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## A Future Lost: Artistic Appropriations of the Socialist Internationalist Legacy in Africa

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### Abstract:

The publication *Red Africa* edited by British curator and writer Mark Nash sets out to excavate a seemingly forgotten past: the socialist friendship with Africa in the Cold War. The contributions present the results of a two-year research project and seasonal programme at Calvert 22 Foundation in London that included the exhibition *Things Fall Apart*, film screenings, and seminars. In the form of a collage, transcripts of conversations are assembled together with six scholarly essays and glimpses into the work of eleven artists and artist groups whose projects were on display at the exhibition. The mix of exhibition catalogue, edited volume, and glossy art magazine enters into a conversation with its readers and viewers that is equally intriguing and confusing and that leaves them wanting more.

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Nash, Mark (ed.): *Red Africa. Affective Communities and the Cold War*. London: black dog publishing, 2016. 192 pages, 19.95 GBP. ISBN: 9781910433942

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The history of socialist internationalism in Africa presents itself as an anachronistic phenomenon whose dreams for the future were crushed in 1991 and whose legacy lingers in the present unnoticed to most. Futures past, a lost utopian moment, an unfulfilled search, and an alternative history of globalisation are but a few of the characterisations that dominate the account in *Red Africa. Affective Communities and the Cold War*. The contributors work with washed-out murals (Jo Ratcliffe), empty open-air cinemas (Isaac Julien), rusting shipwrecks (Kiluanji Kia Henda), “faded images in black and white” (Ribeiro Sanches, p. 78), or with a Guinean archive of unfinished films and unedited footage that is dubbed “irrelevant” by archivists in the capital of the former colonial power (Fernandez, p. 92). They contrast the falling apart of the relics of socialist internationalism in Africa with the bright

colours and cheerful narratives of propaganda materials that tell the story of friendship between nations and the aspiration of a common socialist future. By excavating this seemingly forgotten past, the publication draws on two recent trends in the arts. On one hand, the artistic contributions are inspired by what has been named archival art due to its approach of making lost or displaced historical information physically present (cf. Hal Foster's essay "The Archival Impulse" from 2004). On the other hand, the phenomenon of ruin gazing, the watching of decaying socialist infrastructure, has established itself as a popular theme in portraying the post-Soviet region (e.g. Rebecca Bathory's photo-book *Soviet Ghosts* from 2014).

*Red Africa*, edited by British curator and writer Mark Nash, evades genres and instead presents a collage of enquiry that bears characteristics of an exhibition catalogue, an edited volume, and a glossy art magazine. The contributions stem from a two-year research project at Calvert 22 Foundation in London that resulted in early 2016 in the exhibition *Things Fall Apart* and a seasonal programme with film screenings, seminars, and talks. Against this background, the publication unites research and artistic practice and assembles glimpses into the work of eleven participating artists with six scholarly essays and transcripts of two conversations in extracts. The editor Mark Nash first briefly introduces the theme of "affective communities" and provides an overview of the history of socialist internationalism in Africa and its relation to different parts of the world. In the scholarly essays, Polly Savage and Manuela Ribeiro Sanches deal with Soviet student exchange programmes with Africa and the anti-colonial international solidarities between Africans and their diasporas, while Kate Cowcher, Nadine Siegert, and Ana Balona de Oliveira provide insights into the art produced during Soviet-Ethiopian friendship, the socialist legacies of the contemporary Luanda art scene, and into the remembrance of decolonisation in art from Lusophone Africa.

In the sixth contribution, "A Grin without Marker", Filipa César's encounter with the fragmented film archive in Guinea-Bissau offers a vivid account of how artistic and research practice merge in view of the troubled history of colonialism and liberation movements. Many stories are left undocumented and material traces damaged, which urged César's artistic collective to a new approach to the archive: "These are no representations of the past, only matters of the present. We stopped calling it an archive and instead a collective milieu, an assemblage of shrapnel." (94) Many of the artistic contributions in *Red Africa* share the method of appropriating historical sources and imbuing them with new meaning. Whether they work with already existing archival collections such as the Museum of Yugoslav History or they create their own virtual collection, such as Yevgeniy Fiks' *The Wayland Rudd Archive*, the rearrangement of historical film, photographs, and posters invokes a new perspective on the past and thus reveals unresolved issues in the present

While *Red Africa* is a richly illustrated and thought-provoking reflection on Africa's history during the Cold War, it also has many loose ends that make it a challenging reading. The inserted sections on the participating artists vary in format and it is not always readily discernible who authored the texts accompanying the illustrations. Most regrettably, though providing a timeline of events after 1945, the publication does not include an overview of the events organised at Calvert 22 Foundation that formed the basis of the contributions. Such overview would be invaluable for piecing together a standalone publication as described in the introduction (cf. p. 7). The different intriguing strands of thought unravel in the explorative fashion of the underlying event series without any conclusion at the end. In this sense, the publication assumes the form of the necessarily incomplete and loosely organised archive that may be used by the reader for information and for inspiration, but that does not tell self-contained stories. It leaves the reader both intrigued and confused, but definitely curious for more.

**German Abstract:**

**Eine verlorene Zukunft: Künstlerische Aneignungen des sozialistisch-internationalistischen Erbes in Afrika**

Die vom britischen Kurator und Autor herausgegebene Publikation *Red Africa* macht sich daran, eine scheinbar vergessene Vergangenheit freizulegen: die sozialistische Freundschaft mit Afrika im Kalten Krieg. Die Beiträge präsentieren die Resultate eines zweijährigen Forschungsprojekts und eines Saisonprogramms in der Calvert 22 Foundation in London, welches die Ausstellung *Things Fall Apart*, Filmvorführungen und Seminare beinhaltete. In der Form einer Collage sind Abschriften von Gesprächen zusammengetragen mit sechs wissenschaftlichen Essays und einen kleinen Einblicken in das Schaffen von elf Künstler\_innen und Künstlergruppen, deren Projekte in der Ausstellung gezeigt wurden. Die Mischung von Ausstellungskatalog, Sammelband und Hochglanzmagazin beginnt eine Konversation mit ihren Leser\_innen und Betrachter\_innen, die ebenso faszinierend wie verwirrend ist und sie mehr wollen lässt.

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