

# Sightlines

The exhibition, Sightlines, sees our team position artworks in small, conversational groupings. When not installed at A4, these reside in our archive – a research environment for curators, arts workers, and practitioners who may wish to revisit past work. Sightlines shares viewpoints from this archive with visitors. What stories might these artworks tell when standing together?

In preparation for this project, we printed a deck of cards, with each card representing a work. Multiple discrete objects, given this uniform 'frame', were played alongside one another. With everything pictured together, connections became visible, uninhibited by geographical distance or pre-conceived hierarchies. This is a 'Sightline' – a passage to thought that emerges across the chatter of like and unlike things brought together. Sets of artworks constellate along an axis and come into focus.

Unpacking the archive presents an array. Our approach has been to edit and refine curious lines of sight, installing select artworks in the gallery with cards remaining as stand-ins for others. With a publication of these sightlines in mind, we invite arts writers and curators to tend to this choreography towards a written engagement with these works.

What you encounter during your visit are distilled arrangements reflecting our team's current preoccupations. These will change during the course of the exhibition.\* To accommodate this movement, this wayfinder would need to accrue additions. What you are reading is a start – the places and positions from which we begin.

\* We hope to make adaptations to this wayfinder beyond the first edition of this publication. Where you come across a work in the exhibition that you can't find here, visit [www.a4arts.org](http://www.a4arts.org) to see how Sightlines develops.



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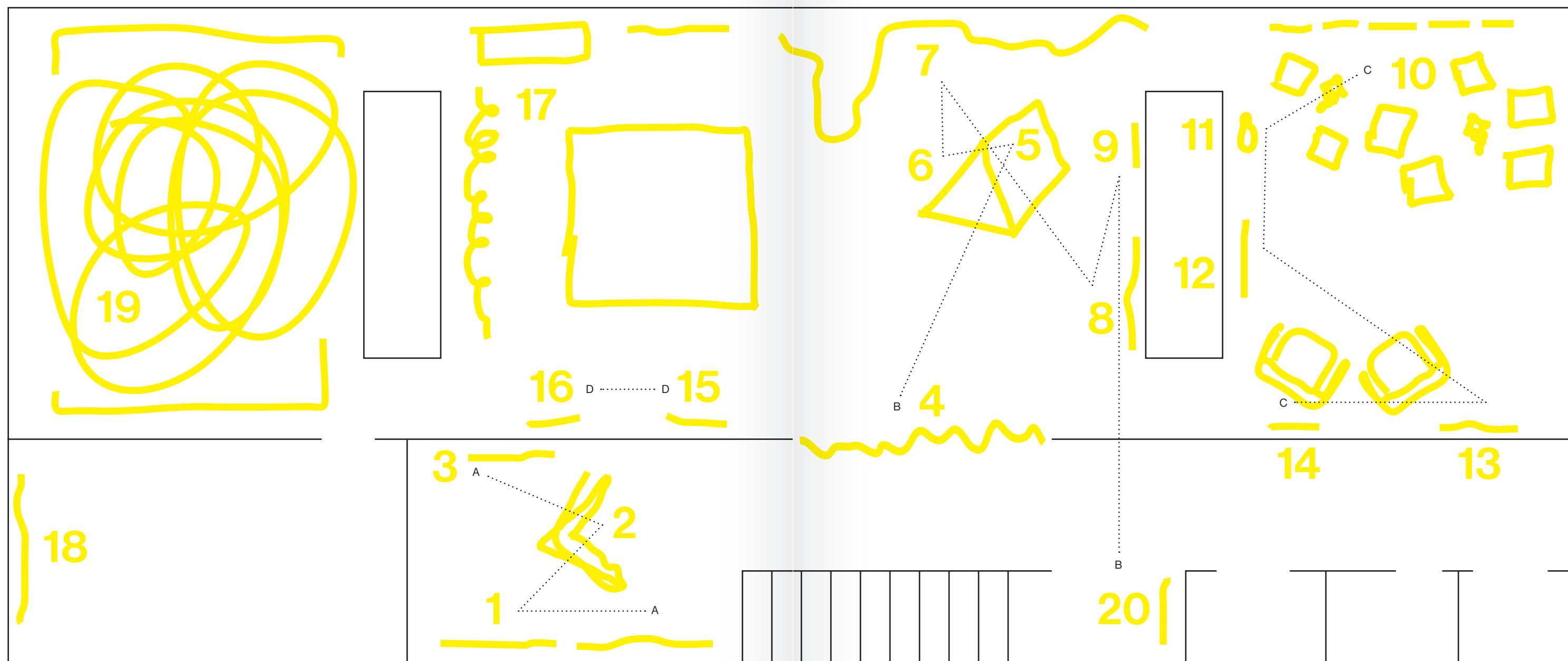
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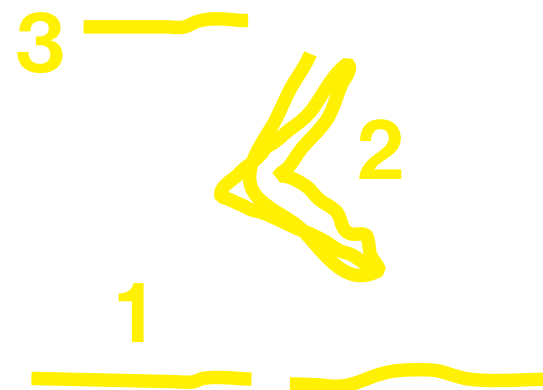
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## Sightline A: History will break your heart\*



Begin with a backward glance. History addresses itself variously to the artist as artefact, material, subject, and story. In this first Sightline, three artworks offer three views into the past. In one, a found object is hung alongside a memory transcribed in chalk on blackboard. In another, a monument of conflicting resonance (safe harbour, war) stands as a fabricated fragment. In the last, a family photograph, reproduced at scale, magnifies both the individuals it describes and the damage that threatens to eclipse them.

How to picture the past? How to return to it a vivid immediacy, to lift the opacity of distance that has dulled its image? The texture of time lost is particular to its traces: a recollection worn smooth by its retelling, a genealogy pockmarked by the missing, a story of origin weathered rough. Refigured as a medium, the past lends itself to both descriptive and speculative engagements, to factual retellings of what was and fictitious imaginings of what could have been otherwise. Such historical revisitations and reenactments as these might be differently conceived of as a restorative gesture, critical reappraisal, or “protest against forgetting.” They might be quietly revealing of personal stories or urgently provocative in the accounts they convey.

All three works gathered here extend from the biographical outwards, coming to rub up against the stuff of History – obliquely, evidently. Folded into their retrospective reflections are stories of individual and collective dispossession, ambitions deferred or flatly denied. So often recited as a series of triumphs, perhaps the past more properly belongs to the province of tragedy.

Included in this Sightline is Kemang Wa Lehulere’s *Does this mirror have a memory 2* (2015), a found print by the late artist Gladys Mgudlandlu paired with a remembered impression drawn in conversation with the artist’s aunt, Sophia Lehulere; Danh Võ’s *We the People* (2011–2014), a 1:1 scale excerpt from the Statue of Liberty that returns abstraction to an abstract noun, and betrays the material lightness of the statue’s indelible form; and Dor Guez’s *Samira* (2020), a photograph of his grandmother on her wedding day in occupied Lydda in 1948, which extends reflections on indivisible histories, their proximities and palimpsests.

\* A phrase borrowed from the title of Kemang Wa Lehulere’s 2015 exhibition, which debuted at the National Arts Festival in Makhanda. Two of Wa Lehulere’s works, *Does this mirror have a memory 2* (2015) and *Cosmic Interluded Orbit* (2016), are included in Sightlines.









Weiwei, Ai

1679



Coca Cola Vase, 2014

Han Dynasty vase (206-220 AD),  
paint  
37 x 45 x 28 cm

REFERENCE COPY



## Sightline B: In its place

One building performs as the central protagonist in each of these works.

In 1965, David Goldblatt photographed *The Corner House, Joburg's first skyscraper, headquarters of Rand Mines, on Simmonds, corner of Commissioner*. Reading the title in full lends the building hubris, and some irony. Commissioned by mining magnate Hermann Eckstein Jr (who retained the humble 'House' in the name with a nod to previous, more modest dwellings that had occupied the site), the building imported the recently developed steel armature supporting the flourishing construction of skyscrapers across New York City. In 1903, The Corner House was the tallest building in Johannesburg, adorned with marble floors, fire-resistant vaults for gold bars, a copper-covered dome, and African teak interiors. The year before Goldblatt photographed it, it had become Barclay's Bank, perhaps no longer sufficiently imposing for Johannesburg mining's enormous ambitions – development of a bigger 'Corner House' was completed at a nearby intersection on the same Commissioner Street. Goldblatt's persistent quoting of Johannesburg's structures in his images excavates the dominant philosophies (political, social, and environmental) that underpinned that city's construction of wealth and power.

Ten years after the Corner House opened (1903), Johannesburg Art Gallery's foundation stone was laid (1913). In Sightlines, the two buildings are brought together. William Kentridge draws JAG in charcoal and ink for his film-work *City Deep* (2018). The domed ceilings appear intact, the room fulfils the obligations of a museum (there are things on the wall, at the very least, and cabinets for safe holding and display). Why, then, this aura of misgiving? The shelves are empty, the storage units oddly stashed, while mining magnate Soho Eckstein insouciantly leans with both hands pressed against the vitrine. *City Deep* will show images of zama zama miners digging a pittance from the abandoned shafts beneath Johannesburg while JAG deteriorates and stumbles. The attendant sinkholes, dangers and entrapments of Johannesburg's mining history provoke this informal economy – a desperate means of scraping a living while the city's infrastructures collapse and fall away. It has been reported in the Daily Maverick newspaper as recently as November 2024 that JAG has extensive water damage, an 'imperilled' art collection, and is at risk of crumbling into ruin.

When Patrick Waterhouse and Mikhael Subotzky began their epic portrait of Ponte City in 2008, the landmark (built in 1975) was possessed of a storied infamy, a place to point to as proof that Johannesburg was a violent and unmanageable city. Photographing the apartment block over six years, the artists' long-term engagement with Ponte City complicates these disparaging narratives. In place of hyperbole, many of the images within

the project capture the daily intimacies of residents' communities. In this photograph, a child in a bright-orange dress stands on tippy toes, as if preparing to grow, to fly. Her tallest and brightest self illuminates the frame as an age-mate sweeps the already spotless room.

Gian Maria Tosatti's portrait of life within the convent di Santa Maria della Fede, *5\_ I fondamenti della luce - archeologia (intonaco 7)*, performs the same techniques utilised by conservators to preserve frescoes of cultural significance, upon the walls of that ancient building. Since the 15th century, Santa Maria della Fede has been a rigid convent administered by nuns for sex workers, abandoned, and unmarried women; a safe-house during war; a refuge after earthquake; a corporate-owned building with links to Naples' underworld; standing empty, falling into ruin, and used for illicit activities. Tosatti's city-wide project throughout Naples, *Sette Stagioni dello Spirito (Seven Seasons of the Spirit)*, revived the building. For the exhibition *The Future Is Behind Us* at A4, December 2022–April 2023, Tosatti was asked about *5\_ I fondamenti della luce - archeologia (intonaco 7)*.

"When I started *Seven Seasons of the Spirit* in Naples, 200 churches stood abandoned and closed in the centre. There was, at the same time, a sense of monumentality, and a sense of abandon. I was demonstrating, through culture and private funding, that art can fundamentally restore back to the public their institutions. As an artist, I was giving to the state. I want to treat the lives of the people who have lived in these rooms, to give to their lived experience, the dignity that is given to the frescoes of Giotto. Just leaving the trace of one's passages is a masterpiece. I consider this work one of my most political works, for just living is a miracle of beauty."

Igshaan Adams lends similar reverence to the ordinariness of living, tracing the wear and tear that develops on the vinyl floors in the homes of his childhood neighbours and community. These document pathways of everyday rituals – the tread from the front door to the backdoor, through the living room, around an armchair, the impression made from sitting and watching one's community beyond an open front door. Priscilla lived at 11B Larch Weg. She took care of Adams' elderly grandparents. In place of negative space, an extravagant patina in beads, glass, and seashells.

*Le Marché Oriental* is a social and spiritual record of a place that is gone. In 2008, on the fourth day of Ramadan, James Webb invited Sheikh Mogamat Moerat of the Zeenatul Islam Masjid mosque next door to the already abandoned Oriental Plaza in District Six to sing the adhan (call to prayer.) The building was demolished soon after. Similar plazas, all bearing the same moniker, were built in cities across racially segregated South Africa

under apartheid. Grouped as 'oriental', these plazas centralised control over Islamic traders. At this Cape Town location, many of the shopkeepers retained links to District Six, which was systematically razed, beginning in 1968 and continuing throughout the 1970s. While it stood, the plaza indelicately connected people and services, performing as a synthetic substitution for the social fabrics of communities rent apart by forced removals. The call to prayer witnesses its close.

A4 commissioned a beaded work from Igshaan Adams to coincide with the opening of our foundation's premises in 2017. We have found ourselves calling on *Al asma ul Husna*, named by the artist to recall the 99 names of Allah, on many occasions since. Hung like a curtain, it lives in our Reading Room. From time to time, we carry it into our exhibitions where the work becomes a device to mark a transition. A threshold between one state and another, its fall of beads and string provides a soft boundary, a note – *now, you are here*. In *Customs*, curated by Sumayya Vally and Josh Ginsburg, 2 July–8 October 2022, *Al asma ul Husna* enclosed a selection of books and reading material to do with maintenance, ritual, use, and tradition.

It would be insincere to pull one work as representative of the organisation. A4 does not own a collection of artworks. Rather, we write a series of stories – about artworks that may have been included in an exhibition, stored in A4's archive for a time, on loan from an artist, gallery, or private collection – and share these writings with the public. A selection of artworks reside in the on-site archive but the majority persist as digital artefacts – an image, together with the text that is written for them. ('Story' is a form of soft provenance where artworks accumulate meaning from being shared and considered). *Al asma ul Husna* is singular in that it is purpose-made for A4. Tending to it, we see our story.











## Sightline C: No ordinary school

“Rorke’s Drift was no ordinary school,” Peder Gowenius writes in the introduction to *Rorke’s Drift: Empowering Prints*. When he and Ulla Gowenius landed in South Africa from Sweden, they knew very little about the country. Naive to apartheid, the couple arrived at the mission station in (what is now) Kwa-Zulu Natal with relatively modest aims: to explore traditional craftmaking and whether these crafts could assist women in rural areas to make a living. “The whole idea was absurd and politically unclear,” he writes.

The students became the project’s key collaborators, the *teachers’ teachers*. Azaria Mbatha and Allina Ndebele-Khumalo were vital contributors who, together with their colleagues, guided the founders to the three cornerstones upon which the Rorke’s Drift Evangelical Lutheran Art Centre would be built:

- 1 - That the art made there could, through metaphorical pictures and stories, convey messages that were forbidden or banned in South Africa under apartheid.
- 2 - That ‘ordinary’, or western school systems might be inhibitory to creative expression.
- 3 - That Rorke’s Drift be self-sufficient, where sanctions on SA made it difficult to access foreign aid, and reliance on foreign donors would be irresponsible.

Ulla Gowenius and her team of weavers accomplished the third cornerstone within the first four years of the art centre’s establishment, through demand for their storied tapestries.

Ten years prior to the establishment of Rorke’s Drift, in 1952, Cecil Skotnes was appointed as Cultural Recreation Officer at Johannesburg’s Polly Street Art Centre. At the time, Polly Street functioned as an urban community centre with a jazz bent, the extra-curricular educational programme for black South Africans staffed by a cohort of white volunteers from across Joburg’s arts ecosystem. Skotnes was a young artist, inexperienced as an educator. Engaging local businesses and sponsors, he developed a robust arts education programme at the centre that taught life drawing and landscape art while encouraging the development of the distinctive ‘township art’ style of that next decade. Sydney Kumalo, Lucas Sithole, Dumile Feni, Ezrom Legae – these greats were students at Polly Street, and Skotnes’ renown as a mentor and educator travelled beyond its walls. A series of letters in Peter Clarke’s distinctive handwriting dated from the 1960s into the 1980s evidences a warm correspondence between the two artists. Clarke proposed an exchange of prints, to which Skotnes responded with ready enthusiasm. It is perhaps interesting to note that the date of Clarke’s first letter to Skotnes coincided with that of his painting *Anxiety* (1969), a period of heavy expectation for Clarke. Simon’s Town had been declared



a whites-only area. That he would be forcibly removed from his home and relocated to Ocean View was inevitable. With no date yet set, only waiting –

*Dear Cecil (if it's ok with you),  
Your fine prints arrived last week.  
I was overwhelmed. It really was more than I expected, really very generous  
of you considering that the prints I  
sent you were so tiny in comparison.  
I am very happy to have these prints,  
You can be sure...  
Anyway, once again, thanks and best wishes,  
Peter*

It took a moment of pushing and pulling at the moveable walls for our curatorial team to figure out how much space to give Kemang Wa Lehulere's *Cosmic Interluded Orbit* (2016). The installation has remarkable presence. It is so very still. Yet, on the chalkboards, whizzing diagrams, abandoned experiments in magical science – it is these, perhaps, that turned those dogs to gold. Read as an interlude, as its title suggests, everyone's on a space trip, with the room gone to the dogs. Wa Lehulere is an alchemist. No other artist in South Africa is able to grasp so firmly onto history's long tail and pull out infrastructure for the imagination. He works best with dimension, where frames and objects jut and push into the room. Modest materials (chalk, bricks, blackboard, repurposed school desks) and these ceramic dogs have recurred throughout his practice. As George Mahashe wrote, Wa Lehulere's works historicise key moments in this country's history and "simultaneously inscribe the diversity of concerns animating South African and some diaspora artists; ideas like a fascination with outer space as well as other scientific and occult tendencies." Writing in 2016, Mahashe bemoaned the exclusion of these themes from a dominant discourse that pigeon-holes these artists only into "conversations about politics of the gaze or some form of self-representation...that only lives within an economy of filling a gap in the Euro-American archive and history." One wonders how long the orbit will take, what the teacher might have to share on his return.

"Almost everything I found conceptually interesting had to do with paper or books," Willem Boshoff wrote about the period of working in which he made *Blind Cards* (1977). "I was also interested in how information was processed and disseminated." Boshoff was developing a style he referred to as low-definition, but that required effort to decipher, the results of which provoked the mind to engage and puzzle it out, thereby encouraging participation. As libraries were moving towards digitisation, this 'low-def' strategy appealed immensely to the artist who, immersed in the theories of Marshall McLuhan, was interested in how knowledge systems are replaced, or cease to be, with respect to

the ordering effects that literacy and books may have had on conceptions of space and time .

Kathryn Smith uses the pseudonym serialworks for some of the research-driven curatorial projects she undertakes alongside her studio practice. Alana Blignaut writes that serialworks "undercuts the self-seriousness of modern curatorial stylistics, investing in encounters between individuals singular in their pursuit of curiosity." In Sightlines, serialworks is used by the A4 team to refer to the Woodstock apartment in which Smith held various engagements, 2009–2012. *Converse* keeps a seat open for artist-led projects that encourage experimentation and rigour. Faced with ever-increasing obstacles to their existence, project spaces are love letters to fellow practitioners sustained by an obsessive devotion to the practice of art.











## Sightline D: Equal in Paris\*

16

15

Two works introduce a fourth Sightline: pre-empt it, propose it. Folded into them are stories of modernist ambition, profound loss, and improvised community. The paired paintings were made in France by South African artists and friends Ernest Mancoba and Gerard Sekoto, who left their country of birth for Paris in 1938 and 1947 respectively, entering into self-imposed exile. To both, the French capital promised a vision of emancipation that glowed bright against apartheid's suffocating darkness. But a sense of belonging was hard-won. While Paris would become a centre of anti-colonial theory and pan-African optimism over the course of the 20th century, greatly contributing to liberation movements and political struggles on either side of the Atlantic, the near-decade between the two friends' arrivals was punctuated by war and occupation. The hardships they individually faced were at once particular to their status as exiles and pervasive. Mancoba arrived too soon. Classed a British subject (South Africa was still, at the time, a colony), he was imprisoned in a German internment camp following the fall of Paris, where he was held for four years. In half-rhyme, Sekoto, who arrived in an independent but war-scarred France, spent three months in a state psychiatric ward on the outskirts of the capital.

This Sightline might expand to include other artists from the diaspora, who similarly gravitated to Paris in the following decades, among them American painters Beauford Delauney in 1953 and Bob Thompson in 1961, both of whom are also represented in the collection. The Cuban painter Carmen Herrera also offers a compelling complement. Like Mancoba and Sekoto, she was greatly influenced by continental modernism. Her time in Paris from 1948 to 1953 marked a decisive shift in her work towards graphic abstraction and the refined geometric forms for which she is best known. Her arrival in the French capital, however, was wholly dissimilar to their first, hard years. Of the city, she wrote: "Paris in 1948 was essential for me... When I was there, everyone was there. It was a delicious time." Herrera left New York, where she was living at the time, not under duress nor at immense personal cost but in pursuit of inspiration, and found it. Push and pull – the circumstances under which artists gravitated to cultural centres such as Paris – present a thread of enquiry to be followed as this Sightline plays out.

\* The title of this Sightline is taken from James Baldwin's 1955 essay of the same name, in which the writer recounts how, the year following his arrival in Paris in 1948, he was arrested on suspicion of stealing a bedsheet. "And it must have seemed to me that my flight from home was the cruelest trick I had ever played on myself, since it had led me here, down to a lower point than any I could ever in my life have imagined – lower, far, than anything I had seen in that Harlem which I had so hated and so loved, the escape from which had soon become the greatest direction of my life."



Delaney, Beauford

1938



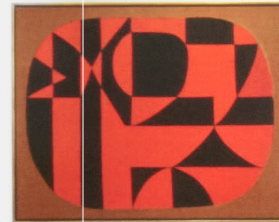
Bernard Hassell, 1963

Oil on canvas  
65.1 x 54 cm

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Herrera, Carmen

1944



Untitled (Halloween), 1948  
Acrylic on burlap  
96.5 x 123.2 cm

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Kelly Ellsworth

1287



White Paper under Glass, 2012  
Oil on canvas, two painted panels  
122 x 188 cm

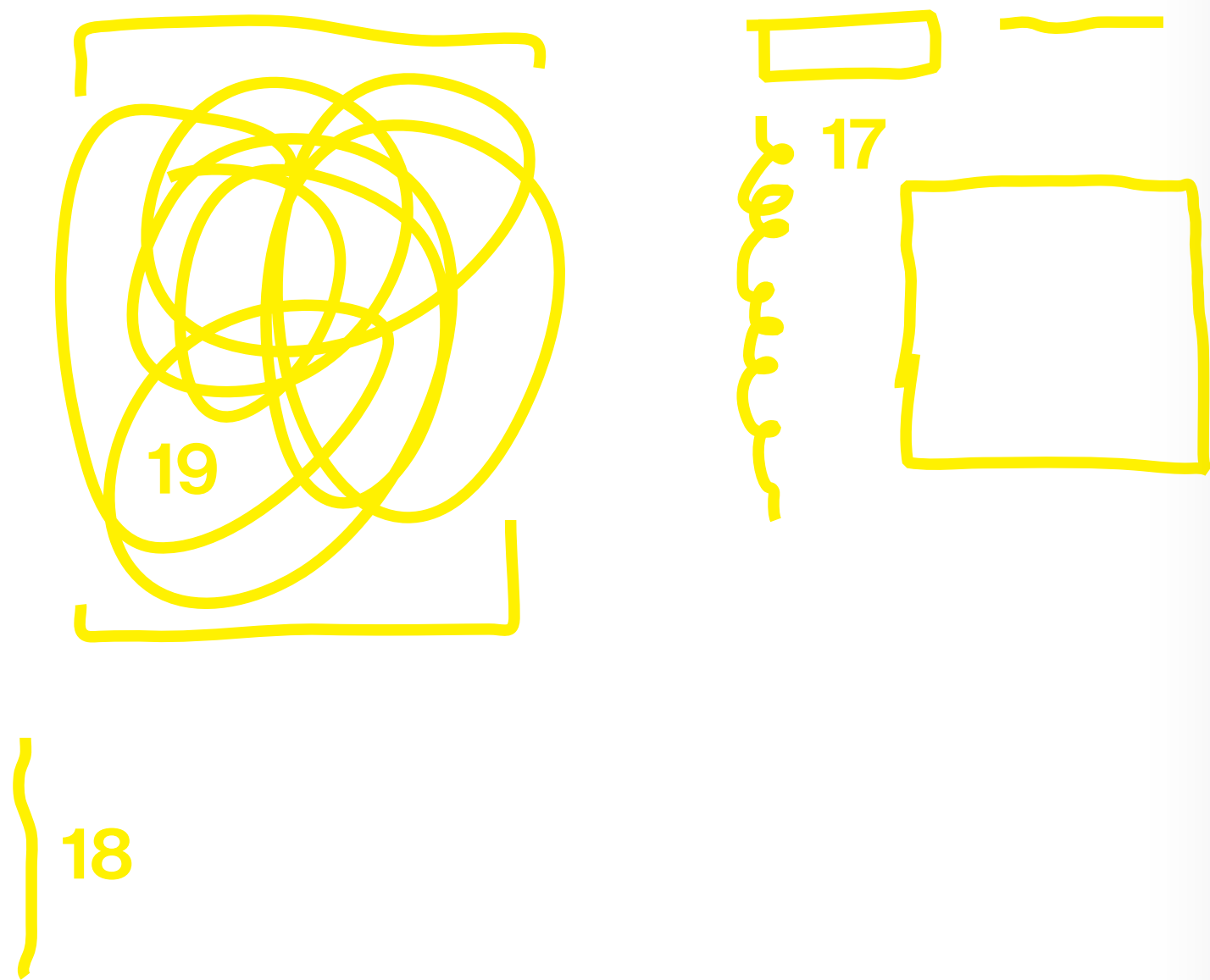
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# Studio, Cinema, Storage

The Sightlines Studio is where we make images, select artworks, process conversations with practitioners, and interact with visitors to the exhibition. The screen allows us to livestream artworks that are currently off-site, or bring arts workers (those who aren't able to attend Sightlines in person) into the room. You're welcome to browse the books on the shelf and ask us about Sightlines.

In the Cinema, a slide projector carousels through images of artworks that might be incorporated into Sightlines.

Behind the moveable wall, a storage room. This backstage environment keeps particular works out of the way, but still accessible, for when we are ready to work with them.













Sightlines

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**A4**

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