



Translation/Seduction/Displacement:
Post-Conceptual and Photographic Work
by Artists from South Africa.

Where Schönfeldt reflects back a Western view which looks to art from abroad for its exotic appeal, and Tshabangu's focus is the confluence of Western appearance and African ambiance in religious experience, Siemon Allen draws the observer into power relations behind the surface of the African/Western dialogue. In Screen, 2000 a large rectangular installation blocks free movement around the gallery. Allen cross-references Los Angeles-style exclusive walled suburbs and the architecture of Johannesburg's predominantly white middle class neighborhoods. The construction's walls are made of tightly woven unspooled VHS tape. Its surface mirrors and fragments the viewer and other art in the room. The use of VHS tape as a sculptural material was inspired by weaver Sam Ntshangase, who taught at Allen's alma mater, the Natal Technikon. Ntshangase used natural materials as well as industrial waste in his large scale basketry work. VHS tape is a raw material which stores information but is rendered mute when woven, thus becoming a metaphor for historical evidence whose legibility is frustrated. The installation elaborates upon that idea-- it is a human scale, 6 foot tall box, just low enough to encourage the viewer to want to see inside, just high enough to block that desire--like concealing walls around the houses in affluent suburbs.

Zulu for Medics, 1994 is an audio piece which interweaves excerpts from a tape found in a pawn shop and Allen playing awkwardly on a broken guitar. The guitar sound disturbs the *isiZulu* lesson, and hints at the paternalism potentially encoded in the learning of a foreign language. The piece suggests that the uneven power relation between a doctor and patient, and a white and a black South African may be recorded on a seemingly innocuous instructional tape and played back in the politics of everyday conversation. Siemon Allen shares with Boshoff, Marasela, and Lieberman a critical view of the politics of texts interwoven with everyday lives; with Mofokeng a sensitivity to the ideological component of the architecture of daily routines. As with the other artists on Translation/Seduction/Displacement, his work offers up a nonsite to the viewer looking for a taste of South African culture-- a nonsite informed by South African history, but applicable elsewhere.

John Peffer from
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Above: Siemon Allen, Untitled(Richmond, VA), 1996
Opposite top: Zulu For Medics, 1994
Opposite below: Siemon Allen, Screen, 2000

