

# Affect Assemblage Architecture

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# **Affect Assemblage Architecture**

*architecture as becoming-with*

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TU Delft  
2022-2023



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## Introduction

Before starting my architecture studies I worked as a cabinet maker for three years, a time that shaped my opinion on architecture as a practice a lot. My fascination starts here. In the workshop. My daily work was always bound to an abundance of tools, machines, wood, glue, screw, oil, fabric. In this environment of noise and dust, I found myself entangled in a constant process of creation, adapting my working method to the material I was working with, but also myself and my body to the tools I was using. This close relation to the more-than-world I formed and the abundance of different objects I surrounded myself with, lead to a growing interest of mine in the field of objects, crafts, and the more-than-human entities around us.

Here at the University these material entanglements sometimes seem to fade away, they become less tactile. I decided to pursue this fascination of mine further but in a more theoretical manner. I started an Honours Programme where I am investigating objects found in allotment gardens in Karlsruhe, Germany and the practices related to them. These specific home-separated gardens are unique places of gathering and collaboration with the more-than-human. Although the layout of the gardens and even parts of the vegetation are dictated through strict sets of rules imposed by the club authority, each garden plot still has its very own characteristics. Here the conscious or subconscious curation of objects seems to form an additional aesthetic layer, allowing for the personal individualisation of each plot. It is this dense field of human, other more-than-human species and the constellations of objects within, that signify how these places can be seen as more-than-human gatherings, where unique relations between human and more-than-human are created and maintained. They are places of world-making.<sup>1</sup>

One focus of this research lies on the exploration of assemblages that are formed by the gardeners in a bricolage manner formed from found objects within their gardens. Assembled by parts that are wholes, these ontological Frankenstein's exemplify unique practices of creation, an intimate process of working with the more-than-human. For me personally the intriguing part of these assemblages is to see how whole entities are formed from parts, that nevertheless are whole entities themselves. Where does one object start and where does one end? The ontological experimentations

1

Tsing, A. L., „The mushroom at the end of the world“ (2015)

drew me more towards the notion of ontology and I became increasingly interested in the impact this philosophical field can have on the architectural practice. My graduation starts here.



Fig. 1

A constellation of objects in one allotment plot within the Rennichwiesen e.V. in Karlsruhe, Germany.

As I am interested in these practices of world-making, one book that inspired me to follow this path more during my graduation was *“The Mushroom at the End of the World”* by anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing. In her book she describes the livelihoods of Asian Migrant communities in the United States making their lives from foraging mushroom, specifically the Matsutake mushroom, a delicacy within the Asian markets. These livelihoods exemplify for Tsing what she calls world making projects:

<sup>2</sup> Tsing, A. L., „The mushroom at the end of the world“, 21-22. (2015)

*“World-making projects emerge from practical activities of making lives; in the process, these projects alter our planet. To see them [...] we must reorient our attention. Many preindustrial livelihoods [...] persist today and new ones emerge, but we neglect them because they are not a part of progress. These livelihoods make worlds too and they show us how to look around rather than ahead. [...] World-making projects can overlap, allowing room for more than one species. Humans too, have always been involved in multispecies world-making”<sup>2</sup>*

As she describes these processes of human practices of mushroom foraging, she lays down the foundation for my consideration of assemblages, formed by many parts, all entangled in one world-making project. It is these world-making projects that I base my approach on, yet there are more nuances to the topic which I discovered throughout the reading of another author.

In her book “Staying with the Trouble” the biologist Donna Haraway motivates us to move beyond the concept of the human. Starting with a critique of the term “Anthropocene” and a shift to concepts of entangled lives and compost, Haraway invites us to form new kinships with the critters, with the more-than-human species around. As she also describes certain world-making projects as she bases her philosophical ontology in her field biology and on concepts of symbiogenesis or symbionts, meaning a becoming together with other species as an opposition to autopoiesis or self-making.

*“Sympoiesis is a simple word; it means „making-with.“ Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self- organizing. [...] It is a word for worlding-with, in company. Sympoiesis enfolds autopoiesis and generatively unfurls and extends it.”<sup>3</sup>*

In an earlier book of hers, “A Cyborg Manifesto”, Haraway already used a similar approach of a becoming-with to criticise any nature-culture distinctions. More specifically she uses the image of the cyborg to question gender roles, emphasising our entanglements with technology and by doing so questioning the concept of the human as such.

*“Nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other. The relationships for forming wholes from parts[.], are at issue in the cyborg world. [...] Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves.”<sup>4</sup>*

It is this tight bound of relations I am interested in, it is this woven state of human, more-than-human, technologies, and environments, it is an extended form of sympoiesis. Within the following project I aim to look for the way out of the maze, leaving my previously known ontology behind.

<sup>3</sup>  
Haraway, D.J., „Stay-  
ing with the Trouble“,  
58. (2016)

<sup>4</sup>  
Haraway, D.J., „Ma-  
nifestly Haraway“, 9.  
(2016)

## Whats the Problem?

Although this entangled state of living entities with each other or with technicities becomes more and more apparent in many fields, considering large parts of the architectural discipline today it is still widely perceivable that this distinction is still forcefully being held up. And that comes at a high price. As we ignore our entangled state with the more-than-human around us we are deeply invested in the invasion of the territories of other species and the destruction of landscapes. Architecture as a practice of shaping matter is deeply involved in these processes. I believe we as architects must become more aware of how and on which scales architecture has material outcomes whenever we do it. Instead of maintaining a certain disconnection to the “animal, plant or object world” and its following destruction, we need to leave any subject-object differentiation behind and learn new approaches to the practice of architecture. One that is more considerate of the constant network of relations we find ourselves entangled in. More precisely I want to question:

*How can we include the more-than-human into an architectural assemblage in an inclusive way, becoming aware of their affective environments?*

*In which ways can we assemble structures / aggregates of humans and more-than-humans to form new chances of collaboration?*

Plastiglomerate,  
forged by sun, salt  
and pressure.

Fig. 2



*When forming new ways with the more-than-human, how can this blur the boundaries between built object and living system?*

## Theoretical Approach

These questions automatically lead to certain issues that have to be taken into account when approaching the topic. As we expand the field of what to consider in an architectural analysis or project, it is crucial to think with the other more-than-human entity and find new ways for their ontological investigation. How can we analyse the more-than-human realm and not fall back into distinctions between human - non-human and make false assumptions? Firstly it is important how to study the ontology of other beings or entities. Considering this question the biologist Johann Jakob von Uexküll laid out an ideal foundation with his concept of the "Umwelt". He shows us that in order to study how another being is, it is important to note that beings are always inseparable from their subjective environment-world or "Umwelt". The being itself, therefore, has to be analysed by what is meaningful to it or where the meaning in its specific "Umwelt" is created, which varies largely between entities as their ways of perceiving or acting in a specific surrounding are very different from one another.<sup>5</sup> With this theory, Uexküll plastered a new way for the discipline of ethology but also science theory.

Many years after the concept of the "Umwelt" was formulated, the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze extends Uexküll's theory and describes how being manifests itself in pre-individual milieus or territories, that are constantly changed or maintained. It becomes necessary to look at the capabilities to affect

<sup>5</sup> Buchanan, B., „Onto-Ethologies“ (2008)

A strandbeest by artist Theo Jansen, signifying the topic of affects as well as assemblages in one structure.

Fig. 3



or to be affected by something. Affects here mean independent intensities corresponding to the passages of one state of a body to another. For Deleuze, it is important to note that,

*“You will define an animal, or a human being, not by its form, its organs, and its functions, and not as a subject either; you will define it by the affects of which it is capable.”*<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>  
Deleuze, G. „*Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*“, 124. (2008)

<sup>7</sup>  
Buchanan, B., „*Onto-Ethologies*“, 161. (2008)

By basing his concept entirely on a study of affects, Deleuze expands far from the concept of “Umwelten”. This study of affects renders Deleuze’s ontology as “univocal”; “where a body can literally be any thing”.<sup>7</sup> In my project, I aim to use affects as a tool or entry point for my ontological analysis; allowing me to dive into the worlds of the many entities that will be included within my project. This concept will furthermore allow me to overcome any ontological hierarchies, revealing the creation of meaning through the use of objects or technicities, changing the environment and the living entities within.

So if we now know what to look at in order to describe the processes that shape our environments and the beings within them, moving towards a flat ontology, what can be a new unit to think with? What would allow us to go beyond any distinction within being itself?

Here the concept of assemblages allows us to study entities as assembled from parts that are wholes or assemblages themselves. The concept or theory of assemblage was first theorised by Deleuze and his colleague Felix Guattari, yet underwent a specification by philosopher Manuel DeLanda. For him, it is important to note that assemblages consist of assemblages, by doing so he acknowledges how assemblages constantly manifest themselves in diverse processes of coding and territorialization, any major or minor mode in being itself gets questioned more. The main focus in this concept does therefore not lie within the wholes or parts but how these wholes or assemblages constitute themselves and their environments through ontological processes, continuously exchanging affects. What is important in architectural investigations, therefore, starts to change entirely.

*„If an assemblage is the minimum unit of reality, it is not because it “exists” in reality but, rather, because it “produces” reality; affective technicities manipulate an environment that, at the same moment, is directly produced by assemblages.“<sup>8</sup>*

But if then everything is assembled of assemblages, what allows us to remain focused and not get raveled in the endless process of assemblages exchanging affects. Gilles Deleuze's concept of the fold (translated from French, “*pli*”) provides a certain chronological approach to follow. When looking at processes of individuation, assemblages constituting themselves through exchanging affects, for example in aesthetic production, it is useful to consider three steps: implication, complication, and explication. In his text “Affective Aesthetics beneath Art and Architecture” the architectural theorist Gökhan Kodalak describes the process as follows:

*“Aesthetic production begins with a process of implication [...]. This is the moment an aesthetic assemblage encounters actual extensities and harnesses imperceptible forces while implementing a creative selection. What follows is a process of complication [...]. This is the stage of transmuting collected forces into artistic sensations and architectural formations, of zigzagging and subverting, of forging a new composition. And the final process is that of explication [...]. This is the time of making an artwork or an architectural construct stand on its own, of presenting a new sensation in expanded intensity, of turning life back in on itself.“<sup>9</sup>*

These three conceptual pillars will guide me through my study of assemblages and their constitution through affects in a process of folding. I aim to relate these tools to Donna Haraway's texts and combine this study of aesthetic production as a tool to capture processes of sympoiesis or becoming-with in a flat or univocal ontology. For me, this is also an endless process, as every explication leads to another consecutive implication, leading to continuous new entanglements of assemblages within the project, an aspect that has to be kept in mind in order to draw lines and not follow the threads of affects until the analysis gets lost in overwhelming confusion and exploration of meaninglessness.

8

Kousoulas, S., „Drift, Naturally: A Trans-affective Unfolding.“ (2020)

9

Kodalak, G., „Affective Aesthetics beneath Art and Architecture: Deleuze, Francis Bacon and Vogelkop Bowerbirds.“ (2018)

## Research Structure

Based on the concept of the fold and its chronological approach towards processes of individuation, the research is structured into three segments. Each research question herein relates to one segment of the fold and the consecutive order in the process. Combined with each question I will use a glossary of verbs that I connect to each step of the fold. In the first step, I aim to investigate the questions of whom or what to encounter during my architectural analysis and what their affects are, finding new ways for a process of implication in my project. Relating to this question I will look at processes of *gathering* and *scattering* as my terms of focus for this question. Secondly, I will explore how the affects are transcoded by the entities, how are they complicated and what is the aesthetic plane that is being created; can processes of *cooperating* or *hindering* be seen as processes of complication? Lastly, I will study how these transcoded affects go out again, spreading new affects, the process of explication. This step will be related to terms *going on* or *decaying*. By relating the questions and the fold to my glossary I aim to narrow down my field of site, binding my questions and my analysis directly towards an architectural spatial practice.

Implication:

How can we include the more-than-human into an architectural assemblage in an inclusive way, becoming aware of their affective environments?

Complication:

In which ways can we assemble structures / aggregates of humans and more-than-humans to form new chances of collaboration?

Explication:

When forming new ways with the more-than-human, how can this blur the boundaries between built object and living system?

But how can I ensure not to get lost in chaos or ravel myself in the enfolding of affects? Here the concept of the fold will help me to remain focused, as I will use it for each step again as the research methodology enfolds itself throughout the research structure. Each step, topic, or research question will be worked on in three consecutive steps, using the process of implication, complication, and explication. More concretely I will first examine the concepts or the terms and what they imply. Secondly, I relate these terms to

Fig. 4

Research Scheme presenting how the structure of the research relates to the research questions in the top part and the methodology in the lower part. Underneath the research questions the working-glossary can be found with four terms relating to each question. It is important to note that the terms do not stand in opposition, more importantly they deny any form of opposition as they signify crucial aspects of interdependence within the steps but also from one step of the fold to another.

Implication:

Gather, Scatter, Accrete, Disperse

Complicate:

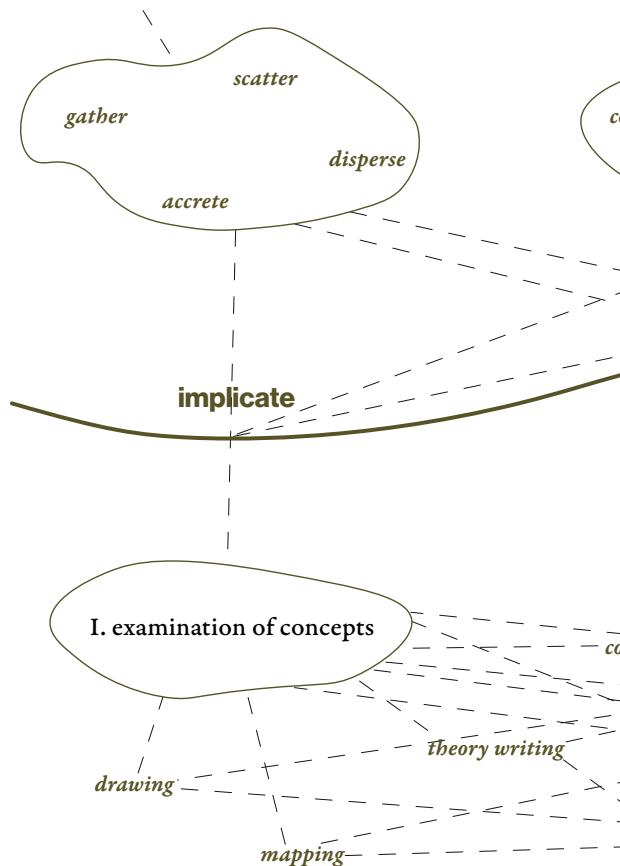
Collaborate, Disturb, Cooperate, Hinder

Explicate:

Live, Remain, Go On, Decay

Below the curvature of the fold, the methodological structure can be found, in their order the steps relate to the concept of the fold. In a first step the concepts are examined and inspected by what they imply, secondly the real life scenarios found on site allow for a certain complication of the glossary and finally a materialization and application will allow for an investigation of an explicating process. The chronological steps of the research are surrounded by the set of tools that will be used. These stand in no particular order and are not related to a specific step in the research in any way, as they will be used according to specific situations found on site.

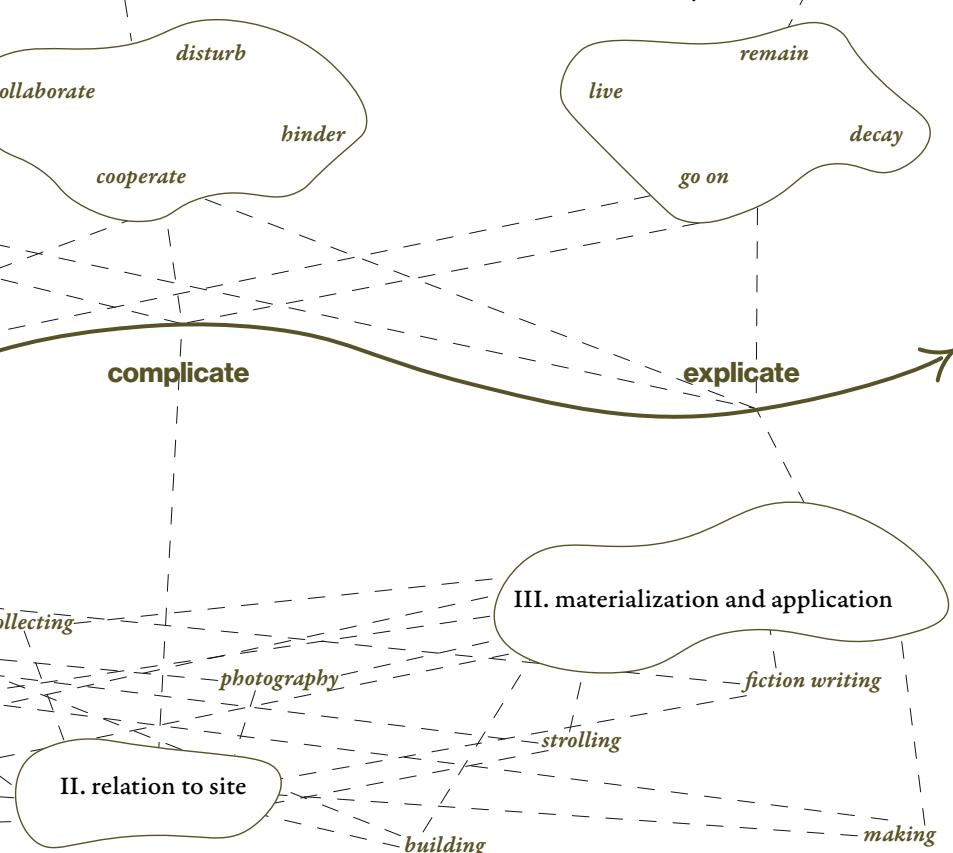
How can we include the more-than-human into an architectural assemblage in an inclusive way, becoming aware of their environment worlds?



my site(s), looking at how they complicate real-life scenarios. Lastly, I aim to investigate, in a process of explicating, how the terms are or can be materialized. Within these steps, I will not restrict myself to a specific tool, but allow room for negotiation and experimentation with different methods such as drawings, maps, writing fictive stories, photographs, material studies, and more. Which tool will be used for which will be highly situational and depends on the situation found on site.

which ways can we assemble structures/  
gates of humans and more-than-humans  
to form new chances of cooperation?

When forming new ways of collaborating with  
the more-than-human, how can this blur the  
boundaries between built object and living  
system?

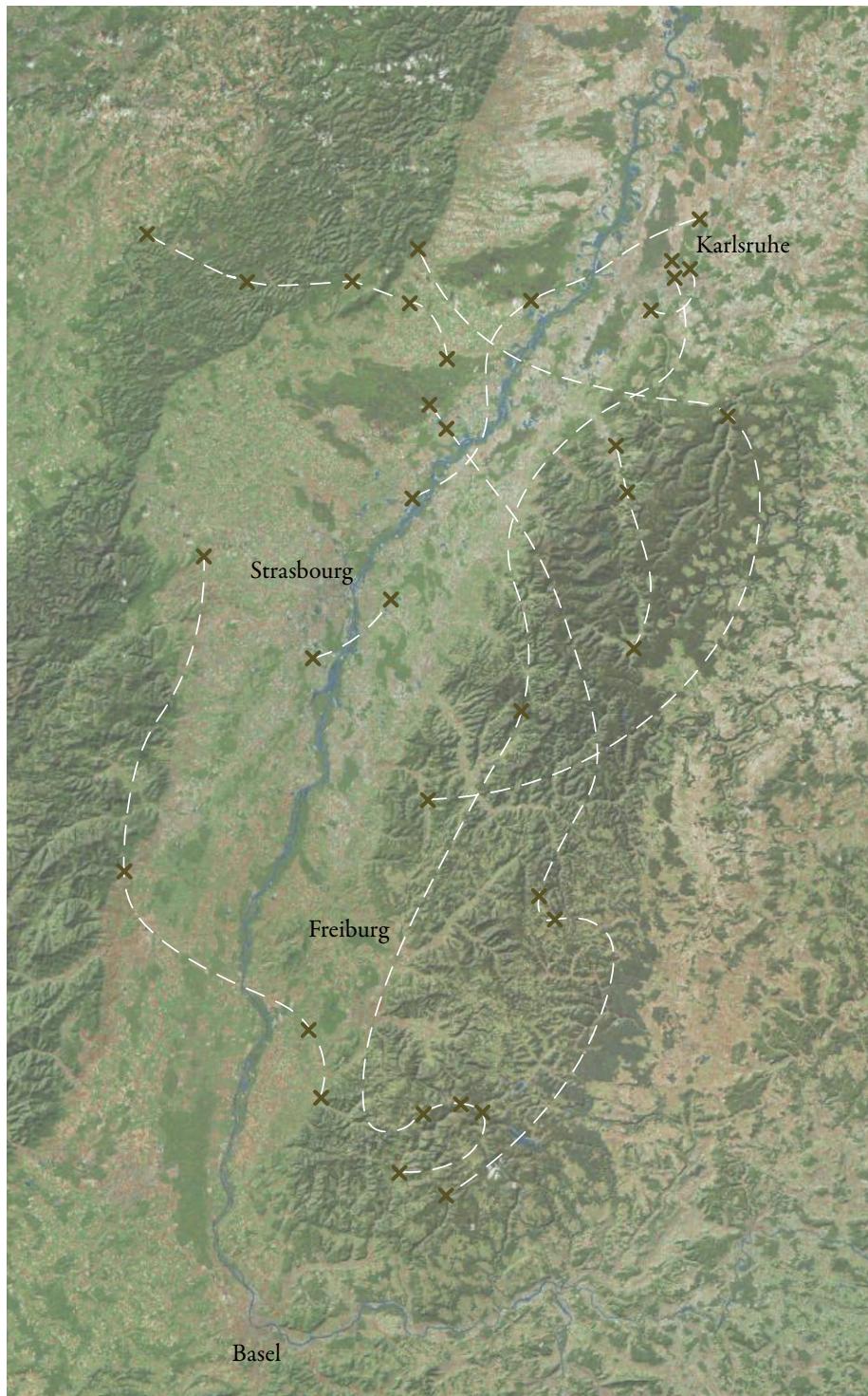


## Where to land?

To make my research an intensive approach I will conduct my investigation in relation to a set of sites, get out in the field, and into the mud. This allows me to study the affects of various entities, assemblages and their different stories of world-making in relation to their specific environments. As my site of interest, I will focus on the region from the city of Karlsruhe in southwest Germany, expanding down the Rhine river towards Basel in Switzerland. This field includes the upper Rhine plain, but also the area of the Black Forest and a part of the Alsace region on the French side of the border marked by the river. Within this region, I will visit places where processes of becoming-with appear, places where multi-species collaboration is happening, such as a trout breeder, or historical places for silk production with the help of moth larvae. I will visit areas in the forest where a bark beetle has left its marks, killing a majority of the trees, or extraction landscapes of gravel production, forming completely new ecosystems. Secondly, I will also expand my field and study the relation of technicities and their entanglements within the stories of our lives and our surroundings, such as workshops for pre-industrial crafts like pottery in the Alsace, recycling sites where groups of people gather to repair and re-use discarded objects or an abandoned paper factory in a deep valley in the Black Forest. The newly gained insights will always be related to my research questions and the glossary I am working with. By studying these sites I aim to gain insights into the relations of the environments in relation to the living entities, the multispecies entanglements, but also how the three parts (living entity, technicity and environment) have changed each other through time and space.

Fig. 5

Map showing the area of research, reaching from Karlsruhe at the top, down towards Basel and spanning from black forest on the right towards the Vosges mountainscape on the left. The points on the map that are connected follow a similar narrative, like crafts or destruction within a landscape.



## Design Approach

Through this research, I aim to become more aware of processes of sympoiesis, where to find these in specific environments, and how architecture is or can become a part of them and contribute here. I will explore the field of architecture as a practice of gleaned concepts, weaving stories, and crafting materialities as an intensive process allowing me to form new places for multispecies

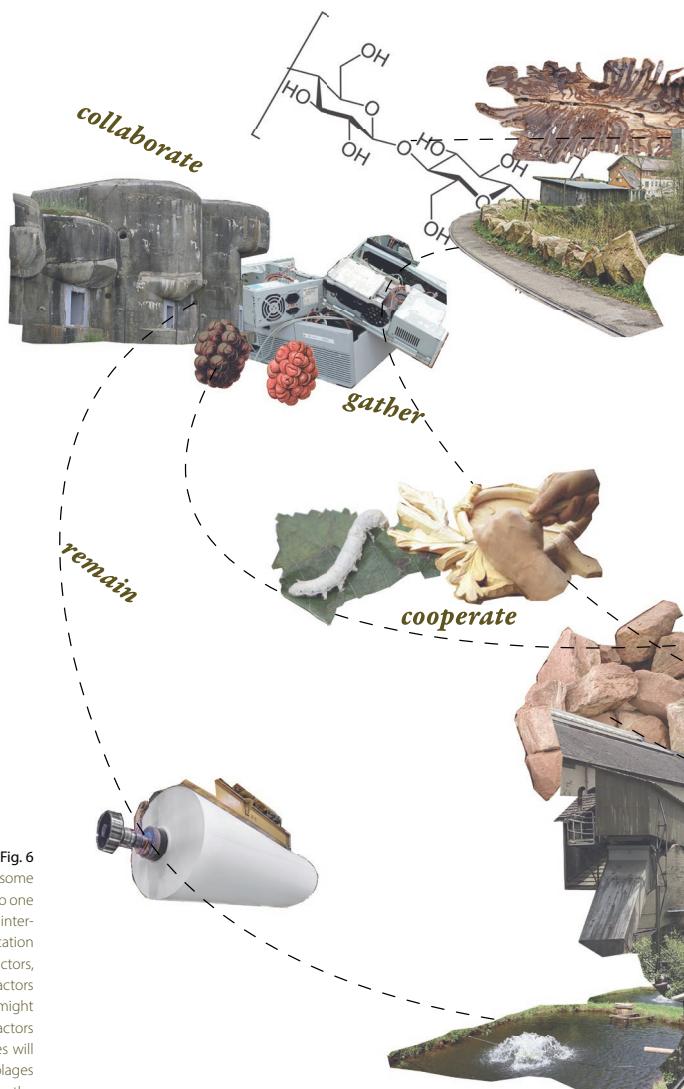
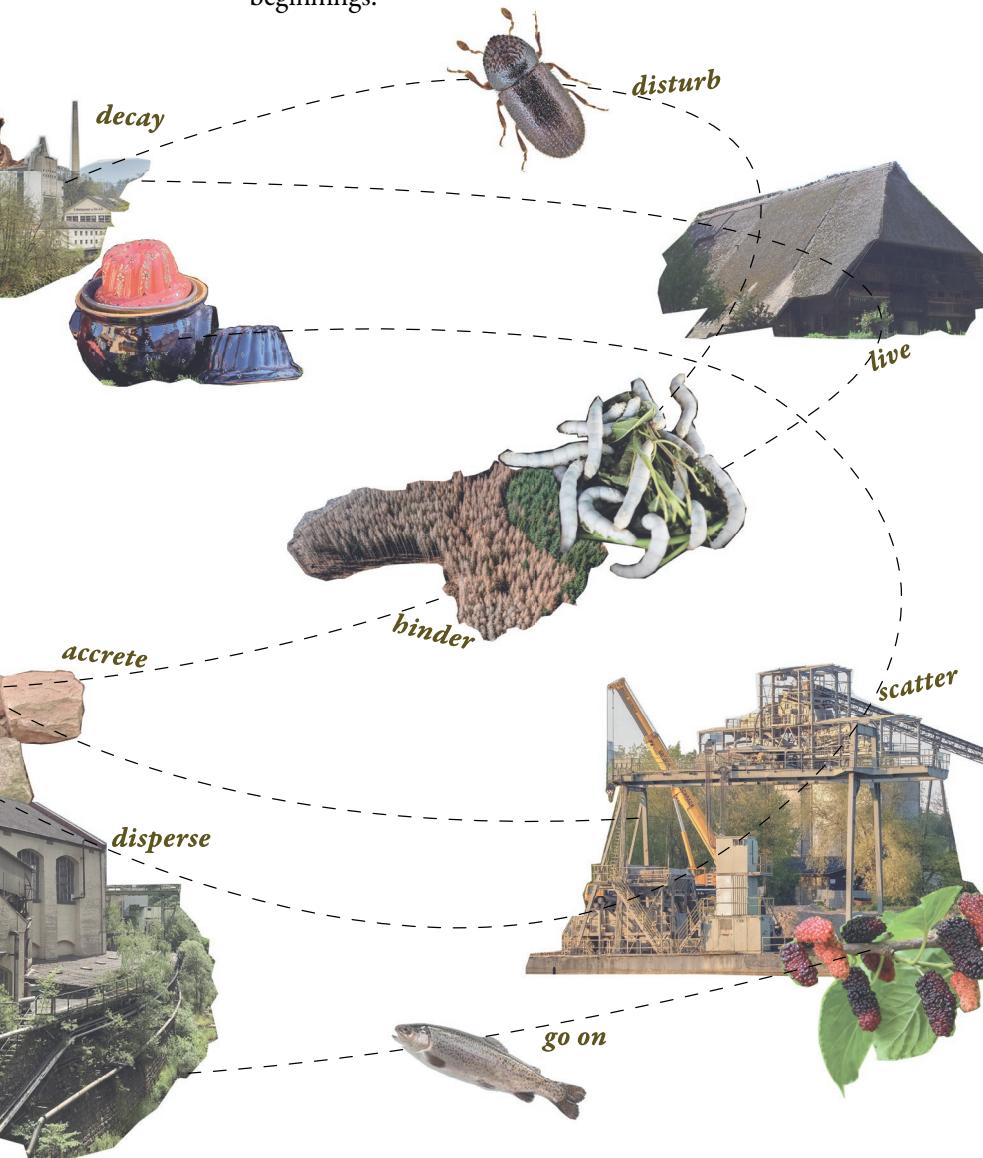


Fig. 6

The design approach assemblage shows how some entities found on the different site(s) may relate to one another. This sort of constellation allows for free interpretation and tries to signify a certain complexification within the relations of different sites, different actors, but also the terminology of the glossary. Some actors might be more graspable like silk larvae, some might be more abstract like cellulose, the amount of actors and the variety is never set in stone as new sites will allow for new encounters, affects and assemblages to be taken into account and enfolded within the project.

collaboration, where living entities, technicites become interwoven in making their environments leading to new ecologies, placing my architecture outside of a constant narrative of a predictable story of progress. I imagine one or several structures or aggregates where silkworms, humans, bark beetle, rivers, cellulose, an old factory come together in spaces of open-ended production, forming new assemblages. Making their worlds together, gathering and collaborating towards a not-so-certain ongoingness, leading to new beginnings.



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