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ART IN REVIEW

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'Context and Conceptualism'

Artists Space
38 Greene Street, SoHo
Through March 2

Conceptualism has long encouraged the sometimes blind faith that all you need is context: a bit of real life isolated in an art gallery equals a telling work of art. Of course, many such efforts never take off; so two out of three — which happens in this exhibition — is not bad.

The most impressive work is Simon Allen's "Stamp Collection," which reviews 100 years of South African history through a chronological presentation of the country's postage stamps. This innately post-minimalist display tells a cruel tale of colonial exploitation and official racism. After decades of British royalty and white leaders, idealized black South Africans in tribal dress, and tourist-poster portrayals of exotic wildlife and landscapes, Nelson Mandela's image appears in 1994. Magnifying glasses recommended.

Coco Fusco's video "The Reapers" seems unpromisingly casual, but turns out to be both subtle and entertaining. Shot in a studio in Barcelona, it features hired actors trying to sing the Catalan national anthem, but mostly talking. As they reveal the ways their skin tones or accents make them more or less acceptable to the Catalan community, the exclusionary side of this oppressed, excluded culture is revealed, but so is the way culture and identity are continually altered by actual people.

Of the three artists, Melissa Gould works with the most charged material, to the least effect. In "From Adler to Zylber" she selects from a 1,000-name Nazi transport list 36 German-Jewish names that are also German nouns: Adler (Eagle), Baum (tree), Bernstein (amber) and so on to Zylber (silver). Each word is paired with a prewar European pictogram on a grainy photocopy. But except for a bit of Gothic typeface sinisterness, Ms. Gould's visual treatment adds little to the information provided in her accompanying brochure.

In one of the project rooms, Francis Gomila's eerily hypnotic video projection, "A Place Called Oxmoor," expands upon the show's theme. The camera scrolls along the walls of the nearly identical apartments of an English housing project, past nearly identical inhabitants, to a cheerful musical accompaniment. **ROBERTA SMITH**