

# Designs for Solidarity: Photography and the Cuban Political Poster 1965–1975

By Catherine Moriarty ‘Political propaganda has never been understood by the masses ... if it does not begin by disclosing the ethical dimension of the activity it invites them to oppose.’\*

Cuban graphic designers played an important role in campaigns condemning US intervention in Vietnam and photography occupied a significant place in the posters and publications they produced. Cuba had rapidly identified the war in South East Asia as emblematic of the struggles against imperialist aggression worldwide: as Che Guevara famously described in 1967, ‘we could look into a bright future should two, three or many Vietnams flourish throughout the world.’<sup>1</sup> The internationalist perspective at the heart of the Cuban political agenda was a key determinant in the designs produced to encourage solidarity. So too, was the endorsement of armed struggle as a mechanism for defending the rights of decolonised nations to self-determination. It is this militancy that makes the posters produced in Cuba so confrontational and that distinguishes them from those produced by anti-war campaigners elsewhere who called for peace, rather than victory.

Since their own overthrow of the puppet dictator Batista in 1958, the Cubans were eager to represent the Vietnamese as determined successors, and as spirited defenders in the face of US aggression. In 1971, Félix Beltrán designed a poster for the Havana-based, Organización Continental Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Estudiantes (the Continental Organization of Latin American and Caribbean Students, OCLAE) to celebrate the 11th anniversary of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF) – better known derisively as the Vietcong – who sought unification with the North of their country, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). Occupying the lower third of the poster, in front of the dramatic primary colours of the NFL flag, Beltran has overlaid a black and white photographic image of a soldier with a machine gun, assisted by a woman who

feeds the ammunition belt. Foregrounding the woman in this way, Beltran emphasizes the active participation of women in the defence of Vietnam and like other designers, encouraged spectators to recognise the involvement of citizens of all ages in guerilla warfare. The plight of the Vietnamese was depicted at close range, as a struggle between poor rural populations and the weight of the US military forces. Inevitably, the role of direct Soviet support to the DRV and the conflict as an enactment of Cold War allegiances did not tend to appeal as an approach, though the wider view was not entirely avoided. The designer René Mederos was sent to North Vietnam as official cultural representative of the Cuban government in February 1969, and his poster of Nixon ‘ripping the heart out of South East Asia’ expresses a rage breathtaking in its force. This poster, with its theme of political culpability and stratospheric point of view, presents a startling contrast to the main body of work that Mederos produced as a response to his visit – intimate, colourful, carefully composed screen prints narrating the daily endurance of the Vietnamese, often in domestic space or in the fields.<sup>2</sup>

Mederos’ poster was produced for the Organización de Solidaridad con los Pueblos de Asia, Africa y América Latina (the Organisation for Solidarity with the People of Africa, Asia and Latin America, OSPAAAL), established in Havana in January 1966 after the Tricontinental Conference, a meeting of delegates from the Congo, South Africa, Angola, Guinea, Vietnam, North Korea, Syria, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Chile and the Dominican Republic. It was at this time that the significance of design in a directly political sense, as opposed to being limited to the promotion of cultural activity, was taken on board fully by the Cuban government.

Its Comisión de Orientación Revolucionaria (Commission for Revolutionary Guidance, COR)) recognized that graphic design was to play a vital role in communicating ideas to both Cuban and international audiences: both OSPAAAL and the OCLAE embraced this remit.<sup>3</sup> The work of OSPAAAL was structured alongside an ongoing calendar of solidarity with its members around the world, and the populations they represented struggling for decolonization. As Dugald Stermer described it in 1970, ‘the organization sponsored more days and weeks of solidarity with various groups and countries around the world than the Catholic Church has saint’s days.’<sup>4</sup> The production of posters to promote these events was simply one element of a broad coordinating and campaigning strategy, within which the war in Vietnam had a particularly prominent presence.

It was the necessity to communicate beyond text – though as we will see not to its absolute exclusion – to audiences of different languages, levels of literacy and cultural contexts, that distinguishes the work of Cuban designers in these years. For while the legacy of the political appropriation of photography includes the defining images of Joseph Renau in Republican Spain, John Heartfield in Nazi Germany, and Gustavs Klucis in the Soviet Union, the designers working for OSPAAAL and OCLAE in the late 60s and 70s were also deeply interested in the visual languages employed by their contemporaries both in capitalist environments and in other socialist countries: embracing on the one hand, Pop art and commercial advertising techniques, and on the other, the work of East European designers, particularly in Poland.<sup>5</sup> The socialist realism of posters produced in the Soviet Union and China is decidedly absent: Cuban designers wanted to be contemporary, distinctive and provocative.



\* Jean-Paul Sartre, *Tricontinental*, November/December 1967  
Opposite: Felix Beltrán, *Poster to mark the 11th anniversary of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam*, 1971, OCLAE



To this end, all approaches were valid be they conceptual, minimal, or directly illustrative. Likewise, all available sources were there to be appropriated as required, photography among them. The 1967 poster that comprises a grid of repeated images of Che, beneath his ‘two, three...many’ polemic quoted above, not only adopts the colour and apes the appearance of a Warhol silk screen print, but adds a political pertinence to ideas of seriality and reproducibility. With no commercial client to satisfy but instead, a revolutionary agenda that located Cuba’s struggle in an international context, a wide variety of means were commandeered and freely experimented with. While silkscreen was used for producing cultural posters on a relatively small scale, the Cuban designers had access to offset printing technology and government support of a kind that enabled

posters to be printed in significant quantity. These technologies and distribution networks also serve to distinguish their work from the more adhoc productions of student presses of the same period. Solidarity with Vietnam formed part of a planned political programme and designers would also have been busy with posters in support of the peoples of Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, Bolivia, Guatemala and elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> These posters were not the spontaneous productions of radical students with limited resources as the contemporaneous outputs from Berkeley or Paris have been characterized. In this sense, they were not ‘countercultural’ but an integral component of Castro’s vision. Though the texts on Cuban posters usually played a supporting rather than a central role, and though texts were produced

on OSPAAAL posters in Spanish, English, French and later Arabic (after 1968 all on the same poster rather than as separate print runs), it is important to recognize that posters were a primarily visual component of a wider publication project. The magazine *Tricontinental* was a significant element in OSPAAAL’s campaigning agenda and most of the posters it produced were designed as inserts to sit folded within its pages. First published in 1966 as a bulletin in a 4x8 inch format, it became a bi-monthly magazine in 1967 with a modified format, better paper, and sharper design. On average 50,000 copies of each issue were printed.<sup>7</sup> Alfredo Rostgaard (1943–1985), chief designer for OSPAAAL between 1960 and 1975, supervised poster production and as art director, coordinated and championed the power of the visual within and beyond *Tricontinental*.

The publication conjoined photography and texts in a series of articles that reported news from OSPAAAL’s member states around the world, committee reports, and the deaths and disappearances of its most prominent champions, among them Ben Barka, Turcios Lima, and eventually in 1967, Che Guevara. The headlines of the May 1966 issue are indicative: Solidarity with the Dominican Republic; The Revolutionary Struggle in Guinea; Rhodesia – Concentration Camp; the Struggle for the Reunification of Korea; and finally, Message to the US People, for the civil rights movement in the US was keenly supported, especially the militancy of the Black Panthers. Within the publication black and white photographs were interspersed among the texts, usually without captions. The covers were more ambitious, they were printed with at least one additional colour, and incorporated photography in striking graphic arrangements below the title of the publication and the OSPAAAL symbol that comprised an outstretched arm holding a gun set against a globe. As well as its eponymous publication, *Tricontinental* established a Committee of Support to Vietnam that produced another serial, *For Vietnam*. This slim tract, first produced in 1966, celebrated the military achievements and the political programme of the NLF, it renounced the ‘Yankee aggressors and their puppet administration’, and described solidarity protests and meetings taking place around the world. Issue number six published in 1967, features a striking cover depicting Vietnamese troops atop a captured US Army assault vehicle. Inside were listed enemy casualties and the number of US aircraft shot down, as a previous issue described, ‘figures that will give Mr Johnson a headache.’ Photographs of dead and captured enemy troops, were placed alongside those of injured civilians. One photograph of a dead figure lying face down bears comparison with a poster by Eduardo Bosch Jones comprising an otherworldly depiction of evil work in the shape of helmeted South Vietnamese (ARVN) troops. Evoking malice, victimization and the perpetration of suffering, it is accompanied by one of the most explicit textual pronouncements of the entire OSPAAAL catalogue, ‘CUT-OFF THE HANDS OF IMPERIALISM IN VIET NAM.’<sup>8</sup> Rather than evoking only pity, the inclusion of injured and dead Vietnamese sought to rouse support for armed struggle, and it demonstrates the distinctive and persistent militancy of the Cuban outlook and the OSPAAAL alliance. While Cuban designers

often used bright colours and flattened forms with bold outlines, this poster suspends the photograph within a poetic yet sinister syntax intended to disturb then provoke. This shifting use of the photograph both as descriptive and suggestive, particular and symbolic, corresponds with the overarching eclecticism of the Cuban poster at this time. Photographs might appear within a variety of graphic arrangements; compressed tonally, cropped or even reversed. Most photographs used by Cuban designers would have originated from sources associated with the North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front, via the news agency Prensa Latina. While, as we have seen, they might represent Vietnamese soldiers in action and the active role of women in armed struggle, or alternatively focus on the suffering of civilians – especially children. Impact could also be achieved by commandeering photography originally distributed by international news agencies, particularly that depicting suffering and casualties. Luis Balaguer’s use of the well-known Larry Burrows photograph of NLF dead from 1962 is a striking instance.<sup>8</sup> The original, taken in colour, was cropped by Balaguer so that all context is removed and reproduced in black and white as a defining component of his demonisation of Nixon, a poster published by the OCLAE in 1969. It is the juxtaposition of the colourful, Pop-derived portrait within which one then reads the disturbing detail of the photograph, that creates a response in the viewer: blunt and unequivocal it performs its work. Balaguer uses this photograph, seven years after it was taken, (in fact, when Kennedy was in office) both as document and as symbol. In a similar way, anti-war activists within the US and around the world re-deployed photography that appeared in the press: the poster published by the Artworkers’ Coalition of Ron Haerberle’s photograph of the massacre of civilians at My Lai in 1968 is the most widely reproduced and commented upon. Yet posters were published by many other organizations that sought a cessation of hostilities and the withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam, and some employed similar strategies, their emphasis often determined by the parameters of broader Cold War politics – the International Union of Students and the Medical Committee Netherlands-Vietnam to name two examples.<sup>10</sup> In the GDR, designer Klaus Wittkugel’s 1968 poster ‘In the name of humanity’ locates both injured Vietnamese children and a US soldier as victims of imperialistic directives so removed from the impact of their actions that carpet bombing,



napalm, and Agent Orange seemed tenable. The November/December 1967 issue of *Tricontinental* included an article by Jean-Paul Sartre. It recounted his experience as Executive President of the International War Crimes Tribunal convened by Bertrand Russell and held in Stockholm earlier that year. The Tribunal, comprising delegates from around the world including several Nobel Prize winners, arrived at a unanimous condemnation of the actions of the US in Vietnam. In his article, Sartre sought to counter criticism of the legality of the tribunal and he also explained at length the processes by which delegates, in the face of the evidence presented to them, came to set aside their various individual, social and national divisions: Today, the photographs we can see on the posters denouncing United States policy in Vietnam, are of course the *facts* presented to us. But these facts are the ones most apt to provoke in us a moral condemnation: a mother holding her dead child in her arms... It is at this elementary and deep level, all at the same time, that public opinion is roused. The masses have a simple and revolutionary moral, which before any political education, demands that the relations between men be humane, condemning exploitation and oppression as radically bad actions even before the organisations come to life that combat the processes giving rise to these actions.<sup>11</sup> Sartre then, recognised unequivocally the force of the photograph of atrocity. Indeed, his rarely referenced observations on the

Above left: Eduardo Bosch Jones (also attributed to Alfredo Rostgaard), *Cut off the Hands of Imperialism in Vietnam*, 1967, OSPAAAL  
Above right: René Mederos, *Nixon Tearing heart out of Indochina*, 1971, OSPAAAL

Above: Lee Lockwood, *Cuban boy seated by the poster 'Cut off the Hands of Imperialism in Vietnam'*, 1965

verity of the photographic image might be seen to sit alongside the view of the Cubans and with those whom they expressed solidarity. For them, the photograph expressed the horrors of war *prima facie*, above and beyond its mode of delivery, context and re-use. The cynicism or caveats of other commentators who suggested image saturation had led to a kind of visual ennui, were immersed in Western environments where such a position was entirely a privilege of ‘first world’ citizens.<sup>12</sup> The posters produced by the Cubans, those with creases visible from where they were folded, and the publications with their unequivocal covers that contained them, achieve a clarity within which the photograph performed a variety of roles in reiterating the rallying call of the very first Tricontinental conference – This Great Humanity has said: 'Enough'!

In 1968, while the posters of Cuban designers were being printed by the thousand in Havana, 1300 miles away in New York the Museum of Modern Art was mounting its first major exhibition on graphic design. Entitled *Word and Image*, this survey show of posters from Mucha to Milton Glaser, Toulouse-Lautrec to Tadanori Yokoo, presented an elegant graphic feast for its Manhattan public. As Mildred Constantine opined in her introduction, the ‘traditional poster’ had come to the end of the road, posters were now acquired by wide publics and institutions as cult objects to be collected.<sup>13</sup> This view of the death of the poster, now turned art commodity, sets the energy of the Cuban project in sharp relief, and Constantine’s statement is prescient in two important ways. It portends the relentless commoditization of Che’s image that was emerging at this time, yet it also serves to describe an environment that provoked the well-known Art Workers' Coalition protest took place at MOMA two years later, their poster of the My Lai massacre photograph seeking to upset institutional complacency.<sup>14</sup> Just the year before, the American novelist James Purdy was asked, with many others writers around the world, to comment on the war in Vietnam, replicating a project undertaken thirty years earlier during the Spanish Civil War. He responded:

I am opposed to intervention by the United States of America in Vietnam, but such mass massacres seem to me inescapable as long as the content of the American mind is cigarette and liquor ads, its religion dope-sex, its people millionaire movie and baseball stars. Vietnam is atrocious for the dead and maimed innocent, but it’s probably sadder to be a live American with only the Madison Avenue gibbers for a homeland and a God.<sup>14</sup>

José Gómez Fresquet’s design *La modelo y la vietnamita* of the same year might be seen as the visual parallel to Purdy’s words. For Cuban designers occupied the moral high ground in various ways: they had the visual perspicacity to deploy a wide vocabulary of images and idioms – photography playing a significant role among them – in order to insist on the validity of their cause which, they wanted all to see, was also the cause of others.<sup>15</sup> ■

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- 3 See the account of Edumundo Desnoes in Cubaanse Affiches: Exhibition of Posters from Cuba, (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1971), p.34 and Pepe Menéndez, *Notes for a Chronology of Graphic Design* (2007), casadelasamericas.org/artesplasticas/eventos/2007/cubagrafica/english/cronologia.php
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- 8 Tricontinental Committee of Support to Vietnam, *For Vietnam*, July/August 1966.
- 9 Reproduced as Fig. 1 in Lincoln Cushing, *Red all Over: The Visual Language of Dissent*. <http://www.aiga.org/content.cfm/red-all-over>
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Opposite: Alfredo Rostgaard, *Create 2, 3 Many... Viet-nams. That is the Watchword*, 1967, OSPAAAL