

# SIEMON ALLEN'S STAMP COLLECTION

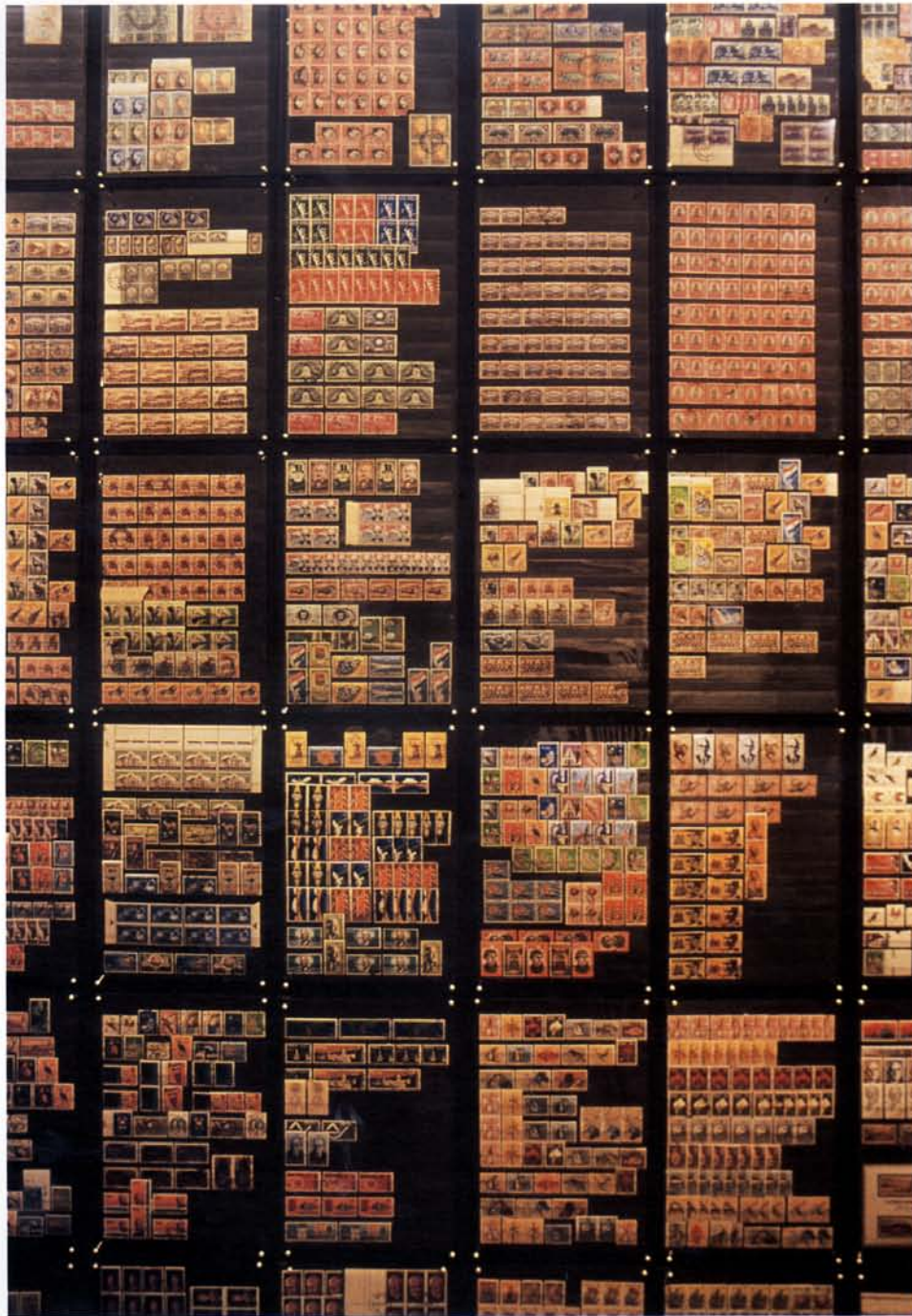
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The work of Siemon Allen aptly speaks to questions of context and conceptualism with regard to South Africa by appropriating materials specific to the circumstance of South Africa's political history and cultural legacy. Allen, born in Durban, South Africa, received his Masters Degree in Technology and Fine Art at Technikon Natal, in Durban, and now lives and works in New York and Washington DC. Reflecting on his childhood pastime, Allen turns to his complete collection of South African stamps that tells a history of colonialism and democracy. The stamps are badges of nationalist propaganda and represent highly coded emblems that recount a singular and dominant narrative. Their isolation and decontextualization in this installation acts to theatricalize the banal artifacts, thereby questioning their validity and identity as cultural currency. Adhering to a formalist-minimalist lexicon, Allen creates dense panels of stamps as grid "paintings." This piece reconfigures an earlier stamp work of 1993, which Allen characterizes as comprised of "icons from a middle class youth." In light of the fact that appropriation of archival material is so highly contested in the context of contemporary art of South Africa because of conflicting aesthetic and ethical interests, this critical gesture marks a highly conscientious reflection on notions of truth, memory, history, and recovery.

Allen's work addresses problematics of classification and identification of national, social, political, and historical signs. Rooted in this trajectory of images of a nation is ambivalence, desire, and fantasy. Allen comes from a generation of artists steeped in heated debates of representation of the body in contemporary art of South Africa, a body



Artists Space, Concepts and Conceptualism.  
January 12 - March 2, 2002.  
Siemon Allen, Stamp Collection.  
dimensions variable, 2002  
courtesy of the Artist



Siemon Allen, *Stamp Collection*, dimensions variable, 2002, courtesy of the Artist

highly charged in terms of cultural, racial and ethnic identifications, plagued by the enactment of myth. Allen's work is consciously engaged with the canonical and constructed notion of whiteness' equation with citizenship, and its authoritative and official iconography which has fueled artistic gestures on the part of a younger generation of artists, vacillating between a hyper turn to bodily representation and a shift towards the erasure of the figure.

Allen's work marks a move towards personal reconciliation with a traumatic history by carefully memorializing the past before proposing new lexicons for the future. Negotiating legacies of practitioners such as William Kentridge's historicism, the aggressive conceptualism of Kendell Geers, the subtle linguistic meditations of Willem Boshoff, and the revisualizations of South African subjectivity by David Goldblatt and Santu Mofokeng, how does a younger generation respond? While some collect and appropriate Afrikaner paraphernalia, Allen's excavation of cultural memory is reckoned with on personal terms, turning to items from his white suburban youth — Hardy Boy books, Doc Marten boots, Tintin comics, his parent's house.

The initial incarnation of the stamp collection installation at the Corcoran Hemicycle in Washington D.C. reverses the terms of the artists' renowned minimalist installations of woven videotape. Siemon's *Screen*, 2000, exhibited in *Translation / Seduction / Displacement* at White Box in New York City, exemplary of Allen's architectural homage to apartheid architecture, is discussed by art historian Andres Mario Zervignon. He writes of Allen's *Screen*, "[It] takes memory as its central concern...it does so without outlining that memory's contents. Indeed, the very opacity of his woven video tape suggests that memory can be decoded only once consensus arises on how it will be read, how it will produce meaning. [It] therefore memorializes memory by making its indecipherability, rather than its contents, a central aesthetic focus."<sup>1</sup> The political and social content and context of Siemon's minimalist panels and installations are remarkable in their refusal to provide narrative. In the stamp work, this operation is turned inside out to in an effort to expose the highly coded information of his country's history. Allen's obsessional collection and installation reflects the self-representation of the nation vis-a-vis mapping colonial domination and democratization — imaging miners to Mbeki in 40 panels of

over 8000 stamps. In the guise of a natural history mode of installation, Allen displays his collection as a badge of propagandist logic and his own nostalgic-fetishistic-philatelic practice of collecting such artifacts. From pictures of Robben Island to a rainbow nation rendition of pop cultural icons in the form of gladiators, Allen's chronological collection includes prominent images of Die Afrikaanse Patriot 1876, golfer Gary Player, a 1947 portrait of the Queen, the anniversary of the 1976 Soweto Uprising, and the Voortrekker Centenary 1838-1938, using a stamp of King George V marking the Union of South Africa November 4, 1910 as his point of departure.

As both hobbyist and historian, Allen brings specificity in terms of context to his mode of conceptualism. Situated in a framework reminiscent of the language and logic of his minimalist architectural installations that do not speak directly but abstractly to these questions of nation and citizenship, Allen provides a neutral backdrop for the highly charged trajectory of the country's colonial and post-colonial histories.

Siemon Allen exhibits *Stamp Collection* at *Artists Space* in New York City, January-March, 2002 in an exhibition titled *Context and Conceptualism* featuring Siemon Allen, Coco Fusco, and Melissa Gould. The piece previously traveled to the Renaissance Society, Chicago featured in Hamza Walker's *Detourism* and to the Hemicycle Gallery at the Corcoran in DC, 2001.

Lauri Firstenberg is curator of *Artists Space* in New York City.



Notes

<sup>1</sup> Andres Mario Zervignon, "The Weave of Memory," manuscript, forthcoming.

