

RE-STAGE/RE-PRINT

On the Legacies of Jim Allen



Jim Allen, 'Poetry for Chainsaws', 1976, performed by Ruth Allen at 3 East Street, Auckland, 2022. Image courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett.

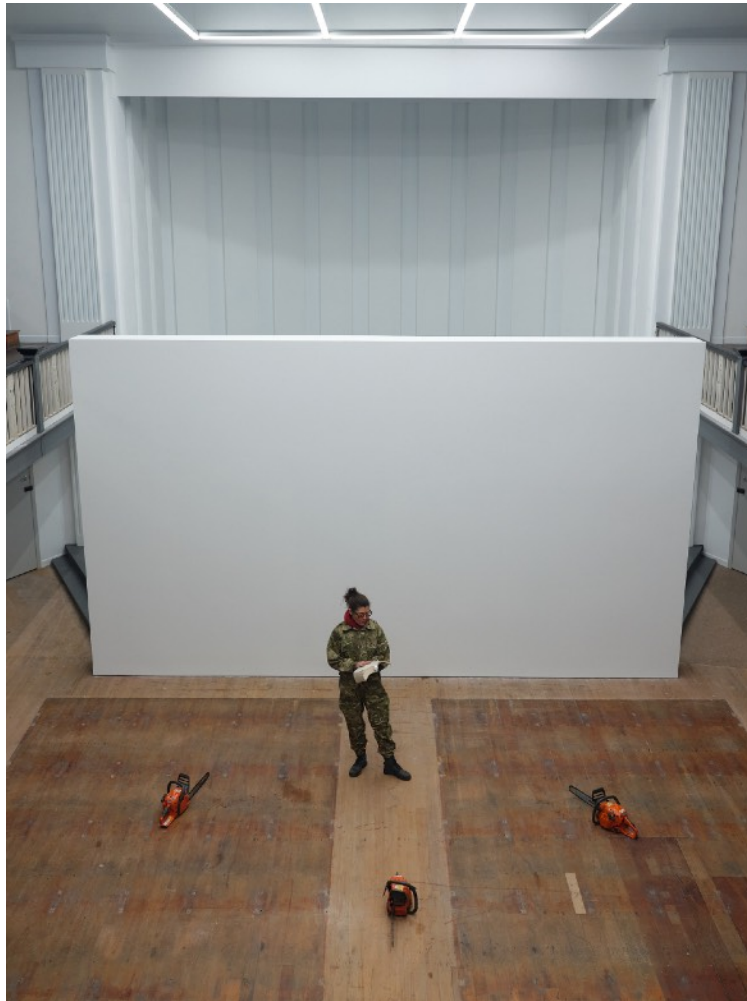
Hamish Coney

Aug 22 2022

ON 22 JULY, artist and educator Jim Allen celebrated his 100th birthday. Among the events marking the occasion was a re-staging of Allen's performance work, 'Poetry for Chainsaws'. First performed in 1976 at the Experimental Art Foundation (EAF) in Adelaide, and re-staged in 2006 at Michael Lett, this third presentation of 'Poetry for Chainsaws' took place at 3 East Street, Michael Lett's new exhibition space in the former Methodist Mission Hall. On this occasion, rather than Allen himself in the central role, the artwork was performed by his daughter, Ruth.

ArtNow Essays has taken this occasion to think through the enduring influence of Allen's work as both an artist and an educator, that continues to shape how conceptual and performance-based work is

produced and understood in Aotearoa. First, Hamish Coney reflects on Ruth Allen’s performance at 3 East Street, considering the re-staging in the context of Jim Allen’s life and work. Second, an extracted re-print of an essay by Blair French, produced for *Intervention: post object and performance art in New Zealand in 1970 and beyond*, an exhibition held at the Robert McDougall Art Gallery in 2000. French’s text, a discussion of the content and context of Allen’s work through the 1970s, pays rigorous attention to the innovative, disruptive, and experimental performance works produced during Allen’s residency at the EAF—works which resound throughout Aotearoa and Australia’s art histories.



Jim Allen, ‘Poetry for Chainsaws’, 1976, performed by Ruth Allen at 3 East Street, Auckland, 2022. Image courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett.

Machine Metal Music

Hamish Coney

JIM ALLEN’S ‘Poetry for Chainsaws’, performed at Michael Lett’s new space at 3 East Street, in central Tāmaki Makarau, on July 24, was a moment to celebrate the artist’s 100th birthday, experience an historic urban space reborn, and bear witness to familial intimacy. History rarely stays in its lane,

i.e. the past. The re-staging of ‘Poetry for Chainsaws’, performed by the artist’s daughter Ruth was part of a series of events under the rubric of *Jim Allen at 100*. First staged in the mid-1970s, what happens is pretty much explained on the label. The 1954 poem, ‘Howl’, by Allen Ginsberg, is recited for the edification of three buzzing chainsaws, each animated with just enough fuel to be alive to the moment—about thirty minutes of gas—before they, and the reader, fall silent.

It’s a dance between man/woman (and in this iteration father/daughter) and machine. We, the audience can’t hear a word, of course, so the poetry is lost on us. But the poetics of the discourse(s) are very much present. Calm and tumult, organic and machine, collide and collaborate to (mildly) terrify and pacify in equal measure.

Jim Allen is an artist whose achievements and legacy—punking the art scene not the least of them—are much like Lou Reed’s 1975 noise epic, *Metal Machine Music*. More talked and thought about than actually seen or heard, Allen’s presence in 2022 acts as a feedback loop into what we might wistfully look back on as a funkier, even more dangerous, art scene in the 1970s. Allen’s role as a one-man ginger group was acknowledged in the exhibition, *Groundswell: Avant Garde Auckland, 1973-1979*, at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, curated by Natasha Conland in 2019. At 3 East Street, Conland spoke to Allen’s six-decade contribution—once the poetry and chainsaws had fallen silent.



Jim Allen, ‘Poetry for Chainsaws’, 1976, performed by Ruth Allen at 3 East Street, Auckland, 2022. Image courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett.

*Calm and tumult, organic and machine,
collide and collaborate to (mildly)
terrify and pacify in equal measure.*

THE OTHER PLAYER on the day was the freshly renovated former Methodist Mission Hall, which opened its doors in 1909 with a musical performance. Michael Lett has, in effect, “re-staged” this space as a communal art environment. He and his team must be congratulated for this vital new addition to the wider art scene. Infrastructure of this sort will have far reaching impact.

But this day belonged to Jim Allen. He introduced the performance with a dedication to firefighters in Australia and Aotearoa, sheeting home the interrelationship of his practice to wider job of contemporary art—to be grounded in the here and now: bush fires, global climate disruption, and environmental degradation. Legacies all of the privileging of capitalism over community discourse. The enduring nature of this performance work is that it affords a portal to all of these ideas, many of which, given the tenor of the times, are dystopian in tone. However, this moment, for this viewer, was freighted with an intimacy with roots that lay in family connections. To witness a daughter performing her father’s mahi, in a grand old Edwardian interior whose intent was to provide care for our youngest and most vulnerable, was all the poetry I needed.

Hamish Coney is an Auckland-based writer and arts advisor. He has a particular interest in the intersection of cross-cultural thinking in the arts, with a view towards placing Māori art concepts and production at the centre of the broader discourse within New Zealand art history. He has a BA in Art History from the University of Auckland and has built a deep working knowledge of New Zealand art as the founding managing director of the auction house Art + Object (2007–2018). He writes a regular arts column for newsroom.co.nz and is a trustee of Artspace Aotearoa.

The following is a condensed and extracted version of the essay which first appeared in the catalogue for *Intervention: post object and performance art in New Zealand in 1970 and beyond*. The full text can be accessed [here](#).

Jim Allen: From Elam to the Experimental Art Foundation

Blair French

1. Our appreciation of the world is active, not passive, and art displays an emergent apprehension.
2. Art is only incidentally and not essentially aesthetic. Art is concerned with every kind of value and not particularly with beauty.
3. Art interrogates the status quo: it is essentially, and not incidentally, radical.
4. Art is experimental action: it models possible forms of life and makes them available to public criticism.

(Statement displayed in foyer of Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, 1970)¹

JIM ALLEN LEFT New Zealand for Australia in 1976 to take up a residency at the Experimental Art Foundation (EAF) in Adelaide. Here, free of the burdens of administrative and teaching duties associated with his position as Associate Professor and Head of Sculpture at Elam School of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland 1968 Allen produced a number of performance and installation works — 'Newspaper Piece', 'Poetry for Chainsaws (or Chainsaws)', 'The Elastic-Sided Boot', 'On Planting a Native', 'There are Always Elephants to be Made Drunk' (also presented at the 1976 Biennale of Sydney), and 'Sending/Receiving' — outside the general consciousness of New Zealand's burgeoning contemporary art scene. Furthermore, Allen never returned to teaching at Elam. In 1977 he took up the position of founding head of Sydney College of the Arts. Allen's influence as an art educator runs deep in both locations. It is only in New Zealand, however, that his own earlier work and his example as an artist figure is inscribed in the folklore of contemporary art and written with increasing precision into its history, for during his tenure at Sydney College (1977–87) Allen by his own admission made no work.² These EAF works are therefore little acknowledged in the recent art histories of either Australia or New Zealand.

By working towards these works I hope not only to address this neglect in some small way, but to suggest also the manner in which Allen's work operated within, even exemplified a certain dynamic, multi-lateral movement or exchange between New Zealand and Australian contexts. We might treat this movement in conceptual, material, bodily and metaphorical terms as a form of productive intellectual and cultural energy—a sideways exchange between two sites traditionally figured in

¹ Noel Sheridan (ed), *The Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, South Australia* (Adelaide: EAF Press, 1979). Cited in Anne Marsh, *Body and Self: Performance Art in Australia 1969–1992* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1993) 62.

² Letter to Author, May 2000.

colonial, provincial, or antipodean frames and yet quite peculiarly foreign to each other in many ways. In rehearsing some observations regarding the intellectual framework and imperatives underpinning the establishment of the EAF and driving its program, then casting these against particular conditions of the Auckland or New Zealand scene as characterised by Allen himself we might begin to conceive of that space (conceptual and social) of transition or exchange within which Allen's 1976 work developed. Although some basic comparative analysis is useful, and certain impelling agents of difference must be acknowledged, it is most appropriate and productive to think of how Allen's 1976 work simultaneously acted as both departure from and extension of aspects of his earlier work, of how it both problematised and attempted resolution of certain concerns that trace back at least as far as his 1969 exhibition *Small Worlds*.



Jim Allen, 'Contact', 1974, performed at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, 2010. Image courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett.

From Elam...

THE LATE '60s and early '70s saw a radical opening up and proliferation of modes of art investigation and practice in New Zealand, and particularly at this moment in Auckland. Allen recalls first instances of work by Elam sculpture students during the latter part of the '60s beginning to respond to increasingly open forms of inter-disciplinary teaching and manifest a growing interest in

propositional forms of environmental and spatial engagement and site-specificity.³ Things accelerated following Allen's return from his sabbatical sojourn in Europe, the UK, and USA during 1968, both in terms of Allen's own activity and the critical and creative energy abounding in the Elam sculpture department. A full history of the determining conditions, drives, impulses, relationships, and trajectories feeding into the plethora of work emerging from Elam during this early-'70s period is an undertaking too large and complex to undertake here, but one which needs tackling at some point if for no other reason than to discriminate myth from actuality and so ascribe agency and responsibility where it's truly due amongst some quite remarkable young artists of the time. For the time being, whilst acknowledging the undoubted importance of Allen to the early development to certain specific artists, there are three apparently simple but key quantifiable inputs we should particularly note, in part for their relation to the type of environment or context later fostered at the EAF.

First, the development of a contemporary art library at Elam that not only ensured student access to the latest in international practices but encouraged an intellectual, investigatory approach to art. Second, the visiting artist program initiated by Allen that brought people such as Steve Furlonger, Adrian Hall, Kieran Lyons, John Panting, and Ti Parks to Elam. Third, the instigation of critical response and discussion sessions between staff and students. These sessions were based in part upon similar interview sessions Allen had witnessed at British art schools in 1968, and both fostered and in turn demanded a culture of intellectual rigor, integrity, and trust. Interestingly, this in fact quite structured discourse model not only carried over to situations outside educational contexts (indicating a general emphasis upon critical reflection and discursivity built into the very motive force of much work) but resulted in a number of important published texts such as the discussion regarding Bruce Barber's 'Bucket Action' (1973) and the two discussions on Allen's *O-AR* exhibitions (1975).⁴ In a sense group discussion provided an early model for contemporary art writing in New Zealand.

This furthermore indicates, of course, how Elam was not the only important site of activity in Auckland at this time. The Barry Lett Galleries provided a crucial location for the public presentation of work, hosting important exhibitions by Allen, and Adrian Hall amongst others. The Auckland City Art Gallery hosted the *Four Men in a Boat* projects by Allen, Bruce Barber, Philip Dadson, and Kieran Lyons for the 1974 Auckland Festival, before John Maynard instigated the first set of solo-artist contemporary Project Programme exhibitions there in 1975. And of course numerous activities took place in various public sites around the city and its environs. It's important to note here, however, that

³ Letter to Author, July 1999.

⁴ The former published in Jim Allen and Wytan Curnow (eds), *New Art: Some Recent New Zealand Sculpture and Post-Object Art* (Auckland: Heinemann Educational, 1976) the latter as *O-AR: Jim Allen-Recent Work* (Transcript of gallery discussions, 1975).

none of these sites— commercial, institutional, public— were configured in primarily ideological terms, nor were they successful in fostering much of a public consciousness of this work.



Installation view. Jim Allen, 'O-AR II', black and clear agricultural plastic, recreated for *Groundswell: Avant-Garde Auckland 1971-79*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, 2018. Image courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett.

ALLEN HIMSELF proposed some key characteristic or conditions of the Auckland 'scene' both immediately prior and subsequent to his departure.⁵ He claimed that works the equal of any international model were being produced. However, whilst New Zealand artists had a detailed knowledge of overseas practices, they had little actual contact or direct dialogue with a contemporary international art scene. Allen conveyed the impression of a hothouse atmosphere, but one characterised by a fundamental sense of detachment. In an audio recording he made with the EAF and Radio SUV in Adelaide he spoke about the necessarily alternating roles played by all participants—at one moment the artist or performer, at next the supporting collaborator, the audience, the critic or discussant. The limitations of such a small, compressed community were felt in the manner that periods of extremely close dialogue were inexorably followed by participants spinning off into disparate orbits in search of fresh creative space. What is clear in both this tape recording and the interview with Pauline Barber that preceded it is Allen's increasing awareness of the unsustainability of such an impermeable set of conversations occurring within isolated pockets or groups.

⁵ In Pauline Barber, 'The Splinterview 4: Jim Allen', *Spleen 4* (1976), and Jim Allen, 'Experimental Art in New Zealand' (audio recording of radio programme) (Adelaide: Radio SW, 1976) respectively.

Whilst all this activity of the early '70s was obviously taking place within broader contexts of social and political activism, and particular works were driven by political imperatives (or as applied more acutely to Allen's work were interventionist, challenging, or disruptive in form and action rather than content) there appears to have been little sense of an over-arching ideological project being pursued. In fact, one source of the energy of the time appears to have been a sense of inventive possibility of making 'art' itself anew in each work or action (which itself, of course, does bear political implications). And in this in fact we can perceive an individualism underpinning this more apparent sense of communality or collective action. With the work of Philip Dadson (including *Scratch Orchestra* and *From Scratch*) the notable exception, the collective action or activities of the period don't necessarily correlate to a collective ethos or manifesto—an important point given the appearance of collectivity engendered in retrospection by New Art.

What I'm trying to convey here, however loosely, is a sense of the context in which Allen's New Zealand work was undertaken—the tensions in that context between a small community and the energies such intellectual and creative relationships gave rise to, alongside otherwise disparate, quite individual sets of concerns and impulses around which various critical or theoretical interests clustered. The stress here should be that critical issues or trajectories very much emanated from rather than led work.



Jim Allen, 'Poetry for Chainsaws', 1976, performed at the Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide. Image courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett.

In fact, one source of the energy of the time appears to have been a sense of inventive possibility of making 'art' itself anew in each work or action.

...to the EAF

IT WOULD BE deceptive to simply claim the inverse to the above as conditions in Australia at this time, however it is clear that there were more specifically determined organisational frames and networks which provided support as well an ideological impetus to post-object practices. And the EAF was one of the most important.

Formed by artists and academics in Adelaide in 1974 with Australia Council support, the EAF provided, in Anne Marsh's words, "a venue and a critical forum within which experimental art could develop", and for founding board member and influential art theorist Donald Brook in particular, "a kind of theoretical laboratory where he could test out his theory of experimental art."⁶ Founding director Noel Sheridan brought with him a library of documentation of American and European conceptual and performance work, and under his stewardship the EAF was committed to national and international networking and exchange, including acting as host to the work of a number of important visiting artists and theorists.⁷ It's easy to see the appeal of this situation to Allen—the opportunity for new conditions of dialogue within just the form of supportive and internationally engaged context for experimental practice that he had been seeking to establish at Elam. Whilst Adelaide like Auckland contained a very small contemporary or experimental art scene, it was a focal point within far larger Australian and international networks, and furthermore in the form of the EAF had become a site insisting upon the overt intersection of artistic and polemical activity. Crucially, Allen was resident at the EAF during a particularly active moment in its history: performances, screenings, and presentations such as an important lecture by Donald Brook on post-object art took place on an almost weekly basis, whilst a major exhibition, *Australian and New Zealand Post Object Art: A Survey* was put on during May.⁸

⁶ Marsh, *Body and Self*, 53.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Marsh, *Body and Self*, 58-59.

MARSH'S DISCUSSION OF performance art at the EAF during the '70s is useful for imparting a sense of the dynamic creative and intellectual environment Allen was entering in 1976. It also infers something of its compatibility to his own general concerns as well as the manners in which his new work may have set out to negotiate it. Marsh rehearses a discrimination between three modes of performance⁹—body art, ritual performance, and conceptual performance—whilst clearly marking the indeterminacy of these modes. As she notes, Brook was most interested in conceptual art modes, in art “more inclined to explore intellectual systems than sensory experience,”¹⁰ but in his own writing on early performance work by Imants Tillers recognised the crucial meeting of intelligence and imagination that activated the propositional nature of much performance (and certainly that of Allen).¹¹ Allen's work, as we shall see, traverses these categorisations (although they remain useful tools for its exegesis). Allen's 'Contact' (1974), for example, which did pursue concentrated bodily and psychic states (body art), was fundamentally located at a nexus of experiential and intellectual investigation—at the productive intersections of sensory experience and formalised, repeated action structures or patterns. In Allen's performance work the intuitive, pragmatic and intellectual always met in discursive play.

Also of interest is the manner in which Marsh points to a key issue of intellectual conflict fermenting at the EAF: the meeting of Brook's determination for an art of and interventionist within the social—an art of social ethics—and Sheridan's equally determined separation of art from social or political responsibility. There's an oscillation between these poles within Allen's work itself, right from the beginning, with the social coming strongly to the fore in Adelaide works such as 'On Planting a Native' and 'There are Always Elephants to be Made Drunk', particularly when compared to his most recent New Zealand works, the *O-AR* exhibitions of 1975. However, as we shall see, all Allen's work was in part based on responses to immediate social situations. The EAF work illuminates this to some degree, but any clear reading of an art of social politics within Allen's work is also complicated by 'On Planting a Native' which actually disrupted the masquerade-as-progressive of a politically comfortable response to a contentious issue of the day.

⁹ Ibid, 55.

¹⁰ Ibid, 56.

¹¹ Ibid, 55.

*In Allen's performance work the intuitive, pragmatic
and intellectual always met in discursive play.*

IN CONTRAST TO 'Contact', most of these works produced by Allen at the EAF were of apparently modest scale or undertaking; involved looser, more porous frameworks; and perhaps most significantly were characterised by a focus upon the performative figure of the artist new to Allen's work. This location of himself within the work may in part have been motivated by very practical reasons of what was logistically (financially) possible within the framework of his EAF residency, but what emerged across the works was an apparent impulse towards an exploration on the part of Allen of his own embodied experience of the fundamentally phenomenological situations he set up as the limit conditions of these works.

'Newspaper Piece' was undertaken in April on the same evening as 'Poetry for Chainsaws' as well as performances by Leigh Hobba and Richard Tipping. Allen sat reading a page of a newspaper. When finished he crumpled it tightly into a ball and discarded it. He then retrieved it, read it again, crumpled and discarded it over again, repeating the process until the page became illegible pulp. In 'Poetry for Chainsaws' Allen read Allen Ginsberg's poem 'Howl' against the sound of three chainsaws that he had set running on the floor around him. The piece was prepared so that each chainsaw had exactly enough petrol to operate continuously throughout the reading, but to splutter and fall silent just at the point Allen finished reading the poem. The floor of the EAF was concrete, so not only did this compound the sound of the chainsaws it also meant that they tended to shudder and jolt about dangerously around Allen's feet. A third similar work, 'Sending/Receiving', was performed in October also alongside works by Hobba and Tipping. Here Allen had performers call out extracts from literary works *The Third Policeman*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, and *Tunc*. Audience members receiving the information called it back to the best of their ability. All three works explicitly addressed themselves at or inserted themselves within problems of communication—gaps in intention and meaning between 'sending' and 'receiving' positions in any singular or set of communicative act(s). Each engaged limit conditions for communication and proposed pressure points where it broke-down irrevocably.

For 'The Elastic-Sided Boot', his major contribution to the EAF post-object art survey exhibition, Allen issued an 'invitation' in advance to people wishing to "sound off... make sounds". Participants were asked to selected sound-making objects and leave them in a designated area of the

EAF exhibition space several days prior to the performance “thereby identifying themselves with the piece.”¹² The actual performance took the form of four 15-minute components where participants sat in an area marked off by Allen attempting to communicate with each other solely via their ‘sound’ objects. These were interspersed with ‘rest’ periods in which participants could stand, stretch, walk about and introduce themselves to each other.



Jim Allen, 'Poetry for Chainsaws', 1976, performed at the Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide. Image courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett.

The area designated by Allen for this piece was ‘roped’-off by a strip of 35mm film wrapped around four pillars. The film contained images Allen had taken one day in Adelaide when he happened to be passing by an intersection just as a shooting was taking place down its cross street. A man was apparently trying to hold up a gun shop but was shot by police. It was later treated as suicide. He didn’t present these as exhibition ‘images’ but rather as the physical ‘barrier’ delineating the space or environment of the work in socially discursive as well as physical terms. In addition he projected on one wall a Super 8 film of a small model he had constructed from Lego components, complete with soundtrack of radio news broadcasts regarding violent acts and disasters. All the debris from that initial performance was subsequently left strewn about in the designated space of the piece for the duration of the exhibition, as trace or material mnemonic of the night’s gathering.

¹² ‘The Elastic-Sided Boot’, artist invitation

Like 'Contact', 'The Elastic-Sided Boot' was an attempted critique of the manners in which people are subjected to stress (the social alienation of a modern, mechanistic society) and the means by which they may attempt to relieve this (on one hand via acts of random violence, on the other by means such as those enacted in the performance element of the piece—seeking and being sensitive or responsive to forms of communication and commonality other than those binding the alienating structures of daily life). In this work, however, the processes of interaction and potential outcomes were far less directed by Allen. It was not unlike the type of exercise Allen and colleagues set students at Elam where certain parameters of action were given and general sphere of activity to occur within those parameters indicated, but both motivation and shape of action (and therefore outcome) left up to the participants to develop in the very process of making, acting, and engaging with each other.

*All three works explicitly addressed themselves at
or inserted themselves within problems of communication—
gaps in intention and meaning between 'sending' and 'receiving'
positions in any singular or set of communicative act(s).*

THE LARGE TEXT work, 'There are Always Elephants to be Made Drunk', installed at the EAF in September and subsequently at the 1976 Biennale of Sydney, utilised press material from this same Adelaide shooting along with text (particularly conversational) fragments sourced in a magazine article dealing with the network of relationships that exist within a single family, especially that between a father and teenage daughter. Allen attempted to map or grid these relationships out in a diagrammatic form, replacing names with numbers, so creating a piece that had the appearance of a mathematical, scientific or perhaps technical calculation. Similar to 'O-AR I' of the previous year in its utilisation of textual fragments in need of cognitive reconstitution on the part of the viewer, this was a difficult piece to apprehend. It set out to test discursive functions and parameters of language acts in both direct, one-to-one vectors and more complex cultural networks. As Allen said of 'O-AR I', it sought "to create a gap between the definitive statement and the residue of meaning."¹³ Here issues of communication difficulties and information contamination were dealt with in a very different manner from Allen's performance work. Nevertheless, a similar idea of frissure between transmitted and

¹³ *O-AR: Jim Allen-Recent Work.*

received utterances and thus dislocations (by and from the social) of cognitive functioning and ultimately meaning were made apparent via Allen's systematic pressuring of information structures.

'On Planting a Native' was undertaken in response to the removal by the Art Gallery of South Australia of a work by Tony Coleing—an installation of black gnomes—from their front garden/forecourt area, and the subsequent furore regarding both work and its removal.

According to Allen, Coleing had consulted local Aboriginal people prior to installing the work, however an Aboriginal writer visiting from Queensland had publicly objected to the piece whereby it became a major issue in the local press leading finally to its removal.¹⁴ In response, Allen obtained a small gum tree that he set up in a large box in the EAF. For the performance he, in "the role of someone to care and nurture,"¹⁵ systematically attacked the tree with a knife, chainsaw, pruning shears, small axe and oxy-acetylene torch, burning and taking it apart piece by piece (including at the end smashing the tub to remove the roots and pruning them).

Once the tree was completely taken apart he reconstituted it by taping its components to the wall in a perfectly regular, geometric fashion (vertical trunk, horizontal branches, leaves fanning off the end of the branches in precise patterns). Thus, to use Allen's own deliberately ironic phrasings, the "poor neglected, unloved, native" was "reconstituted in its best interests"¹⁶ in a (blindly violent) act of cultural ordering and regulating—an act of representation. Throughout the performance Allen spoke to the audience via a megaphone strapped to his chest describing and reflecting upon his actions. 'On Planting a Native' posed a generatively ambiguous relationship to its source. On one hand it assumed an ambivalent distance from the act of removing Coleing's work from public display (and the strange mix of interests operating in support of that action ranging from sectors of an indigenous community through to a conservative 'talkback radio' local constituency refusing to see the work as 'art' through to the host institution itself); and on the other re—staged an act of desecration which could itself have been both (and at once) any act of public representation of the European genera 'native' (irrespective of political intent) and the denial or evasion manifested in its censorship.

¹⁴ Interview with Author, July 1999.

¹⁵ 'On Planting a Native', artist invitation (1976).

¹⁶ Ibid.



Jim Allen, 'On Planting a Native', 1976, performed at Michael Lett, 2014. Image courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett.

'ON PLANTING A NATIVE' was clearly Allen's most culturally interventionist work to this date. Indeed the social as subject emerged in Allen's EAF work in new, more direct, more content-driven manners than previously, and did so coupled with a stronger, more overt communicative imperative. In performance works such as 'Newspaper Piece', 'On Planting a Native', 'Poetry for Chainsaws', and 'Sending/Receiving' there was an apparent impulse propulsion outside the body (and indeed consciousness) of the artist/performer. Allen, for example, read or spoke at the audience subjecting their perception to the potentially unstable effects of multiple readings of the same texts, or the discords and discrepancies between word and action (between the act of attacking the tree and its accompanying commentary; between the intent of Ginsberg's emotive, polemical, textual rant against contemporary society and its dispersal amongst a cacophony of machine-age noise). But in doing so he also tested or challenged audience tolerance for this communicative act. So whilst in 'Poetry for Chainsaws' the act of reading (shouting) must necessarily have constituted an act of both physical aggression and cathartic release on the part of the artist, but also for the audience one of jarring, visceral assault upon both sensory and cognitive faculties. Conversely, in 'On Planting a Native' the body of the artist stood in metonymic relation to the body of culture enacting acts of violence (now via order, regulation, and rationality) upon the body of an other—the 'native'.

To conclude then, these EAF works resolve, problematise and extend aspects of Allen's earlier practice inasmuch as each relation is in part synonymous with the other, and necessarily incomplete. If we were to attempt some more concrete summation, it might be to claim that these later works foreground, or expose, the very fundamental trajectories, the tensile structures of Allen's practice: the

striving at (and through) the conditions for and instances of communication diffusion, the points at which the clarity of the test-pattern breaks down into static and the vectors along which communication may be re-tuned; the search for the most cogent means of direct, interventionist response to social and material environments; the figuring of pragmatic action, sensory experience, and intellectual reflection within shared frames; and the generative tension between pre-determination and wilful intent within the bounds of emotional and cultural convention.

There are developments of course, progressions of sorts and shifting concerns and conditions patterning Allen's practice. But I maintain that it's the often discordant migrations back and forth between specific works—between *New Zealand Environment #5*, *Arena*, and *On Planting a Native*; between *Contact* and *The Elastic-Sided Boot*; or *O-AR I* and *There are Always Elephants to be Made Drunk* to cite but a small few obvious examples—that most ignites their respective agency, and via which we might begin to apprehend something of the sustained complexity and intelligence of Allen's post-object work of the period 1969—1976.

Blair French is an arts leader, curator, and writer who has held curatorial and management roles at a range of key organisations: Australian Centre for Photography, Performance Space, Artspace (where he was Executive Director 2006-13) and most recently Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (Director, Curatorial and Digital). Blair has a PhD from University of Sydney and has taught in universities in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, as well as publishing extensively. He was also President of Contemporary Arts Organisations Australia, a formal nationwide network of contemporary art spaces, from 2006 until 2009. As a curator Blair has initiated and developed solo exhibitions and performances with a wide and diverse range of artists from Australia and around the world. He was curatorial convenor of the 6th (2010 – 2011) and curator of the 7th (2013) iterations of *SCAPE Public Art: Christchurch Biennial*, and one of the initiators and co-curators of the first edition of *The National: New Australian Art* presented at Art Gallery of New South Wales, Carriageworks and MCA in 2017.