Consider a meme, any meme. Chances are you are thinking of at least two distinct forms: one that somehow disturbs the other, producing humor (or anger or perhaps some secret third thing) in the process. Allow me to take a fairly dated meme from 2017 as an example. In a series of images that were circulated all over social media right after then-president Donald Trump announced the United States’ withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, photos from the White House—with Trump and his mostly male entourage all grinning and thumbing up to the camera for a photo-op—were set next to an image of a giant polar ice shelf cracking into two. These two images accompanied the text “cracking open a cold one with the boys,” a “copypasta”—a combination of text that gets circulated in different contexts online—that notes the obsession (and pleasures) of masculine bonding over chilled, canned beers.¹

Together, the three pieces of content—Trump’s photograph, a depiction of polar climate change, and the internet slang about men drinking beer—produce, for someone aware of all three objects independently, a mildly humorous (and morbidly terrifying) expression signifying several things at

once: (1) the unfortunate gender imbalance in Trump’s group of advisers and supporters; (2) the implicit association of this group with participation in homosocial activities; (3) the shared cracking sound made by a beer can being opened and the glacial ice shelves disintegrating; and, finally, (4) the horror that these group of men, as a part of their homosocial bonding and its political preservation, might have just cracked open a different cold one at the global scale, sending us all to our climate doom. Whenever I have taught this meme in my classroom, I have noted to my students that juxtaposition is integral to how and why it works. Memes bring together wildly different objects from different contexts; the copypasta, after all, was not initially created to talk about ice shelves breaking, nor was the Trump photo taken as an indication of homosocial pleasures. By selecting, arranging, and configuring—all functions that form an integral part of Kyle Parry’s theoretical apparatus in *A Theory of Assembly: From Museums to Memes*—memes present a stark distinctive juxtaposition that makes you chuckle. This production of (morbid) humor through unexpected juxtaposition might be understood as part of an even larger phenomenon; think of how puns work or why sitcoms feature the unexpected stomping on the familiar. And though it doesn’t explicitly touch on the question of humor, Parry’s book ably illustrates why the problem of distinct juxtapositions, as I have understood it until now, may explain something more fundamental in contemporary media cultures than just one memetic artifact several years old.

Reading *A Theory of Assembly* offered me a new terminology and made me ask myself if I should, instead of juxtaposition, focus on assembly as the ur-memetic operation in my classes going forward. In his well-written study, Parry quite convincingly makes the case that we need to consider assembly as an expressive strategy that has already been in widespread use across several different media ecologies from art galleries to popular and social media. The book ultimately sets out to intervene in theories of human expression itself, positioning assembly alongside narrative, representation, abstraction, performance, parody, mapping, allegory, database, and visualization as a fundamental aspect of how we communicate. These “expressive strategies” or “cultural forms” comprise the pantheon of things we do. Assembly, Parry argues, “has [in our world today saturated with digital and social media] come to equal narrative, representation, and other dominant cultural forms in its capacity to move audiences and mobilize publics, and just as crucially, to do harm.”

Put simply, an assembly is constituted by almost any set of materials and the positions those materials can occupy, and one assembles by acts of selection and configuration. For Parry, much like the narrative drive, there exists a drive for assembly that hinges on being able to see relationally and

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5. Parry, 2.
systemically.6 This drive does not just animate the creation of assembled forms in media, but is also responsible for people pursuing and participating in social assemblies.7 He also links these assemblies, albeit all too briefly, to remix cultures and assemblage (agencement in the Deleuzian sense).8 Assembly, in Parry’s account, does not emerge but is merely recognized; it has already been around us in scholarship and art for quite some time, Parry argues.

A Theory of Assembly can also be read as a self-reflexive collection and arrangement of an impressive array of objects functioning as the foci of analyses. To note just a few, we find examples from across history, ranging from visual art (Hieronymus Bosch’s The Garden of Earthly Delights, Richard Serra’s Verb List, Louise Bourgeois’s 10 AM Is When You Come to Me), sculpture (Kirsten Justesen’s Omstændigheder, Mark Bradford’s Mithra), to installation art (Guanyu Xu’s Parents’ Bedroom and My Desktop, Postcommodity’s Repellent Fence / Valla Repelente) and print art (Joan Fontcuberta’s Googlegrams), and from social media (TikToks, Twitter posts, Instagram pages, archives, online projects, and websites) to comics (Josh Neufeld’s A.D.: New Orleans after the Deluge) and televisual media (Spike Lee’s When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts [HBO, 2006]).9 Parry’s analyses are incisive and texturally lush, making the book a breeze to read. Even the theoretical passages are presented in an extremely systematic fashion; taxonomies are clearly outlined, tables offered, complex arguments lucidly provided, and examples thoughtfully arranged. Several images, stills, and screenshots of various social media and art appear throughout the monograph to provide ample visual aid for even the most uninitiated of meme and net art scholars.

After laying the theoretical groundwork in the introduction and the first chapter, A Theory of Assembly takes up the role of assembly in the context of art and museum spaces in chapter 2. Here, Parry notes several kinds of aesthetic engagements that a lens of assembly brings into focus: assembly can be integral to an artwork, or can be infused in it; assembly can be used to incorporate, participate in, or distribute art; assembly can thus lead to modes of analogies, reconstitution, and other vectors of artistic possibility. In the third chapter—perhaps the most novel and insightful of them all—Parry masterfully takes assembly as a formative and critical framework for memes and internet discourses. Building on the burgeoning subfield of meme studies, Parry notes how memes, especially ones that involve object-labeling, consist of a form of a form.10 In other words, the use of memes assumes “that the world is reducible to a set of situations and scenarios.”11 To understand the practices that animate this use, he offers us the concept of “expressive folksonomy,” indicating the public expression possible through the work

11. Parry, Theory of Assembly, 146.
done when labeling, tagging, and categorizing online. Memes, regardless of whether they are politically abhorrent (plenty of memes are sexist and racist) or socially progressive, bring together hyperdistributed (and sometimes corrosive) media assemblies across scales. Assembly is, for Parry, a fundamental property of the internet era; in fact, when it comes to memes, it is difficult not to assemble. Chapter 4 takes up the art and social media produced in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina to show how comics, photobooks, paintings, films, exhibitions, memes, and massive online archives all select, compile, arrange, and configure, demonstrating a kind of “generativity,” which refers to the ability of such actions and assemblies to rethink social and racial problems for better and for worse. Assembly, in other words, is today an important creative response to catastrophes, particularly for questions of social and cultural memory. Building on this discussion, in the final chapter, *A Theory of Assembly* considers environmental and social violence at large to ask what responses are needed. In this section, Parry engages with Kimberlé Crenshaw’s work on intersectionality and Rob Nixon’s influential interventions on slow violence. Critiquing Nixon’s call for better narratives and better images as a response to environmental violence, Parry instead emphasizes the need for better assemblies, even re-reading some of Nixon’s own most generative examples as falling into the category of “generative assemblies” and “media assemblies.” Such conceptual reassemblies, where Parry finds some productive potentialities, include countermapping projects and atlases and Mark Bradford’s 2015 installation *Scorched Earth*. In “memetic drip” (the “ambivalent incrementality of social media”), the author finds another possible response to environmental violence through better assemblies. By doing so through assembling materials such as EcoTok, the part of TikTok concerned about the environment, alongside Nap Ministry, a movement advocating taking naps as a liberatory social good, *A Theory of Assembly* occasionally dissolves the gap between the two valences of drip: the slang for looking effortlessly cool and the incremental additions of one drop at a time.

If studies of textual and visual culture tend to rely on the frameworks of narrative and representation, *A Theory of Assembly* convincingly suggests that media studies is the proper field for exploring assembly as a cultural form. In this regard, *A Theory of Assembly* is certainly ambitious; it jostles with established notions of disciplinary knowledge. Given this scope, I certainly wouldn’t have minded a greater, more extensive engagement with the origins, specificities, and types of assemblies. While the book is theoretically sophisticated, its implicit presentism leaves the reader searching for a more

12. Parry, 146, 158, 173.
13. Parry, 181.
16. Parry, 240–255. Among other media being critically read here are, interestingly enough, Timothy Morton’s tweets to Rob Nixon, which made me look at my own social media shitposts in fear.
17. Missing from Parry’s account, for example, are assembly languages and computer assemblers, systems that, among other things, mediate between the human-oriented symbols and machinic operations all around us today.
comprehensive historicization and spatialization of assembly. An exploration of how, when, where, and why assembly came to be might, for example, need to contend more seriously with existing concepts such as collage, montage, found art, or remix. Surely Hieronymus Bosch in the fifteenth century would not have considered himself an assembler. How might one then understand assembly’s historical and geographical contexts and evolutions? Why has assembly—the ur-operation of economic production in America in the twentieth century, à la assembly lines—emerged in the twenty-first as a form of media production and critique? Has the relationship between political assembly—be it communal, institutional, or architectural—and creative or artistic assembly changed over time and space? Perhaps, in the end, the book raises more questions than it sometimes answers. But perhaps, also, these questions are to the book’s credit, pointing to the need for more work on the topic.

Despite its limitations, A Theory of Assembly expertly demonstrates what media theory at a scale might look like as a discipline; the book assures us that there are still creative and popular media operations that need accounting for. A Theory of Assembly is a vital intervention, then, and I remain especially convinced of the fact that it has offered us one of the most powerful, though perhaps not the first, theoretical vocabularies for understanding memetic operations on the internet. But more than just noting how some media-materials, such as memes, are assemblies, A Theory of Assembly also suggests how assemblies might themselves be memetic, insofar as they go viral, exceeding their origins and moving into other mediums. This is precisely why my class sessions on memes are about to find a new verve starting this semester. Parry, through his theory of assembly, presents a vocabulary that my students and I can utilize to generate more precise understandings of viral and other pervasive and yet-to-be-outlined cultural and creative experiences, whether they are arrayed in museums or in low-effort memes.

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18. For more on the burgeoning discussions in media studies of logistical assemblies, see Matthew Hockenberry, Nicole Starosielski, and Susan Zieger, eds., Assembly Codes: The Logistics of Media (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).