

Long-Distance Friendships: Exploring Black Narratives in Eastern European Art Exhibitions

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A Nigerian singer fleeing the war in Ukraine and winning the 'Voice of Lithuania' contest; Zulu songs performed at the Lion King concert; Afrobeat music playing in Vilnius night clubs and featuring Black DJs – all of these mark the growing presence of an African diaspora in Eastern Europe, a presence that is hardly noticed in these societies where the Black diaspora has a long history.

During the summer and autumn of 2023, the organisers of a series of independent art exhibitions collaborated in highlighting the lingering cross-regional connections that began with the Non-Aligned Movement at the 1961 Belgrade Conference and the linking of some cities in Eastern Europe with various non-Western countries. The tripartite 'sister events' – the 14th Kaunas Biennial in Lithuania (25 August – 29 October 2023) and the Contemporary Art Festival 'Survival Kit 14' in Riga, Latvia (7 September – 8 October 2023), whose co-curators Inga Lāce and Alicia Knock collaborated under the framework of 'Long-Distance Friendships', and the 35th Ljubljana Biennale of Graphic Arts in Slovenia (15 September 2023 – 14 January 2024), under the artistic direction of Ibrahim Mahama – invited artists and collectives from Africa, Europe, and beyond, to highlight enduring solidarities across the regions.

This collaborative effort was further exemplified by Alicia Knock and Inga Lāce joining the Ljubljana Biennale's curatorial team (together with the Exit Frame Collective, Selom Koffi Kudjie, Beya Othmani and Patrick Nii Okanta Ankrah), and by Ibrahim Mahama, who presented his own artworks in Kaunas, thus forming a unique interweaving of artistic endeavours. A multitude of artists exhibited their works in two of the locations, or in all three. The events provided the artists with a platform for reflecting on the value of transnational friendships in the face of adversity and a relentless neoliberalism. Visitors were invited to engage with stories of transnational solidarity, resistance and resilience from the postsocialist and postcolonial world, where microhistories of friendships became a starting point for contemporary alliances.

The choices of exhibition venues were not accidental. The old central post office in Kaunas and Riga's Vidzemes market are both defunct spaces that were once vital for unity and exchange. The history of each space mirrors the histories of the people who have inhabited it. The two-month Kaunas Biennial was housed in one of the most significant sites of interwar Lithuanian architecture – the former central post office, a renowned masterpiece of Lithuanian modernism. Opened in 1932, when Kaunas was the capital of an independent Lithuania at the peak of its



Artists and curators at the official opening of the 35th Ljubljana Biennale of Graphic Arts, Slovenia, 2023, photo by Urška Boljkovac

national rise, the old post office is in the heart of the *New City* – a part of Kaunas that saw intense construction in the 1920s and 1930s. From here, people sent mail to Poland, Germany, Norway, and what was still colonial Africa at the time. The building stands as a proud monument to communication, or, rather, a symbol of the desire to leave a note or engage in dialogue. The institution of the post office served as a point of connection not only for countries bordering the USSR, like the Baltics, but for many African nations as well. Under the nose of official communication, it was a space for smuggling and resistance that the curators hoped to revive through mail art and decolonial education networks. Highlighting ongoing mobility restrictions based on harsh visa policies, ‘Long-Distance Friendships’ articulated both official and unofficial spaces, as well as reminding us of the post office as a space of surveillance and censorship.

The post office building is no longer used for its original purpose and is waiting for something; it has not yet been demolished. Such large spaces are no longer needed for communication when a smartphone is enough. The magnificent facade, with its combination of rounded and rectangular forms and its decorative fragments of folk ornaments, now represents only the past. Artists have used it as a tool to revisit the past on more than one occasion. It works just by the layout of the offices and the light streaming through the large windows, which take you to a different time when you had to wait for news, and conversations with people in other cities or countries had to be booked in advance. Back then, a letter in the post not only had a textual but also a visual weight because it was necessary to stick a postage stamp on the envelope, a stamp bought after standing in line in the spacious operations room, the floor of which resembles a Lithuanian grandmother’s woven bedspread. And the stamps stuck onto the received letters became ‘windows to the world’, as many works in the 2023 Kaunas Biennial reminded us. During the Biennial, an improvised post office was temporarily opened in the former post office,

and visitors were able to use it to send postcards to their relatives and friends. The postcards were created by artists, and people could pick them up right there.

The 'Survival Kit' exhibition was housed in a large, transparent hangar of the historical Vidzeme market in the centre of Riga. Even though many of the works were presented in small, peculiar pockets – former kiosks – the exhibition breathed the same air. The Art Nouveau market hall, built more than a hundred years ago, was bright and transparent, and accordingly several works of art fit together in the viewer's field of vision, but they did not interfere with each other. The high ceilings and windows of the building offered an exclusive additional dimension, which was also skilfully used scenographically by several of the participating artists. Handpainted shop signs and incredibly well-preserved advertisements from the 1990s, that created a slightly distasteful but sweet wave of nostalgia, successfully coexisted with the very diverse, tonally saturated artworks. Although the market had been officially closed for a couple of years, some noise and bustle returned to it during the exhibition. The building, although it had already begun to disintegrate (unventilated and uncleaned rooms smelled of decades of accumulated meat and organic juices), came to life for a while with the help of some successful scenography.



General view of the Contemporary Art Festival 'Survival Kit 14', in the former Vidzeme market building in Riga, Latvia, 2023, photo by Gundega Evelone

The market, and especially its interior, led to thoughts about trading, about mutual exchange, about goods. As one of the artists mentioned, putting both your own and other people's memories and personal stories on the market counter was quite brutal. At the same time, there was something clean and calming about the white tiles – a neutral background against which to look at it all. At the Kaunas Biennial, the former post office and its function were almost the main

motif for the exhibition (the symbolism of the post office was repeated both visually and narratively), and this seemed, at times, to limit the potential possibilities of the message. In Riga, the works of art, although completely unrelated thematically to the role of the market, looked quite organic on the counters.

The Ljubljana Biennale, on the other hand, was structured around eight different venues, from the main exhibitions in the International Centre of Graphic Arts at Tivoli Mansion and the Cukrarna building, to Švicarija, Plac, Krater, and others. One of the main Biennale venues, Tivoli Mansion, is in the city's beautiful Tivoli Park, at the foot of Rožnik Hill. The current structure, built in the seventeenth century atop the ruins of a Renaissance-period castle, was initially owned by the Jesuits. In the mid-nineteenth century, it was purchased by the Austrian Emperor Francis Joseph I and renovated in the neoclassical style, giving it its present appearance. In 1863, the mansion was purchased by the Municipality of Ljubljana and initially served as a poorhouse before being divided into condominiums. In 1967, following another renovation, it was transformed into the venue for the International Centre of Graphic Arts.

One of the main venues of the Ljubljana Biennale was Cukrarna, a renovated former sugar factory built in 1828. Originally starting out with twenty-two workers, by the mid-nineteenth century it had grown to become Slovenia's first major factory and the largest sugar refinery in the Austro-Hungarian empire. In 1845, it burnt down, leaving only the outer walls intact. During the fire, so much sugar spilt into the Ljubljanica river that the water tasted sweet for days. After the fire, it became a tobacco factory and later a textile factory, then a military barracks, and finally a refuge for the stranded and the homeless. It was also a temporary home for many poets and writers during Slovenia's Modernism period, which was key to establishing Slovenia as an independent nation. Thus, the Cukrarna building is much more than a unique monument to industrial capitalism, it is a piece of Slovenian national identity. When the renovation of the building was completed in 2021, visitors were immediately struck by the gargantuan dimensions of the former factory. It now features 'white cube' galleries, levitating above the ground floor, suspended from a steel roof structure, contrasting with the historic concrete walls.

The sister exhibitions of the Kaunas Biennial and 'Survival Kit', followed by the Ljubljana Biennale, invited visitors to engage with stories of resistance, resilience and transnational solidarity between Africa and Eastern Europe, where microhistories of friendships and encounters became starting points for contemporary alliances. The historical and cultural ties between Eastern European and African countries were initiated and maintained, from the 1960s, by the 'anticolonial' efforts of the Soviet Union with its ambitions to expand influence and promote socialism globally. It is therefore difficult to imagine a more ideologically charged example of friendship. Yet, the expansion and calculation of power by no means exhausts the presence of the legacy of the Soviet Union and other Socialist bloc countries in the modern world. Nonetheless, these ideologically driven exchanges provided deeply personal and often transformative experiences for the communities of students and artists and the workers involved.

Building on these past exchanges, once leveraged by Soviet ideology to expand its influence, the curators proposed alternative perspectives for the future. With the region's traumatic past

currently resurfacing in the daily lives of Eastern European societies due to the ongoing invasion of Ukraine, the curators were asking the question: in a time of geopolitical fragmentation, can international alliances be forged and nurtured based on friendship and solidarity rather than power and market dynamics? Although, in the wider context, the Baltic countries' historical relationship with Africa is not commonly known today, during the Cold War it had an impact on art, culture and daily life. Exhibitions of Congolese, Angolan and Ghanaian artists were held in Riga and Vilnius; students from African countries studied in many universities across Eastern bloc; and news about Africa's struggle against colonialism was regularly published in local periodicals.

The curators of the Kaunas Biennial, Alicia Knock and Inga Lāce, focused on a continent that many in the region associate with neither power, progress or peace, nor with the cooperation that we dream of, as a point of reference for their exhibits. Many people in the region see Africa only as an ally of Russia, sabotaging the decisions of the United Nations in supporting Ukraine (and the Baltic region). Listening to the curators at the opening, one of my colleagues shared her concerns, wondering if now is the worst or the best time to get to know Africa. The curators tried to zoom in on a map to indicate the identity of individual countries – Benin, Ethiopia, Uganda, Ivory Coast, Senegal, Sudan, Zimbabwe – and delve into the micro-stories told by the artists living there. But as another visitor noted, the exhibition labels featured many unusual surnames whose nationality it was not easy to determine, unlike with the participating Europeans. From the postcards and portraits, Black heroes looked out at the visitors, their names and merits remaining unknown because there is simply a lack of information about African countries and artists available to the general public in Lithuania.

To what extent does the post-Soviet experience of the Baltic countries parallel the postcolonial experience of the African states? Could European states that never engaged in colonialism, and were only involved in the cultural and economic exchanges of the 1960s and 1970s as part of the 'socialist bloc', become more desirable partners for African countries in various forms of exchange?

In Riga, during the Contemporary Art Festival 'Survival Kit', Lāce and Knock revisited past international conferences and festivals, seeking to create new networks of solidarity, storytelling and intimacy. The 2023 edition of this annual event featured archival and research-based commissions connecting Latvia, Central and Eastern Europe and Africa, shedding light on the performative archaeology of both the Soviet era and precolonial times and offering fragments of unwritten histories by propelling them into the present. During the Cold War, performances of peace and friendship at festivals, gatherings and conferences were framed by a specific ideology. To address contemporary issues of co-existence, the curators invited participating artists to propose a redefined framework for a transnational event that would consider the environment, gender and politics.

The 'Survival Kit' exhibition investigated the complex mesh of friendships (artistic, intellectual, intimate, personal, economic and political) through the ideological and economic alliance put in place between the USSR and the Eastern bloc with African and Latin American countries during

the Cold War. These alliances, perpetuated through grants, student and worker exchanges and international funding, were forms of soft power and shaped the contamination between cultural community and long-lasting economic benefits. A curatorial decision reflected on the Soviet bloc's attempt to foster a horizontal economic approach, aiming to promote mutual growth and cooperation among participating nations. At the same time, the thematic focus of the exhibition – the friendship of the Soviet Union with African countries – is also reminiscent of current times and Russia's interest in the African continent. Moreover, at a time of ever-increasing political polarisation, a call to look back on a multifaceted past can help combat the bubble of ethnic insecurity.

The Ljubljana Biennale, founded during the Cold War in 1955, the same year Documenta was launched in West Germany and the Bandung Conference took place, mirrored a similar internationalist spirit. From its first years, artists were invited from the Non-Aligned countries, the Soviet Union and the West. Thus, the Biennale's archive functions as a journal, unveiling traces of other significant gatherings and workshops in printmaking and other media, including film. In the context of transnationalism, the value of prints lies in their facility for widespread dissemination and circulation, and the rejection of singular art pieces in favour of more of a mass distribution, mirroring a process of decentralisation. The 35th edition of the Ljubljana Biennale of Graphic Arts in 2023–2024, with its title 'From the Void Came Gifts of the Cosmos', explored how visual culture and its dissemination created transnational spaces, transcending borders and fostering Southern solidarities.

The curatorial collective of the Biennale, under the artistic direction of Ibrahim Mahama, grounded their approach in three conceptual figures – the void, the gift and the cosmos – as prefigured in the Biennale's title. The concept of the void was introduced as a peripheral yet encompassing realm of potentiality that resists centralisation and hierarchies, encouraging instead the creation of gifts: modes of transference without exchange value. This void, shaped by historical political failures, was to serve as fertile soil for nurturing relationships based on solidarity, friendship and intimacy. It was a curatorial framework that genuinely provided room for the artworks and fostered the emergence of relationships around them – a space where the past is the base for a meeting in the present.

The 35th Ljubljana Biennale, anchored in the history of the Non-Aligned Movement, marked a significant expansion of Mahama's practice. Historically, the Biennale had showcased Ghanaian artists, particularly following the 1961 Cultural Convention between Yugoslavia and Ghana. Resonance with the values found in socialist Yugoslavia, which managed to be both historic and contemporary, added an intriguing layer to the theme. The curatorial direction drew on Mahama's interest in Ghana's first President, the Pan-African political theorist and politician, Kwame Nkrumah, and his post-independence vision for Ghana's development. This vision included collaborations within the Non-Aligned Movement, involving architects, designers, structural engineers and urban planners from Yugoslavia and other socialist countries working on institutional buildings in Ghana, reflecting post-war Socialist Internationalist co-operation.

The strong ties between post-independence Ghana and the former Yugoslavia were rooted in shared ideological values, principles of non-alignment and a mutual commitment to national sovereignty. Nkrumah and Yugoslavia's leader, Josip Broz Tito, fostered a personal friendship, promoting self-determination and anti-imperialism. Nkrumah, aiming to shed colonial legacies, collaborated with Eastern bloc countries like Yugoslavia, and he visited Ljubljana a couple of times. A photograph from one visit captures schoolchildren lined up on the street waving little flags, with a poster in the background that reads 'Welcome to our friend from Ghana'. During this period, Yugoslav, Polish and Soviet architects and engineers worked on Ghana's infrastructure, while Ghanaian students came to study in Yugoslavia.



Christian Guerematchi, *Blaq Tito Addressing the Parliament of Ghosts*, 2022, 35th Ljubljana Biennale of Graphic Arts, Slovenia, 2023/2024, installation view at MGLC Grad Tivoli, photo by Urška Boljkovac

One of the opening works of the Ljubljana Biennale was a video installation by the Amsterdam-based Slovenian performer Christian Guerematchi, in a direct response to the Biennale's artistic director. Guerematchi, as 'Blaq Tito' – a persona inspired by former Yugoslav president – dons a white military uniform and peaked cap with a red star, his head covered by a black stocking for a spectral appearance. In the short film, Blaq Tito visits Mahama's birthplace, Tamale, in northern Ghana, where since 2019 Mahama has established three contemporary art institutions. This mirrors Tito's mid-twentieth-century travels in Africa to seek support for the Non-Aligned Movement. In the video, Blaq Tito delivers a monologue on Non-Aligned Movement ideals over a soundtrack of electronic music. He starts in the flooded basement of Nkrumah Volini, a former grain silo turned into a cultural centre by Mahama in 2021. Originally built under Nkrumah, who enlisted architects from the Eastern bloc to build large-scale

repositories across the country for the storage of maize, grain and cocoa, the silos were abandoned after the 1966 coup. The next scene shows Blaq Tito, now in aviator glasses, descending from decommissioned aeroplanes-turned-classroom at Mahama's Red Clay studio,¹ then riding a tuk-tuk through Tamale, waving to indifferent crowds. Finally, he returns to Red Clay's *Parliament of Ghosts*, an evolving installation with tiered seating, and ends up gesticulating around a firepit.

In another work titled *An Unduly Restrictive View of Salvation* (2019), Ukrainians Andrii Dostliev and Lia Dostlieva created a rather cosy room, but looking at the wallpapered walls, something flickers – probably a mirage of Somalia left behind by the refugees staying in Vinnytsia. In the 2000s, this small Ukrainian city was a hub for clandestine migration from Somalia to the EU. Somalis travelled through the Persian Gulf countries to Moscow, then to Vinnytsia, from where they moved on to Slovakia or Hungary, eventually reaching German cities such as Munich or Frankfurt. The artists explored how these people viewed Vinnytsia and how their transient presence went unnoticed. What could this city become for those who were escaping the horrors of a civil war and were heading towards the promise of a happier life in Germany? The artists attempted to reconstruct the mythological spaces of cheap rental apartments where Somalis could have stayed in Vinnytsia, as well as ways in which they might have perceived the city. After all, they asked, what do we actually know about Somalia and Somalis? Would we notice a real person between a colonial orientalist stereotype and a media-forged speculative image? The work also evoked memories of Hungarians running in the opposite direction during World War Two.

Next to Dostliev and Dostlieva's installation, Lithuanian artist Anastasia Sosunova laid out the symbolic bodies of persecuted people on a mail conveyor belt – images taken from the Lithuanian gay magazine *Naglis*, published at the beginning of independence of 1990, and the Ugandan print magazine *Bombastic* (first published in 2014). On the one hand, it is a reference to a specific prototype – like the 'ab' press, Kaunas's secret underground printing house that operated in the 1980s and 1990s and which was built from scrapped and thrown away parts of other machines. Back then, this printing press was mainly used for patriotic and religious literature, otherwise prohibited from being published. On the other, drawing from this experience of resistance, Sosunova reframes it, employing a strategy she terms *extended montage* and incorporating visual elements from both the Ugandan and Lithuanian underground queer press into the narrative. 'The installation named *Body of an Image* is called upon to raise the question', says the Biennial's catalogue/newspaper, 'what was removed from the Soviet-era ideology of friendship between nations, and how can we fix it?' How, indeed? This comment could have been applied to the entire exhibition. Sosunova continued exploring this topic at the 'Survival Kit' exhibition in Riga.

In terms of a more deliberate merging of contexts, one of the most impressive works was an installation by the Angolan artists Yonamine and Ihosvanny Angel dedicated to an artist and

¹ The Red Clay Studio is the personal studio of the Ghanaian artist Ibrahim Mahama, situated in Tamale, Ghana. A central part of Red Clay is Mahama's *Parliament of Ghosts* — an installation artwork that comprises an assemblage of rescued and repurposed objects that form a parliament-like seating space for conversation and collective thought. First presented for the Whitworth gallery in Manchester, England, as part of the Manchester International Festival in 2019, *The Parliament of Ghosts* in Tamale is permanent, and is used as a classroom, cinema and exhibition hall for site-specific installations.

cultural figure from Luanda, Paulo Kapela. It was located in another exhibition area of the Kaunas Biennial, in a former gunpowder warehouse turned cultural venue, P.A.R.A.K.A.S. As visitors entered its underground dungeons, they gradually approached the long hall that contained an impressive shrine, a performative tomb lit up in red and filled with candles and all kinds of objects and pictures. Photos of Kapela were displayed alongside those of Lithuanian politicians, the discovery of which may not have pleased some local viewers and might even have annoyed them. The artists brought with them or found various items in Kaunas, mixing the white noise of old TVs, Poto-Poto silhouettes,² an Angolan flag made from lace, fake flowers covered in coal, the sounds of pagan Baltic songs, broken Congolese music, and even several African masks found in Kaunas flea markets, embodying what Yonamine calls ‘installational realism’. Through this work, the two artists extended the legacy of a transnational form of communism which spanned from Africa to Eastern Europe, recalling Angola’s internationalist spirit in the 1980s. This narrative brought together ex-USSR, Yugoslav and Cuban soldiers, refugees and dissidents, the pirated whisky very common during the Angolan Civil War called ‘The Best’, and art and freedom fighters such as Kapela. Yonamine and Ihosvanny Angel, together with the Kaunas international dance company ‘Aura’, also created a performance at P.A.R.A.K.A.S., dedicating it to their experiences as war refugees.



Yonamine and Ihosvanny Angel, mixed media installation in P.A.R.A.K.A.S., 14th Kaunas Biennial, Lithuania, 2023, photo by Martynas Plepis

² The Poto-Poto painting school, founded in the 1940s in French Equatorial Africa, was a key moment in Congolese painting. Founded by Pierre Lods in 1950 in Poto-Poto, the ‘Centre d’arts africains’ was notable for its style, characterised by simplified dancing silhouettes. In this installation, the silhouettes were created out of guns.

Although the problems of Africans are not usually of much concern to Lithuanians, these exhibitions highlight shared colonial experiences between Eastern European and African countries – such as an imposed foreign language, repressive institutions, resource depletion, and genocide. The installation *I Am My Sun* by ‘The School of Mutants’ (which was also presented in Ljubljana and awarded the Research Residency Award), based on Ousmane Sembene’s novel *God’s Bits of Wood* (1960) about railway workers’ strikes in French-colonised Senegal in the 1940s, powerfully illustrated this. ‘The School of Mutants’ is a collaborative platform for art and research initiated in 2018 by Hamedine Kane and Stéphane Verlet-Bottéro in Dakar, Senegal. The installation, featuring film, photos, relics and memorabilia, tied these events to Lithuanian protests like the self-immolation of Romas Kalanta in an act of protest against the Soviet regime in Lithuania.³ A strange train route on the wall connected cities in Lithuania and Africa, symbolising shared struggles; for example, a train full of Senegalese railway workers is already taking deportees to Siberia and those fleeing the Soviet occupation to the West.



School of Mutants, *I Am My Sun*, 2023, mixed media installation in the former Kaunas central post office, 14th Kaunas Biennial, Lithuania, 2023, photo by Martynas Plepis

‘The School of Mutants’ work was complemented by a video by Berlin-based Egyptian writer and director Jihan el-Tahri titled *Cinema Died at Camp Boiro* (2017), in which she interviews family

³ Romas Kalanta was a 19-year-old Lithuanian high school student who in 1972 killed himself by self-immolation in an act of protest against the Soviet regime in Lithuania. His death provoked the largest postwar riots in Lithuania and inspired similar self-immolations. Kalanta became a symbol of the Lithuanian resistance throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

members and friends of the fathers of African cinema, including Costa Diagne and Kalifa Condé, who received scholarships to study in Moscow at the same time as Sembene did. They later became creators and developers of Guinean cinema and African cinema in general. But it was not only cinema that was taught to young people in Moscow, but the young foreigners were also instructed to talk about socialism. Meanwhile, the first president of independent Guinea, Ahmed Touré, changed his thinking and working methods: everyone had to think alike. The thoughts of ordinary people did not matter to the president and therefore the young cinema masters were imprisoned in the Boiro camp, where they were treated particularly cruelly. El-Tahri's film is about the memories of family members who survived in the camp at that time. In Riga, El-Tahri, together with Zbynek Baladran and Tereza Stejskalova, traced the stories of some of the first African students who were offered scholarships to study in Moscow, Prague and Lodz in the 1960s.

In Ljubljana, natural fibres took centre stage in El-Tahri's adjoining installation *Threading Solidarity*, which featured silkscreen prints on jute and cotton muslin, complemented by furniture and a collection of collages and archival documents. Above hung a string of portraits extracted from a photograph capturing Non-Aligned Movement leaders laughing at the 1961 Belgrade Conference – a deliberate effort by the artist to establish friendship as the foundational principle of political solidarity. As such projects depend on available image libraries, they effectively consolidate established narratives rather than contest them. Close to the floor, a video montage juxtaposed post-independence images of Egypt and India, highlighting the significant role of the cotton industries in their postcolonial realities and ongoing bilateral relationships. El-Tahri's work explores how these intertwined national narratives become the surfaces on which the aforementioned 'potential histories' unfold.

In Riga, Ukrainian artist Nikolay Karabinovich's work was inspired by the Soviet-era Melodiya record label, particularly its lesser-known 'Traditional Music of Asia and Africa' series that was produced locally in Latvia. The more widely distributed records were produced at the Moscow headquarters, while those intended for smaller audiences were left to the peripheries. With the emergence of the Non-Aligned Movement, Soviet propaganda officials found it compelling to release limited editions of music from non-aligned countries such as Angola or Laos. Karabinovich displayed the original Melodiya records on the wall, alongside his interpretations of missing covers. The work also critiqued Soviet nostalgia, highlighting the superficiality of cultural exchange and the colonial undertones in how these records were distributed.

What does it mean to find a place for yourself in a newly independent country? Is belongingness valued, and what is that ease with which one can say 'I belong to this cultural code, to this region?' At the 'Survival Kit' exhibition in Riga, Latvian artists Inga Erdmane and Žulijens Nuhums Koulibali discussed questions of identity, memory archives and friendships within a system that collapsed, presenting creative interpretation in their works.

Inga Erdmane's *Imprints* was a site-specific archive featuring photographs from Latvian universities in the 1960s and 1970s, focusing especially on international student groups. Inspired

by encounters with Dr A A Duchi in Zanzibar, a former student who had studied medicine in the Soviet Union and cherished memories of Riga, Erdmane utilised Dr Duchi's archive of intriguing images depicting student life. These images, comparable to those found in Western universities today, dismantle the myth of isolated Soviet uniformity. Erdmane's work included interviews with former exchange students from Africa, the Middle East and Latin America who studied at Riga's Institute of Civil Aviation during the Soviet era. The artist acts as a detective, legitimising and chronologically arranging these forgotten ties, revealing the erased narrative of 'exotic' southern students in Riga's collective memory. The students' archives were arranged on a market table – photos from their study days, various notes, and transcripts of the artist's interviews with them. Some questions posed by the artist, such as 'Wasn't it cold in Riga for you?', unwittingly echoed the prejudices that led interviewees to leave Latvia decades ago. In terms of emotional hearing loss, it is comparable to the question that Americans often ask me: 'You all speak Russian there, don't you?' Or, in the words of Saidiya Hartman: 'How does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence?'⁴



Inga Erdmane, *Imprints*, 2023, in the Contemporary Art Festival 'Survival Kit 14', Riga, Latvia, 2023, photo by Liene Millere

Next to Erdmane's work was Žulijens Nuhums Kulibali's *Gaisa dārzs* (*Garden in Flight*). As the son of an Aviation Institute student, Kulibali explores his Afro-Latvian identity through family archives, through photos and memories. He questions how he can reinterpret his childhood and the life of his parents in post-Soviet Latvia in the 1990s, discovering the complexities of carving out a place for a mixed-race couple in a newly independent country. The artist is interested in how it is possible to settle down in a place where, by nature, you have almost no roots, and that is why the work was titled *Gaisa dārzs*. Kulibali said that he liked the English *Garden in Flight* because

⁴ Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe*, vol 12, no 2, June 2008, p 7

it is clear – the Aviation Institute and its history of flying is somehow present but so is the notion of taking root in an empty place, which in the end still happens.

Kulibali's work offers a poignant blend of deeply personal history and global socio-political commentary. A watermelon in a glass display with an open envelope nearby bore witness to a powerful family story: 'Mom, how heavy does a watermelon have to be for a pregnant woman who the saleswoman has called "that nigger's arse" to lift?' The artist relates the story as follows: when his mother was pregnant with him, she went shopping with his father at the Central Market and a market seller called her a 'negro bitch'. His mother's response was to pick up a watermelon and hit the woman's head with it. Kulibali sees these incidents, though harsh, as necessary defences of loved ones. In that sense, there is a connection with the market space as such. The artwork includes headphones playing imagined conversations with his parents, allowing viewers to eavesdrop on his inner monologue but also to experience the desire to throw the rotting watermelon in a glass box in the direction of each and every abuser.

The artist duo Janek Simon and Max Cegielski presented their work *One Man Does Not Rule a Nation* in both Riga and Ljubljana. The artists travelled to Ghana to research a short-lived monument created by the Polish sculptor Alina Ślesieńska. Publicly revealed in 1965 in Winneba, a coastal town in Ghana, and destroyed in a CIA-backed coup a year later, the sculpture depicted independent Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah. Their installation blended archival materials, newly conducted interviews with witnesses, and a model of the monument, exploring connections between Eastern European and West African histories. The artists aimed to highlight the ongoing relevance of this narrative, and the shared architectural influences from the 1960s and 1970s, although some of these warm exchanges and intellectual ties had already been subverted and instrumentalised as anti-Western propaganda by the Soviet Union.

Thierry Oussou's work was shown in the former Cukrarna sugar factory, and included a crate of cotton and a large poster titled *Equilibrium Wind*, featuring the logo of his own cotton business enterprises in Benin's Panouignan district. Originally introduced to Africa as a monoculture crop by Egypt, cotton has been a contentious commodity. In parts of the Soviet Union, cotton was pivotal for imperialist ambitions, often justifying human rights violations. Some historical records of the cotton trade between Socialist Bulgaria and parts of Africa indicate that traders, rather than adhering strictly to the bloc bipolarity of the Cold War, often operated according to the dynamics of international markets, revealing a capitalist dimension underlying their socialist ideals. Today, in Benin, cotton represents autonomy and economic empowerment. For Oussou, cotton stands apart from other commodities due to its historical entanglement with deeply rooted and storied forms of nationalised labour, from the sweat and songs of picking it to the shipping, packing and manufacturing, and the eventual wearing of garments.

In Ljubljana's Bežigradski Dvor district, a neglected construction site originally designated for a new Ministry of Justice building was taken over in 2020 by the Krater Collective. Comprising local ecologists, artists, permaculturists and architects, the collective works with imported and invasive plant species in the urban space. Their project titled *Feral Occupations: Our labour is Our Infrastructure!* involved interventions at various sites of the Biennale, with particular emphasis on

the abandoned ‘crater’ at Bežigrajski Dvor. There, they created a nursing home for discarded houseplants, such as *pileas* and *monstera*s, bought originally to enliven a domestic space with a bit of exotic flair but brought in by their owners and now cared for by the artists, highlighting problematic relationships between biopolitics and the soil. The project acknowledges the historical fetishisation and extraction of southern flora while also creating space for migrant plants that have been so unceremoniously discarded. Krater also operates a papermaking station at the site, recycling invasive plants into paper for postcards and exploring the revolutionary potential of printed materials. This historical backdrop is significant for the Biennale of Graphic Arts, founded as it was originally to showcase works on paper and notably emphasising printmaking. Following various revolutions in Africa and Eastern Europe against colonial and Soviet powers, the printed word and image gained special political significance, enabling the dissemination of crucial knowledge and ideas. The 2023–2024 edition of the Biennale featured legendary printmakers who experienced those years firsthand, including Kagiso Patrick Mautloa from the Bag Factory Artists’ Studios in Johannesburg. Also included were Assadour Bezdikian, Sadik Kwaish Alfraji, Galle Winston Kofi Dawson, and Mohammad Omar Khalil, who engaged in a dialogue with Lebanese artist, publisher and curator Abed Al Kadiri that reflected on their friendship through the perspective of Asilah, a Moroccan city they both frequent.

However, we are only just beginning to approach a true *long-distance friendship* – an understanding of and respect for each other’s contexts. Thus, it was important to create a captivating thematic experience across time and space, building bridges between sister exhibitions in Kaunas and Riga and a related project in Ljubljana while developing site-specific approaches to each of them. In this regard, the 14th Kaunas Biennial marked an important first step, highlighted by its achievements – the inception of a joint statement between two major art events, a diverse and extensive lineup of participants and artworks, and an exceptionally fitting main venue. However, it also revealed some shortcomings: the curators were white and European, for example, and there was a lack of detailed information on the artists and their backgrounds and minimal engagement with the local African community. Nonetheless, the Biennial was perhaps surprising in its ambition. It was the first and largest exhibition in the history of Lithuanian contemporary art that managed to gather so many artists originating from, related to or speaking from the position of the Global South. There was a bursting forth of unexpected stories, forgotten connections and a reminder of the global need for compromise. In Kaunas, I also presented a small artwork of my own: some artistic research about the campaign of the Lithuanian youth newspaper *Lietuvos pionierius*’s (Lithuanian Pioneer) to promote friendship with Congolese children. It was interesting to see artists during the installation period and to witness firsthand their impression of the city of Kaunas. Impressions also went both ways: Angolans were not expecting, for example, to dance *kizomba* in Lithuania.⁵

The ‘Survival Kit’ exhibition in Riga followed a similar concept but also proposed additional insights, actively resisting the idea of ‘the East’ of Europe as a uniform society separate from

⁵ *Kizomba* is a dance form that originated in Angola in the 1970s/1980s, and has recently been popular in Europe.

global influences and therefore creating its own history of friendships separate from Western Europe. It highlighted friendships forged by students, artists, agricultural workers and scientists, fostering cultural and scientific exchanges that benefited both Eastern and Western ends – in contrast to the systems that create economic and cultural dependency between nations. The exhibition proposed revisiting historical relationships that flourished despite the hegemonic threat of the West, which today is relatively forgotten and unknown following the decline and dissolution of the Soviet Union in the 1990s. ‘Survival Kit’s extensive programme of accompanying events addressing inclusion, discrimination, war, language policy, and other sensitive topics, stood out in comparison to the Kaunas Biennial, which focused more on nostalgic reflections and bittersweet memories of past relationships with the southern continent.

This edition of the Ljubljana Biennale of Graphic Arts showcased how past crises and failures have sparked creativity in the present. While ghosts such as Tito and Nkrumah may still linger, their absence has paved the way for alternative presents. In cosmic terms, a void emerges from rupture. A tumultuous series of events marked the demise of the utopian vision of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, culminating in a decade of ethnically driven conflict. Amidst the crumbling remnants of colonisation and the divide between conflicting worlds, new modes of existence, thought and solidarity are materialising. Yet, it remains uncertain whether today’s art, as a field, can give birth to novel forms of international relations.

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