



Siemon Allen, *Newspapers*, 2002. Installation view, Fusebox Gallery, Washington; and (inset below) detail

# Making headlines

Siemon Allen's *Newspapers* project highlights press coverage of South Africa in the United States, writes **Lauri Firstenberg**

In his installation, *Newspapers*, Siemon Allen mediates the representation of South Africa vis-à-vis personal and historical memory. Borne out of the artist's methodical daily practice of collecting newspapers featuring South African coverage (beginning in August 2001 with the UN Racism Conference in his hometown of Durban), the initial incarnation of Allen's *Newspapers* at the Fusebox Gallery in Washington in September signaled the first in a line of dialogic installations engaging the media image of South Africa. Subsequent versions of this work will be mounted in metropolises including St Louis, Boston and New York. The work will later evolve into a larger archive in which the discourse of a particular city will not be isolated, but rather seen within a greater compilation of America's treatment of South Africa in the press.

Continuing the logic of Allen's recent *South African Stamp Collection*, the mode of appropriationism in *Newspapers* questions the validity of the medium's "currency". Allen's work not only presents a chronological archive of contemporary reporting on the African continent in the *Washington Post* and *Washington Times*, but also provides for a multiplicity of readings, narratives, projections and misinterpretations. In the guise of a modernist grid, the larger critique of ubiquitous nationalist rhetoric and propagandist tools in the news is subtle and discreet. The artist is concerned with South Africa as construction



and how it is positioned within the context of international reportage. In re-examining the presence of South Africa in the press, Allen challenges the viewer to encounter news either forgotten or overlooked in the context of concurrent world events such as September 11. It is the entanglement of global politics, economics and culture that is of absolute concern to Allen.

Reverberating his earlier practice of collecting artefacts from his white-suburban youth, Allen's polemical and aesthetic interests have transferred to fabrications of both authoritative official iconography and rhetoric external to South Africa. His turn to textual material in the

form of newspapers is highly strategic, in light of the fact that iconography around South African representation is highly contested territory in the spaces of both local and international contemporary art.

What does it mean to reconstruct the American media vision of South Africa in this way? Allen reveals, "an image that I have constructed and reconstructed through memory is now presented back to me through the filter of the US newspaper media". In an extension of *Stamp Collection*, Allen analyses badges of nationalist propaganda to recount a singular and dominant narrative in *Newspapers*. The isolation and recontextualisation of the newspapers beg them to perform a distinct political function. A reversal of Allen's early minimalist woven videotape panels that refuse to provide narrative, the newspaper grids expose highly coded information of South Africa's history documented in the West. As hobbyist and historian, Allen's interest has shifted from the self-representation of the nation to a re-examination of the Western imaginary. The grids of newspapers serve as a screen for images to be projected back onto the audience that created or facilitated them. Allen, with *Newspapers*, brazenly engages the viewer and incites translation and interpretation of South Africa as country and construct.

Lauri Firstenberg is the curator of Artists Space, New York