

SIEMON ALLEN Interview

with Amanda Zucker Bowker

for the exhibition *The American Effect* curated by Lawrence Rinder, Whitney Museum, New York, 2003

Amanda Bowker Why did you decide to undertake this project?

Siemon Allen There are a number of reasons. I had worked on a project the previous year that involved collecting and presenting every single stamp issued by the South African Government/Post Office from the time of its Union in 1910 to the most recent issues in 2001. In this project I was looking to examine the 'official' image of South Africa as constructed by the government for international distribution (by means of stamps). In other words it became an examination of 'internal' construction of image or propaganda.

Some months later I was looking for material to begin a new project... I had for some time been cutting out articles about South Africa from the newspapers and saving them. But it was only during the UN Racism Conference of Aug/Sep 2001 (held in my hometown of Durban) that I began saving whole newspapers and as many articles as I could find. Of course within two days of the closing of the conference, the events of 9/11 occurred and I just could not stop buying the newspapers everyday... not only to find information regarding the events that followed 9/11 but also to continue with my collecting of articles on South Africa within what became this larger media event. It took about a month in some papers for articles to reappear and it was at about this time that I thought of undertaking this project of collecting newspapers, isolating articles on South Africa and displaying them somehow.

In as much as the stamp project was about an 'internal' construction of image, the newspaper piece was about the 'external' construction of image; or an image of South Africa as seen by the US media. So while both projects deal with information about South Africa, the latter partially examines the role of the US media.

Finally I would say that I was familiar with the propaganda image of South Africa in the stamps, but with the newspapers I had only a general sense of South Africa's media image

as constructed by the US press. (For example, my presumption that most articles would deal with only AIDS and the after effects of apartheid turned out not to be entirely true.). So essentially this project was an investigation into the image of South Africa in the US media – and exactly what that image was.

Amanda Bowker What do you think the work conveys?

Siemon Allen Literally of course, the work presents most articles on South Africa in any given US newspaper, for a given period from the UN Racism Conference and the events of 9/11. In presenting this information about South Africa to a US audience my actions could be seen as being educational or even didactic. Implicit in the presentation could also be an unsaid partial critique of the US media (depends who's looking!) But ultimately, I think the presentation takes on a rather detached stance. That is, I set up conditions – to collect, isolate, and present these articles with an organizing system that is a simple act of chronological arrangement. Tracing paper covers over the page except for the selected articles on South Africa. Foregrounding what might otherwise be marginal news.

Amanda Bowker How site-specific is the work?

Siemon Allen As an artwork, the piece can really be shown in any space. FUSEBOX in Washington, DC was the first venue but it does not have to be the only venue. The piece would obviously need to be formatted for each space, so in the physical sense it is not necessarily that site-specific.

However in terms of context... to begin the project in Washington, the seat of government, was extremely important... partly because the piece deals with aspects of US media coverage and US foreign policy (a hot topic).

Another aspect of its site-specificity, is the fact that I have collected newspapers from each city in which this project will be exhibited. (More about this below.)

Amanda Bowker Could the work as it is in DC be shown elsewhere?

Siemon Allen In the specific case of the Washington Post and Washington Times, it is possible though it is not necessarily part of my program for exhibiting the project in the United States. [In the case of The American Effect at the Whitney Museum in New York, The Washington Post and Washington Times were selected specifically within the context of the political nature of that exhibition.]

I have been collecting the newspapers of each city in which this project will be or may be exhibited. So far I have the Washington Post, the Washington Times, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, the New York Times, the Boston Globe, the Baltimore Sun, the LA Times and the Richmond Times-Dispatch. If the exhibition moves to cities not already collected, then the project will evolve to begin and incorporate those collections as well.

I wanted to do this to personalize the exhibition for each community it is shown in. In this way I hope to show or mirror to the community how each of their newspapers constructs (or receives a construction of) an image of another place.

Ultimately though it is my intention to show all the collected papers from US cities in South Africa.

Amanda Bowker Why did you chose the materials you did? (Newspaper/tracing paper)

Siemon Allen Essentially the newspapers were chosen because they contained the information I wanted to present. Also I have these various collections underway at the moment: stamps, books, records, CDs etc. The newspapers just seemed to appeal to my obsessive need to collect sites of information.

The tracing paper was chosen partly for aesthetic reasons. And partly because it does also guide the viewer to the article on each page. It was also a way for me to highlight each article in a non-invasive way. (This appeals to the collector in me.) In other words without damaging or cutting the original paper surface. The partial transparency of the tracing paper allows for reading of the covered text and the cut sections 'frame' the articles or sections of articles that become foregrounded and more readable.

Amnada Bowker Do these materials enhance the purpose of the work?

Siemon Allen I think they do, yes. The tracing paper not only guides the viewer to the article highlighted, but one is also able to read through the other articles of the day thus contextualizing the South African information in terms of other world events. Originally I had considered exhibiting the piece without the tracing paper. But the tracing paper allowed for the play between what is more easily seen and what is partially obscured.

My other reasons for using the tracing paper were aesthetic. And here I could go on another whole aspect of the piece not yet discussed.

I do see two separate but equal (and maybe even contradictory) ways that this piece can be read. One: the political or social and two: the aesthetic. For some time now I have been working with fields of information, whether they be masses of stamps or large woven screens of video-tape etc... In this work the grid still dominates. Though the complex pattern is the result of the chance cutting around articles as they appear, it is still a pattern. The panels of papers still display a distinct palette with subtle tones. Formally, in some ways, I see the work as being in conversation with aspects of geometric abstraction.

Amanda Bowker What do you think is the work's intrinsic and/or lasting artistic value?

Siemon Allen It is hard to say, only time will tell.

Amanda Bowker What do you think is the work's intrinsic or lasting social/political value?

Siemon Allen Lasting is impossible to address. The work is very much about a very specific action – collecting the papers daily, looking, selecting. In collecting I satisfied some of my own personal curiosity about what I might end up with if I set out to methodically consider how South Africa was represented in the US media.

I did say of the stamp piece when it was shown in the context of a museum - and the same could be said of the newspapers - that if the piece 'fails' as an art object, it can still surreptitiously be seen and exist purely as a typical didactic museum display! This is the gray area in the works that I most enjoy.

Amander Zucker Bowker researched for the exhibition *The American Effect* and was assistant to Larry Rinder, curator, Whitney Museum, November 2002.