

Simon Allen: Internal Affairs

by Chris Gilbert

Sculptor Simon Allen was in his late teens and still a student at the Technikon Natal art school when events such as the release of Nelson Mandela, the end of apartheid, and the lifting of the cultural boycott were changing the face of his native South Africa. A telling moment for South African artists—



The Hardy Boys, 1993. Books and display case, 86 x 27 x 22 cm.

heretofore very direct in their politics—came in 1989 when anti-apartheid campaigner Albie Sachs called for a five-year moratorium on treating art as a weapon of political struggle. “A gun is a gun is a gun,” Sachs announced at an ANC conference, “but the power of art lies precisely in its power to expose contradictions and reveal tensions—hence the danger of viewing it as another sort of missile firing apparatus.”

Born in the harbor city of Durban in 1971, Allen’s earliest exhibited work spoke to this world in transition, where artists found the international art world suddenly brought to their door, sidelining many parochial political concerns. From the beginning, Allen’s work demonstrated that an interest in the subtleties of human identity and

a self-reflexive attitude to artmaking were compatible with political art. In an exhibition in Johannesburg in 1993, his sculptures *Compact Disk*, *Hardy Boys*, and *Shirt & Boots*—Minimalist display cases housing assorted consumer items and collectibles—received widespread critical acclaim. Kendell Geers, a Johannesburg-based critic and artist, saw the encased relics of white youth as “an incisive social critique comparable in contemporary terms with Hogarth.” In *Flash Art*, Benjamin Weil wrote that Allen’s appropriations reflected a sense of distance from European art, “as if living in isolation had the effect of recreating the world as it is in the homeland.”

Although Allen was, as Weil points out, isolated from major art centers, he did seek to make connections with other artists through a unique living arrangement. For 16 months beginning in 1993, the residents in his Durban apartment—including Thomas Barry, Neil Jonker, and Ledelle Moe—ran a gallery out of their home, which they appropriately named “the FLAT.” In sharp contrast to the regulated world around them, the FLAT’s residents mandated “a vibrant interaction amongst creative individuals” through a completely open exhibition policy. With 32 exhibitions in less than two years, the environment quickly became like a Bakhtinian carnival according to Allen—an understatement when one considers that the gallerist-residents often ceded their living spaces to multi-room installations and more than once saw the space transformed into a workshop for local entrepreneurs.

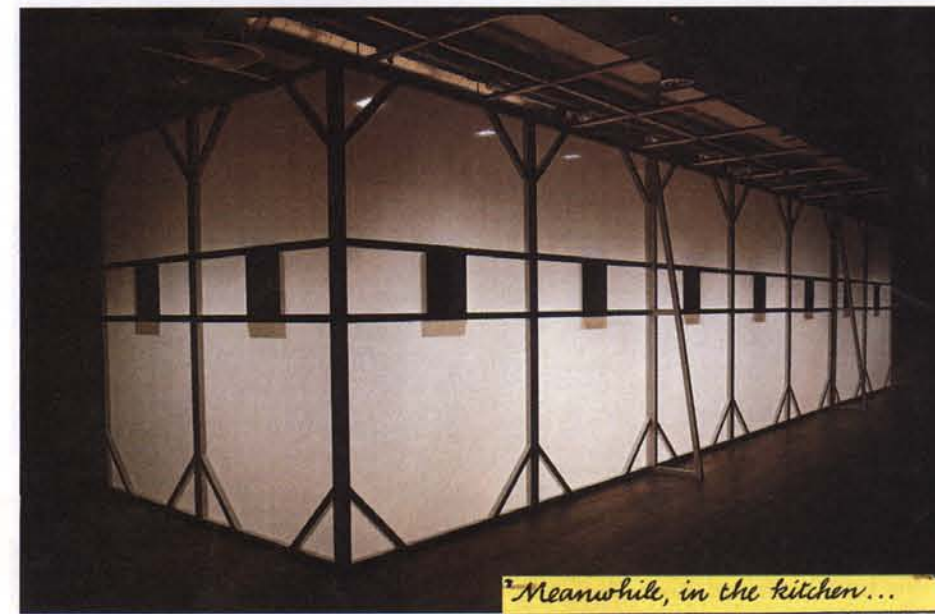
Allen’s own art in this creative and sometimes maddening environment consisted mostly of audio pieces inspired by the music of Steve Reich, as well as William Burroughs’s “cut up” technique. In *Zulu for Medics* (1994), a sound piece he later presented in the “Volkskas Atelier” in Johannesburg, Allen’s cacophonous guitar playing blends with a tape used for training medical doctors to address Zulu patients, highlighting the issue of the control and representation of Black

voices. *Songs for Nella*, a seven-stereo installation of the same year, was an exploration of sensory overload, while *Especially the Fact That I Don’t Have a Car*, created with fashion designer Elmin Engelbrecht in 1995, dealt with the banalities of social exchange in a superficial male-female relationship.

After the FLAT gallery closed its doors in 1995, Allen returned for a time to object-making, yet his work continued to be interventionist in character. He relocated to the United States

was interested in using a technical material in its raw form (“rendering it mute,” in his own words) to create objects that, although they referenced minimalist painting, were actually more conceptual than aesthetic.

With the aid of an elaborate mechanical loom, Allen began to construct larger panels, which expanded the spatial possibilities of his installations, allowing his forms to serve as dividers of space. When invited to participate in the “Art Sites” exhibition in 1996,



Above and detail: *Pictures and Words*, 1998. Cut-up comics and textbooks, wood, and fabric, 900 x 330 x 22 cm. Top right: *La Jetée*, 1997. VHS videotape and steel, 19,500 x 4,200 x 3,000 cm.

as part of an artist’s residency program in the summer of that year, where his first major piece, *Untitled* (Richmond, VA), was a *mise en abîme* of the gallery space: a four-walled structure formed from white gauze stretched on frames. For the faux art inside this faux gallery, Allen wove videotape and motion picture film to create panels that had the look of Minimalism. The weaving of unraveled videotape was a practice he had developed two years earlier, influenced by the South African weaver Sam Ngshangase. In this new work, Allen



he presented *Elegy* at School 33 in Baltimore, a work built of seven huge rectangular tableaux of the woven material. His contribution to the “Graft” exhibition at the Johannesburg Biennial of 1997, *La Jetée*, consisted of a series of panels that created a narrow passage in the main exhibition space of the South African National Gallery,



reflecting and fragmenting the famous artworks in its collection. The following year, in a show devoted to the five artists short-listed for South Africa’s prestigious Vita award, Allen was able to bring his early interest in the material culture of privileged youth together with another faux gallery space in *Pictures and Words*. In this work, the large gauze-covered panels provided a neutral context against which he displayed encased Tintin comics that had been doctored to bring the white protagonist’s speech in contact with a range of postcolonial discourses.

Throughout his work, Allen’s balanced approach and subtlety has necessitated careful attention to context. It is hardly surprising, then, that his first pieces to address the American environment, *Talk and Fence*, were only just completed. The former is an enormous darkened gauze enclosure out of which disembodied questions from national talk radio shows emanate at irregular intervals; the latter is a low corral of inwardly facing camouflage material, which makes reference to recent military interventions as well as issues of protection and power. Both works, with their charged contents turned inside, embody a personal-political approach to artmaking characteristic of the post-*Mauer*, post-apartheid, post-Cold War era. It’s a strategy that Allen himself likens to “setting up a construct, then withdrawing.”

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