

Gun (An American Loop): Assemblages, Objects, Agentic Swarms

Johndan Johnson-Eilola

Clarkson University

2020.02.20 Draft

LITTLETON, Colo. (AP/Gray News) - A Florida teenager who authorities say was obsessed with the Columbine school shooting and may have been planning an attack of her own in Colorado just days ahead of the 20th anniversary was found dead Wednesday in an apparent suicide after a nearly 24-hour manhunt. (Foody and Slevin)

Take another, weirder case: theories, concepts, and memes. Is there an ethics of ideas? Not an ethics for their application, as by human hands, advancing a political cause, but an ethics for the interactions of ideas as such? When I utter a phrase, does it owe more than its utterance? When it enters into relations with other utterances—whether as inscription on surface, as charge on magnetic storage device, as disruption in the fluid dynamics of a cold morning—what responsibility do I have to it through my having uttered it?" (Bogost)

The news comes too fast, too much. If we are not numbed to the horror, we often wish we were. And the aftermath: Thoughts and prayers. Gun registration. Mental health services.

The flurry of causes, effects, positions becomes a second-order trauma: textualized, mediated, informed, visualized. The noise subsides and nothing seems to have changed except the body count.

In the United States, at least, we have reached what Lyotard called a "differend," a stalemate or paralysis due between two sides possessing incompatible rules for debate or what counts as legitimate evidence. What causes gun violence? Guns? People? Social inequities? Individual mental instabilities? Violent video games?

To state the obvious, there's no solution to the problem of gun violence because we're living in and across complex, contingent systems involving multiple actors enmeshed in their own complicated situations, often self-contradictory and fluid. Rather than attempt to locate a cause (let alone a solution), the deleuzian concept of assemblages may provide at least a way of conceptualizing the forces and actors/actants involved.

Without being facetious (although clearly oversimplifying), this paper offers an interactive audio-video application as an

approach to grappling with complex issues such as gun violence.

Gun: An American Loop

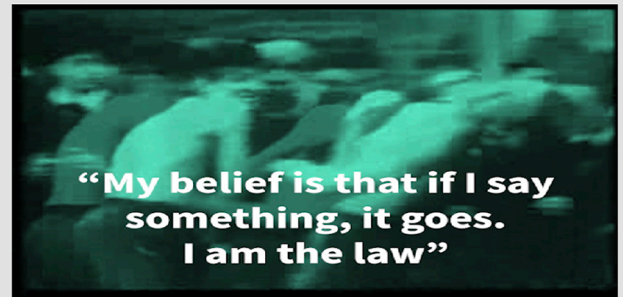


Figure 1: Screen from *Gun*

Assemblages, Objects, Agentic Swarms

In this brief sketch, I'll use the term "assemblage" in a decidedly imprecise way to describe the contingent portions of a social whole—a "conceptual object"—that are "intimately connected and highly conflictual" (Bennett 23) or parts of "a whole that does not totalize its parts" (DeLanda 11).

Some examples: During the collapse of the Roman empire, the different forms of Latin spoken/written/read by differing communities for differing purposes were each semi-detached assemblages (Malins). The power blackout in 2003 that affected 50 million people across Northern America was an assemblage (Bennett 23-50). A person on hallucinatory drugs is an assemblage (Malins).

Assemblage in the philosophical sense differs slightly from that common in art, although the differences and overlaps are themselves useful: In translating the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari into English, the original French term *agencement* becomes "assemblage." As John Philips notes, conventional assemblages in art tend toward collage while *agencement* encompasses the act of putting parts together as well as the (contingently) compound object itself. A cut is a very simple assemblage of flesh and blade: the cut and the act of cutting (108-109).

Although I've previously worked with assemblages in other contexts using slightly differing definitions including

technical communication (Johnson-Eilola and Selber 2007 and writing (Johnson-Eilola 2012; Johnson-Eilola and Selber 2017), much of what I'll use here is drawn from work in Object Oriented Ontology (OOO). A simple thumbnail definition:

OOO puts *things* at the center of being. We human beings are elements, but not the sole elements, of philosophical interest. OOO contends that nothing has special status, but that everything exists equally—plumbers, cotton, bonobos, DVD players, and sandstone, for example. (Bogost)

What OOO buys us (at the cost of the unwieldy acronym) is the ability to move away from human-centered stance that prioritizes mythical free agents. At the same time, it avoids making non-human objects (plumbers, cotton, bonobos, DVD players, and sandstone—and guns) free, autonomous agents. For OOO philosopher Jane Bennett, assemblages are "agentic swarms" involving complex efficacy or creativity [9], trajectory, directionality, or movement [10], and causality:

The third element in the agentic swarm is perhaps the most vague of all: causality. If agency is distributive or confederate, then instances of efficient causality, with its chain of simple bodies acting as sole impetus for the next effect, will be impossibly rare. Is George W. Bush the efficient cause of the American invasion of Iraq? Is Osama bin Laden? (Bennett 32)

Which brings us back to gun violence. Just in time to take a left turn toward electronic music. (What you're reading is, after all, an assemblage that you're part of.)

Sequencer and Samplers: Electronic Music as Assemblage

Digital musical instruments are a good example of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of assemblage (1987) in how things often self-organize or are the result of a bottom-up emergence. (Magnusson 52)

As should be clear (even without the discussion above), the assemblage of performer, musical instrument, and performance can be illuminated through the lens(es) of assemblage/OOO. The terminology may differ, but the general trajectories have been here for some time: Burroughs' cut-ups, *musique concrete* and later tape-oriented looping and experimentation (including Reich, Eno, the Mellotron, etc). For the final section of this paper, I'm primarily drawing on software including Cycling 74's Max/MSP/Jitter and hardware/software systems such as eurorack modular synth. These technologies offer us a way to work with assemblages and OOO's agentic swarms not available decades ago. More to the point, they may provide a way to conceptualize complicated issues like gun violence/gun rights in the United States—not solutions, but conceptual objects for discussion.

The detour into the construction of digital/physical objects is not so much as detour as a crucial step in elaborating the concepts I've framed, here, what Bogost, drawing on the work of others, calls "carpentry." The term is not a metaphor: it's the "practice of constructing artifacts as a philosophical practice" (92). Carpentry not only anchors philosophy but complicates it, enriches it, enters into the dialogue, "making things that explain how things make their world" (93).

Jerod Sommerfeldt's untitled piece for modular synth and live piano (both traditionally played as well as strings stroked directly with a horsehair bow) represents, for this discussion, one bit of carpentry. [name obscured] review], during my interview with him, is in the midst of composing for a pianist, who he describes as the "performer." The interplay of agency swirls around, with Sommerfeldt as composer, the pianist as performer, the piano itself as an agent—"thinking about the piano more as something to contribute to the resonance of the space and the sound world itself." Against a drone wash, the piano score involves 15-second sections involving a series of simple pitches that are eventually combined into chords, the notes of which are rotated into new chords based on mathematical formula; the pianist uses a timer but the score itself does not subdivide the sections so the pianist retains a degree of agency in determining where the notes are played. The notes of the piano are then processed by a Mutable Instruments Clouds synth module (among others) to affect the sound. Agency becomes difficult to sort out here: Sommerfeldt clearly somehow orchestrating it, but the indeterminacy and multiple actors—human, technical, architectural—defy simple cause and effect. This complexity, of course, is not new: Alvin Lucier's 1969 "I am Sitting in a Room," for example, is a piece by design heavily reliant on the acoustics of each room where it's performed. [Name obscured] himself notes that the specific acoustic characteristics of the room and the speakers through which the processed tones will play may require changing aspects of the modules or the pre-recorded segments once he is in the room where the performance will take place.

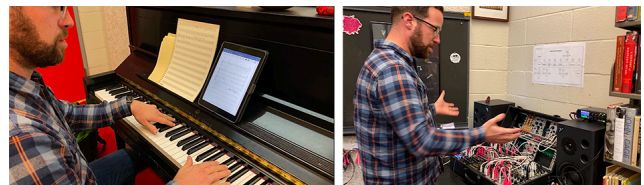


Figure 2: Jerod Sommerfeldt demonstrating portions of a piece for pianist and modular synth

The assemblage of elements is what Bennett calls and "agentic swarm": composer, player, piano, modular synth moving within an identifiable *something* but never perfectly united or coherent.

Each member and proto-member of the assemblage has a certain vital force, but there is also an effectivity proper to the grouping as such: an agency *of* the assemblage. And precisely because each member-actant maintains an energetic pulse slightly "off" from that of the assemblage, an assemblage is never a stolid block but an open-ended collective... (24).

In other words, an assemblage can be seen as having agency at the same time as the member-actants may be pulling in different directions from the main body.

Our technological systems are increasingly gaining autonomy as we like to delegate to the machine tasks that we find tedious or effortful, but in music technologies, this manifests through *play*, through playing the instrument, but also the playful interaction that can emerge between a human and machine if the latter is given agency. (Magnusson 52).

By "agency," Magnusson is not describing a freely autonomous agent to do as it sees fit. But neither does the performer, in most cases, use a piece of modular synth equipment like a simple tool. Modular synth performers (including Jerod) joke frequently about the impermanent and unreplicable nature of complex patches: The tangled flow of control voltage, logic, and audio through these systems make it difficult to not anthropomorphize them. That tendency, though, can serve to call into question our own autonomy during a musical performance (and in general).

Gun: An American Loop

For the musicologist, the question becomes what it takes to understand such a piece [a generative music app]? Can the musical composition present itself sufficiently through repeated listening or do critics and musicologists have to engage with the code in which the piece is written? Need, is it important that the source code of the piece is made available—a privilege that has traditionally been granted to critics and students of music in the form of a music score (Magnusson 115)?

In the summer of 2019, working out the implications of assemblages, agentic swarms, and music technologies against the jarring backdrop of repeated mass shootings in the US, I created a small, crude bit of carpentry: *Gun: An American Loop* for exhibition at ACM Hypertext 2019. My early inspirations for the structure of the piece were Ableton Live, a popular performance and recording app. Live's structure allows (among other things) performers to build banks of looped audio (usually music) that can be elaborately filtered, combined, warped, switching from bank to bank while changing parameters dynamically in a seamless performance. Live in performance view presents a grid from which a user—a DJ—drops in loops across several dimensions (sequencing and layering). Given the propensity of Live performers to rely heavily on sampled work by others

(an evolution of the turntablist's juggling and juxtaposition of small clips from vinyl albums as the content for a performance), Live asks what constitutes a performance? What is the content and who is the creator? Who is/are the agents?

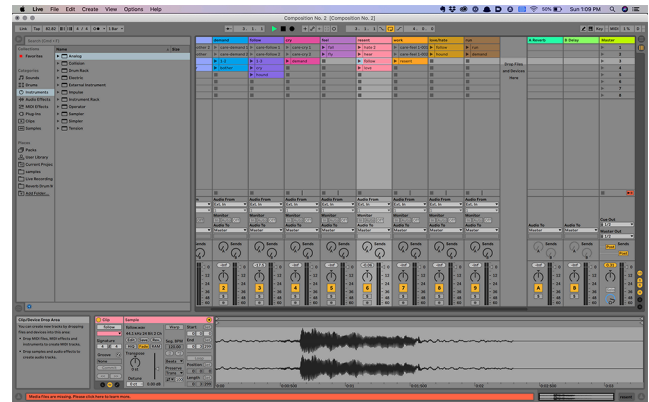


Figure 3: Performance View of Ableton Live

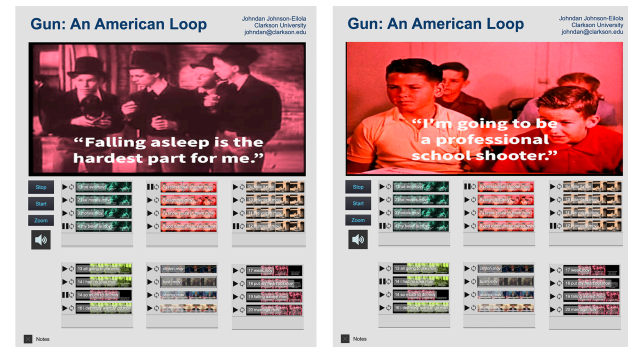


Figure 4: Two Screens from *Gun: An American Loop*

For a number of reasons, I ended up building the application in Cycling 74's Max/MSP/Jitter environment, popular with digital artists working with (among other things) audio and video. The interface of *Gun* resembles Live's sequencer (and to some extent, a Las Vegas slot machine). The program offers six "banks" of samples. Each sample includes a processed video clip (drawn primarily from old movies about schools) accompanied by a voiceover reading quotes from school shooters.

The user picks one clip from each bank and the application runs from bank to bank, looping through the selection. Users can switch each bank's selection to create a different performance of the piece.

Artistically, *Gun* is (at best) a rough draft, rough carpentry. For my purposes, it's a form of carpentry, a way of thinking with/through ideas about agency, performance, and creativity against complex cultural issues such as gun violence in the US.

Who is the agent in *Gun*? The user of the app? They have agency but it's bracketed by the program itself? Is it the programmer? To some extent, certainly, but here I am working against the programming environment (which is never as completely controllable as I wish) as well as the limitations of the content (I am only using the words of the criminals as published in popular news accounts). Does that give the shooter agency?

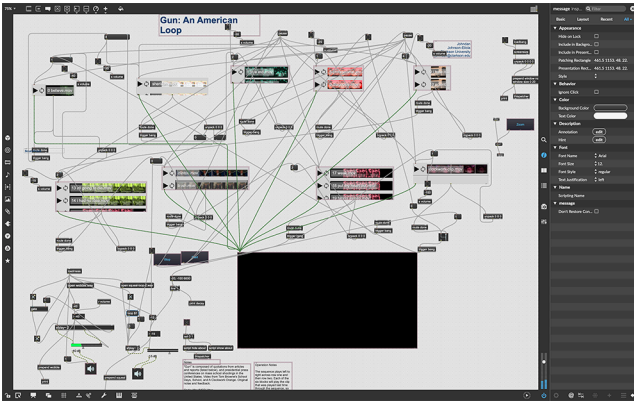


Figure 5: Two Screens from *Gun: An American Loop*

To return to the earlier question about ethics, does my use of the shooter's words give them agency? Again, in a limited (assemblage/agentic) sense, it does. Like many who write about school shootings today, I've chosen (or been chosen to?) omitted their names. But at the same time, I have to recognize that the shooters are in a real sense speaking through me, through the standard practices of quotation I'm relying on. Indeed, early on in the project I'm horrified by what I'm reading, then cutting and pasting, into *Gun*. I feel like I've lost agency at many, many points.

My decision to not contribute my own words to the main body of the piece further complicates things because, while my design involves what I feel are autonomous choices about what to allow the shooters to say, looking at this

through the assemblage/ooo lenses forces me to understand that I can't really say *why* I made certain decisions. Does the original act of violence pull me into a certain stance? Who, reading or seeing accounts of school shootings, hasn't been caught off guard, put into certain stances at least partially out of their control?

In other words, as an agent within a cultural assemblage we are all implicated in these acts of violence. I would not say as individual actors we caused it, but we are part of the assemblage. Our only choice is to pull at what strands of force we can to effect change. If this sounds a little too much like the "Think Global, Act Local" bumper sticker, that may be because that's our best option.

The carpentry becomes even more complex when I attempt to recruit volunteers to read the words of the shooters: I tweet a request for several hundred of my followers to choose a few lines to read. My intention was to create a varied, multivocal text of many speakers. The only evidence that someone has read my tweet is a re-posting of it by my wife, asking her own followers to consider volunteering. No one wants to be the voice of the gun.

I end up reading the quotes myself, mouthing the words of the shooters like a ventriloquist's dummy. I vomit into my wooden mouth a little.



Figure 6: Screen from *Gun*

References

- "Polymorphous Perversity and Texts." *Kairos* 16.3 (Summer 2012). <http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/16.3/topoi/johnson-eilola/index.html>.
- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter* (Durham, NC: Duke U Press, 2010).
- Bogost, Ian. *Alien Phenomenology: Or, What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 2012).
- DeLanda, Manuel. *Assemblage Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U Press, 2016).
- DeLanda, Manuel. *Assemblage Theory*, 59.
- Foody, Kathleen and Colleen Slevin, "Young Woman 'Infatuated' with Columbine is Found Dead." *ABC 12 News website* accessed November 23, 2019,

<https://www.abc12.com/content/news/FBI-looks-for-woman-infatuated-with-Columbine-shooting-as-Denver-schools-close-due-to-threats-508685821.html>.

Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart A. Selber. "Reterritorialization." In Kathleen Yancey and Stephen McElroy (Eds.) *Assembling Composition*. Urbana, IL: NCTE Press, 2017.

Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart A. Selber.. "Plagiarism, Originality, Assemblage." *Computers & Composition* 24 (2007): 275-403.

Magnusson, Thor. *Sonic Writing: Technologies of Material, Symbolic, & Signal Inscriptions* (New York: Bloombury Academic, 2019), 52.

Malins, Peta. "Machinic Assemblages: Deleuze, Guattari and an Ethico-Aesthetics of Drug Use." *Janus Head*, Vol, 7, No, 1, 84-104, accessed November 24, 2019.

Philips, John. "Agencement/Assemblage" *Theory Culture & Society*. May 2006. 108-109.

Sommenfeldt, Jerod. Interview by Johndan Johnson-Eilola. Personal interview. SUNY Potsdam.