

in conversation

This email interview was held following a conversation between Louise Van Der Bijl and Anthea Pokroy of Assemblage, and Mandy Conidaris and Kevin Sneider from outoftheCUBE (OOTC) in April 2014.

OOTC Louise and Anthea, we are very glad to have the opportunity to collaborate with you on an outoftheCUBE Assemblage exhibition. In different ways we feel both our projects are trying to assist early-career artists in continuing to make work and promote their careers.

Could you tell us a little about why you decided to start up Assemblage? What need did you see among artists at the time?

LVDB - We started Assemblage in 2010. We had studied together at Wits graduating in 2007 and had then each gone out into the world and pursued various jobs. In 2010 we found ourselves both in Johannesburg and desperately wanting to get back into making art. We decided to start Assemblage as a support network/tool for ourselves and artists similar to ourselves – wanting to make art and exhibit but not sure where to start. We wanted to encourage collaboration, sharing, professionalism and excellence – these were all things we felt were lacking in the Johannesburg visual arts community to varying degrees. We started with a website and quite rapidly progressed to starting our peer mentoring sessions – these existed as an opportunity for artists to get feedback and input on their work. We then began our workshop programme and started seeking exhibition opportunities. In 2012 we opened our studio space. Each activity has developed as a response to a need we have seen within the visual arts community of Johannesburg.

AP - I had just come back from spending two years in London after graduating from my BAFA at Wits. I hadn't made art while I was away but was exposed to the most incredible opportunities and resources for London-based artists. Upon my return, and when deciding to start making art again, I saw this massive gap between the institution and reaching a certain level of 'success' i.e. being picked up by a gallery. There was no place/space for emerging artists like myself; no emerging artist group exhibitions to take part in; no one advising on how to actually go about 'being an artist'. The need emerged from our own needs, but we started recognizing this need in so many of our peers that we graduated with, and then when the word of mouth began to spread, in many other artists in Johannesburg.

OOTC - **How did you think a project such as Assemblage could alleviate this need?**

LVDB - We felt that by developing our programmes we would meet ours and other artists' needs, we responded directly to what we wanted and then later to what artists told us they wanted. By doing this we were pretty certain we were beginning to alleviate the identified

needs, that is artists need to receive feedback and support, to improve what they were doing and then to be able to exhibit what they produced.

AP - We wanted to create a 'support structure' that was in a way similar to what we had during university, but without becoming institutionalized. At university (or any other training college) you have exams and deadlines, your lecturers and peers around you constantly giving you input, advice and critique, a studio space and exhibition spaces just given to you. In the real world those things aren't just there – so we wanted to create it. Our monthly peer mentoring sessions give that monthly deadline to encourage artists to constantly be making and not be producing work in isolation. In the sessions, the mentors, as well as the other artists, provide that motivation and critique. We have the studios now and give artists platforms through group exhibitions.

OOTC - Did you have any other experiences that influenced and motivated you to establish Assemblage?

LVDB - I worked at Brodie/Stevenson for 3 years, this influenced me a lot. I saw what artists were and were not doing and began to understand how the gallery industry functioned. What I came to realize was that Fine Art graduates were lacking in many very necessary skills required to have a career within the arts industry i.e. how to present themselves, write about their works, document their works, make work properly and I saw a way to rectify this need. Hence my desire to share knowledge and encourage sharing, workshops and mentorship.

AP – The one thing we started to do, which was something that was not emulating the education institutions, was to run professional practice workshops. When we were at Wits there was no professional practice training (I think there is now). No one taught us how to write a contract, make out an invoice to a client, photograph our artwork, write an artist statement, and write funding proposals (or even that we would need to do that!). That's when our workshop programme began. We wanted to encourage artists to be professional, not to be taken advantage of and to improve the unprofessional reputation that artists often have.

OOTC - Assemblage is more than just rented studio space, it is becoming a holistic centre for artists to converse and collaborate, share skills and experiences, and this was part of your vision. Could you elaborate on this?

LVDB - As mentioned above, Assemblage existed for 2 years without a space. While we realized fairly early on we would need a space eventually, it wasn't our main aim, rather a by-product of our primary activities, that is, mentorship and skills training along with exhibiting. When we did open the space it was exciting and it has made what we do much more accessible to people. There is, of course, also the danger in this that is that people think that we are only a space, and it is important for us to emphasize that we do so much

more than offer studios. We want to be running our skills, mentorship and exhibition programmes and also encouraging as many artists as possible to share and collaborate thereby improving the broader visual arts industry.

AP - We felt, in 2010 when we began, that there wasn't that much going on in the independent art scene (outside of galleries), and if there was something interesting it was happening in small, insular pockets. We wanted to create a 'hub' where all visual artists in Johannesburg could come together to share, network and collaborate.

OOTC - **Your website mission statement states that you wish Assemblage to become a hub for the Johannesburg visual arts community, and it is situated in Newtown, already a hub for other creative communities such as Artists Proof Studio and the Bag Factory. These have in part served a need for certain segments of the Joburg art community. Do you see Assemblage as offering an opportunity to draw in the wider art community, namely artists that may not previously have worked in Newtown?**

LVDB - Yes, we were hoping for this and are still aiming towards it. The way we see it, there are so many interesting things happening within the Johannesburg visual arts community but they happen in pockets and cliques. We want to open things up, allow as many people as possible to be aware of the opportunities, events and activities happening out there and thereby improving the industry. Ideally we want people to be able to come to Assemblage and for us to redirect them to the appropriate platform or space, encouraging conversation and sharing.

AP - We most certainly work with artists that are not based in Newtown. We recently received funding from RMB to do research into the needs of the Johannesburg visual arts community so that we could customize our workshop programme to speak to these needs. As part of the research, it was our mission to discover and connect with artists, arts collectives and organisations throughout the Greater Johannesburg region. We have done this and work with artists from Soweto and Alexandra, even as far away as the Vaal.

OOTC - **Could you describe the cross-section of artists who currently have studio space at Assemblage?**

LVDB - The artists currently occupying the Assemblage Studios are a broad mix of artists. We have one or two recent university graduates, we have several printmakers coming out of spaces such as Artist Proof Studios, of varying experience levels. We have graduates from UJ, TUKS, WITS, KZN, and UCT. We have one or two self-taught artists. We have at least one graphic designer. We have painters, photographers, printmakers, installation artists, sculptors. The artists range from their early 20s to their mid-40s. So overall a very mixed bunch.

AP - There are artists working in a variety of media at the studio, including painting, printmaking, sculpture, installation, performance and photography. We have quite a lot of printmakers here (many of which are Artist Proof Studio graduates). It was for this reason, amongst others, that we decided to open a printmaking studio at the studios to cater for their needs, and those of others outside of the studio.

OOTC - What do you see as the positive impact that working within this community is having on their creative lives?

LVDB - I think that working in a community space such as this has several benefits for the artists. They all tend to treat the space as their office or work space and most are there 8 – 5pm or 10am – 8pm. Artists are continually asking for advice from each other and bouncing ideas off one another. There is a certain level of competitiveness and more awareness around what funding and other opportunities are out there and the artists encourage each other to apply. We see the artists using their spaces to develop their ideas and concepts and we see many of them increasingly exhibiting the longer they are in the space.

AP - I think that working in a community motivates you to do better. It puts necessary pressure on you when you see your peers making work, exhibiting and selling. There is also a strong sense of support in this community – there isn't 'competition' here – we all just want the best for each other and to see each other succeed. There have been many occasions where we have seen artists helping each other – reading each other's funding proposals, making introductions to positive buyers, etc.

OOTC - What are your criteria for selecting artists applying for studio space, or do artists come to you by a word of mouth recommendations from your existing artists?

LVDB - Any artist can apply. All we need are examples of work, a CV and motivation letter. Artists do come to us by word of mouth and also through our PR channels – our website, Facebook and twitter. We then review the application and decide whether the artist is appropriate for our space. We consult the existing studio artists for some applications, especially when they will be sharing a studio with a new artist – this has sometimes led to self-filtering. It's as if the artists themselves expect a certain standard of work and if it isn't produced they show that this is not acceptable.

AP - There is an application process – artists must send through their CVs, references, images of their work and a motivation as to why they want to be at the studio. As we are still a young organization and we have rent to pay, we are not able to be too fussy. In the future, when we have extensive waiting lists, we will be able to have a more stringent selection process.

OOTC - You have just opened up a printmaking studio on your premises. What techniques does this offer and who will facilitate artists' exploration in print? For example, you have

an involvement with some printmaker/artists who have completed their 3-year training program at Artists Proof Studio – does this offer one way forward for their careers, as technical printmakers?

LVDB - The printmaking studio is a separate business that operates out of the Assemblage studios, Assemblage is a shareholder. We have a large traditional press on loan from Beezy Bailey, who we are very grateful to, and we have a fully kitted out screenprinting unit and darkroom. So lino, monotype, drypoint and all forms of screenprint can be facilitated in the space. Yes, several studio artists are involved in the running of the space as they have been trained by APS or KZN Varsity and we are starting to run a busy workshop programme. Artists can book and pay to use the space per day and we have many activities planned, including collaborative portfolios and exhibitions. Yes, we are definitely hoping that this will offer a way forward for young printmakers just starting out.

OOTC - Do you intend this facility to function as an ‘open access’ studio (i.e. space for rent) or to offer a contract printing service? Or will the studio be available only to Assemblage artists?

LVDB - As mentioned above it will primarily function as an ‘open access’ studio, but contract printing will also be possible. To access the space, you will need to sign up as a member or otherwise you will pay a premium on the normal daily rate. Visit www.printsonpaperstudio.com for more information.

OOTC - Regarding other ways of connecting and participating in the larger arts community, do you offer, for example, lectures and workshops given by outside artists/specialists?

LVDB - Yes, this is something we began doing in the early days of our activities, particularly workshops. We sought out professionals within the industry who we felt had knowledge to share. They either ran workshops for us for free or we paid them a small amount. We continue to do this, for example last year we ran a budgeting workshop facilitated by a chartered accountant. In the past we have run workshops on copyright, art law, basic website building, writing an artist statement and so on all run by various arts professionals and others including Toby Orford (a lawyer), Brendan Copestake and Mary Corrigan. We have also had a number of talks in the past given by people such as Gordon Froud and Alet Vorster on a range of topics, and we hope to hold more in the future.

AP - Yes we do – we are currently making some decisions on how to proceed with our workshop programme, but in the past the workshops have been run by specialists in that field. For example, Alet Vorster ran a workshop on ‘Making artworks that last’ that looked at working with archival materials; Mary Corrigan ran a workshop on ‘Writing an Artist Statement’; Carmen Dell from First Rand Bank ran a workshop on ‘Budgeting: How to manage your money as an artist’, etc. We are always open to specialists approaching us to

run a workshop. As we are a non-profit organization and our goal is to make these workshops as accessible as possible. We are, unfortunately, unable to pay the facilitator a large amount, so most of the time they are run on a volunteer (or partly) basis. We also have Open Studio events quarterly and are always looking for an interesting speaker to feature at one of these events.

OOTC - It seems as though many people are enthusiastic about Assemblage, and been generous with their knowledge and time?

LVDB - Yes, we have found this and it is very exciting for us, it seems to affirm the needs we have identified and encourages us to continue what we are doing. Assemblage exists because of volunteers. The Assemblage trustees continue even now as volunteers.

AP - My motto is 'If you don't ask, you don't get' – and that has proven to be true with Assemblage. From the beginning people have been very generous with allowing us to use their venues for workshops, peer mentoring and exhibitions. Also, most of the furniture, appliances and books in our library were donated. We also have a great relationship with restaurant Primi Piatti who give us pizza for every big event that we have! From the beginning we have also been really good at meeting with as many people as we could, and asking as many questions as we could, and through that have gained lots of valuable insights into the industry.

OOTC - Who have been most involved in assisting you in the setting up and running of Assemblage?

LVDB - We have spoken to so many people over the last four years who have all influenced us in various ways. We find value in meeting with others, especially those who have more experience or knowledge than ourselves. In the early stages we received a lot of support from Wits University, VANSA, the Bag Factory and Play Braamfontein. All of these entities allowed us to use spaces and facilities for free or at very low cost. We were also supported by numerous landlords and entities such as the Joburg Fringe who allowed us to access spaces for exhibitions. We have had exhibitions in Maboneng, Braamfontein, and even the Drakensberg because of their support. We received help from a law firm when setting Assemblage up as a legal entity. We received many generous donations of furniture, books and equipment when we first opened the Assemblage Studios – in fact we now have a fully kitted out space with tables, chairs, a library, a fully equipped kitchen all due to generous donations. We have received a huge amount of support from Business and Arts South Africa especially through their mentorship programme which has been incredible for us. In fact, we could list lots of people who have helped us to get to where we are, individuals who have given their time and energy, sometimes just by listening to us. We are so grateful for all this support. One thing we have learnt is to always ask, so many people are actually so willing to give if you can identify your needs as being other than monetary.

Lastly the primary running of Assemblage for the last 4 years has been shared between myself, Anthea, and Mandy Johnston on volunteer basis. We have built an amazing and strong team and it has been exciting to find individuals who share your vision and are willing to work at something. We aim to continue to share this vision with as many people as possible.

AP - Louise and I started the initial conversations around Assemblage. Mandy Johnston joined us soon afterwards and wanted to run with the workshop programme so she is in charge of that. All three of us are Trustees. None of us are able to run Assemblage as a full time job, and so we all have other ways of supporting ourselves. We have been running the organization for almost 4 years on a volunteer basis, and only recently in March, received some funding to hire both an administrator and an intern. Having those extra hands has been a tremendous help.

OOTC - You both received your BA Fine Art degrees from Wits. Are there any links between Wits and assemblage, either formally or informally?

LVDB - Initially Wits was our point of departure so we returned and used space, asked for advice and pulled artists from their graduates. Wits is still generous to us – they will allow us to use space and speak to their artists but no, there are no links beyond this today. We do think it is important to keep alerting them to what we are doing but we feel the same about UJ and all other educational institutes in Gauteng. We did run a programme for school children with Wits Art Museum last year, though this was quite separate from Wits School of Arts.

It has been important for us to go beyond Wits and not remain only within that space, so maybe in some ways it has pushed us into where we are going now.

OOTC - Do you envisage forging links with communities in other parts of the country, such as Greatmore Studios in Cape Town, or are you intending to be exclusively Joburg-based and expand within this city?

LVDB - We have always wanted to expand beyond Joburg and have once or twice explored the possibility of linking to other spaces but we have realized this is dependent on the right relationships and connections which we have not yet found. Beyond this we feel that Assemblage in other parts of the country is going to be dependent on resources, which we do not yet have. We would love to open an Assemblage Studios in each major city!

AP - We would love to expand what we do to other parts of the country – we know that there is a need for what we do elsewhere in SA. Unfortunately, we are restricted by resources – both financial and human resources – and so this is more of a long term vision. The Turbine Art Fair group exhibition will include artists from other parts of the country, so we hope to do more projects like that, but would be unable to without funding (that

exhibition is funded by RMB). We are hoping to set up a residency programme (but again, are looking for the funding to do that) which may engage with artists in other parts of the country.

OOTC - Regarding this exhibition *Assemblage Studios – an experiment*, did you put out a Call-for-Artists within the studio? Is your curatorial intention to exhibit the cross-section of work being made in the Assemblage space? Are there any cross-overs of influence shown between the works?

LVDB - I did put an open call for artists within the studio and yes, the curatorial intention was to exhibit a cross-section of work being made in the Assemblage Studios. There are most definitely cross-overs of influence shown between the works which most definitely speak more broadly to our concerns as a society. The works can be divided quite easily into two groups, one that deals with the figurative and identity and one that deals with the navigation of space. In some ways it is surprising how strongly these two themes come through in this body of works. There are several artists who are working very directly with references to Johannesburg and the city space, particularly Ross Passmoor, Yael Feldman, Louise Ross and Audrey Anderson – perhaps the allure of Johannesburg and her spaces are too strong to resist especially for artists travelling into the inner city every day. The majority of the rest of the works are figurative and each speak in such a different way to the author's identity that there is a strong figurative reference I find interesting. Why is this? As a people are we trying to understand how we each fit into the largely fragmented and divided society within which we exist. I hope that the viewer will enjoy creating their own narrative through viewing these works and begin to understand the working process of an artist within a space such as the Assemblage Studios.

OOTC - On a more personal note, when you each speak of your own creative works, the idea of collecting is significant – Anthea's well-known 'I collect gingers', yet Louise, you also mention painting certain things that you collect: newspaper articles, postcards, website links etc. Would you say that Assemblage could be considered an extension of that tendency you both share, in this case the collecting up of creative people?

LVDB - I like this, and yes perhaps it is, collecting and encouraging creative people to be creative and not let the world get you down.

AP - I like that a lot! Yes, I think we are both collectors and connectors. That very idea is embodied in the name 'Assemblage' which implies the putting together of different parts. That was our very intention with starting the organization.

OOTC - Would you say that working within the Assemblage environment with such a variety of artists, and kick-starting the many creative projects that you have, has boosted your engagement with your own artwork?

LVDB - Most definitely, all three of us (Anthea, Mandy and myself) have seen our personal art careers blossom and grow during the period that we have been running Assemblage. What we are doing has most definitely advantaged us and we hope has advantaged many other artists too. We are all exhibiting and selling a bit, and we hope that we are encouraging other artists to pursue the same things.

AP - Most certainly. Even though I am the organizer of peer mentoring, I attend and present my work at every session. The people that I have met through this, and the input that I have received, has been invaluable to my practice. In my own capacity as an artist, I am participating in two really interesting exhibitions this year – *Fresh Produce* at Turbine Art Fair and *Degrees of Separation* at Absa Gallery – both of which were organised by Assemblage. I am not sure if I would have had those opportunities if it wasn't for the organisation.

OOTC - **You are both practicing artists. Could you each speak about your current work in progress?**

LVDB - I am currently working with my movement through space, particularly my daily journeys through the city and through this looking at memory. I am working on oil paintings and watercolours to articulate these ideas. I will be having a solo exhibition of watercolours in July at the Ithuba Arts Gallery in Braamfontein – I'm very excited about the show and hope that lots of people will come and see what I have been producing.

AP - I am working on quite a few projects this year – some new, others direct extensions of the ginger project. The new work involves exploring further the notion of archiving and collecting through photography and other digital media. Through a continuous process of gathering groups of people, I am interested in identifying collective experience, communal identity and 'otherness'. In this way, I begin analysing (pseudo-scientifically) the likenesses and differences amongst self-identified groups. These investigations all feed into the exploration of my own identity as a white, (ginger), Jewish, female artist living in Johannesburg. The next 'random' coordinate of my own identity that I will be working on next is the "artist".

I am doing a residency through the online platform *Floating Reverie* in May <http://floatingreverie.co.za/residency-2/>, exhibiting at Turbine Art Fair and Absa *L'Atelier* in July, at *Degrees of Separation* in September, and there are a few other pending projects.

Thank you Louise and Anthea!