

'Revolutionary Romances: Transcultural Art Histories in the GDR – Prologue' at the Albertinum, Dresden, 2022

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'Revolutionary Romances: Transcultural Art Histories in the GDR – Prologue', Albertinum, Dresden, Germany, 13 April – 4 September 2022



Installation view, 'Revolutionary Romances: Transkulturelle Kunstgeschichten in der DDR – Prolog', 13 April – 4 September 2022, Albertinum, Dresden, Germany, courtesy of the Staatliche Kunstsammlung Dresden (SKD), photo by Klemens Renner

Following the exhibition '1 Million Roses to Angela Davis' (10 October 2020 – 30 May 2021), the Albertinum in Dresden showed a prologue to its exhibition and research project 'Revolutionary Romances: Transcultural Art Histories in the GDR', from 13 April to 9 September 2022. '1 Million Roses to Angela Davis' was only open to the public for a short time due to the pandemic and was dedicated to the solidarity of the GDR¹ with the Black Panther movement, as well as to the more recent Black Lives Matter movement that flared up in the spring of 2020. After embedding the art of the GDR in a broader, primarily Eastern European context in 2018 thanks to its largescale programme 'Wir müssen reden', with this

¹ The German Democratic Republic, or 'East Germany' as it was more commonly known in the West

2022 exhibition the Albertinum analysed the cultural and artistic relations of the GDR to the so-called ‘Global South’, or what, in the West, was generally referred to formerly as the ‘Third World’. In this way, the Albertinum closed another research gap, as the art of the GDR is still far too rarely inscribed in the international web of art histories and is presented as isolated from the rest of art historiography, contributing to the promotion of it in the Western narrative of an art that has fallen out of time.

The Albertinum has not been the only museum to address this topic. Other institutions have also been exploring these international connections of the GDR with the Global South, the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) and the Humboldt-Forum in Berlin, for example, or Das MINSK Kunsthaus in Potsdam. While HKW is pursuing these cultural connections with the countries of the Global South, the Albertinum started from the collection of the Staatliche Kunstsammlung Dresden (SKD), examining which artworks in its own collection address the Global South and what works by artists from the Global South are in the collection itself – that is, artists who were active in the GDR, on the one hand, or whose works were acquired for the collections, on the other. In addition, the Albertinum showed contemporary artists who deal artistically with this network of relationships. This first prelude or prologue was integrated into the presentation of the permanent collection and meandered through the entire Albertinum, demonstrating the interconnectedness of the art of the GDR not only with the Global South but also with the rest of the collection. It also conveyed the general interconnectedness of art histories.

The presentation extended over all three floors of the Albertinum. Installed in the atrium was the video sculpture *Angela* (2020) by the South African-Portuguese artist Ângela Ferreiras, an abstracted replica of a GDR-era industrial printing press that was actually used for the solidarity campaign in support of Angela Davis in 1971. The sculpture features a film with several sequences revolving around, among other things, Angela Davis and her fight for freedom for African Americans, as well as the GDR’s solidarity with her. Laura Horelli’s video work *Namibia Today* (2018) was projected in the Hermann Glöckner Lecture Room. In this documentary-style video, cover pages of *Namibia Today*, the Namibian liberation movement’s magazine, are shown, as well as protagonists of the magazine from the GDR and the Namibian liberation movement telling their stories. The editorial office-in-exile of SWAPO (South West Africa People’s Organisation) was forced to operate from Angola due to the disputes with South Africa over Namibian independence. The GDR not only supported SWAPO, but from 1980 to 1985 *Namibia Today* was printed at the Fortschritt printing plant in Erfurt, and Laura Horelli had assembled some of the original issues of the magazine in a display case.

In the stairwell of the Albertinum was a graphic conceived by the Nigerian artist Emeka Ogboh, in cooperation with the Museum für Volkerkunde zu Dresden, that documented the ongoing demands for the return of African cultural assets as well as the various international exhibitions of Benin bronzes from Berlin collections. In contrast to the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), the GDR showed interest in an exchange back in the 1970s and presented



Installation view of Ângela Ferreira's *Angela* (2020), mixed media with video (11:46 min loop), 400 x 120 x 60 cm – in 'Revolutionary Romances: Transkulturelle Kunstgeschichten in der DDR – Prolog', 13 April – 4 September 2022, Albertinum, Dresden, Germany, courtesy of the Staatliche Kunstsammlung Dresden (SKD), photo by Klemens Renner

exhibitions of historical art from what is now Nigeria, although without actually returning any cultural goods. This graphic accompanied an intervention by the artist within the SKD collection that addressed a controversial part of the collection itself. In a darkened room, a large-format photograph of a portrait of a Benin bronze from the artist's series *At the Threshold* (2021) was shown at the exact chronological point in the collection correlating to when the theft of the bronzes by the British colonial power took place: 1897. The works exhibited in this room eluded the viewer's gaze through their darkening, just as the Benin bronzes have eluded viewers in their country of origin for more than a century. Likewise, only part of the photograph is illuminated, which is why the Benin bronze that was on display oscillated between presence and absence. Usually, many stories are attached to a work of art or a cultural object, but as the bronzes were stolen from their place of origin they are therefore deprived of such life stories. These stories disappear into the nothingness of the dark that surrounds them. This fact takes on all the more significance since the art of the GDR is also loaded with the stories of many former GDR citizens, as was evidenced by the visitors' books during the 2019 exhibition 'Focus Albertinum: East German Painting and Sculpture 1949–1990' (15 June 2018 – 6 January 2019). In these, countless visitors told personal stories that they associated with the exhibited paintings, pictures that have often accompanied them and represented important stages throughout their lives.

On the same floor, integrated into the presentation of contemporary art, could be found the work of Sung Tieu, which deals with the living conditions of Vietnamese contract workers who were brought to the GDR thanks to a 1980 recruitment agreement. Such employment enabled

the Vietnamese workers to have a higher standard of living and to purchase goods they could not have acquired in their home country, but they also faced exclusion through being forced to live in dormitories and with work contracts that heavily regulated them and prevented them from fully integrating into GDR society. Seldom shown portraits from the 1950s to the 1970s in the SKD's collection depicting foreign trainees, workers or students were hung alongside and amongst Sung Tieu's work. Only rarely were those depicted mentioned by their full names, which is why part of the research work of this exhibition project was also devoted to identifying these individuals in order to restore their identity.

One floor below, a room was dedicated solely to works by Cuban, Chilean and Vietnamese artists, as well as artists from the GDR whose works dealt with these countries in some way. Cuban posters that were folded and placed as inserts in each issue of the magazine *TRIcontinental* were shown next to a graphic by Lea Grundig that invoked the world socialist community. *TRIcontinental* was initially published in 1967 by OSPAAL, the Organization of Solidarity with the Peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America, an organisation founded in Cuba in 1966 with the aim of co-ordinating solidarity among freedom movements and the young nation-states on all three continents that had achieved independence. Similar to Lea Grundig, OSPAAL also propagated the strengthening of a socialist internationalism, which is why the slogan of the artists working for the magazine *TRIcontinental* was 'The art of revolution will be internationalist'.



Installation view, 'Revolutionary Romances: Transkulturelle Kunstgeschichten in der DDR – Prolog', 13 April – 4 September 2022, Albertinum, Dresden, Germany – with Dietrich Peter's *Miriam Makeba* (1979, oil on cardboard) on the left, two linocuts from Paul Pedak's 1978 series *Children of Soweto* (centre), and a selection of solidarity posters from 1967–1969 on the right, courtesy of the Staatliche Kunstsammlung Dresden (SKD), photo by Klemens Renner

Almost all of the Chilean and Vietnamese artists whose work was exhibited here had a direct connection to Dresden through their studies; many continued their studies in Dresden or completed postgraduate studies at the art academy there. After the military coup in Chile in 1973 that brought General Augusto Pinochet to power, many of the Chilean artists presented here, such as the artist couple Hernando León and Margarita Pellegrin, emigrated to the GDR. César Olhagaray, for example, brought Chilean mural painting to the GDR and founded the mural painting group 'Brigada Salvador Allende' in Dresden. Hector Tobar, represented in the exhibition with graphics from his *Solidarity* series (1976), also designed facades and interiors of homes, schools and kindergartens. The illustrated book *Chile Hoffnung eines Kontinents* (Chile: Hope of a Continent) from 1972 by the photographer Thomas Billhardt, shown in a display case in the exhibition, shaped the image of this Latin American country for many GDR citizens. The 1973 coup in Chile especially was taken up as a cause and interest by many of the artists in the GDR, with the veneration of the assassinated Salvador Allende and condemnation of Pinochet. In his overpainted photomontage, for example, Lutz Dammbeck superimposes the 1973 coup with everyday scenes from Leipzig in 1978.



Thomas Billhardt's 1972 book *Chile: Hoffnung eines Kontinents* in a display case in 'Revolutionary Romances: Transkulturelle Kunstgeschichten in der DDR – Prolog', 13 April – 4 September 2022, Albertinum, Dresden, Germany, courtesy of the Staatliche Kunstsammlung Dresden (SKD), photo by Klemens Renner

Following the transcultural approach of Monica Juneja, holder of the first and only chair of Global Art History in the German-speaking university landscape at the University of Heidelberg, this exhibition interrogated the SKD's collection for 'reciprocal assignments and

for configurations of interconnectedness² of the various art histories in the GDR and the diverse countries of the Global South. Thus, once again, the master-narrative of the West, and especially of the Cold War, of a dominant temporality – the Western art historical chronology – that attributes the character of belatedness to all other art developments, is broken in favour of a ‘heterochronicity’, in the sense of Thomas Dacosta Kaufmann.³ Traditional art historiography, especially Western art historiography, which often understands linear art developments in terms of a higher and further development, is countered by a multiple network of an ‘entangled art history’ that understands temporality as achronological. This approach also allows ‘the concept of culture to be freed from an ethnically, religiously, or linguistically conditioned closedness [... and] to make actors, processes, and phenomena “sayable” beyond the cultural boundaries previously understood as static, thus enabling a polyvalent and reciprocally conceived history of relations’.⁴ In a context such as the city of Dresden, where rightwing populist and nationalist tendencies and movements such as Pegida are heating up the atmosphere to an extreme and are advocating for a genuinely German or even East German identity, and also instrumentalising the art of the GDR for this purpose, such an exhibition project as this proves particularly valuable in underscoring the fact that culture is never homogeneous or pure and thus the concept of a pure German identity is also obsolete. After fleeing Chile for Peru in 1974 and subsequently moving to Dresden, Hernando León taught at the Dresden art academy until 1992, leaving his mark on a generation of artists. ‘[E]stablished notions of fixed identities and alterities, as well as immovable dichotomies between assimilation and resistance’ can thus be countered by ‘[t]he focus on the agency of individual actors – as an important corrective against master narratives’.⁵ Even though Juneja rejects Homi Bhabha’s notion of ‘hybridity’ because – as she puts it – of its inflationary use, this notion however could capture the exhibition as an in-between space and realm of difference where communal interests and cultural values emerge through intersubjective and collective experiences, creating a space for difference without assumed or imposed hierarchies.

The stories surrounding the acquisition of some of the works, which curator Kathleen Reinhardt related on a walk with her through the exhibition, support this thesis. These stories play out on a microhistorical level and add another layer to the web of relationships presented here. One particularly romantic story concerns some prints by Cuban artists from the SKD’s

² Julia Allerstorfer, ‘The West and the Rest? De- und postkoloniale Perspektiven auf Kunst und Kunstgeschichte(n)’, in Julia Allerstorfer and Monika Leisch-Kiesel, eds, *Global Art History: Transkulturelle Verortungen von Kunst und Wissenschaft*, transcript Verlag, Bielefeld, 2017, p 39

³ See Thomas Dacosta Kaufmann, as quoted by Monika Leisch-Kiesel in ‘Kunstwissenschaft in globaler Perspektive: Westliche Kunstgeschichtsschreibung und Ansätze inter- bzw. transkultureller Blicke’, in Julia Allerstorfer and Monika Leisch-Kiesel, eds, *Global Art History: Transkulturelle Verortungen von Kunst und Wissenschaft*, op cit, pp 19–28

⁴ ‘Kultur, Kulturtransfer und Grenzüberschreitungen: Joachim Eibach und Claudia Opitz im Gespräch mit Monica Juneja’, *Zeitenblicke* 11, no 1, 7 November 2012, p 2 www.zeitenblicke.de/2012/1/Interview

⁵ Ibid, p 4 (translation by the author)

Kupferstich-Kabinett (collection of prints and drawings). A Cuban art historian travelled as an intern through various museums in the GDR to learn about museum work practices. During her stay at the Kupferstich-Kabinett, she fell in love with one of the staff members. They were married in Cuba and were able to purchase some prints for the Kupferstich-Kabinett on their honeymoon.

The interconnectedness of the various art histories was further explored through ‘The Global GDR: A Transcultural History of Art (1949–1990)’ conference that was held from 9–11 June, 2022, and a blog accompanying the exhibition on the SKD’s digital platform Voices. Both illuminated the complexity of transcultural relations. The interconnections thus also extended to different media. In her introduction, Kerstin Schankweiler, one of the organisers of the conference and professor of image studies in a global context at the Technische Universität Dresden, referred above all to the affective bonds resulting from the artists’ encounters and the imagined community of a solidary internationalism. Christian Saehrendt contextualised the exhibition through his remarks on the GDR’s foreign cultural policy in Africa and the Middle East, on which he also published a detailed book in 2017.⁶ African independence movements in the 1960s led to many new African state formations, in which the Soviet Union saw an opportunity to export the socialist system to Africa and build a socialist world system. The GDR acted as a junior partner in this process, also in order to open up new sources of raw materials. The young charismatic politicians of the newly founded African states, with whom lively exchanges took place, evoked a charisma transfer both internally and externally for the GDR, which was led at the time by a geriatric elite, and to a semantic upgrading of the GDR. As a result, the elite, with whom most GDR citizens had become disenchanted, profited from the charisma of these young and popular African politicians. Other conference presentations analysed the international artistic networks established through ‘Intergrafik’, an international triennial organised by the Verband der Bildenden Künste, and MailArt.

However, the conference also highlighted the danger of this very important approach: the threat of a purely empirical accumulation of data and facts with little theoretical treatment, as the artworks are reduced to artefacts or the archival material of transcultural encounters. Even though some of the presentations in the conference shone through their meticulous archival study, the studies did not really go beyond a presentation of the collected data and facts. This contradicts the very critical approach taken by the organisers of the conference, since an empirical positivism is fundamentally rejected by it.

The visitors’ books that were laid out in the exhibition also invited the public to add their stories to the art stories on display. As in the ‘1 Million Roses to Angela Davis’ exhibition, curators Kathleen Reinhardt and Mathias Wagner thus performed a ‘tiger’s leap’ back into

⁶ See Christian Saehrendt, *Kunst im Kampf für das ‘Sozialistische Weltsystem’: auswärtige Kulturpolitik der DDR in Afrika und Nahost*, Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart, 2017

the past, in the sense of Walter Benjamin,⁷ in search of past treasures that could develop new relevance in the present. In this way, the story extends into the now and replaces the temporal sequence with a collaged interrelation of the various historical levels. The internationalism addressed by Kerstin Schankweiler at the conference is considered by Chelsea Haines and Gemma Sharpe, guest editors of a special issue of *ARTMargins*, ‘as a form of bureaucratized peacekeeping [and diplomacy] ... Postwar internationalism thus played a vital role in determining statehood and depended, in turn, on an increasingly normative model of the nation-state itself.’⁸ This internationalism extends through the personal stories of the visitors to the present day, reminding them of their solidarity with countries of the Global South, which was not only imposed by the propaganda of the GDR. In works such as those by Sung Tieu and Emeka Ogbob, however, the dark sides of colonial internationalism are also revealed. Chika Okeke-Agulu summarised the two sides in an interview with *ARTMargins* as follows: ‘There are two ways that I look at internationalism. One is to see it as a colonial enterprise or as the outcome of a colonial enterprise. The other is a product or a form of agency within anticolonial practices.’⁹

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⁷ See Walter Benjamin, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* [On the Concept of History], Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 2010 [1940]

⁸ Chelsea Haines and Gemma Sharpe, eds, ‘Introduction: Art, Institutions, and Internationalism, 1945–73’, special issue, *ARTMargins*, vol 8, no 2, 2019, pp 6–7

⁹ Chika Okeke-Agulu, ‘Legacies of Internationalism’: *Conference Report and Roundtable*, in *ARTMargins*, vol 8, no 2, p 20