





IMAGING SOUTH AFRICA

The Archival Turn in Siemon Allen’s Production

Clive Kellner

Found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private.

— Hal Foster¹

How has the memory of the colonial and apartheid past been indexed in artistic production?

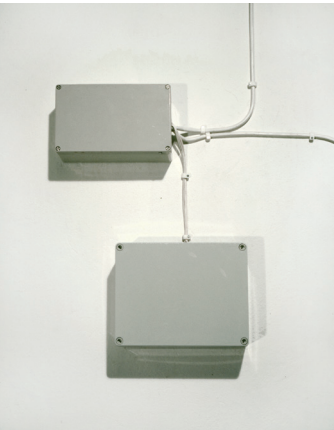
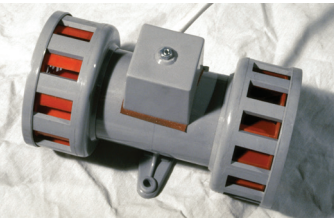
— Okwui Enwezor²

My creative relationship with Siemon Allen has been an ongoing conversation that can be traced over two decades and began in 1989, when we were both art students at Technikon Natal in Durban, South Africa. It was a vital period in the country’s history, framed by those years just prior to and after the end of the apartheid era. At the time, Allen co-founded the FLAT Gallery, an alternative space and experiment-in-living project that was the site for many of the studio practices that would later shape his work. I began what would become a move from the studio to curatorial practice by entering the first Johannesburg Biennale Curators Programme and then the curatorial programme at De Appel in Amsterdam.

One of my first independent curatorial efforts was an international group exhibition in 1996 at the Generator Art Space, an alternative venue in downtown Johannesburg. Titled *Hitchhiker*, the show looked at old and new media and the notion of migration in contemporary practice. It featured the work of twenty artists, including Eugenio Dittborn, Jimmie Durham, Olu Oguibe, and Moshekwa Langa. For the exhibition, Allen produced a piece that required the installation of an industrial siren in the gallery—the type of siren commonly used in South African factories and mines to signal breaks and to resume work, thus regulating the hours of the labourers’ day. When the siren rang, the sound was deafening, almost violent. Allen’s gesture called attention to the brute power of an imposed regulatory system, and it functioned as a disruption within the exhibition itself, bringing the outside world into the gallery.

The historic 2nd Johannesburg Biennale took place the following year. Okwui Enwezor’s monumental *Trade Routes: History & Geography* included an exhibition of contemporary South African art at the South African National

- left: *Church*, 2010.
digital print, 78" x 78", edition: 2 + 1 artist proof.
Epson HDR ink on Hahnemühle Museum Etching
Fine Art Paper on Sintra, gordonschachatcollection,
Johannesburg, SA.
- below: *Work*, 1996.
siren, timing device.
Generator Art Space, Johannesburg, SA.





• *La Jetée*, 1997.
woven VHS videotape, steel
2nd Johannesburg Bienale, *Graft*
South African National Gallery, Cape Town, SA.

Gallery in Cape Town. Titled *Graft* and curated by Colin Richards, this exhibition included a version of Allen’s earlier siren piece. More significantly, the show also featured a new work by Allen called *La Jetée*, a massive installation of black mirror-like panels made with woven videotape. Sited to reflect on its surface works in the gallery’s permanent collection, the panels interfered with any attempts by visitors for neutral viewing or normal movement through the space. Composed of 40 connected panels, each measuring one metre by three metres, the installation operated as an architectural intervention within the gallery’s display of iconic “resistance art.” As one of Allen’s seminal woven works, it would lead to an extended exploration of film, audio, and VHS stock in sculptures that incorporated aspects of painting and architecture. Ten years later, in an exhibition entitled *Disturbance* at the Johannesburg Art Gallery that I organized with colleague Maria Fidel Regueros, he showed *The Birds*, a large-scale piece woven out of old 16mm film footage of the Hitchcock masterpiece; in this instance, the tiny, embedded, just visible images on the film created an overall pattern. Like his earlier woven videotape works, *The Birds* resided in a territory where painting and sculpture merge.

Last year, as curator of the gordonschachatcollection, a private collection in Johannesburg of predominantly modern and contemporary South African art, I travelled to Durban to see Allen’s concurrent exhibitions at the Durban Art Gallery and BANK Gallery. I was struck by the complexity of his powerful room-sized installations and immediately reminded of the transformative power of art, of how an artist can act at once as mediator, collector, and archivist. The Schachat Collection subsequently acquired Allen’s new suite of twelve monumental prints, *Records*, which was featured in the 2009 Johannesburg Art Fair, as well as his massive installation, *Stamps*.

Allen’s act of art making can be described as “an archival impulse.”³ He is a prodigious collector of stamps, books, newspapers, vinyl records and, more recently, audio recordings. According to historian Pierre Nora, our whole society lives for archival production. “At a time when we both crave and feel overwhelmed by information,” he observes, “the archive can seem like a more authoritative, or somehow, more authentic body of information or of objects bearing value and meaning.”⁴ Our human nature compels us to privilege certain cultural objects over others, and to assert their value economically and culturally; the creation of value, both symbolic and economic, is a mediated process. Collecting is a form of archiving. As such, a collection attests to and illuminates the political, social, and economic variables shaping society. In this way, Allen’s collection projects operate as cultural markers within the larger changing social, political, and economic climate.

The post-apartheid environment has been a fertile site for Allen’s artistic production. In the past sixteen years since apartheid formally ended, rapid transformations have occurred in South Africa. After moving to the United States in 1997, Allen has continued to observe, collect, isolate, and present various forms of ephemera that have been used to brand and rebrand South Africa. Considering his work brings to mind French philosopher Jacques Derrida’s notion of the archive as a site of power and authority, and also American critic Hal Foster’s notion of the archive as a mode of practice or a point of reference for the artist. Allen’s collections of newspapers, stamps, and records not only suggest an affinity with the archive as the artist’s mode of practice, but also infer an added political dimension as his presentation is never neutral. He is an active observer and participant.

First exhibited at FUSEBOX in Washington, DC, in 2001, *Newspapers* considers the “external construction of an image of South Africa” presented in the US news media.⁵ Allen developed and expanded the project to include newspapers from each of the cities where it has been exhibited. To date, they include *The Washington Post*, *The Washington Times*, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, *The Des Moines Register*, and *The New York Times*. Allen collected, isolated, and presented selected articles in a chronological arrangement. He used tracing paper to conceal everything except articles about South Africa, foregrounding “what might otherwise be considered marginal news.”⁶ By choosing the local newspaper of the city where the project was on view, Allen aimed to mirror to that community its coverage of an ‘other’ foreign place—South Africa.

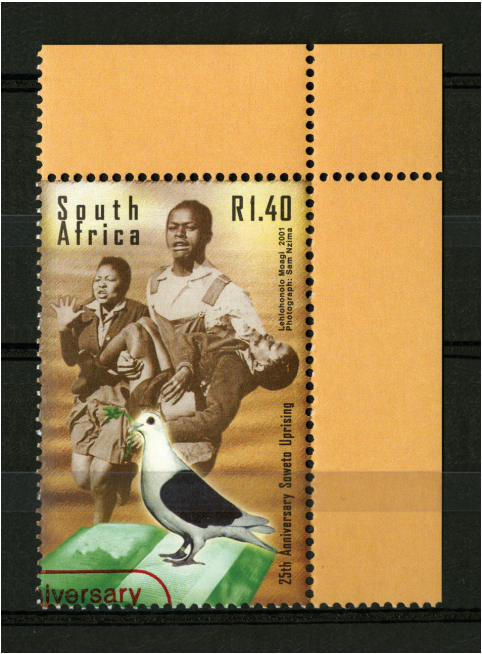
With regard to South Africa’s recent hosting of the World Cup, the reality of what visitors actually experienced in the country this past summer contrasted sharply with the negative image that was earlier constructed by the foreign media. On another level, Allen’s experience of viewing his home country through the US media foregrounds the artist’s own dislocation from his country, family, and memories. He observes a distorted image of a place called home. In this, he is both an insider and an outsider.

The most recent iteration of *Stamps* consists of 50,000 individual postal stamps displayed in a cylindrical, architecturally-impressive installation. The work is not a philatelic exercise, although it does speak to that form of collecting. Exhibited in 2009 at the Durban Art Gallery, this collection begins with the Union of South Africa in 1910, represented by a stamp of King George V, and marks the transformation of South Africa’s colonial past into its democratic present. Not unlike German painter Gerhard Richter’s *Colour Charts*, the work relies on the language of the encyclopaedic. Richter’s paintings are “structured on a pre-



• top: *Records*, 2010.
view of the digital prints, Johannesburg Art Fair.
gordonschachatcollection, Johannesburg, SA.
• above: *Stamps IV*, 2009.
stamps, pins, acetate, perspex, wood, aluminum
Durban Art Gallery, Durban, SA.

5. Taken from an interview with Amanda Bowker and Siemon Allen for the exhibition, *The American Effect* at the Whitney Museum in New York, 2003.
6. Ibid.



• *25th Anniversary of the Soweto Uprising*, stamp issued June 16, 2001, SAPO. design: Lehlohonolo Moagi, photo: Sam Nzima. This is the first South African stamp to officially acknowledge the apartheid past—issued seven years after the historic 1994 elections. Sam Nzima’s photo shows Mbuyisa Makhubu carrying the body of Hector Pieterson, who was shot by police during student protests against Afrikaans as the school language medium, in June of 1976.

7. <http://www.gerhard-richter.com/biography/work/>

8. Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2009.

9. From the interview with Amanda Bowker.

10. From a letter by Barnett Newman replying to Clement Greenberg’s review in *The Nation*, in *American Artists on Art from 1940 to 1980*, ed. Ellen H. Johnson, West View Press, Boulder, 1982, p.15.

11. This quotation is taken from Siemon Allen’s text in *Records: A Collection Project by Siemon Allen*, *gordonschachtcollection* and *flatinternational*, brochure for the Johannesburg Art Fair, 26-28 March, 2010.

established system of colour determination, removing artistic whim”;⁷ likewise, Allen’s stamps are found objects configured in a minimalist grid that suggests the work as archival trace. An archival turn is suggested as one hundred years of a nation’s history is presented through images of the Queen of England, the Voortrekker Centenary (1838-1938), the anniversary of the 1976 Soweto uprising, Nelson Mandela, and former President Thabo Mbeki, among others.⁸ Described by Allen as “an internally constructed image of South Africa” as opposed to the “externally constructed image” of *Newspapers*, this project revolves around an exclusive narrative of sovereignty, colonialism, struggle, and liberation.⁹ In a very public way, it is a symbolic portrayal of how a country represents itself to the outside world, but largely for its own purposes. Allen’s singular act has been to appropriate and historicize the past into the present.

Records includes a new series of monumental prints—each measuring nearly two metres square—made from scans of shellac and vinyl discs that Allen selected from his expansive collection of over 2,000 South African audio items. The entire suite of twelve prints was shown at the Johannesburg Art Fair last March. Entering the space was like standing in the Rothko Chapel: the images initially suggested color-field paintings floating a short distance from the wall. Like the serial works by German photographers Bernd and Hiller Becher, Allen’s *Records* embraces a typology in which each image is formally similar to the next; yet each image in the series has a unique, metaphysical presence. His prints speak about seriality in relation to image and surface, where the ever-present tensions between figure and ground are revealed. And it is the surface of these images that is so astounding. The viewer’s eye traces the magnified topography of scratches, marks, and lines that convey in each a sense of lived history, as well as the concentric grooves graphically etched into the vinyl. The record appears sculptural and tangible, but we are denied access. It is, as painter Barnett Newman commented, “an abstraction of the visual fact.”¹⁰

In its final rendition, each scanned record becomes an iconic image with an inner and an outer disc. The inner disc, or record label, not only includes factual information, but also creates a visual play with colour. An acid green label in one image, for example, sits alongside another with deep mauve and black print reminiscent of the jazz of the 1940s and 50s. The damaged black shellac outer disc bears markings made by previous owners who “unwittingly altered the original recorded sound and, in so doing, contributed their own history to the object”.¹¹ On various levels, these images become increasingly intricate portals to South African musical and social history.

Allen constructed a new woven videotape piece, *Screen II*, for this survey of his collection projects and, in the current context, he thinks of it as “an archive of the unseen or the unknown.”¹² French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan described the mirror stage of a child’s development as significant for two primary reasons: it defines a decisive turning point in the child’s mental development or self-recognition, as well as an essential libidinal relationship with the body image. These ideas come into play when considering how the viewer experiences Allen’s *Screen* as a conscious engagement with the self. The black reflective surface of the woven videotape acts as an interpellation of its immediate environment. The viewer’s image is reflected together with the space and contents of the environment in which the work is situated. The result is an effect of recognition or conscious identification with one’s self and one’s surroundings.

South African writer and scholar Njabulo Ndebele said, “In South Africa, reality outstrips metaphor.”¹³ The implications of this observation resonate with Allen’s weaves when thinking about them in the context of memorials. The reality of apartheid for many black South Africans went beyond what artists could produce to either represent their oppression or defy it. How can an artist, poet, or musician find images to express such grave acts of inhumanity? How can art do justice to such atrocities and racial hatred? Allen’s silent woven works pay homage to this history by offering non-representational forms that create a space for reflection.

Allen operates in a manner that recalls what Bernd and Hiller Becher have described in their own work as an effort, “to create families of motifs.”¹⁴ His process is in some ways an indeterminable one that has no real beginning or end. One object informs another to create “a pattern of sequential experiences.”¹⁵ The resulting body of experiences and works produced by Allen at once frame and blur the hierarchies and distinctions that authority, the media, and history inevitably create. His combination of conceptual rigor with visual and material presence speaks of a poetic politic and an enduring way of organizing the world in which objects are once again collected, transformed, and displayed.

Clive Kellner is curator of the *gordonschachtcollection* in Johannesburg, South Africa.



• *Untitled (mad weave)*, 1996. woven VHS videotape, steel, Richmond, VA. View showing the reflection of the VHS videotape. This was an unusual and difficult weave constructed out of three strands of tape positioned as 60° to each other. The technique was apparently used in prisons as punishment—hence the name “mad weave.”

12. Quotation taken from Siemon Allen’s website: www.siemonallen.org

13. Njabulo Ndebele, “Memory, Symbol and the Triumph of Narrative”, in *co.@rtnews*, eds. Fernando Alvim and Clive Kellner, 3rd edition, Johannesburg, April 2000.

14. This quotation is from Blake Stimson’s essay on the Bechers at: http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/04spring/stimson_paper.htm

15. Ibid.