

BOOK REVIEW

'Art and Solidarity
Reader: Radical Actions,
Politics and Friendships',
edited by Katya
García-Antón



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On 11 December 2019, the same year when the democratically elected Indian government rescinded Article 370 and Article 35A in the Valley of Kashmir on 5 August, the amendment of the Citizenship Act (CAA) was announced in the Indian Parliament. The discriminatory nature of the newly enacted bill was abundantly clear. It offered Indian citizenship to refugees escaping religious persecution from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan who arrived in India before 2014, but only to those of Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Parsi, Buddhist and Christian persuasion. The bill included neither Muslim refugees nor refugees from other communities fleeing persecution from neighbouring countries, including Rohingyas from Myanmar, Tamils from Sri Lanka, and Tibetans. The announcement was immediately met with intense protest in a variety of geographical pockets in India and beyond. The tradition of dissent against sectarian politics in the Valley was reignited at an unprecedented scale across India, when Kashmir was under siege with minimal channels of communication.

Performing at one of the protest events against the CAA, 'India, My Valentine', the poet Aamir Aziz recited his poem *Sab Yaad Rakha Jayega* (Everything Will be Remembered). When Roger Waters of the rock band Pink Floyd narrated a few lines of Aziz's poem at an event marking the arrest of whistle-blower Julian Assange, the moment enacted what Peg Birmingham has described as: 'We became aware of the existence of a right to have rights as well as the right to belong to some kind of organised community, only when millions of people emerged who had lost and could not regain these rights because of the new global political

situation.¹ Aziz and Waters used their artistic expression to claim the right to live in the face of simmering binaries between truth and fabrication. In a non-aligned world, they paved the way to facilitate a glimpse into a performative solidarity that cuts across the linear circuit of space and time. These two radical actions in the face of state authorities initiated a rippling effect across geographies, irrespective of the physical distance between them, to build bonds of solidarity.

The *Art and Solidarity Reader: Radical Actions, Politics and Friendships*, edited by Katya García-Antón and published by the Office for Contemporary Art Norway (OCA) in 2022, is centred around this metaphor of ripples as it walks readers through the different arts practices produced as a response to the events of solidarities, from the epoch of the Cold War in the 1970s to the recent post-truth years. A substantial work, the book is divided into four sections: ‘Political Imaginaries. The Past and Future of Museological and Organisational Solidarities’; ‘World-Building Solidarities. Friendships and Reciprocities’; ‘Collectivity. The Everyday of Solidarity’; and ‘Situatenedness. Radical Accomplices, Indigenous Epistemologies and New Technologies of Solidarity’. Each section has different chapters by academics, artists, curators, filmmakers and researchers. The book is an expedition through the political turmoil at the centre of a vulnerable environment with the potential to cause ripples, with its intensity gauged only through the layers of troughs and crests experienced at both short and long intervals on the temporal axis. The ambitious expanse of fifty years that is taken into account in the *Reader* explores different physical parts of the globe to open a perspective on the bonds forged across art, history and political urgencies, to suggest what García-Antón mentions in the Introduction: that ‘a life of solidarity needs to be a shared one’ (p 10). Even when the act to unveil the hegemonic practices resulting from faultlines is inherited in the act of resistance, the Introduction clearly mentions the complexity and intersectionality in which the term ‘solidarity’ is enmeshed.

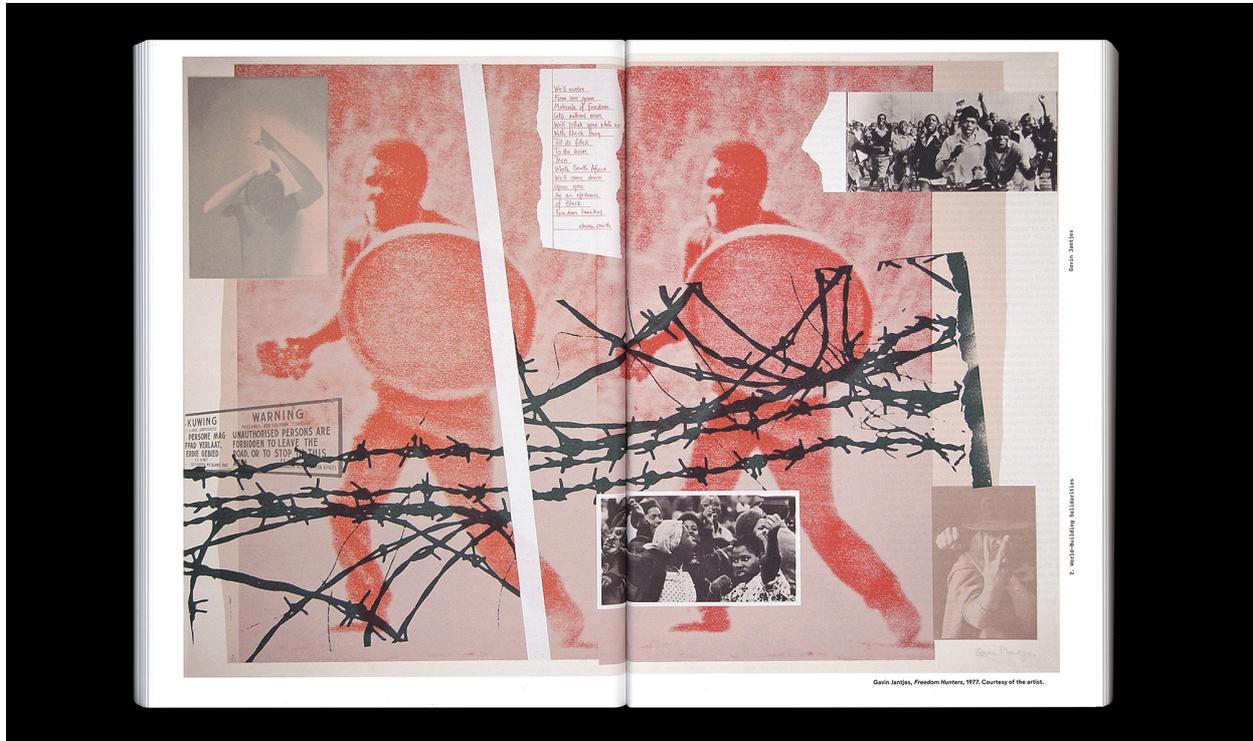
At the pinnacle of the Cold War, a corollary to the two World Wars and the eventual collapse of the colonial power network, the logical dimension of modernist time was contested to catapult the previously peripheral history to the new centre around which narratives were created in the recently independent republics. Within the disciplines of the arts, the institutionalisation of the production of knowledge systems – in the form of archives and museums – was the main preoccupation of the Eurocentric cultural task force of the twentieth century. However, with the advent of decolonisation and the Cold War, the urgent need to critique this repository of supposed rarefied truth, tied as it was to the matrix of power and knowledge, created the most important challenge to the canonisation of knowledge systems. The necessity to break the legacy of the epistemic status quo of the past was an assertion of a possibility of anchoring an ontology of relationality.

¹ Peg Birmingham, *Hannah Arendt and Human Rights: The Predicament of Common Responsibility*, Indiana University Press, Indiana, 2006, p 36

The artistic practice of solidarity in the museums of Chile and its archives is instrumental to the functionality of decolonisation, a task facilitated by the recognition of the presence of the dominant power structure in the absence of the voices of others. To support this argument, the Museo de la Solidaridad in Santiago – founded by Salvador Allende in 1971 – is a result of a network built on transnational solidarity. The first chapter of the book, ‘The Solidarity Community of the Museo Internacional de la Resistencia Salvador Allende in the Swedish and Finnish Collections’, by Soledad García Saavedra, illustrates the coming of the ‘nomadic’ museum to deflate the idea of coherent aesthetic sensibility in the face of a coup d’état. The arrival of the US military force in Chile to ‘rescue’ the nation in crisis established an authoritarian regime that lasted a few years shy of two decades. The dominance of geometric and abstract art in the museums of the US, especially during the Cold War, promoted a homogeneity and conventionality in the way that art was looked at. Antithetical to this, the Museo, or MIRSA as it was known, was home to donated artworks from more than forty countries, including Costa Rica, Canada, the US, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, the USSR, Iraq, Mongolia and Venezuela, to name a few. The ‘heterogenic aesthetics’ (p 38) that García Saavedra mentions decentralised the institutional rules of collection and display, up until 1990 when the artworks travelled to the countries from whence they had been donated. In doing so, the transnational form of activism channelled victimisation into a collective resistance to dictatorship. The spectrum of works encompassed a variety of genres and expression: from the conventional to the experimental, from fine arts to crafts, and from the abstract to the figurative. The artists’ donations were seen as a form of solidarity – a symbolic act of standing with the left-wing Chileans and their striving for freedom against illegal acts of death and torture.

Gavin Jantjes, in his ‘Art Contre Apartheid. The Power to Make the Local Global’, elucidates that the struggles in South Africa against the apartheid movement of the 1980s did not go unnoticed by the artist community; they were instilled with a desire to ‘infuse political culture with images that underlined the humanitarian spirit of solidarity’ (p 191). The Frenchman Ernest Pignon-Ernest and the exiled Spanish painter Antonio Saura initiated the formation of a special group named ‘15 Artists Against Apartheid’ with the help of the Paris UNESCO office. The group aimed to produce a portfolio of graphic art that was to be put on sale as signed limited editions but also as unlimited editions of posters. In 1983, the exhibition ‘Art Contre Apartheid’ opened at the Petit Palais in Paris. On International Human Rights Day, Jack Lang, then Cultural Minister of France, requested that state-funded art institutes exhibit the posters made by the ‘15 Artists Against Apartheid’ group. The exhibition was refused a place in the South African National Gallery collection in Cape Town, but travelled for nearly twelve years across the world, before finding a permanent home in the Centre for Humanities Research at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in South Africa. The final collection, ‘Art against Apartheid’, exemplifies what it means to go beyond the places of art to

highlight acts to ‘show’ solidarity. As García Saavedra says in the opening chapter of the book, solidarity is an operative term that demands a continuous negotiation beyond the conventional spaces of museums.

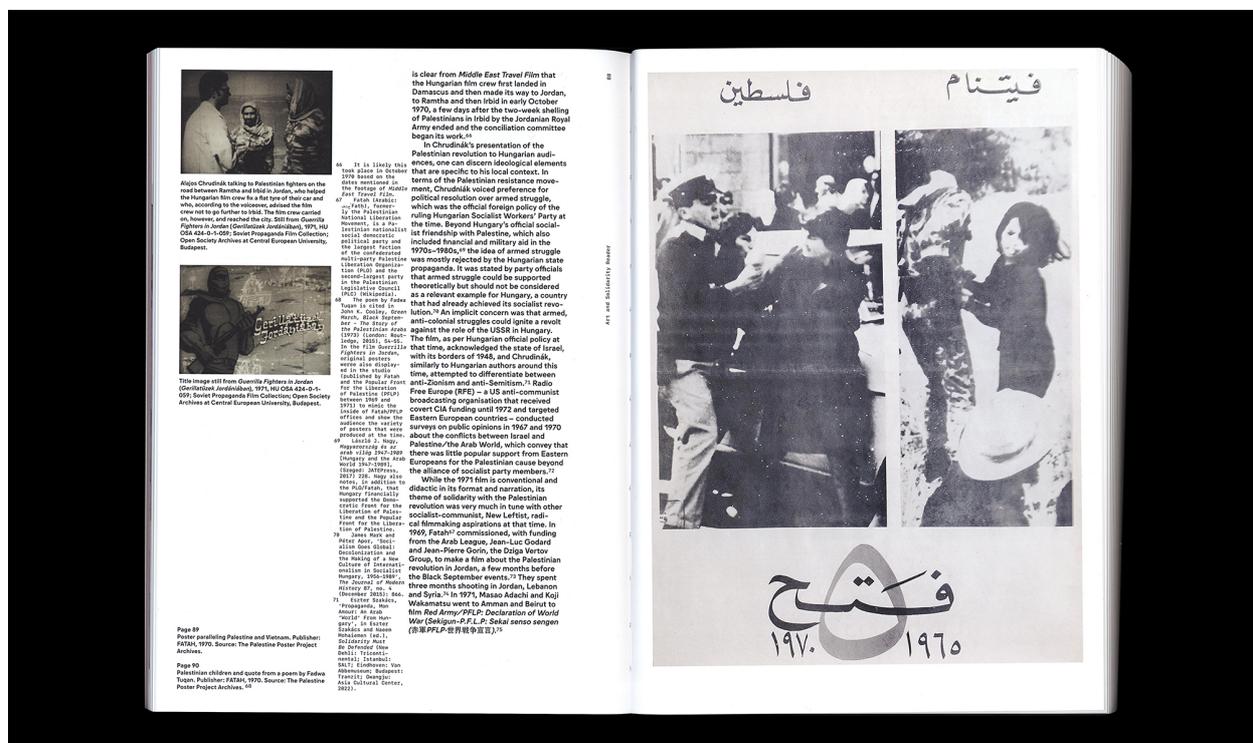


Page spread from Gavin Jantjes, ‘Art Centre Apartheid. The Power to Make the Local Global’, in the ‘World-Building Solidarities’ chapter in the *Art and Solidarity Reader*, with Jantjes’s own *Freedom Hunters* (1977)

In the chapter ‘Undoing and Redoing Cultural Space’, Laura Raicovich, in talking about the neutral stand of museums catering to affluent tastes – a way to wrap radical political ideology in the robes of cultural capitalism – offers an example of the project ‘Look at Art. Get Paid’ (LAAGP) at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum (RISD) in Providence in the US. This project encouraged people to visit the museum, the incentive being that visitors would be paid to visit the museum as ‘guest critics’. The prompt takes away the barrier between museums and visitors while puncturing the halo of reverence around the museum, which maintains itself as a site of cultural capitalism outside of the scope of exploration by the community. But the idea of bringing art into the public space could be of disservice, when, for example, the sensitivities shared by the local community are not taken into account. Raicovich looks at the incident of the installation *Scaffold* (2017) by the artist Sam Durant at the Walker Art Center’s newly expanded Sculpture Garden in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The sculpture reappropriated the gallows used in seven US government-sanctioned executions that were carried out between 1859 and 2006. The intention of inclusivity, which the artist and the Walker had intended, failed to resonate with the local community in an

instance when the work was a stark reminder of the colonial violence meted out by President Lincoln towards the indigenous Dakota people.

When the event of watching cinema is synonymous with democratic mass culture, the cinema serves as a site of cultural encounter. This is further illuminated when the transnational approach to the production of cinema was a common phenomena in the postwar period. One tactile example of this is the attention devoted to bringing the Palestine cause to the global platform. Soon after the Third Arab-Israeli War of 1967, the tenuous link between Israel and Eastern Bloc member countries was severed, encouraging the latter to create a bond of solidarity with the Arab world. At around the same time, the film *Guerrilla Fighters in Jordan*, made by the Military Studio of the Mafilm Hungarian Film Studios, translated to celluloid the events of Black September. Its production, detailed in the chapter ‘Ali’ in Jordan. Palestine Solidarity on Film’ by Eszter Szakács, highlights the common grounds of solidarity between Hungary and Palestine. The pervasive narrative on ‘Greater Hungary’ resonated with the ‘Hungarian national minorities, who – due to the significant changes of borders in Eastern Europe after the First World War treaties – had been residing outside of Hungary as citizens of its neighbouring countries (Romania, former Czechoslovakia former Yugoslavia)’ (p 96). The 24-minute-long film, with a voiceover by a Hungarian journalist, Alajos Chrudinák, navigates the viewers through maps, archival footage and a few excerpts of the interviews Chrudinák made with Yasser Arafat, Khalid Bakdash, and others.



Page spread from Eszter Szakács, ‘Ali’ in Jordan. Palestine Solidarity on Film’, in the ‘Political Imaginaries’ chapter in the *Art and Solidarity Reader*

The exercise of excavation leads an uninitiated self to see the archive not just as a static mimesis of reality but, rather, as an anchor of critical intervention with a multi-perspective approach to critique the implications of universal history. To encounter an entangled sliver of history is to lay bare the continual metamorphosis of the silenced fragments in the epistemic folds to the means of articulation. This is manifested by Toufoul Abou-Hodeib, who relates in her ‘The Travelling Scarf and Other Stories. Art Networks, Politics and Friendships Between Palestine and Norway’ how she found a letter from the Plastic Arts Section of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) addressed to the Kunstneres Hus (Artists’ House) in Oslo, detailing the logistics involved in organising an upcoming exhibition of Palestinian art in Oslo in 1981. To her surprise, the letter was not found ‘in Palestine or Lebanon but in Oslo in the archives of a Norwegian national institution’ (p 182). The event of rediscovering the archival letter serves the ‘agentive quality of documents’ to trace the journey of association and friendships shared across borders in the political struggles of the current times.² When Abou-Hodeib mentions that the ‘Palestinian archive does not exist as an institution, but as traces scattered here and there across the globe’ (p 182), it is a call to what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls the ‘imaginary waiting room of history’ awaiting its exploration.³ The finding in an unexpected land pushes Abou-Hodeib to implore readers to undertake the journey to places where a visit might be curtailed due to the national identity defined by a government-sanctioned passport and/or the availability of a visa determined by the position of one’s political activism. The anticipation of an imaginary waiting room to restore the historicity of the margins is realised at the serendipitous discovery of the letter. To put it differently, when Abou-Hodeib asks for mobility beyond the reality of geopolitics and non-finalised borders, she suggests an incessant act to tunnel into the past to uncover the difficult histories, only to chart the possibility of accessibility in order to give a face to it in the future.

The double bind of the term ‘solidarity’ – an expression of the social struggle channelled through the formation of the collective identity – as suggested by the authors, resists the political antagonism put into force. Here, the vocabulary used by communities to show solidarity permeates a point of enquiry to assess the importance of political alliances and shared experiences. The diachronic approach to words refrains from focusing on the linear progression of events but considers, rather, the operation and circulation of power-knowledge structures through its discursive constructions. Yásnaya Elena Aguilar Gil, in ‘Making a Territory of Collaboration Possible. Art, Solidarity and Indigenous Peoples’, affirms how ‘the word “solidarity” has lost much of the force of its positive connotations preserved in other languages and contexts’ (p 199). With the formation of the National Programme of Solidarity

² See Catherine Trundle and Chris Kaplonski, ‘Tracing the Political Lives of Archival Documents’, *History and Anthropology*, vol 22, no 4, 2011, pp 407–411

³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2000, p 7

(PRONASOL) in 1990 in Mexico, at the time of the uprising of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation against the Carlos Salinas de Gortari administration, which was the social face of a government – the term ‘solidarity’ was ‘expropriated’ by the official discourse of the country. But the author asserts the necessity of reactivating the connotation of the word with social struggle and processes of artistic creation, in place of such terms as ‘collaboration’, ‘camaraderie’ and ‘brotherhood’.

When the choice of vocabulary is crucial to the discourse of solidarity, it opens a discursive space to ruminate upon the nuanced meanings of diversity. Olivier Marboeuf’s chapter, ‘Dirty Faces. A Scene Without a Well-Known Face’, is a *tour de force* of meditative emotion, which helps to expand the horizons of solidarity within the pervasive hyper-secularism of France. The conjectural attempt to mobilise an alliance with the phrase ‘Je suis Charlie’ (‘I am Charlie’), created by French art director Joachim Roncin to support the freedom of speech, in the light of the killing of twelve team members and employees of the French satirical weekly newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015, is determined by a presupposition of absolute absorption into the French territory, irrespective of class, race, gender or sexual orientation. Marboeuf unpeels the incident of electrocution suffered by Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré while escaping police custody in 2005, as well as the protest by young people in 1983 to stop the killing of people residing in *habitation à loyer modéré* (housing at moderate rent). These events, the precedent to the *Charlie Hebdo* killings, draw focus to the invisible lines of separation between the high Parisian life of the white community and the marginalised existence of Blacks and Arabs in the city. In other words, Marboeuf questions the prognostication of the participatory individualism attached to the ‘I’, in the phrase ‘I am Charlie’, when the racial intolerance of the past is a cloud that hangs over present-day political struggle. Cognisant of the repercussions borne by the friends and families of the other in this lopsided relation, Marboeuf opts to think of ‘the victims at the same time: past, present and future’ (p 296). In a similar spirit, Irene Soria Guzmán, in her ‘Probably Everybody. Notes Towards Technology for Situated Solidarity’, exonerates the linear progression of struggles from the modernist clock of temporality to maintain that ‘the present and future struggle belongs and will belong to each and every one of us’ (p 343).

Marboeuf mentions hearing, when attending a seminar on violence, a young scholar expounding ‘Violence is what hits us from out of nowhere’ (p 300). The state of exception as an origin of violence mythologises the secularism of the French nation beyond the zone of comprehensibility. The inability to locate the lacunae as a lead-up to the rippling effect is a failure to meet the promise of collective identity manifested in ‘Je Suis Charlie’. To disavow white taxonomies is to forge the bonds of solidarity: ‘those who are not *Us*, do not come toward *Us*, escape from the margins of the safe zone and take away with them something that *We* do not want to know’ (p 301). Marboeuf directs our attention towards the film *Ouvertures* (2019), a collaboration between Marboeuf and Louis Henderson, to talk about the politics of absorption and the necessity of a distance to the functionality of solidarity. The literary tool of creolisation

and the act of mining the archives serve to decolonise the supremacy of the language and destabilise the power structure of colonial knowledge production. To translate the play *Monsieur Toussaint*, written originally in French in 1961 by the Martiniquan poet and thinker Édouard Glissant, into Haiti Creole at the request of the artistic group The Living and the Dead Ensemble embodies what Bhabha calls ‘a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite’.⁴ It defies the safety guards of inclusivity in the face of a systematic denial of hyphenated identities to anchor a possibility of a living third space populated by plurality. This diversity was officially rendered absent from the meeting Marboeuf attended with a cohort of the white-dominated male figures of the TRAM contemporary art network to discuss the value of art as it ‘softens the manners and hunts down savage spirits’ (p 303). Rather than the action to repatriate the stolen art, Marboeuf adds that when the national treasure is claimed to be as much ‘ours’ as ‘theirs’ it fails to acknowledge and vindicate the illegitimacy of colonial looting.

The umbrellic ‘us’ of which ‘Je suis Charlie’ was a potent representation overrides the scale of distance with a sense of proximity, rejecting the possibility of a mode of life other than that of the hegemon. An attempt to rephrase it becomes a defiance of the perpetual assumption, which locates the other in close proximity to the scene of alliances. The solidarity encouraged by ‘unspeakable attachments’ and ‘unnameable lives’ (p 308) compounded by unprecedented art forms is what Marboeuf advocates. The action to form a collective identity to extend solidarity with a subjugated and suppressed community is antithetical to the despotic tendency to assert common planes of origin. The ‘we’ of ‘We are all Chelsea Manning’ – coined during the demonstration in support of Chelsea Manning – appeals to the circle of recognition. Here, the inherent fluidity of the term ‘solidarity’ charts itself through difference in an effort to articulate solidarity of difference, as mentioned by Soria Guzmán. The political freedom aimed at being achieved through the framework of solidarity is an acknowledgement of collective identity rooted in singular individualism, yet compounded by the acceptance of difference. The intrinsic plurality of ‘we’ as the condition of collective identity is capable of identifying patterns of understanding between the self and the other, maintaining individuality without asserting interchangeability.

Against the short journey from the episode of crisis to the moment of collapse, the time required to build a network of solidarity necessitates creating systems to sustain and support the conversation of collaborations: the art representation beyond the confines of the said genres to circulate alternate knowledge. The indispensability of actions – protest, revolt and revolution – to foster artistic production and to embrace the practice of solidarity, which are part of the ‘Radical Actions’ of the title of García-Antón’s *Reader*, gestures at her thesis of the emancipatory potential of art. For this purpose, the empirical proposition extended by art

⁴ Homi Bhabha, ‘Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse’, *October*, no 28, Spring 1984, pp 125–133, p 126

places solidarity-driven actions in the service of the transformation. This is also achieved by the design of the book, which renders in pink the pages dedicated to the Introduction, with the Biographies in red. The choice of colour unsettles the set of black/white binaries bound within the parenthetical limits of hegemonic discourses. Soria Guzmán echoes similar sentiments when she refers to Heather Dewey-Hagborg, indicting the black code of the black box as an extension of the neutrality embodied by the political position of privilege of the computing-creator; the alternate proposal offered is to call it a ‘white box’ – one that reveals, not conceals information about its makers/users.

García-Antón is careful to state that the *Reader* was conceived and developed in and from Norway: the nation in question is implicated in an imperial implication ambition with regard to the indigenous Sápmi nation. For García-Antón, the Sápmi, and other Indigenous populations, negotiated to personify the wealth of the theory and practice of indigenous political and community-based alliances of solidarity (p 16). However, despite the painstaking mapping of the historical movements accentuating the potential of art to the display of solidarity across the globe, the absence in the long Introduction of any mention of the Arab Spring is noticeable. The intersectional nature of the revolution is recognised as the entry point to offer visibility to the arts produced in the MENA regions.

The *Reader*, with its extensive chapters, is richly populated with archival manifestos, graphic stories and photo-essays: a response that is neither declarative nor derivative but dialectical in approach, leading to the formation of solidarity in forms of political struggles to de-essentialise the structural norms of domination. Here, the global material performs a function of sublimation – the art produced in the decisive moment of action calls attention to its phenomenological existence, rather than pretending to be a means of entertainment presenting the illusion of beautified appearances. From the cacophonies of asymmetrical patterns of exploitation across five decades of global history, García-Antón gauges the impulse of the current times. She exhumes the events of artistic production and contemplative solidarities to suture the period of broken time with the thread of radical actions against authoritarian teleology.

Released in the year of a gradual receding of Covid-19 (2022), after two years of a global struggle with the pandemic that were witness to a crisis that demanded collective empathy, the *Reader* holds that the power of art is crucial to subvert the binaries of hierarchy as well as to serve as a ‘crucible of care’ (p 15). The zeitgeist of those two years was populated by some strident voices of protest and war – ‘Black Lives Matter’, the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict, ‘My Body, My Choice’, the Ukraine-Russia War, ‘Zan, Zendegi, Azadi’ (Woman, Life, Freedom) – which have indispensably anchored conversation around the making of another *Reader*. The expanse of the book, compounded by the density of the material included, has set a benchmark for any potential editor interested in the subject, and serves as a toolkit to forge future bonds of solidarity across the art community. García-Antón takes the readers on a voyage to revisit and discover the events in history pushed towards a state of oblivion, as an

attempt to assess the ‘matrix of oppression’ (p 341): a corollary of Reason as endorsed by structural Western colonialism and perpetuated by the network of neoliberalism. The initial discussion evokes a rippling dispersion to the effect that the past finds resonance in the present, where the socio-political imagination of the artists continues to develop historical prototypes for the action to be performed by posterity. Although the *Reader* attempts to establish when the affiliations to the cadence of broken time are apparent, the onus lies with the reader-cum-listener to hear the whispered sound of silences.

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