

## Making Portraits, Reclaiming our Collective Archive

The Tenth Tricontinental Art Bulletin (December 2024)

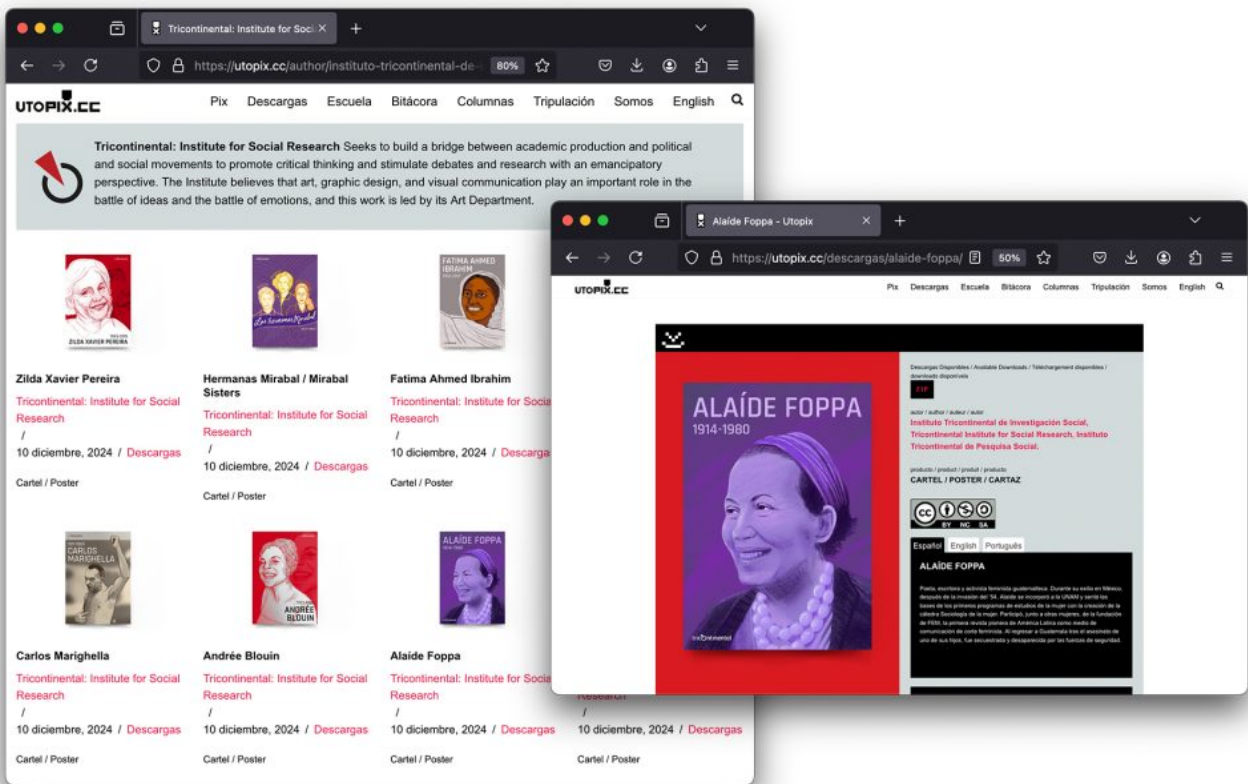


☒ Listen to Ekla Chalo Re - Shreya Ghoshal

To accompany this month's art bulletin, here is the Bengali song, '**Ekla Chalo Re**', composed by writer and poet Rabindranath Tagore and sung by Shreya Ghoshal.

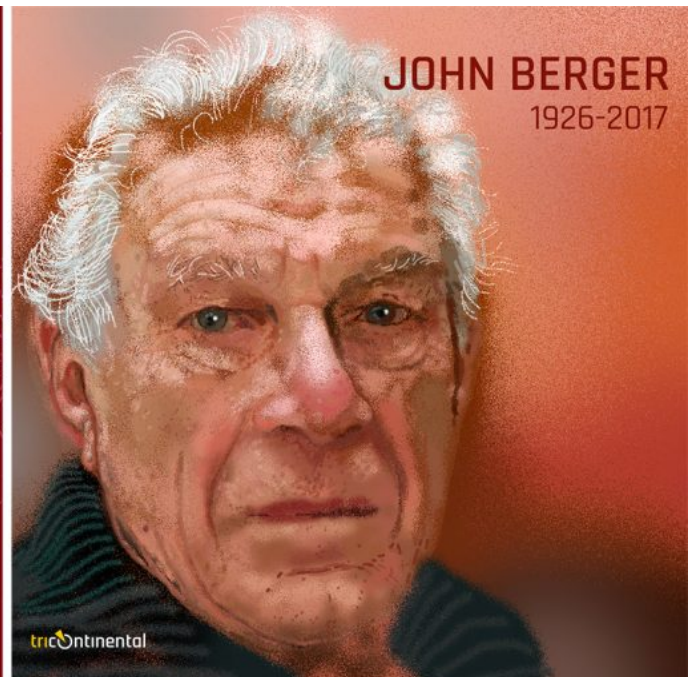
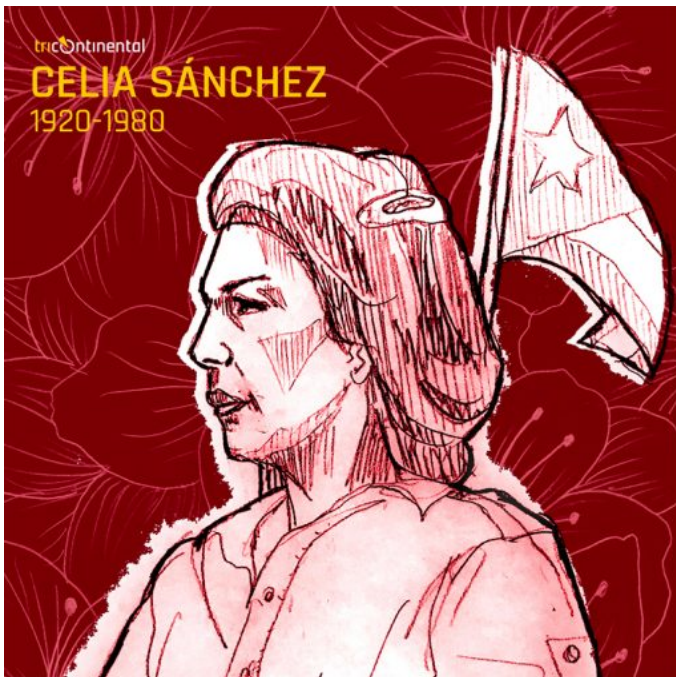
The first portrait I drew for Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research came as an accident, much like our logo. Both were products of doodles during long planning meetings, in 2018, as were about to launch the ambitious project of an international movement-driven research institute. With a red pen in my notebook, I sketched a portrait of Walter Rodney, Guyanese Marxist scholar, days before the anniversary of his birth. I took a photograph, made some edits in Photoshop, and we published our first portrait, in what would become a collection of hundreds of images made by our art department, and by friends of Tricontinental. This month, we are launching our **portrait gallery**, hosted by the design and communications collective, **Utopix**. Come back every month, to see new portraits that we will release. We invite all of you to download, share, and study

these images, as well as the life and work of the featured revolutionaries.



So, why portraits? This art bulletin attempts to answer that question and shares our collective thinking, and what we have learnt through the practice of making them. The following portraits were created by Ingrid Neves, Dani Ruggeri, Vanshika Babbar, and I.

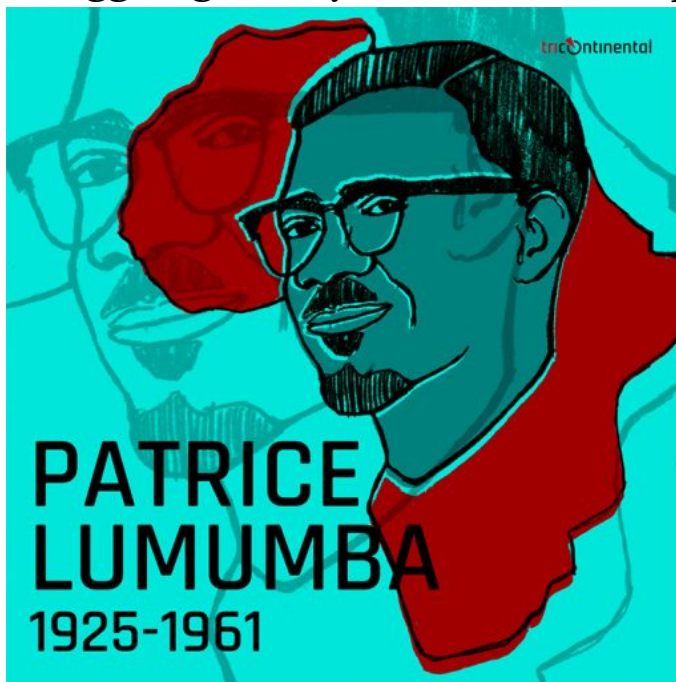
## Reclaim our archive



In a 2009 interview included in his book of essays, *Portraits*, British Marxist art critic John Berger said that archives were ‘another way of people who lived in the past, who perhaps are still living or perhaps are dead, being present’. An archive, in other words, allows us to coexist with people across time and space. He added, ‘It’s what actually distinguishes [the human being] from any other animal: living with those who have lived, and the companionship of those who are no longer alive’. Tricontinental portraits are almost exclusively of the dead; together they form an archive-in-construction of the thoughts and deeds of revolutionaries who came before us and the movements of which they were part.

Historically in the Left, recovering, building, and maintaining our archives is undertaken in the face of adverse conditions, from destruction to co-optation to the lack of material resources. Cuban revolutionary Celia Sanchez, one of the first in our portrait series, knew this quite well. In the jungles of the **Sierra Maestra**, she meticulously and ingeniously designed networks to carry, hide, deliver, and store documents and artefacts. During the guerrilla struggle, hidden in vaults under the floorboards or the lining of women’s petticoats and dresses, Sanchez collected material for what would become the future archive of the Cuban revolutionary state. In this spirit, we make portraits to reclaim our past archive for perpetual use.

## Struggle against cynicism and for hope



Who should we portray, and why? Recognising the role of movement leaders and organic intellectuals recognises much more than their individual lives and contributions. Rather, through portraits, these individuals come to represent the aspirations of generations of people – workers, peasants, and the popular classes – and the unfinished projects of national liberation and human emancipation. We are reminded of this when we see **Congolese youth** today carry the portrait of Patrice Lumumba, when the **uprisings** in the Sahel invoke the legacy of Thomas Sankara and, amongst the self-declared **Chavistas** who may not have even come of age when Hugo Chávez’s was alive.

For us, making portraiture counters the cynicism that reduces the celebration of individual historical figures to the ‘cult of personality’, claiming they no longer hold weight in our ‘leaderless’ age. These portraits preserve the hope that these revolutionary leaders represented for past generations, those struggling in the now, and

those who have yet to be born.

## Resist erasure



When we represent leaders, we are also uplifting stories often left out of the history books. We began producing portraits out of a certain necessity; the images of many revolutionaries, especially women, simply did not exist. Many images that remain are often restricted through exorbitant copyrights or locked away in the archives of former colonial capitals.

So we began to draw, based on research and scattered references that we could find, indigenous leaders from Bartolina Sisa to Berta Cáceres, political organisers such as Emma Mashinini and Andrée Blouin, theorists like pan-Africanist Claudia Jones to Soviet leader Alexandra Kollontai, black popular feminists like Lélia Gonzalez and Marsha P. Johnson, and artists like Frida Kahlo and Nina Simone, who are remembered for their artistry, but conveniently not for their communist politics. To draw is also to resist the erasure of the legacy of women activists, and an invitation to learn from each other's rich histories.

## Mark our history



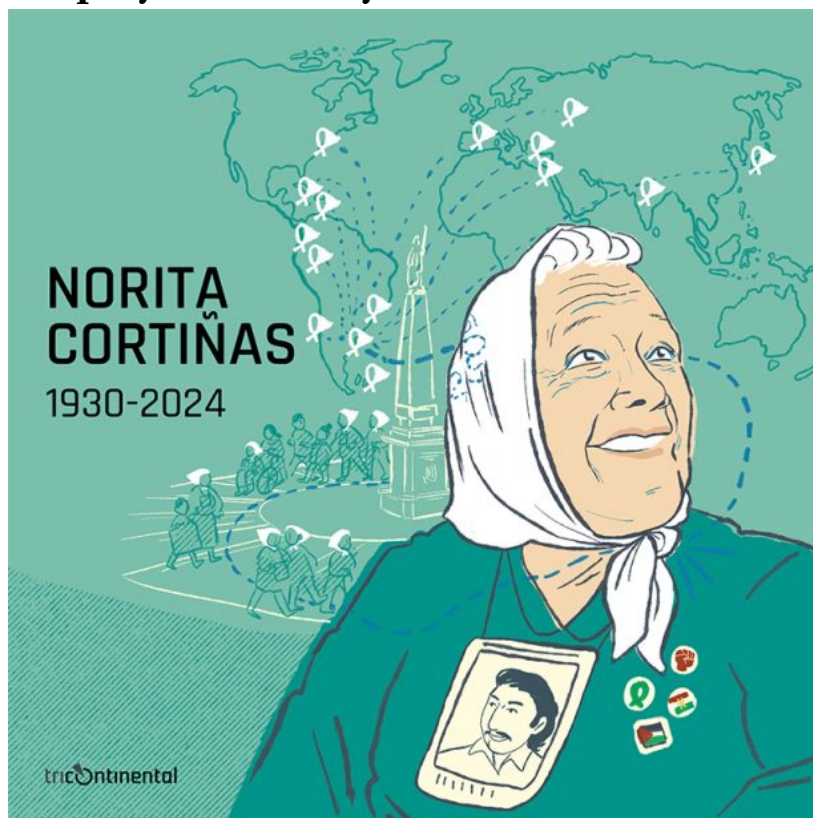
Some portraits commemorate moments of victory and of defeat, to mark the history of people's struggles and, construct our own narratives. As Indian communist photographer Sunil Janah said, his decades-long work was not only to portray 'poverty and wretchedness' but the people's 'repeatedly manifest revolt against it'. On

8 March 2022, Ayanda Ngila, a leader of **Abahlali baseMjondolo**, the shack dwellers movement in South Africa, was assassinated by hitmen linked to the local government for struggling against such wretchedness. The day after this news, we created a portrait of Ngila for the movement, and it was widely circulated online with their demands, and printed for protests and memorial events.

Lindokuhle Mnguni, a leader from the same eKhenana Commune, **reflected** on his conversations with Ngila: ‘We used to talk a lot about death because we knew that someday luck won’t be on our side. They will kill us. We even said, “it is socialism or death!” because we want it, no matter what it takes. Even if it means death, because we can’t continue living in these inhumane conditions’.

He was also assassinated two months later. Again, we drew his portrait. We know that images cannot bring back our movements’ martyrs, but they can serve as powerful registers of their lives and deeds, carried forward in myriad ways and places. A month after his death, at the Arts and Resistance festival in Amsterdam, Mnguni’s portrait found its way to the backdrop of a performance by British political rapper, Lowkey.

## Amplify and massify



<b>Walid Daqqa</b> وليد دقة	
	
Drawing of Daqqa	
<b>Born</b>	18 July 1961 Baqqa al-Gharbiyye, Israel
<b>Died</b>	7 April 2024 (aged 62) <sup>[1]</sup> Shamir Medical Center, Israel <sup>[2]</sup>
<b>Notable work</b>	<i>The Tale of the Secrets of Oil</i> <i>Fusion of Consciousness</i> <i>A Parallel Time.</i>

To live alongside those who have passed on is to live a fortified life. From the revolutionaries of historic struggles and victories we can draw strength, inspiration, and clarity. More than through bloodlines, they are our collective ancestors, whose legacies need to be continually amplified and massified. The portraits of women such as Norita Cortiñas help teach us this. She was one of the founders of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, who spent nearly five decades demanding justice for the 30,000 missing and murdered people during Argentina’s military dictatorship, until her passing this year.

Walid Daqqah, the Palestinian political prisoner who was held in an Israeli prison for 38 years, died amidst the year-long genocide in Gaza, an event that has only served to inspire a new generation. Our portrait of him

was shared across continents, with his family, and even made its way to his Wikipedia page. A portrait is never singular, it tells the story of a struggle and of a people, across eras. Each story enriches us. This collective archive we are building is a process of constant construction, which we hope you will contribute to, enjoy and share.

### In Other News...



If you missed the news, the Red Books Day Calendar 2025 is now **available** for download, with print copies available for sale at selected bookstores that form part of the International Union of Left Publishers.



Photo credits: Semillas de Rebeldía Volunteers, Priscila Ramos, Vanshika Babbar, students of the Sagarmatha class.

The **exhibition of Children’s Art from Gaza** that we launched last month travelled to many countries for the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People. It reached La Plata, Argentina, where a youth workshop was organised by the Semillas de Rebeldía (‘seeds of rebellion’) of the Rural Federation, who are

using art to tell the story of what Palestinian children are experiencing today. In São Paulo, Brazil, The Sarau Palestina Livre ('Free Palestine Sarau') event of poetry, dance, music, and our exhibition was organised by the Armazém do Campo, Landless Rural Workers' Movement, and Expressão Popular. In Delhi, India, the exhibition was mounted in an event organised by Voices Against Genocide, together with the film screenings of *Foragers* by Jumana Manna and *Electrical Gaza* by Roshalind Nashashibi. At the Madan Bhandari School of Asia in Kathmandu, Nepal, a group of over 30 people from 12 countries in Asia organised a filmed **cultural performance** with the exhibition, accompanied by the song 'Ekla Chalo Re' sung in Bengali and composed by writer and poet Rabindranath Tagore:

If no one answers your call,  
Then walk alone,  
(be not afraid) walk alone, my friend.

...

When dark clouds cover the sky,  
when darkness engulfs the truth,  
when the world cowers and bows before fear,  
you be the flame, the flame that burns you and banishes darkness from the world,  
(be not afraid) burn alone, my friend.

Warmly,

Tings Chak,  
Art Director, Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research