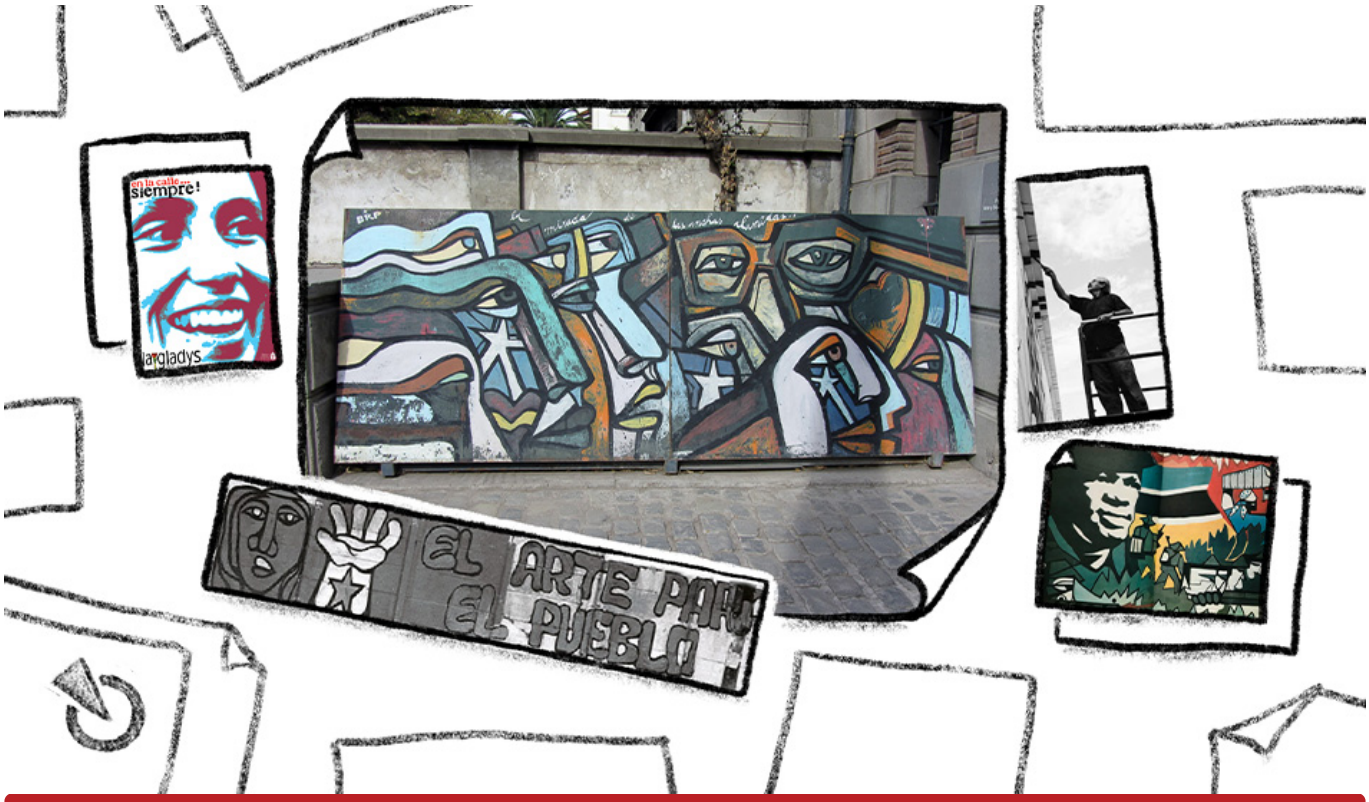
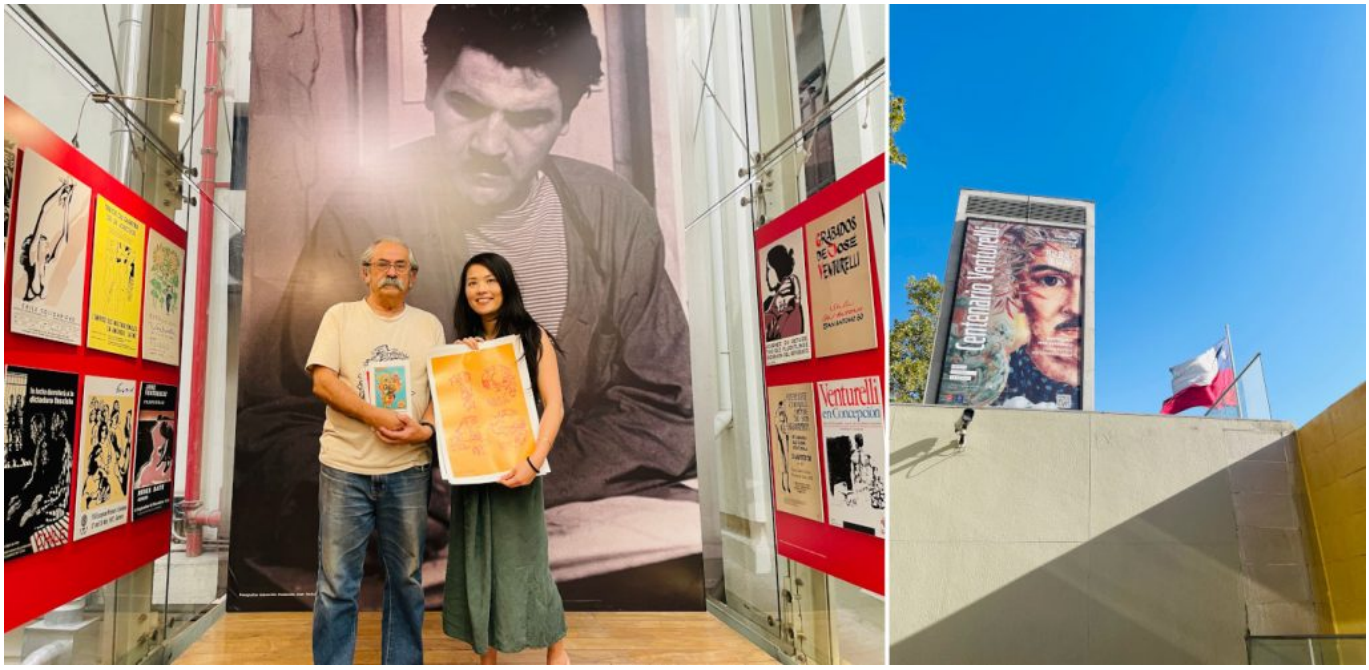
What Was Censored and Killed, the People Spread Through the World



Listen to Vamos mujer - Quilapayún

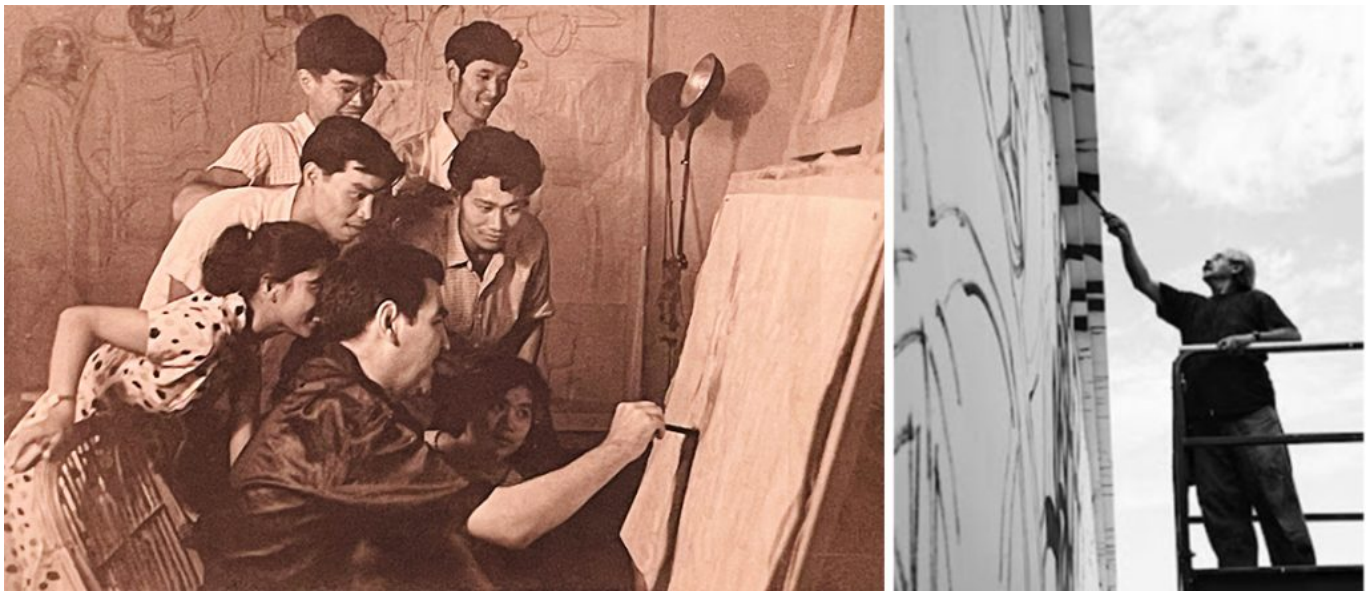
[Please **listen** to 'Vamos, Mujer' ('Let's go, woman') by Quilapayún, one of the foremost groups of the Nueva Canción Chilena movement during the Popular Unity Government of Salvador Allende.]

We met on a sweltering summer afternoon at the National Library of Chile in the heart of Santiago. With his signature white moustache, and just two days shy of his seventy-eighth birthday, Alejandro 'Mono' Gonzalez sat down and immediately began to talk about the exhibition in the adjacent room. *Patria negra y roja* ('Black and Red Homeland') was a show dedicated to the centenary of Chilean painter José Venturelli's birth. A lifelong communist, Venturelli began his painting career as the assistant to Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, at just 16 years old. He later became one of the key figures of the World Peace Council, which brought him to the young People's Republic of China as a de facto cultural ambassador for Latin America and the Caribbean.



Left: Alejandro 'Mono' Gonzalez and Tings Chak at the José Venturelli exhibition, National Library of Chile. Right: José Venturelli centenary exhibition, La Moneda Cultural Centre.

Curiously, retracing the steps of Venturelli's own life trajectory was one of the reasons that I found myself in Chile, which you can read more about **here**. But we were not meeting to talk about Venturelli nor the great Mexican muralists that inspired both him and Mono. We were here to talk about the legendary Ramona Parra Brigades, of which Mono was a founding member nearly six decades ago, when he was a design student at the University of Chile and a member of the Communist Youth of Chile. Named after Ramona Parra, the twenty-year-old communist who was shot by police in Santiago in 1946 during a nitrate workers strike, the brigades were formed in 1968, just before the election campaign of socialist leader Salvador Allende. They were young communist activists, organised in different cells working in factories, ports, high schools, and universities, born out of a flourishing political moment in the region.



Left: José Venturelli with his students in China, n.d. Credit: Eva Sandberg Xiao. Right: Mono Gonzalez painting his mural in Xinjiang, China, 2016.

'In the 1960s, Latin America had a strong musical movement: Atahualpa Yupanqui in Argentina, Alfredo Zitarrosa and Daniel Viglietti in Uruguay, and the Nueva Canción Chilena ('New Chilean Song'). In literature, there was Julio Cortázar, Mario Benedetti, and the Latin American Boom'. He added that the Cuban Revolution of 1959 also ushered in a new tradition in the graphic arts, namely posters, which influenced Latin American visual culture. Meanwhile, the political street art and aesthetic that developed alongside the Chicano and Black radical movements in the United States also found their way to Chile.

'1968 was an important year globally. It wasn't just about Paris – there was also the student massacre in Mexico, where hundreds were killed in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas'. He was referring to the brutal crackdown in Tlatelolco against the student uprising, ten days before the country hosted the Olympic Games. During the wave of protests in the lead up, student brigades were organised in full force. Engineering students designed balloons to shower leaflets. Theatre students led street performances. As government repression grew, so did popular support for the student movement – supported by the **Propaganda Brigades**, responsible for producing flyers, posters, banners and stickers. The brigades were born out of the political and cultural fervour of the times. Mono recalls, 'These were important phenomena – hard to replicate under different historical conditions'.

Murals by the Ramona Parra Brigades, c. 1970s.

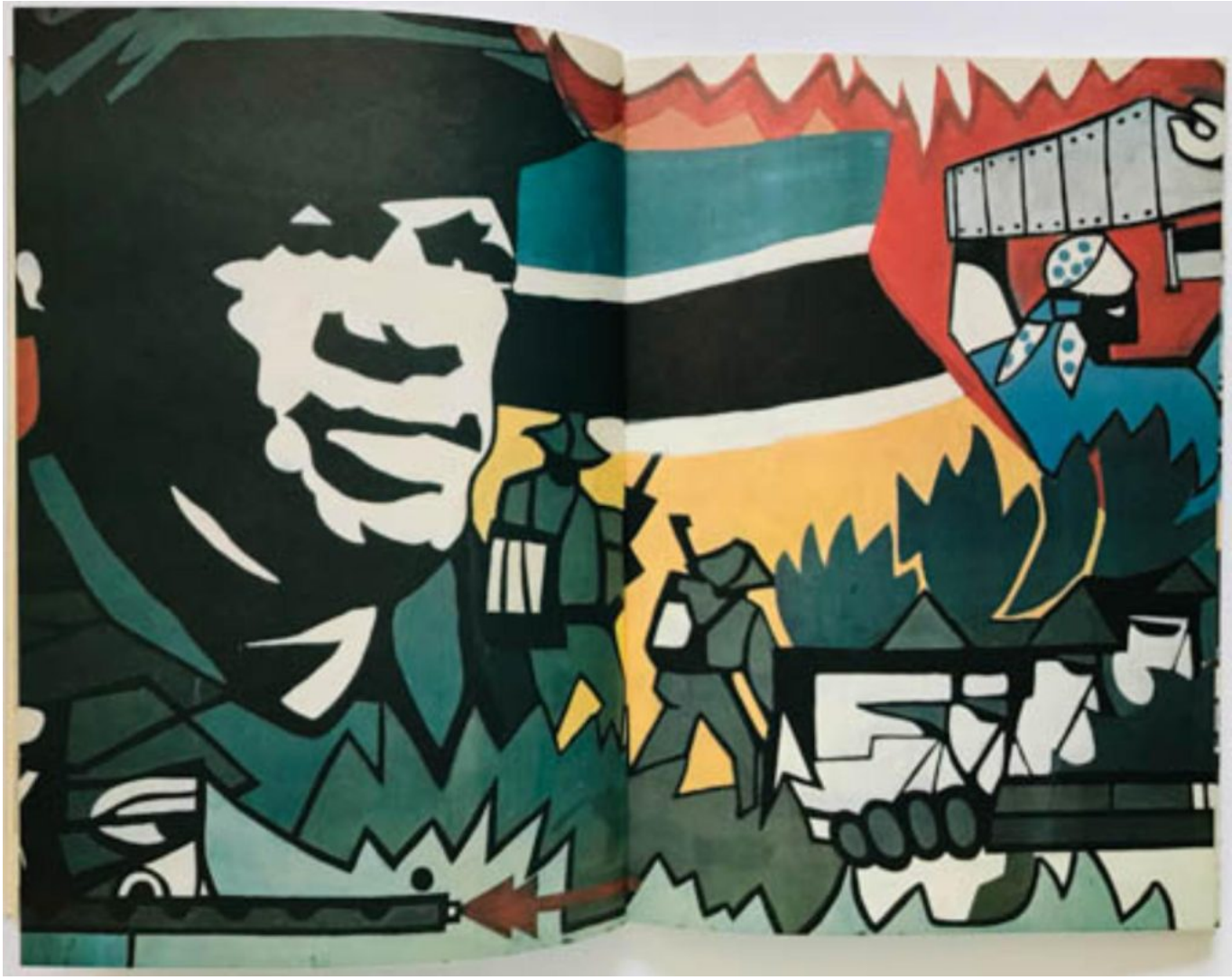
With direct ties to the Communist Party of Chile – though 'it wasn't controlled from above and emerged from the grassroots' – the brigades responded to the political necessities of the time through their chosen medium of murals, which have a unique capacity to express and dispute ideas in specific communities and territories. A week before the elections, they coordinated Amanecer Venceremos ('We will win at dawn'), an operation mobilising over 120 brigades across Chile to paint murals the night before Allende's presidential election. On 4 September 1970, the Popular Unity coalition of left-wing parties won the elections, with Allende as its leader, which ran on a programme to address the 'economic and social stagnation, widespread poverty, and the forms of total neglect suffered on all fronts by workers, peasants, and other exploited groups'.

They proposed radical economic and social reforms, focused on the nationalisation of copper as well as innovative cultural programmes (a fifth of the world's known reserves are in Chile). Amongst the efforts was to establish the Museo de la Solidaridad ('Museum of Solidarity'), a project created by the Popular Unity government to encourage the donation of artworks from across the Americas and Europe. The vision of this project, which was in full force from 1971 until the **coup** in 1973, was to create a museum of international art for the Chilean people. Murals played an important role to popularise the policies and programmes of the Popular Unity government. 'During Allende's time', Mono added, 'murals reached hundreds of thousands of people daily. Even if they were erased, they had already served their purpose'.

However, Allende's presidency would be cut short, when Chile's leadership, an example to other countries of the Third World, was found to be intolerable by the imperialist order. On 11 September 1973, reactionary sections of the Chilean army, led by General Augusto Pinochet and supported by the CIA, overthrew the Popular Unity government, and Allende died in the attack on La Moneda, the presidential palace. Killing the leader, however, was not enough, Pinochet's soldiers wanted to kill ideas, burning Marxist books and leftist artwork, including many of those from the Museum of Solidarity.

Left: Augusto Pinochet's soldiers burn Marxist books and the silkscreen print America Awakens, 28 September 1973. Credit: Wikimedia Commons. Right: Mono, La mirada de las anchas alamedas ('The Gaze of Wide Boulevards'), 2005. Credit: Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende (MSSA).

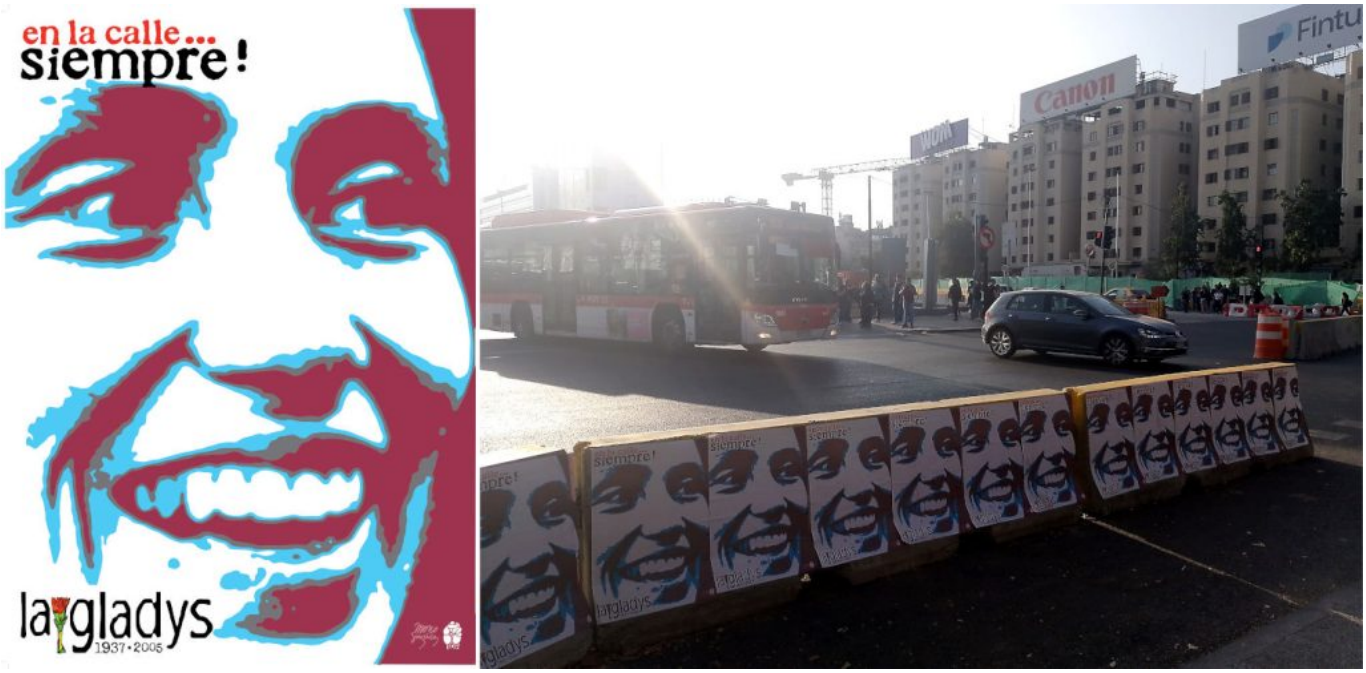
Despite the coup regime's attempts to erase the museum, Chilean cultural workers who were underground and in exile revived the institute abroad between 1975 and 1990 under the name the Salvador Allende International Museum of Resistance. The project was restored in 1991 following the return of democracy in Chile and is now called the MSSA. You can see some of the **artworks** that were featured in our dossier for the fiftieth anniversary of the coup.



Murals in Mozambique. Credit: Imagens de uma revolução (1982) by Albie Sachs.

Just as the museum's artworks survived the coup and the twenty-one-year dictatorship that followed, so did the muralism of the brigades. 'Chilean exiles carried this aesthetic worldwide', Mono said. 'The style became part of the global imagination, not just Chile's. What was censored and killed, the people spread through the world'. Some of the brigade members ended up across the world, including in Mozambique, where their aesthetic and political influence can be felt in the muralism of artists such as Malangatana Ngwenya, who collaborated with Chilean exiles – as documented in Albie Sachs' book *Imagens de uma revolução* ('Images of a Revolution'). The full breadth of this influence internationally may never be known. 'There's still so much that remains undocumented, especially regarding exile and the work of unearthing, recovering, and preserving that historical memory remains', he added.

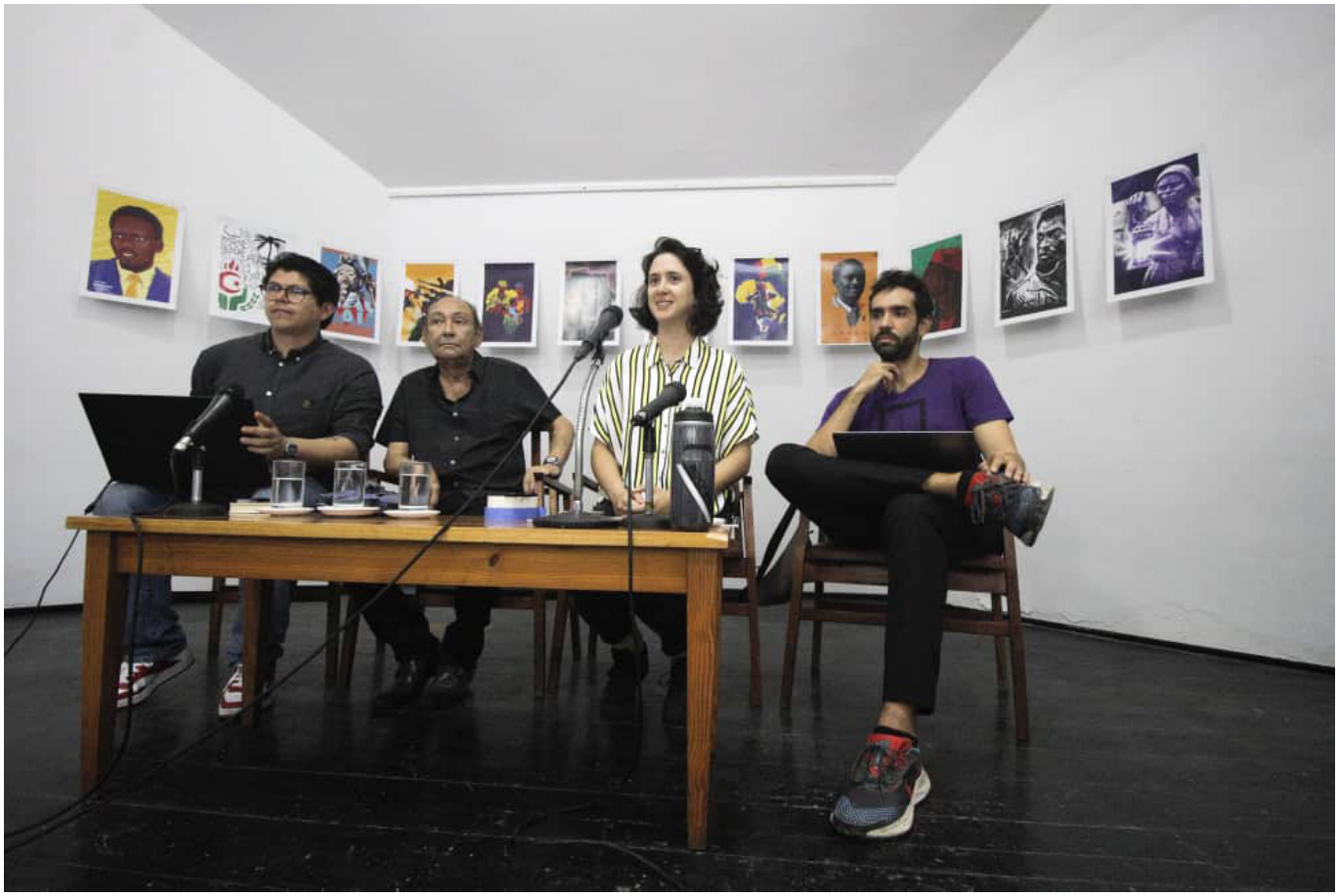
While over five decades have passed since the coup against Allende, Mono has not been held back by the past and has continued his political and cultural life, which now spans over sixty years. Today, while he still paints murals, he focuses more of his attention on poster design. 'Large murals require funding, machinery, and time. That's why we've shifted towards posters. A well-placed poster in a high-traffic area can be as effective as a mural'. As we were meeting, he had just created a poster for International Women's Day and was preparing for its mass dissemination.



Mono's 8 March poster of Gladys Marín (1937–2005), former secretary general of the Communist Party of Chile.

For Mono, 'Art is a tool for political education. Whether through murals, posters, or digital media, our challenge is to keep cultural resistance alive'. He often hosts free workshops for young artists and activists in his studio in the Victor Manuel flea market – where we also met while he celebrated his seventy-eighth birthday. While he laments the loss of the structured political education schools for artists of the Popular Unity period, and the fact that struggles, such as those relating to feminist, environmental, indigenous concerns, have become isolated owing to the lack of a 'central coordinating body', he continues to work tirelessly to create artwork that forwards the political needs of this time. 'We must ensure that art serves the people. Whether in Chile or abroad, the essence remains the same: creating work that speaks to the struggles of the moment'.

In other news…



Event and poster exhibition at the Havana Book Fair.

Between 15 and 25 February, our good friends at **Utopix** were in Cuba for the thirty-third Havana Book Fair. In collaboration with Casa de las Américas, they **organised** two poster exhibitions, which included artworks from our Tricontinental Art Department. There, they also presented the Red Books Day 2025 Calendar. Finally, please do have a look at the featured artwork for March in our portraits **gallery**. Amongst the revolutionaries we pay homage to this month is Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (1941–2008), born 13 March, whose legacy reminds us that 'to be human is to love, to create, and to resist'.

Warmly,

Tings Chak
Art Director, Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research