

Fragmented Histories and Unfinished Theories of Socialist Global Cultural Exchange: A reflective report on the conference 'Global and Forgotten Connections: The Circulation of Visual Arts between Socialist European Countries and Asia, Latin America and Africa during the Cold War'

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'Global and Forgotten Connections: The Circulation of Visual Arts between Socialist European Countries and Asia, Latin America and Africa during the Cold War', Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, Poland, 5 – 6 February 2026

Over the past several years, the global turn in art history has fostered new scholarly interest in regions previously overlooked in narratives of modernism and contemporary art. Central and Eastern Europe – especially the former socialist countries of the Eastern Bloc – and their connections with the Global South during the Cold War have garnered renewed attention in the last fifteen years. Seminal curatorial and research projects, such as 'Red Africa: Things Fall Apart' (2017, curated by Mark Nash) and 'Saving Bruce Lee: African and Arab Cinema in the Era of Soviet Cultural Diplomacy' (2018, curated by Koyo Kouoh and Rasha Salti), have spurred increasing scholarly and curatorial attention on socialist cultural networks beyond Europe. Shaped by the historical experience of division and the legacy of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR, or East Germany), Germany has become a key site for this historiographic development. In recent years, Dresden has hosted multiple exhibitions reconsidering East German socialism and its global cultural exchanges, including 'A Million Roses for Angela Davis' (2020–2021, curated by Kathleen Reinhardt) at the Kunsthalle im Lipsiusbau, and the two-part project and exhibitions 'Revolutionary Romances? Global Art Histories in the GDR' (2022, 2023–2024, curated by Kathleen Reinhardt and Mathias Wagner) at Albertinum Dresden, alongside the research initiative 'Art in Networks: The GDR and Its Global Connections', initiated by the REACT-research group at Technische Universität Dresden. Parallel inquiries have unfolded at HKW in Berlin, including the project



Audience members at the international conference 'Global and Forgotten Connections: the Circulation of Visual Arts Between Socialist European Countries and Asia, Latin America and Africa During the Cold War', Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, Poland, 5 – 6 February 2026, photo courtesy of N Gawryś, Z Sekowska / Zachęta Archive, CC BY-SA

'Destination: Tashkent' (2024), dedicated to the Tashkent Film Festival as a contact zone for filmmakers of the Global South, and the exhibition 'Echoes of the Brother Countries' (2025), among many others. Numerous seminars, conferences and workshops across Europe and beyond further attest to the consolidation of this field. This resurgence is inextricably linked to shifting geopolitical circumstances, including the ongoing Russian imperial war in Ukraine, now in its fourth year. These shifts, along with the emergence of a new global order, have intensified critical examination of the history of socialism, empire and internationalism.

Against the backdrop of an expanding historiography, and renewed attention to socialist internationalism, the conference 'Global and Forgotten Connections: The

Circulation of Visual Arts between Socialist European Countries and Asia, Latin America, and Africa during the Cold War' sought to map transnational artistic exchange and to interrogate the conceptual terms for understanding socialist cultural exchange within a global context. Held at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw on 5 – 6 February 2026, the two-day event significantly contributed to this ongoing discussion. The conference featured an exceptionally dense programme, bringing together twenty-six scholars: international researchers who responded to an open call, and invited local Polish researchers.¹ In their opening remarks, conference organisers Gabriel Świtek and Wiktoria Szczupacka highlighted the rise of conservative political forces in Poland and the subsequent reduction in funding for humanities research, resulting in a critical lack of systemic institutional support. These funding reductions have long-term consequences for scholars, demanding significant time to repair existing infrastructures and sustain future research. Zachęta has responded to these challenges by positioning itself as a centre of scholarly support, facilitating archival access and developing digital databases and collections to expand and stabilise research possibilities in the coming years. Organising this conference was one such gesture of support towards the international scholarly community, providing both research material and a platform for international discussion and exchange.

¹ For the full conference programme and audio recordings, see the Zachęta website: <https://zacheta.art.pl/pl/kalendarz/global-and-forgotten-connections-the-circulation-of-visual-a>



Organisers of the conference, Gabriela Świtek (left) and Wiktoria Szczupacka (right), during the presentation of Wiktoria's paper, 'Between the People's Republic of Poland and India: Women Artists, Feminism, and the Exhibition at the BWA Gallery in Bydgoszcz in 1988', photo courtesy of N Gawryś, Z Sękowska / Zachęta Archive, CC BY-SA

While the programme was largely structured around regional panels focused on Asia, Latin America and Africa, the presentations repeatedly highlighted transregional triangulations – for example, circulations between Finland, the USSR and China, or between Mexico, Poland and China, or Brazil, France and Poland. While some papers examined artistic exchange through formal diplomatic agreements, others looked beyond state structures, emphasising informal infrastructures such as mail-art networks, samizdat publishing and alternative circuits of circulation. Still other papers foregrounded transcontinental artistic biographies, featuring both well-known and forgotten figures – such as Jerzy Cwiertnia, Jiří Kolář, Paul Strand, Marcos Kurtycz, Kázmér Fejér, Liuba Wolf, Antonio Berni and Silvano Lora. Taken together, the conference highlighted the tension between regional categorisation and relational global history. The conference sought to redefine the Cold War, presenting it not merely as an ideological conflict between East and West, but as a complex network of exhibition bureaus, biennials, diplomatic channels and artistic mobility.

The first panel, distinct in its non-geographic focus, explored the institutional and structural conditions of socialist cultural exchange. Gabriela Świtek discussed the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, housed at Zachęta from 1949 to 1989, emphasising its role as a coordinating body for international exhibitions in socialist Poland. Terezie Nekvindová's research revealed a more fragmented and decentralised system of international artistic exchange in Czechoslovakia. In the absence of a central authority, exchange operated through interconnected institutional networks.

Dorota Jarecka's presentation on Warsaw's Galeria Studio showed how certain exhibition projects, despite being structurally integrated into officialdom, deviated from official cultural policy. Jarecka used the metaphor of the 'quilt' to illustrate the circulation of foreign art in socialist Poland, emphasising its fragmentation, discontinuity and uneven visibility. This unevenness extended to geopolitical representation. Jarecka, examining the work of Leandro Mbomio Nsue, an artist from Equatorial Guinea whose work was shown at Galeria Studio, noted the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions's partial marginalisation of Sub-Saharan Africa. For example, the exhibitions of Modern Nigerian Art (1969) and sculptures from Zimbabwe (1989) were held at the Palace of Culture and Science and the National Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw, respectively, rather than at the more prestigious Zachęta. This marginalisation was also evident in the conference programme, where only two of twenty-six presentations discussed exchanges with African countries or the experiences of African artists in socialist contexts.

The conference revealed several overarching patterns. The Eastern Bloc emerged as a frequent, though highly selective mediator of Global South visibility. While some artists and exhibitions circulated through socialist and non-aligned networks, censorship, diplomacy or inconsistent institutional support constrained other trajectories. Agata Jakubowska's account of Mexican feminist exhibitions, Thục Linh Nguyễn Vũ's study of Vietnamese art in Poland, and the cancelled Warsaw exhibition of Dominican artist Silvano Lora, illustrated these limitations. Furthermore, multiple speakers highlighted the fragility of archival materials. Missing documentation, forgotten exhibitions and lost artworks hampered historical reconstruction, a condition evident in Terezie Nekvindová's research in dispersed Czechoslovak exhibition records and the incomplete archival traces surrounding women's exhibitions and transnational cultural exchanges discussed in several panels. Collectively, these case studies suggest that socialist globality functioned through asymmetrical mediation and precarious memory, producing a form of global connection that was uneven, contingent and structurally fragile, rather than horizontal.

Socialist institutions, as demonstrated across multiple papers, were active producers of aesthetics and not mere hosts. They filtered styles through artists' unions and exhibition bureaus, shaped audience reception through catalogue narratives and censorship, and generated new media forms, such as the technologically advanced exhibition designs developed by Czechoslovakia following Expo '58 in Brussels, where they received the Gold Star, the highest grand prize awarded to the exhibition's most exceptional national pavilion. Importantly, these practices extended beyond exchanges within the socialist world. Nekvindová's presentation showed that non-socialist patrons, such as Australia, Canada, Egypt or Iran, commissioned Czechoslovak designers and audiovisual specialists, illustrating how socialist cultural expertise circulated within diplomatic, commercial and geopolitical economies that transcended ideological alignment. Thus, bureaucratic and curatorial mechanisms served not only as aesthetic agents of state socialism but also as instruments through which socialist states accrued symbolic, diplomatic and economic advantages on a global scale.

Read in this light, the conference exposed socialist internationalism as structurally contradictory, not purely solidaristic. For instance, Vietnamese art was received in Poland as both a sign of postcolonial modernity and an object of exotic traditionalism. Similarly, Mexican feminist exhibitions were incorporated into the protocols of cultural diplomacy rather than serving as feminist political exchange, and Algerian and Ethiopian collaborations were marked by hierarchies, omissions and geopolitical mediation. These instances suggest that socialist ‘friendship’ was not a simple narrative of anti-imperialist solidarity but a complex formation shaped by ideological rhetoric, diplomatic strategy, material interests and uneven reciprocity. Consequently, it functioned less as unconditional solidarity and more as a negotiated and asymmetrical model of global relations, influenced as much by benefit and mediation as by proclaimed internationalism.

The conference also showcased a methodological shift in socialist art history, with decolonial, feminist and ecological frameworks gaining prominence. For example, Wiktoria Szczupacka’s reconstruction of the circulation of work by Indian women artists through Poland and Agata Jakubowska’s analysis of Mexican women’s exhibitions, reframed by socialist cultural diplomacy, highlighted feminist exhibition histories. These studies revealed the gendered movement of artistic production through infrastructures often overlooked in feminist historiography, while also highlighting the tension between Western and socialist feminism, particularly as the latter was appropriated and controlled by the state. Maja and Reuben Fowkes’s presentation on revolutionary monuments in Ethiopia demonstrated the ecological and decolonial dimensions of socialist memorialisation, illustrating the intersection of socialist internationalism with environmental transformation and postcolonial state formation. Furthermore, Katerian Valdivia Bruch’s study of Third Worldist cultural policy in 1970s Peru traced how anti-imperialist solidarity reshaped artistic production, exhibition practices and cultural administration, moving beyond binary Cold War divisions. Collectively, these approaches suggest a developing synthesis between decolonial critique and the historiography of socialism, in which questions of gender, ecology and Third World solidarity are reconfiguring the interpretative frameworks used to understand socialist global connections.

The conferences coincided with the closing of the exhibition, ‘What Are Our Collective Dreams? Global Connections – Abandoned Friendships’, curated by Taras Gembik, Joanna Kordjak and Antonina Stebur. Although both the exhibition and the conference addressed closely related themes, they operated largely in parallel, revealing a persistent divide between curatorial practice and academic historiography. This asymmetry also proved revealing in another sense. While the conference offered an empirically rich mapping of infrastructures, exchanges and artistic trajectories, the exhibition – without claiming theoretical exhaustiveness – more explicitly sought conceptual terms through which socialist global connections might be interpreted beyond historical reconstruction alone. By centring what Antonina Stebur defines as the ‘ruins of infrastructure’ and ‘imperfect solidarities’ (after Aruna D’Souza) as curatorial



Conference participants during the curators' tour of 'What Are Our Collective Dreams? Global Connections – Abandoned Friendships' exhibition (curated by Taras Gembik, Joanna Kordjak and Antonina Stebur), photo courtesy of N Gawryś, Z Sękowska / Zachęta Archive, CC BY-SA

problems,² the exhibition suggested that the history of socialist internationalist cultural exchange cannot be grasped solely through networks of circulation or institutional exchange, but must also be read through breakdown, temporal disjunctions and the afterlives of unrealised modernities. Yet even here, the question of how such histories might transform the theoretical frameworks of art history itself – its periodisation, categories, and definitions of modernism – remained only partially articulated.

From this perspective, the most consequential limitation shared by both conference and exhibition lay not merely in empirical scope, but in the absence of sustained engagement with theoretical art history. Across all the panels, infrastructures, solidarities, contradictions and exchanges were documented in striking detail, yet key conceptual categories – such as Socialist Realism in its global context, Marxist aesthetics and humanism, and the relationship between socialist art and modernism – remained largely undertheorised. Without confronting how socialist cultural production might reconfigure dominant timelines of modernism, or challenge the conceptual separation between realism and the avant-garde, the recovery of global socialist connections risks remaining historiographic rather than transformative. Further intensifying this theoretical gap was the limited engagement with race as a structuring dimension of socialist internationalism. Despite the wide geographic range of case studies – from Vietnam and Algeria to Ethiopia, Mexico, Palestine and Peru – racialisation seldom emerged as an analytic

² See Aruna D'Souza, *Imperfect Solidarities*, Floating Opera Press, Glasgow, 2024

framework, leaving insufficiently examined the tension between socialism's proclaimed anti-racism and the lived realities of exoticisation, hierarchy and everyday discrimination within socialist societies. Notably, such concerns surfaced most clearly only in the final discussion, where participants reflected on unresolved methodological questions. Zsuzsa László pointed to the tentative conceptual figures proposed during the conference – the metaphor of the 'quilt', evoking fragmentary and uneven transnational connections, and the image of the 'staircase', drawn from Wiktoria Szczupacka's analysis of the socialist state-sponsored exhibition of Indian women artists at the BWA Gallery in Polish Bydgoszcz in 1988 – as preliminary steps toward a more reflexive historiography. Together, these figures gesture less towards a coherent narrative of socialist solidarity than towards a layered terrain of partial visibility, structural asymmetry and unresolved difference. Articulating a theory of art history that accounts for the Cold War's socialist global exchanges and is attentive to race, power, mediation and modernism's unfinished temporalities remains an urgent task for future scholarship in this emerging field.

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