

# Visual Solidarities: Crossing borders in aesthetic practices

Mary Ikoniadou, University of Central Lancashire

Zeina Maasri, University of Brighton

This session examines the often side-lined, post-1945 histories, trajectories and methodologies of visual production and circulation that express and constitute relations of solidarity. It builds on the premise that in solidarity there is a sense of border-crossing from self to other and towards a shared space of politics that potentially challenges stable identities and fixed localities. Engaging with the concept of solidarity in expanded art historical and visual fields of enquiry, allows us to probe the particular affective and symbolic capabilities of image production in relation to contingent politics of circulation and reception. Visual solidarities do not just require inclusion in a world map of artistic production; crucially, such visual practices and cultures challenge conceptual frontiers in the field and allow us to imagine and/or shape its future.

The papers in this session will focus on historical networks of exchange and political solidarity that were established against the backdrop of a global Cold War order and in the wake of Civil Rights Movements and processes of decolonisation. Through different perspectives and methodological approaches, each of the papers will focus on a specific element of aesthetic practice and its associated mode of artistic production and circulation: mail art; posters; a magazine; and the decolonisation of artistic pedagogy. The discussion will cover a vast geography of connections brought by relationships of affinity, friendship and activist collaboration, which cut across national frontiers and ideological divides.

## Speakers and Abstracts

### **The Aesthetics of a Common Struggle: Third World solidarity in a foreign-language magazine in the GDR**

*Mary Ikoniadou (University of Central Lancashire)*

For the Greek political refugees who resided in the socialist states, solidarity with anti-colonial and liberation movements was not an empty political discourse promoted by their host states and/or supported by the Greek Left. Solidarity provided a notion of cross-identification across multiple ideological, aesthetic and affective registers.

For *Pyrsos* illustrated magazine, published in the GDR in the 1960s by Greek political refugees, solidarity 'with those fighting for their freedom, for democracy and national independence, for peace' was at the core of its editorial strategy. *Pyrsos* publicised the anti-imperialist struggles in Vietnam and Congo, amongst

others, while at the same time drawing parallels between the plight of the Third World and Greece, which, since the aftermath of WWII, was under US-controlled administrations. According to this perspective, Greece's subordination to US political and economic power implied that its national situation could be considered analogous to that of Third-World countries whose underdevelopment was also explained by US interventionism.

Beyond symbolic, the comparative plights and its aesthetics in *Pyrsos* corresponded to lived and constructed experiences and memories for the magazine's readership, largely composed of former partisans, young political refugees in Eastern Europe as well as students and economic migrants in the West. Through the visual analysis of the magazine, the paper will argue that *Pyrsos* mobilised solidarity and positive identification in its efforts to generate collective political subjectivities amongst its diverse readers. These were rendered visible in the design layout of the magazine, which was conceived according to Brechtian aesthetics.

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### **'Working Men of All Countries, Unite!' Mail art networks across Eastern Europe during late socialism**

*Cristian Nae (George Enescu National University of the Arts, Iași, Romania)*

Despite their historical differences, during the 1970s and 80s, Latin America and Eastern Europe shared the status of 'secondary' cultural and economic regions, where authoritarian political regimes aimed to

control and often restrict the international circulation of ideas and cultural goods. Appearing as an informal alternative to the more prominent institutions and art spaces fostered by the *Fluxus* movement, mail art ensured a horizontal connection between remote artists sharing similar aesthetic or political concerns. It transformed personal communication into an art form, using various social systems and challenging their bureaucratic apparatuses through subversive artistic strategies.

The presentation intends to map out and analyse influential mail art exchanges between Hungary, Romania, East Germany, Poland, Uruguay and Argentina during the 1970s and early 1980s, which fostered artistic solidarity not only within the former Eastern bloc, but also across the Iron Curtain. It also offers a theoretical framework for describing these more or less formalised artist networks and publications in terms of a special kind of relational aesthetics and geography, which could be grounded in the leftist cosmopolitan imagination described by the term 'internationalism'. I claim that, at least in Eastern Europe, mail art extended and materialised in a virtual, secondary public sphere the principles of solidarity, collective creativity and authorship predicated by many leftist political agendas. It also defied established cultural categories and geographical confinements, blurring the boundaries between artistic media such as photography, conceptual art, performance art and graphic design, as well as between the production, exhibition and reception of art.

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### **Draw Me a Revolution: Aesthetics of Solidarity in the Trenches of Arab Hanoi**

*Zeina Maasri, University of Brighton*

Mobilised by radical networks of solidarity, stretching from Cuba, through Algeria and all the way to Vietnam and China, an anti-imperialist revolutionary subjectivity was constituted through a global flow of discourses and associated circuits of visibility. In this globally expansive revolutionary geography, Beirut — dubbed the 'Arab Hanoi' — acted as a nodal site in and through which an aesthetic of solidarity with the Palestinian liberation movement converged and circulated along transnational circuits. The city's formerly liberal and cosmopolitan artistic and intellectual public culture, I argue, was displaced in the aftermath of the devastating 1967 Arab-Israeli war and thereby radically transformed. *Dar al-Fata al-Arabi*, a pan-Arab publishing project launched in Beirut in 1974 and linked to the PLO, exemplifies the aesthetic embodiment of 'Arab Hanoi'. By closely examining the social life and international itinerary of one particular publication, entitled *The Home*, I reflect on the historical junctures and disjuncture of the Palestinian struggle with global politics of decolonisation; circuits of visibility linking revolutionary anti-imperialism; tensions between radical art and diplomacy; and last but not least, the utopias and disenchantment of a generation of politically committed Arab artists and intellectuals.

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### **Arte do Povo: Revolutionary aesthetics and solidarity networks at the National School of Visual Arts, Maputo**

*Polly Savage (SOAS)*

Opening in 1983, Mozambique's national school of visual arts (ENAV) sought to develop a revolutionary mode of visual practice for the new nation — 'arte do povo', or art by the people, for the people, in reprisal for the bourgeois elitism of colonial art systems. The school was staffed in the early years of independence almost exclusively by cooperantes — international solidarity workers from both sides of the Iron Curtain, but primarily from Eastern Europe, the USSR and Cuba, who sought to express commitment to the Mozambican Revolution. Over the 1980s, the cooperantes were gradually replaced by *bolseiros*: Mozambican students who had trained in the Soviet Bloc and Cuba, many of whom still teach in the school today. Taking ENAV as a critical nodal point in the aesthetic and affective geographies of late socialism, this paper draws on archival research and interviews with students and teachers from the school to consider how this diverse faculty brought differing forms of art theory and practice into contact in the classroom. Examining the implications of visual pedagogy as an expression of transnational solidarity, I interrogate the forms of knowledge exchanged during this pivotal period at ENAV, and, more broadly, the nature of the political and aesthetic ontologies forged at this contact point of militant global networks.