

Tumelo Mosaka

# Negotiating Identity

Siemon Allen uses a minimalist approach to decoding mediated imagery. As a South African now living in the United States, Allen has been interested in analyzing the ways in which official South African identity is represented through stamps and newspapers. His earlier stamp collection series of 2001 amplified the ways in which official images come to stand in for national identity. For this exhibition, Allen looks at how American media participates in constructing South African identity from the outside. He systematically gathers and catalogs newspapers from cities around the United States and isolates those containing articles about South Africa. The isolation and recontextualization of these newspaper articles examines the political function performed by Western representations of South Africa. The articles are shown in a grid filling the surface of the exhibition wall. On the one hand, this presentation provides the viewer with access to a myriad of texts about South African issues. On the other hand, the flatness and abstraction of the work's formal presentation exposes the texts as a screen through which the viewer projects his or her own fictions about South African reality. The work operates on tension between fact and fiction. Through this ambiguity, Allen shows how identity is constructed even through seemingly objective media such as newspaper reportage.

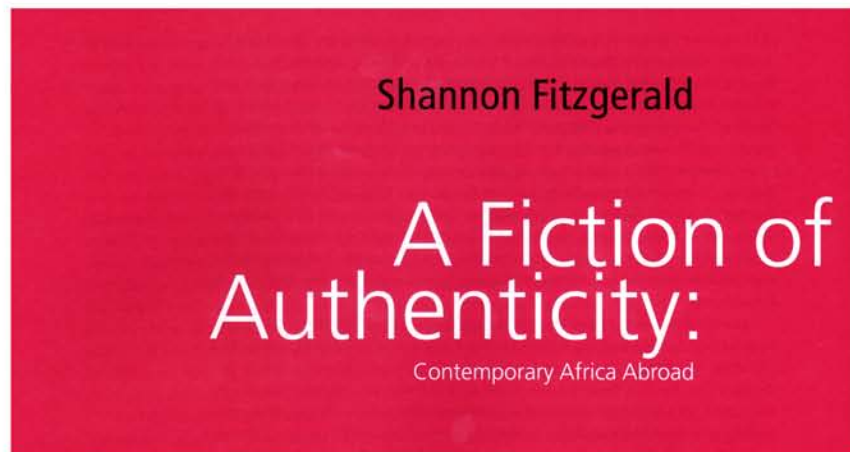
## A Fiction of Authenticity

Contemporary Africa Abroad

Curated by Shannon Fitzgerald and Tumelo Mosaka

Organized by the  
Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis

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### The Artist

- III In an ongoing project that began in 2001, South African artist **Siemon Allen**, who currently lives in Richmond, Virginia has been investigating how the *image* of South Africa contributes to the nation building and identity formation of that country. The specific *image* Allen addresses is created through the media and its emphasis (or lack thereof) on particular historical moments that relate to contemporary South Africa. His point of departure for this project began with his interest in world opinion of the UN Racism Conference, held in his hometown of

Durban, South Africa, August 31-September 7, 2001. With this historical moment representing his start date, Allen began collecting United States newspapers that included coverage of this controversial event.<sup>8</sup> However, after the events of September 11, 2001, all media turned to covering those events, thus altering Allen's first impulse and the direction of his work. Allen continued to collect newspapers, but now in a search for any mention of South Africa. Having previously created installations exploring US *imaging* of South Africa in Washington, DC and New York, *Newspapers*, created for *A Fiction of Authenticity*, represents a new chapter in the project. For the Contemporary's installation, his collection of the local paper, *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, is exhibited. He has arranged his collection in a minimalist grid that represents two years of researching external views of South Africa as presented through the St. Louis media. This project will continue to evolve as its representation shifts to include the local media at each venue where the exhibition travels.

The idea of *imaging* South Africa, as Allen calls this strategy, is particularly relevant for a nation still working through the identity crisis and complex nation building it has been experiencing since the end of apartheid in 1994. As a new nation, South Africa is actively engaging in mandates for improving its image at home and abroad. Critical to this image making process, is the projection of a democratic, racially equal, politically and economic sound nation of first World order that through its own resolve is moving beyond its tumultuous past. Aware of the mechanisms of nation building within South Africa, Allen became increasingly interested in how that image was portrayed in his current home, the US. Imaging South Africa from within its borders is a government and media apparatus; but Allen's *Newspapers* reveal that imaging South Africa in the US is a fabrication of American imagination as delivered by its media. Lauri Firstenberg writes of Allen's NY installation of *Newspapers*: "It is the entanglement of global politics, economics and culture that is of absolute concern to Allen," and that the "isolation and re-contextualization of the newspapers beg them to perform a distinct political function ...[that] "brazenly engages the viewer and incites translation and interpretation of South Africa as both country and construct."<sup>9</sup>

Allen arranges this external image of South Africa in a minimalist grid to be read in chronological order, left to right and top to bottom. The monumental collection, mounted on gray linen and veiled behind transparent vellum sheets, thus becomes a linear monochromatic grid that references the language of high modernism as it simultaneously presents low, quotidian culture in the form of the mass-produced newspaper. Similar to Hanne Darboven's approach to presenting successive systematic information in grid format through her minimalist installations (and who also uses transparent paper) Allen, although less formulaic, likewise emphasizes viewer participation, through the act of reading. His blending of high and low culture creates a visual sleekness that maintains material tactility. Visually, the information pushes forward when considered in isolation and recedes

when looked at in its entirety. This push and pull of images and text create a hierarchy in perspective that mimics the hierarchy of information chosen on a given day. The few color images push to the fore while diminutive text of only a few sentences fades to the point of being lost in the whiteness of the vellum. This whiteness functions to frame the information, as a mat would, but as so little information is actually there, it also engulfs the information in a field of silence. The subjects of the color images are clearly visible—sports (particularly golf and soccer) and entertainment—indicating that the primary American interest in South Africa resides in the economy of sports and spectacle. Cliches are second to sports and entertainment in their prominence in Allen's presentation. Perpetuating the fiction that South Africa (and all of Africa) is poverty and disease ridden, politically corrupt and morally vapid, the newspaper presents the AIDS crisis, indigence, and civil unrest as the next most pressing issues to report.

Interested in the simultaneity of world events, Allen displays full pages in order for articles on South Africa to be presented in the context of other international reports. This act, an effort to maintain the integrity of the whole, illustrates how disaster shares the same space with banal advertisements (an earthquake tragedy and the latest wonder bra share the same page spread). Aware of these distinctions, Allen asks himself "whether these newspaper images are constructed by the US media, for a US audience and whether by re-presenting this *image* do I perpetuate stereotypical or limited notions of South Africa? Conversely, I also wonder if this project [and its evolution] might not allow the audience to re-focus on important issues from South Africa that they might have on any given day's news coverage overlooked."<sup>10</sup>

While they are installed chronologically, Allen's *Newspapers*, cannot be interpreted as a developing chain of events as one might anticipate. What emerges instead is a transparent veneer of narrative fragments that expose a fracture in the presentation of a nation through this distinctly Western lens. And by excluding newspapers containing no reference to South Africa, Allen's work reveals the country's relative invisibility—for days and weeks at a time, there simply is no coverage of South Africa at all. Recalling an aspect of Alfredo Jaar's extensive *Rwanda Project 1994-1998*, in which the artist collected news magazines during the state-sponsored genocide in Rwanda in 1994 to illustrate the enormous lack of world reporting on the horrors, Allen also addresses the power of absence and its danger in building world opinion.<sup>11</sup> This absence of information is made palpable by the overwhelming whiteness of the grid. Enhanced by the yellowing newspaper, this whiteness evokes silence; the silence of loss, fading memory, the unknown, and, in this case, the unreported. While Allen could not predict where and when information would appear, his formal presentation as dictated by the format of the newspapers themselves reveals the random rhythm of systematic information delivery over a specific period.

The archive possesses a permanent evolutionary character, while the newspa-

per is transient and disposable—and this becomes a subtext in Allen's *Newspapers*. As the newspaper is meant to be read quickly and only once, Allen hones in on what was to be discarded immediately after consumption to offer a critique twice compounded. He confronts the viewer with news, not in the safe context of the home, but in the distilled, focused context of the gallery and the confrontation makes the viewer somehow complicit in the information itself. Through his placement of the information within the modernist grid, Allen reinvests passing and seemingly insignificant information with new gravity worthy of second consideration. Like Joseph Kosuth and Dan Graham, who in the 1960s used newspapers as a vehicle for their art, Allen is interested in the way newspapers conceptually deliver ideas. However, where Allen departs from their practices, lie in his delivery of art, not via the common newspaper to reach masses, but through the salvaging of the common paper to bring it to a museum audience. The incongruous accumulative effect of such research becomes a line of inquiry to challenge the authoritative voice of the media, all media.

Despite the specificity of this project to South Africa and the artist's own biography, it effectively illuminates several general hierarchies in news making and reporting, particularly regarding who decides who and what are important, who and what are not. The manufacture of information is necessarily the product of either the liberal or conservative media, and is inevitably an economic activity. In another context, Allen refers to a documentary film on Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, in which two rolls of paper are unrolled side by side, each containing press articles stuck end to end covering two different world situations over a common time period. One roll represents coverage of the war in Vietnam, and stretches the length of a football field; the other shows coverage of the situation in East-Timor, and reaches only a few feet. For Allen, this illustrates the ongoing disparity as to who and what is rendered important in the media.

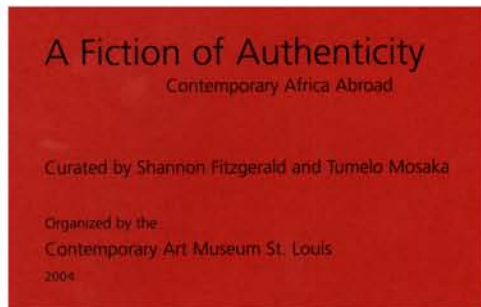
Literally (re)presenting information at face value, as flat and direct in its re-delivery, Allen demonstrates how the most economic means for seeking information (the newspaper) may warrant new levels of scrutiny and critique that challenge the authenticity of reporting and fictitious image making, and as a result, the authenticity of the subject reported. What may be accepted as truth, in reporting the international to the local, in sound bites and in daily doses, is highly selective and a purposefully edited endeavor. For Allen, the work "addresses the profound implications behind the simple act of reading the newspaper that are overlooked. It is about the everyday experience of the 'world in your living room.'"<sup>12</sup> This everyday experience is unique and personal, and while Allen is not necessarily interested in what is read, he is interested in what options are given to be read.

Allen does not address a specific historical event, but extracts the contemporary before it becomes the archival. He negotiates through both a personal and global mining of the media. This installation has broader implications as it begs

10. Ibid., brackets are my emphasis, as Allen's questions have gained momentum as the project has expanded in the year since asking himself these questions.

11. See Alfredo Jaar, *Let There Be Light: The Rwanda Project 1994-1998*, exhibition catalog, Centre d'Art Santa Monica, Barcelona, Spain, Barcelona: Actar, 1998. In one component of this project, Jaar juxtaposed Newsweek's cover stories of Kurt Cobain and O.J. Simpson with the grim reports that occurred simultaneously in Rwanda but were never reported: "Rwanda, April 12, 1994: The interim Rwandan government flees Kigali of the town of Gitarama. Relief officials estimates that as many as 25,000 people have been killed in Kigali alone in the first five days of violence."

the question of what other locations, cultures, and individuals are perpetually excluded from the international dialogue on what is happening in the world. Is it possible to think beyond first and third worlds within these parameters? Will the notion of *us* and *them*, and the authenticity of the image of *us* and *them*, ever break down in the media?



Siemon Allen *Newspapers, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 2003*, installation and limited edition artist book.