Janice Gurney

Actor-Network-Theory and the Translation of Things: An Introduction

**Actor-Network-Theory and
the Translation of Things:
An Introduction**

On the Series

Named after the list of corrected errors appended to publications, the *Errata* Series consists of short texts or interpretive notes presented in the form of a small pamphlet with hand-drawn illustrations. Thematically the *Errata* Series focuses on corrections to the existing state of discourse.

Series Editors
Miriam Jordan & Julian Jason Haladyn

Janice Gurney

Actor-Network-Theory and the Translation of Things: An Introduction

As an artist working in the late 1970s, I began to think more critically about what I wanted my work to do. One of the strongest reactions I felt at the time was against the concept of having to develop a personal artistic style. I saw style as a trap, a surface appearance that made change and growth much more difficult. Style was supposed to define you as an individual, as being different from other artists. But I was continually thinking about the importance of making connections—connections I could make in my work to other people and to other time periods. I needed to incorporate other ways of being in the world into my work, to construct bridges between different people and histories. At first I made connections between myself, art historical sources, film and family histories. For example, in one of these early works, I included photographic reproductions of Uccello's paintings and the actual drawings of a great-uncle within a constellation of my own drawings and paintings. In another work I linked two small found paintings by

an anonymous artist with another small painting by Andy Patton, my own text painting and a painting by well-known Toronto painter Joanne Tod. I continued to incorporate the work of other artists who were part of my art community—Arlene Stamp, Sheila Ayearst, David Clarkson, Will Gorlitz, Shirley Wiitasalo, Oliver Girling, Rob Flack—into my own work. I used their work as elements of my own work, placing them in other contexts with connections to other elements that I had made. Some of these elements were photographic, others were paintings, some were text. Because this new work was not made up of only one part, a complex constellation was formed between different media and different makers.

The works I made using other artists' physical pieces were not collaborations. At the time, I called my method of making work "montage" because not only did it include a number of different media in one work, it also included existing images taken from other sources and the actual work made by other people. This method of working reinforced my belief that when an artwork goes out into the world, the artist no longer has control over how it is received and understood. And, like any physical entity, it can be lost or damaged. I was interested in how these artists that I knew gave up control of their work when they gave it to me. They had a willingness to let something unknown happen to it, along with an element of trust in me and a curiosity as what I would do with it.

Their work was changed when I incorporated it into a different context within my own work. It was used both as a material and as another way of seeing the world that I could now present in addition to my own. In the process, the meanings these other artists had originally intended for their work were altered.

Appropriation and issues of originality were just beginning to be talked about at that moment in the late seventies. Although these issues were crucial aspects of my thinking about my work, I was more concerned with how I could make connections to others. Actors, alliances and translations were already all in place in my work but I did not yet recognize the roles that they played. I sensed that my role could be seen as something between that of a film director who was also an actor in the film and a curator who was also one of the artists in the exhibition. I now realize that making these multiple connections was the beginning of forming a network. At that time, a friend and fellow artist, Judith Doyle, spoke in conversation about my work in terms of social networking. I remember being skeptical of the concept of the network because it seemed to be in opposition to the materiality of things.

It took ten more years before I began to understand that non-humans such as art galleries and art services could also be actors within a network. I had listed the names of these kinds of actors, along with human actors,

in Credits*, a work that I made in 1990. All the names recorded in this work were of the actors I had used in some way in making my work from 1979 to 1990. It was another fifteen years before I came across the concepts of actor-network-theory (ANT). They made the idea of the network so much richer and more complex. In addition to placing both human and non-human actors within a network of alliances, non-human actors were not only understood as material objects, but could also include things such as events, ideas, hallucinations, stories, thoughts and moments in time. These actors formed shifting alliances within networks of continuously transforming things.*

The networks of connections that I had intuitively been making in my work for many years now had a much stronger foundation on which to build. By now, I have accumulated enough history to enable me to re-examine my past work. I have a retrospective view of the work that I did in the early 1980s, a time when I was unaware of the concepts that ANT has now mobilized. Today, I can begin to re-frame past work in the light of ANT, recognizing that I have intuitively worked with these ideas for many years, again without any conscious knowledge of their presence. Appropriation was a practice that I realized I was taking part in only after I had already made much of my early work, after the term was in wide circulation and was being applied by others to this work. Then, in

the late 1990s, appropriation was no longer considered to be relevant as a method of making art. It was a known strategy that had been completely co-opted as an empty form. As with many art strategies, it was now seen as part of a time that was past. Actor-network-theory has opened up a way to move beyond the restrictions of this closed system of historical moments that is much more useful to me as an artist working in the present. I now see the ideas of appropriation that labelled much of the work that I made during the 1980s and 1990s as other actors in even larger networks that can continue to change and expand.

My introduction to ANT came in 2006 through a conversation with Dave Kemp, another student in the Master of Visual Studies program with me at the University of Toronto from 2005-2007. He was also taking a collaborative degree in the Knowledge Media Design Institute where he had encountered the concepts of actor-network-theory. Dave thought that the methods I used when making my work were closely related to ANT. I did not follow it up at that time because I thought the theory was more relevant to computer networks than to the kinds of networks I was interested in, such as social networks. Still, the idea stayed with me.

Three years later, during my early research for this thesis, one of the first books I read on Bruno Latour and actor-network-theory was Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour

and Metaphysics *by the philosopher Graham Harman.*
More recently I came across an entry in another book
by Harman, Towards Speculative Realism*, in which he*
speaks about his introduction to Bruno Latour. He says
that his reading of Latour began in 1998 on the
recommendation of Felix Stalder, a Swiss doctoral
candidate at the University of Toronto. They had met
when Harman gave two lectures on the Heidegger/
McLuhan relationship there the previous month. In this
story of another University of Toronto connection, I saw
one more instance of how accidents and contingencies
align in the formation of real world networks.

In retrospect, these moments of alignment can be seen
as evidence of our day-to-day experience of how things
continuously come together in unexpected alliances.
Maybe our sense of serendipity should not be so
surprising. Artists are expected to go wherever they need
to go to find whatever they need to find. For example,
Philip Guston's introduction to Walter Benjamin's
thoughts about allegory came through a book review
published in 1977 in The New York Review of Books*.*
As David Kaufman noted in his book Telling Stories:
Philip Guston's Later Works*, Guston had described his*
work as allegorical since 1972. Yet after reading about
Benjamin's views on allegory in Charles Rosen's review
of Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Guston's sense of*
how and why he worked with ideas of allegory in his

painting was strengthened. Perhaps Guston read Rosen's review because it was printed in the same issue that contained a review of a book by his friend Philip Roth? Whatever the reason, it had a big effect on his thinking about painting. In my own experience, an unexpected event that had long-term consequences for my work occurred when reading one of the many mystery novels I read as a form of entertainment. In a novel by P.D. James I discovered a fragment of one of the meditations of Marcus Aurelius to which I was immediately drawn. As a result, multiple translations of his meditations became a source of my work for many years.

The connections formed by many different networks continued to leap out at me as I wrote and made the artworks for my thesis. I began to see both appropriation, one of the methods I used to make art, and my own use of secondary sources in my thesis as related methodologies, as other forms of translation. It seemed accidental when I found a fragment of a meditation by Marcus Aurelius in a work of fiction just as it did when Philip Guston found Walter Benjamin's views on allegory in a book review. Secondary sources often seem to come together to form unexpected networks with unforeseen connections. But they are a crucial aspect in the operation of a network. They translate primary sources through the actions of many other actors.

Marcus Aurelius wrote his meditations in classical Greek. I can only read them in English, but in many different translations written over many centuries. I cannot read the writings of Michel Serres in French, only in the English translations of the original work. My introduction to actor-network-theory came through Graham Harman's book on French sociologist Bruno Latour. Another book that I read late in my research was one of the most useful books on Latour's thoughts. It was written by two Danish writers, first in Danish, then translated into English. It includes an interview with Latour that was first done in English, then translated into Danish, then back into English for the English publication. As the writers Anders Blok and Torben Elgaard Jensen note in their preface, "Not that this seems to bother a man for whom translation as transformation represents a general truth about the world...." (Blok and Jensen, x).

Over time, I have come to the realization that all things are translated by time. Any direct connections we had to primary sources have by now been eroded. Throughout this process, they have become encrusted with additions and interpretations. It is impossible for the original meanings attached to an object from the past to exist apart from its interaction with objects in the present. Meanings are transformed within the larger networks of things that continue to spin out through time. Time has translated the primary sources of the past into secondary sources.

*

Many actors are jostling for space. Some push their way forward. The concepts of actor-network-theory allow these actors to emerge and fade throughout this paper. One night I dreamed about writing this thesis as a fiction where characters and events would interact in ways as yet unknown to me. In my thesis, one of the characters would be Pascal Mercier, the author of Night Train to Lisbon. *In Mercier's novel, the main protagonist, Raimund Gregorius, writes in a letter about how much influence* The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius *have had on his life. "You and I are both admirers of Marcus Aurelius, and you will remember this passage in his* Meditations*: '... Every man has but one life. But yours is nearly finished, though in it you had no regard for yourself but placed thy felicity in the souls of others... But those that do not observe the impulses of their own minds must of necessity be unhappy' "(Mercier, 29). The place and importance of these meditations to both readers and characters shifts as they move continuously throughout the novel. As I read this book, I was also moved back through time, to the moment in 1998 when I first encountered the writings of Marcus Aurelius. My introduction took place in another work of fiction, the mystery novel* Original Sin *by P. D. James. The fragment of the meditation quoted below was spoken by a character in the novel as part of a eulogy for a murder*

victim. As in Mercier's novel, the fragment was not identified by its number or translator. This unmoored text provided the spark for my work with, and research into, the many English translations made of the meditations over time.

> In a word all the things of the body are as a river, and the things of the soul as a dream and a vapor; and life is a warfare and a pilgrim's sojourn, and fame after death is only forgetfulness.
>
> -from *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, Book 2.17, translation by C. R. Haines

In *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Bruno Latour says, "An 'actor' in the hyphenated expression actor-network is not the source of an action but the moving target of a vast array of entities swarming toward it. To retrieve its multiplicity, the simplest solution is to reactivate the metaphors implied in the word *actor*… If we accept to unfold the metaphor, the very word actor directs our attention to a complete dislocation of the action... By definition, action is dislocated" (Latour, 46). In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau writes "In modern Athens, the vehicles of mass transportation are called metaphori. To go to work or come home, one takes a'metaphor'— a bus or a train. Stories could also take this noble name: everyday, they traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make

sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories" (de Certeau, 115). Are the novels *Original Sin* and *Night Train to Lisbon* another form of metaphor, vehicles that move me from place to place? Michel de Certeau believes that "stories, whether everyday or literary, serve as a means of mass transportation, as *metaphori*. Every story is a travel story—a spatial practice" (de Certeau, 115).

In his book Genesis*, French philosopher Michel Serres says that, in Greek, "Thesis is the action of putting something in a place... It is a place taken, a place where someone has set a foot down" (Serres, 53). I will set out on a road where the fragments of stories I tell throughout this thesis will not remain in a fixed place but will also become vehicles that move the readers from place to place within the thesis. If these fragments fit together to form a whole, it will have an irregular shape, composed of gaps and glue. The pieces will hold together at their rough edges of contact, the cracks between them sometimes more visible and sometimes less. At times the object will break apart, be scattered, then pieced together again.*

Rome is the thesis that acts as a model for this thesis.

In his chapter "Walking in the City," Michel de Certeau suggests that Rome was a city that had "learned the art of growing old by playing on all its pasts" (de Certeau, 91).

> The true museum of Rome, the one of which I speak,
> is certainly made up of statues, colossi, temples,
> obelisks. But no less important are the places, sites,
> mountains, streets, ancient roads, the various positions
> of the city in ruins, geographical relationships, the
> interactions between all these objects, memories, local
> traditions, existing customs, and comparisons that are
> possible only in Rome itself.
>
>   -Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy,
>   1796

In 1928, Walter Benjamin published *One-Way Street*,
"a montage of textual fragments in which he juxtaposes
observations on everyday life with descriptions of his
dreams... it has more the appearance of a city plan:
avenues of open space cross its pages, between compact
and irregular blocks of text" (Burgin, 139). It begins with
the following epigraph:

> **This street is named**
> **Asja Lacis Street**
> **after her who**
> **as an engineer**
> **cut it through the author**

In his book *In/Different Spaces*, Victor Burgin goes on
to speak about "Naples", the essay that Benjamin wrote
together with Asja Lacis in 1925. In it they describe the
space of the city of Naples as being porous: "Building

and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades, and the stair-ways. In everything they preserve the scope to become a theatre of new, unforeseen constellations" (Benjamin and Lacis, 169). It is also a space for actors. "Buildings are used as a popular stage... Balcony, courtyard, window, gateway, staircase, roof are at the same time stage and boxes" (Benjamin and Lacis, 170). "Just as the living room reappears on the street, with chairs, hearth, and altar, so, only much more loudly, the street migrates into the living room" (Benjamin and Lacis, 174).

In her introduction to *One-Way Street*, Susan Sontag wrote: "Benjamin's poor sense of direction and inability to read a street map became his love of travel and his mastery of the art of straying... But space is broad, teeming with possibilities, positions, intersections, passages, detours, U-turns, dead-ends, one-way streets. Too many possibilities, indeed" (Sontag, 13). Sylviane Agacinski took these openings further, saying of Benjamin in her book *Time Passing: Modernity and Nostalgia*, "The 'passer' is also the one in whom traces intersect: a weave of the city, rocks, monuments, streets, images, things seen and things read, street signs or books, stories told" (Agacinski, 56).

Walter Benjamin felt the relationship between text and streets, between reading and walking. Writing about Benjamin's Parisian stroller in his *Book of Passages*

(Das Passagen-Werk), Agacinski concludes, "The writer of *The Passages* achieves a work of collage or montage with the texts he collects, assembling the pieces and juxtaposing some of his own texts with 'passages' from Baudelaire or Nadar, from Maxime Du Camp or Balzac... The writer passes between the texts and makes us pass there, building bridges from one to another, making original montages... Benjamin's writing imitates the heterogeneity of the urban fabric" (Agacinski, 57). In his essay "Attested Auditor of Books" in *One-Way Street*, Benjamin wrote about the typographical experiments found in Mallarmé's book *Coup de dés*. He pointed out that in these experiments, "Printing, having found in the book a refuge in which to lead an autonomous existence, is pitilessly dragged out onto the street..." (Benjamin, 62).

The narrative of this thesis is that of a walk taken through a city, a story told in fragments. Along main roads, smoothly paved, lined with both old and new buildings. Detours onto smaller roads, with surfaces of bricks or paving stones. Houses encountered along the way, both familiar and strange, some in ruins. Diversions, chance meetings. Dead-ends.

The formation of constellations of seemingly unrelated things, events and times is an idea put forth in the writings of Walter Benjamin. In the essay "Capitalism, modernism, and postmodernism" from 1985, Terry Eagleton has spoken of this process as one "within which

sudden affinities, correspondences and constellations may be fashioned between disparate struggles" (Eagleton, 365). I can now see Benjamin's constellations as a precursor of networks. But his idea of "sudden affinities" that come together to form constellations has been further developed using the principles of actor-network-theory as set forth by Bruno Latour. ANT recognizes that there are more complex processes involved when sudden connections are made between disparate things. These things have their own individual strengths and weaknesses. Alliances between them are continuously being made and broken as power shifts from one actor to another. Things are also changed when they are translated in the network or move from one network to another.

I recently came across a sentence written by E.M. Forster in a letter to a friend that was quoted by P.N. Furbank in his introduction to the novel *Maurice*: "I was trying to connect up and use all the fragments I was born with" (Forster, 9). I do not see all the fragments I am gathering together as being something I was born with, but as things I have collected over time. But, like E.M. Forster, I am trying to connect and use up many of these fragments in my work and in my writing.

Bibliography

Agacinski, Sylviane. *Time Passing: Modernity and Nostalgia*, trans. Jody Gladding. Columbia University Press, 2003.

Benjamin, Walter and Asja Lacis. "Naples" in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Schocken, 1978.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982.

_____. *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and K. Shorter, Verso, London, U.K., 1997.

_____. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, Verso, London, U.K., 1998.

_____. "On the Concept of History", *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938-1940*. trans. Edmund Jephcott and others. eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 398-400, 2003.

Blok, Anders and Jensen, Torben Elgaard. *Bruno Latour: Hybrid thoughts in a hybrid world*, Routledge, London and New York. 2011.

Burgin, Victor. *In/Different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture*, University of California Press, 1996.

de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984.

Eagleton, Terry. "Capitalism, Modernism, and Postmodernism", *New Left Review*, I/152, July/August, London, UK., 1985.

Harman, Graham. *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*, Re-Press, Melbourne, Australia, 2009.

_____. *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures*, Zero Books, Winchester, UK and Washington, USA, 2010.

James, P.D. *Original Sin*, Penguin Group, 1995.

Kaufmann, David. *Telling Stories: Philip Guston's Later Works*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2010.

Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social: an Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2005.

_____. "Where are The Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts" in *The Object Reader*, eds. Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins, Routledge, London, 2009.

Latour, Bruno, Graham Harman and Peter Erdelyi. *The Prince and the Wolf: Latour and Harman at the LSE*, Zero Books, Winchester, UK and Washington, USA, 2011.

Law, John J. and John Hassard, eds. *Actor-Network Theory and After*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1999.

Lucretius. *The Way Things Are*, trans. Rolfe Humphries, Indiana University Press, London: Bloomington, 1968.

Marx, Ursula, ed. *Walter Benjamin's Archive: images, texts, signs*, Verso, London, New York, 2007.

Mercier, Pascal. *Night Train to Lisbon*, trans. Barbara Harshav, Grove Press, New York, 2008.

Needleman, Jacob and John P. Piazza. trans. *The Essential Marcus Aurelius*, Penguin Group, New York, 2008.

Rosen, Charles. "The Ruins of Walter Benjamin" in *Romantic Poets, Critics and Other Madmen*, Harvard University Press, 1998.

Serres, Michel. *Detachment*, trans. C. James and R. Federman, Ohio University Press, 1989.

_____. *Rome: The Book of Foundations*, trans. Felicia McCarren, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1991.

Serres, Michel with Bruno Latour. *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time*, trans. Roxanne Lapidus, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1995.

Serres, Michel. *Genesis*, trans. Genevieve James and James Nielson, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1995.

_____. *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr, University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

_____. *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley, Continuum, 2009.

Janice Gurney was born in Winnipeg, and currently lives in Toronto. She has been exhibiting her artworks since the late 1970s, with solo exhibitions in Canada and the United States. Her work has been included in numerous group exhibitions internationally, and is represented in the collections of the National Gallery of Canada, Art Gallery of Ontario, Winnipeg Art Gallery, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, McIntosh Gallery (Western University), University of Toronto, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, Museum London, and the Canada Council Art Bank. Gurney received her BFA and MVS respectively at the University of Manitoba and the University of Toronto, and her PhD from Western University, London, Ontario in 2012. This current text is a modified version of the introduction to her dissertation titled *An Alliance of Fragments: Actor-Network-Theory and the Translation of Things*.

Errata