The Art of Assemblage at La Venta
Claudia Brittenham

Detail from Offering 4, La Venta, Olmec, deposited c. 600 BCE (plate 4).

One afternoon in April 1955, archaeologists noticed a change in the colour of the earth at La Venta, Mexico, an Olmec centre that had thrived during the first millennium BCE. Just in front of a low platform, a lighter-coloured oval within the reddish clay floor suggested that the ground had been disturbed in ancient times. Excavations eventually revealed a group of figurines, arranged in a scene of dramatic confrontation against a backdrop of polished oblong jade stones, or celts (*plate 1*).[1] The group of objects that we now call La Venta Offering 4 is famous among Mesoamericanists because it offers a clear example of social memory: nearly a century after the configuration was initially buried, people at La Venta dug a hole barely exceeding the limits of the hidden figures, viewed them, and then buried them again. Offering 4 is also important for what it demonstrates about how meaning can be assigned to objects. The figurines and celts in Offering 4 were already old at the time that they entered the ground, the products of diverse and complex trajectories and life histories. In this final configuration, the act of assemblage imbued these objects with new meanings.

Assemblage is a term that has multiple points of resonance for a configuration like Offering 4. First, there are the blandly archaeological definitions: 'a collection of material related through contextual proximity', either a group of objects found together in a single context or the set of artefacts typical of a particular period and location.[2] But assemblage also came to have currency in the art world of the 1960s, as exemplified by MoMA's 1961 exhibition *The Art of Assemblage*, as a term for contemporary art practices in which works were constructed by incorporating disparate materials and found objects, often juxtaposed in unexpected ways. The exhibition used the term to redescribe collage, dada, and other earlier art practices, as well as to encompass more literary forms of juxtaposition. By including a Central African power figure and a chest ornament from Papua New Guinea in the exhibition checklist, and by citing a generic 'primitive cult object' in his discussion of the poetic and metaphysical possibilities of assemblage, curator William Seitz suggested that the analytical potential of assemblage was not limited to Euro-American contemporary art.[3] Finally, assemblage also entered the literature as a translation of the French term *agencement*, used by theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to describe complex, heterogeneous interrelations of people and things.[4] As Amy Morris puts it, such an assemblage is 'a coalescence of disparate things into a larger entity, vibrant with networked relationships, but resisting the foreclosed identity of a completed whole'.[5] Taking up Bill Brown's call to adopt an 'assemblage analytic',[6] what I want to suggest in this essay is that all of these different meanings of the term assemblage help us make sense out of Offering 4 at

1 Offering 4 during excavations in 1955, La Venta, Olmec, deposited before c. 600 BCE. Jade, greenstone, coloured clays. Photo: National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Heizer #0079.

La Venta – and other ancient works of art as well. Together, they help us see how the meaning of any artwork is situational and contextual, vulnerable to changes over time, and never fully separable from the networks of social relations that surround it.

La Venta was one of the early cities of Mesoamerica, a region encompassing modern day Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and Belize in the millennia before the Spanish invasion. During the Middle Formative period, c. 900–400 BCE, La Venta was one of the most prosperous centres along the Gulf Coast of Mexico, a region inhabited by the Olmec, an archaeologically defined culture whose people participated in a vibrant exchange of materials and ideas with a broader Mesoamerican world. The city grew to power with the abandonment of San Lorenzo, a nearby centre that had thrived c. 1400–1000 BCE. Building on innovations in monumental architecture and sculpture at San Lorenzo – such as large, axially oriented platforms and basalt

sculptures in the form of colossal human heads – the inhabitants of La Venta popularized new forms including pyramids, stone stelae, and dedicatory rituals on an unprecedented scale.[7]

Over the centuries of its occupation, the monumental centre of La Venta grew to be over a kilometre long, oriented along an axis 8° west of north (*plate* 2). One of the largest pyramids in early Mesoamerica, Complex C, stood in the northern part of the city, with a large plaza surrounded by massive platforms to its south, beyond which lay still other architectural complexes; palaces and elite residential compounds were likely in this sector. To the north of the pyramid was Complex A, where Offering 4 was found, an area of intense ritual activity and rebuilding that was radically remade four times over the site's occupation.[8] These renovations yielded a four-phase chronology: each phase had distinctive features, particularly when it came to the surfacing of the floors, from 'water-sorted floors' of Phase I to the red clay cap that covered the entire area in Phase IV. This stratigraphic history allows for precision about chronological
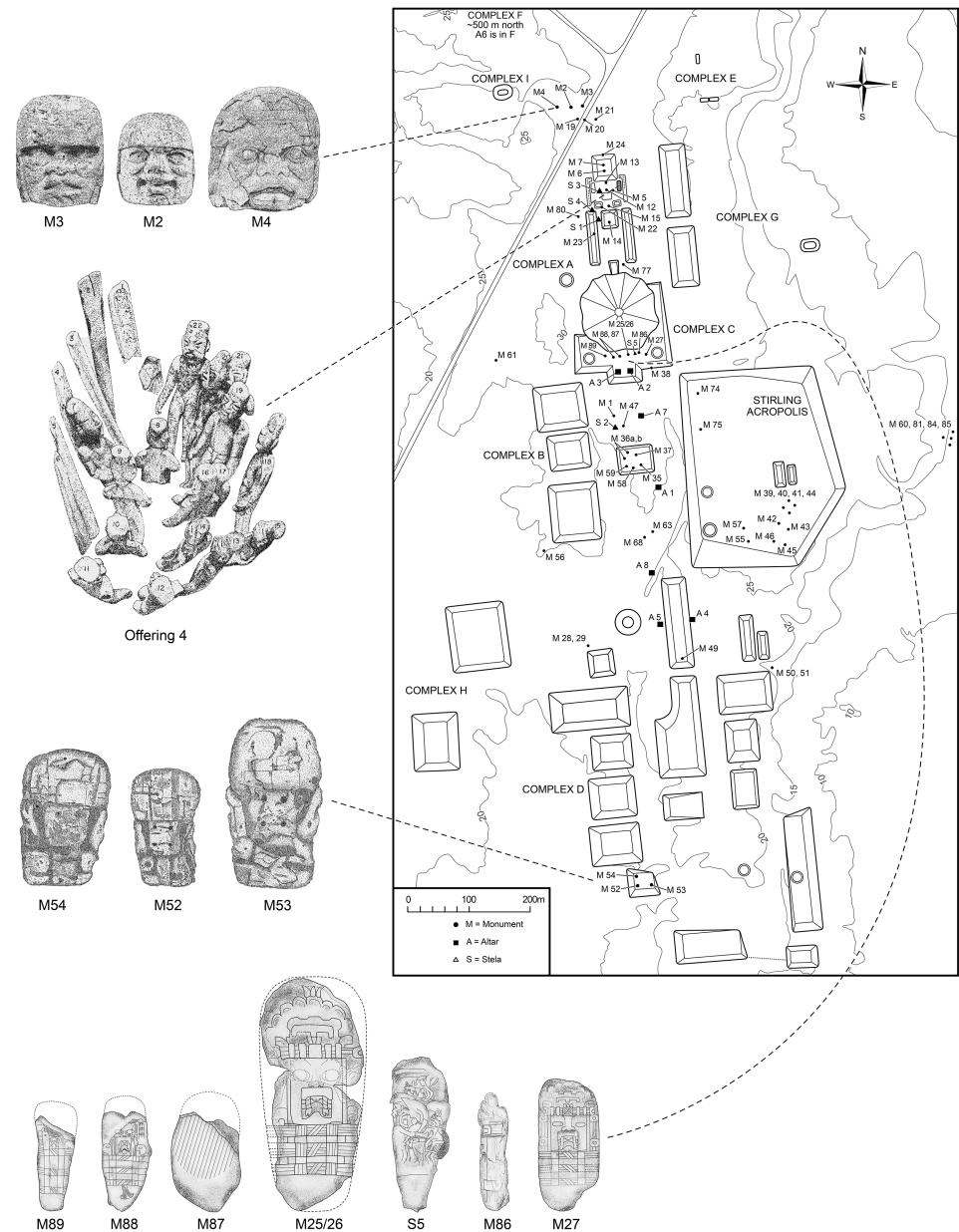
2 Plan of La Venta, highlighting the findspots of the objects discussed in the text, Olmec, 900–400 BCE. Illustration: Dale Mertes, incorporating site plan and drawings of stelae, colossal heads, and sandstone sculptures courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation; drawing of Offering 4 from Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta, Tabasco, 1955,* **Washington, DC, 1959, fig. 38.**

sequence – providing evidence, for example, for the considerable lapse of time between the burial and re-access of Offering 4.

Offering 4 was by no means the only assemblage at La Venta. The term is also a useful way of conceptualizing the so-called Massive Offerings that initiated each phase of renovations at Complex A (*plate* 3). In them, hundreds of tonnes of greenstone blocks brought from distant mountains, carefully selected coloured clays, and above all, human labour, combined to compose powerful ritual operations whose process of making mattered more than any acts of later viewing.[9] The Massive Offerings were swiftly buried after their creation, with other smaller configurations of objects placed above them as they were buried. Indeed, Offering 4 is one such gesture, placed above Massive Offering 3 during the Phase III renovations of the centre.[10] In addition, Rebecca González Lauck has described several arrays of monumental sculpture at the site, including a row of three basalt colossal heads to the north of Complex A, a row of three crouching sandstone figures to the south of Complex D, and the line of stelae arrayed in front of Pyramid C (see *plate* 2).[11] In each case, there are sufficient variations within the sculptural array to suggest that the objects were not made as sets, but rather, produced sequentially in different moments. Further, there is little reason to assume that any of these monuments were found in the places where they had originally been placed – in other words, these groupings are also deliberate reassemblages.

Assemblage was a common Olmec sculptural practice. Archaeologist Philip Drucker and colleagues, who excavated La Venta, wrote: 'The extent to which the stone monuments of La Venta have been intentionally mutilated and moved about is truly impressive'.[12] Such movements were by no means unique to La Venta: at other Olmec centres including San Lorenzo, Loma del Zapote, and Tres Zapotes, sculptures

3 Massive Offering 1 in situ during the 1955 excavations, La Venta, Olmec, 900–400 BCE. Photo: National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Heizer #179.

experienced radical transformations during their life cycles. As sculptures moved, they were juxtaposed with other sculptures in ways that created meaning. As archaeologist and art historian Ann Cyphers observes,

> It is apparent that the spatial context of monumental sculptures regularly included other such sculptures. This observation raises the probability that the 'meanings' of each piece may have been multivocal, modifiable in terms of what other pieces were placed where and in what association with it. An isolated piece would thus convey one set of possible symbolic significances; that same piece relocated to an architectural setting could acquire a different set of meanings.[13]

Further, Cyphers writes elsewhere: 'Olmec scenic art *sculpted* space itself, giving it form, volume, masses, and voids, and above all, greater meaning.'[14]

A comparison of Offering 4 with several of the monumental sculptural arrays at La Venta demonstrates how the assemblage, and not just the individual work, can be an important category of art-historical analysis. Although radically different in size, materials, and format, the figurines of Offering 4, the colossal heads in the north of the site, and the stelae in front of Pyramid C all gained meaning from their juxtaposition with other objects, some of them perishable and ephemeral. Thinking of these groupings through the lens of assemblage emphasizes three key properties: the relationships among members of the group; the associations of each component that extend beyond the assemblage; and the emergent properties that arise from these interactions between people and things. It is only by assembling different strategies, taking into account factors including archaeological context, material histories, scale, and iconographic motifs, that it is possible to surmount the evidentiary hurdles of working with objects about which few texts survive. Doing so over the long span of archaeological time lets us see instances of memory, reinterpretation, and forgetting. Contextualized within a larger Olmec landscape of practice, these three case studies demonstrate how assemblage operates as a strategy for creating meaning that exceeds the original intention of each individual work's creators.

Openness: Offering 4

When the figurines and celts assembled to create Offering 4 were finally revealed, their careful arrangement hinted at a heightened moment in a specific narrative (*plate* 4). The sixteen figurines are gathered in a purposeful configuration, bordered on one side by the oblong stones that seem to define a space for the interaction. In the centre of the group, as shown in *plate* 4, four figures are arrayed in a line, as if walking in single file (Figurines #8–11 in *plate* 4 and *plate* 7). They face towards a figurine carved out of an unusual mottled black and green composite stone (Figurine #22 in the illustrations), and pass in front of still another figure, much harder to see, its back set against the celts. This other focal figurine is also made out of an unusual material: a plagiogranite stone that has degraded over time, taking on the colours of the surrounding earth (Figurine #7 in the illustrations).[15] The remaining figurines, made out of more generic greenstones, seem to constitute an audience for the interaction. While much about the scene remains enigmatic, its very idiosyncrasies suggest that it had a precise meaning for those who buried it, perhaps commemorating or re-enacting a particular event. But what is crucial for the present purposes is that this was not the only meaning attached to these objects over their long lives: it was precisely the act of placing them together in this particular configuration – this assemblage – that created meaning.
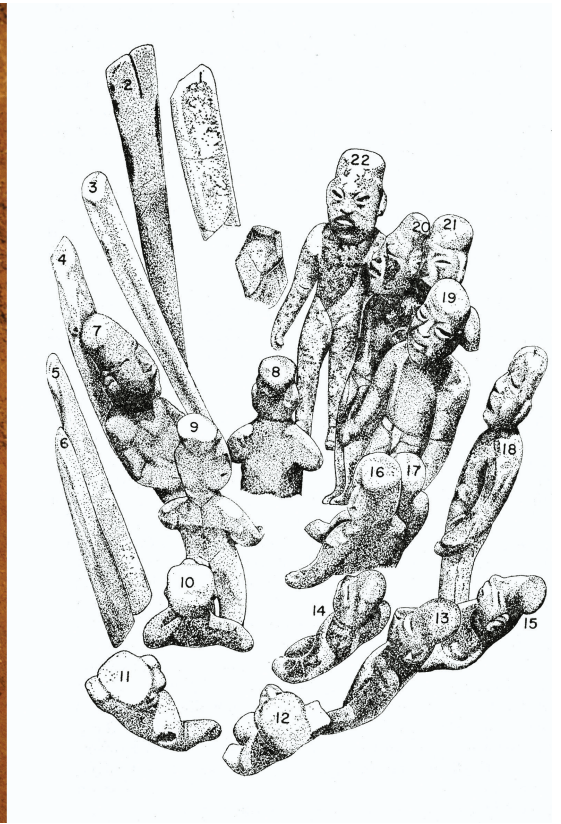
4 Offering 4, La Venta, Olmec, deposited *c.* 600 BCE. Jade, greenstone, and coloured clays. Photo: National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Heizer #1145. Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta, Tabasco, 1955*, Washington, DC, 1959, fig. 38.

Offering 4, as a group of objects found together, clearly fits the archaeological definition of an assemblage. Yet this idea of an assemblage can function at different scales. While it is possible to consider Offering 4 as a discrete and isolated gesture, it was also part of a larger 'ritual event' (to use Arlene Colman's term) that encompassed the much more extensive labour of excavating and depositing Massive Offering 3. Indeed, Offering 4 was one of several smaller groups of objects placed above this configuration of coloured clays and greenstones as the pit was being refilled.[16] The analysis can even be extended out to the entire region and time period: both greenstone figurines and celts are kinds of objects characteristic of Middle Formative period archaeological assemblages throughout Mesoamerica.[17] Yet although the forms were new on an archaeological timescale, by the time these objects had been deposited in the earth, they were already old.[18]

All six celts bordering the scene bore traces of previous histories (*plate* 5). Made of precious jade, they were arguably the most valuable objects in the assemblage, and their scarcity may have dictated their repurposing.[19] The six celts are taller, narrower, and thinner than the normal run of such objects at La Venta, which raises the possibility that at least some of them might have been re-worked and specially scaled to the figurines in this particular configuration.[20] This seems especially likely to be the case for Celts 3 and 4, which were both made from a single pectoral: the holes for suspension are still visible on the left side of Celt 4. Susan Gillespie proposes that the two pieces of the pectoral had long been separated before being reunited in Offering 4; however, it seems equally possible that the pectoral was cut up, and the edges polished, at the moment of the offering's creation.[21] This object was originally decorated with a horizontal figure wearing an elaborate headdress and holding a torch in an outstretched arm (*plate* 6).[22] Converting this item of jewellery into celts implied changes in function and orientation of the object, as well as interrupting its decoration:

as the new celts were smoothed, the edges of the previous pattern were polished away, breaking the continuity between the two pieces.

The four remaining celts also showed notable signs of wear, including fissures and fractures on the undecorated Celts 5 and 6 as well as traces of incised decoration on Celts 1 and 2, suggesting that they, too, had been reworked from other objects.[23] The remnants of angular patterns on Celt 2 and curvilinear patterns on Celt 1 are harder to resolve into recognizable forms – again, while incision marks were preserved, maintaining a visible trace of a previous state, legibility was sacrificed in the remaking; no other fragments of either object were recovered during excavations.[24] Petrographic analysis shows that the jades came from two different regional sources: Celts 1, 5, and 6 come from Alta Verapaz, while Celts 2, 3 and 4 (the latter two previously part of the same pectoral) are from the Motagua River Valley.[25]

Likewise, the greenstone figurines assembled in Offering 4 bear signs of use and wear, hinting at long lives before the creation of this configuration. At least nine of the sixteen figurines have significant signs of wear or damage, and nearly all have worn and abraded surfaces (*plate 7*). Figurines 9 and 12 are missing their left arms, four figurines are missing at least one foot, and at least six others have nicks, stress fractures, and other kinds of damage to the feet. Figurine 10 is missing its nose; Figurine 18 has damage to nose, mouth, and chin; and there is abrasion on the face of Figurine 11, which also has damage to the back of one shoulder.[26] This damage had occurred long before the figurines were placed in Offering 4: the missing limbs were not found in the offering, the fractures had been smoothed over by repeated handling, and the cinnabar that was rubbed all over the figurines also covered the areas of damage.[27] What's more, archaeologists John Clark and Arlene Colman suggest that the form of the Offering 4 figurines correlates more closely to that of clay figurines over three centuries earlier, raising the intriguing possibilities that the figurines are either particularly long-lived heirlooms or archaizing in their style.[28] Diana Magaloni and Laura Filloy suggest that many different artists' hands may be represented in the group, with only a few potential pairs that might have come out of the same workshop.[29] Variation in colour among the serpentine figurines may also hint at different moments of sourcing and procurement of materials, although all thirteen of them seem to have a common regional source.[30]

Analysis of pigment residues suggests different life histories for the celts and figurines. All of the figurines had traces of red pigment remaining on them, especially

5 Celts from Offering 4, La Venta, Olmec, made before c. 600 BCE. Celts 3 and 4 were originally part of a single pectoral. Jade; tallest celt 27.5 cm high. Photo: National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Heizer #131. Drawing: Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta, Tabasco, 1955*, Washington, DC, 1959, fig. 40.

concentrated on the faces, but also unevenly present on hands, feet, and in other incisions. Yet none of the celts did, and no red pigment was found in the offering. This suggests prior contexts and practices of use for the figurines, in which they were handled and anointed with colour, while the celts had no such history. When fourteen of the sixteen figurines were analysed using X-ray fluorescence or Raman spectroscopy, all demonstrated the presence of cinnabar, a precious and exotic red pigment frequently found in association with jade – and with burials – at La Venta. But two of the figurines (Figurines 15 and 21) also showed traces of hematite, another red pigment (see *plate 7*).[31] This might hint at another earlier association of just these two figurines in a ritual or assemblage where more common hematite was substituted for precious cinnabar.

Other definitions of assemblage might also be applied. According to the terminology of the 1960s art world, Offering 4 might be considered a multimedia assemblage. Although only stone survives in the acidic soil of La Venta, the original configuration likely involved not only jade, serpentine, and other forms of precious stone, but also materials like feathers, cotton textiles, bark paper or other fibrous bindings, as well as the coloured clays and white sand into which the objects were embedded. Holes drilled in the figurines' ears and noses offered points for suspension of perishable ornaments, while the figurines' sleek bodies and elongated heads could easily have been draped with clothing and headdresses. The celts may have been wrapped with textiles or fibre.[32] Perishable adornments would have done much to distinguish the individual figurines, adding markers of identity to each one. And indeed, the process of adding perishable attributes and dressing each figure might have invoked the presence of a particular deity or ancestor. But such markers of identity could also change from one use of the figurines to the next.

These portable and changeable markers of identity highlight the openness of meaning of figurines. A traditional account of how meaning is ascribed to a figural object might propose that the artist and user agree on the meaning inhering in the object – that the artist fixes the identity of the person that they are representing, and that later users accept that ascription. This is too simple a model, of course, and most crucially, it deprives viewers of their agency in viewing, interpreting, and ascribing meaning to what they see. Further, in its focus on the individual work, it neglects how the combination or juxtaposition of objects – their assemblage – might shape or transform meaning, a point often elided in the classic discussions of the 'death of the author'.[33] The figurines in Offering 4 suggest a different process, in which

6 Reconstruction of the 'flying Olmec' on the jade pectoral recarved to make celts 3 and 4 from Offering 4, La Venta. Drawing: Colman and Clark, 'La Venta Offering 4', in *The Dimensions of Rituality [...]*, El Asintal, Guatemala, 2016, fig. 2.9/ Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

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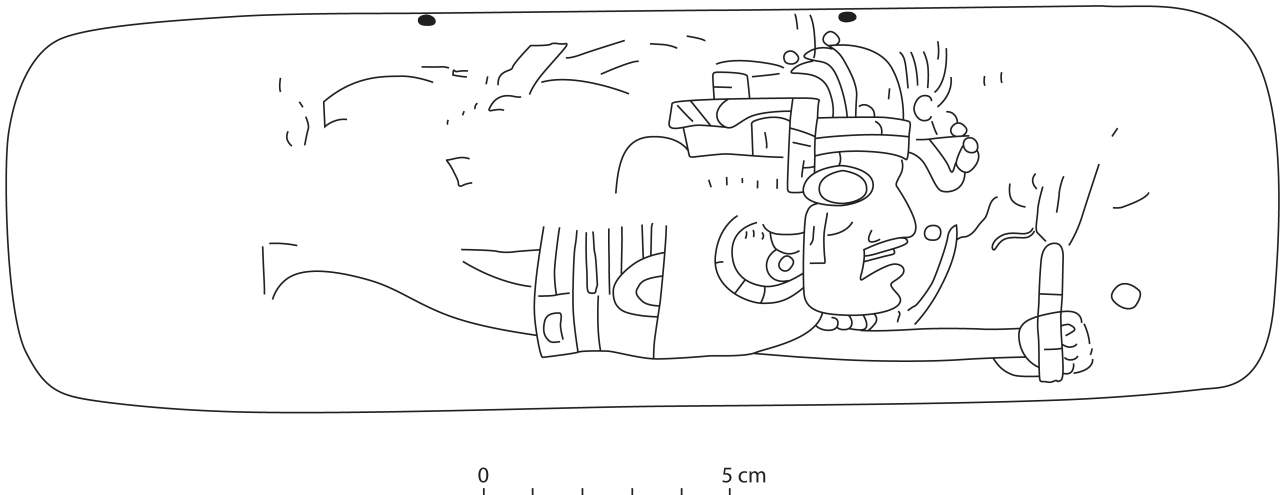
7 Figurines from Offering 4, La Venta, Olmec, made before *c.* 600 BCE, with areas of significant damage highlighted; dotted lines indicate breaks where elements were reattached by conservators. Jade, serpentine, plagiogranite, and composite stone; tallest figurine 20 cm high. Photos: National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Heizer #114, #118, and #123, with modifications by the author.

meaning might be assigned by users and viewers, and change over time as objects are combined in different configurations. Even if makers and users agreed on the identity of each figurine as it was made, that identity could have shifted, been reassigned, or even been forgotten and reinvented over the years as the figurine entered into new configurations.[34] Identity may have been reinforced by clothing and perishable materials, but changes in clothing might also have made it easier to ascribe different meanings to a single object over the course of its long lifetime. It is possible that at least some objects retained traces of their prior meanings even as new meanings were attributed to them, so that over time, the associations of each object grew richly layered.

At the same time, Deleuze and Guattari's expansive formulation of assemblage is important in that it includes not only objects, but also people, within its purview.

While this formulation was originally designed to address larger capitalist social formations, such as modern armies, universities, and corporations, there is value in applying its lessons to smaller scale and more ancient configurations as well. Perhaps what was most important about Offering 4 at La Venta was not the arrangement of the objects that we encounter today, but the social negotiations that resulted in the deposition of these objects together in the first place. If these figurines and celts were already old when they were deposited in the ground as Offering 4, to whom did they belong before their final grouping? Did this offering represent the accumulated wealth of one family or the collective treasures of many lineages? Although there is no conclusive evidence, I am inclined to believe that the figurines and celts came from many different sources. No other offering at La Venta concentrates so many figurines in one place: even the most lush burials of the wealthiest in Phase IV include only a few figurines.[35] All told, Offering 4 accounts for nearly half of the greenstone figurines found at La Venta. If, as this evidence seems to suggest, figurines were scarce at La Venta, or only rarely deposited into the earth, this makes the accumulation of Offering 4 seem even more noteworthy. Celts were more plentiful than figurines in the offerings of La Venta, but jade celts were always rare, and incised ones rarer still. That at least three incised jade objects, some perhaps previously items of personal adornment, were refashioned into the backdrop for this offering again suggests a recruitment of scarce and precious resources. Given that the celts were also already old, their uniformity of colour is again extravagant, illustrating a depth of resources on which to draw that might have exceeded the wealth of any one individual or lineage.

Offering 4 thus begins to look like a communal, rather than an individual, action, paralleling the Massive Offerings that demanded the entire community's labour. Assembling Offering 4 might have meant recruiting wealth from many different lineages, who willingly – or perhaps reluctantly – surrendered heirlooms to create this new assemblage. This surrender of wealth may not have affected all of its participants equally. Imagine that each figurine was contributed by a different lineage; such a gift would have represented a greater sacrifice for a family that owned just one or two such greenstone objects than it would for one that owned many. Even an equal contribution could thus have a proportionally greater impact on some lineages than on others.[36] Thus, even the kind of communal gift I have been positing has the potential to increase inequality within the community.

When these heirlooms were assembled to make this offering, that act created new meanings that each figurine might not have had individually in its prior life. Since the figurines and celts could not stand alone on a flat surface, they were on certain occasions joined together by embedding them in the earth.[37] This was a convenient way to manage a group of figurines that might not otherwise stand on their own, but perhaps it was something else as well – perhaps the action of planting these greenstone figurines in the earth had a powerful symbolic resonance, the very colour of the precious stones evoking the qualities of the maize plant. And perhaps these figurines were planted not just once over their long lives, but many times, as the damage to so many of the feet might suggest. Burial rendered this assemblage permanent (at least until its modern excavation), fixing the identities assigned to the figurines and the relationships among them. By combining these three different framings of assemblage – the archaeological, the art historical, and that of Deleuze and Guattari – we can see how the objects of Offering 4 involved larger and larger networks of agents, from the obdurate blocks of stone to the people who transported, worked, cherished, and eventually deposited these stones in the ground.

Over one hundred years after the burial, people returned to the site of the assemblage. When they dug down so precisely to re-view Offering 4, they exposed only the heads of the figures and the tips of the celts.[38] The figurines remained embedded in the reddish-brown sand beneath the grouping and the layer of white sand surrounding the figurines was undisturbed (see *plate 1*). They do not seem to have been moved. The presence of the offering was verified; perhaps the number of individuals in it could have been counted, but the details of the scene might not have been easily visible. A perishable offering scattered over the heads of the figures, such as blood or maize, might have renewed or re-energized the offering, but would not have left any record that archaeology in 1955 could have detected.

Yet perhaps the most significant feature of Offering 4 is that it is *not* the only instance in which Olmec people encountered the remains of their own past. On the contrary, Complex A was studded with the remains of Olmec excavations, as Susan Gillespie has highlighted.[39] Most of these other ancient excavations were indicated by pits mostly empty of cultural materials (except for an occasional layer of ash), suggesting that objects might have been removed, destroyed, or have degraded over time. In some cases, the same area was studded with multiple pits, suggesting repeated action. These empty pits change our understanding of Offering 4. It was not a unique moment of social memory, but part of a prolonged process of remembering and re-encountering the past. In comparison to these other excavations, what is unusual about Offering 4 is not that it was remembered, but that it endured even after residents of La Venta dug down to verify its contents, either because it was made out of durable jade, while other offerings were made out of perishable materials, or because the people of La Venta chose not to remove it when they revisited it, perhaps breaking in some way with tradition. Whatever the case, this extraordinary act of re-access and preservation demonstrates the enduring significance of this assemblage.

Since its discovery, the relationship among the objects that constitute Offering 4 has been considered significant, although not significant enough to prevent the objects of Offering 4 from being divided between collections in the US and Mexico for over half a century before the entire group was reunited in 2012.[40] Yet equally powerful are the ways that the objects within Offering 4 cannot be reduced to a simple set, as each object carries with it associations of past lives, owners, identities, and conjunctions. The act of bringing together these disparate objects also brought people together, as they contributed heirlooms, ephemeral ornaments, offerings, song, and prayers to the assemblage. Witnessing or participating in the ceremonies associated with the creation of the assemblage generated shared memories and collective ties, ties that might have been strengthened – or perhaps tested – by the later re-viewing. These active processes of joining remind us of what Bill Brown terms the 'implicit performative dimension of assemblage': how the very act of creating an assemblage contributes to its ever-evolving meaning.[41]

New Meanings: Colossal Heads

At first glance, the openness of meaning that I have described for the greenstone figurines of La Venta appears dramatically opposed to the ways that meaning is assigned to monumental sculpture. La Venta was home to many massive stone sculptures, including stelae, thrones, and colossal heads. Four colossal heads are known from La Venta; they range in height from 1.6 m to 2.4 m tall (*plate 8*). Each depicts distinctive facial features and headgear, rendered at monumental scale. They are part of a tradition that likely originated centuries earlier at the Olmec site of San Lorenzo, where ten such heads have been found. At San Lorenzo, several of the

Mon. 3　　　　　　　Mon. 2　　　　　　　Mon. 4
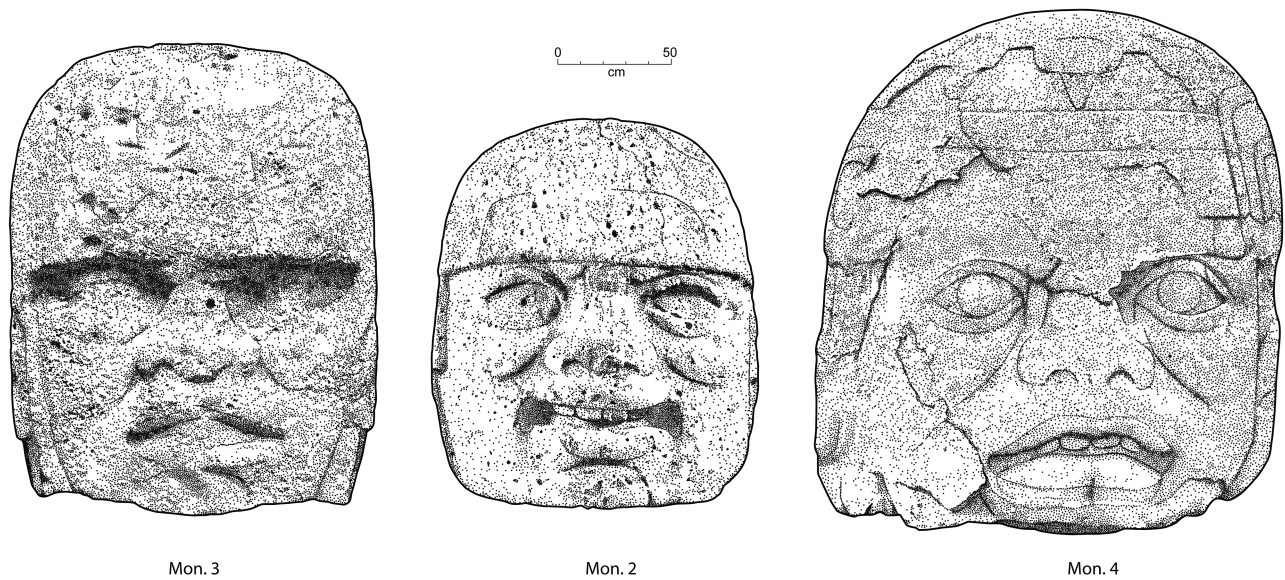
8 Colossal Heads 3, 2, and 4, La Venta, Olmec, 900–400 BCE, arranged in the order in which they were found in the northern part of the site. Basalt; 1.98, 1.63, and 2.26 metres high. Drawing: Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

colossal heads show signs of having been recarved out of monumental stone thrones, suggesting a tight connection between an individual and a stone of authority.[42] Crucially, no writing fixes the identities of the people represented by the colossal heads, though their carved headdresses may bear distinctive attributes that refer to personal or lineage names.[43]

From the moment of their discovery, Olmec colossal heads have been assumed to represent specific individuals, likely rulers of each site. To cite just one example of a predominant line of thinking, archaeologist Matthew Stirling wrote in 1965 that 'The realistic treatment of the features depicts men rather than gods [. . .] each has an individual quality and was probably the portrait of a prominent leader', although other scholars have proposed that they represent individual ballplayers or warriors instead of rulers.[44] The consensus that the colossal heads represent individuals no doubt emerges partly because of the specificity of their features and the variable nature of their headdresses, but is equally a response to their sheer size: the group or individual with the power to command the construction of such a monument likely also had the social capital to create a public consensus about the referent. I have no doubt that this was true at the moment of the colossal heads' making.

But such monumental referentiality may also be fragile. Three of the four colossal heads at La Venta were set in a row in the northern part of the site, far from the largest concentrations of sculpture to the south. They were found facing northwards, away from the site centre, spaced approximately 30 metres apart, where they may have been associated with stone or earthen platforms.[45] The current plan (see *plate* 2) shows the colossal heads slightly to the west of the notional centreline running through the site, but they may originally have been placed in relation to that central axis before the construction of the airstrip just to the north of Complex A.[46] The smallest head is placed at the centre. The three heads display a diversity in size, style, and facture that suggests that all were not made by the same team of artists at a single moment. These works are probably among the earliest sculptures at La Venta, continuing a prior tradition of sculpture in the round that was gradually displaced by stone stelae and other more planar and directionally oriented works.[47]

If so, several centuries may have elapsed between the creation of these works and their final deployment in the northern part of the site. As Susan Gillespie has

demonstrated, it is not until Phases III and IV that the builders of La Venta displayed a distinct preference for bilateral symmetry along the axial centreline drawn through the site, placing offerings and platforms inside Complex A either directly along the centreline or at equal distances to the east and west of it.[48] This line of three colossal heads could not have grown organically like a line of stelae in front of a Maya temple; they must have been deliberately placed in this arrangement, with the smallest head at the centre and the two larger ones flanking it. That is to say: confronted with a single object, people late in La Venta's history would most likely have placed it on the centreline; confronted with two, they would have placed them at equal distances to the east and west of the centreline. The present arrangement, with the smallest head in the middle, accords with the emphasis on bilateral symmetry and the centreline characteristic of La Venta's latest phases; in arranging the heads in this way, aesthetic preferences may have superseded other forms of organization based on history or chronology.

Aligned in a row, the colossal heads came to have a collective meaning as well as individual ones. This is true of all serial art, of course: the addition of one more to the series inevitably changes the understanding of all the objects that had come before. But as Bill Brown emphasizes,

> the assemblage is constituted through the interaction among its component parts, which themselves have external relations, each component having once belonged somewhere else (and *to* something else). The part is *there* (in the work) but it was (and continues to point) *elsewhere*, in place and in time.[49]

In other words, the colossal heads might have brought with them associations of their previous identities, which could enrich or stand in tension with their meanings as a group.

No longer just portraits of individual rulers, the assembled heads became a collective, confronting those entering the site from the north. The original identities ascribed to the heads could have been remembered, but they may also have been forgotten or wrongly attributed. People may have recognized the portraits as former rulers without being able to accurately specify which sculpture corresponded to which king. More importantly, perhaps the association of these heads created new meanings, and erased old ones. For example, it may have drawn new distinctions between these three colossal heads and Colossal Head 1, which was located near the centre of the site. Colossal Head 1, in turn, maintained a tighter association with Stela 2, near which it was displayed in Complex B, an association not shared by the other colossal heads placed further to the north.

In spite of their vastly different scales and formats, the figurines and celts of Offering 4 and the colossal heads of the northern group may have more in common than it would initially appear. Both classes of objects were moved across great distances over the course of their long lives. They also derived meaning from their juxtaposition with similar objects and had those meanings changed by reassemblage. Monumentality was no protection against shifting meaning.

The colossal heads were not the only Olmec monuments to have been moved around the landscape. Stone was a precious resource at many Olmec centres, which were located on a flat alluvial plain, far from sources of materials for monumental sculpture.[50] Yet symbolism as well as scarcity likely dictated the recycling or recarving of thrones into colossal heads discussed above, as well as the movement of sculptures around the landscape at many Olmec centres. For example, the colossal heads at the

early Olmec centre of San Lorenzo were arrayed in two parallel lines, creating what Ann Cyphers terms a 'macroscene of ancestral rulers'.[51] Christopher Pool has also proposed that many sculptures at Tres Zapotes were moved in antiquity; two colossal heads were among the reset sculptures.[52] Moving monumental sculpture around the landscape seems to have been a particularly Olmec habit.

Recontextualizations of stone sculpture created new assemblages, and with them, new meanings. One of the clearest examples of this process of reassemblage is a group of sculptures found by Cyphers at Rancho Azuzul, near the site of Loma del Zapote, a satellite of San Lorenzo, which thrived several centuries before La Venta's apogee (*plate 9*).[53] Two nearly identical figures, kneeling youths with elaborate headdresses, were positioned facing towards a sculpture of a crouching feline with bared fangs. Another, slightly larger, feline sculpture was found on a slope several metres away. Arranged in a confrontation, one human figure slightly behind the other, the array points to the narrative power of assemblage.

The two pairs of sculptures are quite different in materials, style, and facture. The kneeling youths were clearly made as a pair, nearly identical in all aspects, save for their slightly different facial features and the different patterns on their now-damaged headdresses. The two feline sculptures are clearly of different facture, carved out of more porous arkose sandstone with coarser features and visible marks of hammering, in contrast to the smoothly polished andesite surfaces of the human sculptures. Even the sculptural conceptions are vastly different: as Cyphers notes, the exceptionally long headdresses of the two youths point to a kind of material extravagance, given how greatly they enlarged the size of the stone block from which the sculptures would have been carved.[54] By contrast, the feline sculptures are curiously compact, and in the case of the smaller one, this is at least in part because the stone was recycled from some other work, traces of which remain in an otherwise inexplicable arc on the feline's right knee.[55] As Cyphers observes:

9 Sculptural assemblage found at Rancho Azuzul, Loma del Zapote, Olmec, 1200–900 BCE. Andesite and arkose; human figures approximately 1 metre high. Photo: Courtesy of Ann Cyphers. Secretaría de Cultura-INAH-MEX. Reproduction authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.
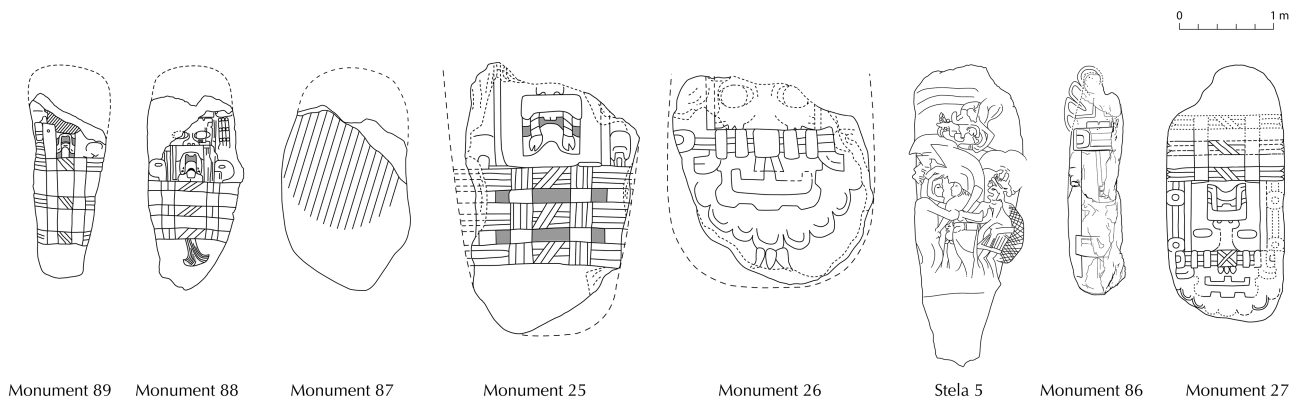
10 The two felines from the Azuzul assemblage, Loma del Zapote, Olmec, 1200–900 BCE. Left: Monument LZ-7, the sculpture found near the human figures. Arkose, 1.2 × 0.73 × 0.52 m. Museo de Antropología de Xalapa INV10-573558 3/3. Photo: Linda Schele © David Schele/ Courtesy of Ancient Americas at LACMA (ancientamericas. org). Right: Monument LZ-10, found a small distance from the rest of the group. Arkose, 1.64 × 1.1 × 0.71 m. Museo de Antropología de Xalapa INV10-573562. Photo: Author. Secretaría de Cultura-INAH-MEX. Reproduction authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.

'The recycled nature of the felines points to sculptural transformation not only as pragmatic, but also as symbolic'.[56]

Yet it is by no means clear that the two felines are equally old, or that they were made as a set in the way that the twins appear to have been. The felines are different heights: the one that forms part of the scene is 1.2 m tall, while the one found on the nearby hill is 1.6 m in height (*plate 10*). The smaller feline has a prominent nasal bridge, bisected by a gentle depression, where the larger one has a rounded nose, deeply inset eyes, and details indicated through lightly incised lines, including a pair of spots above the eyebrows. The features of the larger feline are substantially more eroded than those of the smaller one, and although this may simply point to their different conditions of preservation, it seems equally possible that the two had different life trajectories before they came to form part of this assemblage, with the larger feline potentially having stood exposed to the elements for a longer period of time.[57] Stylistically, both felines look to be much earlier than the naturalistically modelled youths.

Several different scenarios might be imagined that would have brought this assemblage of sculptures into being. As Cyphers proposes, it is possible the two youths were carved for the purpose, and two other stones were recarved into the felines, perhaps preserving some echo of the meaning of their former forms. Still, if both felines were recarved for this purpose, it would have been possible to make them far more similar to one another, echoing the formal similarity of the twins. Other, more complicated scenarios might also be imagined: two already-existing feline sculptures, perhaps made at different moments, were brought into juxtaposition with the newly made youths; one feline sculpture already existed and the second was made

0   1 m

Monument 89   Monument 88   Monument 87   Monument 25   Monument 26   Stela 5   Monument 86   Monument 27

11 Stelae aligned in front of Pyramid C, La Venta, as they were found by excavators, Olmec, 900–400 BCE. Drawing: Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation, with modifications by Amanda Chacón.

expressly to create a pairing between the two youths and two feline sculptures. Even the relatively crisp-looking youths might have been deployed in other configurations, being brought together into this configuration. These speculations only reinforce the considerable possibilities of assemblage. As Bill Brown observes,

> These relations of exteriority can have the effect of what Deleuze and Guattari call deterritorializaton and what Seitz calls centrifugal potentiality; they render the identity of any assemblage contingent for 'a component part of an assemblage may be detached [. . .] and plugged into a different assemblage in which its interactions are different'.[58]

The juxtaposition of the figures in the El Azuzul group has a kind of narrative tension, recalling the confrontational scene embedded in Offering 4.[59] Like the objects in Offering 4, at least some components of the El Azuzul scene had long prior histories, in which they might have had vastly different forms and functions: the recarved pectoral in Offering 4 and the recarved feline in the El Azuzul scene have similar trajectories of remaking, while other objects in each assemblage might have been made expressly for this purpose. What these two dramatically different narrative examples help us see, however, is that any movement or recontextualization of Olmec sculpture, large or small, like the repositioning of the colossal heads, had the capacity to change meaning, sometimes in unexpected ways.

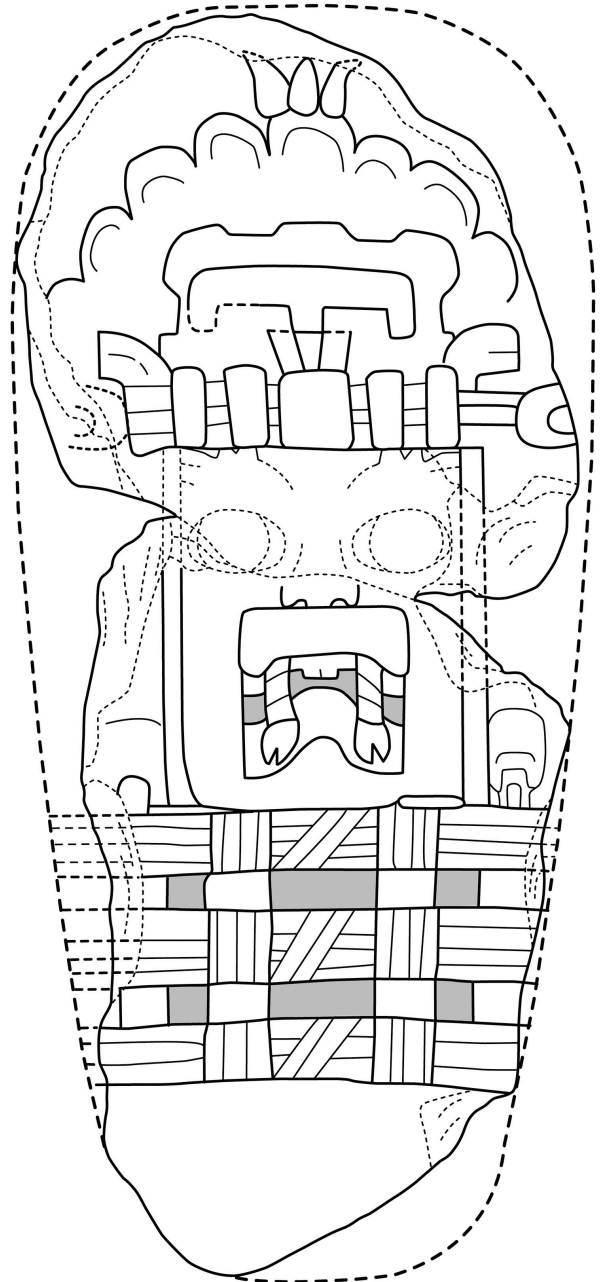**Forgetting: Stelae in front of Pyramid C**

One final example of the movement of sculpture at La Venta demonstrates the power of forgetting as well as the meanings created by a new assemblage. During Phase IV, the final phase of construction at La Venta, a line of eight stelae bordered the massive earthen Pyramid C, facing away from the pyramid towards the plaza to the south (*plate 11*).[60] What related these stelae in their final configuration was not iconography but materials and visible signs of age. It is possible that the stelae signified first and foremost *as stelae*, as assembled markers of a kind of prestige object tied to La Venta's history, even after their carvings became eroded and illegible.

This line of stelae to the south of Pyramid C constitutes a curious assortment. Four of them – Monuments 89, 88, 25/26, and 27 – represent crowned supernatural heads with wrappings below them, an enigmatic composition that Karl Taube has identified as the Maize God or a sacred bundle of maize, and David Grove has interpreted as the face of the earth or of a mountain (*plate 12*).[61] Monument 86 may represent a torch with flames at the upper end and an elaborately wrapped handle beneath, Stela 5 features a complex narrative scene involving interaction between three standing figures as a

fourth descends from the sky (*plate* 13), and Monument 87 is a roughly shaped boulder with no visible carving.[62]

The objects are aligned with purpose. As Rebecca González Lauck first noted, stelae to the stair's centreline are made of grey volcanic stone, while the stelae to the east are made of a variety of greenish stones, including serpentine, schist, and gneiss.[63] In associating these objects, materiality may have mattered more than iconography: Stela 5 may have been selected for the greenish serpentine stone out of which it is carved, rather than the nearly illegible figures on its surface. Monument 87, with no discernible carving at all, may likewise have been selected for its colour, size, shape, and material.[64]

12 Monument 25/26, La Venta, Olmec, 900–400 BCE. Schist, 4.56 × 1.83 × 0.27 m. Museo de sitio de La Venta. Photo: Author. Drawing: Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

13 Stela 5, La Venta, Olmec, 900–400 BCE. Serpentine, 3.47 × 1.12 × 0.3 m. Museo de Sitio de La Venta. Photo: Author. Drawing: Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation. Secretaría de Cultura-INAH-MEX. Reproduction authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.

The placement of several stelae suggests inattention to or lack of understanding of their decoration. Monuments 26 and 27 were displayed upside down, their surfaces so eroded that the iconography on them was difficult to make out (*plate 14* and *plate 15*).[65] Monuments 25 and 26, which we now recognize as two halves of the same sculpture, were separated from one another, each carefully placed in a pit dug to a precise depth so that both fragments would project approximately the same height above ground (*plate 15*; see also *plate 12*).[66] Moreover, it appears that the break had occurred long before the two stones were reset, as the fractured surface was 'very heavily weathered'.[67] It is not clear if the inhabitants of La Venta understood these two fragments to have been part of the same object: at the moment that the two stones were excavated in
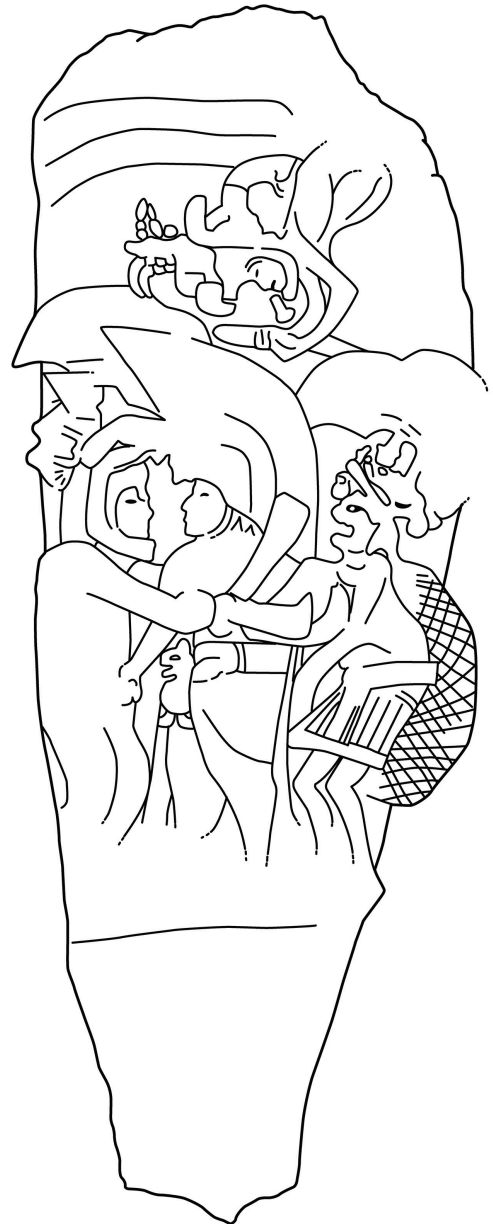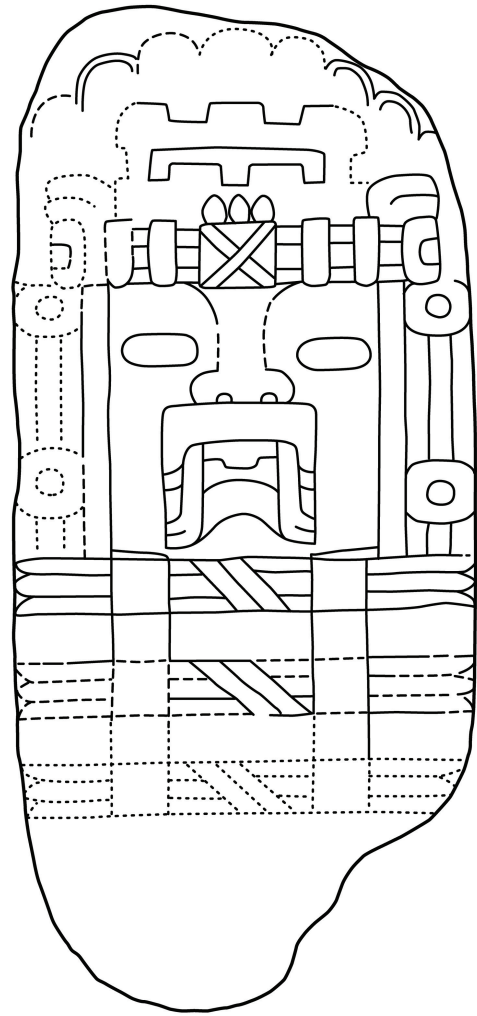
14 Monument 27, La Venta, during excavations (note that it was buried upside down), Olmec, 900–400 BCE. Gneiss, 2.77 × 1.35 × 0.37 m. Photo: National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Heizer #136967. Drawing: Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation. Secretaría de Cultura-INAH-MEX. Reproduction authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.

1955, the relationship eluded Drucker and his colleagues, usually astute observers of Olmec iconography, and it was not until the 1980s that James Porter and Rebecca González Lauck made the connection between the two pieces.[68]

Indeed, it may have been the age value and fragmentary state of the works that mattered most. In addition to the two halves of Monument 25/26, Monuments 27, 88, 89, and likely 87 were also visibly damaged, with substantial parts of the upper portions of the monuments missing (see *plate 11*).[69] Part of the underground base of Monument 25 was also absent, unequivocally demonstrating that the damage had occurred before the present resetting of the stela fragment; to compensate, stones were wedged underneath the gap to level the pointed base.[70] In sum, many of the stelae assembled were already old at the time that they were brought together, displaying those signs of age, fragmentation, and erosion. By contrast, many of the stelae *not* incorporated into this line, including Stelae 1, 2, and 3, are carved in much higher relief and remain far more legible than the stelae selected for display in front of Pyramid C.[71] Indeed, it is possible that these particular objects were associated because, and not in spite of, the illegible carvings on their surfaces. They were unquestionably

15 Monuments 25 and 26 during excavation (note that Monument 26 is buried upside down). The two pieces constitute a single stela, as illustrated in *plate 12*. Photo: National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Heizer #136969H.

worked stones, even the undecorated Monument 87, the worn and eroded surfaces signifying venerable age.[72] The visibly damaged nature of the surfaces itself may have held meaning.

Stratigraphically, it is clear that the arrangement of stelae in front of Pyramid C was a late configuration. The stelae were set into the red clay cap that covered Complex A during Phase IV, the final phase of occupation at the site, set into a 'shelflike bank' cut into the body of the pyramid.[73] Although the original excavators interpreted the fragmentation of these works as evidence that they were installed after the abandonment of La Venta, the amount of effort involved in placing these stelae is quite incommensurate with the other construction and offerings attributed to the period after La Venta's abandonment.[74] Far more likely, I suggest, is that these works formed part of the long-standing Olmec tradition of moving and recontextualizing sculpture, already discussed in this essay. As Drucker and colleagues observed, very few sculptures at La Venta were found below the Phase IV red clay cap, suggesting that monuments were moved with each successive renovation of the site.[75]

None of this rules out the possibility of an alignment of stelae in front of Pyramid C earlier in La Venta's history. Colman and Clark argue for such an alignment, based on the resemblance to the arrangement of six celts behind the figurines in Offering 4, buried at the beginning of Phase III and re-entered near the end of that phase.[76] Colman and Clark account for the divergence between the six celts of Offering 4 and the line of seven or eight stelae in front of Pyramid C (depending on whether Monuments 25 and 26 are counted separately or as a single object) by suggesting that the stelae in

front of Pyramid C were moved as the pyramid expanded in Phase IV, when an initial alignment of supernatural-faced stelae was augmented with new objects, including the narrative Stela 5 and the undecorated Monument 87. Even if this were the case, it would support the argument that the stelae came to have new meanings, more closely related to their materiality and fragmentary states than to their iconography, during Phase IV. But it seems equally possible that the placement of the monumental stelae responds to the small-scale configuration of Offering 4, or that if the celts in Offering 4 are intended to stand in for stelae, that they represent stelae displayed elsewhere at the site during Phase III and earlier. At least one other supernatural-faced stela made out of green schist, Monument 58, was found near Mound B-4, a low platform that divides the plaza to the south of the pyramid, suggesting another possible locus for the earlier display of these objects.[77]

Whatever the case, assemblage changed the meaning of these objects. Placement in this line created associations between what had once been a narrative scene on Stela 5 and the badly-effaced frontal presentations of deity heads or sacred bundles on Monuments 89, 88, 25/26, and 27; it also declared a similarity between the unornamented Monument 87 and the carved stelae surrounding it. This may have had little to do with the original signification of the stones: it may be that by late Phase IV times at La Venta, the visible age of these objects – and their collective accumulation – mattered as much as their iconographic content. From individual markers of history, myth, or ritual, assemblage transformed these stelae into collective signifiers of antiquity.

Conclusions

At La Venta, even the most durable and monumental kinds of objects were in movement. Colossal heads and stelae, like figurines and celts, came together in different configurations over the course of their extended lifetimes, their meanings shifting with each new assemblage. At La Venta, assemblage fostered different kinds of meaning-making: the purposeful reassigning of identities to the figurines in Offering 4, the collective resignification of the colossal heads, the processes of forgetting implied by the line of stelae in front of Pyramid C. But what matters most is that none of these works stood in isolation. Instead, their meaning was defined by assemblage.

Art history tends to privilege individual objects. Our methods frequently begin with the puzzle of a particular work, asking especially deliberate questions about its moment of making and first reception. Even studies of later reception often focus on individual objects or classes of objects. But meaning does not necessarily inhere in a single object alone. Instead, meaning is also defined by relationships: to other examples of the same series or genre, to contrasting classes of objects, to things nearby, to people. Assemblage offers an analytical framework that makes some of these relationships more visible, highlighting the ways that deliberate – often performative – actions of combination and juxtaposition are themselves productive of meaning. Especially in the absence of contemporary texts, as is so often the case with archaeological materials, analysing objects together also sheds new light on how makers and audiences understood the works with which they interacted.

Moreover, objects often have long lives, and meaning does not always remain stable, even for the most monumental of public sculptures. Foregrounding change over time in the analysis of assemblage provides new frameworks for studying the life histories of objects, highlighting the tangled trails of associations that individual works bear with them as they are joined together in new configurations, meanings which may enrich or exist in tension with the aims of the grouping as a whole. In some cases,

the people constituting assemblages responded to changes in meaning; in other cases, it was the very making of a new assemblage that instigated changes in interpretation and signification. Assemblage allows us to consider layers of meaning that surpass the individual object and the intentions of its creators.

Notes

1   The original accounts of the find are in Philip Drucker, Robert F. Heizer, and Robert J. Squier, *Excavations at La Venta, Tabasco, 1955*, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 170, Washington, DC, 1959, 59, 61, 152–161; and Philip Drucker and Robert F. Heizer, 'Gifts for the Jaguar God', *National Geographic*, 110: 3, 1956, 367, 374–375. Other details of the discovery can be found in John Clark and Arlene Colman, 'Olmec Things and Identity: A Reassessment of Offerings and Burials at La Venta, Tabasco', *Archeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association*, 23: 1, 2013, 30–31, n19; and David Grove, *Discovering the Olmecs: An Unconventional History*, Austin, TX, 2014, 58–59. The date of discovery (4 April 1955) comes from field notes at the National Anthropological Archives of the Smithsonian Institution. For recent assessments of the offering, see Diana Isabel Magaloni Kerpel and Laura Filloy Nadal, eds, *La Ofrenda 4 de La Venta: Un tesoro olmeca reunido en el Museo Nacional de Antropología. Estudios y catálogo razonado*, Mexico City, 2013; Susan D. Gillespie, 'Journey's End(?): The Travels of La Venta Offering 4', in *Things in Motion: Object Itineraries in Anthropological Practice*, ed. Rosemary Joyce and Susan D. Gillespie, Santa Fe, NM, 2015, 39–61; and Arlene Colman and John Clark, 'La Venta Offering 4: Representation of an Olmec Ritual', in *The Dimensions of Rituality 2000 Years Ago and Today/Las dimensiones de la ritualidad hace 2000 años y en la actualidad*, ed. Christa Schieber de Lavarreda and Miguel Orrego Corzo, El Asintal, Guatemala, 2016, 124–151.

2   Rosemary Joyce and Joshua Pollard, 'Archaeological Assemblages and Practices of Deposition', in *Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies*, ed. Dan Hicks and Mary C. Beaudry, Oxford, 2010, 292; see also Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn, *Archaeology: Theories, Methods, and Practice*, London, 2012, 120; Yannis Hamilakis and Andrew Meirion Jones, 'Archaeology and Assemblage', *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 27: 1, 2017: 77–84, and the other essays in this special issue of *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*.

3   William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage*, New York, 1961, for non-Western art and assemblage, especially 83, 153–154, and for commentary, Julia Kelly, 'The Anthropology of Assemblage', *Art Journal*, 67: 1, 2008, 24–30. See also Allan Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments and Happenings*, New York, 1966.

4   Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis, 1987 [1980]; especially as glossed in Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*, London, MN, 2006, *Assemblage Theory*, Edinburgh, 2016. On the translation of the term, see John Phillips, '*Agencement*/Assemblage', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23: 2–3, 2006, 108–109.

5   Amy Morris, 'America and the Art of Assemblage', https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/admissions/graduate/reading/American-LT19-Assemblage.pdf

6   Bill Brown, 'Re-Assemblage (Theory, Practice, Mode)', *Critical Inquiry*, 46, 2020, 259–303.

7   For the Olmec generally, an excellent starting point is Christopher Pool, *Olmec Archaeology and Early Mesoamerica*, Cambridge, 2007; for an

introduction to Mesoamerica more broadly, see Mary Miller, *The Art of Mesoamerica from Olmec to Aztec*, fifth ed., London, 2012. For the place of San Lorenzo and La Venta within broader patterns of Mesoamerican monumentality, see Takeshi Inomata et al., 'Artificial Plateau Construction during the Preclassic Period at the Maya Site of Ceibal, Guatemala', *PLOS One*, 14: 8, 2019, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0221943; Takeshi Inomata et al., 'Monumental Architecture at Aguada Fénix and the Rise of Maya Civilization', *Nature*, 582: 7813, 2020, 530–533. For holistic views of the site of La Venta, Rebecca González Lauck's work is crucial; Rebecca B. González Lauck, 'Proyecto arqueológico La Venta', *Arqueología*, 4, 1988, 121–165; 'La Venta: An Olmec Capital', in *Olmec Art of Ancient Mexico*, ed. Elizabeth Benson and Beatriz de la Fuente, Washington, DC and New York, 1996, 73–81; 'Acerca de pirámides de tierra y seres sobrenaturales: observaciones preliminares en torno al Edificio C-1, La Venta, Tabasco', *Arqueología*, 17, 1997, 79–97.

8   The excavation reports for Complex A are Philip Drucker, *La Venta, Tabasco: A Study of Olmec Ceramics and Art*, Bulletin 153, Washington, DC, 1952; and Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*. For reassessments of Complex A, essential references are Arlene Colman, *The Construction of Complex A at La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico: A History of Buildings, Burials, Offerings and Stone Monuments*, MA thesis, Brigham Young University, 2010; and Susan D. Gillespie, 'History in Practice: Ritual Deposition at La Venta Complex A', in *Memory Work: Archaeologies of Material Practices*, ed. Barbara Mills and William Walker, Santa Fe, NM, 2008, 109–136; see also Carolyn E. Tate, *Reconsidering Olmec Visual Culture: The Unborn, Women, and Creation*, Austin, TX, 2012.

9   For discussions of the Massive Offerings, see especially Gillespie, 'History in Practice'; Colman, *The Construction of Complex A*; John Clark and Arlene Colman, 'Structure of the Mesoamerican Universe, from Aztec to Olmec', in *Enduring Motives: The Archaeology of Tradition and Religion in Native America*, ed. Linea Sundstrom and Warren DeBoer, Tuscaloosa, AL, 2012; and Claudia Brittenham, *Unseen Art: Making, Vision, and Power in Ancient Mesoamerica*, Austin, TX, in press, 17–46.

10 Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 59, 61–63, 125.

11 Rebecca B. González Lauck, 'Observaciones en torno a los contextos de la escultura olmeca de La Venta, Tabasco', in *Acercarse y mirar: Homenaje a Beatriz de la Fuente*, ed. María Teresa Uriarte Castañeda and Leticia Staines Cicero, Mexico City, 2004, 79–97; González Lauck, 'The Architectural Setting of Olmec Sculpture at La Venta, Tabasco', in *The Place of Stone Monuments: Context, Use, and Meaning in Mesoamerica's Preclassic Transition*, ed. Julia Guernsey, John Clark, and Barbara Arroyo, Cambridge, MA, 2010, 129–148. Carolyn Tate also discusses sculptural groupings in Tate, *Reconsidering Olmec Visual Culture*, 199–262.

12 Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 229.

13 Ann Cyphers Guillén, 'From Stone to Symbols: Olmec Art in Social Context at San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán', in *Social Patterns in Pre-Classic Mesoamerica*, ed. David Grove and Rosemary Joyce, Washington, DC, 1999, 174.

14 'el arte olmeca en escenas *esculpía* el espacio mismo, dándole formas, volúmenes, masas y vacíos, y, sobre todo, mayor significado', Ann Cyphers Guillén, 'Escenas escultóricas olmecas', *Antropológicas*, Nueva época, 6, 1993, 48. Italics in the original; translation by the author.

15 Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 159; Laura Filloy Nadal et al., 'Las materias primas utilizadas para la manufactura de las figurillas y hachas de la Ofrenda 4 de La Venta: caracterización y fuentes de origen', in *La Ofrenda 4 de La Venta*, ed. Magaloni Kerpel and Filloy Nadal, Mexico City, 110–113.

16 Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 59, 61–63, 125; for the term 'ritual event' and its application to Massive Offering 3 and Offering 4, see Colman, *The Construction of Complex A*, 117–121, 157–169.

17 Kent Reilly includes figurines and celts among the markers of a 'Middle Formative Ceremonial Complex', see F. Kent Reilly, 'Art, Ritual, and

Rulership in the Olmec World', in *The Olmec World: Ritual and Rulership*, Princeton, NJ, 1995, 29–30. Since then, many celts and a very few greenstone figurines corresponding to the Early Formative period have also been discovered at El Manatí and elsewhere, see for example, Kathleen Berrin and Virginia Fields, eds, *Olmec: Colossal Masterworks of Ancient Mexico*, New Haven, CT, 2020, 135–143.

18 Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 158, 161; Gillespie, 'Journey's End(?)', 46, 57–58.

19 As Clark and Colman note, serpentine celts are more common than jade ones in offerings, but the proportions are reversed in burials. Incised celts are rare in both contexts: only twelve have been recovered from La Venta, one third of them from Offering 4; see Clark and Colman, 'Olmec Things and Identity', 20.

20 For other celts of similar proportions in La Venta Offering 2, see Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 156; Olaf Jaime-Riverón, 'Las hachas de jadeíta de la Ofrenda 4 de La Venta', in *La Ofrenda 4 de La Venta*, ed. Magaloni Kerpel and Filloy Nadal, 79, 83, 87.

21 Gillespie, 'Journey's End(?)', 58–60.

22 Also discussed in María Antonieta Cervantes, 'Dos elementos de uso ritual en el arte olmeca', *Anales del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia* 7th series, 1, 1969, 43–44; Colman and Clark, 'La Venta Offering 4', 132–135, 139–141; Gillespie, 'Journey's End(?)', 58–60.

23 Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 156–158, 161; Jaime-Riverón, 'Las hachas de jadeíta', 55–88.

24 For a reconstruction, see Colman and Clark, 'La Venta Offering 4', 132–135, 139, 142.

25 Figurine 8, the only figurine made out of jadeite, also resembles the chemical signature of the Motagua River valley; Filloy Nadal *et al.*, 'Las materias primas', 119–120, 125. Note that this differs from the original account in Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 156–158, where the archaeologists initially suggested that all four incised celts were pieces of a single previous object.

26 Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 161, underreports damage; Magaloni Kerpel and Filloy Nadal, 'Retratos de los ancestros', 131–204, provides a more reliable catalogue, but note that the authors mislabel several of the figurines: Figurine 12 is mislabelled as 17, Figurine 17 as 20, Figurine 20 as 21, and Figurine 21 as 12. I have used the original numbering from Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 152–161, plates 33–36. The four figurines missing feet are numbers 8, 13, 14, and 19; Figurine 10 is missing a chunk of the right foot; and Figurines 11, 12, 15, 17, and 18 also have damage to the feet. Excavators reported finding one or two arm fragments in Offering 4, and photos and drawings also seem to show another diamond-shaped fragment that looks like the torso of another figurine, *Excavations at La Venta*, 153, 156. After close examination of excavation photos, I believe that the fragmentary arms belong to Figurine 8: they were found close to this figurine, and in situ photos show that Figurine 8's arms were broken off near the shoulders (see *plate 4*; an even clearer view is reproduced as Figure 4 of Jane MacLaren Walsh, 'El papel del Instituto Smithsoniano en el descubrimiento y estudio de la Ofrenda 4 de La Venta', in *La Ofrenda 4 de La Venta*, ed. Magaloni Kerpel and Filloy Nadal). By the time the figurines were photographed for the excavation report, the arms had been reattached, but fissures are still clearly visible, see *plate 7* and Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, plate 33. Figurine 19 also appears to have had its right arm reattached after excavation. The 'torso' I believe is part of Celt 1, following Filloy Nadal *et al.*, 'Las materias primas', 63. I am grateful to Laura Filloy for discussing these questions with me (personal communication, 2014). See also Colman and Clark, 'La Venta Offering 4', 143. For an alternative interpretation, see Gillespie, 'Journey's End(?)', 56–57. For fragmentation more generally, Julia Guernsey, *Human Figuration and Fragmentation in Preclassic Mesoamerica: From Figurines to Sculpture*, Cambridge, 2020, 87–112; John Chapman, *Fragmentation in Archaeology: People, Places, and Broken Objects in the Prehistory of South Eastern Europe*, London, 2000; John Chapman and Bisserka Gaydarska, *Parts and Wholes: Fragmentation in Prehistoric Context*, Oxford, 2007.

27 Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 158, 161; Filloy Nadal *et al.*, 'Las materias primas', 125–127.

28 Clark and Colman, 'Olmec Things and Identity', 23; for Olmec figurines as heirlooms, see also Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 255.

29 Diana Isabel Magaloni Kerpel and Laura Filloy Nadal, 'Retratos de los ancestros: la Ofrenda 4 de La Venta y sus 16 figurillas de piedra verde', in *La Ofrenda 4 de La Venta*, ed. Magaloni Kerpel and Filloy Nadal, 131–223; but see also Billie J. A. Follensbee, *Sex and Gender in Olmec Art and Archaeology*, PhD thesis, University of Maryland, 2000, 124–129.

30 Filloy Nadal *et al.*, 'Las materias primas', 122–123, 125–127.

31 Filloy Nadal *et al.*, 'Las materias primas', 126–127; Magaloni Kerpel and Filloy Nadal, 'Retratos de los ancestros', 159, 171 (note that Figurine 21 is misidentified as Figurine 12).

32 For wrapping celts, see F. Kent Reilly, 'Middle Formative Origins of the Mesoamerican Ritual Act of Bundling', in *Sacred Bundles: Ritual Acts of Wrapping and Binding in Mesoamerica*, ed. Julia Guernsey and F. Kent Reilly, Barnardsville, NC, 2006, 1–21.

33 For example, Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image – Music – Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, New York, 1977 [1968], 142–148; Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, trans. Donald S. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, Ithaca, NY, 1977, 113–138.

34 For Olmec memory work, see Gillespie, 'History in Practice'; Jillian Mollenhauer, *Olmec Monuments as Agents of Social Memory*, PhD thesis, University of California, San Diego, 2010; Mollenhauer, 'Sculpting the Past in Preclassic Mesoamerica: Olmec Stone Monuments and the Production of Social Memory', *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 25: 1, 2014, 11–27; Christopher A. Pool and Michael L. Loughlin, 'Creating Memory and Negotiating Power in the Olmec Heartland', *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*, 24: 1, 2017, 229–260. On forgetting more generally, see Paul Connerton, 'Seven Types of Forgetting', *Memory Studies*, 1: 1, 2008, 59–71.

35 Four small figurines were found as a centreline offering from Phase IV, Offering 1943-M, Waldo R. Wedel, 'Structural Investigations in 1943', in *La Venta, Tabasco*, ed. Drucker, 73; Drucker, *La Venta*, 157–159; Colman, *The Construction of Complex A*, 222; two even smaller figurines constituted a similar offering in a burial from Phase III, Offering 3, Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 146–152, Colman, *The Construction of Complex A*, 135–141. John Clark and Arlene Colman suggest that the perforated figurines may have served as ear ornaments, John Clark and Arlene Colman, 'Dressed Ears as Comeliness and Godliness', in *Wearing Culture: Dress and Regalia in Early Mesoamerica and Central America*, ed. Heather Orr and Matthew Looper, Boulder, CO, 2014, 177. Other figurines were also associated with burials: one figurine was found in the stone cist tomb; another in a stone sarcophagus; two figurines were associated with each of the bundles of bones in the massive basalt tomb. Several very battered figurines were found in construction fill. See Drucker, *La Venta*, 148, 153–160, 211–212.

36 On this point, see also Richard Bradley, *The Passage of Arms: An Archaeological Analysis of Prehistoric Hoards and Votive Deposits*, Cambridge, 1990, 39, citing Christopher A. Gregory, 'Gifts to Men and Gifts to God: Gift Exchange and Capital Accumulation in Contemporary Papua', *Man*, 15: 4, 1980, 626–652; Gregory, *Gifts and Commodities*, London, 1982. This idea is especially resonant in light of Susan Gillespie's proposal that the Phase II Massive Offerings were carried out by different lineages, 'History in Practice', 126–136. Yet there are substantial differences in scale between the handfuls of objects in Offering 4 and the thousands of tonnes of greenstone in the Massive Offerings.

37 Joyce Marcus, 'The Importance of Context in Interpreting Figurines', *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 6: 2, 1996, 285–291; Marcus, 'Rethinking Figurines', in *Mesoamerican Figurines: Small-Scale Indices of Large-Scale Phenomena*, ed. Christina Halperin *et al.*, Gainesville, FL, 2009, 26–31; Follensbee, *Sex and Gender*, 71–84, 129–130; Claudia Brittenham, 'Shifting Scales at La Venta', in *Figurines: The Sense of Scale*, ed. Jaś Elsner, Oxford, 2020, 57–62.

38 Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 154; Philip Drucker and Robert F. Heizer, 'Commentary on W. R. Coe and Robert Stuckenrath's View of Excavations at La Venta, Tabasco, 1955', *The Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers*, 33, 1965, 61–62.

39 Susan D. Gillespie, 'Archaeological Drawings as Re-presentations: The Maps of Complex A, La Venta, Mexico', *Latin American Antiquity*, 22: 1, 2011, 24–28; Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 17, 24, 26, 29, 63–70, 92–93, 112, 114, 116–117.

40 On the reunion, see Magaloni Kerpel and Filloy Nadal, *La Ofrenda 4 de La Venta*; Susan Gillespie, in 'Journey's End(?)', 41, is especially eloquent on the way that Offering 4 has been treated as a unit rather than an

assemblage of component parts. On the problem of the term 'offering', see Brittenham, *Unseen Art*, 25–27.

41 Anna Dezeuze, 'Assemblage, Bricolage, and the Practice of Everyday Life', *Art Journal*, 67: 1, 2008, 31–37.

42 James Porter, 'Olmec Colossal Heads as Recarved Thrones: "Mutilation", Revolution, and Recarving', *Res*, 17/18, 1989, 22–29; Ann Cyphers suggests that nine out of the ten colossal heads from San Lorenzo show signs of recarving, Ann Cyphers Guillén, 'Escultura monumental olmeca: temas y contextos', in *Acercarse y mirar: Homenaje a Beatriz de la Fuente*, ed. María Teresa Uriarte Castañeda and Leticia Staines Cicero, Mexico City, 2004, 58.

43 For Olmec writing, see María del Carmen Rodríguez Martínez *et al.*, 'Oldest Writing in the New World', *Science*, 313: 5793, 2006, 1610–1614; Stephen Houston, 'The Case for Olmec Writing', in *The Oxford Handbook of Olmec Archaeology*, Oxford, in press. Monument 13, a Phase IV sculpture from La Venta, is one of the strongest cases for Olmec writing to have been archaeologically excavated, see Alfonso Lacadena García-Gallo, 'La escritura olmeca y la hipótesis del mixe-zoque: Implicaciones lingüísticas de un análisis structural del monumento 13 de La Venta', in *Olmeca: Balance y perspectivas, Memoria de la Primera Mesa Redonda*, ed. María Teresa Uriarte Castañeda and Rebecca B. González Lauck, Mexico City, 2008, 607–626. These few stone examples suggest that there may also have been an Olmec tradition of writing on perishable materials, but what is essential here is that none of the examples considered in this essay bear writing upon them.

44 Matthew W. Stirling, 'Monumental Sculpture of Southern Veracruz and Tabasco', in *Archaeology of Southern Mesoamerica, Part 2*, ed. Gordon R. Willey, *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, Austin, TX, 1965, 733. For the colossal heads as ballplayers or warriors, see Román Piña Chan and Luis Covarrubias, *El pueblo del jaguar (Los olmecas arqueológicas)*, Mexico City, 1964, caption to photo facing p. 36, 48; for a survey of colossal heads, see Beatriz de la Fuente, *Cabezas colosales olmecas*, Mexico City, 1992.

45 Matthew W. Stirling, 'Great Stone Faces of the Mexican Jungle', *National Geographic*, 78, 1940, 328–332; Stirling, *Stone Monuments of Southern Mexico*, Washington, DC, 1943, 57–58; Drucker, *La Venta*, 9; González Lauck, 'Observaciones', 85–88; González Lauck, 'Architectural Setting', 133–134, also discussed in David Grove, 'Public Monuments and Sacred Mountains: Observations on Three Formative Period Sacred Landscapes', in *Social Patterns in Preclassic Mesoamerica*, ed. David Grove and Rosemary Joyce, Washington, DC, 1999, 267; Tate, *Reconsidering Olmec Visual Culture*, 209–210, 252–256.

46 Matthew Stirling, who first uncovered the heads in 1939, described their location only vaguely and did not map the finds. The rough map in Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, Figure 2, from the 1945 excavation season, shows the three colossal heads closely aligned to the centreline of Complex A. They are arranged in an east-west line, with the central Colossal Head 2 positioned closer to Colossal Head 4 on the west, as if it had been moved out of position to make room for the airstrip which separates Colossal Heads 4 and 2 from Colossal Head 3. More recent maps, like that in *plate 2*, based on Rebecca González Lauck's mapping project, locate all three colossal heads to the west of the airstrip in a slightly ragged line, based on recollections of the landowner on whose lands they were found, González Lauck, 'Observaciones', 85. Note that the present location of the casts of the colossal heads at the site does not correspond to their original location: they are too close to the northern limit of Complex A, and also too close to one another.

47 Cyphers Guillén, 'Escultura monumental', 58; Christopher Pool, 'Stone Monuments and Earthen Mounds: Polity and Placemaking at Tres Zapotes, Veracruz', in *The Place of Stone Monuments: Context, Use, and Meaning in Mesoamerica's Preclassic Transition*, ed. Julia Guernsey, John Clark, and Barbara Arroyo, Cambridge, MA, 2010, 108.

48 Susan Gillespie definitively demonstrates that this centreline was not part of the plan of La Venta from the beginning, as the original excavators presumed, but instead a property that emerged over time, see 'Archaeological Drawings', 11–12, 28–31.

49 Brown, 'Re-Assemblage (Theory, Practice, Mode)', 271, italics in original.

50 Howel Williams and Robert F. Heizer, 'Sources of Rocks used in Olmec Monuments', in *Sources of Stones used in Prehistoric Mesoamerica, Contributions of the University of California Archaeological Research Facility No. 1*, Berkeley, 1965, 1–40.

51 'una macroescena de gobernantes ancestrales', Cyphers Guillén, 'Escultura monumental', 58, translation mine; see also 'La gobernatura en San Lorenzo: Inferencias del arte y patrón de asentamiento', in *Población, subsistencia y medio ambiente en San Lorenzo Teonochtitlán*, ed. Ann Cyphers Guillén, Mexico City, 1997, 234; Grove, 'Public Monuments and Sacred Mountains: Observations on Three Formative Period Sacred Landscapes', 277, 280.

52 Pool, 'Stone Monuments', 118, 122–124 and passim; Pool and Loughlin, 'Creating Memory', 246–247.

53 Ann Cyphers Guillén, 'Olmec Sculpture and Architecture, Azuzul Acropolis, Loma del Zapote, Veracruz', *National Geographic Research and Exploration*, 10: 3, 1994, 299–304; Ann Cyphers Guillén and Fernando Botas, 'An Olmec Feline Sculpture from El Azuzul, Southern Veracruz', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 138: 2, 1994, 273–283; Ann Cyphers Guillén, *Escultura olmeca de San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán*, Mexico City, 2004, 246–255.

54 Cyphers Guillén, *Escultura olmeca de San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán*, 251–252. As Cyphers notes, the block of stone necessary to carve these figures with their long headdresses would have been as large as one required to make a colossal head or a throne, even though the finished works are ultimately much smaller.

55 Cyphers Guillén, 'Olmec Sculpture', 301; Cyphers Guillén and Botas, 'An Olmec Feline Sculpture from El Azuzul, Southern Veracruz', 273, 277–281; Cyphers Guillén, *Escultura olmeca de San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán*, 163–164. Cyphers notes that the back of the smaller feline is notably weathered, suggesting that it was the underside of the work in its previous iteration, Cyphers Guillén and Botas, 'An Olmec Feline Sculpture from El Azuzul, Southern Veracruz', 280, but this pattern of wear might also point to a prior moment of exposure in its present form. The larger feline was likely also recarved from weathered stone, Ann Cyphers Guillén, 'Three New Olmec Sculptures from Southern Veracruz', *Mexicon*, 16: 2, 1994, 30.

56 Cyphers Guillén, 'Olmec Sculpture', 304.

57 Cyphers suggests that the larger feline may not have been finished, or attributes the differences in form to the possibility that different kinds of felines are being represented, 'Olmec Sculpture', 301, but it seems equally possible that its ill-defined features are the result of erosion.

58 Brown, 'Re-Assemblage (Theory, Practice, Mode)', 275, citing DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory And Social Complexity*, Bloomsbury, London, 10.

59 Cyphers Guillén, 'Escenas escultóricas olmecas', 50.

60 González Lauck, 'Proyecto arqueológico La Venta', 142–149; González Lauck, 'Acerca de pirámides', 85–92; González Lauck, 'Observaciones', 91–95; González Lauck, 'Architectural Setting', 135–138; also discussed in Mollenhauer, *Olmec Monuments as Agents of Social Memory*, 225–229, 259–262; Tate, *Reconsidering Olmec Visual Culture*, 208–209, 240–246.

61 Karl A. Taube, 'The Olmec Maize God: The Face of Corn in Formative Mesoamerica', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 29/30, 1996, 50–54, 75; Taube, 'Lightning Celts and Corn Fetishes: The Formative Olmec and the Development of Maize Symbolism in Mesoamerica and the American Southwest', in *Olmec Art and Archaeology in Mesoamerica*, ed. John Clark and Mary E. Pye, Washington, DC, 2000, 310–111; *Olmec Art at Dumbarton Oaks*, Washington, DC, 2004, 25–29; David Grove, 'Cerro sagrados olmecas: Montañas en la cosmovisión mesoamericana', *Arqueología Mexicana*, 87, 2007, 30–35; Grove, 'Faces of the Earth at Chalcatzingo, Mexico: Serpents, Caves, and Mountains in Middle Formative Period Iconography', in *Olmec Art and Archaeology in Mesoamerica*, ed. Clark and Pye, 277–295.

62 For Monument 86, see González Lauck, 'Architectural Setting', 137; Colman and Clark, 'La Venta Offering 4', 131. For Stela 5, see González Lauck, 'Proyecto arqueológico La Venta', 145–149; Follensbee, *Sex and Gender*, 190–195. For Monument 87, see note 64.

63 González Lauck, 'Acerca de pirámides', 91; González Lauck, 'Architectural Setting', 136. For the original report of the colour and materials of Monument 25/26 and Monument 27, see Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 120, 126, 204–208. This association of green with the eastern direction continues a pattern found as early as Phase II at La Venta, for example, in the marker walls surrounding the mosaic pavement in Massive Offering 1, where only the eastern wall is green in colour, *Excavations at La Venta*, 99. For colour symbolism at La Venta, see Clark and Colman, 'Structure of the Mesoamerican Universe', 31, 35.

64 It is possible that Monument 87 was originally painted or decorated in some way that has not left a trace in the archaeological record; see, e.g., González Lauck, 'Acerca de pirámides', 89; Colman and Clark, 'La Venta Offering 4', 131. Yet we should take seriously the possibility that the stone, like later Mayan and Teotihuacan blank stelae, was never decorated: that its shape and potential ritual efficacy mattered more than its decoration. For the important tradition of Preclassic blank stelae on the Pacific coast, see Frederick J. Bove, 'The People with No Name: Some Observations on the Plain Stelae of Pacific Guatemala (and Chiapas) with Respect to Issues of Ethnicity and Rulership', in *The Southern Maya in the Late Preclassic: The Rise and Fall of an Early Mesoamerican Civilization*, ed. Michael Love and Jonathan Kaplan, Boulder, CO, 2011, 77–114. For Maya plain stelae, see Adam Herring, *Sculpture in the Maya Cities, AD 250–800: A Critical Study*, PhD thesis, Yale University, 1999, 114; Barbara Arroyo, 'The Naranjo Rescue Project: New Data from the Preclassic Guatemala', 2007, http://www.famsi.org/reports/06109/06109Arroyo01.pdf., 17–20; Karen Pereira, *Plain but Not Simple: Middle Preclassic Stone Monuments of Naranjo, Guatemala*, MA thesis, University of Florida, 2009; David Stuart, 'Shining Stones: Observations on the Ritual Meaning of Early Maya Stelae', in *The Place of Stone Monuments: Context, Use, and Meaning in Mesoamerica's Preclassic Transition*, ed. Julia Guernsey, John Clark, and Barbara Arroyo, Cambridge, MA, 2010, 283–290. For blank stelae at Teotihuacan, see Matthew H. Robb, ed., *Teotihuacan: City of Water, City of Fire*, Berkeley, 2017, 285.

65 Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 120–121, 204–209.

66 Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 120. Monument 86 was also found in two pieces, separated by some distance, but it is harder to tell if this breakage was pre-burial and intentional; see González Lauck, 'Proyecto arqueológico La Venta', 143. The breakage of Stela 5 seems to have been accidental and part of a natural process, as the base was found still embedded in the ground and the rest of the stone face-down, not far from where it would have fallen naturally, see 'Proyecto arqueológico La Venta', 145.

67 Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 206.

68 Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 120, 204–208; González Lauck, 'Proyecto arqueológico La Venta', 145.

69 González Lauck, 'Acerca de pirámides', 89, 90; González Lauck, 'Observaciones', 93.

70 Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 120.

71 Note that Stela 1 may actually have been intended for horizontal display; see Follensbee, *Sex and Gender*, 165–168; Colman, *The Construction of Complex A*, 244.

72 At the later Olmec site of Tres Zapotes, a plain stela was also displayed in conjunction with a broken and reoriented piece of Stela C, Pool and Loughlin, 'Creating Memory', 251–252.

73 Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 120, 206. Also see Colman and Clark, 'La Venta Offering 4', 128.

74 Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 121; for the post-Phase IV materials, see *Excavations at La Venta*, 215–229.

75 Drucker, Heizer, and Squier, *Excavations at La Venta*, 230.

76 Colman and Clark, 'La Venta Offering 4', 128, 132–135, 138–140, 144–146.

77 C. William Clewlow and Christopher R. Corson, 'New Stone Mounments from La Venta', *Contributions of the University of California Archaeological Research Facility* 5, 1968, 178, plate 13b (see *plate 2* for location). James Porter identifies Monument 66 as yet another celtiform stela, see James Porter, 'Celtiform Stelae: A New Olmec Sculpture Type and its Implications for Epigraphers', in *Beyond Indigenous Voices: LAILA/ALILA 11th International Symposium on Latin American Indian Literatures (1994)*, ed. Mary H. Preuss, Lancaster, 1996, Figure 5. However, on the basis of its present and very damaged condition, it is difficult to be certain that this is the case. It is also made out of greenish schist, Clewlow and Corson, 'New Stone Mounments from La Venta', 180, plate 14b.

The Art of Assemblage at La Venta
Claudia Brittenham

How might the meaning of monumental sculpture be ephemeral? At La Venta, objects from greenstone figurines to massive basalt sculptures were recycled, reworked, and moved around the landscape, their new configurations and associations creating new kinds of meaning and enabling new kinds of ritual interaction. This essay considers the assemblage, and not just the individual work, as an important category of art-historical analysis. By considering the divergent materialities of stelae, celts, figurines, and colossal heads, as well as the role that ephemeral materials played in the construction of ritually significant assemblages, I explore the connections between monumentality, memory, and forgetting at La Venta.

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