The exhibition “Things Fall Apart” features artists, filmmakers and groups from across Africa, Asia, Europe and North America. Drawing on film, photography, propaganda, and public art, the exhibition presents interdisciplinary reflections on African connections to the Soviet Union and related countries. The title of the exhibition is borrowed from Chinua Achebe’s 1958 classic of post-colonial fiction, seen by many as the archetypal modern African novel in English which reflects on the devastating impact of colonialism in Africa. Our exhibition uses this association to focus on a similar loss of utopian perspective following the end of the cold war and collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc.

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The historic ties between these nations find expression across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: from early-Soviet utopian visions of interracial collaboration; through the height of the Cold War when soft power was used to influence independence struggles; to the ongoing stories of African independence and liberation.

For the last few years, South Korean artist One-joon Che has been working on a project related to monuments and architectures in Africa built by North Korea. Mansudae Master Class (2015) continues the artist’s previous explorations of links between military and economic geopolitics and is presented in a feature-length film, photographs and installations. Established in 1959 by the order of Kim Il-sung, Mansudae Art Studio plays a central role in enhancing North Korea’s national image by producing statues and portraits of the Dear Leader. In 1974, it erected the Tiglachin Monument in Ethiopia and subsequently donated public buildings and monuments in a number of African countries including Madagascar, Togo and Guinea. In 2010, Mansudae Overseas Projects received new attention when the African Renaissance monument was unveiled in Dakar, the capital city of Senegal.

Paulo Kapela creates depictions of his inner universe, combining Bantu philosophy, Catholicism, Rastafarianism and socialist iconographies together with a strong sense of a local praise culture. In paintings and collages of various sizes he depicts personalities from the international media. There are works showing Angola’s current president José Eduardo dos Santos next to one of the first president, Agostinho Neto. A socialist iconography is clearly visible both in the way he depicts revolutionary figures such as Deolinda Rodrigues or Hoji-ya-Henda, but also by the use of socialist symbols such as the red star or the emblematic icons of the socialist nation like the machete and the hoe.

The Congolese painter Tshibumba Kanda-Matulu depicts important events and personalities in his works. In 1960 Congo (DRC) became independent and Patrice Lumumba - politically directed towards socialism - gave his famous speech, in which he sharply condemned colonial policies. Lumumba’s regime lasted only ten weeks. With Belgian support, General Joseph Mobutu took power and Lumumba was arrested and killed under mysterious circumstances.

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Staged at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Filipa César’s Conakry (2012-2013) is a 16 mm film that revisits a reel from the Guinean archive which documents an exhibition organized by Amilcar Cabral at the ‘Palais du Peuple’ in 1972 in Conakry, reporting on the state of the war against Portuguese rule. César invited the Portuguese writer Grada Kilomba and the American radio activist Diana McCarty to reflect on these images and their history.

The Wayland Rudd Archive, collected by Yevgeniy Fiks (born in Moscow, lives in New York) and displayed here as a project of series of digital images, focuses on the representation of Africans and African-Americans in Soviet visual culture. It is comprised of over 200 Soviet images (paintings, movie stills, posters, graphics, etc.) from the 1920s to the 1980s. Wayland Rudd was an American actor who moved to the Soviet Union in 1932. During Rudd’s twenty-year-long career there, he appeared in numerous films, theatrical performances and plays. Although only a small section of the assembled images in The Wayland Rudd Archive are of Wayland Rudd himself, the project is given his name to commemorate this African American-Soviet actor’s personal story as a case in point of the complex intersection of race and communism in the 20th century American-Soviet narrative.

The travelling Communiqué project conceived by Armin Linke, Doreen Mende and Milica Tomic explores the idea of political friendship. Its point of entry is the collection of 1,200 photographs taken during the first Conference of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), held in Belgrade in 1961. Those who were fighting imperialism and colonialism in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America set a collective message from the 25 delegates to the NAM conference to the outside world. At that moment, the NAM could be understood as a third space of emancipation, one that sought to unsettle a bipolar world without the establishment of a third power bloc.

The travelling Communiqué exhibition continues the work of the Socialist Friendship research strand (conducted by Calvert 22, London between 2013 and 2015) exploring the Soviet educational bursary scheme supporting countries that were conducting anti-colonial liberation struggles and developing Communist cadres within them. Connections were particularly strong with countries such as Mozambique, Ghana, Ethiopia and Angola that were conducting liberation struggles or which, post-independence, were part of the Non-Aligned Movement. The starting point for this research project, a radio programme produced by Burt Caesar for BBC Radio 4 in 2009 called Black Students in Red Russia, is available to listen to in the gallery.

Things Fall Apart has a particular focus on cinema as a means of developing a militant aesthetic, one intended to imagine a future independent of the colonial powers as well as creating international links between African countries and the developing and Communist worlds.

The installation by Cuban artist Isaac Julien was produced during his moving image installation Fantôme Afrique (2005), which weaves cinematic and architectural references through urban Ouagadougou, the center for cinema in Africa, and the arid spaces of rural Burkina Faso. In defiance of World Bank prescriptions, under revolutionary leader Thomas Sankara, Burkina Faso developed a creative industries economy focusing on film and television production and continues to host Sub-Saharan Africa’s major biennial film festival. Julien’s Cinema Cinema presents one of the open-air cinemas in Ouagadougou. Place des Cinéastes shows a roundabout in the capital of Burkina Faso, which celebrates the mechanical elements of the camera and projection apparatus.

Shown together for the first time, the three maquettes for sculptures by Lisbon-based artist Angela Ferreira, who was born in Maputo, Mozambique and grew up in South Africa, pay homage to the film workshops that Jean Rouch, the French filmmaker and ethnographer, established in Mozambique. After the declaration of independence in 1975, Rouch and a team of filmmakers arrived in Maputo in 1974 to run a series of Super 8 workshops at the University Eduardo Mondlane and various rural communities, where Rouch tested his ideas of using Super 8 film as a tool for development. The photographs that form part of Study for Monument to Jean Rouch’s Super 8 film workshops in Mozambique (2011-2012) were made by Française Foucault in Mozambique for the purpose of documenting the working process and various filming and screening locations during the Super 8 film workshops.

The installation by Cuban artist Tonel, who lives and works in Vancouver, reflects on the historic relationship between the USSR and Cuba through the lens of the space race, real and imaginary. The objects displayed in the vitrine supposedly belonged to the team of international (Cuban, Soviet, German, American) rocket scientists known as the ‘Heroes of Baikonur’. These objects are accompanied by pages from the artist’s book Dispatches from the War Zone (2009-2014), which has its own soundtrack created in collaboration with Bob Turner, a Vancouver-based musician. The installation also includes three framed drawings.