

Seminar 6

The Art and Form of Assembly (Vagias Karavas and Steven Howe)

Friday 9 June, 9.30-12.30



This seminar proposes a short interdisciplinary dive into questions around concepts of ‘assembly’, which we will explore here in two discrete yet relatable directions. First, we will focus on the ‘art’ of assembly and, particularly, on a current practice that links art, activism, politics and performance – for which the Dutch artist Jonas Staal has coined the term “assemblism”. As a strategy of political-aesthetic intervention, assemblist practices resist the alternativeless quality of our contemporary (non-)imaginaries by producing new symbolic forms, institutions and solidarities that extend, and work upon, collective imaginaries of the possible, and which contain “the forward surge of an achievement that can be anticipated.” (Ernst Bloch)

Various concepts have been suggested to shed light on these interventions: fabulation, speculation, prefiguration, pre-enactment. Thinking with these and other categories, we will consider the radical potential of the artistic assembly as a way and space of imagining otherwise. How do these initiatives evoke alternative possibilities? What forms do they assume and what kinds of presence do they produce? Do they create something entirely new? Or do they accommodate to what is and draw out emerging and *not-yet* possibilities? What potential do they hold for reclaiming futurity and facilitating a renewal of utopian hope? To what extent might they help revitalise critique as a ‘possibility-disclosing’ practice?

In the second part of the seminar, we will then turn to look at the (legal) form of assembly as an instrument of empowerment. Using the concrete example of the fragmentation of the biomedical body and its subsequent commercialization, as well as Latour's concept of a parliament of things, we will ask how the biomedical body can be theorized differently and who can gain control over it. We will suggest that in the face of a proliferating rights discourse that strives to recognize ever-new bodily rights, the (legal) form of assembly might function as an alternative form of empowerment beyond the shortcomings and pitfalls of the rights paradigm.

Readings

- Florian Malzacher, ‘Theatre as Assembly: Spheres of Radical Imagination and Pragmatic Utopias’, in Ana Vujanovic et al. (eds.). *A Live Gathering: Performance and Politics in Contemporary Europe* (Berlin: b_books, 2019), pp. 178-199
- Jonas Staal, ‘Assemblism’, *e-flux* 80 (March 2017)
- Wendy Brown, ‘Suffering the Paradoxes of Rights’ in Wendy Brown and Janet Haley (eds.), *Left Legalism/Left Critique* (Durham NC & London: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 420-434.
- Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr, ‘Towards a New Class of Being: The Extended Body’, available at: <https://raco.cat/index.php/Artnodes/article/view/53105/479851>
- Vagias Karavas, ‘Biomedical Collective Labour: Politics, Sovereign Subjects and Empowerment in Biobank Research’, in Marie-Andrée Jacob and Anna Kirkland (eds.) *Research Handbook on Socio-Legal Studies of Medicine and Health* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2020), pp. 365-385
- Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Boston MA: Harvard University Press, 1993)