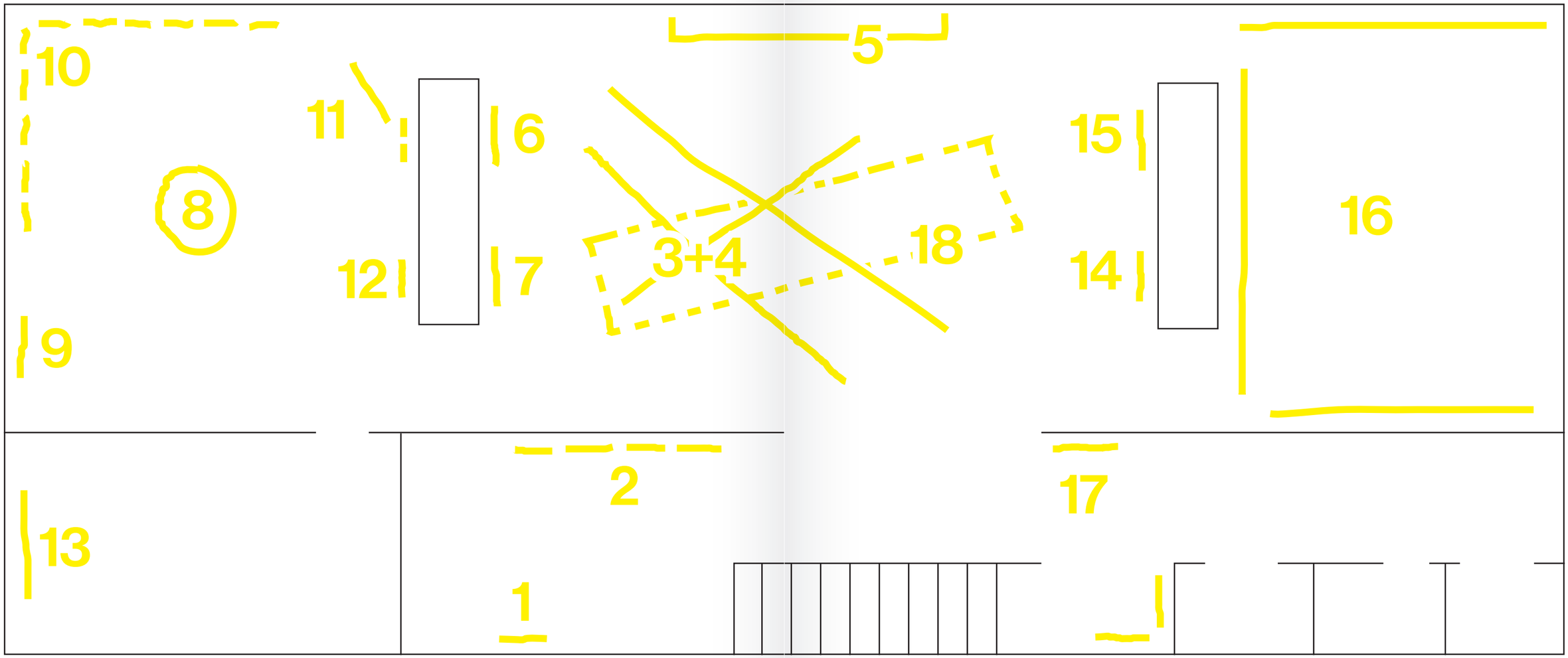
Common

Curated by Khanya Mashabela




THINK STRAIGHT!
HIV POSITIVE
COSAS
TROOPS OUT of the TOWNSHIPS
ZIMBABWE
GHANA

Introduction
by **Khanya Mashabela**

The necessity of banding together and communicating in order to achieve a shared goal is profound. 'The Commons' is a broad term which refers to any resource shared by a group of people. In her writings about the Commons, economist Elinor Ostrom analysed how people come together when there is a need to distribute resources in a manner that is equitable, efficient, and sustainable. She identified several principles needed for good governance of shared resources, including clearly defined, enforceable boundaries which meet the needs and conditions of the affected individuals. People must feel that they have a voice in the creation of these rules and that they can participate in changing them. The view that we are incapable of correctly distributing shared resources without an overarching governing body – an idea referred to as 'The Tragedy of The Commons' – has prevailed within the structures which guide our lives, such as workplaces and national governments (including democracies). Without top-down governing bodies, it is widely believed that people will work against the interests of the collective.

The exhibition Common has multiple entryways, initially found in process towards other projects at A4. The first is through research about independent initiatives by emerging artists and practitioners, and a desire to account for the exhibition models and experiences produced within the local ecosystem. The second entryway is via an anecdote that was shared in conversation with artist Unathi Mkonto. His family had come together for a funeral and, because of limited space, and the number of attendant guests, the marquee for the gathering was installed over the wall of the yard so that the crowd was split into two. One's place in the familial and social hierarchy determined one's seating position on one or the other side of the wall. This struck me as a relatable obstacle to the Commons.

Common explores new and longstanding models of self-governance and collective action. Expanding beyond the realm of economics – 'the Commons' is usually used to address ecological concerns such as forestry and water management – the exhibition takes an intimate approach to collective action, highlighting relatable forms of organising which are often taken for granted. These forms are as localised as a family refrigerator, weddings, and protest groups – and as expansive as

liberation movements, the art world, and online information sharing. Though they may seem disparate, these examples demonstrate the variety and omnipresence of organisational structures in our daily interactions. By unpacking and magnifying the experiences and emotional responses evoked by varying forms of collective action, Common seeks to explore how people perceive themselves within these structures, and how we can better prioritise trust, reciprocity, and sociability.

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Family as organisational structure
Sue Williamson, Guy Simpson, Sabelo Mlangeni

The most relatable – and widely defined – organisational structure is the family unit. The exhibition begins with Sue Williamson's *The Last Supper at Manley Villa* (1981/2008). The series of photographs documents the Ebrahim family's last Eid celebration in their District Six home before being forcibly removed by the apartheid government. The first ten images of the series were taken on or around 2 August 1981, showing a family at peace in the comfort of their home. The last two photographs show the remnants of their home. One was taken a few months after Manley Villa's destruction, made visible in the remaining rubble. The final image shows the site of removal almost two decades later. Here, there is no sign of the act of violence or the harmonious structure that preceded it. In its place is an expanse of scenic green space. The beauty of nature is often used by colonialist governments to mask and justify the destruction of preexisting communities.

The inclusion of fourteen photographs from Sabelo Mlangeni's *Isivumelwano* series (2003–2020) continues the exploration of family as an organisational structure. As set out in Ostrom's principles of a well-run commons, boundaries should not only be clearly defined, but the people affected by these boundaries should be able to participate in modifying them. The title of the series can be translated into English as 'agreement' – a word which can be interpreted as referring to informal consensus amongst a group, or a formal process of defining the boundaries between two or more people, which acts as a social (or legal, or customary) contract. Marriage is the primary tool of shifting boundaries within the family (alongside divorce).

Wedding photography centres on sentimentality, a quality which is ranked low within the Western hierarchy of aesthetic value. Mlangeni subverts this understanding of the genre by pairing sentiment with challenging compositions. Neutral, candid facial expressions and veils of shadow

create a sombre tone and a sense of anonymity, which is uncommon in a wedding picture, placing the rituals which surround weddings above the subjectivity of the brides and grooms. However, he does not fully rely on the critical, impersonal lens of the documentary photographer. The moments he has captured often feel deeply intimate, such as *Umkhongi, the chief negotiator* (2020), an image of a male family member sleeping on the floor during the process of negotiating lobola (translated in English as 'bride price' or 'bride wealth').

Marriage is a mechanism of sharing wealth among immediate family, while weddings cast a wider net to the community at large. This intention drives the ubiquitous inclusion of the multi-tiered wedding cake, marquees, buffet tables, and event chairs draped in white fabric, all present in the images. They are a visual expression of an organisational form, intended to create an impression of plentiful resources and generosity.

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Archives of collective action
GALA Queer Archive, SAHA, *The Library of Things We Forgot to Remember*

Central to the exhibition are organisations which have enlivened the archive by including ephemera which highlight the sensations associated with collective action. The GALA Queer Archive and the South African History Archive have contributed a small selection of the many T-shirts in their care, made for specific protest actions. While many of the T-shirts prioritise message over visual impact, there are also many which clearly express the creativity and care of their makers – a reminder of the essential work of cultural workers like Judy Seidman and Thamsanqa Mnyele.

The selection of T-shirts contributed to the exhibition by the South African History Archive (SAHA) are a visceral response to inequitable access to the country's resources. Labour unions and community groups as large as the National Union of Mineworkers and as small as the Queenstown Residents' Association are represented. Their slogans show the struggle for basic resources: housing, living wages, safe working conditions, freedom of movement, and the right to gather. They reiterate the need for collective action, placing persistent emphasis on words like 'we' and 'us', 'unity', and 'mobilise', and phrases such as "each one, teach one".

The T-shirts in GALA's collection show the struggle for equitable access to safety and tolerance as resources. The context of ideological and physical violence against LGBTQI+ people which has forced them to hide their sexuality or gender – an innate part of our sense of identity –

makes the T-shirts particularly affecting. Groups like the Gay and Lesbian Organisation of Witwatersrand (GLOW) and the Organisation of Lesbian and Gay Activists (OLGA) gave their members the ability to wear their hearts on their sleeves with ferocity and humour, through slogans like "Marriage: anything less is not equal" and "Closets are for clothes, not people".

The Library of Things We Forgot to Remember expands the exhibition's view to collective, political action throughout Africa. This exhibition focuses on *The Library's* vinyl record collection. Most of the vinyls were produced between the mid- to late-twentieth century. They were the soundtrack to the continent-wide struggle for freedom and a further example of the contributions of cultural workers to liberation movements. Though they do not all include explicitly political messaging, their references to folk traditions of African music were inherent acts of resistance to colonial governments.

Gerard Sekoto's *The Milkman* (1945–47) and George Pemba's *The Agitator* (1960) both make use of their own interpretations of social realist painting, to different emotional ends. The golden light and long shadows of *The Milkman* imbues it with sentiment despite the poverty of the people, seen bare-footed amongst the rudimentary forms of township houses. The composition places emphasis on the mechanism they use to distribute food within their community, rather than their individual experiences. The milkman, who is ostensibly the central figure, is mostly faceless and grouped together with his customers. In *The Agitator*, the protagonist (or antagonist) is more clear-cut. The audiences' faces are a blur of abstracted brushstrokes. We see the potential influence of an individual over a group.

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Information sharing and knowledge as commons
Fabian Saptouw, Mark Bradford, Hanna Noor Mahomed, *The Library of Things We Forgot to Remember*

> Knowledge is cumulative. With ideas the cumulative effect is a public good, so long as people have access to the vast storehouse – Charlotte Hess and Elinor Ostrom.[1]

The Commons was initially used to understand how best to distribute and maintain natural resources which are finite and therefore need to be sustainably managed. Knowledge is an unusual resource because one person's use does not exclude its use by others, and greater access fuels greater knowledge production. Fabian Saptouw's *ISBN Portrait Series* (2015) gives a 'face' to the huge stores of knowledge held by the libraries of South African universities. Saptouw's attempt to exhaustively record

these codes was challenged by the bureaucracy which guards university archives, as well as the lack of software compatibility amongst different digital archive systems, and the fact that ISBNs were introduced in 1970, not capturing the many books which existed before, as well as publications which were informally produced.

Hanna Noor Mahomed's painting, *Google Docs* (2022) depicts the online software's icon. For many it is a symbol of productivity and collaborative processes. However its instant recognisability illustrates the growing monopoly on personal data and information held by tech companies like Google. The company assures users that they do not mine personal documents for data to sell to advertisers or government agencies, though this use of data from their search engine is integral to their business model. Given the ubiquity of Google's software, it is plausible that a change in this policy would not deter most users away from their services. Privacy has been devalued in favour of technological conveniences.

Mark Bradford's *Life Size* (2019) is an editioned rendering of a police body camera, used in the US. It brings to mind the social structures which have created an environment in which people of colour are murdered by police with little to no consequences. However, it is also an illustration of the power of online information sharing. Filmed footage of police brutality, shared widely on the internet, has validated African American experiences of the corrupt justice system which had been ignored for years, leading to widespread calls for police reform.

Boundaries
Nolan Oswald Dennis, Francis Alÿs, Guy Simpson, Lerato Shadi, Hanna Noor Mahomed

Nolan Oswald Dennis' *model to an endless column* (2021) references Constantin Brancusi's work of the same name, which he turned into a monumental outdoor sculpture in 1938. It is a visual illustration of infinity. For Brancusi, this was a symbol of the infinite sacrifice of Romanian soldiers during the First World War. Dennis' sculpture shows infinite Earths, implying infinite resources. The impossibility of the model emphasises the finite nature of the world's resources. Dennis has flipped the Earth, placing the southern hemisphere at the top of the globe - a reminder that the models we use to understand the world are a result of the cultural primacy of European cartographers rather than scientific necessity.

Conceptually, Guy Simpson's *Untitled* (2023) acts directly in contrast with *model to an endless column*. Dennis' work is a representation of

infinity, which is near impossible to wrap one's head around, while Simpson uses a relatable example of limited resources and their boundaries. A shared refrigerator, whether it is placed in the home or in the workplace, is subject to the boundaries of etiquette and the collective's perception of fairness. The appliance's familiar surface immediately gives rise to all of our personal anecdotes about the communications and miscommunications surrounding its contents.

In *Painting/Retoque* (2008), Francis Alÿs offers a more intimate interaction with boundaries imposed by overarching, dominating bodies. The video is set in the former Panama Canal Zone, carved out by the US to secure economic interests in South America via the Panama Canal shipping route. Alÿs carefully repaints the faded marking of a traffic boundary line with an artist's brush, as locals continue on in the course of their daily lives, sometimes watching the performance with bemusement. The humour of Alÿs's action and the contrast of his unchanged surroundings shows the arbitrariness of national boundaries.

Lerato Shadi's *Mabogo Dinku* (2019) points to an opaque Setswana proverb, "Mabogo Dinku a a thebana" translated in English as "hands are like sheep, they help each other"[2]. Like this proverb, Shadi's video documentation of hand gestures resists translation. Language is often explored for its ability to bridge gaps of understanding. This work demonstrates language as a fortress against the oppressive, colonial force of English translation.

In a discussion about the present lack of cultural workers' groups, like the Community Art Project (CAP) in Woodstock and the Medu Art Ensemble in Gaborone, Sue Williamson suggested that it could be due to the 'enemy' being more diffuse. The people and organisations who contributed to the three archives represented in Common had clearly defined obstacles and objectives. The contemporary art world often uses the language of radical, collective action but there is a wider context of individualisation and commercialisation. There is also the understandable need to be an individual rather than only making work about one's gender, sexuality, race, or economic class. Hanna Noor Mahomed's wall mural, titled *The Prodigal Daughter* (2023), details the battle undertaken by young women artists of colour attempting to surmount the ambiguous boundaries, hierarchies, and rules of the art world, mediated through her own experience.

1 Hess, Charlotte, and Ostrom, Elinor. 2006. 'Introduction', *Understanding Knowledge as a Commons: Theory to Practice*, p. 8. The MIT Press: Massachusetts.

2 Ramagoshi, Refilwe, 2016. 'Stokvels in the African communities: this is how we do it', *Plus 50*, Vol. 11, No. 4, p.51.

Sabelo Mlangeni

b.1980, Driefontein; works in Paris and Johannesburg

KwaMtsali, Bhekumthetho, Nongoma, 2016
Silver gelatin print
50 x 40 cm (framed)

1

Sabelo Mlangeni's photographs offer intimate insights into the lives of others. He takes as subject expressions of community – be it chosen or happenstance – from a poor, historically-white suburb in Johannesburg to migrant workers living in hostels, Christian Zionist church groups and inner-city street sweepers. A sense of Mlangeni's affinity with the people he photographs is apparent in all his work; a sense of his being present in the photograph yet out of frame. His is not the lens of voyeur, but rather one in close dialogue with those he pictures, wary of the tropes of poverty and otherness to which the documentary medium plays. Bongani Madondo writes that "Mlangeni is ill at ease with referring to his work as 'art,' or to himself as a 'photographer,' preferring instead the term 'cameraman.' It might be most accurate, though, to say that he is a street photographer in the most historical sense, the ultimate flâneur—to wit, an [Eugène] Atget of Johannesburg." Each photograph is a tender reflection on selfhood and community, on what it is to be both a part and apart.

This photograph, which opens Common, reminded curator Khanya Mashabela of an anecdote shared by her friend, the artist Unathi Mkonto: the marquee hired for a funeral was split across a family yard, which saw some guests seated in the yard and others seated on the other side of the wall. Sabelo Mlangeni's *KwaMtsali, Bhekumthetho, Nongoma* from the series *Umlindelo wamaKholwa*, extends reflection of community beyond the familial to the spiritual.

Sue Williamson

b.1941, Lichfield; works in Cape Town

The Last Supper at Manley Villa, 1981/2008
Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag
50 x 67.5 cm each

2

In word, object and image, Sue Williamson gives to South Africa's recent past a material reflection. Her commitment to historical verity is apparent in all her work, as is her archival inclination for accumulation. Trained as a printmaker and journalist – two disciplines that necessitate exactitude – there is to Williamson's work a formal and conceptual rigour. Her early career in reportage has proved a lasting influence on her extended practice, instilling her preoccupation, the artist suggests, with "people's exact words and precise narratives." Williamson remains largely unconcerned with history's overview, revisiting instead the stories of individual lives left untold. Using first- and second-hand accounts, found objects, photography and text, she returns to the nation's history a more human expression.

The Last Supper at Manley Villa documents a family's final days in a house marked for demolition. In 1981, Manley Villa, home to Naz and Hari Ebrahim, was one of the few houses left standing in District Six, Cape Town. Declared a white-only suburb under the Group Areas Act, the many families of colour who lived in the District were forcibly removed to far-flung, segregated suburbs. Naz had begun writing on the walls shortly after receiving the eviction notice and encouraged visiting friends to contribute messages. In its final weeks, Manley Villa became a site of remembrance and resistance. "The truth is on the walls inside this house," one handwritten sentence reads. "The truth that is denied." Before their home was taken from them, the Ebrahims gathered to celebrate Eid, sharing a last supper. Williamson remained to watch the bulldozers advance, recording the rubble left in their wake. In 2008, she returned to the site and photographed the place where the house once stood, now an empty lot. Together, these collected images stand as testimony, working against history's erasure that Manley Villa might be remembered.

SAHA est.1988

T-Shirt Archive, 1970s–1990s
Archival Protest T-Shirts
Dimensions variable

3

The South African History Archive (SAHA)'s collections comprise documents, posters, photographs, oral histories, and ephemera relating to past and current struggles for justice. Together, these accumulated artefacts of visual resistance offer an ongoing demonstration of South African communities' demand to be heard. With substantial collections relating to the United Democratic Front, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the wider anti-apartheid movement, SAHA is a significant custodian of heritage and national legacy. Their archive of over 350 T-shirts – of which curator Khanya Mashabela selected 30 for Common – evidences South Africa's history of collective resistance with such slogans as "Liberation before education," "An injury to one is an injury to all," and "Release the detainees," among others. "T-shirts are situated in an interesting part of the struggle," writes fashion theorist Frances Andrew. "The T-shirt became a political imperative for which the physical self was willingly placed in direct danger in order to resist. Indeed, the T-shirt without a body had little power and could be said to be inert. It was only in the wearing, that the true power of the T-shirt was activated."


We Demand Better Living Conditions
ERAPO


There shall be housing security and comfort for all
EAST RAND PEOPLES ORGANISATION


STOP NOISE IN THE UNDERGROUND


AMANDLA NGAWENG - MACHT AN DER MACHT
ANC LEADS
PEOPLE'S JUSTICE


RATANDA CIVIC ASSOCIATION


ORGANISE!
OR BE
HOMELESS


HLANGANANI BASEBENZI
G A W U
An injury to one is an injury to all


LIBERATION
BEFORE
EDUCATION


SEVEN BUILDINGS
PROJECT


WE DEMAND
SECURITY OF TENURE
AFFORDABLE RENTALS
SOCIAL HOUSING
DECENT ACCOMODATION


TROOPS OUT
OF THE
TOWNSHIPS


STOP
the
Call Up


RELEASE THE
DETAINEES


when
you've
got them
by the
balls
...THEIR HEARTS
AND MINDS
WILL FOLLOW


WE SHALL NOT BE MOVED


WARRIORS FOR A JUST PEACE


THE FREEDOM CHARTER
PEOPLE'S CHARTER


30th
Anniversary
of the
Freedom
Charter


10 YEARS OF CASSINGA MASSACRE
1978 - 1988
A LIVING MEMORY
AMONG THE OPPRESSED


WE SHALL NOT
FORGIVE
NOR
FORGET


DISINVEST
ON OUR TERMS


Support Conscientious Objection


ACT to STOP
EVICTIONS


MILITANCY BY THE OPPRESSED
IS CALLED TERRORISM
MILITANCY BY THE OPPRESSOR
IS CALLED FIGHTING TERRORISM


ZIMBABWE NOW


Everyone has the
Right to Decide
their Own
Destiny
Bob Marley


WORKER UNITY MAY
FOR
WORKERS
POWER


MAY DAY IS...
WORKERS'
CHARTER DAY


I REFUSE
TO SERVE IN
THE SADF.


RELEASE
OBJECTORS

GALA Queer Archive

est.1997

T-Shirt Archive, 1980s–2000s
Archive of printed T-shirts
Dimensions variable

4

Founded in 1997, the GALA Queer Archive (formerly the Gay and Lesbian Archive) established itself as a response to the continuous omission of LGBTQIA+ history from museums and archives in post-apartheid South Africa. With over 200 organisational and personal collections in its care, GALA ensures that each item is preserved and remains publicly accessible. GALA's T-shirt archive, of which curator Khanya Mashabela selected 30 for Common, spans over 30 years and comprises T-shirts collected by GALA and donated by various organisations. The T-shirts – bearing slogans: "Gays against apartheid," "Open your eyes, a global crisis is exploding," and "Marriage, anything less is not equal" – offer records of the inclusion of the Equality Clause in South Africa's constitution in the mid-1990s, the fight against HIV/AIDS, and the marriage campaign of the 2000s. Testament to collective action towards equality, the archive includes T-shirts made by the activist groups AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), Association of Bisexuals, Gays & Lesbians (ABIGALE), Gay and Lesbian Organisation of the Witwatersrand (GLOW), and the Lesbian and Gay Equality Project (LGEP), among others.


MY LOVE HAS NO GENDER


PRIDE WITHOUT BORDERS
1998
NO DISCRIMINATION
DON'T HATE...APPRECIATE...


JOHANNESBURG
1990
UNITY IN THE COMMUNITY


Lesbians & GAYS
FOR
HUMAN RIGHTS


LACO


silence will not protect you


STOP HATE CRIMES !!!

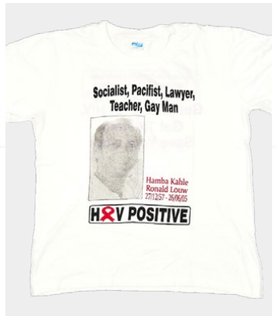

GAUTENG
PRIDE
IN
GAUTENG


GAUTENG
ENCOURAGING ACCEPTANCE IN COMMUNITIES.


THEY/THEM/THEIR


SOWETO PRIDE
GAY LIVES MATTER


SAFETY JUSTICE FREEDOM ARE OUR RIGHTS


Socialist, Pacifist, Lawyer, Teacher, Gay Man
Hamba Kahle
Ronald Louw
HIV POSITIVE


Get Tested for HIV,
Get Treated,
Save Your Life!


CAPE TOWN'S FIRST
LESBIAN & GAY MARCH


EQUALITY FOR ALL !


I CAN'T EVEN THINK STRAIGHT


HATE IS NOT A FAMILY VALUE


EQUALITY IS NOT A PRIVILEGE, IT'S A RIGHT. KNOW YOUR RIGHTS.


GAYS against apartheid


HOUSE OF GALA


SODOMY
so-do-my friends
so-do-my family
so-do-my lovers
so-do-my neighbours


Africa 2000


GAY CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY


See you at church
Tel. 726 - 3620


I'LL SEE YOU HATER!


ITS NOT OK TO HATE


Nobody Knows I'm Gay


OLGA


GLOS


CAUGHT WEARING CLOTHES THAT TO GIRLS

Kudzanai Chiurai

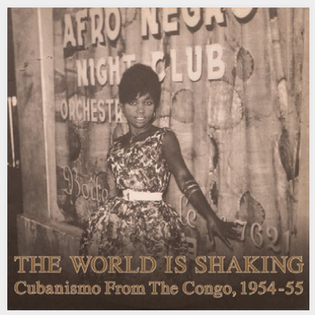
b.1981, Harare; works in Harare

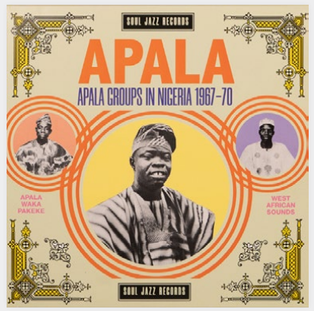
The Library of Things We Forgot to Remember, 2017–
Acrylic vinyl facsimiles, digital reader, speakers
Dimensions variable

5

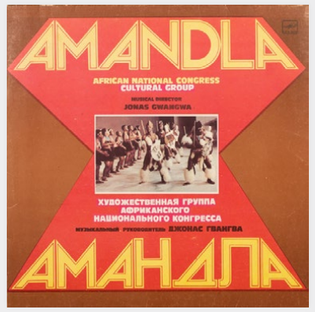
The Library of Things We Forgot to Remember is at once an archive, art installation, and resource centre for collaborative production. Its accumulated vinyls, posters, paintings and ephemera – collected by artist Kudznai Chiurai over several years – attest to pan-African histories, liberation movements, and civil rights struggles as articulated in cultural artefacts, and gestures to shared ambitions for imagined futures. In form, the project is iterative. Each time *The Library* is exhibited, a new librarian is invited to make the selection, that they might offer novel understandings of the assembled material, "and so bring to our attention dialogues and ideas forgotten but still very much a part of our present." That libraries can be generative rather than static, and moveable rather than located, is central to Chiurai's proposition of *The Library* as a "liberated zone"; a site for both established and emergent knowledge; historical and speculative.

This iteration of *The Library of Things We Forgot to Remember* was selected by guest librarian Samantha Modisenyane, and features selections from the library's sound archive, including popular music, resistance songs and speeches. For Common, A4 curator Mitchell Gilbert Messina supported his colleague – Common's curator Khanya Mashabela – by digitising the audio contents of each of the 30 records loaned by *The Library.* The digitisation preserves the patina of use (heard in the crackling of an eroded record) accumulated on the vinyls up until the point that they were loaned to A4. These digital recordings are then shared with *The Library,* where, at the discretion of the artist Kudzanai Chiurai, other sorts of options for accessing this portion of the sound archive become possible – whether online, and for listeners who would otherwise not be able to visit iterations of *The Library* to interact with the originals. The covers have been printed to perspex, and visitors to this exhibition are encouraged to select from these 'records', placing each against the listening box that Messina developed to play the recorded version of the original. This way, the 'records' on the shelf retain the haptic quality of the original vinyls – they remain things to pick up and play.




SOUL JAZZ RECORDS
APALA
APALA GROUPS IN NIGERIA 1967-70
APALA WAKA HAUSA
WEST AFRICAN SOUNDS
SOUL JAZZ RECORDS

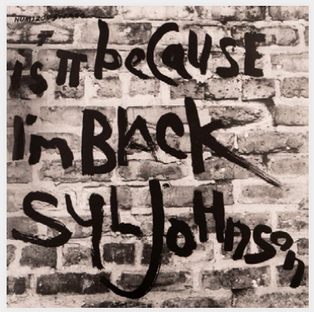

VIVA!
ZIMBABWE
DANCE MUSIC FROM ZIMBABWE


AMANDLA
AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS CULTURAL GROUP
ХУДОЖЕСТВЕННАЯ ГРУППА АФРИКАНСКОГО НАЦИОНАЛЬНОГО КОНГРЕССА
АМАНДЛА


AMANDLA

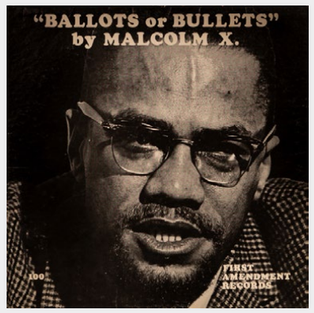

SUPER DISCO
45 RPM
NEW Discolypso SOUND
ROKEL
AFRO DISCO
AFRODISC PRODUCTION


CHIMURENGA


its because
im BLACK
SYL Johnson

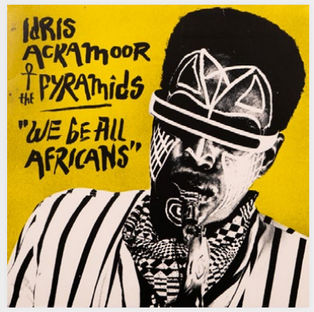

BOTEREKWA
SIMON CHIMBETU
& THE ORCHESTRA DENDERA KINGS
(MARXIST BROTHERS)

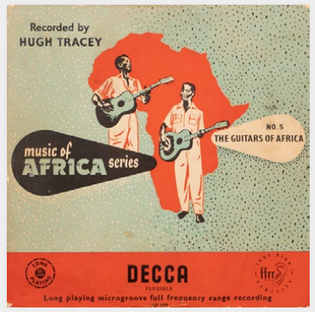

FÉERIE SUD-MAROCAINE
tout le folklore musical pré-saharien recueilli et présenté par JEAN MAZEL
PHILIPS


"BALLOTS or BULLETS"
by MALCOLM X.
FIRST AMENDMENT RECORDS


MAUNGIRA
OLIVER & BLACK SPIRITS


ZIMBABWE
MUST BE FREE


IDRIS ACKAMOOR & the PYRAMIDS
"WE BE ALL AFRICANS"


Recorded by
HUGH TRACEY
music of AFRICA series
NO. 5
THE GUITARS OF AFRICA
DECCA
Long playing microgroove full frequency range recording


LUKOMBO VIBES


Brenda
BLACK PRESIDENT


FELA
Ransome - Kuti & The Africa 70
DEAF AND DUMB
SETTLEMENT
HE HISS ROAD

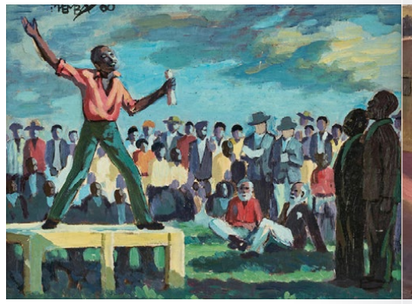

OH! DEARRRR ZIMBABWE
side one
OH! DEAR ZIMBABWE
WOMAN'S TEMPTATION
DON'T RUN ME DOWN
OOOOOOOOO
side two
LOOKU-ME
ILEMA
AJUWA
IJIMERE
POLP 020
VICTOR UWAIFO

George Pemba

b.1912, Gqeberha; d.2001, Motherwell

The Agitator, 1960
Oil on board
28.5 x 38.5 cm

6



“I have almost throughout my life,” George Pemba wrote in an undated journal entry, “been in the wilderness.” Like his contemporary Ernest Mancoba, Pemba went largely unrecognised as an artist in his lifetime, his paintings passed over as ‘township art’. He persisted despite his relative obscurity, persisted even in times of great personal hardship. Many black South African artists of his generation left for Europe, among them Pemba’s friend Gerard Sekoto. Such a journey was beyond Pemba’s means. Instead, he stayed and witnessed in paint the country’s transition from colonial segregation to apartheid and later to freedom. His paintings, the artist insisted, were never political, but rather studies in life’s minutiae. But then politics had a way of staining all life under apartheid, of colouring even those scenes which first appear innocent. History has since turned to Pemba’s paintings to understand something of those times, to gain insight into the lives of ordinary people under the regime’s oppression. Recognition has posthumously granted Pemba pride of place in the South African canon. He is remembered as a pioneer of South African social realism and is counted among the country’s most influential artists. “I have to thank myself,” Pemba said in an address given in 1991, “for holding on with the hope that one day the sun will also shine on me.”

Throughout his career, Pemba favoured scenes populated by crowds – weddings, funerals, protests, children at play, packed train carriages and hospital waiting rooms, urban shebeens and township streets. Viewed in the context of this exhibition, such gatherings become metaphors for social collectivism and community organisation. In *The Agitator* (1960), the artist describes a political rally. The title, one presumes, is cynical – any person of colour with popular appeal necessarily suspect to the apartheid regime. To this, a pair of white security police stand among the gathered onlookers, watching the impassioned figure on his makeshift stage. The painting is at once an expression of shared faith and solidarity, and a warning against political aspirations under white-minority rule.

Gerard Sekoto

b.1913, Botshabelo; d.1993, Paris

The Milkman, 1945–47
Oil on canvas
50.8 x 60.3 cm

7

“All that I do, even outside of South Africa,” Gerard Sekoto wrote, “is still with the eye, the heart and the soul of the land of my birth.” Counted among the country’s first black modernists, Sekoto’s paintings transcribed everyday life into images of profound humanity. Writing in 1983 under apartheid’s pall, the art historian Esme Berman wrote, “None of the tired academic clichés or timid prettiness which so irked the modern spirits were present in the self-taught painter’s work. The fearless colour, the unconventional viewpoint, even the awkward handling of familiar forms was refreshingly original and honest.” He took as subject the scenes around him – in Sophiatown, District Six, and Eastwood – impoverished areas designated for people of colour. By the 1950s, all three suburbs had been razed under the Group Areas Act. Sekoto, however, did not witness their destruction – he left for Paris in 1947. The following year, the National Party was elected, and apartheid became official legislation. While he returned often to township scenes in his paintings, Sekoto would never return to his native country. He died in exile in 1993, shortly before South Africa’s first democratic election.

In 1945, Sekoto returned from District Six in Cape Town to his mother’s home in Pretoria. The following three years – the artist’s ‘Eastwood period’ – were among his most prolific; his works of the time imbued with a formal confidence and observational clarity. He continued to favour scenes of everyday life, recalling in paint vivid impressions of black urban communities under apartheid. Such is *The Milkman*, which describes the morning ritual that marked the beginning of each day in Eastwood. This work was first exhibited in Johannesburg in 1947. “His street scenes and the donkey cart, which features in two paintings, are redolent of the atmosphere of the location and its society,” one critic wrote at the time. Another wrote that the works “show him to be above all else a painter alive to the problems and lives of his people…in colours sombre or bright, he paints the sadness or gaiety of their lives.” Later that same year, at the height of his career, Sekoto left South Africa for France.

Nolan Oswald Dennis

b.1988, Lusaka; works in Johannesburg

model for an endless column, 2021
Altered PET plastic globe models, steel rod
220 x 30 x 30 cm

8

Investigating the material and metaphysical conditions of colonialism, Nolan Oswald Dennis explores the interactions between objective and subjective conditions of change. What structures of organisation – whether technological, historical, the known or invisible – maintain or transform these conditions? “What do these structures mean for our work – the work of trying to find, or make, or change the world?” Dennis asks, his drawings and diagrams offering entry points to the cosmologies that he is preoccupied with; his models inviting strategic play. “Reciprocity is the key mechanic of play that I’m interested in,” says Dennis. “The humorous and playful aspect is the part of the work that operates on the surface – this is a cover underneath which a lot more can happen.” South Africa’s democracy is rigged by the structural and systematic remnants of colonialism, and it is through this invitation to play that the audience can begin to engage in potent critique. Dennis’ practice is equal parts experimental and complex – testing reality with the curiosity of the scholar; the precision of an astrophysicist.

Dennis’ *model for an endless column* extends reflections on two inquiries central to the artist’s engagement with conceptual cartography: (1) how can space be imaged, and (2) how can the finite be described? A chain of globes is suspended from the ceiling, the surface of each world identically mapped by colonial powers and histories of violence; by an imposed, Western interpretation of national borders and regional boundaries. Dennis denies the familiarity of this matrix, cutting the earth at its equator and rotating each globe – south above north, the world turned on its head. A matt black globe at the centre of the column invites new imaginings for what a decolonial future may hold, and the potential for “a black consciousness of space.” The work’s form and title are reminiscent of Constantin Brancusi’s sculpture series, *The Endless Column*, begun in 1918. However, where Brancusi’s columns were intended as a visual illustration of infinity, Dennis’ variation on the theme suggests that infinity is an illusion – the earth’s resources depleted by imperial entities.

Guy Simpson

b.1994, Johannesburg; works in Cape Town

Untitled, 2023
Acrylic, wall paint and graphite on canvas
182 x 60 cm

9

Pursuing divergent themes, Guy Simpson’s drawings and sculptures consider (respectively) imaginary spaces populated by the works of local artists and cartoon-like visual jokes. Both appear as theatrical propositions; his drawings empty sets for encounters, his sculptures props for comedic scenes. More recently, the artist has turned his attention to painting, and finds in the medium more oblique encounters with humour. His works on canvas take the form of 1:1 scale impressions of architectural incidents: a light switch, a broken blind, the sensor of a burglar alarm. The line work is spare, the paintings composed largely of emptiness. “What,” asks Simpson (as relayed by Sean O’Toole), “is the least I can do to represent this door or parquet floor or plug? How do I do that?” In pursuing such distillation of form, the artist hopes, he might distil “small truths from within the giant-ness of changing life.”

The fridge has been a recurring subject in Mashabela’s conception of this exhibition; a device with which to explore the curatorial theme at its most domestic. A site of sustenance and shared meals, contested perishables, and petty office theft, the fridge embodies the variable nuances of communal resources and social organisation. Commissioned for this show, Simpson’s to-scale painting of the appliance offers an unsentimental representation of this kitchen commonage. It offers quiet reflections on the theme in a familial register, being at once particular (as present in the assortment of mismatched fridge magnets and handwritten note) and commonplace. The work’s conceptual lineage in the artist’s practice is apparent in his recent exhibition, House of Fran (THK Gallery, 2023), which documented the interior of his childhood home in Johannesburg; its skirting boards and panic buttons, popcorn walls, and bathroom tiles. Those unremarkable things that have become, as O’Toole writes, the “generic and fungible landmarks of his youth.”

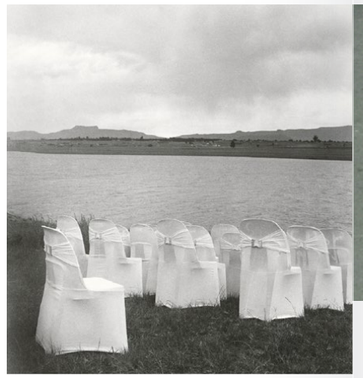
Sabelo Mlangeni

b.1980, Driefontein; works in Paris and Johannesburg

From the series *Isivumelwano*, 2003–2020
Silver gelatin print
Dimensions variable

10

For *artist's biography*, please see page 14.



"The camera's intervention reveals the ritualistic work of love – in these works, it is a formal act that drives cultures from subjugation to celebration," says Emmanuel Balogun of *Isimvumelwano*. "The Nguni word, isivumelwano, represents a contract, agreement or alliance. In Sabelo Mlangeni's context, *Isivumelwano* is a cause for celebration and critique of the relationships we keep with others." In this series of wedding photographs spanning nearly 20 years, Sabelo Mlangeni documents moments of informality seldom seen in staged wedding photographs – empty chairs; silvered catering containers; a bride, Xhikeleni, and her husband, Rafito, his likeness halved by the image edge. Mlangeni often divides his images in two, obscuring figures in darkness. Through imperfect images, he betrays both his photographic precision and position within the scenes pictured – he is a part of the procession, at once observer and participant. A maker of deeply etched snapshots, Mlangeni makes visible the power of marriage in shifting communal boundaries and loyalties.

Francis Alÿs

b.1959, Antwerp; works in Mexico City

Painting/Retoque, 2008
Single-channel video, sound
8 min 31 sec

11

In Francis Alÿs's practice, expansive themes are distilled in the simplest of gestures. Walking becomes form; metaphors, the artist's medium. Gestures last only as long as they can be sustained; the exhaustion of the action more often necessary to the work's logic. "Maximum effort, minimal result," remains Alÿs's guiding phrase. That Alÿs is drawn to cooperative play, as apparent in his ongoing project *Children's Games* (1999–), is perhaps telling. With their repetition, their rules, their invitations to chance and happenstance, and metaphorical resonance, games offer a compelling parallel to the artist's wider inquiry.

In a characteristically futile and lyrical performance, Alÿs repainted – with slow precision better suited to easel paintings – the weathered centerline on the road of the former Panama Canal Zone, the symbolic divide that cleaves North and South America. The action took three days; the artist restoring 60 lines "erased by the passage of time." The documentation, however, records the painting of only a single yellow strip at Paraiso, an ex-US military base. Alÿs walks into frame with paint can and brushes. Onlookers pause to watch the artist at his work, cars pass; buses. In the distance, large container ships move along the canal. Voices and birdsong accompany the scene, a radio plays. Impassive, the artist continues in his labour. Nothing happens. The gesture completed, the artist leaves – the brilliant yellow of the restored centreline bright against its faded counterparts.

Gregory Olympio

b.1986, Lomé; works in Besançon

Paysage Grillage 10, 2021
Acrylic on canvas
41 x 33 cm

12 |

Much is made of Gregory Olympio's cross-cultural upbringing as a conceptual shorthand for reading his spare compositions. Yet while such biographical notes perhaps lend themselves to the artist's preoccupations with boundaries, limits, and dividing lines, for the artist, "My work has always been about the line, the limits –" speaking of his formal engagement with figuration – "the line between the two parts of the paintings is important". To this, Olympio's paintings are often composed as diptychs and more often feature two figures, inviting the doubling effect of pictorial division. Compositions recur across canvases, the continuity of iteration allowing the artist to "introduce as little intention as possible." That he cites "attitudes" as his guiding theme further suggests that his national identities – Beninese, Togolese and French – are more incident than apparent. The figures that populate Olympio's paintings have no single origin, composed from composite impressions of people seen on the street, in magazines and online. They are ambiguous, fluid; vessels of feeling, of attitudes, rather than identity.

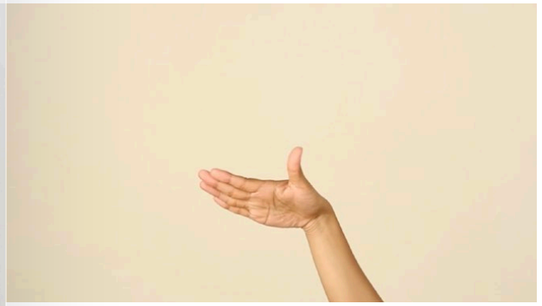
In *Paysage grillage*, an ongoing series of seemingly abstract studies, Olympio reimagines ubiquitous chain-linked fences (the *grillage* of the title) as compositional device. Line, pattern, form – however flatly two-dimensional – the fence, reduced to image, offers observations on space and its boundaries, both in the world and on canvas. That the artist titles these studies 'landscape' (*paysage*) extends reflections on how such boundaries have come to shape urban spaces. That he sets his fences against flat planes of colour suggests his preoccupations are primarily formal. Notice these boundaries, the artist proposes, but notice them *differently* – for their rhythm, the shade of their rusted wires, the machined regularity of each twist.

Lerato Shadi

b.1979, Mahikeng; works in Berlin

Mabogo Dinku, 2019
Single-channel video, sound
6 min

13 |



"My entire practice is a durational practice," Lerato Shadi says of her embodied engagement with societal assumptions and mechanisms. In works that more often necessitate many hours of labour and a slow accumulation of actions, the artist performs symbolic strategies of resistance. Central to her preoccupations is "the idea that whenever there is oppression there is resistance, and meditating on that spirit." To Shadi, opacity and interpretation offer a productive alternative to structural exclusion and cultural erasure, that marginalised histories and bodies might find a space to inhabit. Refusing translation and deferring easy explanation, she invites the audience to assume an attitude of unknowing, and pursue more oblique understandings beyond inherited Western doctrines.

In *Mabogo Dinku*, Shadi extends reflections on legibility. Both the title of the work and the folk song she sings to accompany the video are rendered in only Setswana. A series of hand gestures – some commonplace, others enigmatic – play across the screen; a wave, a hand beckoning, a finger pointing, a palm raised, variations on the closed fist, a series of less familiar signs. As curator Winnie Sze writes, Shadi offers no "guidance on what the words and gestures mean because she is narrating the un-narratable, the history of her people, marginalised during apartheid South Africa. The history she was taught at school is the history of the coloniser, which she rejects, so what history can she tell?" Resisting translation into English, the artist centres her mother tongue (its words and its gestures), disregarding assumptions of opacity, access and explanation. In doing so, Shadi asks after the ways in which knowledge and access are particular to experience and perspective.

Mark Bradford

b.1961, Los Angeles; works in Los Angeles

Life Size , 2019
Cast handmade cotton paper, pigment, gouache, ink, letterpress
30 x 22 x 2 cm

14

“The source material comes from the world,” Mark Bradford says. “I drag it into the studio, and I beat it into some form of beauty…demanding that even though the world is a violent place…there’s also a magic and an alchemy that can happen.” Described as an abstract artist, Bradford resists the late-modernist formulation, *the medium is the message*. “Race, gender and class will always cling to the material,” he says. The stuff of life – its political, social and economic tensions and histories – is transcribed in the hair foils, streetside advertisements, salvaged plywood fencing, and discarded newsprint that he reimagines in large-scale paintings and installations. His ‘social abstraction’ invites a more oblique engagement with Black-American life; insisting on a certain opacity, rather than more didactic figuration. In works of layered material and meaning, he enacts a symbolic withholding, necessitating an associative rather than prescriptive engagement with his painted surfaces. “I have the right to go to a racially charged site and decide how much I’m going to give you,” he says to the implied viewer. “And how much I’m going to keep for myself.”

“What is the purpose of an image?” Bradford asks. The question, posed in the context of his *Life Size* project, invites reflection on issues of visibility, policing, and profiling. The work is at first an ambiguous offering, appearing as a worn relic from an earlier technological age. It is, in fact, a paper cast taken of a Los Angeles policeman’s bodycam, marked by years of use. “There’s this idea that a camera will protect its citizens,” Bradford says, “but there are so many ways to interpret truth.”[1] For all the many mechanical eyes that keep watch, from surveillance cameras to mobile phones, the American criminal justice system remains intricately and intractably flawed. Bradford’s object is one of material tension – an armoured, mechanical device precisely reproduced in layers of paper; the indestructible rendered fragile, its heavy implications held in weightless form.

[1] Produced in support of the Art for Justice initiative, proceeds from the sale of the editioned work contribute to career-development opportunities for people transitioning out of prison.

Hanna Noor Mahomed

b.1999, Durban; works in Cape Town

Google Docs, 2022
Acrylic on MDF wood
80 x 60 cm

15

Storytelling is central to Hanna Noor Mahomed’s practice. Her narratives, however, do not lend themselves to legibility – the artist resisting pictorial clarity in favour of productive ambiguity. That her paintings and drawings are rooted in abstraction is, she suggests, an invitation to more expansive complexity. Noor Mahomed works against the aesthetic assumptions and demands, and the expected foregrounding of identity politics, that so many minority artists are freighted with. How might one centre one’s religious and cultural experience without reaffirming conceptions of otherness and difference? In answer, she composes stories gleaned from personal, collective, speculative and historical accounts, gesturing to those narratives that go unheard and untold. Quoting a range of religious motifs, political symbols, traditionally Western tropes, and essentialist images, Noor Mahomed considers how these accumulated signifiers are disrupted by a new and unfamiliar context. The resulting, hybrid compositions, with their layers, quotes and fractal forms, offer alternative imaginings of the past, present and future.

Reimagined as a sculptural object, the ubiquitous Google Docs logo becomes a metonym for community. Made during the global pandemic, Noor Mahomed was drawn to those symbols that came to represent collaborative production, social engagement and informal exchange. Google’s blue rectangle – a stylised facsimile of a printed page with bent corner – offers itself as icon, representing a digital plane on which real-time, written interactions take place. Like a word repeated over and over, the icon seen again and again fails to read as the page it once represented, and instead gestures to a series of transient, geographically unlocated communities, their rituals and word-processing practices.

Hanna Noor Mahomed

b.1999, Durban; works in Cape Town

The Prodigal Daughter, 2023
Wall paint, charcoal
Site-specific installation, dimensions variable

16

For *artist's biography*, please see previous page.

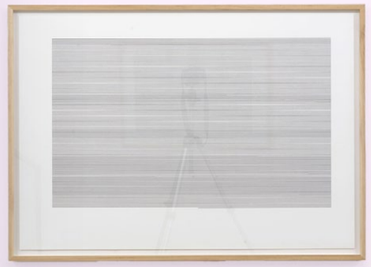
The Prodigal Daughter has a backstory that begins in Goods, a project space at A4. Goods is in the foundation's 'goods' entrance, demarcated by blue walls. When not occupied by projects, the goods entrance is most often a thoroughfare for objects as diverse as A4's sidewalk umbrella, artworks that come in and out of the archive, as well as any building materials for wet-work, should repairs need to take place at the foundation. In preparation for the exhibition Common, curator Khanya Mashabela first prototyped a few ideas in Goods. In September 2022, she invited Noor Mahomed to take up residence in the project space. Noor Mahomed's intervention, titled *Disruption*, saw the artist paint over and intervene upon archival posters of independent, practitioner-led events and exhibitions. These posters were submitted digitally after an open call to practitioners, in an attempt by Mashabela to create a social archive of Cape Town's art ecology. They were then printed at the foundation and wheat pasted onto the blue walls. The conversation the curator and artist began (with one another as with the greater arts ecology in the city) during that process, is continued in Common through *The Prodigal Daughter,* where, this time, Noor Mahomed paints directly onto the walls of A4's exhibition gallery. The work can be read as a bildungsroman, as well as an allegory for navigating the art world in Cape Town. Told in four movements, three painted murals proceed like a fresco cycle; the last drawn on plinths of varying heights arranged in the centre of the space. Central to this narrative is a femme figure, who is birthed in the first phrase, made multiple in the second, enters into battle in the third, and founds a new city in the ruins of the old in the last. Newness and its potential for novel freedoms guide the episodic tale – a story of space-making – as Noor Mahomed reimagines an art world, created for and by women of colour. The narrative turns on the theme of destruction towards creation. Quoting Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, Noor Mahomed says, "to be born again, first you have to die."

Fabian Saptouw

b.1984, Cape Town; works in Cape Town

ISBN University Portraits Series, 2015
Digital print
100 x 70 cm each

17



Equal parts artist and academic, Fabian Saptouw centres his practice on the production, storage, and distribution of knowledge. Through repetitive actions – unravelling and reweaving a section of blank canvas, pushing and pulling at a pill of prestik – Saptouw attempts to laboriously unmake and remake the mass with which he began. Seldom are the originals restored, the end results experiments in scientific method rather than finished products. Of attempting (and failing) to precisely re-weave a canvas, Saptouw says, "in this sense the very premise of the project becomes more like an idealistic goal, rather than an achievable outcome." It is the futility of such actions that satisfies the artist's primary enquiry – that of accounting for time spent. Saptouw's qualitative and quantitative observations, distilled in seemingly unremarkable objects, make apparent his wider preoccupations with system and structure.

An abstract visualisation of South African universities' libraries, *ISBN University Portraits Series* comprises layered prints featuring all ISBN and ISSN entries in each institution's database. ISBN and ISSN numbers identify the edition, publisher, and physical properties of a book, allowing libraries to efficiently search for publications; their assembled knowledge reduced to numerical signs. In sourcing this data, Saptouw engaged the bureaucratic gate-keeping of such knowledge, citing software challenges and difficulties in communicating with the various institutions as challenging to his process. The black-and-white images, which appear as obscure diagrams or illegible documents, offer portraits of only the more recent life of each library (ISBN technology having been used from 1970 onwards). With each portrait necessarily incomplete, Saptouw's seemingly futile exercise in accumulating data becomes central to the project – the artist pursuing a visual representation of the untranslatability of archive.

How to play a record from *The Library of Things We Forgot to Remember* using Mitchell Gilbert Messina's soundbox.

"How to play" illustration by Mitchell Gilbert Messina.

The books and accompanying excerpts of text on the table are browsable. Together, they offer a bibliography to Common in the interest of treating the exhibition as part of the knowledge commons:

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On the occasion of Common, which includes a selection of protest T-shirts from the GALA Queer Archive, artist Brett Seiler pays homage to Simon Nkoli. The proceeds of this T-shirt will be donated to Pride Shelter Trust.

Common is curated by Khanya Mashabela

—

Common – Wayfinder

Editor – Sara de Beer
Writers – Lucienne Bestall, Lily van Rensburg, Sara de Beer, with Introduction by Khanya Mashabela.
Design – Ben Johnson

Artworks courtesy of private collections, blank projects, SAHA, GALA Queer Archive, *The Library Of Things We Forgot to Remember*, and the artists.

A4

6 May —
26 July ‘23