

Solidarity with Nature (Norwich, 21–22 May 26)

Sainsbury Art Centre, University of East Anglia, May 21–22, 2026

Deadline: Feb 11, 2026

Reuben Fowkes

SAVA Conference on Solidarity with Nature: Envisioning the Ecological Heritage of World Socialism.

The progressive ecological heritage of socialism is routinely overshadowed by a prevalent emphasis on the billowing pollution of its smokestack industrialization and consistently occluded through the eco-catastrophist filter imposed on its environmental legacies by residual Cold War thinking. Rising environmental awareness from the 1960s saw socialist states make declarative commitments to the protection of nature, perceptible in ambitious environmental legislation, international scientific cooperation and the establishment of mass societies for the defence of natural heritage. Non-state forms of socialist environmentalism also emerged, with an ecological consensus bringing together radical currents of dissident environmentalism, alternative and faith-based eco-circles, as well as proponents of ecocentric worldviews at the confluence of ecosocialism and ancestral beliefs. This conference asks how socialist art history could be unlocked as a repository of this ecological heritage, explores the role of art practitioners in environmental movements and considers how experimental art practices performed beyond-human solidarities and expanded the system's ecological horizons.

The notion of the Socialist Anthropocene encapsulates the system's reconfiguration of the natural environment. As an ecocritical tool, it also paves the way for the non-deterministic reassessment of the capacious relation to nature of a geopolitical order that around 1980 saw a third of the world population living under various denominations of socialism. The geographies of world socialism extend from Vietnam to Cuba and from Albania to Mozambique, but also connotate the sites of multifarious infusions, interrelations and interactions with situated knowledges, traditions and beliefs that enlighten the system's approach to planetarity. The SAVA Conference on Solidarity with Nature investigates how historical artworks portrayed the activities of official associations for nature protection, organized hiking groups and workers' recreation in natural settings and how the progressive heritage of ecocentric attitudes and practices under socialism is reenvisioned in contemporary art. In what ways has the critique of the productivist ethos of developmentalism been articulated in the visual arts and how did ecology become a field for liberatory struggles? Also considered is how art practice was entwined with the rise of environmental consciousness around 1968 and embedded in the ecological activism of late socialism, and to what extent it articulated the entanglement of environmental and decolonial agendas. A further line of inquiry addresses artistic engagement with eco-utopianisms, varieties of eco-spiritualism and Indigenous nature practices, as well as the implications of the extension of socialist solidarity to more-than-human realms from the botanical and the zoological to the geological.

Proposals are sought for 30 minute papers within and beyond the fields of environmental art history, ecocritical art theory and contemporary art practice that push the boundaries of interdisciplinary debate around attitudes and practices towards the natural world under socialism. Submissions are encouraged which foreground the ecological potentialities of African, Latin American and Asian socialisms, explore conjunctures of socialism and environmentalism in Pan-Africanism, Third Worldism and the Non-Alignment Movement, and engage with the ecocentric heritages of Eastern European, Baltic and Central Asian socialisms from ecocritical and decolonial perspectives.

Topics might include but are not limited to:

- Beyond scientific socialism; degrowth socialism and solar communism; socialist environmental holism; socialist cultures of self-sufficiency and repair; welfare socialism; planetary epistemologies of socialist science; Ujamaa and Afro-centric eco-socialisms; eco-conceptualism
- Eco-utopian socialism; socialist hippies and eco-communes; eco-socialist sisterhood; socialist vegetarianism; eco-spiritual socialisms
- Beyond-human heritage of socialism; depicting biodiversity and extinctions; artistic engagements with socialist zoos; hunting under socialism; socialist safaris; nature reserves; interspecies performances
- Arboreal socialism; botanical acclimatization; transborder plant migrations; astrobotany; biocultural interconnectedness with rivers, lakes, forests, mountains, oceans and steppes
- Eco-activisms; environmental consciousness in the socialist insurrections of 1968; eco-feminism; artist involvement with the environmental protests of 1989 from Eco-glasnost in Bulgaria to the Nevada-Semipalatinsk movement in Kazakhstan; Indigenous activism against socialist developmentalism
- Ecological aspects of socialist artworlds; artist colonies as vehicles of nature encounter; ecocritical exhibitions; mail art as site for the dissemination of ecological thought

The conference is organised within the framework of the Socialist Anthropocene in the Visual Arts (SAVA), a European Research Council (ERC) / UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) supported research project led by Principal Investigator Dr. Maja Fowkes at the School of History and Art History, University of East Anglia.

PROPOSAL SUBMISSIONS

Please send a 250 word abstract and a short biography to: sava@uea.ac.uk.

Support for travel and accommodation costs is available.

For further enquiries, please contact Natalia Pavlovicova: N.Pavlovicova@uea.ac.uk.

Reference:

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