

Hauke
Ohls

University
Duisburg-Essen

THE ARTWORK AS ASSEMBLAGE. NEW MATERIALIST PERSPECTIVES ON AESTHETICS.

“Assemblages are not defined by their components; they are defined, rather, by what they produce, and what they produce, ultimately, are complex forms and objects that populate contemporary society.”¹

“We live in the Assemblage Era.”²

The assemblage as practice and theory is omnipresent. However, problems arise when we try to perform methodological thinking based

¹ Ian Buchanan (2021). *Assemblage Theory and Method*. London: Bloomsbury, 47.

² Bill Brown (2020). “Re-Assemblage (Theory, Practice, Mode)”. *Critical Inquiry* (46), 288.

on the assemblage and to use it as an analytical tool. Ian Buchanan's assertion in the quote above is central to this essay, because a pure description of the material components from which a particular assemblage is composed is not useful to a holistic understanding of what an assemblage can be. Of course, analysing, for example, an artwork using assemblage theory involves a far-reaching extension to include its material components and matter in general. But, if the specific agency of the parts is also to be factored in, it becomes equally important to reflect on how to describe that agency, and more to the point, what the (possible) outcome of doing so is.

For this purpose, a contemporary artwork will be viewed as an assemblage from a new materialist perspective and to what extent this perspective is unique will be explored. The artwork is Xinhao Cheng's *The Naming of a River* (2014 to 2018) both a multimedia installation and a photo book (Fig.1). The artist does not describe his work either with the art historical term "assemblage" nor with the philosophical theory, but there are potential benefits to doing so. Therefore, an *assembled-assemblage-theory* will be used in order to gain new theoretical insights about what an artwork can be. It is important to specify that the question is not primarily what the artwork can contribute to the philosophical understanding of an assemblage, if any at all, but the other way around. What added benefit is brought to the interpretation of artworks in general and this work specifically by analysing it as an assemblage? The arts' and art history's recent interest in aspects of new materialism opens a wide range of perspectives that can be taken into consideration. This essay focuses on assembling a theory from several approaches, all of which, implicit or explicit, refer to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's assemblage theory.



[Fig. 1]. Xinhao Cheng, *The Naming of a River*, 2014–2018, dimensions variable. Exhibition view “Critical Zones. Horizonte einer neuen Erdpolitik” at ZKM | Zentrum für Kunst und Medien Karlsruhe, 2020–2022. © Xinhao Cheng, © ZKM | Karlsruhe, Photo: Tobias Wootton.

Deleuze and Guattari describe their concept of the assemblage in *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* published in English in 1987 (original: *Mille Plateaux. Capitalisme et Schizophrénie* published in French in 1980). One widespread misunderstanding arises from the fact that the two authors did not use the French word “assemblage”, which could be translated as “assembly”, but rather “agencement”, which is more like “arrangement”, but which was translated as “assemblage” for the first English version of the book. This must be borne in mind when the word “assemblage” is used in the following, because the focus is not on a general assembly of things, but rather on a well-placed

configuration, or an arrangement of heterogeneous parts. They are brought together, and through this (temporal) unity they provide a better understanding of certain processes, or alternatively the purpose of these processes is to achieve that unity. Confusingly, in the German translation *Tausend Plateaus. Kapitalismus und Schizophrenie* published in 1992, the assemblage is called the “*Gefüge*”, even though Deleuze and Guattari referred to the German word “*Komplex*” (complex) and to Sigmund Freud’s description of it when constructing their assemblage/agencement theory.³ Despite these diverging translations, the expression “assemblage” will be used here in the following as well, since it is widely known and associated with Deleuze und Guattari.

The two authors describe the assemblage as a result of a flat ontology, without any centre or hierarchy, but, and this is crucial, it is something that needs to be fabricated.⁴ A subject who has the power to assemble the (passive) material parts cannot achieve this fabrication alone, it is in fact an interactive production. Furthermore, the process is not additional in nature but based on an ongoing subtraction – all the available dimensions are brought together first, before being dissected to reveal the heterogeneous manifolds.⁵ This leads to the “smallest real entity” which is in and of itself an assemblage, because it is the only thing capable of making a new proposition.⁶ It is a paradoxical position. On the one hand, the processual outcome is described as both an assemblage and as a starting point. On the other hand, because of its interchanging context, within which nothing is completely isolated, the assemblage can

³ Buchanan, *Assemblage Theory and Method*, 19-21.

⁴Deleuze, Gilles; Guattari, Félix (1992). *Tausend Plateaus. Kapitalismus und Schizophrenie*. Berlin: Merve, 16.

⁵ Deleuze, Guattari, *Tausend Plateaus. Kapitalismus und Schizophrenie*, 18.

⁶ Deleuze, Gilles; Parnet, Claire (2019). *Dialoge*. Berlin: August Verlag, 77.

only evolve with and within other assemblages.⁷ These co-developments are asserted by the movements of “deterritorialization” and “reterritorialization”. Every assemblage immediately starts to deterritorialize, to build “lines of flight” towards others, but this spreading is in a way dangerous for the assemblage, because it can be annexed by other assemblage(s).⁸ The reterritorialization as a territorial gesture is an instant reaction designed to prevent this.

At this point, three significant observations can be made. First of all, the assemblage as a complex entity is not (only) the sum of its parts, but actually active at every level. Second, there is a tendency to connect with other assemblages, which is a constantly ongoing process. And third, assemblages are definable as distinct units, and there is a countermovement to the tendency to deterritorialize. When analysing a certain phenomenon using assemblage theory, it is not justifiable to simply mount parts together and describe an ongoing (material) expansion, especially not when using Deleuze’s und Guattari’s methodological thinking as the starting point.

In his recent book on assemblages, Buchanan argues against contemporary assemblage theory and tries to tie the concept back to Deleuze and Guattari exclusively. For Buchanan, the assemblage can only be adequately described by looking at each book that Deleuze and Guattari wrote together and selecting some of the subsequent books that either composed individually after *Thousand Plateaus*. In general, for him the assemblage is a concept that is not fully realized and has potential for further development, but only if there is a strict focus on the writings of

⁷ Deleuze, Guattari, *Tausend Plateaus. Kapitalismus und Schizophrenie*, 443.

⁸ Deleuze, Guattari, *Tausend Plateaus. Kapitalismus und Schizophrenie*, 92.

Deleuze and/or Guattari.⁹ Hence, Buchanan spends many pages describing the assemblage and contextualising it within the concepts of “desire”, the “body without organs”, or the “abstract machine”. He considers desire especially crucial, because it has a productive dimension: “Assemblages have in common the fact that they are all arrangements of desire.”¹⁰

Consequently, the most critical remarks of his book are in the chapter “expressive materialism”, which focuses on the “vibrant” assemblage thinking of Jane Bennett and (in addition to other chapters) on Manuel DeLanda’s assemblage theory. Buchanan explains that the two philosophers merely appropriate the term assemblage to “knot” heterogeneous bits of material together, and that Bennett’s attempt in particular results in an endless chain of “mapping” things that can never be finished, which leads to “all substance and no form”.¹¹ Buchanan’s carping criticism of his colleagues is understandable as long as the new materialist insights are ignored; as soon as they are considered, there is fertile ground to be found in carefully combining the diverging concepts. A major contribution made by Buchanan are his careful excavations in Deleuze’s und Guattari’s assemblage concept, which show that not every entity is automatically related, and moreover, that there are different planes for these processes: “Not everything we encounter is an assemblage, or part of an assemblage.”¹² This is important to both views, because otherwise only the interconnectedness element is described,

⁹ Buchanan, *Assemblage Theory and Method*, 6.

¹⁰ Buchanan, *Assemblage Theory and Method*, 79. He further explains that there are three types of “strata” identified by Deleuze and Guattari, the “geological”, the “biological”, and the “alloplastic”, and that all of them require two variables (“content” and “expression”), which impact these strata differently.

¹¹ Buchanan, *Assemblage Theory and Method*, 115-119.

¹² Buchanan, *Assemblage Theory and Method*, 37, 73.

which leads to one endless (universe-)assemblage and the potential of the delimited assemblages being lost.

The reflections on the material components, alongside institutional and discursive practices, to interpret an artwork from a new materialist perspective are especially dependent on the thinking of Bennett and DeLanda. However, it should be clear that a certain caution is necessary to prevent the productive dimensions of assemblage thinking from mingling into the descriptions of a generic connectedness – here Buchanan plays a crucial role as a counterpart. Nonetheless, the notion of materiality needs to be expanded within a new materialist ontology. Materiality can be described as “an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable”.¹³ Human, non-human and more-than-human things are shaped reciprocally within an assemblage and the material parts have – due to their materiality – the agency to emerge and to create effects. These determinations will be connected to and critically extended in the light of the writings of Karen Barad below. She describes an interfolded situation, not only of materials, but also of time and space. All of this is connected with ecological thinking. For instance, the artwork is in close connection with, or maybe only thinkable in, the era of the Anthropocene, in which humanity is determined as a geological force, constructions of (deep) time and space are called into question, and new engagements between life and non-life inevitably emerge.¹⁴

¹³ Coole, Diana; Frost, Samantha (2010). “Introducing the New Materialisms”. In D. Coole, S. Frost (Eds.), *New Materialisms. Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Durham, London: Duke University Press, 9.

¹⁴ Julia Adeney Thomas, Mark Williams, Jan Zalasiewicz (2020). *The Anthropocene. A Multidisciplinary Approach*. Cambridge: Polity Press. For the mutual influence of deep

In a recent essay, Bill Brown analysed the art-assemblage, starting in the midst of the twentieth century, along with the physical assemblage practice, and connected this with assemblage theory. He asserts that the theory neglected, in a way, the (former) physical assemblage, especially the art historical phenomenon, although there is a close bond and influence between them.¹⁵ His goal is to develop an “expanded” assemblage: “In this nascent formation, assemblage theory, informed by assemblage practice, presents itself as practice.”¹⁶ Brown proposes a “re-assemblage”, by returning to the assemblage practice in the arts, because this can be used as a blueprint to develop a better understanding of assemblage theory in particular, and assemblages in general.¹⁷ For example, it would lead to insights on how assemblages fundamentally evolve out of each other and how the material aspects and the concept “re-activate” each other reciprocally.¹⁸ These suggestions are important to consider because assemblage as an art historical term, with (three-dimensional) objects assembled, also resonates in the new materialist approach to an “artwork as assemblage”.

time and the Anthropocene see, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2018). *The Crises of Civilization. Exploring Global and Planetary Histories*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 161-243. A posthuman approach to entanglements in the Anthropocene can be found in Rosi Braidotti (2019). *Posthuman Knowledge*. Cambridge: Polity. Guattari’s famous “three ecologies” as “three fundamental realms” that define human life and which need to be connected anew to prevent the arising of new dangers is another vivid example of this ubiquitous ecological thinking, Félix Guattari (1994). *Die drei Ökologien*. Wien: Passagen Verlag.

¹⁵ Brown, “Re-Assemblage (Theory, Practice, Mode)”, 259-260. Brown underlines that Deleuze and Guattari describe William S. Burrough’s literary methods as a point of reference for their assemblage concept.

¹⁶ Brown, “Re-Assemblage (Theory, Practice, Mode)”, 267. His wording of an “assemblage in an expanded field” is informed by Rosalind Krauss’s influential book on sculpture.

¹⁷ Brown, “Re-Assemblage (Theory, Practice, Mode)”, 278.

¹⁸ Brown, “Re-Assemblage (Theory, Practice, Mode)”, 295.

The Naming of a River as an Assemblage

Xinhao Cheng tries to give the river that he has known since he was a child a name. The river in question is the Panlong River, which flows through the city of Kunming in the province of Yúnnánin. The name has to be “objective”, or at least he hopes so.¹⁹ Although the river is (only) around 100 kilometres in length, it is “the cradle of Kunming’s civilization”, Cheng’s hometown.²⁰ In his photo book *The Naming of a River* published in 2016, passages of texts written by Cheng complement his photos and provide the recipient with an impression of the intentions behind the project. The waterway of the Panlong is the best preserved of several rivers in this region, but an ancient map reveals its former path(s). This sparked an artistic reflection on scales of time and space and a curiosity to find a new approach to the river that would allow the artist to grasp the Panlong from the perspective of his lifetime, whilst also including the deep geological space-time. For this project, Yuling Zhong describes Cheng’s course of action as “ethnography as method and anthropology as theory”, both informed by “fieldwork”, as he spent more than a year photographing and collecting diverse objects alongside the riverbed.²¹ The photo book includes a body of photographs in horizontal format, with the river at the lower edge and the changing landscape above, from forests, to fields, to farmlands, to suburbs, to the city. Cheng also portrayed several people he met during his research who have a connection to or interact with the river. And finally, there are white

¹⁹ All the subsequent quotes by Cheng are taken from the texts in his photo book, it has a two-side design and consists of a total of 128 unpaginated fold-over pages, Xinhao Cheng (2016). *The Naming of a River*. Ningbo: Jiazazhi Press.

²⁰ Cheng, *The Naming of a River*.

²¹ Yuling Zhong (2018). “When Contemporary Art Practices Meet Ethnographic Research in Chinese Societies”. *Yishu. Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* (17.2), 62.

sheets in the photo book where artefacts, or “pieces of my treasure” or “specimens”, as Cheng calls them, are arranged like a biological taxonomy.²² His specimens are leaves, snail shells, fossils, but also photos of rock formations, all various (material) artefacts the artist collected while he was working on the project.

The photo book is the basis for the installation *The Naming of a River*, developed from 2014 to 2018 and installed several times afterwards in different forms and with variable dimensions. The different variations of the installation have multiple things in common. Several of Cheng’s specimens, like rocks, fossils, shells, and layers of earth, are distributed in space, some of them on top of each other, others connected through ropes. There are also one or two cubes, which are formed by thin metal pipes, one or more of his photographs are shown by screens or projector, and framed pages from the photo book. The overall impression is that the arrangement of the heterogeneous objects, photos and pieces of material creates a relation between them. Or, to put it more bluntly, a relation is constructed, revealing something about the object of investigation. In the following, the version of *The Naming of a River* at the Zentrum für Medienkunst (ZKM) in Karlsruhe will be analysed more closely.

Cheng’s goal with both the photo book and the installation is to take the river, this ever-changing continuity, and transfer it into his lifetime. It is kind of a translational work because it was not possible for him to perceive the totality of the river, due to the very different time scales. Only when he is able to transfer some of the dimensions in which the river exists into his limited human scale – with a little help from the

²² Cheng, *The Naming of a River*.

specimens – can an objective naming then be envisaged. It becomes clear that the naming has nothing to do with “giving a name” but is a much more complex operation. He tries to illustrate the present by contextualising the different layers of space and time, and since this is almost impossible, it needs a “sophisticated time-space complex”.²³ One way to achieve this is by the installation’s combining of the various specimens from very different times in one space, therefore conveying them into the new simultaneous time of the exhibition space. The specimens equally consist of all the times and spaces that are sedimented in them – millions or billions of years in the case of rocks and fossils. Additionally, it is significant that Cheng found the pieces during his one-year research. His project to give the river a name based on his specific space and time makes him an essential part of the installation. The aim of giving an “objective” name is a very personal and, even more, a thoroughly subjective approach. This is not necessarily a paradox, but a reflection about time and space and their different scales. It reveals the constructivism and quasi-subjective mythology in effect every time something is named, defined or classified. When Cheng’s practice is expanded to a more general perspective, every taxonomy or even the definition of a geological era can be viewed as a random arrangement of several specimens that are collected and interconnected. It becomes clear that Cheng’s approach cannot be explained by Robert Smithson’s site / non-site dialectic based on entropy, even if parallels to the theory of the Land Art artist are clearly evident.

To consider the work *The Naming of a River* using the theoretical concept of the assemblage means that Cheng as a person cannot be excluded. He

²³ Cheng, *The Naming of a River*.

cannot even be marginalised, which would happen if he were displaced into the periphery of the art-assemblage and the material components were described as the important ones. On the contrary, the artist is not the only entity with agency within the assemblage, and there are several processes which are far beyond his control. A careful convergence is needed in order to reach an appropriate interpretation of a specific artwork using the assemblage concept.

First of all, Cheng's installation exemplifies the procedures of "territorialization", as he tries to give the Panlong a new and more adequate name. He is the entity that collects and narrates on a very intentional scale, as his texts in the photo book show. With the research project and every new version of the installation in an exhibition room, Cheng performs a territorial gesture, which is important for every assemblage. If there are no distinctions, ultimately nothing can be said at all. It is crucial to keep in mind that Deleuze describes the assemblage as active on every scale – both the beginning and the end must be viewed as an assemblage. Cheng himself is not the centre of *The Naming of a River*, he is one aspect of the assemblage and must be considered an assemblage on his own already – there is no such thing as a monadic unit. The two authors together, Deleuze and Guattari, call this a "non-centered manifold".²⁴ These manifolds establish connections with their neighbours, creating a manifestation that is always instantaneous and undergoing constant change.

The connections are the next step for the assemblage, a step that happens at almost the same time as the territorial gesture. This has nothing to do with the connections within a certain assemblage, which are always

²⁴ Deleuze, Guattari, *Tausend Plateaus. Kapitalismus und Schizophrenie*, 30.

present. Moreover, as already described, there are lines of flight in deterritorialization that transverse the manifold towards another assemblage and immediately start the process of reterritorialization; these counter-lines cover the outreaching lines and help to keep the assemblage intact.²⁵ Cheng initiated the assemblage *The Naming of a River* but certainly not all the connections and effects that come with it. The separation of human and geological timescales, as well as the very different spatial aspects of the two spheres, are far beyond Cheng's agency. He just recognized that there is a gap, a merely artificial one produced by a dichotomous ontology that separates life from non-life, and the artist tries to challenge these constructions, or rather, to make sense of them for himself. Elizabeth Povinelli profoundly disputes this separation between life and non-life and clarifies that whether we apply the definition of life to something or leave it in a geological sphere is dependent on the scale.²⁶ "Rocks" are one example Povinelli uses, they "extrude into their environment, changing wind patterns and leaving soil deposits, and they ingest the living that changes their geochemical imprint".²⁷ For Povinelli, the descriptions of the assemblage by Deleuze and Guattari are very important to overcome the division, or at least, to show which regimes of power come about through the separation of life and non-life into different spheres.

The placement of several rocks in *The Naming of a River* underpins a deterritorial gesture, not only towards the very different timescales which Cheng tries to transfer into the exhibition time, but further towards the more general questions of development and decay of life, as

²⁵ Deleuze, Guattari, *Tausend Plateaus. Kapitalismus und Schizophrenie*, 699-703.

²⁶ Povinelli, Elizabeth A. (2016). *Geontologies. A Requiem to Late Liberalism*. Durham / London: Duke University Press, 42.

²⁷ Povinelli, *Geontologies. A Requiem to Late Liberalism*, 45.

well as the various thresholds. Other examples are his use of snail shells, which are obviously connected to life, and the integration of (mineralized) fossils. The latter are a process that go far beyond Cheng's lifetime, they are formerly living organisms that have been fossilised, even "turned into stone". The very different scales that Povinelli describes can be seen in Cheng's fieldwork, as one of many examples. The artist was drawn to the river and to all of its complexities. Every change, from deep time to the (recent) cultivation process undertaken by humanity, influenced not only the river and its bio- and geosphere, but also had an impact on Cheng himself, as he wandered through the riverbed, taking photos, and collecting specimens. This can be extended in every direction; for instance, during his research he breathed in the fine stone particles that are the product of the rock cycle. *The Naming of a River* also has a strong reference to reterritorialization. It is mutually important that Cheng created the artwork and that it is about the Panlong River. Both circumstances guarantee that every installation is an attempt by one artist to give one river a name from his perspective. These attempts – there are several different versions of the artwork – limit the development of some connections. For example, only one river of the Yúnnánin province is examined.

By arranging material entities in space, Cheng certainly produces connections and interconnections that could not be seen (easily) from a human perspective beforehand. But for assemblages to be possible, everything cannot always be connected, because then we cannot make any distinctions. Frédéric Neyrat makes this very clear in his "ecology of separation", by which he explains that every interconnection must leave room for a separation – nature and ecology are neither a "fixed substance", nor an "indefinite process", both depictions would limit the

possible outcome.²⁸ The separation here is accompanied by a reterritorialization, it is the attempt to avoid the threatening dissolution into an interconnected infinitum. All of this, the territorial gestures, followed by the de- and reterritorialization, can be summed up in Buchanan's claim: "Territorializing is world-making."²⁹ Every kind of knowledge we produce evolves from the movements inside of an assemblage and from their tendencies to connect with other assemblages, but also from the attempt to stay intact as long as possible. This is not to assert that an assemblage is static, indeed there is constant and simultaneous change. But still, from the perspective that everyone and everything is already an assemblage, the production of an assemblage leads to the production of knowledge.

When examining more closely the material parts of *The Naming of a River* and their connection-producing placement in the exhibition room, Jane Bennett's concept of an assemblage should be considered. Her vibrant approach has several basic assumptions. She makes a distinction between "humans" and "non-humans" in general, but humankind is never isolated, instead we are always in an assemblage with non-humans.³⁰ With this distinction she rejects the fatal dichotomy between subject and object that dominated western philosophy and metaphysics for centuries. Instead of summarising everything which is not human under one umbrella term, for example an object, and producing a demarcation line, her thinking of the non-human is much more open. For her, it is not possible to make a clear separation between life and matter,

²⁸ Neyrat, Frédéric (2017). "Elements for an ecology of separation: Beyond ecological constructivism". In E. Hörl (Ed.), *General Ecology. The New Ecological Paradigm*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 103.

²⁹ Buchanan, *Assemblage Theory and Method*, 98.

³⁰ Bennett, Jane (2010). *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham / London: Duke University Press, 116.

because the processes and the mutual interferences are too extensive.³¹ Furthermore, the non-human is not a clear one-dimensional category; instead, the term covers a broad range of entities and agencies. To clarify this, Bennett uses the term “thing”, because when things are in an assemblage they can act as “vivid entities”, which are never “reducible to the context in which (human) subjects set them”.³² According to Bennett, things have a certain power – even if they are (still) inanimate, they have the ability to produce and act, especially because of the close interrelations of the assemblages. She calls this thinking a “vital materialism”, and its application makes it possible to limit the superiority of mankind, for example by recognising that the (formerly) human construct called “culture” has always been shaped by “biological, geological, and climatic forces”.³³ It is important to mention that Bennett retains a certain division between humankind and things. We as humans – considered an assemblage that is not clearly delimited – still have more power, there is no completely horizontal plane, but everything is ultimately a “material configuration”.³⁴ This is not necessarily a contradiction – for instance, the political process of participation and power is very unequally distributed, but this does not necessarily mean that one side has no power at all. In general, for Bennett, an assemblage is a “dense network of relations”, which are “ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts”.³⁵

The phrase “ad hoc groupings” is criticised by Buchanan, who, as already mentioned, is very loyal to Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the assemblage. For him, a kind of spontaneous gathering and merging of

³¹ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*, 62-63.

³² Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*, 5.

³³ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*, 115.

³⁴ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*, 104-112.

³⁵ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*, 13-23.

diverse entities is not what the assemblage should be about, although to describe it as an intentional design is not an adequate answer either.³⁶ Buchanan goes a step further and claims that if the assemblage concept can produce any gain of knowledge, then the materials or things inside it are relatively unimportant, the “underlying principles of selection and arrangement” should be considered instead.³⁷ According to him, the benefit of Bennett’s approach is that it could be the starting point for an investigation, but certainly not the end of it, or at least, he claims that with Bennett some entities are included that are usually left aside.³⁸ Both attempts – Bennett’s and Buchanan’s – have their advantages, and it is interesting to consider a convergence between the two; because in this case, every entity, even the smallest bits of matter, cannot be described as passive, or simply left aside, and the focus on the selection process and how the parts of the assemblage are related to each other is relevant.

The artwork *The Naming of a River* as an assemblage combines all the entities of the installation inside the exhibition room, including (parts of) the exhibition room and the institution in which it is exhibited, as well as the visitors, but also several other specimens in Cheng’s collection, and even some of the artefacts he did not take with him during his research – everything is folded into the changes of time and space that ultimately led to this very specific situation and the very specific moment the artwork is encountered. Several dimensions that can help understand the artwork evolve out of this, some of which illustrate the intrinsic agency. It becomes clear that the artwork-assemblage is far more than the material components or the forces that shaped them. The connections, initiated by Cheng, can reach out to their environment, and

³⁶ Buchanan, *Assemblage Theory and Method*, 124.

³⁷ Buchanan, *Assemblage Theory and Method*, 117.

³⁸ Buchanan, *Assemblage Theory and Method*, 116.

connect with it as well, this being part of their agency. This means, for example, that when a recipient is included in the assemblage and transformed by it, his or her thoughts or beliefs about rivers in general and the way we should think about them is deeply changed after the encounter with the artwork.³⁹ Of course, this is only one (peripheral) aspect of the artwork as assemblage, because it would be wrong to assume that it is all about the recipients and their transformation. The view must be widened to different scales as the installation changes the airstream in the museum or the history of the institution, as it does the area of the Panlong River where selected entities are removed during Cheng's investigation. However, it is also clear that not every aspect of the assemblage-exhibition or the assemblage-museum is connected with the artwork – this would create a situation where the artwork is imperceptible, because it occurs as a feature of the museum, like the air conditioning. Most of the possible connections must be held back.

If Cheng's intentions are reconsidered using Bennett's vibrant matter, this assemblage is a very private river, which challenges our ecological understanding of interconnection and environmental processes. All parts of the artworks, not only the material ones, have the capacity to develop active links between the heterogeneous parts and discourses that can be included. The assemblage which evolves from this establishes connections through the process of deterritorialization and retains identity through a reterritorial movement. It should be clear that an assemblage is not one unity that grows and shrinks, but that there are several different ones inside the artwork-assemblage and they consist of

³⁹ This kind of transformational process that every artwork is in principle performing on its recipients can be found in Markus Gabriel's thinking, Markus Gabriel (2020). *The Power of Art*. Cambridge: Polity. In this essay, the interpretation must be significantly expanded.

multiple layers.⁴⁰ The agency, as Bennett points out, of this ever-changing manifold is not a “strong, autonomous kind”, but always “porous, tenuous, and thus indirect”.⁴¹ Agency in this case can be further described as an ongoing process of becoming, in which both the human and non-human parts have transformational powers.⁴² To grasp *The Naming of a River* as an assemblage, it is necessary to extend this processuality into space and time, an act of extension implied by several aspects in the artwork and in Cheng’s texts in the photo book.

The Naming of a River as an Interfolded Space-Time Assemblage

Cheng’s strategy of creating a space-time-complex through his artwork and his attempt to grasp the river from his (very limited human) perspective leads to the different versions of *The Naming of a River*. The rocks are all individually formed in a geological timescale, their shape and even the notches indicate innumerable processes. Simply placing some of the rocks on top of each other creates a new connection that shows that they (possibly) evolved from a former unity. It could be the case that some of these boulders belonged to one rock formation. But this is just speculation based on the human timescale, and this is exactly what the artwork is reflecting on. Therefore, the installation is different every time, because the idea that the specimens and their assembly can contribute something to the understanding of the river is crucial – it is not the exact placement of each stone which conveys knowledge. In addition to the little towers of rocks, there are rocks hanging on small

⁴⁰ Deleuze, Guattari, *Tausend Plateaus. Kapitalismus und Schizophrenie*, 426.

⁴¹ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*, 36.

⁴² Coole, Frost, *Introducing the New Materialisms*, 31.

ropes. It seems like they are free-floating in space and somehow connected with the cube structure.

The cube is made a central element of the installation by the fact that the material entities are concentrated on, above, under, inside and beside of it. Hence, from its form and the placement of several specimens, the cube can be seen as a metaphor of space and time. All the entities, which already include a wide range of processes, are connected with each other in the installation through an artificial structure. This structure mediates between them, because it establishes an ordered connection – a geometrical one – between the times and spaces that have shaped the rocks. The installation consists of different types of rocks with very different textures. All of them evolved out of geological processes which have a unique time- and space frame. But nonetheless, all of them – somehow – ended up in the region of the Panlong River where Cheng found them.

The projected photos establish another time and space connection. In the installation at the ZKM Karlsruhe, the photo chosen is of the surrounding area of the river in question. It shows a rock formation with vegetation in the left foreground and the city of Kunming in the background. Cheng took the photo from a higher angle, maybe one of the hills near to the city and the river. The skyscrapers on the right and the more industrial area in the middle of the background represent the human and very rapidly changing times in direct comparison to the rocks on the left. Two of the specimen-rock-towers on the metal cube and one hanging rock above the higher tower cast shadows on the projection surface. The attempt to give the river a name, the installation in the museum, disturbs the photographic reproduction of the environment of the Panlong. As already mentioned, Cheng was trying “to meet the present with traces of

the past in various time-snaps”.⁴³ Every rock can be seen as one of those snaps. In summary, he states that “the present is illustrated through interweaving space and time”.⁴⁴

How these interweaving processes can be thought of in the context of the artwork as an assemblage and with a new materialist view is best described using aspects of Manuel DeLanda’s and Karen Barad’s writings. DeLanda names two main aspects that are crucial for every assemblage:

[that] the parts that are fitted together are not uniform either in nature or in origin, and that the assemblage actively links these parts together by establishing relations between them.⁴⁵

Both assumptions can be found in *The Naming of a River*, the relations and the links already being present from the very moment in which Cheng assembles the parts in the exhibition space. But it would be wrong to claim that only the human (mind) is capable of establishing connections. Further, DeLanda describes that there must always be “assemblages of assemblages”, so there is nothing singular about an assemblage, and even more importantly, every one of these bundles is a “concrete historical individual”.⁴⁶ The assemblage *The Naming of a River* consists of “properties”, which are “always actual” and therefore exclusively present in the here and now and which have the capacity to change completely as soon as a new connection is made.⁴⁷ At the same time, the assemblage has “dispositions, tendencies and capacities that

⁴³ Cheng, *The Naming of a River*.

⁴⁴ Cheng, *The Naming of a River*.

⁴⁵ DeLanda, Manuel (2016). *Assemblage Theory*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2.

⁴⁶ DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 3, 108.

⁴⁷ DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 108.

are virtual”, they are as “real” as the actual properties but not manifested at the very moment – the virtual properties are far greater in number.⁴⁸ Within a virtual sphere that has no correlation with our minds and is therefore not tied to our scales of time and space but nonetheless fully exists, these two realms of the assemblage lead to a far-reaching extension of the assemblage.⁴⁹ This indicates that it is necessary to excavate as many connections, properties and capabilities as possible, because most of them exist (hidden) in a virtual sphere.

This virtual sphere in which most of the agencies of the assemblage can be found is nothing nebulous. For Barad, it can be described in new materialist terms and from a quantum theory perspective. In her post-human and performative approach, she uses quantum-entanglement and quantum-field-theory to define an agential realism.⁵⁰ This profoundly challenges the conventional views of space as a container, time as linear and matter as passive. All three of them make a significant contribution to a progressive and entangled becoming, whereby everything is “intra-actively produced in the ongoing differential articulation of the world”.⁵¹ Barad describes “diffractive apparatuses” as processes, the very reason the phenomena are produced.⁵² These apparatuses are not technical, mechanistic or stable units outside of the process. Quite the contrary, they are part of the ongoing entanglements of time, space and matter. However, with each new boundary an apparatus produces, with each new “intra-action”, the enormous “manifold of entangled relations is

⁴⁸ DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 108-109.

⁴⁹ DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 138.

⁵⁰ Karen Barad has a doctorate in theoretical particle physics and is Professor of Feminist Studies, Philosophy, and History of Consciousness at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

⁵¹ Barad, Karen (2007). *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham / London: Duke University Press, 234.

⁵² Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, 384.

reconfigured".⁵³ This cannot be seen as a linear process either, but shows multiple disruptions:

The point is that it is the intra-play of continuity and discontinuity, determinacy and indeterminacy, possibility and impossibility that constitutes the differential spacetime-matterings of the world.⁵⁴

In conclusion Barad, with her background in theoretical physics and the notion of a new materialist thinking, is able to define an approach beyond our (western) ontology of definite bodies and clear dichotomies. She describes this as "*ethico-onto-epistem-ology*", an "intertwining of ethics, knowing, and being" in which the whole world is remade in every instantaneous moment.⁵⁵ This gives rise to social, political and ethical dimensions that emerge as a result of the assemblage: Amanda Boetzkes speaks of an "ethical awareness of the earth" that artists developed as early as the 1960s and that has become increasingly important in the younger generations.⁵⁶ However, if Cheng's artwork is interpreted as an assemblage, his work with the specimens of the Panlong not only displays an "ethical awareness", but also negotiates the process of the constant re-creation of the world that Barad illustrates. This requires a new ontology, which Clive Hamilton says is based on "embeddedness" because "our inescapable responsibility for the Earth defines us as moral beings."⁵⁷

What this means for Cheng's installation and for each specimen becomes evident when we look at the layers of soil that have a cubic structure. In

⁵³ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 393-394.

⁵⁴ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 182.

⁵⁵ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 185.

⁵⁶ Boetzkes, Amanda (2010). *The Ethics of Earth Art*. Minneapolis / London: University of Minnesota Press, 24.

⁵⁷ Hamilton, Clive (2017). *Defiant Earth. The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene*. Cambridge, Malden: Polity, 52.

the ZKM installation, it is placed at a certain distance from the other specimens, the metal cube and the photo projection. A spotlight highlights the layers of soil and at first, they seem somewhat isolated. But the shape is reminiscent of the metal cube, making the connection obvious. In the installation, the metal cube is kind of a placeholder for the cubic layers of soil. The rocks are arranged around the artificial structure, but they could surround the natural structure as well. In fact, following DeLanda and even more so Barad, both options are equally present. The actual appearance in the ZKM is just one “here and now” manifestation, and all the connections, not only between the specimens and the Panlong, but between the exhibition, the visitors and the geological taxonomy as well, to name just a few, are very small in number compared to the virtual ones.

The rocks and the layers of soil have a close relation in the assemblage manifold of *The Naming of a River*, both include the various times and places, as well as the overall processes that lead to their physical appearance. There is a connection with the deep time of the earth’s history but at the same time with the choices Cheng made. The layers of soil show very clearly the different sedimentary strata of the Panlong region. It acts as an indicator for a timescale far beyond a human lifetime and the difficulties that arise when one individual tries to perceive the ever-changing river – or to give it a name. In addition, the brownish vegetation and even more so the many shells and fossils in the strata illustrate clearly the constructed dichotomy between life and non-life that Povinelli challenges. The advantage of Cheng’s inclusion and presentation of the layers of soil is that it leads to far more “bundle[s] of lines”, as DeLanda puts it, which are the “virtual dispositions”, the hidden

“objectivity” that could be revealed in novel conditions, such as a new installation.⁵⁸

In connection with Barad’s apparatus theory, whereby each new boundary produces the phenomena, the (artwork-)assemblage has an extension into the entanglements of time, space, and matter.⁵⁹ Barad describes how to think about this in a more recent essay, in which she explains the idea of “diffraction as methodology”: “[It is] a matter of reading insights through rather than against each other to make evident the always-already entanglement of specific ideas in their materiality.”⁶⁰ The diffraction is not a separation from the outside but a difference which is inside each entity and must be accepted as factual. Barad uses waves as an example, because when it comes to time and space “multiple waves can be in the same place at the same time, and a given wave can be in multiple places at the same time”.⁶¹ She describes experiments from quantum physics to prove her point and concludes that the “diffraction pattern” is present for each entity and on each scale. As a result, we are always confronted with “different times bleeding through one another” and are far away from any kind of linearity when it comes to time.⁶²

The concept of space is profoundly challenged by Barad as well. She argues using the image of quantum fluctuations that require “virtual particles” to be something factual: “Virtual particles are experimenting with the im/possibilities of non/being, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t

⁵⁸ DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 110, 185.

⁵⁹ Barad, Karen (2015). *Verschränkungen*. Berlin: Merve, 189.

⁶⁰ Barad, Karen (2018). “Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness: Re-Turning, Re-Membering, and Facing the Incalculable”. In *New formations: a journal of culture/theory/politics*, 92, 64.

⁶¹ Barad, “Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness: Re-Turning, Re-Membering, and Facing the Incalculable”, 65.

⁶² Barad, “Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness”, 68.

real; on the contrary.”⁶³ They are equally existent and non-existent, and even more important, they are indeterminate in their core. The virtual particles are “intra-acting” with every entity, allowing them to exist. Therefore, space has nothing to do with the “logics of the void”, there is no vacuum that can be filled with entities like a container, but the “virtual particles” produce several spaces of existence and non-existence at the same time, an “ontological indeterminacy”.⁶⁴ Clearly DeLanda does not argue from a quantum physics perspective, but his descriptions of the virtual as existing in multiple shades and with a far greater capacity than that which is presently perceptible, resonates with Barad’s writings.

Overall, the new materialist assemblage challenges our (epistemological and metaphysical) understanding of entities, whereby artworks as reflective and thought-provoking things provide the best tools to catch up with these developments – they are “a thing to think with”, as Brown puts it.⁶⁵ However, this is far from being the central point here, because more crucial is what the assemblage is able to contribute to the understanding of *The Naming of a River*. Cheng is able to create several versions of the Panlong, each very personal, with every new version representing only one new shaping of an innumerable manifold of the different times and spaces in which his basis point of reference exists. This shows that the artwork itself has an unlimited potential – each new specimen or the entry of a new beholder changes the work immediately. Cheng manifests a short standstill, with all the virtual manifolds buzzing around his assemblage. A radical openness to the constant transformation must be maintained because this is not the only version of the artwork. Rather, the work exists equally in different places and

⁶³ Barad, “Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness”, 78.

⁶⁴ Barad, “Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness”, 76, 80.

⁶⁵ Brown, “Re-Assemblage (Theory, Practice, Mode)”, 247.

times. The version that manifests, and the connections we as viewers can draw from it at that moment, are outstripped by the virtual possibilities behind it. Nonetheless, the work as we see it is the initial starting point to be engaged with, but this does not in any way mean that we should stop at that point if the artwork is assumed to be a new materialist assemblage. For Deleuze and Guattari, it is the process of writing that enables a deterritorialization and therefore the building of an assemblage.⁶⁶ Cheng does the same with the assemblage practice in his installation. The assembly of specimens, together with his writings, can be described as the development of an assemblage and at the same time as the reflection of this process – both expand our understanding of what an artwork can be.

References

Barad, Karen (2007). *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham / London: Duke University Press.

Barad, Karen (2015). *Verschränkungen*. Berlin: Merve.

Barad, Karen (2018). “Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness: Re-Turning, Re-Membering, and Facing the Incalculable”. *New formations: a journal of culture/theory/politics* (92), 56-86.

Bennett, Jane (2010). *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham /London: Duke University Press.

⁶⁶ Deleuze, Guattari, *Tausend Plateaus. Kapitalismus und Schizophrenie*, 22.

Boetzkes, Amanda (2010). *The Ethics of Earth Art*. Minneapolis / London: University of Minnesota Press.

Braidotti, Rosi (2019). *Posthuman Knowledge*. Cambridge: Polity.

Brown, Bill (2020). "Re-Assemblage (Theory, Practice, Mode)". *Critical Inquiry* (46), 259-303.

Buchanan, Ian (2021). *Assemblage Theory and Method*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh (2018). *The Crises of Civilization. Exploring Global and Planetary Histories*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Cheng, Xinhao (2016). *The Naming of a River*. Ningbo: Jiazazhi Press.

Coole, Diana; Frost, Samantha (2010). "Introducing the New Materialisms". In *New Materialisms. Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Durham / London: Duke University Press, 1-43.

DeLanda, Manuel (2016). *Assemblage Theory*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Deleuze, Gilles; Guattari, Félix (1992). *Tausend Plateaus. Kapitalismus und Schizophrenie*. Berlin: Merve.

Deleuze, Gilles; Parnet, Claire (2019). *Dialogue*. Berlin: August Verlag.

Gabriel, Markus (2020). *The Power of Art*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Guattari, Félix (1994). *Die drei Ökologien*. Vienna: Passagen Verlag.

Hamilton, Clive (2017). *Defiant Earth. The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene*. Cambridge / Malden: Polity Press.

Neyrat, Frédéric (2017). "Elements for an Ecology of Separation: Beyond Ecological Constructivism". In Hörl, Erich (Ed.). *General Ecology. The New Ecological Paradigm*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 101-127.

Povinelli, Elizabeth A. (2016). *Geontologies. A Requiem to Late Liberalism*. Durham / London: Duke University Press.

Thomas, Julia A.; Williams, Mark; Zalasiewicz, Jan (2020). *The Anthropocene. A Multidisciplinary Approach*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Zhong, Yuling (2018). "When Contemporary Art Practices Meet Ethnographic Research in Chinese Societies". *Yishu. Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, 17 (2), 61-75.