IN CONVERSATION
Ashley Kistler talks to Siemon Allen

Ashley Kistler: Let’s focus for a moment on the timing of your exhibition with regard to the events of this past summer—specifically the World Cup—and how that feeds so beautifully into your overall project, Imaging South Africa. Would you talk about why it was important for you to begin the show with the newspapers piece?

Siemon Allen: The newspapers piece has always been about how South Africa’s image is constructed in the US media. Previous displays featured varied topics with full articles and small random mentions. But as this version began to take shape, I realized that coverage of South Africa in the US press during this particular period of collecting was dominated by the country’s hosting of the World Cup soccer. It seemed to me that it was an event that South Africa was using to rebrand itself. There are actually a couple of articles in The New York Times that talk about this event as a way to rebuff the country’s image. For most people, especially those who have never been there, South Africa has a very strongly defined image—most notably the apartheid years, the release of Nelson Mandela, the historic conversations across racial barriers. There was a diversity of the fans and accounts of new things that happened on the field, but rather that soccer coverage was often not about the celebratory face.

On a lighter note, so much of the coverage around the soccer dealt with the sound of the ubiquitous vuvuzelas. Perhaps this became the ultimate image of South Africa during this period. And so I decided to display two of these plastic horns from South Africa with the newspapers. During the World Cup, many vuvuzelas were decorated in countless ways—some with elaborate socks and others with more traditional means. One example on display features an elaborate beadwork cover, which was made by Rose Shozi, an artist working at the Hillcrest AIDS Centre in KwaZulu Natal.

AK: What other considerations were most important to you in conceiving what work that would go where on the three floors of the building, and what was the final form of each work?

SA: The idea of installation as an architectural intervention emerges once again in one overarching methodology. SO: Of course. Let me begin with the woven video installation. I always saw that work as being conceptually part of the collection projects but just didn’t have the space to include it in my recent shows in South Africa. With this exhibition, there was the opportunity to link it to the other works. Something that goes back to many of my earlier pieces is the idea of the room as a display strategy that I’ve used for so many years and I am continually questioning what keeps drawing me back to it. I use it to think it was somehow connected to my love for the “play within the play” in Hamlet, or that it was a way to make physical the metaphoric artificial space of a collection. All of the collections are displayed using some kind of architectural intervention, and each was a response to the particulars of the space.

AK: Talk a little more about how the form of each piece reinforces its content.

SA: One thing that I wanted to do was to somehow change that first room, where newspapers are located, so that when you arrive at the Anderson Gallery, the augmentation of the space itself suggests something that is different, something that’sshifted. The curved wall was also informed by earlier showings of my work in the grand cylindrical room at Durban Art Gallery and the Corcoran Museum's Hemicycle Gallery. So I was already interested in the way the piece could curve and how I could work within the limits of the Anderson Gallery space. I extended the existing wall so that it would bring to mind your initial experience of the stamp piece, and I hoped that it somehow change that first room, where the newspapers piece is located, so that when you arrived at the Anderson Gallery, the experience is sharply contrasted in the very same stamp depicting King George V. Perhaps there is some irony in that! I was interested in how the viewer would be confronted by the exterior wall of the stamp piece and I hoped that it would bring to mind your initial experience of the inaccessibility of the woven piece downstairs.

So the projects throughout the Anderson space converse with each other. The woven video wall is perhaps the most gentle intervention, compared to the others. The Printed Curator is a light, almost transitory version of that same curve. The stamp-collection enclosure curves almost 360 degrees at the wall around.

AK: When did this element of enclosed space begin to appear in your work?

SO: I suppose the earliest version was the first sculpture I made after leaving art school. It was a small, intimate piece, where I reconstructed one of the many homes that I had lived in growing up. I placed what operated like a small model inside a display case. In a way, it was almost as if the house itself was a reliquary on display. For me, psychologically, the piece takes you inside the space, and it’s a way to make a display of protection—of being in a cocoon or a protected space—but also being on display. Perhaps with some uncanny presence, the piece was titled The Collector.

In a way, you could almost say that a lot of what I’m doing today is an extension of these early display-case works. These projects were very personal, and they came about at a very particular time in South African history, just prior to the 94 elections. Perhaps they dealt with a form of latent self-critique. So they were a self-examination taking place from within South Africa at a specific period in the country’s history. How that all extends into this work is a bit more complex, but I think one of the things that keeps coming up, especially with the stamp piece upstairs, is the idea of a Jaeger. It’s a South African term from a time when the Boers were traveling overland with ox wagons. A common military strategy to position these wagons into a circle—like a fort—so everyone on the inside was protected from the outside, so to speak. But what is curious is that this term is now used to describe a psychological state. A “Jaeger mentality” seems as a negative characteristic and suggests someone who is in a persistent state of isolation or fear, someone who is building psychological fences.

Ten years or so ago, Kendall and I were in the leafy suburbs of Johannesburg with a camera. I drew around a number of residential blocks while she filmed the walls surrounding them. I was interested in knowing that you could go full circle around the block and, though there were perforations in the form of doorways, the walls surrounded...
SAMAP have been brought back newspapers with images these windows into the wider news media: As a teenager, I remember there were inaccessible information resonates with my for a long time is how much the idea of work remains inaccessible to the viewer. And that work is also initially inaccessible. It occupies here it could be viewed as an archive of the power of silence. And every time shifts that occur as you physically move around and through each piece, of course, but also to our mental inclination to project meaning onto the work when information is withheld, unseen and unheard.

SAMAP: The notion of changing perspective is manifested in these works in so many ways. In terms of the viewer, it applies to perspective shifts that occur as you physically move around and through each piece, of course, but also to our mental inclination to project meaning onto the work when information is withheld, unseen and unheard.

SA: You see yourself reflected in the work. So I suppose from a psychological point of view you might ask if the content is the viewer contemplating his or her own reflection. Is it just a mirror image, or a blurred mirror image? There are levels of layering in the piece, but it is essentially, I suppose, a piece about nothing. But it can be many things.

With the other installations, I am always interested in the tension between the far view and the close view. The far view would be a panorama; the close view would bring the particular into focus. So there is a battle between the specificity of each artifact and the pull towards those items operating in the service of an organizing configuration that becomes a large visual field. This is true with newspapers and Mileafold, but perhaps most complex with the stamps, given the massiveness of the installation in proportion to the scale and number of units.

AK: With the current version of Stamps, I know the stamps are in chronological order, and so on. But if you put the entire configuration, how did you determine the sequence of these blue stamps to use, for example? Were those purely aesthetic decisions?

SA: When I realized that I had more stamps than I could display even in the large installation, I went through all the stamps before we started, and counted how many I had of each. My goal was to index the final display to the actual number of each different stamp in the collection. So if I had 5,000 of one stamp and 4,000 of another, I wanted the display ratio to be 5:4. I wanted the installation to accurately reflect the percentages of stamps that were to some extent used historically; if the blue stamp was widely and commonly used, then the installation needed to reflect this. Of course the other goal was to show at least one of every stamp image—rather than being philatelically correct and showing every iteration of each stamp for color shifts and errors. Given this, stamps that are less common do not repeat as often in the display.