

## Call for committee participants: Progressive Heritage

University of East Anglia

Deadline: Oct 5, 2026

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Based at the School of History and Art History at the University of East Anglia and with support from the Getty Foundation Connecting Art Histories initiative, the research project "Progressive Heritage: Reappraising State Art Collections of World Socialism" is launching an open call for participants to form its roving committee. Led by Dr. Maja Fowkes and Dr. Reuben Fowkes, the project sets out to engage a new generation of research curators, collection custodians and art historians working with state collections in a collective inquiry to reconsider the progressive heritage of socialist art. The committee members are drawn from across the territories of world socialism, with a specific focus on the regions of East Africa, Central Asia and Eastern Europe, to participate in three meetings over 2027-29.

The finite store of artworks produced under socialism and collected by state institutions across its global geographies calls for an active, informed and rigorous process of revalorization in order to embrace them as an integral, if antagonistic, part of a shared cultural heritage. To date socialist heritage has been most cogently examined within the field of architectural history, where material remains that stand as concrete testimony to the alterity of the past socio-political system have been rehabilitated into an increasingly cherished heritage, while socialist art is yet to fully attain that status. With the lion's share of these artworks now in the custodianship of national museums, art academies and other public institutions, this project calls for a reassessment of state collections to explore their potential to be reactivated as bearers of intergenerational memory and alternative social visions, as well as to establish common ground between the transcontinental inheritors of these shared histories. The project will gather up the threads of progressive heritage by recuperating the submerged internationalism of socialist art, reactivating artworks through the discerning perspectives of decolonial, feminist and environmental thought, and addressing socialist museological practice as a source for the reimagining of institutional models.

Participants will engage with a new wave of art historical and curatorial thinking around socialist art, understood in all its aesthetic diversity encompassing avant-garde, realist and modernist practices and as a decentred artistic phenomenon characterized not just by its global geographical reach but also its temporal extension from the 1920s to the 1980s. This includes reassessments of socialist realism as the mode of art production primarily associated with the socialist system, which has also been considered an authentic global movement on the grounds that during the Cold War and in the era of decolonization artists from 'half of the globe' were educated according to socialist realist precepts. The research draws on the work of Hungarian art critic László Beke, whose preference for the descriptor 'progressive art' went beyond the parameters of realism to

include abstraction and neo-avant-garde practices, collapsing binary oppositions between state and unofficial art since the 'threads became extremely entangled,' while also signalling alignment with 'political progressivism.' In that sense, the notion of progressive heritage connotes not just the reappraisal of these internationalist art histories in which aesthetic choices were entwined with social engagement, but also the possibility of the intergenerational transfer of forward-looking values.

Taking the guise of a Progressive Heritage Committee, the participants will confer on the best practices for revalorizing artworks produced and collected during state socialism, as a challenging heritage that is nevertheless worth preserving, studying and exhibiting. Each of the committee meetings is conceived as a week-long gathering to be held in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, Tallinn in Estonia and Almaty in Kazakhstan, where members will have the opportunity to engage with local art collections, museum displays and holdings, as well as to visit public monuments and other sites of preserved heritage. Committee meetings will include presentations by participants about their curatorial and collection research, as well as talks by core team members, invited experts and local guests, with further input coming from visits to artist studios. The agenda of the sessions will revolve around establishing common ground by uncovering the internationalist character of socialist art, considering the challenges of revalorizing state collections and devising strategies to reactivate them, and reassessing the museological legacy of the socialist world. The committee will work collaboratively to write a memorandum of recommendations for the revalorization of socialist art as a creative exercise in institutional critique to be presented at a concluding symposium at University of East Anglia.

Applications are sought from curators, collection custodians and researchers working with state collections of socialist art in the focus regions. Of relevance here are the art collections of state museums, but also those of academies of art, house museums, industrial enterprises, art directorates, etc. Travel, accommodation and subsistence costs will be covered and participants must commit to attending all meetings for the full duration.

To apply, please submit a single word or pdf document with:

1) Your name, email address, institutional affiliation, and postal address.

2) An applicant statement (up to two pages)

This should describe a relevant collection and explain your relation to it, as well as outline its place in the museological landscape. Please also let us know what you would bring to and how you would benefit from participation in the Progressive Heritage project.

3) A short CV

This should consist of a two-page CV, including a selection of your most relevant experience, curated exhibitions, publications or research projects.

For enquiries, please contact Maja Fowkes [m.fowkes@uea.ac.uk](mailto:m.fowkes@uea.ac.uk) or Reuben Fowkes [r.fowkes@uea.ac.uk](mailto:r.fowkes@uea.ac.uk)

Please email the application materials specified above as a single document to [r.fowkes@uea.ac.uk](mailto:r.fowkes@uea.ac.uk) by Monday 5 October 2026.

Selection of the participants will be made based on the application and short online interview by the project team comprising Dr. Maja Fowkes (UEA), Dr. Reuben Fowkes (UEA), Berhanu Ashagrie Deribew (Alle School of Fine Arts and Design, Addis Ababa University) and Jakub Gawkowski (Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź). We aim to notify applicants of the outcomes by the end of October 2026.

Reference:

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