

Struggle is hazardous and proceeds in spirals and zig-zags.
—“THE AIMS OF ARTISTS FOR DEMOCRACY,” 1974¹

In his 1978 “Preliminary Notes for a Black Manifesto,” the artist Rasheed Araeen writes:

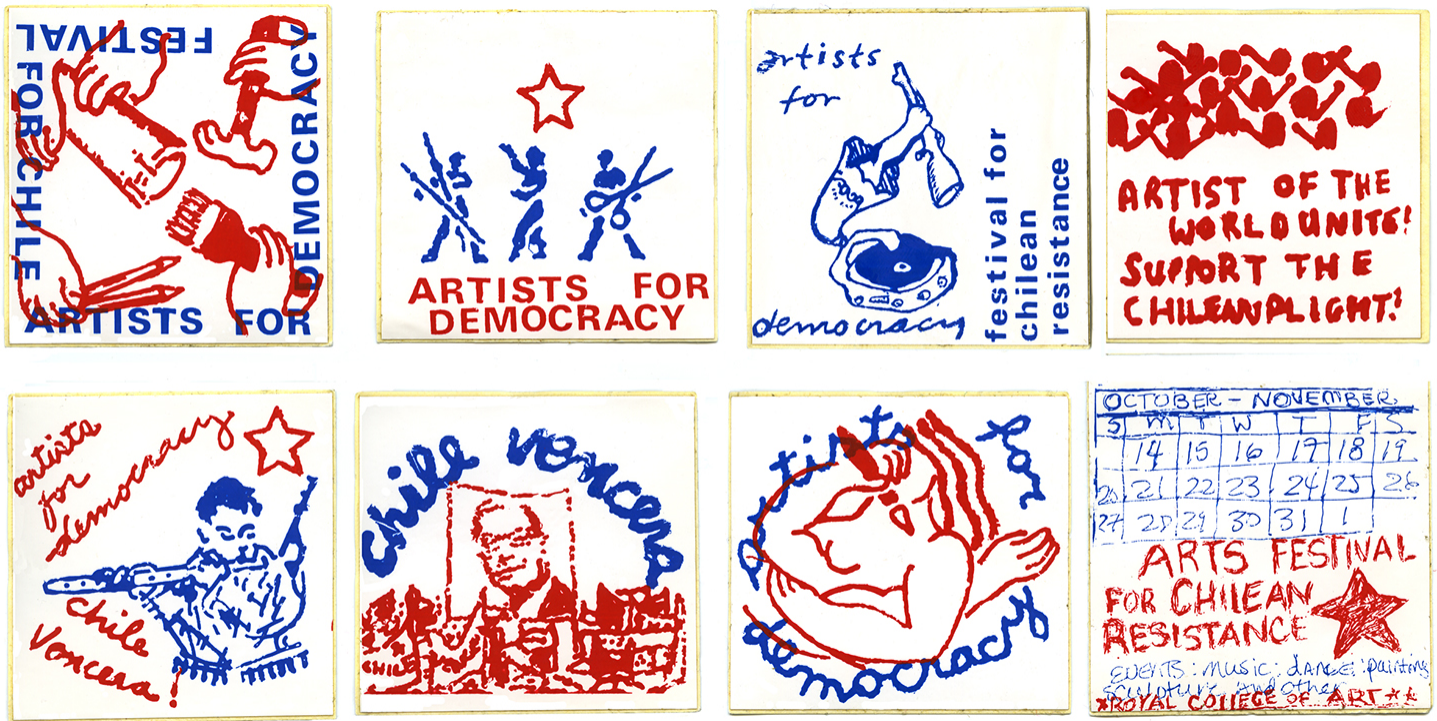
What is important now is not WHAT WE WERE IN THE PAST, but WHAT WE ARE TODAY ... Finding ourselves surrounded and dominated by the forces which either demand our return to ethnic traditions or make us accept the hegemony of Western developments, WE HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO OPPOSE THEM BOTH; AND OUT OF THIS CONFRONTATION WILL EMERGE NEW FORMS THAT TRULY REFLECT OUR PARTICULARITY IN THE WORLD TODAY.²

David Morris

Precarious Solidarities: Artists for Democracy in Historical Perspective, Part 1

Araeen’s “TODAY” can be read historically, in the context of the times and places in which he was working on the text—in Karachi and London during 1975–76. It can also be read indexically—the “TODAY” invoking the present, wherever and whenever that may be for the reader. In what follows I try to explore the long “today” across the points suggested by Araeen’s words, to talk historically about the present, about particularity in its world(s), and to do so by way of this 1970s “today.”

Of course, another sense of this “today” might be *the contemporary*. Our particularity in the world today is the expression of the spirals and zigzags of history; the globalized present is in particular a reiteration of a world map shaped by colonialism.³ “Contemporary” is a description of the disjunctive coexistence of multiple temporalities, characteristic of globalization.⁴ But if contemporaneity—the condition or quality of being contemporary—is an articulation of the temporal logic of global capitalist modernity, it is not reducible to it—hence the Zapatista call for *un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos* (a world where many worlds fit).⁵ In “Preliminary Notes,” Araeen asks: “How are Third World people trying to enter into the modern era or/and create their own contemporary history? If their voice is muted or not heard at all, what are the underlying causes? And what are the alternatives open to them?” He goes on to note a handful of examples of organized attempts to find Third World alternatives to those directions imposed by the West. The three examples he gives are FESTAC ’77 (the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture), which took place in Lagos, Nigeria in 1977; Centro de Arte y Comunicación (Center for Art and Communication,



Artists for Democracy, stickers created by artists including John Dugger, David Medalla, and Cecilia Vicuña, for "Arts Festival for Democracy in Chile," Royal College of Art, London, 1974. Courtesy Cecilia Vicuña Studio and England & Co.

CAYC), formed in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1968; and Artists for Democracy (AFD).

AFD, as any artistic or social movement, is the expression of a very particular time and place. In London in 1974, a small group of artists and cultural workers from Chile, the Philippines, the United States, and Britain agreed to form an internationalist organization to offer material and cultural support to liberation movements worldwide. Their immediate context was a declining imperial power in a state of deep crisis. In the words of one contemporary analysis: "There is no doubt that the old British state is going down."⁶ Legislation such as the 1968 Commonwealth Immigrants Act and the 1971 Immigration Act, introduced by respective Labour and Conservative administrations, introduced a racialized two-tier citizenship system—"unashamedly racist," in the words of then-premier of India, Indira Gandhi—that provided the blueprint for Britain's current "hostile environment" for migrants.⁷ For many of those arriving in London from elsewhere, this did not appear to be a place with especially favorable conditions for the creation of revolutionary culture.⁸

Artists, writers, and intellectuals from all over the world have long gathered in imperial centers for reasons often antithetical to the project of empire.⁹ Just as the economic status of a city such as London is based on the labor of peoples from elsewhere, so too is its cultural capital. A project such as AFD exceeds narratives of "Britishness" or

"British art history"; it happened in spite of, rather than because of, the imperial nation-state. As cofounder David Medalla wrote at one point: "We are the expatriates of a future world."¹⁰ (Several AFD members had problems with visas to live and work in Britain; one of them narrowly avoided deportation.¹¹) Nadine El-Enany argues that contemporary Britain in toto may be understood as "the spoils of empire," rightfully belonging to those whom Britain has historically dispossessed.¹² The British state itself can therefore be considered an object of restitution alongside its many stolen artefacts; to echo the words of Nii Kwate Owoo in his 1970 film *You Hide Me*, it should "immediately and unconditionally be returned to us!" There is nonetheless a critical tension between the contemporary persistence of London's position within international art circuits—hence its gravitational pull for artists the world over—and its distance from where "the real thing" was actually happening. These tensions would both expand and circumscribe AFD's field of activity.

The group was a precarious formation. The founders began to splinter within the first six months; further splits would occur during its subsequent tenure at 143 Whitfield Street. Overall, it managed to sustain itself for a little over three years. A level of volatility is not uncommon in the context of collective political and artistic endeavors; group initiatives that last into the medium-long term are a comparative rarity. Histories of AFD have thus far been largely told in relation to individual artists' biographies, a fact that tells us more about the individualizing ways of



Cecilia Vicuña with her installation *A Journal of Objects for the Chilean Resistance* at Art Meeting Place, London, 1974. Courtesy Cecilia Vicuña Studio.

constructing art's histories that remain dominant. In practice, the role of the "artist" was a highly fluid one within their activities. What I attend to here is not just whatever was being produced under the name of "art," but everything happening around it or made possible by it. Paradoxically, the "artist" may appear as a rather incidental character in the present story—a collective fiction, perhaps, and one that helps map a different set of possibilities.

The story of AFD may also serve as a reminder of alternative, pre-identitarian political sensibilities. This can be seen, for instance, in the group's ready expression of common cause with peoples across vast cultural, geographic, and geopolitical differences (and regardless of participation from members of those communities), or in the way their Whitfield Street squat was a "queer" space without ever considering itself as such.¹³ Such an approach to organizing a space or collective points to a politics grounded in relationships within and across difference, and an understanding that individualized identities can function as barriers rather than a basis for solidarity.

AFD's story is in no respect a singular one; as one participant observed of their milieu: "[A] feature of this

period was the formation of groups. Their history has never been written."¹⁴ As such, this text is a call for a history that recognizes art and culture as a wholly non-individuated activity, grounded in the mess of group work and its exponential interrelations.

From the perspective of one London-based critic, the 1970s was a decade in art where "everything seemed possible."¹⁵ This was a moment where "young artists emerged with a host of heretical alternatives in mind, including film, video, performance, raw documentation, photography and texts."¹⁶ Naeem Mohaiemen, another keen observer of the 1970s, has remarked that the decade was also "a moment when anything seemed possible *politically*, particularly if you're from the left. And it's a moment of promise because of decolonization. But then it pivots and everything starts going dark, by my estimation ... It's the period when things didn't work out."¹⁷ AFD is the outgrowth of these two moods of possibility—political and artistic. Its story is of the contradictions and mixed fortunes of both.

What happens when the transnational networks of anti-imperialism from the not-too-distant past are brought

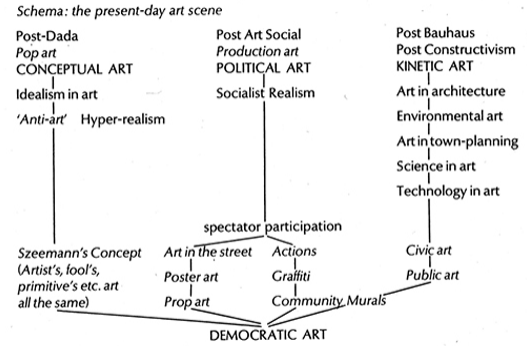
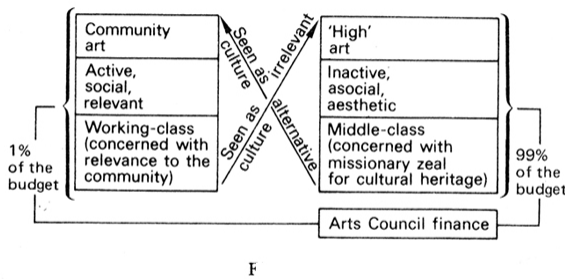
into the “global” context of today? Indeed, fascination with the artistic-solidaristic complexes of the seventies is a distinct contemporary mood.¹⁸ Noting this tendency, the exhibition project “Southern Constellations: The Poetics of the Non-Aligned” hazarded that “in this time of increasing global inequalities, crises, and the widening chasm between the rich and the poor, artists are seeking new ways and means of expression with which to overcome such divisions and perhaps re-establish different, more just global relations.”¹⁹ Yet the critical concern is what relationship the “solidarity” expressed in this earlier moment, with its overlapping horizons of decolonization, liberation, and revolutionary struggle, can have to contemporary manifestations, given the distance between then and now. Are such manifestations predicated on “the absence of a context of political practice that might give such exhibitions an effective extra-artistic political force” (as Peter Osborne has argued in another context)?²⁰ Or, to turn to AFD more concretely: Is this story of a politicized and particularly worldly group of artists remarkable most of all for its anticipation of art’s “global?” Or could there be other reasons to return to it now, other lessons we might learn, other ways we might extend it in the present?

At a conference in 1978 on “The State of British Art,” art critic Richard Cork would acknowledge the prevailing attitude in British art at the time: “We are guilty of appalling British imperialist provincialism with regard to the Third World.”²¹ Araeen’s “Preliminary Notes for a Black Manifesto,” published in the journals *Black Phoenix* and *Studio International* that same year, offered a trenchant critique of predominant understandings of “internationalism,” as something anchored in Europe and North America to the exclusion of the majority of the world. In Araeen’s analysis, “international art” may as well be described as “imperialist art,” a Western model imposed on the Third World. We may thus think of the prevailing aesthetic model in European and American art contexts at that moment as *international-imperialist* aesthetics. This may be contrasted with what Sanjukta Sunderason terms “partisan aesthetics,” to describe artistic practices that were politicized through their adjacency to left-wing activism in Calcutta through the 1940s and ’50s.²² “Partisan” here describes a political position-taking for artists that could support and promote the intersecting political positions of modernity, nationalism, and socialism, through different examples of participation in and disassociation from India’s Communist Party. This conjuncture is precisely the shift from a colonial to a postcolonial condition, and the formation of the modern Indian state post-independence; for Sunderason, “partisan aesthetics” refers to those modes of artistic and intellectual practice that articulate the relationships between socialism and modernity in the context of decolonization.

AFD’s anti-imperialism was advanced within a still-imperial metropole, and the concept of the partisan offers a point of contrast for understanding how AFD took shape as part of a critical dialogue with internationalist-imperialist aesthetics. As a collective, they were *not* partisan, and deliberately so. They were a self-described “broad front” group of cultural workers operating under the banner of “democracy,” and as such they held various political affiliations. (In fact, partisanship towards the Revolutionary Left Movement [MIR] at the close of the Chile Festival, discussed later, was one of the major factors that led to an initial split in the group.) “Democracy” signaled a range of meanings: from specific opposition to the military coup in Chile and commitment to anti-imperialist solidarity with the Third World, to a more general sense of affinity with democratic politics of different types. This extended, in particular, to socialism in its various “really existing” varieties in the mid-1970s, as well as being the expression of a general principle of collective political organization.

The “broad front” strategy extended to AFD’s aesthetics, characterized by an experimental spirit realized through a great diversity of artistic approaches. It was unusual in its combination of various and often incompatible tendencies and approaches—many of which can be seen in diagrams drawn up by Su Braden and Frank Popper. Certain features mark AFD out as an outlier within the contemporary art scene at the time: (1) its aesthetic agenda, tending towards performative, literary, and poetic forms; (2) its embrace of “amateur”/DIY/nonart forms;²³ (3) its queer experiment-in-living at Whitfield Street; (4) its demographic makeup; and (5) its internationalism in artistic and political terms. All of this combined in a mercurial admixture of agitprop and avant-garde.

AFD’s specific political outlook could only have taken the shape that it did in the years it existed, the mid-to-late 1970s. The years 1973–75 saw the success of several anti-colonial armed struggles. The African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC) declared independence in Guinea-Bissau in September 1973, and the following year the Carnation Revolution in Portugal saw the collapse of Estado Novo and the acceleration of the decolonization process in Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, and São Tomé and Príncipe. The period saw revolutions in Ethiopia (1974), Laos (1975), Afghanistan (1978), Grenada (1979), and Nicaragua (1979), while the cause of national liberation movements was being advanced at the United Nations, notably in the 1974 New International Economic Order, which highlighted “the interdependence of all members of the world community” and put forward a set of proposals to end the economic colonialism that newly decolonized nations still faced.²⁴ But above all, the independence of Vietnam, hard won against the forces of United States imperialism, defined the moment. For the Third World and its supporters, much indeed seemed possible.



Diagrams from (left) Su Braden, *Artists and People* (1978); and (right) Frank Popper, *Art – Action and Participation* (1975).

But the geopolitical outlook was by no means clear. Hopes for a British revolution were raised, while reactionary forces beckoned a Pinochet-style military takeover in Britain.²⁵ AFD was a response to the overthrow of Allende’s democratic route to socialism, with support from the US, and the imposition of national debt and structural adjustment programs was already beginning to shape the neocolonial dynamics between the First and Third Worlds (or what would come to be known as the Global North and South). In Southeast Asia, the years following 1975 took increasingly violent turns, defined by the genocide in Cambodia in 1975–79, the Vietnamese-Cambodian war in 1978, and the Vietnamese-Chinese border war in 1979. With anti-imperialism no longer a common cause in the region after 1975, the interference of Cold War geopolitics in Southeast Asia combined with old prejudices and ambitions for regional dominance, with devastating effects. A festival in homage to the victory of the Indochinese peoples, such as that organized by AFD in London in 1975, could only have happened at that moment. As the 1970s drew to a close, the triumphant mood was no longer possible to maintain. And this is also the point at which AFD dissolved.

In a conversation published in a 1979 issue of *Black Phoenix*, Araeen and Medalla discuss the “failure” of AFD’s project. In Araeen’s analysis, it lay in its inability to deal with cultural imperialism, particularly at the level of artistic practice; for Medalla, it was instead to be found in the disconnect between cultural workers, who had little knowledge of politics but saw it as an opportunity to exhibit, and political radicals, who had little or no interest in art or poetry. These critiques offer some coordinates for thinking about what we might consider “successes” in relation to AFD—namely, how it dealt with cultural imperialism at the level of its practice (or failed to do so), and how it reconciled (or not) the conflicting priorities of its collective.

With this in mind, we may ask: What was the relationship between the twin senses of artistic and political possibility

at this very particular moment of 1974–77? What was AFD’s relationship to those to whom it dedicated its activity—“the people”, “the masses,” “the international working class?”²⁶ What publics did it in fact gather? What practices and languages were established towards its aim of giving “material and cultural support to liberation movements worldwide” and towards democratic and progressive cultures?

The “Arts Festival for Democracy in Chile” (Royal College of Art, London, October 14–30, 1974) is a place to start considering some of these questions. As the first and largest event organized under the banner of AFD, the Chile Festival may be the clearest instance of a collective artistic manifestation developing from, and contributing to, progressive political movements. The central role of culture in Salvador Allende’s “peaceful route to socialism” provided a model for artists and cultural workers, and the shock of the 1973 coup saw a great wave of solidarity organizing across the world. In Britain, the national Chile Solidarity Campaign, with its basis in a strong trade union movement, quickly took the lead in organizational efforts to campaign for democracy to be restored for the Chilean people, and in support, too, of the several thousand Chileans exiled in the UK. One of those exiles was Cecilia Vicuña, who later wrote that:

AFD’s revolutionary attempt was to dream on the scale of the Americas by reversing the colonial order of the art world, where the metropolis dictates the aesthetic language the colonies must follow. It offered an alternative model of creativity generated from South America and the Third World ... where revolutionary politics and experimental art merge with ease.²⁷

Vicuña’s retrospective account emphasizes the festival’s

debt to the examples of “new forms of collective participation” provided by 1960s–70s Chile, including Allende’s agrarian reforms and Project Cybersyn, the pioneering experiment in cybernetic governance. From this perspective, the Chile Festival is seen as extending the alternative models of creativity that developed during the Chilean revolutionary process. And this represented a reversal of the prevailing internationalist-imperialist dynamic, where cultural-political developments of the supposedly “peripheral” world could provide models for cultural workers worldwide, and especially in the imperial metropole. In an interview towards the end of the AFD collective’s life, Medalla would emphasize the group’s purpose as a space to learn from what was happening in the Third World (offering Guinea-Bissau and Vietnam as examples): “New types of culture are being created, you see, and because one is away from these places doesn’t mean one should be blind to what is happening there.”²⁸

Besides Allende’s Chile, AFD drew from cultural-artistic models emerging from numerous contexts. European-American avant-garde traditions, still dominant within art schools and the art system at large, operated as genuine inspiration and critical foil; and these were complemented by understandings of avant-garde developments within a wider geographical scope, such as the internationalism championed as part of Signals Gallery in London and its accompanying publication *Signals Newsbulletin*, particularly with respect to Latin America. In the Philippines in the late 1960s, the Ermita district of Manila was a formative context for several core AFD members; “happenings” took place in unexpected venues, from streets, parks, and by the sea wall, as well as cafes, bars, restaurants, churchyards, and cemeteries. These events mingled with marches against the Vietnam War and the activities of the communist youth organization Kabataang Makabayan.²⁹ We may also speculate about AFD’s continuity with what Patrick Flores describes as a wider “installative” tendency in art in Southeast Asia, a “relationality activated by multiple forces” and motivated by the desire “to convene an art world, or a relational or transpersonal world of art, by creating conditions for people to assemble along the various axes of dissent, development, nationalism and solidarity.”³⁰

Cultural models from elsewhere opened significant space for invention and projection. China was of special interest to the international post-’68 generation, as a powerful locus of inspiration, fantasy, as well as orientalist misunderstanding through which political and artistic questions could be advanced. Jun Terra recalls the Maoist influence on his cultural-political milieu in Manila, and Guy Brett and John Dugger each participated in Society for Anglo Chinese Understanding (SACU) tours of the People’s Republic during the 1970s; these experiences furnished a range of new ideas on art, which were elaborated in writing and exhibition-making. This included Brett’s championing of non-professional “spare-time artists” and the touring exhibition “Peasant Painting from Huhsien [戶县] County”;³¹ Terra’s Maoist readings of the

art of his contemporaries;³² Caroline Tisdall’s *Guardian* article based on Dugger’s experiences in China and the social and economic position of artists there;³³ and “People Weave a House!,” Dugger’s 1972 exhibition collaboration with Medalla and others at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, in which visitors were invited to collectively weave architecture using a large loom and transparent plastic tubes. Altogether China appeared to offer an example the British art world should learn from—“the basis for a completely new culture,” as one observer put it³⁴—constructing an irresistible image of the artist in society, however distant its realities may be: cultural work prioritized over individual careers, artists unalienated in their work and supported by government salaries, and an emphasis “on community, or the sensual contact of bodies, or food, or the earth.”³⁵

Dugger and Medalla’s collaboration first developed through shared interests in Buddhism and interconnected South Asian intellectual traditions, and through their mutual involvement in the Exploding Galaxy (1967–68), a multidisciplinary collective and “dance-drama” group.³⁶ Their aim was to “break down the invisible barrier between ‘creator’ and ‘spectator’ ... Art [should] be a living process in which one, two or several people formulate suggestions that others take up and develop in different directions.”³⁷ Dugger and Medalla would travel together to visit the Kerala Kathakali dance company, a major influence on the collective, spending time in India and Sri Lanka as part of an eighteen-month journey via ship with additional stops in Dakar, Senegal, Durban, South Africa, Mombassa, Kenya, Pakistan, and Manila.³⁸ The experience was formative: as summarized by Drower, they “left England as Buddhists and came back as Maoists.”³⁹ Dugger and Medalla would draw heavily on Mao’s writings in their articulation of their art practices back in London, individually and through the Artists Liberation Front (ALF, a precursor to AFD formed in 1971). Maoist precepts offered a new rationale for their ongoing experiments in participatory artmaking: “the masses have boundless creative power” indicated mass participation as the basis of a revolutionary people’s culture; participation art offered “a democratic form of proletarian cultural internationalism.”⁴⁰ As the banner that hung at the entrance of their People’s Participation Pavilion at Documenta 5 (1972) boldly proclaimed: “Socialist Art through Socialist Revolution!”

ALF’s (over)identification with certain orthodoxies of “socialist art” is particularly curious because in general the work they produced at the time is barely recognizable in terms of the aesthetic agendas of “really existing socialism.” The British art context of the time included a wide spectrum of leftist practices, including the League of Socialist Artists, a group whose rhetorical style bore strong similarities to ALF but whose arguments and practice favored orthodox socialist realist aesthetics. By



This is a photograph taken by the artist Stephen Pusey of a mural he completed in 1977 in Covent Garden, London, UK. License: CC BY-SA 3.0.



"Arts Festival for Democracy in Chile," Royal College of Art, London, October 1974. Lynn MacRitchie (left) stands next to one of the exhibition's "campamento" environments. Photograph courtesy Jun Terra.

contrast, ALF's aesthetics continued to develop according to their interest in experimental and participatory artistic forms emergent and popular at the time. It is possible that some still saw a vanguard role for the ALF group within the "broad front" movement that AFD sought to build; indeed, this might explain certain conflicts that would later emerge in the group. In any case, in Brett's estimation the major difference was that "AFD was open to more people and therefore more ideas," and its "broad front" aesthetics allowed the coexistence of "orthodox" and "experimental" styles.⁴¹ At the entrance to the Chile Festival hung a large-scale painting by AFD cofounder Stephen Pusey—whose practice would develop into civic activism and the community mural movement—which depicted Allende, Pablo Neruda, and the Chilean masses, in grand socialist-realist style.⁴²

The Chile Festival's numerous symposia, such as "Cultural Imperialism and Latin American Art and Culture" and "Art and Culture in Asia," reflected the worldwide scope of the group's transnational ambitions. But the group also turned its attention to its immediate colonial context: the United

Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. A 1974 planning document drafted by Medalla includes plans for a travelling exhibition that would "examine the history of working class culture in England, from the beginning of capitalism to the present day."⁴³ The exhibition, never realized, was to address the legacy of British colonialism within Britain itself.⁴⁴ It also set out to explore the potentials of "minority cultures" within the imperial nation.⁴⁵

The program for the Chile Festival's opening night, on October 14, 1974, reveals several significant connections to Black history in Britain. The night began with an invocation on conga drums by Trinidadian artist Roy Caboo, who had been amongst those on trial in 1971 as part of the infamous Mangrove Nine case, a landmark in the struggle against racist policing in Britain. Poems were read by seven-year-old Accabre Huntley, daughter of Eric Huntley and Jessica Huntley, founders of Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, one of the first independent Black-owned publishers and booksellers in the UK.⁴⁶ Barbadian poet and communist Peter Blackman also featured on the opening program, reading from his

1952 poem *My Song is for All Men*.⁴⁷ The festival went on to include a symposium, “Art and Culture in Africa and the Black Culture of the Caribbean,” chaired by Saint Vincent-born Lester Lewis, who would found the Hackney Black People’s Association, and with contributions from groups including the UHURU Arts Group, who developed theatre, dance, poetry, exhibitions, and participatory “Grounding” events with the Black community in Chapeltown, Leeds.⁴⁸

conflict in Ireland was a live issue, as a mainstay on the national news and the focus of large-scale campaigns such as Troops Out, and as a reference in the events program at AFD’s festival for Vietnam, which involved a durational performance by Limited Dance Company (including Rose English, Sally Potter and Jacky Lansley). Ireland was amongst the concerns that led to another split in the group, with some feeling it was necessary to focus on the struggle “on their doorstep” rather than the more “distant” concerns of Third World liberation—a dynamic



Rasheed Araeen performing *Paki Bastard* (Portrait of the Artist as a Black Person), 143 Whitfield Street, London, July 31, 1977. Courtesy the artist and Grovesnor Gallery.

Various more “local” issues register in AFD’s archive, including campaigns on housing, healthcare services, and abortion; and through performances, such as Araeen’s 1977 *Paki Bastard*, which refracted Britain’s (post)imperial conjuncture through the racism of British society.⁴⁹ AFD overlapped with numerous other left political groupuscules in London at the time, including the ALF; the British Black Panthers, via Araeen and H.O. Nazareth; and trade unionism and British second-wave feminism. Lynn MacRitchie, for instance, was a union representative at the hospital where she worked as a cleaner and a regular at feminist meetings throughout her time with AFD. The

reproduced across the British left in the mid-1970s.⁵⁰

The intent behind AFD’s unrealized exhibition on the history of the working class in England may be understood with reference to a number of common theoretical sources. One is the work of Amílcar Cabral. AFD participants were familiar with his work following a talk at Westminster Central Hall in 1971, and Cabral would inform Araeen’s “Black Manifesto.”⁵¹ Cabral’s emphasis on culture as integral to anti-colonial liberation movements offered a powerful example for cultural

workers worldwide, whatever their proximity to armed struggle.⁵² Cabral's strategy of a "return to the source"—the development of popular, "indigenous" cultural forms as a tool to resist colonial domination—resonates with another reference point common to AFD members: the Maoist principle "from the masses to the masses" (also known as "the mass line"). This recommended a cyclical process: listening to the "scattered and unsystematic" ideas of the people, concentrating them into systematic ideas, taking them back to explain to the people and using them as a guide for action, and then repeat: "And so on, over and over again in an endless spiral, with the ideas becoming more correct, more vital and richer each time. Such is the Marxist theory of knowledge."⁵³

In the early 1970s, Dugger and Medalla would position their experiments in participation art as direct expressions of this principle. The 1974 planning document reiterates AFD's commitment to the mass line, but raises the need for determining more precisely how "progressive" art, as they called it, should be defined, including: "(1) a meaningful and qualitative definition of the *new* in art (beyond formal terms); (2) ability to distinguish *progressive* vs *retrograde* examples of experimental art." Noting that "the 'new' and the 'experimental' do not necessarily confer upon an artistic production the quality of being truly progressive," the text surveys historical examples of progressive tendencies (Dadaists, Cubists, Russian Constructivists, Fernand Léger, John Heartfield, Vladimir Tatlin, Bertolt Brecht, Vladimir Mayakovsky) as well as retrograde (some expressionists, symbolists, Futurists, Ezra Pound, F. T. Marinetti), with reference to a fundamental question: "FOR WHOM?"⁵⁴ The statement rejects "poster-and-slogan" style art, referencing Lenin's and Mao's remarks ("both of whom vigorously opposed it") and acknowledging that there are also many significant artists who nonetheless fall short in their commitments to scientific socialism. It argues instead for an attitude of "critical assimilation" to art and artists: to "broaden and extend their *formal* artistic discoveries, and *infuse them with proletarian content*"; to "be able to distinguish what Lenin called '*the democratic and socialist elements in every national culture*,' concentrate them and bring them to a higher stage in our artistic production"; and to "follow in a living way Chairman Mao's teaching: 'Make the past serve the present' (culturally speaking, the *past* here means all valuable artistic heritage of *every* culture in the world, and the *present* refers to the progressive forces of our time)."⁵⁵

In practice, what was AFD's relationship to "the masses?" In the estimation of one Exploding Galaxy member, the 1960s counterculture was heavily skewed towards British elites and white almost without exception.⁵⁶ The core members of AFD came from a wider mix of social backgrounds and a significant number were from other parts of the world. Amongst the British were aristocratic, bourgeois, and working-class individuals.⁵⁷ Its members

from outside the UK came from a comparable range of class backgrounds, but their "foreignness" presented additional barriers for Britain's overwhelmingly white, parochial art establishment.

These dynamics could produce curious alliances between radical and conservative tendencies in the art-institutional landscape. Signals Gallery, for instance, clashed with the narrow nationalist agenda of the Arts Council of Great Britain in the mid-1960s, which would have had no interest in providing support for such a conspicuously internationalist project. Medalla and Signals cofounder Paul Keeler would therefore turn to other sources of support, sustaining the gallery through more old-fashioned, private means. Signals relied on an "enlightened" elite patronage (e.g., Keeler's father, an optical instruments manufacturer, and others brought in by Brett and poet Hugo Williams, both alumni of the boarding school Eton).⁵⁸ While the agenda of the Arts Council did change by the 1970s, when AFD received some project- or artist-specific grants, the group was still not able to achieve the necessary support to make their project sustainable long-term.⁵⁹

In such circumstances, what material support was AFD able to offer to liberation movements? The Chile Festival did not receive any state funding, but the initiative was supported by prominent figures in the establishment; the Royal College of Art was secured as a venue (Lord Esher, the rector and vice provost, was Brett's father), and the list of sponsors included British members of parliament, a fellow of the Royal Society, and Nobel Prize-winning scientist, diplomats, ambassadors, and international cultural figures. Material support for Chile was to be raised in an auction of works donated by artists, with proceeds split fifty-fifty, half to the artist and half to the Chilean cause. The auction raised three hundred pound sterling, from thirty artworks sold, which was given to Alvaro Bunster, English representative of the Chile Anti-Fascist Front in Rome, with the recommendation that the full amount be given to MIR as an organization within the front.⁶⁰ A further one hundred pounds was raised by a later ICA auction. For a group of unwaged cultural workers operating without a budget, four hundred pounds was not an insignificant amount. But to put it in perspective, a Trade Union Congress campaign for Chile that same year raised £3929 in total, with AFD's total closer to the lower-middle range of donations by individual trade union branches.⁶¹

Beyond AFD's moderate financial contribution to liberation struggles, how else was its material and cultural support enacted? Much can be said for the simple gesture of a festival in solidarity (as explored in the second part of this text). Another powerful example is provided by Dugger's "Chile Vencerá" banner, as seen in probably the most widely circulated photograph of AFD, of the Chile Solidarity Campaign rally in London's Trafalgar Square in 1974. The scale is extraordinary: this monumental banner proclaiming "Chile Will Prevail" at the head of a ten



John Dugger's "Chile Vencerá" banner mounted on Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square, London, 1974. © John Dugger Archive, England & Co.

thousand-strong gathering for the Chilean people. But the image also speaks to the interdependence of artistic practice and social movement, for the scale of the rally is what makes the scale of the work possible.

Yet material-cultural support can also ripple out in more subtle ways. The Chile Festival took place at the crest of a wave of energy generated by the optimism of Allende's victory in Chile and the subsequent shock and outrage generated by the coup. By way of contrast, we may consider AFD's homage to Ho Chi Minh and the Indochinese Peoples, which took place the following year at a much-reduced scale compared to the Chile Festival. By 1975, Vietnam was no longer the subject of widespread campaigning in Britain—though it had been just a few years earlier, as seen in major rallies organized by the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC) in 1967 and '68. In its celebration of Vietnam's victory, the AFD group were more in tune with the mood of the US left—where fifty-thousand joined an end-of-war rally in New York in May 1975—and, more generally, the anti-imperialist mood across the world, in stark contrast to the generally muted response in Britain. Having left the UK for Colombia, Vicuña would produce her own homage to the Vietnamese people through a series of paintings and banners. One such work, *Chile saluda a Vietnam!* (*Chile Salutes Vietnam!*, 1975), depicts a Mapuche woman and a female Vietnamese guerilla, passing on a rifle and revolutionary book. It is a banner cut into strips—echoing “Chile Vencerá”—and was shown in Vicuña's 1977 solo exhibition at the Fundación Gilberto Alzate Avendaño, Bogotá: “Homenaje a Vietnam” (Homage to Vietnam).

To be continued in Part 2, December 2023.

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- 1 "THE AIMS OF ARTISTS FOR DEMOCRACY, and some suggestions for our organisation, with proposals for immediate and long-range tasks," November 26, 1974, Guy Brett collection, Tate Archive.
- 2 Rasheed Araeen, "Preliminary Notes for a Black Manifesto," *Black Phoenix*, no.1 (Winter 1978): 11.
- 3 By "our" I mean something gesturing towards the universal, with "particularity" as dialectical counterpoint—following Araeen's own idiosyncratic dialectical thinking/practice. I'm grateful to Kylie Gilchrist for discussion of Araeen's explicit use of dialectics in his work at this time.
- 4 See Peter Osborne, "Existential Urgency: Contemporaneity, Biennials and Social Form," *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 24, no. 49–50 (2016).
- 5 I am grateful to Migrants in Culture for introducing me to *un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos* <http://www.migrantsinculture.com/>.
- 6 Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism* (New Left Books, 1977), 13.
- 7 See Ian Sanjay Patel, *We're Here Because You Were There: Immigration and the End of Empire* (Verso, 2021).
- 8 AFD cofounder Cecilia Vicuña, for instance, quickly realized that "the real thing" was happening back in Latin America. Vicuña, conversation with Courtney J. Martin at the symposium "Precarious Solidarities: Artists for Democracy (1974–77)," February 2, 2023 <https://www.afterall.org/videos/part-1-2-symposium-precarious-solidarities-artists-for-democracy-1974-77-2-february-2023/>.
- 9 See, for instance, Benedict Anderson, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (Verso, 2006); or the April 2021 issue of *Chimurenga Chronic*, "imagi-nation nwar—genealogies of the black radical imagination in the francophone world."
- 10 *we are the expatriates of a future world*, drawing for David Medalla's performance *Tatlin at the Funeral of Malevitch*, 1976. This is not to suggest that these artists should not be included in national canons but to emphasize the expansive horizons their work demands.
- 11 Dom Sylvester Houedard, letter to Jun Terra, February 16, 1975; Vicuña, conversation with Martin.
- 12 Nadine El-Enany, *Bordering Britain: Law, Race and Empire* (Manchester University Press, 2020).
- 13 Charles Hustwick, conversation with the author, June 22, 2023.
- 14 Guy Brett, "Internationalism Among Artists in the 1960s and 1970s," in *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain*, ed. Rasheed Araeen (Hayward Gallery/South Bank Centre, 1989), 112. Exhibition catalog.
- 15 Richard Cork, *Everything Seemed Possible: Art in the 1970s* (Yale University Press, 2003).
- 16 Cork, *Everything Seemed Possible*, back cover.
- 17 Naeem Mohaiemen, "I wanted to take the documentary form and jar it," *The Observer*, September 22, 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/sep/22/naeem-mohaiemen-turner-prize-2018-documentary>. Emphasis added.
- 18 The present text is no exception to this, and it is in good company. Chimurenga's panoramic forays have focused on numerous seventies-era exhibitions and artist groups, including "The International Art Exhibition for Palestine" (1978) in Beirut; post-'68 artists of the Salons de Jeune Peinture in Paris; and the Japan, Asian, African and Latin American Artists' Association (established in 1977), among others. More broadly, the cultural politics of the decolonization era and legacies of the 1955 Bandung Conference have been explored through exhibition projects including "After Year Zero: Geographies of Collaboration" (2013) and "Southern Constellations: The Poetics of the Non-Aligned" (begun in 2019). Other recent exhibitions have centered "solidarity"—for instance "Actions of Art and Solidarity" (2021), curated by Office for Contemporary Art Norway (OCA) and organized in collaboration with Kunstnernes Hus, Oslo; and "Solidarity Spores" (2020), Asia Culture Centre, Gwangju.
- 19 *Southern Constellations: The Poetics of the Non-Aligned*, ed. B ojana Piskur (Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana, 2019), 5. Exhibition catalog.
- 20 Peter Osborne, "Living with Contradictions: The Resignation of Chris Gilbert," *Afterall*, no. 6 (Autumn–Winter 2007) <https://www.afterall.org/articles/living-with-contradictions-the-resignation-of-chris-gilbert/>.
- 21 Quoted in John A. Walker, *Left Shift: Radical Art in 1970s Britain* (Tauris, 2002), 212.
- 22 Sanjukta Sunderason, *Partisan Aesthetics: Modern Art and India's Long Decolonization* (Stanford University Press, 2020). I am grateful to May Adadol Ingawanij for her recommendation to look at Sunderason's work.
- 23 The group included numerous nonartists and hosted a range of "nonart" activities, such as writing, cooking, homeopathy, poetry, education, political meetings, and organizing.
- 24 United Nations General Assembly, "Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order," May 1, 1974 <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/218450?ln=en>.
- 25 Tariq Ali, *The Coming British Revolution* (Jonathan Cape, 1972); Patrick Cosgrave, "Could the Army Take Over?," *The Spectator*, December 22, 1973. See also Andy Beckett, *Pinochet in Piccadilly: Britain and Chile's Hidden History* (Faber and Faber, 2002), in particular chapter thirteen on the formation of far-right "civil defence group" Civil Assistance, involving various establishment and ex-military figures.
- 26 See "THE AIMS OF ARTISTS FOR DEMOCRACY."
- 27 Cecilia Vicuña, "Organized Dreaming," trans. Christopher Winks, in *Artists for Democracy: El Archivo de Cecilia Vicuña* (Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos/Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, 2013), unpaginated.
- 28 David Medalla, interview by Steven Thorn, 1977, Guy Brett collection, Tate Archive.
- 29 Jun Terra, correspondence with the author, July 19, 2022 and April 28, 2023.
- 30 Patrick D. Flores, "A Changing World," in *Artist-to-Artist: Independent Art Festivals in Chiang Mai 1992–98*, ed. David Teh and David Morris (Afterall Books, 2018), 269 and 278.
- 31 In Brett's account, "the paintings convey a great sense of adventure in the large-scale collective undertakings of irrigation systems, terracing climbing the mountains, the density of healthy crops. And at the same time delight in the small scale—the workers' tea cups, a book, a newspaper, shoes left behind to enter the soggy field—material details of real life." G. Brett, "China's Spare-Time Artists," *Studio International* 189, no. 973 (January–February 1975), 14. See also *Peasant Paintings from Hu county, Shensi Province, China* (Arts Council of Great Britain, 1976).
- 32 J. Terra, "'From the Masses to the Masses': The Art of David Medalla," unpublished manuscript, 1972.
- 33 Caroline Tisdall, "Chinese Agitscape," *The Guardian*, December 15, 1972.
- 34 Adrian Rifkin, "The Chinese Exhibition at the Warehouse Gallery," *Artscribe*, no. 5 (February 1977): 17.

- 35
Tisdall, "Chinese Agitscape."
- 36
Jill Drower, *99 Balls Pond Road: The Story of the Exploding Galaxy* (Scrudge Books, 2014).
- 37
Medalla, "The Exploding Galaxy," 1968. Guy Brett collection, Tate Archive.
- 38
Their trip was financed by film producer, director, and underground patron Sylvina Boissonnas, who also supported other members of the Galaxy with travel to India and various other projects. I am grateful to Eva Bentcheva for sharing her research on John Dugger's experience of this time.
- 39
Drower, *99 Balls Pond Road*, 339.
- 40
Medalla, "On the Elements of Democratic and Socialist Culture," March 3, 1972; John Dugger, "On Participation," February 22, 1972. Guy Brett collection, Tate Archive.
- 41
Artists for Democracy: El Archivo de Cecilia Vicuña .
- 42
Stephen Pusey, correspondence with the author, April 27, 2023.
- 43
"THE AIMS OF ARTISTS FOR DEMOCRACY."
- 44
"THE AIMS OF ARTISTS FOR DEMOCRACY": "Historically, English imperialism systematically destroyed or denigrated the national cultures of its colonies; how did the English imperialists launch cultural aggression against the culture of the working classes at home in England?"
- 45
"THE AIMS OF ARTISTS FOR DEMOCRACY": "Among the non-English people who work in England, what effective roles do their different national cultures play in resisting the cultural penetration of the English bourgeoisie?" The unrealized exhibition also planned to involve cultural-political groups working in Britain such as Cinema Action, Red Ladder Theatre Company, and May First Movement, among others.
- 46
Accabre Rutlin, communication with the author, July 6, 2023.
- 47
Blackman does not appear in Lynn MacRitchie's footage of the opening, although not all parts were captured on film. Lynn MacRitchie, correspondence with the author, July 27, 2023.
- 48
Chapelton News , no. 18 (July 1974) <https://harehills111.files.wordpress.com/2016/12/july-1974.pdf> ; and Imruh Bakari, conversation with the author, June 15, 2023.
- 49
For a detailed account and documentation of the performance, see Rasheed Araeen, "Paki Bastard," *Black Phoenix* , no. 2 (Summer 1978).
- 50
Lynn MacRitchie, conversation with the author, October 7, 2020.
- 51
Cabral's lecture was published as *Our People are our Mountains: Amílcar Cabral on the Guinean Revolution* (Committee for Freedom in Mozambique, Angola and Guiné, 1972).
- 52
See Amílcar Cabral, "National Liberation and Culture," in *Unity and Struggle: Speeches and Writings* (Monthly Review Press, 1979).
- 53
Quotations from Chairman Mao Tsetung (Foreign Languages Press, 1976), 129.
- 54
"THE AIMS OF ARTISTS FOR DEMOCRACY." Emphasis in original.
- 55
"THE AIMS OF ARTISTS FOR DEMOCRACY." Emphasis in original.
- 56
Drower, *99 Balls Pond Road*, 44–45, which describes the scene around London's UFO club.
- 57
The planning document includes a call to AFD members from working-class backgrounds to lead study meetings and seminars with a view to "informing all members on the working class struggle in England."
- 58
Paul Overy, "Other Stories," *Art History* 20, no. 3 (1997): 494.
- 59
AFD were awarded £250 in 1976 for "The Hand in Life and Art," and five hundred pounds in 1977 for "Vernacular Art in Camden." A request of five thousand pounds per annum to rent a new premises following the group's from Whitfield Street, made directly by Medalla to Peter Bird, assistant art director at the Arts Council, was refused. See Arts Council of Great Britain, "Value for Money: Thirty-Second Annual Report and Accounts 1976/77"; and Peter Bird, letter to Lord Escher, May 27, 1977, Guy Brett collection, Tate Archive.
- 60
Adjusted for inflation, the total is equivalent to around five thousand pounds in today's money. The proceeds of the sale were a contentious issue for some time, with Lord Escher and Roland Penrose earlier insisting that the donation be made to Amnesty International. The circumstances around the subsequent decision to divert the funds to MIR was the basis of a bitter split in the founding AFD group.
- 61
Ann Jones, *No Truck with the Chilean Junta!: Trade Union Internationalism, Australia and Britain, 1973–1980* (ANU Press, 2014), 50.