Reactor Assemblages

Co-written with Jonathan Waring and presented at Virtual Futures 2.0 conference, Warwick University. 19 June 2011.

Stuart:

Good afternoon, for our presentation, Reactor Assemblages, I will be presenting live as a current 'guest' member of Reactor, and Jonathan will be presenting via video as an 'ex' or virtual member of the group.

Assemblage theory, Manuel DeLanda's theory of the social, is a response to the age old theory of resemblances, in which the social is imagined as a body with classes, groups, institutions, or other structures as its organs (DeLanda 2006: 8). Developed from Deleuze and Guattari, its purpose is to provide the 'ontological basis' for the work of the social sciences. The theory seeks to address the relationship between parts and whole in a way that evades hierarchy and identity. In most social theory the relationships are based on 'a strict reciprocal determination between parts' where they are defined by their position in the whole (DeLanda 2006: 9). These 'relations of interiority' mean that if a part is detached from the whole, it cannot survive intact because those relations define it. In assemblage theory, the whole is instead characterized by 'relations of exteriority' meaning that an element can be taken out of one assemblage and inserted into another, where it can perform a different function. The theory relies on the idea that components can actualize different capacities in different situations or assemblages (DeLanda 2006: 10-11), for instance, my own functions in the art groups AAS, the Zero Point Group, or Reactor are very different, even though I have a limited number of capacities that I can actualize. The different components of an assemblage interact but maintain their own 'self-subsistence' and this heterogeneity of parts is central to assemblage theory (DeLanda 2006: 11).

Anti-Oedipus (Deleuze and Guattari 1984) opens with the example of the mother's breast as a machine for feeding (and bonding) and describes the way it is coupled with the baby's mouth, which is a feeding-machine, a breathing-machine, and a language-machine (Deleuze and Guattari 1984). This coupling together of machines is developed in *A Thousand Plateaus* into the concept of 'machinic assemblages' (Deleuze and Guattari

1988: 7). The use of the word ‘assemblage’ in translation belies the fact that it is translated from the French *agencement*, which has several meanings: arrangement, layout, or fitting (as in fitting two parts together), all of which have the implication of being connected ‘in a particular way’. When concepts, bodies, or other individuations, get put together in a specific fashion they derive part of their sense from each other in relation and produce something new. It is in this sense that assemblages are described as ‘machinic’: they are productive.

This means that it is no longer sufficient to discuss art collectives as unities with a particular identity: Reactor is not just one thing. The same is true for audiences, which are composed of people who have come to the work at a particular point in time. This is particularly important for groups like Reactor whose work is activated by audiences participating in the work. We should discuss how the Reactor-assemblage makes use of the audience-assemblage in the work and how, as primary authors, they take responsibility for influencing the relations of the group-audience machine and what it produces.

Jonathan:
It is important to be clear that Reactor do not aspire to an ideal of equal collaboration with audience-participants; the participants are co-producers of the work, but they are not co-authors. Reactor’s practice acknowledges that social relationships are unequal and in tension. On the occasions that Reactor do offer up the vision of equal collaboration, it is principally a conceptual-aesthetic device for the purposes of the project, rather than an ambition. Audience-participants activate the work, they influence its dynamic development and the possibilities that can be actualized. The audience-assemblages are components of the work, characterized—as you say—by ‘relations of exteriority’. Audience members have lives and potentials before and beyond the work, whereas the work itself does not exist without them.

Without the audience, the work is nothing more that a dead system of artefacts, texts, rules, descriptions and demarcations of space. But this is not theatre; the form of the conventional play has a consistency as ‘a work’ before it has ever been performed. Yes, then it too lacks ‘life’, but it has a specific existence as an artefact, even without an

audience—without ever being performed. A play can be activated in the mind of the reader, it does not need to be physically embodied on a stage.

It is not possible for Reactor's work to exist without activation by an audience. A rehearsal sufficient to truly activate the work requires an audience of similar numbers, encountering the work in a similar context, and with similar knowledge to that of the eventual 'real' audience. This rehearsal audience crosses a threshold and becomes indistinguishable from the real audience. In this way the work can be considered an emergent property of the three classes of assemblages involved. The Reactor-assemblage and the audience-assemblage set in motion (and are set in motion by) a third assemblage, comprised of the pre-written framework of 'artefacts, texts, rules, descriptions and demarcations of space'.

Stuart:

I agree with you that Reactor do not *collaborate* with the audience, or *co-author* the work, in the conventional sense. However, if we are considering Reactor and its audience to be assemblages and, as you say, they activate the work together, then we may need to establish other terms for these interactions.

You use the example of theatre to discuss two different functions that an audience can perform in relation to the work being enacted and implicit in this distinction is a difference in the way the audience is constructed. There is obviously a difference in the physical position of the audience in a Reactor work and a traditional theatre setting, but this is not necessarily the case with promenade theatre where audience and actors occupy the same space. The main difference is in the relative presence or absence of a process of 'feedback' between audience and actors or artists. For theatre, feedback from the audience is *en mass*, in the form of applause, laughter, or gasps of surprise and the performance treats the audience as a homogenous mass, denying its multiple nature. In contrast, Reactor works rely on heterogeneous feedback from an audience that is multiple and which can influence the foregrounding of different elements of the project at different times.

This brings to mind Roland Barthes' suggestion, in *S/Z*, that texts are either 'readerly' or 'writerly'. Whereas the readerly text is simply a product to be consumed, our only choice being to accept or reject it, the writerly text is a 'productive' model. An 'ideal' writerly text is

like a network or assemblage of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; 'it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one'. (Barthes 1990: 4-5) Texts are not usually or often one or the other but readerly and writerly are tendencies that texts have and it seems to me that Reactor projects tend towards being writerly in this sense.

Even where a play has writerly tendencies, so that directors can activate different meanings in each performance, the assemblage of the theatre is constructed in such a way that the ability of individual audience members to activate their own capacities is constrained; they cannot get up on stage and influence the action so that characters interact other than laid out in the text. The Reactor assemblage is constructed in a different manner; rather than treat the audience as a unity, the audience is considered as a heterogeneous assemblage that is coupled to the Reactor assemblage. Language becomes problematic here, because the terms Reactor and audience both imply unities that are then disavowed.

Jonathan:
In conventional theatre—as you point out—it is usual that audience members be confined to one very specific role: that of *the audience*. The audience is usually understood as a 'molar' entity—to use Deleuze and Guattari's terminology—and, broadly speaking, it completes a generalized feedback circuit. The dual function of this feedback is, on one hand: to help establish the considered success of the piece performed and, on the other: to bear witness to the performance *per se*—to establish its status as a valid performative occurrence.

In contrast to a molar treatment of the audience, in Reactor's work we are dealing with interactions at a 'molecular' level. Not only is there a molecular audience, but also a molecular Reactor, and these molecular agents are interacting with each other, not only between classes, but also within them (audience-to-audience interactions and Reactor-to-Reactor interactions). Unlike these, the third class of assemblage perhaps cannot be considered to be agents (or at least not active agents). The framework-assemblage has been prewritten, it cannot make conscious responsive choices, and whilst Reactor and the

audience alike can manipulate it, its ‘stratified’ nature both constrains and enables potentials that can be actualized.

This framework-assemblage is comprised of the physical space of the work (enclosed interiors, open spaces, built hierarchical structures, barriers, dwellings); the visual structure (costumes, props, banners, signs); the ideological space (backstories, founding myths, appropriate social and symbolic behaviours); and the systematic structure (rules, logistics and predetermined roles). Predetermined roles, particularly job-based roles—those geared around maintaining certain predesigned interlinking systems—serve a key function, structuring the experiences and possibilities for both the audience-assemblage and the Reactor-assemblage. For the system to function these roles must be adopted. However, roles can also be subverted or, conversely, they can be overidentified with and developed further.

Stuart:

In *Asylums*, Erving Goffman discusses the ‘total institution’ and its functioning, which is obviously relevant to Reactor’s practice, consisting as it does of ‘microcosmic worlds’ that are self-contained institutions. Goffman writes that patients in mental hospitals *learn* how to take on the role of mental patient (Goffman 1968: 136-155). Roles are what Goffman refers to as the basic unit of socialisation, which are complex assemblages of behaviours that present a particular ‘front’. According to Goffman, we expect a ‘confirming consistency’ and coherence between setting, appearance, and manner (Goffman 1971: 35); being served at the newsagent by someone dressed in surgical scrubs would be disorientating. A significant characteristic of social front is its generality, for instance, the use of a white coat to convey a front of scientific knowledge that can be played by a doctor or a salesman demonstrating a rug cleaner. There must be a set of ‘starting’ positions in any interaction, whether these are formally established in the project or simply habits of convention. Reactor takes advantage of these habits of ‘front’ to quickly lead the participant in the project’s world.

Roles are like virtual selves that bring with them a whole set of behaviours and actions. When someone takes on the role of participant or performer they usually find that a particular front is already established for them (Goffman 1971: 37). The adjustments

participant and artist alike make to their separate roles are referred to by Goffman as ‘primary adjustments’, but in addition to these, he adds ‘secondary adjustments’. Secondary adjustments are ‘any habitual arrangement by which a member of an organization employs unauthorized means, or obtains unauthorized ends’ (Goffman 1968: 172): ways in which they do not fit into the agreed roles; what they ‘get away with’.

In terms of Reactor projects, primary adjustments are moves participants make in order to adjust themselves to the role of participant in a particular project. These adjustments are based on cues provided by the artists involved, any institutional structures the project takes place within, and also any other participants. ‘Contained’ secondary adjustments would be those that the participant makes within the parameters of the project where the participant tries to work the system for self gain. These adjustments may be ‘permitted’ by the artist because they do not threaten the project, but rather serve to keep the participant engaged; like a release valve.

Returning to the notion of Reactor projects being assemblages in which a Reactor-assemblage and an audience-assemblage meet, it should be clear from reading Goffman that, even if individual roles are defined, individual participants will not ‘stay put’. If a participant makes secondary adjustments, the rest of the assemblage also adjusts itself to the participant, although the effect on the project may be barely noticeable. However, when the structure of, for example, *Total GHAOS* is affected by unruly participants, who aren’t even really themselves, coming in and scrambling things, the effects on the assemblage are unpredictable. ‘Disruptive’ secondary adjustments are those designed to facilitate the participant leaving the project entirely or affecting radical change in the network. Disruptive adjustments are rare in art projects because participants have usually chosen to be involved.

Jonathan:

In *Total GHAOS* most secondary adjustments appeared beneficial to the work. Where behaviour caused problems for the system, it was not when participants tried to gain advantage, but rather—as you suggest—through a deranged enthusiasm that risked overriding the system’s practical functioning (accordingly, on the second day of *Total*

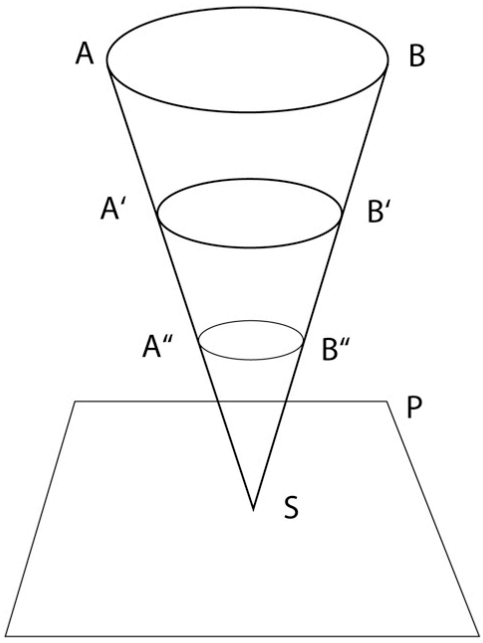
GHAOS the opening periods of the vodka bars—where earned credits could be spent—were greatly reduced).

Refusal to make the basic primary adjustments required for participation in the work itself—situations where a participant simply refused to take part—led quickly to that individual's quiet departure. By contrast, all conscious rebellions or disruptions occurring within the terms of the microcosm served to increase the richness of possibilities actualized. For example, the most severely REXist behaviour (a term referring to a mythical hate figure within the work—analogous to the Goldstein character from Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) in fact opened up a 'backdoor'—via the disguise of a mock execution—to a place on the Supreme Council.

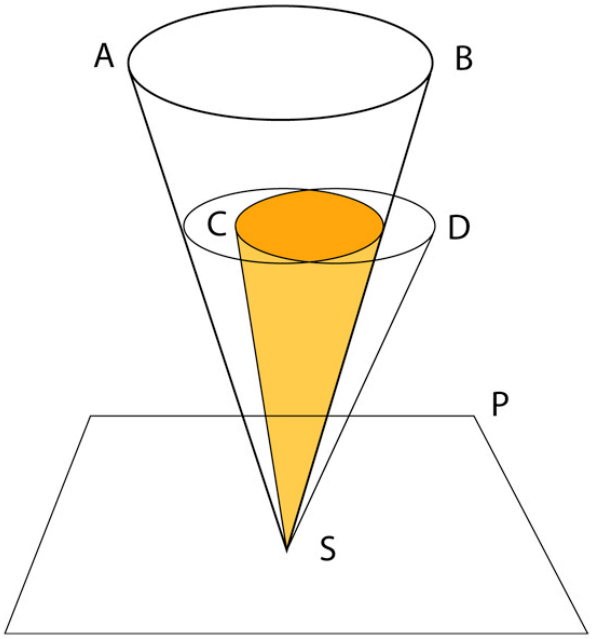
So, certain behaviours and potentials had already been anticipated and prepared for when the members of Reactor were devising the framework-assemblage. However, these possibilities remained virtual unless they were actualized through the interactions of the three assemblages. For example, the exact level of REXist behaviour required to access the backdoor was only achieved twice over the three days of the event. Similarly, much of the backstory—whilst still acting as an invisible scaffold and helping in the work's development—remained virtual and was never directly experienced by participants.

Stuart:

This discussion of roles as virtual selves and the virtual of the work that may remain unexplored or unactualized in the work's performance makes me want to introduce Bergson's cone diagram. The diagram can be found in *Matter and Memory* (Bergson 2004: 211) and is used in discussing memory. In the original diagram point S represents my present, in the form of 'sensori-motor mechanisms', on the plane P, my actual representation of the universe. At the base of the cone, the plane AB represents my total memory. The planes A'B' and A"B" represent the



multitude of positions I can take up in my life that lie somewhere between dwelling purely in the moment (point S) and being overwhelmed by the totality of my being to date. For the discussion we have been having about the virtual in Reactor's work I would like to introduce a second diagram based on Bergson's cone.



In this diagram the plane P still represents the actual, present universe and point S represents any actualized body or event, let us say it is *Total GHAOS*. The plane AB represents the total virtual of the work: backstories, virtual selves in the form of roles, protocols, project pre-planning, the history of Reactor projects, and so on. I have drawn the second cone, with its base CD representing a single participant's total conception of the work. The second cone is off-set from the work to suggest that there may be assumptions or readings that are never actualized and which do not fit within the work. However, it may be that they do, in fact, still constitute part of the virtual of the work, and if acted upon by the participant these aspects will affect the assemblage of the work as it is actualized on the plane. In short then, the Reactor-assemblage develops a framework-assemblage and each of these has its own virtual that steers its actualisation on the plane in the form of an event at point S. The work is then counter-actualized in the virtual of the participant-assemblage, which then re-actualizes the project at point S in a modified form in a cyclical, imminent, creative process.

References

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