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, restless 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, significance. The meaning of any singular word can therefore never be wholly defined in isolation nor fixed in advance, for meaning is ever contingent, 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.

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 recom-bined into new arrangements through improvisation or invention—a form of poéisis. 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 focus upon the homogenisation and alienating experience of contemporary consumerism. Instead, FrenchMottershead present a surprising-ly 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.

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 surprising-ly 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 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 unfinchingly 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 choro-graphed 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 unrav-elled and reworked 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 Paolo on the 14th February, a group of individuals break from the more accepted lovers’
routines 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 tableau. Elsewhere, other affinities emerge through a shared commitment to knowing the provenance of meat; searching for the rarest vinyl; enduring the most intimate piercing; flouting the smoking ban; spoiling the sport of only the very latest fashions; of meat; searching for the rarest vinyl; of self-selection, on an individual’s basis. 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 French-Mottershead for activating public participation within their work, for gently provoking or prompting unexpected forms of social behaviour. With its etymological origins in the French terms etiquette (prescribed behaviour) and éstiquette (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. Inverting this logic, French-Mottershead’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 testifying 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 willfully removed or distracted. French-Mottershead thus empty the practice of ‘going to the shops’ of one cultural meaning and invest 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, French-Mottershead’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’, formed around a set of collective activities and/or communal events as defined by the artist. 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. 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. Unlike 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.10

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.11 In 1961, William Seitz identified assemblage as a specific form of art practice; the juxtaposition and reassembly of arbitrary and everyday ‘preformed objects, or fragments not intended as art materials’ into fragile and often haphazard arrangements.12 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.13 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.

2. See FrenchMottershead’s Friday Social Evening (2001) or My Word is My Bond (2002)
4. De Certeau, 1984, p.34
About the Author