

'Revolutionary Romances? Globale Kunstgeschichten in der DDR' (Revolutionary Romances? Global Art Histories in the GDR) at the Albertinum, Dresden

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'Revolutionary Romances? Globale Kunstgeschichten in der DDR' (Revolutionary Romances? Global Art Histories in the GDR), Albertinum, Dresden, Germany, 4 November 2023 – 2 June 2024



Following the inaugural exhibition 'Revolutionary Romances: Transcultural Art Histories in the GDR – Prologue' (Revolutionary Romances: Transcultural Art Histories in the GDR – Prologue) in the summer of 2022,¹ the Albertinum in Dresden showed 'Revolutionary Romances? Global Art Histories in the GDR' over November 2023 to June 2024. Following the move of the initial curator, Kathleen Reinhardt, to the Georg Kolbe Museum in Berlin, where she took up the

¹ See the author's review of this initial 'Prologue' published in *Third Text Online* in December 2023: www.thirdtext.org/fritzscht-albertinumreview

post of director in December 2022, her former collaborator on the Prologue exhibition, Mathias Wagner, took over the exhibition project, in collaboration with Pauline Hohn and Martin Buhlig.

Based once again on the collection of the Albertinum, the Kupferstich-Kabinett and the Kunstfonds of Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden (SKD), and accompanied with loans from the Ludwig Collection as well as selected contemporary artworks, the exhibition examined and scrutinised the relationship between the former GDR and various countries of the Global South. Beginning with the Cuban Revolution and the independence and liberation movements in Africa in the late 1950s, which were strongly influenced by socialist and communist ideas, the utopia of a socialist world community was created. For the GDR, this sparked the hope for international recognition, denied to it by the West, and the desire to demonstrate its own state sovereignty and openness to the world. In this spirit of internationalism, often staged with great pathos and always bureaucratically controlled, the curators traced a field of tension: the obvious contradiction between, on the one hand, the criticism and condemnation of capitalist imperialism, the demand for universal human rights and unrestricted solidarity with the brother countries, and, on the other, a persistently prevailing Eurocentric perspective that gave rise to paternalistic stereotypes, exoticism and ultimately racism. The curators thus focused on 'the visualisation of contradictions and ruptures in the great left-wing counter-project of the 20th century, which propagated secularism, universalism and egalitarianism, but did not redeem these values in its state-bound form'.² The collection on which this exhibition and the research into these international relations were based did not grow out of any collecting practice or research focus of the museum during the GDR era, but was gathered through donations and transfers of ownership as well as the private initiatives of a few dedicated curators.

The exhibition focused on the 'productive contact zones' and thus a transcultural perspective of the interwoven nature of an entangled art history, which Christian Kravagna has examined,³ as well as questions of othering and representation, which are always linked to difficult power relations and interests, as analysed by the pioneer of postcolonial studies, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.⁴ The exhibition was dedicated to a chapter of art history little researched to date. It was part of a series of research projects and exhibitions, such as those at MdbK (the Leipzig Museum of Fine Arts), and HKW (the House of World Cultures) in Berlin,⁵ and also researched, for

² Kathleen Reinhardt, Kerstin Schankweiler and Mathias Wagner, 'Internationalismus in der DDR: Kunst und visuelle Kultur zwischen Idealen und Widersprüchen', in *Revolutionary Romances? Globale Kunstgeschichten in der DDR*, Spectorbooks, Leipzig, 2024, pp 24–25

³ See Christian Kravagna, *Transmodern: An art history of contact: 1920–60*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2022

⁴ See, for example, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the subaltern speak? Postkolonialität und subalterne Artikulation*, Verlag Turia + Kant, Vienna and Berlin, 2020

⁵ These exhibitions and research projects were 'Re-Connect: Kunst und Kampf im Bruderland' [Art and Conflict in Brotherland] at the MdbK, the Leipzig Museum of Fine Arts, 18 May – 10 September 2023; and 'Echos der Bruderländer: Was ist der Preis der Erinnerung und wie hoch sind die Kosten der Amnesie? Oder: Visionen und Illusionen antiimperialistischer Solidarität. Eine Ausstellung und Recherche im Haus der Kulturen der Welt' [Echoes of the brother countries: What is the price of memory and how high are the costs of amnesia? Or: Visions and illusions of anti-imperialist solidarity. An exhibition and research at the House of World Cultures], 1 March – 20 May 2024.

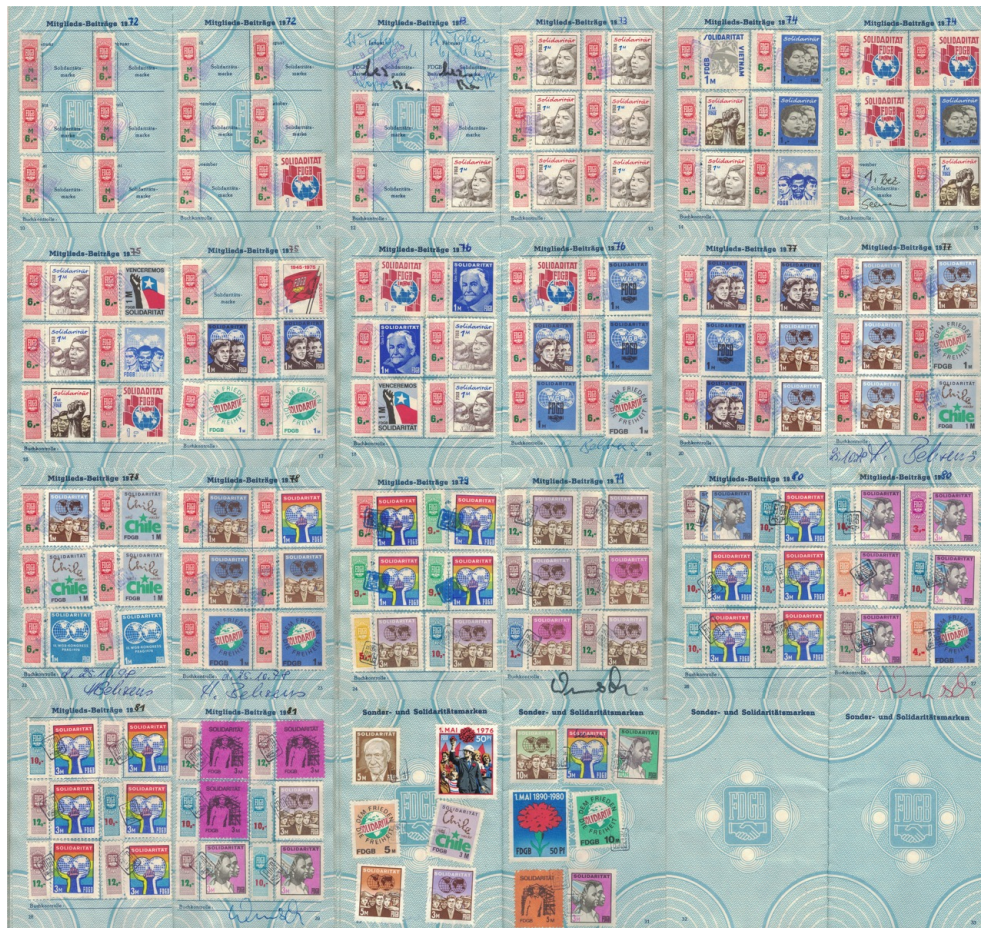
example, by Kerstin Schankweiler at the Technische Universität (TU) Dresden.⁶ Schankweiler and her team were involved in the creation of this exhibition, and it also follows Maja and Reuben Fowke's call to make the methods of postcolonial studies fruitful for the academic examination of art from the former Eastern Bloc states.⁷ Regarding the right-wing populism that has persisted in Dresden for years, these approaches seem particularly important – as a reminder to the people of Dresden that there was indeed solidarity with people of colour in the GDR era, and how low-threshold racism sets in and always poisons a society.

The exhibition unfolded its various themes through five chapters: 'Ideals and Icons', 'Art and Solidarity', 'Travelling and Contacts', 'Temporary Guests?' and 'Gathered Fraternally?'. Unfortunately, this time the exhibition did not wind its way through the entire building, as it did in the Prologue, and did not interweave, in terms of space and time, the presentation of the collection with the works selected. The stories that curator Mathias Wagner knows and told about the individual works, and about the relations of the GDR with the various countries of the Global South in general, not only formed a narrative meta-level but were also important as an arc of suspense in order to make the interweaving of art histories clear and comprehensible.

The ideological leitmotif of the GDR's foreign and cultural policy – friendship between peoples and international solidarity – was deconstructed by the artist Wenke Seeman right in the anteroom of the exhibition. In her installation *Proletarier der DDR, klebt Marken: Wir haben alle Verpflichtungen erfüllt*, from her series *Solidarität, Archivdialoge #2 – Staatsbürger* (Solidarity, Archive Dialogues #2 – Citizens), created in 2022, the artist showed a narrow strip of photo wallpaper on one wall, on which montages from trade union books with glued-on solidarity stamps could be seen, which were classified by a statistical representation of how many stamps were stuck on for which country. Opposite this were photos from Seemann's series *Fahnenapell*, with its scenes of pioneers lining up for a roll call. In front of this was a small mechanical music box, set in motion by a crank, which played the children's song 'Children of the World'. International solidarity was imposed on children through songs and flag appeals, but the routine sticking on of solidarity stamps turned it into an empty gesture. Nevertheless, the immense amount of donations made in the GDR testified to a desire for compassion that was not enforced: for example, after the military coup in Chile in 1973, the sums of money collected were so high that the GDR was almost overwhelmed in coping with them. Due to the non-convertibility of the GDR *mark*, these sums could not simply be paid out to the recipients, as they would not have been able to buy anything on the international market with GDR currency. As a result, the GDR had to resort to the trick of buying goods in the GDR itself with the donated money, that were then sent to the country that was to be supported and which in turn increased the GDR's economy of scarcity.

⁶ See the projects 'Affektive Archive – Auslandsreisen von Künstler: innen zur Zeit der DDR' [Affective Archives – Artists' Travels Abroad During the GDR], <https://tu-dresden.de/gsw/phil/ikm/kuge/forschung/aktuelle-projekte/affektivearchive#intro>; and 'Art in Networks: The GDR and its Global Relations (1949–1990)', <https://tu-dresden.de/gsw/phil/ikm/bgk/forschung/projekte/art-in-networks>

⁷ See Maja and Reuben Fowkes, 'How to Write a Global History of Central and Eastern European Art', in Agata Jakubowska and Magdalena Radomska, eds, *Horizontal Art History and Beyond: Revising Peripheral Critical Practices*, Routledge, London, 2022, pp 111–123



Wenke Seemann, *Proletarians of the GDR, stick stamps | We have met all our obligations, from Solidarity, Archive Dialogues #2 – Citizens*, 2022, room installation, photographs, digital print, music box, plot font, dimensions variable, courtesy of the artist

The contemporary works interspersed throughout the individual chapters, such as those by Wenke Seemann, reflected critically on the exhibited works in the collection. They questioned the propagated slogans of the GDR's cultural policy of socialist internationalism and drew on the curator's intention of a meta-level of critical examination of the contradictions of the GDR's friendly revolutionary relations with the Global South.

In the art produced in the GDR, the subject of solidarity with the people of Chile was taken up by many artists. However, some stylistically varied paintings were created – such as Christoph Wetzel's *Der tote Präsident* (The Dead President), 1974, in a more classically realistic and pathetic style, or Hartwig Ebersbach's expressive installation of paintings *Widmung an Chile* (Dedication to Chile), also from 1974. These very different paintings emphasised that the complexity of international solidarity was not purely voluntary, but also that it was not entirely forced. Ebersbach's case shows that the painterly realisation of such a theme was by no means sufficient to be officially accepted. On the contrary. Laid out on a wall in the exhibition, the tall, narrow formats, reminiscent of coffins, each depicting one dead person, were painted after a police photograph of the Paris Commune of 1871. Due to criticism of his flamboyant expressionist style, this work was only exhibited in a community exhibition; it was later purchased by the West German collector Peter Ludwig. Nevertheless, the paintings by these two artists are an example of the fact that a wide variety of artists in the GDR were united in their support for the Chileans,



Christoph Wetzel, *The Dead President*, 1974, mixed media on hardboard, 200 x 150 cm, courtesy of the Albertinum, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, inv no 80/13



Hartwig Ebersbach, *Dedication to Chile*, 1974, oil on hardboard, 12 panels, 6 panels: 200 x 60 cm, 6 panels: 120 x 60 cm, courtesy of the Ludwig Forum Aachen, Ludwig Collection, donation Peter and Irene Ludwig

even if this produced a polyphony of interpretations rather than a homogeneous approach to supporting other countries.

The posters on display by various Cuban artists, and the prints by Vietnamese artist Trịnh Kim Vinh, showed the transculturality that both art historian Atreyee Gupta and Monica Juneja analyse. As part of the Heidelberg research Cluster ‘Asia and Europe in Global Context’, Juneja’s ‘approach favours the investigation of transculturality in order to free the concept of culture from an ethnically, religiously or linguistically conditioned closedness. [For Juneja] [t]he concept of transculturality sheds light on transformation processes that unfold in encounters and on the resulting relationships between regions and cultures.’⁸

The posters by Cuban artists that were inserted in the magazine *TRIcontinental*, founded in Havana in 1966 and published after 1967 by the Organisation in Solidarity with the Peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America (OSPAAAL), blended stylistic elements of American pop art with Afro-Cuban symbolism, psychedelic art with echoes of advertising. The result was posters that were at the intersection of the art of the ‘West’ and the ‘Global South’.

The Vietnamese artist Trịnh Kim Vinh, who completed further studies at the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts between 1971 and 1973, where she focused on lithography, was trained in the spirit of European modernism during her first degree. However, the revolutionary élan of independence and then the war in Vietnam led to her growing interest in the material cultures and precolonial practices of Vietnam, which was then enriched by her studies in Dresden with a knowledge of Socialist Realism, causing her work to oscillate between modernism and tradition and Socialist Realism. Any distinction to be made between these diverse patterns are no longer valid, as they are each already broken within themselves by a perspective that always looks from the outside.

The works of the Beninese artist Georges Adéagbo and the German Sven Johne ventured a tiger’s leap, not only in terms of time but above all geopolitically. In their work, both artists collect artistic set pieces from the past that develop new relevance in the present and once again point to the complexity and difficulty of historical overlaps. In his installation created for the exhibition, Adéagbo combined objects from his homeland with historical objects from the GDR as well as with artworks from the SKD collection. He commissioned a painter from Cotonou, Benoît Adanhoumé, to repaint several of the artworks from the SKD in the style of African sign-painting. Adding his own comments on them to give some perspective, Adéagbo created an interplay of local and global references, appropriation and reinterpretation, and thus a ‘regional site-specificity’ (Kerstin Schankweiler). It is certainly no coincidence that he also chose the portrait of the Nigerian student Chukwuemeka Ogbue painted by Eva Schulze-Knabe in 1960, to which the painter herself gave the impersonal title *Student aus Nigeria* (Student from Nigeria). For years, this title meant that it was unclear who was depicted reading in the painting. It was only by chance that the

⁸ ‘Kultur, Kulturtransfer und Grenzüberschreitungen: Joachim Eibach und Claudia Opitz im Gespräch mit Monica Juneja’, *Zeitenblicke* 11, no 1, 7 November 2012, p 1, www.zeitenblicke.de/2012/1/Interview/index.html



Trinh Kim Vinh, *Civil Defence*, 1973, colour lithograph, 49.9 x 59.7 cm, courtesy of Kunstfonds, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, inv no 13a/1/73



Georges Adéagbo, *Les étudiants Africains et le Socialisme* [African Students and Socialism], 2023, installation, various objects and materials, dimensions variable, courtesy of the Albertinum, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, on loan from the Gesellschaft für Moderne Kunst in Dresden e.V.

identity of the student was revealed and the name subsequently added to the title. However, the daughter of the late Eva Schulze-Knabe (she died in 1976) sharply criticised the renaming, without giving any consideration to how reductionist and racist the original choice of title was and how it robbed the sitter of his individuality. Adéagbo's work not only pointed out this historical injustice, he also corrected it by presenting a version of Schulze-Knabe's painting in an African style and with the updated title.

In his installation of photographs and archive material, Sven Johne presented current images of the once utopian Vietnamese city of Vinh. With the support of the GDR, it was rebuilt according to the latest modern rules after the destruction of the Vietnam War. However, after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, the residential complexes, which were considered luxurious, lost their significance and literally sank into the vegetation that engulfed them. In this context of disdain for the socialist heritage and the support of the GDR, the explanations given about coffee production in Vietnam by curator Mathias Wagner, in a guided tour, seem almost like an irony of history. As the supply of coffee for the GDR population was getting more difficult from year to year, the GDR decided to negotiate with Vietnam on the cultivation of coffee. A large part of the investment in the necessary infrastructure to enable coffee cultivation in Vietnam was made by the GDR, but in return a certain percentage of the future harvest was requested. However, this coffee cultivation only really bore fruit after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the GDR, suddenly catapulting Vietnam into being one of the major global coffee producers.



Sven Johne, *The City of Vinh*, 2009, installation with 12 pigment inkjet prints on cotton paper, each 31.6 x 41.8 cm (framed), courtesy of Kunststiftung DZ Bank

This successful, multifaceted overview of parts of the collection, which critically reflects on the complex and multilayered relations between the GDR and the Global South, was accompanied by an extensive catalogue and an unfortunately somewhat unsuccessful glossary. It is certainly to be commended when easy language is used in a glossary in order to also engage less-knowledgeable visitors, but such language, it must be said, should also be formulated correctly in terms of spelling and grammar and perhaps some of the facts presented should actually be verified.

However, as the curators emphasised, this overview remains a first step – a beginning and a demonstration of the research desiderata and gaps in knowledge about the collection. All the more reason to wish that concrete further steps were already announced in the exhibition in order to avoid the impression of an ephemeral view of the collection and thus a certain amount of lip service. In the future, there is a great need for an even stronger engagement with the artworks themselves, beyond the networks in which they are located or that become visible through them. Particularly in view of the alarmingly high percentage of votes for the far rightwing AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) party in the disastrous European election results in Saxony earlier in the summer of 2024, and in the Saxony state elections in September 2024, it seems extremely important to continue the project and embed the SKD collections so cherished by the people of Dresden in global contexts. However, a Western impetus to educate the East Germans should be avoided, as was echoed in an interview with the departing General Director of the SKD, Marion Ackermann. Ackermann expressed dismay that although she had befriended so many of the mayors in Saxony, the people had, to a large extent, voted for the AfD. How dare the stupid people from the East resist and ignore the word of the Western General Director of the SKD!

Constanze Fritzsch is a postdoctoral fellow at the Kunsthistorische Institut in Florence and was the Fulbright Fellowship holder at the Getty Research Institute in 2023/2024. With the support of a fellowship from the Bundesstiftung Aufarbeitung, she spent four months in 2024 and six months in 2022 on a research trip to Prague and Warsaw. She holds a doctorate from the Catholic University in Eichstätt-Ingolstadt after getting her MA in art history from the University Paris Nanterre and her BA in art history from University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne. She is a former member of the 'Own Reality' research project run by the German Forum for Art History in Paris, and has worked as an assistant curator at the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden. She has been on the academic staff at the Bauhaus University in Weimar, the Academy of Fine Arts in Dresden and the Universities of Leipzig and Dresden.