



# the thought is the thing

**Colin Richards** examines conceptualism in contemporary South African art – and finds it both distinctive in its materiality and more deeply rooted than is currently acknowledged (EXTRACT)

One could look at any number of Boshoff's works or indeed Payne's in the same essentially materialistic way. More so because of the grueling work ethic and invocation of the senses of the body that characterise much of this work. It is this materialism which perversely conditions the "aesthetic" dimension of a usually anti-aesthetic or simply anaesthetic conceptualism.

Another artist in whom this impulse is patently at work is Siemon Allen. Allen's *La Jetée (The Jetty)* (1997) involved the laborious hand-weaving of VHS videotape in sheer, quasi-reflective panels. Exhibited on *Graft* at the second Johannesburg Biennale, these panels formed a screened enclosure, obscuring certain works already displayed in the room while enhancing others. The work interrupted the front room of the National Gallery, then occupied by works of contemporary South African art including Jackson Hlungwane's *God* and Jane Alexander's paradigmatic *Butcher Boys*.

Allen manipulated the lighting to increase the ambient darkness of the space and enhance the reflectivity of the screens. This favoured certain of the works in the space, while leaving others in the dark. The viewing distance on the periphery of the enclosure was severely constricted and a source of frustration to viewers. Curatorial arrogance, conceit and bias is usually discretely hidden in exhibitions; here it was not.

The ever-dimming reflections of particularly the white sculptures in the middle of the space functioned as "echoes" of South African art of the recent past. The screens reflected these works in a sort of infinite reproduction. The obscuring of some works in the peripheral passages staged for viewers the exclusion of certain cultural traditions and histories from "official" national culture. All that tape was also textual in that it contained information we have no way of accessing. Information became sheer physical material.

Siemon Allen, *La Jetée (The Jetty)*, 1997, VHS videotape, steel. Installation view, *Graft*, second Johannesburg Biennale, South African National Gallery, 1997