I left my trowel at a service station on the information superhighway: the beginnings of assemblage

Judith Winters

Based on a talk given at Department of Archaeology, University of Sheffield, 23 April 2013

My time as a graduate student at Sheffield gave me lifelong friends and precious moments of creative and intellectual energy and also set me directly onto the path that led me to Internet Archaeology [http://intarch.ac.uk] where I have stayed. I was grateful to be given a chance to come back to Sheffield earlier this year to talk about the founding of assemblage, my time at the department and to share a little of assemblage’s background with the current cohort.

Me in the Research School c.1996 (Photo: Jonathan Bateman. CC-BY-NC-ND)

I came to Sheffield in 1994 to do an MSc in Archaeomaterials, and then in 1995 I embarked on a PhD with a longer although very vague aim of staying in archaeology and working in an academic environment. I still got there, but my not so secret shame is that I never finished that PhD because something got in the way. That something was assemblage and was the reason I lost my trowel and started the transformation from archaeologist to e-journal editor.

The mid-nineties was still an analogue rather than digital era, and most of my personal records from the time are photographs, Polaroids and some precious VHS cassette recordings. Not much was or has ever been written down about how assemblage started. Certainly, if any of us thought that assemblage was going to be so formative, we might have documented it better! Unfortunately, some of the primary evidence that might have been contained in the journal itself, like the Issue 1 mission statement, acknowledgements and editor list, all seem now to be lost. My personal records, although patchy, did however yield a few gems, including a fairly complete draft of a talk that Kathryn Denning (the Issue 1 general editor) and I gave at an e-publishing conference at the University of Toronto in 1997 about how we started an e-journal “without experience or a clue” (Denning and Winters 1997). So what follows is based on a combination of these and should be a fairly accurate account of assemblage’s early history. I hope the rest of the early team members forgive me for any errors and oversights.

The idea

From at least early 1994, there had been occasional discussions about a postgraduate publication initiative in the archaeology department at Sheffield. The general idea was to produce an occasional
collection of papers so that graduate students could gain experience in the publication process. Eventually, in November 1995, momentum gathered, led by postgraduates Kathryn Denning, Willy Kitchen and Ross Dean. Sheffield Occasional Archaeological Papers Series (SOAP) was the intention but as discussions developed, a change in the favoured medium, content, and purpose emerged. Having investigated (and rejected) a print series due to the costs involved, the internet was chosen for practical reasons rather than a desire to go to the cutting edge of technology. We liked the possibilities it gave for wider distribution with greater speed, and, not wanting to be limited to publishing thesis conversations or selections of papers on narrow themes, we felt it offered much more flexibility in form and content. A questionnaire was sent to all the department’s graduate students to canvass opinion. Results indicated that very few students used the internet or even knew how to open a browser, but there was a consensus on the idea of starting an electronic journal. A student meeting was called at the end of February 1996 and it was at that point I became involved.
CALL FOR PAPERS AND ARTICLES

The Sheffield Graduate Journal of Archaeology invites your contributions for the first issue.

In the wake of last week’s meeting we intend to bring out the first issue of the journal by the end of September 1996.

We seek:

1. **Substantive articles**: 1500-3000 words in length on any archaeology related topic. Fully referenced and likely to stimulate debate.

2. **Columns and features**: 500-1000 words in length. Informative or just plain witty, e.g. What’s Happening, Pass Notes, Notes and Queries, book and conference reviews etc.

Please let us have your ideas in abstract form (c. 100 words) A.S.A.P.

Final deadline for the submission of completed articles is 24th May 1996.

N.B. For those of you who submitted abstracts last February, please confirm if the offer still stands.

Replies to Kathryn Denning or Willy Kitchen.
K.E.Denning@Sheffield.ac.uk
W.H.Kitchen@Sheffield.ac.uk

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*Original call for papers posted around the Research School and department*

Coalescence

*assemblage* has a number of birthplaces: the Research School, its seminar room and our favourite pub O’Hagans (now since demolished and part of the West One development).
O’Hagans (left) in 1997, now demolished to make way for the West One development (right; the pub was immediately to the left of the white building in the background).

It also has a host of parents. Although Ross and Willy stepped down from active involvement early on, Kathryn very capably took up the mantle of General Editor. Other new recruits from that inaugural meeting were Danny Hind (web design), Jennie Hawcroft helped by Becky Harrison (book reviews), Jo Heron (who briefly worked with Danny), Kenny Aitchison (information pages) and Jonathan Bateman (features). I too signed up as a features editor, but both Jonathan and I got more involved in production from quite early on. None of us had prior experience in publishing but we consolidated as a team, and it very quickly became a group effort from that point on.
The original Issue 1 editors file, now divorced from Issue 1 but found on a floppy disk and reinstated here for posterity!
A typical late afternoon inside O'Hagans: L to R: Danny Hind, Rowan May, Becky Harrison, Peter Tomkins, Kathryn Denning and Jonathan Bateman (Photo: Judith Winters. CC-BY-NC-ND)

So, the Sheffield Graduate Journal of Archaeology needed a name. Suggestions included Matrix and GAS (Graduate Archaeology at Sheffield, but opportunities for odorous wordplay ruled that one out quickly). But one day as I was flicking through a (real, paper) dictionary, the word assemblage caught my eye. The range of meanings was most appropriate, we all liked it and the bookish inspiration was referenced in the early masthead.
Evolution of the Issue 1 masthead

We got a dedicated network account and an email address for the journal. We debated over format and content and had some hilarious early meetings in the seminar room as we brainstormed ideas for features.
A letter we sent to Richard Bradley. We never did get a reply. Was asking for a poem a step too far?!

Kathryn especially agonized over policies and other regulations, and we all became obsessed with keeping the title in lowercase, and in Courier of course! We sent out calls for papers, invented deadlines, and were grateful for the support from postgraduates from elsewhere, like Quentin Drew who created the trowel and other cartoons used in Issue 1. Quentin was a contact made via the then active Lampeter, Southampton, Sheffield postgrad colloquium (which included other postgrads like Cornelius Holtorf, Chris Fowler and Yannis Hamilakis). To our amazement, people sent us some terrific material and even publishers took us seriously and sent us copies of books to review.
We even had our own desk (Photo: Jonathan Bateman. CC-BY-NC-ND)

Working on web. Check out that slow screen flicker. It was not uncommon to wait minutes for a single image to download (Photo: Jonathan Bateman. CC-BY-NC-ND)

We learned very simple HTML thanks to Danny (who went on a course and passed the knowledge on) and by looking at other websites’ source code to work out how to do everything else. We also had to
beg frequently for more space on the university server. The internet was still a fairly colourless place in 1996. There was a default grey background [http://blogs.smithsonianmag.com/paleofuture/2012/12/fun-places-on-the-internet-in-1995/] seemingly used everywhere, so we spent a lot of time playing with graphics and really putting our stamp into the journal’s design. Kathryn was responsible for the wonderfully coloured section banners [http://www.assemblage.group.shef.ac.uk/1/features.html] for Issue 1.

Terminology of course has changed over the years. We did not know what to call what we were doing – everything sounded awkward to say out loud; information superhighway, cyberspace, the infobahn, the PostGutenberg Galaxy. Since we were largely self-taught, and somewhat haphazardly so, our ways of doing and talking about things were full of quirks. Although we knew perfectly well that HTML was just a mark-up language, team members often referred what we did as “programming”, or alternatively, we used our very own verb, “to web”!

We worked tirelessly and would often sit inside on nice summer days and late evenings, but we were always learning, creating and laughing. Our own research took something of a back seat, but assemblage gave us confidence to develop our own voice, enabled us to make those initial contacts in the broader world of archaeology (certainly helpful to me) and placed on us a new found responsibility to organise things completely by ourselves. Things like a special editorial trip to our local trowel factory.

Our trip to the home of the WHS trowel even made to the newspaper! *The Star*, Wed 14 May 1997.

It’s Alive!

The first issue of *assemblage* was launched on 3rd October 1996, a short seven months after the editorial team was formed. We celebrated, naturally, with a party in the Research School (where we noticed at least one lecturer didn’t know how to use a mouse) and we announced the journal’s arrival in cyberspace.
Original Issue 1 announcement. I did not have a copy in my own records but found this buried in another site's archive because I'd remembered what we'd called the email! (from http://unauthorised.org/anthropology/anthro-1/october-1996/0191.html last accessed 22 May 2013)

People visited the site in what we felt to be droves. When the compliments started flowing in, along with material for the second issue, we celebrated some more. All we had tried to do was to create something that we liked, something that we wanted to see, and it really was a bonus if it was something others wanted to read too.

In an effort to reach the more conventional members of the academic archaeology community, we produced a paper version of the first issue for distribution. It is possible that sending these copies to
various departments of archaeology around Britain helped to interest some readers in electronic publication, but of course, we'll never really know. It was far too annoying an exercise to repeat, especially for Kathryn who did the lion's share of the photocopying. The paper copies were also the reason the total set-up costs rocketed to £82.74.

Collective memory

I took the opportunity to contact some of the early team members to see if they had any particular memories of *assemblage*'s early days. For me it was a most formative time and it was heartening to hear that validated by the others. I think we were part of a particularly vibrant community and we worked really well as a team. That's a hard thing to replicate but lovely to have been part of.

Jennie (Reviews) “I remember laughing a lot, and feeling part of a gang, and spending lots of time in O'Hagans ... a real golden age of the Research School with lots of really committed enthusiastic people all clicking with each other, such a good group vibe. I don’t know whether this vibe was a result or a cause of assemblage, and I don’t know whether that vibe is always there and I just remember my own era most fondly. But it did seem to me then that our gang was a specially committed group.”

Kenny (Information pages) “It was very much a formative time – I got more out of assemblage than from many of my other university experiences, and the article that I wrote about the IfA contributed to my getting a job there, from which my subsequent career has largely developed. And in terms of the team spirit, that was very important; it gave us humanities students the opportunity to work late in a lab-like team experience!”

Kathryn (Editor) “I think the journal started a lot of amazing conversations ... it made me feel very committed to continuing to be in and around universities. I've been fortunate in recent years to find a few moments which have the same sort of intellectual energy and idealism. But it's something that I certainly don't take for granted, and I rejoice when it happens because I know it's precious.”
Danny (Web) “The hierarchy was very horizontal. I don't have a strong sense of someone being in charge, although I have vague memories of deferring to Jon, because of his technical expertise, Kathryn because of her editorial expertise and general leadership, and you, because of a combination of the two...I have a strong sense that you three were much more immersed in assemblage than I was ... It’s nice to have worked in one of those small, non-hierarchical teams ... [with] carpe diem enthusiasm. That's a rare and sweet taste.”

Jonathan (Features/Web) “assemblage gave me lifelong friendships and invaluable experience that stretched far beyond archaeology. The knowledge and skills I gained actually proved far more useful in my career than my knowledge of archaeology has done!”

assemblage was forged in the most collegiate and egalitarian of atmospheres. It didn’t exactly help us get our research done but it helped us learn and feel what it meant to be part of a research community. We all acquired a series of skills that we’ve used ever since. It enabled us to gain experience of editing and publishing, strengthened our communication and management skills and forged crucial interdisciplinary links. That the team was rolling meant skills were passed on and ultimately this has continued to produce a diverse and continually evolving journal. The social connections were the most important things for us, both then and now. assemblage in fact simply lived up to its name – a gathering of people, a coming together, the right people in the right place at the right time. I hope that the current and future teams experience even a fraction of the same spirit, energy and enthusiasm that we did.

The End. Or just the beginning?

I have often asked myself the question if, as a new venture, could assemblage happen now? Why Sheffield and not somewhere else? I don’t think current graduate students really have freedom we had, but it would technically be much easier to do today and there are so many examples around to emulate. Lots of people have followed in our footsteps. Back then we had nothing to copy or compare ourselves to. I am sure that any graduates starting a new journal today are bound to do a better job than us, but this will always be the downside of being a very small group of pioneers in a field.

References

**Acknowledgements**

Thank you to all the early *assemblage* team members who allowed me to clog up their busy lives with my requests for a brain rummage: Kenny Aitchison, Jonathan Bateman, Kathryn Denning, Melanie Giles, Danny Hind, Willy Kitchen, Jennie Robinson and Graeme Warren.

**Bio**

Judith Winters was a founding editor of *assemblage*. She went to Internet Archaeology as Assistant Editor to Alan Vince in 1998 and has been Internet Archaeology Editor since June 1999.