

# jim allen now



Jim Allen *Poetry for chainsaws*, 1976/2006, performance,  
Michael Lett, Auckland. Photo: Michael Lett.

**Jim Allen (born 1922) is finally being accorded his due in the history of recent New Zealand art, as an innovative educator and as the prime mover behind the emergence of new – multi-media, time-based, site-specific, performative, and installation – modes of sculptural practice that galvanised artists in the 1970s. His role as Head of Sculpture at the Elam School of Fine Arts in Auckland (1960-1976) has been acknowledged, and the rapid evolution of his sculptural practice – from conventional crafted objects to multi-media environments and situational performances – has at last been analysed and accorded its rightful place in a local art history.**

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Indeed right now Allen is enjoying the attention of a new generation of artists, curators and dealers who have further facilitated his rehabilitation. This has seen the re-staging of key performance works from the 1970s, *Poetry for Chainsaws* (1976) at Michael Lett in Auckland and the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in New Plymouth in 2006, and earlier this year, *Newspaper Piece* (1976) at St Paul Street, the space run by Auckland University of Technology. It has also resulted in the reconstruction and re-presentation of ephemeral projects, like *O-AR Part 1*, the mixed-media installation Allen undertook at the Barry Lett Galleries in 1975, which has been acquired by the Auckland Art Gallery, and which was recently re-installed at St Paul Street as part of a mini-survey of his work.

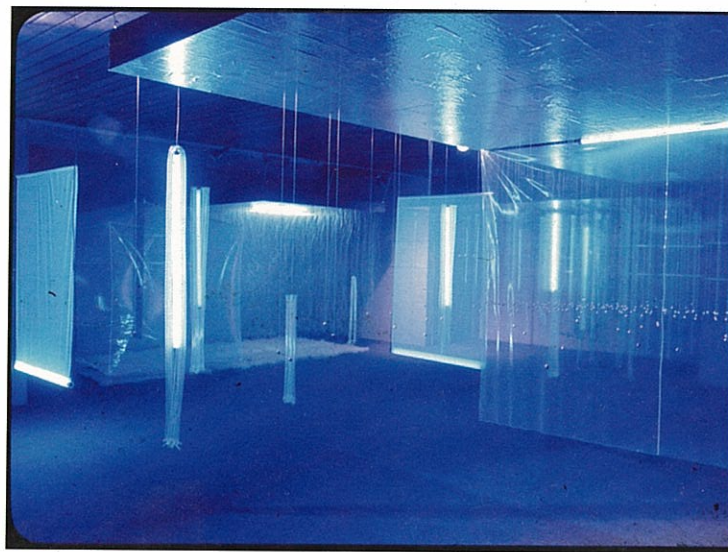
Recently as well, US, Australian, Canadian, South African and Latin American conference-goers heard a paper about Allen's work at the Santiago Gathering, the South Project's third symposium held in Chile in October 2006. This enabled a new audience to appreciate Allen's contribution to the wider history of global conceptualism and especially struck Australian listeners, who knew and admired Allen as Head of the Sydney College of the Arts (1977-1987) but not for his work as an artist.

To date, Jim Allen's contribution to the history of art in New Zealand has been discussed in terms of his achievements as a teacher, organiser and advocate for new dematerialised modes of practice. The narrative that has taken shape follows the artist's evolution from his conventional training as a sculptor studying under Francis Shurrock (an academic British teacher, who had been brought to New Zealand specifically to raise the standards of art training) to the Royal College of Art in London in the early 1950s, where he was forced to rethink his early education once exposed to the more adventurous British art scene; a familiar story, true of many artists in the post-war period, and demonstrably a mid 20th-century instance of our residual deferral to the cultural authority of Britain. The account continues from here to describe Allen's eventful sabbatical in 1968, when he was caught up in the turmoil of student riots in Paris, London and the States, and made contact with a range of artists, educators and curators in England, Europe and America that propelled his practice into new and non-traditional territory, the outcome of which has been considered his lasting legacy.

This positivist account has been complemented recently by acknowledgement of the impact on Allen of his work in the mid 1950s as an Arts and Crafts Advisor working for the Education Department that saw him spending time in remote rural schools in the north of New Zealand, working with mainly Maori children and their teachers to integrate process-oriented, hands-on art-making into the children's schooling, with the aim of using creative and imaginative play as a tool for learning. This left a lasting impression, further conditioning Allen's eagerness to experiment and adding a new and grounded commitment to work collaboratively with materials and subjects that were close at hand and often culturally specific.

These two strands can be traced in Allen's early work, especially as it developed in public commissions for outdoor sites in various urban settings, like *Conversation Piece* (1965) designed for Auckland's first drive-in suburban shopping mall. It clearly registers a debt to modern British sculpture just as it doubles as a children's hands-on adventure playground. They have also been used as a basis for understanding Allen's philosophy, once he started teaching at art school after 1960, that led him to revamp the curriculum, replacing life-drawing and modelling with free-ranging discussion sessions where students and faculty could interact on equal terms. This opened the way for students to experiment with new and unconventional materials, processes and technologies.

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Jim Allen Installation view of *Small Worlds* 1969, Barry Lett Galleries, Auckland. Photo: Jim Allen

It is possible to see the pedagogical outlook Allen developed at Elam (which he brought with him to Australia and made a feature of his teaching at Sydney College) as the result of a process of absorption and adaptation of these various influences. Allen replaced a traditional British model in which knowledge is passed down from master to pupil with new modes of communal interchange and cross-fertilisation that derived from his work in the school communities of the Far North and from the radicalised thinking that came out of the student protests of 1968. This interpretation grants to Allen's work at Elam a political charge that opened the way to an invigorated period of experiment.

Allen's practice as an artist and his efforts as an arts organiser also helped prepare the ground for New Zealand's growing involvement in the international arts arena. By establishing connections with like-minded artists in various locations, he refused the narrow focus of nationalist agendas; and working towards a materials-based, process-oriented practice grounded in place, he side-stepped the universalising claims of late modernism to propound a new global awareness.

*Small Worlds*, the installation he undertook at the Barry Lett Galleries on his return to New Zealand in 1969 and perhaps New Zealand's first immersive environment can be read in such terms. Here he presented what he called 'five environmental structures' made with lightweight materials like plastic, organza and nylon thread and integrating ultraviolet light to transformative effect. He said of the work that he wanted to initiate a 'dialogue of liquidity, volatility, malleability and softness which occupies but does not dominate space' and to achieve this he juxtaposed what he called 'elements of matter, space, light and movement', to activate a situation that was at once immersive and contemplative, using space and materials to act directly on the senses with the aim of altering perceptions.<sup>2</sup> This was perfectly pitched for that late 1960s moment; worthy, I think, of acknowledgement as Allen's contribution to what others have called 'global conceptualism'.

While this reading, and the account on which it depends, grants Allen modest visibility in New Zealand art history and lays the ground for more widespread appreciation of his contribution, it nevertheless conforms to the conventional logic of a nationalist art history. This foregrounds the local (Allen's early years working for the Education Department) and the avant-garde (his exposure to advanced art in Europe and America) to produce an account that mirrors discursive formations that actually originate elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> What I have discovered most recently, in an ongoing effort to find ways of producing art history here that is wary of the traps of such narratives, is an interesting blind spot in the existing account of Allen's practice. There is something I overlooked when I first began work on the artist, something he never denied, but which I (and most others) failed to register, which complicates the story and refocuses it in another direction. This is Allen's strong identification with certain Latin American artists whose work he encountered in the 1960s and 1970s and which has proven a lasting influence throughout his career.

In August 1968 Allen wrote to London-based freelance curator and writer Guy Brett congratulating him on his newly published book, *Kinetic Art: The Language of Movement* and commending him in particular for his inclusion of the 'almost unknown' work of Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Clark and Mira Schendel. Here he tellingly states:

*Being ourselves part of Oceania and enjoying a close and somewhat unique physical relationship with the natural environment I think we are especially receptive to an artform which makes use of simple tactile media; paper, stones, gravel, sand, cloth and water, employed with such finite sensibility and sophistication.*<sup>4</sup>

Allen followed this up when in London by meeting Brett who showed him many of the works illustrated in the publication which he still had in his possession, and introducing him to Signals Gallery which supported Oiticica and Clark and also artists like David Medalla, Takis, Jesús-Rafael Soto and others. Allen's *Small Worlds* would not have taken the form it did without this encounter.

If we return to this installation and examine it more closely the connections are clear. *Thine Own Hands: Poem Environment to Hone Tuwhare*, for example, bears the traces of Oiticica. This structure was made of plastic strips, nylon threads and lead weights all suspended from a reflective rectangle, and threaded through with strips of paper on which the words of a poem (*Thine own hands have fashioned*) by the Maori writer Hone Tuwhare were printed. Viewers were meant to interact physically with the work, moving through it and handling the strips to read the words in order to literally 'grasp' its meaning; in this way poem and sculpture worked together to evoke and literalise the effects of touch. This notion draws inspiration quite specifically from Oiticica's *Box Poems* which were modestly scaled boxes which the spectator had to open, removing a bag filled with pigment which they had to hold to read the unfurling words of a poem. By this simple action Oiticica was able to transform the act of reading into a fully embodied event, establishing a new and animated connection between eye, hand and mind.

Allen took up this example and adapted it to his own situation, by giving material life to a local voice and creating a setting for audiences to actively engage with it. Elsewhere Brett has proposed that Oiticica welcomed the idea that his practice, in which 'life acts' replace the image, could be exported anywhere, taken up by others and mixed with local cultural possibilities.<sup>5</sup> I am convinced Allen was able to take up this suggestion because he already believed that art could mobilise people and understood that materials engender their own abstract but situated meanings.

Allen's *New Zealand Environment no 5*, the last in his series of *Small Worlds*, shown separately later in 1969 bears a striking resemblance to Oiticica's *Penetrables*, the labyrinthine structures for the viewer to enter and explore which he built with different coloured cloth and other materials, and into which he placed objects and substances (plants, sand, etc) specifically designed to engage the senses. Allen knew of Oiticica's *Eden Project*, installed at the Whitechapel in

London in 1969, though he did not see it. He may also have seen photographs of *Tropicalia*, the installation Oiticica constructed at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro in 1967. But where Oiticica drew on the makeshift structures of Rio's favelas and brought native plants and typical Brazilian fabrics into the format of a multi-sensory installation, Allen tuned his environment to his own situation.

*New Zealand Environment no 5* consisted of a cubic frame covered with hessian made from local flax, with wool and woodchips laid in sections on the floor. Cut lengths of barbed wire and hanging nylon threads further charged the space and the whole thing was illuminated by a suspended square of neon that emanated a vivid green glow. Bathed in light and assailed by a mix of smells – greasy wool, sweet pine and the dusty odour of sacking – the viewer is removed from the real world and placed inside another. Here material traces work on the senses and arouse in the viewer memories of pine forests and sheep-filled fields but also the products with which these are associated. This is self-consciously, as Allen states, the 'non-indigenous European environment', a thoroughly colonised terrain.

To get here Allen overturns a whole history of Western representation that removed the viewer from a scene to turn it into a purely aesthetic experience, which we understand now to be inextricably implicated in the colonising process. This installation is the very opposite of that inherited pictorial tradition. It places the viewer inside the picture, entraps them as if they were prisoners; our home becomes a cell in which we are confronted by the raw remains of an extractive attitude to natural resources. What is so interesting about this work is that Allen arrived here through his connection with an artist working in another colonial setting. He may have only known Oiticica's work second-hand and through the mediating influence of Brett in London, but his admiration and connection with such work is deep and longstanding. It is this narrative that fascinates me now and which I think nuances any account of global conceptualism. 🗨️

1 This process got underway with my MA Thesis, 'Post-Object Art in New Zealand 1969-1979 Experiments in Art and Life' (University of Auckland, 1987); and has gained pace more recently, with Allen's inclusion in two exhibitions: *Action Replay* (Artspace, Auckland Art Gallery and Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 1999) and *Interventions* (McDougall Art Annex, 2000). An important interview with the artist was published in *Art New Zealand: 'Contact: Jim Allen talks to Wystan Curnow and Robert Leonard'* (no 95, Winter 2000, 48-55, 99); and just this year St Paul Street Gallery published a catalogue to accompany the latest exhibition to address Allen's work: *Jim Allen O-AR*, curated by Leonhard Emmerling (Auckland University of Technology, 2007).

2 Jim Allen, Artist's statement printed on flyer for *Small Worlds*, Barry Lett Galleries, Auckland, 1969.

3 In this, I am following the recent work of Kobena Mercer, who has established a new platform for art historical research, generically titled *Annotating Art's Histories*, that sets out to expose the limitations of our 'available knowledge about modernism's cross-cultural past'. *Cosmopolitan Modernisms* (inIVA, London and MIT Press, Cambridge Mass, 2005), a first volume of essays in this series, offers a very different account of modernist practices from, say, the equally recent new history of twentieth and twenty-first century art by Rosalind Krauss, Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster and Yves-Alain Bois, *Art after 1900 Anti-Modernism, Modernism, Postmodernism* (Thames & Hudson, London, 2004), whose focus remains resolutely on the canonical figures of European and American art history. Operating as a series of discrete case studies, rather than a single synoptic narrative, Kobena's book contains valuable new insights into the variety of ways in which modernist thought and practice has been mediated through the lens of cultural difference or has been adapted to specific local conditions in places like Brazil, India and the Caribbean. My work on Allen follows this model, similarly using a case study to, again quoting Mercer, 'map a critical pathway' for modernist thought and practice that passes through the metropolis but takes shape in our region.

4 Jim Allen, letter to Guy Brett, 3 August 1968, collection of Guy Brett.

5 See Guy Brett, 'Border Crossings' in *Transcontinental: Nine Latin American Artists, An Investigation of Reality*, Verso, London, 1990, p.9.

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Jim Allen *New Zealand Environment no 5*, 1969, mixed media, collection of Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth. Photo: Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.

