

Abstract

“Found objects” – stray objects found on the street and on flea markets, heirlooms and personal mementoes – evoke memories of bygone events in the observer. The memories prompted can be individual, as when walking stick reminds the observer of happy family excursions of childhood, or collectively, as when a military helmet speaks more broadly to the war that the South African Apartheid state had incited on the border to Angola and the tragedies and social dissensions this caused within the country. In artistic installations that employ found objects, past and present jostle for attention as their physical presence evokes memories of the past and their juxtapositions create new meaning within a specific space and time context. This study poses the question of how installation art interacts with found objects and how this engagement speaks to the fluidity of memory and the process of archive. It does so in relation to the installation artworks by South African artist Penny Siopis that speak directly to the notions of archive, memory and the passage of time. Similarities of conceptual interests and work processes are juxtaposed with installations by Manuela Karin Knaut, made and exhibited in Germany and elsewhere from 1999 to 2017, as well as work produced during a two year period in Johannesburg (2015–2017).

The dissertation does so by working out two separate strains of theory that underlie the dissertation: that of installation art and, in relation to it, that of memory and archive. It first examines the historical development of installation art, initially beginning with Marcel Duchamp and Kurt Schwitters and leading up to the present, in order to ascertain the five most critical characteristics of installation art: space, materials, the observer, senses, time. It then investigates critical aspects of memory and archive within the frame of South African history, as a basis on which to explore more deeply Siopis’s four most important installations: *Reconnaissance*, *Charmed Lives*, *The Will* and *Sympathetic Magic*. I trace how

Siopis’s work with personal, inherited, loaned and found objects change over time and how they speak to her own personal memories of the past as well as those of a more shared, South African history. I examine how Siopis places found objects into relation with each other in such a manner that new connections and meanings are created and that personal and collective memories are made accessible and understandable.

The dissertation then turns to an examination of archive and memory in my installation *Displacement*. This installation poses questions about identity, belonging and one’s place of being in the world by examining my own place in Johannesburg. By engaging the interrelation of found objects from South Africa and Europe, mementoes and loaned objects, it investigates how we see ourselves in the present and what shapes our perspectives towards others. How do our memories, both personal and social, mark how we remember the past, how we understand the present, and how we imagine the future? By including a boat as the biggest found object I have ever used, the installation engages and examines the space between travelling and arrival, between being at home and being a foreigner, and the disjuncture of being displaced. Varied objects in the installation point metaphorically to the tensions between being a foreigner and familiarity and intimacy.

The dissertation is a deeply personal and creative engagement with Penny Siopis’s installation work. It is thus written in a narrative form, to capture the personal investment that is necessary in the accumulative process of finding miscellaneous objects of significance. The story traces the unfolding relationship between Siopis’s art and my own, pointing to similarities and showing how the biographical influences the making of art and in this case complex installations. Of particular importance to my own work is how Siopis deals artistically with South Africa, the country in which I am currently placed as migrant, observer and artist. The artistic language she uses is very similar to my own and yet carries very different meanings relative to those it carries in relation to my own German, European context. ●