



Abstract

Beginning a research project at the Johannesburg City Library in 2013 was the catalyst for the body of work presented here for my Masters dissertation. Since it had been closed for renovations, and reopened in 2012, the Library was filled with boxes of books waiting to be ordered and put away, and old furniture piled up in empty rooms. There was a tension between the structure of the library, an institution whose purpose is to order and classify knowledge, and the state of its contents, which were disorderly and messy.

This paradoxical relationship between mess and order is one which I have mobilised in my practical work, and other case studies upon which I have drawn. Through them, I argue that the tension between mess and order can be a productive space for knowledge/artistic production.

I look at sites like the Johannesburg City Library as examples that present a strategy for display that I have found to be useful in my practical work. These strategies include presenting piles or heaps of papers, which prompt the viewer to sort through, pick something up, or find something amongst the 'mess'.

I use the term 'serendipity' to describe the experience of 'coming across' something on one's own. The serendipitous experience is one that gives the discovered object an air of specialness, something that 'I have found, that therefore must have some special relationship to me'. A presentation by Shireen Ally on her paper, *Material Remains* illustrates this point through an anecdote she shared, about the neglected archives of the administration of the former Bantustan, KwaNgane.

In my own work I mobilise the fragment as an important tool for freeing text of being bound to one specific meaning. A text read as a singular phrase, can adopt many meanings, often personal, in that they are imagined by the viewer. By freeing text of its contextual 'order', one opens possibility for another kind of serendipity, one that is formed through the implication that a piece of text can relate to a viewer in a very personal way.

I invoke the theory of performativity in relation to display strategies of mess and fragmentation. A performative speech act is one that changes the ontological status of the subject that is being implicated by the speech act. Because fragmented pieces of text, displayed 'messily' do not have prescribed categories (meanings), they enable the viewer to enact his or her own meaning-making. Through this, the fragment comes into being as part of the given category; the ontological status of that phrase is changed through the act of categorising. This reminds us that all categories are in fact constructed and are not inherent to the subject of classification.

Here, the form of the Rolodex as a device that holds both my written and practical research embodies the theory of performativity as it allows for pages to be taken out and put back, can be read from any point, facilitating non linearity and fragmentary text. Paradoxically, the Rolodex also performs the function of an ordering mechanism.