



# The Activist Archivist: *Dislocation and Relocation in the Work of Siemon Allen*

*Siemon Allen is a compulsive collector and archivist of South African ephemera. Displayed as large-scale visual and informational installations, Allen's self-described "collection projects" explore, amongst other things, the concept of identity-formation through displacement*

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 Siemon Allen, *Time*, 2007, for publication *Daily Constitutional*, issue 4, Summer 2007, Richmond, VA, magazines, plastic sleeves, pins  
 The balcony during a typical exhibition at the FLAT gallery, circa 1993  
 Photo Thomas Barry  
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 Siemon Allen, *Makeba!*, installation view of *Makeba* labels on black plastic from ongoing collection project in the series *Imaging South Africa*



In the end it is somehow poignantly fitting that the FLAT gallery was, quite simply, flattened. Or, to be precise, razed to the ground. A candle left burning by one of the occupants ignited the blaze and FLAT founders, Siemon Allen and Thomas Barry, arrived on the scene in time to see the firemen extinguish the dying embers. The mix of artists, residents, itinerants and vagabonds who made up the unstable, combustible mix of characters that were the keepers of the FLAT flame had been given until the end of the month to vacate the premises [insert address] by an increasingly exasperated landlord. So there is an element of poetic justice in that, after two years of violent experimentation with the parameters of every kind of possibility, the final act was written by the venue that formed the crucible of this creative force field: the FLAT gallery itself.

It was January 1995 and the smouldering ruins of a dingy flat across the road from what was then Natal Technikon marked the end of one of the most brief, bizarre and strangely significant moments in recent South African art history. From 1993 to 1995, an unknowable energy catalysed a group of young fine art students in Durban to crystallise into a mysteriously coherent entity. They pooled their meagre reserves, rented a flat, moved into it and embarked upon a journey of exhibitions, performances, installations, happenings and all other manner of spontaneity that characterised the turbulent two years of the FLAT gallery's brief but incendiary lifespan. A comet skimming the planet's atmosphere at terrifying speed will leave in its wake a blinding bolt of white heat but be gone an instant later. And no-one, even the most knowledgeable astronomers, will be truly able to say what it was, where it came from, where it was going or why it came skidding across our skies for that fleeting instance. Original FLAT conspirator Jay Horsburgh – currently a writer, actor and director in Malibu and FLAT's de facto André Breton – summed up this spirit of abandonment (one thing FLAT was clear on was to NEVER have a manifesto), on a flyer propagating the Situationist-inspired event "The First International Theatre of Communication" when he wrote: "The principle is that it does not matter what you have to say – but it is vitally necessary that you say it."

Among the extraordinary amount of activity the FLAT participants managed to cram into the two short years of the initiative's formal existence, one group "creation" represents their radical vision and set the stage for one of Siemon Allen's enduring artistic obsessions: maps. One day in 1994 Allen, Barry, Horsburgh, Aliza Levy and Samkelo Matoti drove into the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands, moved by some compelling curiosity to find and for a



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Siemon Allen,  
*Newspapers (Post/  
Times)*, 2003. The  
American Effect,  
Whitney Museum, New  
York, newspapers, vellum,  
cloth, pins

moment physically occupy the point represented by 33 degrees latitude and 33 degrees longitude on a map. The impulse was grounded in the desire to bring about a collision between the artificial orderliness of an intersection of abstract lines on a page and what would be for each artist a distinct and particularly lived experience of a previously unknown place. Recalling the event – which he terms “part performance, part conceptual art work” – in the catalogue of the 2001 Venice Biennale, Allen refers to the escapade as “our own kind of ‘derive’, described by Guy Debord in the *Internationale Situationniste* #2 in 1958 as a ‘transient passage through various ambiances’ entailing ‘playful-constructive behaviour and awareness of psycho-geographical effects.’” It is precisely in this realm of the “psycho-geographical” that Allen has been intensively focusing his gaze, dedicating his increasingly ascendant career and astonishing artistic output over the past 15 years to the creation, collection, codification and re-/de-contextualisation of maps. Literal maps, but also the more intriguing figurative ones: the maps of memory, maps of the mind, and the maps of the heart whose contours merge to form that most elusive of palimpsests, the map of identity.

Allen moved to the USA close on a dozen years ago and currently lives in Richmond, Virginia, where he works and teaches at the Department of Sculpture and Extended Media at Virginia Commonwealth University. The issue of proximity and distance highlights an unavoidable irony, one that presents a curveball to Allen’s single-minded determination to interrogate the complex and contradictory nature of South African identity. For the dogmatist, this irony may appear to present itself as a fatal flaw. Yet, as John Fowles once remarked, “irony is the acceptance of fate” and if there is one thing Allen is not, it is a fatalist. The amount of time and effort spent on his immense archival projects that fall under his *Imaging South Africa* series, together with the intensity of his engagement with his material, are enough to easily dismiss the protests of the most ardent of cynics. Instead, what is required in order to appreciate the depth, scope and validity of Allen’s oeuvre is simply a shift in perspective, to recognise that his metier is both the investigation into the various processes of identity-formation, as well as an investigation into this investigation itself. As much as his collection projects – including those currently on view in Durban: *Stamps* (1993-2001), *Newspapers* (2001 - 04) and



*Makeba!* (ongoing) – are all profoundly significant in and of themselves, it is the prism through which the artist has seen them that is of equal interest. It forms the meta-narrative of Allen's odyssey: how the artist's psycho-geographic separation from the source of his subject matter leads to consideration of how much of this work is, at its core, an investigation into the concept of identity-formation through displacement. Of course the concept of distance lending a clearer perspective – the old "wood from the trees" aphorism – is nothing revelatory. After all, neither Isaac Asimov nor Arthur C. Clarke had to leave their armchairs to travel into the furthest reaches of space. Yet this is pure fiction whereas Allen is attempting to fuse the narrative arcs of experience, history and the distortions lent to these by the manner in which they are mediated. Distortions such as time, distance, cultural re-appropriation of received information and all manner of more buried psychological tremors. There is no shortage of South Africans living abroad who can't wait to erase all traces of their origin just as there are plenty who distil their heritage into an absurdly idealised shrine bedecked with biltong, boerewors, veldskoek and vetkoek. Yet Allen's painstaking and nuanced reconfiguration of his identity – and that of his country's from the perspective of the patch of the planet he currently occupies – marks him as a far more intriguing conundrum, the reluctant expatriate who implicitly recognises the veracity of that line in The Cowboy Junkies song where she sings: "Escape is so simple in a world where sunsets can be raced/ But distance only loses the knife/ The pattern of its scars can always be traced."

Indeed music is one of Allen's more fundamental focal points: from his very early installations of his own modest CD collection (the box was sealed and

contained only the covers as he couldn't bear to part with the music), to his audio installations, to the immensely ambitious *Makeba!* project, music – the sound itself and its cultural impact – presents the artist with an irresistible opportunity to combine sheer appreciation with his relentless quest to collect. *Makeba!* in particular is redolent with Allen's overarching desire to reconcile his interests in the world of the political with the language of the aesthetic. Part of the *Imaging South Africa* series, it is both a work of staggering physical accomplishment as well as another groundbreaking foray by Allen into his all-consuming interest in how psycho-geographical displacement and the altered contexts of cultural information-reception forms tantalising new tropes of identity.

The roots of the *Makeba!* project go back to an instance years ago when Allen discovered a 1965 LP in a thrift store entitled *An evening with Belafonte/Makeba*. Reading the liner notes on the back, he was struck by the highly political nature of the text. Given the date of the album's pressing, Allen began to wonder about how this record cover operated in the dissemination of the anti-apartheid message. How did these commodities, mass-produced in North America and Europe operate in creating awareness about apartheid in South Africa? Thus began Allen's epic quest to collect, document and archive Makeba's prodigious output: over three years of rigorous sifting through internet auctions, the recordings were collected from all over the world in formats ranging from reel-to-reel to mp3. In the process the project has thus far encompassed Turkey, Japan, Sweden, Israel, New Zealand and Brazil, are all linked by a common interest in the music of Miriam Makeba. On one level, the project pays homage to Makeba's prolific career; on another, it is a profound meditation upon the role played by the means of production and transmission of information in identity formation. Looking back now at the long years of apartheid rule, it's more than a little surreal to picture the chasm of difference between how we saw ourselves in this benighted, government-approved way and how anyone in the rest of the world – who merely had to buy a Makeba record – saw us in a radically different light. One of the true strengths of Allen's work is that it allows us to peer down a wormhole back in time to reconcile these perspectives and develop a more robust understanding of who we were, who we are and who we are becoming.

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*Three bodies of work from Allen's Imaging South Africa project are on show in Durban: Makeba! is at Bank Gallery, March 3 – April 16, and Stamps and Newspapers are at Durban Art Gallery, March 8 – April 26*