

Issue 295 / Summer 2016/17

ART MONTHLY

AUSTRALASIA

AU\$14.95
NZ\$16.00
SG\$16.00



Summer bumper edition:
Blossoming teamLab; 5th Singapore Biennale
'Sovereignty' at ACCA; MPavilion/*Art Monthly* essay

artmonthly.org.au

Centre and periphery

Establishing Galerie Allen in Paris

Caroline Hancock, *Paris*



Lodged in a busy street near one of the main Parisian train stations, Gare du Nord, and the picturesque tourist hub of Montmartre, Galerie Allen was founded in 2013 by the Sydney-born, Paris-based artist Mel O'Callaghan and her graphic designer husband Clemens Habicht together with the formerly Sydney-based independent curator Joseph Allen Shea. They currently collaborate closely with ten artists ranging from emerging to mid-career artists (and including an artist estate), working in all types of media in a rich cross-disciplinary fashion with a conceptual backbone. Performance and video are prominent. Quickly they have built a city-wide reputation as a friendly and serious space committed to quality presentations.

Caroline Hancock (CH): How did Galerie Allen come about? How would you describe its specificities?

Mel O'Callaghan (MO): In the late 1990s I often worked in artist-run spaces with friends in Australia.¹ As an artist represented in commercial galleries, I felt I had insight into what could work well. There was nothing premeditated; our conversations came at the right time.

Joseph Allen Shea (JAS): I was running the self-initiated Gallery A.S. in Sydney, creating experimental projects in different spaces of site-specific interest. Occasionally there was a commercial element to sustain the practice.

MO: Joseph curated a 16mm film of mine into a Gallery A.S. show called 'Motion/Pictures' in 2011 at the then-unused former Paramount Pictures distribution offices in Sydney.

JAS: The genesis was Mel's invitation to curate a temporary exhibition in her Paris studio. I applied for a curatorial residency and in 2013 came to the Cité Internationale des Arts in Montmartre for a one-year residency which led to me wanting to live here. Finding solutions out of desires is a fitting metaphor for the gallery's beginnings.

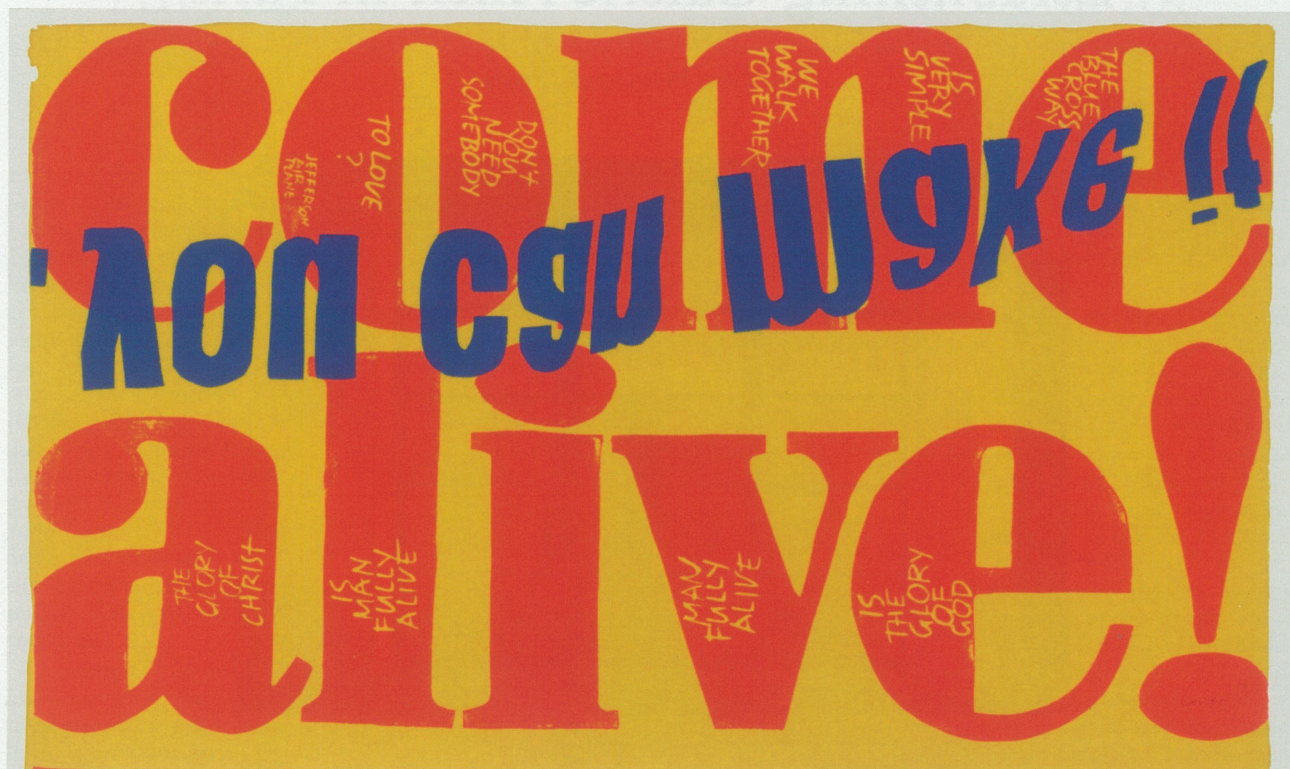
It is a really resourceful partnership; I can rely on Mel to inform our relationship with the artists. Often I am trying to be efficient and square, so an artist's input in the decision-making process is very important in how we structure our work. We seek to create sustainability for artists and exhibition-making – a framework through business, strong mutual beliefs and friendships.

MO: As an artist, what I look for in a gallery director is the sensibility to give me space, connections and curatorial accompaniment to make work in the best way possible. My involvement in Galerie Allen is not administrative or daily. My relation with the artists we work with is as an artist to an artist.

JAS: I believe we have something different to offer. My relations are not artist-to-dealer but, rather, artist-to-gallerist. We all need each other. People are drawn to the energy that goes into ambitious seemingly uncommercial work.

CH: How did you go about deciding which artists you would both like to work with?

MO: We are interested in the fact that each practice is totally unique, emerging from a profound dedication. The first artist we chose to work with was Maurice Blaussyld. He and I had



Corita Kent, *come alive*, 1967, silkscreen on board, 33 x 58.5cm; image courtesy Galerie Allen, Paris, and the Corita Art Center, Immaculate Heart Community, Los Angeles

been in an exhibition together at the Musée de Rochechouart in 2012,² and immediately had an amazing connection. Intuitively I loved his work and have progressively learnt about his back catalogue which is continuously expanding.

JAS: I found his work instantly compelling, even though some of it can seem quite distant and austere. I first went to Roubaix to meet him in October 2012. He made a massive commitment to work with this young gallery of *étrangers*. This was a defining moment for us. Now I speak better French and he is mastering English, so we speak a *melange*. Over time our friendship grew too. Appreciating an artist's work and the person is essential to how we have built the identity of the gallery. His exhibition 'Not say nor hide' was our first show, in September 2013.

CH: What is coming up for you all in the near future?

JAS: We are thrilled that all the artists we work with are showing outside the gallery in very interesting contexts in the coming months in museums, festivals and biennales around the world: Linus Bill + Adrien Horni from Switzerland currently have an exhibition [until 30 December] at La Passerelle in Brest. Mel has a solo exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo in February 2017. Angelica Mesiti is making new work in Aarhus within the

European Capital of Culture 2017 program and will be in a show at the Institute of Islamic Culture in Paris. The American artist Colin Snapp just closed a very impressive show with us and is continuing with screenings and exhibitions in Berlin where he currently lives and works. Maurice Blaussyld is participating in the Biennale de Rennes [until 11 December]. Maxime Rossi has a solo exhibition at MRAC, Sérignan in 2017. Boris Achour will show new work at the Museo El Eco in Mexico City supported by the Ricard Foundation [9 December until 26 February 2017]. We continue to participate in art fairs like FIAC in Paris and ARCO in Madrid.

MO: The other great news is that Corita Kent's work has been acquired by the Centre Pompidou and is on display in a politically themed collection exhibition. We are also working on a solo presentation of her work at BLITZ, a beautiful contemporary art centre in Malta. We are very fortunate that the Corita Art Center in Los Angeles agreed to trust us.

JAS: Ray Smith is the Director of the Center which is in the same Catholic organisation, the Immaculate Heart Community, where Sister Corita [1918–1986] worked during the 1960s. I had included her work in a group show, '1.85 Million: Art Peripher-



Angelica Mesiti, *An Ocean of Air*, exhibition view, Galerie Allen, Paris, 24 September – 14 November 2015; image courtesy the artist and Galerie Allen, Paris; photo: Aurélien Mole

ies', at Campbelltown Arts Centre in Sydney in 2011. She taught art to the nuns at the college and, as a peaceful activist and artist, ceaselessly pushed boundaries and progressive ideas on spiritual matters which were usually on the periphery of the art world. Her early serigraphs tended to be inspired by the Bible. One famous statement of hers, which I love is: 'Never to allow yourself to blink because one might miss something extremely valuable.'

MO: Her work engenders huge compassion and empathy. She was an incredibly inspiring educator with a big commitment to social justice; there is so much to learn from her.

CA: Every gallery exhibition is accompanied by an A3 poster/invitation with a text. Can you elaborate on this part of your activity?

MO: We understand that design is a vehicle to communicate content, and spend a lot of time with the artists getting it right. For the moment, we can't publish books so this is a very enjoyable collaborative process. It is now becoming quite a meaningful little collection.

JAS: Being generous has been key to our thinking since the beginning. We hope the experience of visiting the gallery is engaging and inclusive. Mel hosts dinners in her home just behind

the gallery for each vernissage. These social interactions are very rewarding, and tend to help the artists build relationships with collectors and curators. It also means we can show some artworks in a domestic environment.

CH: What of your relationship with Australia?

JAS: We are interested in the importance of culture in our home country and hope to be able to contribute in new ways. We don't want to exoticise Australian art or make it a novelty here; we like to mix it all together.³ We are dedicated to the arts in the world.

1. These included Rubyayre and Side On in Sydney.
2. 'Livret IV' was curated by Irmavep, a collective of artists and curators active between 2004 and 2012.
3. Galerie Allen has presented four solo shows with Australian artists – Hany Armanious, Angelica Mesiti, Mel O'Callaghan and Ben Quilty – and has included Misha Hollenbach in a group show.

Galerie Allen is located at 59 rue de Dunkerque, 75009 Paris. For more details, see www.galerieallen.com/.