arrive at his shop having forgotten what they came for; those with whom he passes the time of day; his bad debtors; those he knows are wealthier than they plead or who have a chequered past. Alternatively, in São Paulo on the 14th February, a group of individuals break from the more accepted lovers'

rituals of Valentine's Day to create a moment of temporary union outside the bakery. Every 15 minutes a new collective gathers as promised and then dissolves; the shop's architecture and staff remaining the only constants within an ever-changeable photographic tableaux. Elsewhere, other affinities emerge through a shared commitment to knowing the provenance of meat; searching for the rarest vinyl; enduring the most intimate piercing; sporting only the very latest fashions; flouting the smoking ban; spoiling the dog; fetching the bread, getting high.

FrenchMottershead's typologies of community evoke the manner of classification found within a particular passage of Jorge Luis Borges' writing (analyzed by Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things*) which refers to 'a certain Chinese Encyclopedia' in which it is written that 'animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies'.⁵ While Foucault argues that such categories attempt to irrevocably and absurdly separate one thing from another, FrenchMottershead's classificatory system is inherently mutable or porous, where it is possible for a single individual to move between or indeed inhabit more than one of its designated groupings. Consider the innumerable communities of consumption that an individual may – wittingly/willingly or not – participate in on a daily basis. *Shops* is thus less about establishing a system of classification or comparison then, as reflecting on the highly artificial and often arbitrary manner in which communities of belonging become defined; suggesting the inherent slipperi-

ness – indeed absurdity – of certain social categories, their inability to capture or contain the complexity of a social being. Within FrenchMottershead's work, systems of classification are no longer used to hold things in place, but rather become worked until malleable, bent back or folded to reveal other possibilities therein.

What unites the disparate individuals encountered within *The Shops Project* is that they have all voluntarily opted to participate in their chosen community. Unlike those rather more fixed and enforced societal categories of community based on already defined geographical, social or economic criteria, the project's social groupings are constituted through a process of self-selection, on an individual's decision to have a piercing or buy a hat. Moreover, beyond the act of purchasing goods, the individuals have further elected to participate in a social ritual orchestrated by the artists. As such, the photographs do not simply document the customers of a selected shop on a given day, but are group portraits of those individuals who curiously responded to an invitation. The use of invitations or instructions is a device often used by FrenchMottershead for activating public participation within their work, for gently provoking or prompting unexpected forms of social behaviour.⁶ With its etymological origins in the French terms *etiquette* (prescribed behaviour) and *étiquette* (a label or ticket), derivations of the term have also been used to describe small cards written or printed with instructions, which offered guidance on how to behave properly at court.⁷ Inverting this logic, FrenchMottershead's printed or spoken instructions work against the expectations of social etiquette, granting the individual recipient permission to behave against the grain, contrary to habit or routine. Within *The Shops Project* it was the shopkeepers who issued the invitation,

asking their customers to participate in the making of a ritualised group portrait. The portraits thus make visible a particular form of social bond – between the shop and its community – while also attesting to the honouring of a contractual bond or promise, a commitment to participate made between strangers.

Individuals are not photographed while shopping, but return instead to participate in the ceremonial inauguration of a new community produced through the lens of the camera. The gesture of returning to the shop under different pretences divests the act of shopping of its habitual function. Here, the typical telos or goal of the shopping experience – the expectation of an exchange of goods for money – is wilfully removed or distracted. FrenchMottershead thus empties the practice of 'going to the shops' of one cultural meaning and invests it with another. They appropriate the language of shopping, but inhabit or reanimate it in a way that proposes elasticity or porosity therein, playfully transforming and reinventing its routines and rules of engagement. Collectively returning to the site of a previous relational or social exchange (between shopper and shopkeeper), the gathering of individuals perform a strange reunion; the meeting of a community which may never have before acknowledged its own constitution, like the awkward assembly of wedding guests for whom the only common connection is the bride or groom. Separated from the habitual routines of everyday life, these individuals are like initiates at the threshold of a nascent communion; each photograph somehow marking the liminal site of a rite of passage, the swearing in of a newly elected. During the intervals of photographic stillness it becomes possible to witness a new social configuration existing alongside, or even as an alternative to, the more

habitual or typical social groups operating within contemporary culture.

Like that of de Certeau's creative consumer, FrenchMottershead's practice is itself an act of bricolage. The artists appropriate the vocabulary and syntax of various social situations found or encountered, recombining them through invention and improvisation to produce new kinds of social assemblage. The time-bound relationships, connections and intensities that bind together diverse individuals within the space-time of each performative intervention produce the experience of a temporary 'invented community'. Miwon Kwon uses this term to describe those specific social configurations that are 'newly constituted and rendered operational through the coordination of the art work itself,'⁸ formed 'around a set of collective activities and/or communal events as defined by the artist.'⁹ Such communities, she asserts, are both projective and provisional, always 'performing its own coming together and coming apart as a necessarily incomplete modeling or working-out of a collective social process. Here, a coherent representation of the group's identity is always out of grasp.'¹⁰ The construction or curation of a temporary 'invented community' – through the use of a filter or invitation issued by an artist – is evident also within other contemporary art practices that similarly establish unusual – or perhaps even arbitrary – categories of belonging or participation. Witness the reunion of uncredited extras from a 1970s horror movie or those children 'murdered' in Pasolini's film *Salo*, re-assembled almost 30 years after the event to discuss their recollections of the film; or the quest for the class of '69 which had once shared an idea that they had sworn to keep secret. A gathering of underage clubbers pose to camera on a night out, bound both by dress

code and their awkward inhabitation of the cusp of a budding sexuality. Unlikely affiliation connects people willing to share their bed with a stranger, participate in a 24-hour dance marathon, or enter a karaoke competition that only plays songs by The Smiths. Elsewhere, a bond is established between those who consider themselves to have been a strange child or even to look like God; or between Turkish Berliners sporting the blue and white insignia of the Yankees' baseball cap.¹¹

Rather than a form of socially engaged practice or collaboration that involves the participation – and often proposed empowerment – of an already defined or constituted community, such practices instead actively produce propositional and experimental social assemblages, based on criteria that are playfully optional and often temporary, rather like the rules of a game. Here perhaps, the logic of 'new genre public art' collides and reconnects with the traditions of artistic assemblage or even of post-production, the borrowing and reassembly of existing cultural and social formations into new compositions or refrains.¹² In 1961, William Seitz identified assemblage as a specific form of art practice; the juxtaposition and reassembly of arbitrary and everyday 'preformed natural or manufactured materials, objects, or fragments not intended as art materials' into fragile and often haphazard arrangements.¹³ For Seitz, the precarious or contingent creations produced through acts of assemblage often appeared underpinned by 'the need of certain artists to defy and obliterate accepted categories'; their willed attempt to rupture or challenge existing definitions and systems of classification.¹⁴ The social assemblages produced by FrenchMottershead as part of *The Shops Project* – and within their wider practice – similarly evade or blur the terms of existing systems of classification

or capture. So too, their practice itself is inherently slippery and contingent. Like the social identities explored within their various projects, FrenchMottershead create work that refuses to be fixed or defined by any singular criteria, but rather locates itself in the interstices where one form of categorisation slips into the terms of another. Theirs is a practice of wilfully rupturing or disrupting the logic of the prevailing order and of exploring the resulting gaps.

1. See Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, eds. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, in collaboration with Albert Riedlinger, trans. by Wade Baskin, McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1966

2. See FrenchMottershead's *Friday Social Evening* (2001) or *My Word is My Bond* (2002)

3. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendell, University of California Press, City, 1984, p.xiii

4. De Certeau, 1984, p.34

5. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things – An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Vintage Books, New York, 1973, p.xv

6. See FrenchMottershead's *Club Class* (2006–ongoing) or *The People Series* (2003–ongoing)

7. This definition of etiquette is by historian Douglas Harper, in the online Etymology Dictionary. See www.dictionary.reference.com/browse/etiquette (accessed: 6 January, 2010)

8 & 9. Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art & Locational Identity*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA and London, 2004, p.126

10. Kwon, 2004, p.154

11. In a statement that could as easily be applied to FrenchMottershead's practice, Adam Chodzko suggests that 'If you look at anything too hard it begins to disintegrate, dissolving to the point where everything can be linked yet nothing is stable'. Examples of 'invented community' within contemporary art might include: Adam Chodzko's *From Beyond* (1996), *Reunion: Salo* (1998), *Recall: Strange Child* (1997), *The International God Look-Alike Contest* (1995–96); Mario Garcia Torres' *What Happens in Halifax Stays in Halifax* (in 36 Slides) (2004–2006); Rineke Dijkstra's *The Buzzclub, Liverpool* (1996); Roderick Buchanan's *Yankees* (1997), Sophie Calle's *The Sleepers* (1980); Phil Collins' *They Shoot Horses* (2004) and *The World Won't Listen* (2005)

12. Félix Guattari describes how the isolation and separation of a 'partial object' or 'fragment of content' from its habitual context, grants it a certain autonomy, which in turn might become the basis of a new 'existential refrain'. See Guattari, 'Subjectivities: for Better and for Worse', *The Guattari Reader*, ed. G. Genosko, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1996, pp.193–203. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have extensively interrogated the idea of 'social assemblage' in philosophical

terms. For example, see Deleuze and Guattari, 'What Is an Assemblage?', in *Kafka Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan, University of Minnesota Press, London and Minneapolis, 1986, pp.81–88. For post-production see Nicholas Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, Lukas and Sternberg, City, 2002

13. William Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1961, p.6

14. Seitz, 1961, p.92

About the Author

Emma Cocker is a writer and a Senior Lecturer in Fine Art at Nottingham Trent University. Recent essays include 'Not Yet There: Endless Searches and Irresolvable Quests', in *Telling Stories: Theories and Criticism/Cinematic Essay/Objects and Narrative*, Cambridge Scholars Press, Cambridge, 2009; 'Over and Over Again and Again' in *Classical Myth/Contemporary Art*, Ashgate, London, 2010; and 'Performing Stillness: Communities in Waiting', in *Stillness in a Mobile World*, Routledge, London, 2011. She is currently working on the research project, 'Performing Communities', and a forthcoming book entitled *Desiring to be Led Astray: The Art of Wandering*. For further information see www.not-yet-there.blogspot.com