

Everything I know about...

tricontinental photomontage

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...so far

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We begin with a left-hand page divided into three horizontal strips. The first strip is a Zaire banknote from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, featuring a portrait of the US-backed military dictator Mobutu Sese Seko. In the second strip, the Zaire banknote peels back to reveal a US dollar. In the third, the dollar peels back, giving way to a now famous 1961 photograph of the Congolese pan-Africanist politician Patrice Lumumba. [fig. 1] It's a terrifying portrait. Lumumba has just been arrested by the Mobutu regime for fleeing house arrest, and his eyes tell us he already knows his fate. Indeed, shortly after this photo was taken, Lumumba and his compatriots were tortured through the night, and then shot. Moving our eyes from top to bottom, we uncover the awful consequences of this international conspiracy, wherein US intelligence collaborated with the Belgian government to install a military dictatorship that assassinated one of Africa's rising political stars.



Fig. 1: *Tricontinental* 3, 1968.

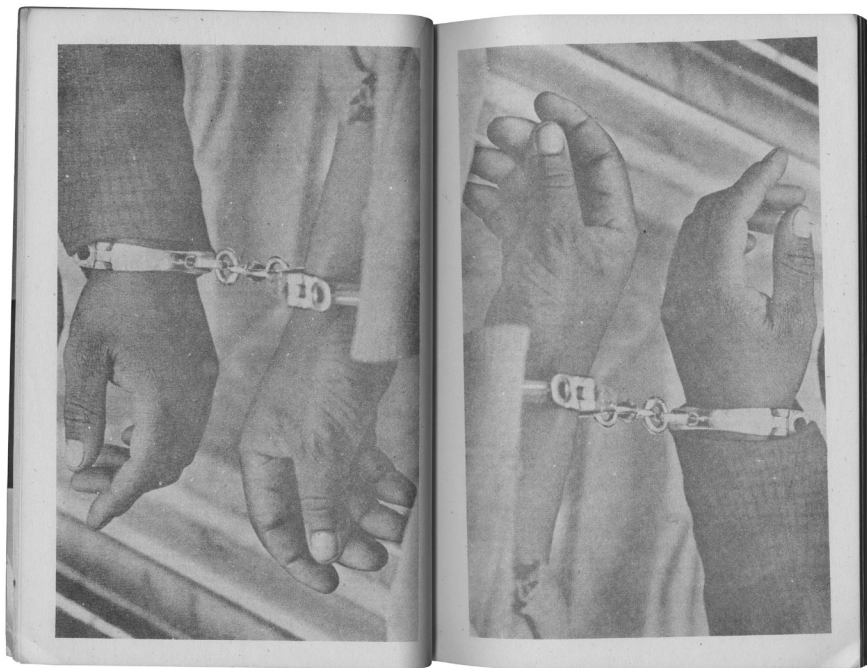


Fig. 2: *Tricontinental* 31, 1972.

This photomontage was made by the Cuban graphic designer Alfredo Rostgaard for the third issue of *Tricontinental* (1968), a political journal published by a new Cuban cultural initiative called the Organization of Solidarity with the Peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America (OSPAAAL). OSPAAAL was a project born out of internationalist enthusiasms following the Tricontinental, a 1966 conference in Havana that brought together revolutionary, largely socialist and communist, movements from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The Tricontinental conference itself emerged from two dynamics that had been in development over the previous decade: the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization and the Non-Aligned Movement. These were military, economic, and cultural alliances among states that had come out of the decolonial struggles of the 1950s and '60s, as well as states that were still mired in their own anti-colonial wars. Initially funded in part by China and the Soviet Union, OSPAAAL's aim was to produce popular, anti-imperialist media at a mass scale. Independent in name but staffed by state employees, the group published posters, magazines, bulletins, films, and radio programs. OSPAAAL's posters, in particular, are some of the best-known pieces of graphic design to ever come out of Cuba. 50,000 offset-printed copies were folded and inserted in issues of

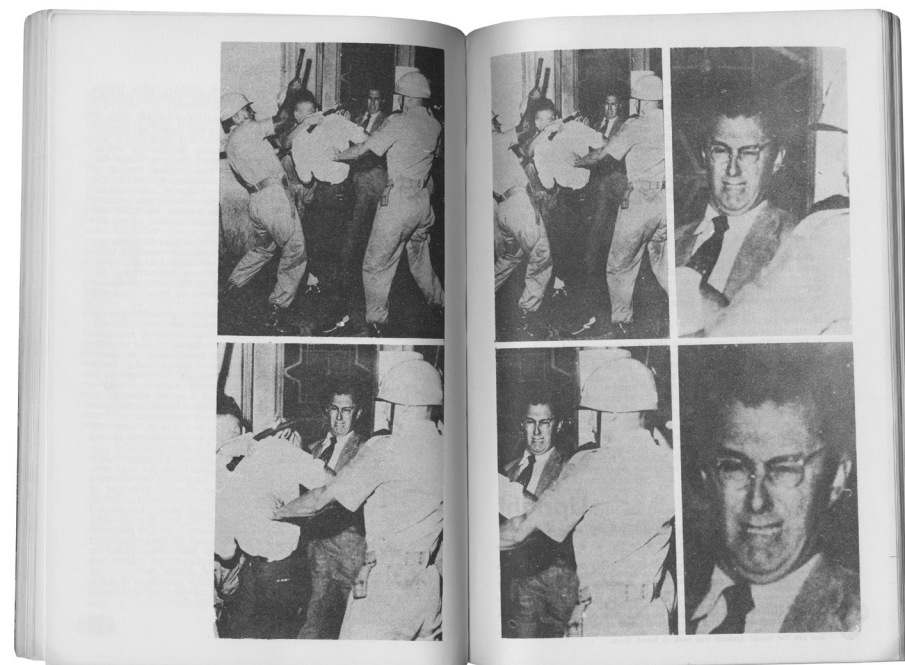


Fig. 3: *Tricontinental* 32, 1972.

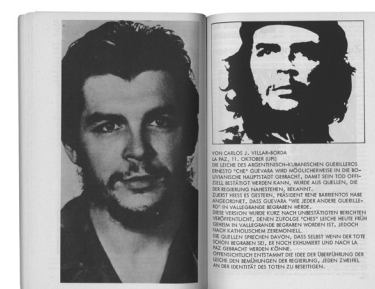
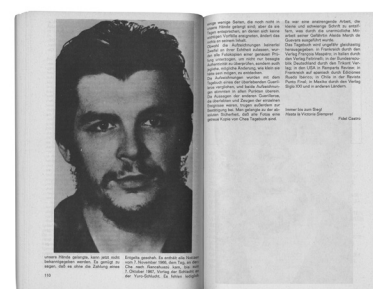
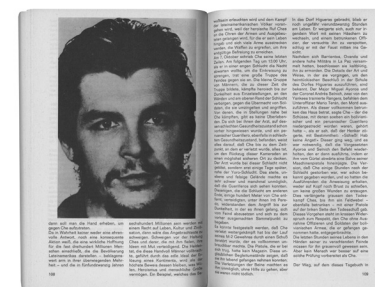
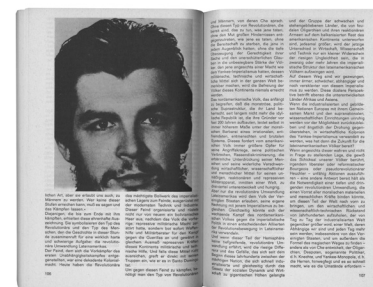
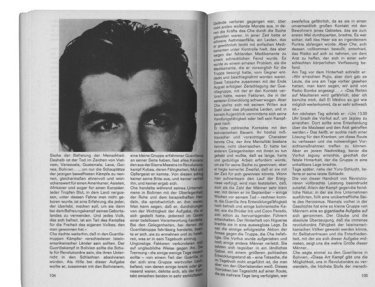
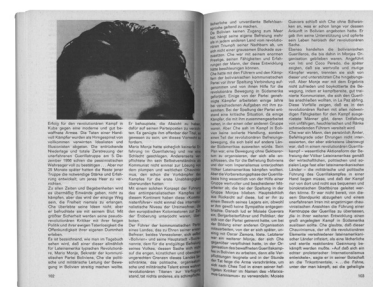
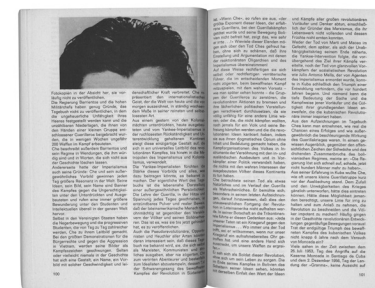
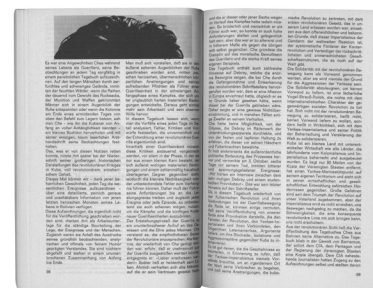
Tricontinental, and 500 screen-printed copies circulated within Cuba. This remarkable output owed a great deal to Rostgaard's tenure as artistic director (1966–1975), but there were many young designers and artists involved. The psychedelic allure of the poster work, the magazine cover shoots that read like political cartoons, and the faux-advertisements critiquing US intervention and espionage are well documented as vital contributions to Third Worldist art and design. This text focuses on the more indeterminate and, I think, more poetic use of photomontage throughout the interior of *Tricontinental*.

Many instances of *Tricontinental* photomontage simulate animation through eye movement. As our eyes scan a spread, a photo repeats, and changes through that repetition. In a spread from *Tricontinental* 31 (1972), we see two black wrists, clearly belonging to different people, handcuffed together. From left to right, the photo repeats and inverts; the hands are now raised upward, perhaps just shy of closing into fists. [fig. 2] This photo spread introduces an article by the French journalist Edouard Bailby, who'd just visited Johannesburg to report on South African apartheid. A similar example, in *Tricontinental* 32 from the same year, accompanies an account of General Médici's repressive police state in Brazil. [fig. 3]

We first see a photo depicting a violent encounter where helmeted, club-wielding military policemen attack what appears to be a political dissident in street clothes. The photo of the scene, shown in its entirety at top left, has been copied, enlarged, and cropped to create six unique panels. As our eye moves to lower right, photographic enlargement simulates a camera zoom that focuses our attention on a man in a suit. As with all photos in *Tricontinental*, there are no image captions relating the photo illustration to the article in which it appears. As the simulated viewfinder zooms in, pans right, pans left, and then stops, we wonder: who is the man adjacent to the abduction? Is he under arrest as well? Is he part of it? Has he realized that he'll soon be one of the political dead?

Encountering the magazines in a library in New York City, I fixate on their lack of attribution. Very few of the subjects in the photographs are identified, the photographers aren't listed, and no artworks credit the artists (though OSPAAAL posters, distinct from the magazines, often do credit an individual designer). We might chalk this up to communist egalitarianism, where each individual is ancillary to the greater cause of the organization. It makes me question my impulse to try to understand where these graphic interventions originated. On the other hand, haven't we much to learn from piecing together how a post-revolutionary state divided the labor within one of its publishing houses? And from studying where exactly its designers departed from traditional production workflows?

Let's recount for a moment the production line this work required. Rostgaard (or one of his comrades) would have been in editorial meetings to discuss visuals for a particular article. The OSPAAAL offices might have just received a dispatch from a correspondent in Johannesburg containing photos to be published alongside Bailby's apartheid report. The designer would have selected a photo to work with, and then done the work of the production designer *and* the production photographer, first working out the desired image cropping, repetitions, and positions. He then had to shoot the image on a Photostat machine (or similar) at the actual size at which it would appear in the layout. For the South Africa spread mentioned above, that's two photos at the exact same scale. For the Brazil spread, that's six different photos, each cropped and enlarged slightly, and then rephotographed. These photos would then be

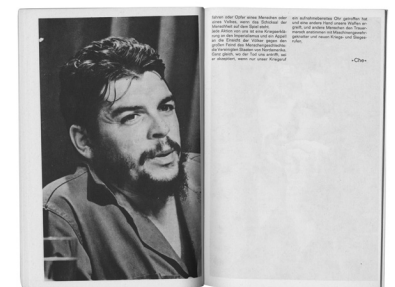
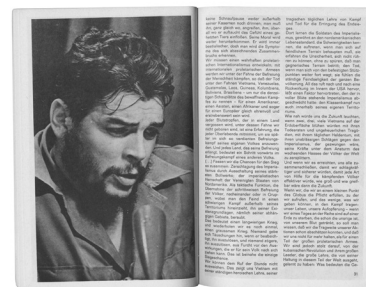
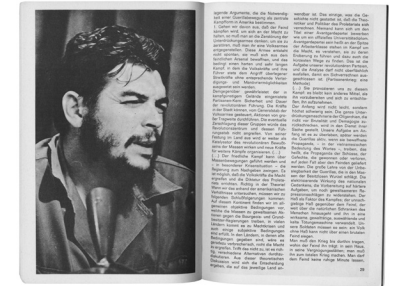
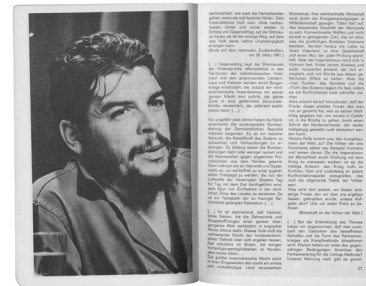
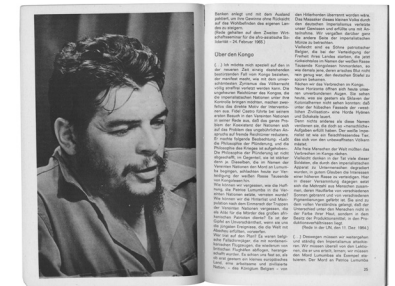
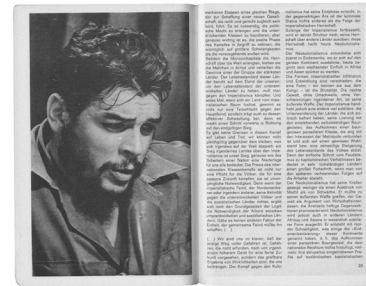
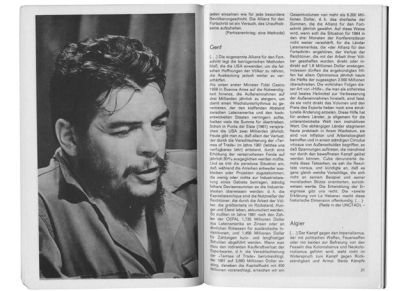
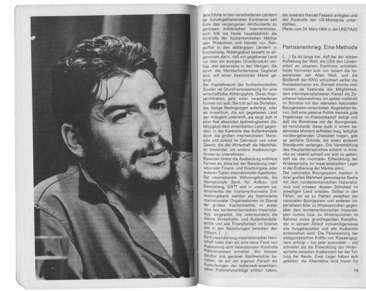


Figs. 4–11: *Tricontinental* 8, 1968.

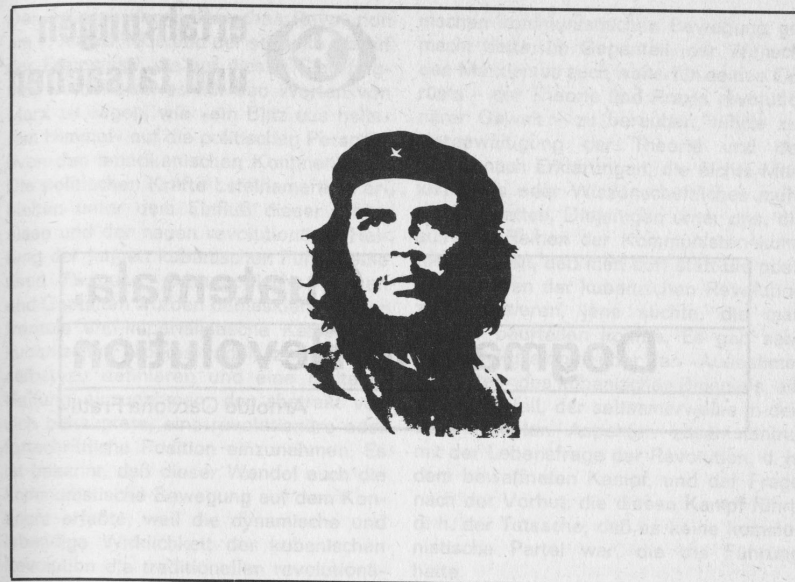
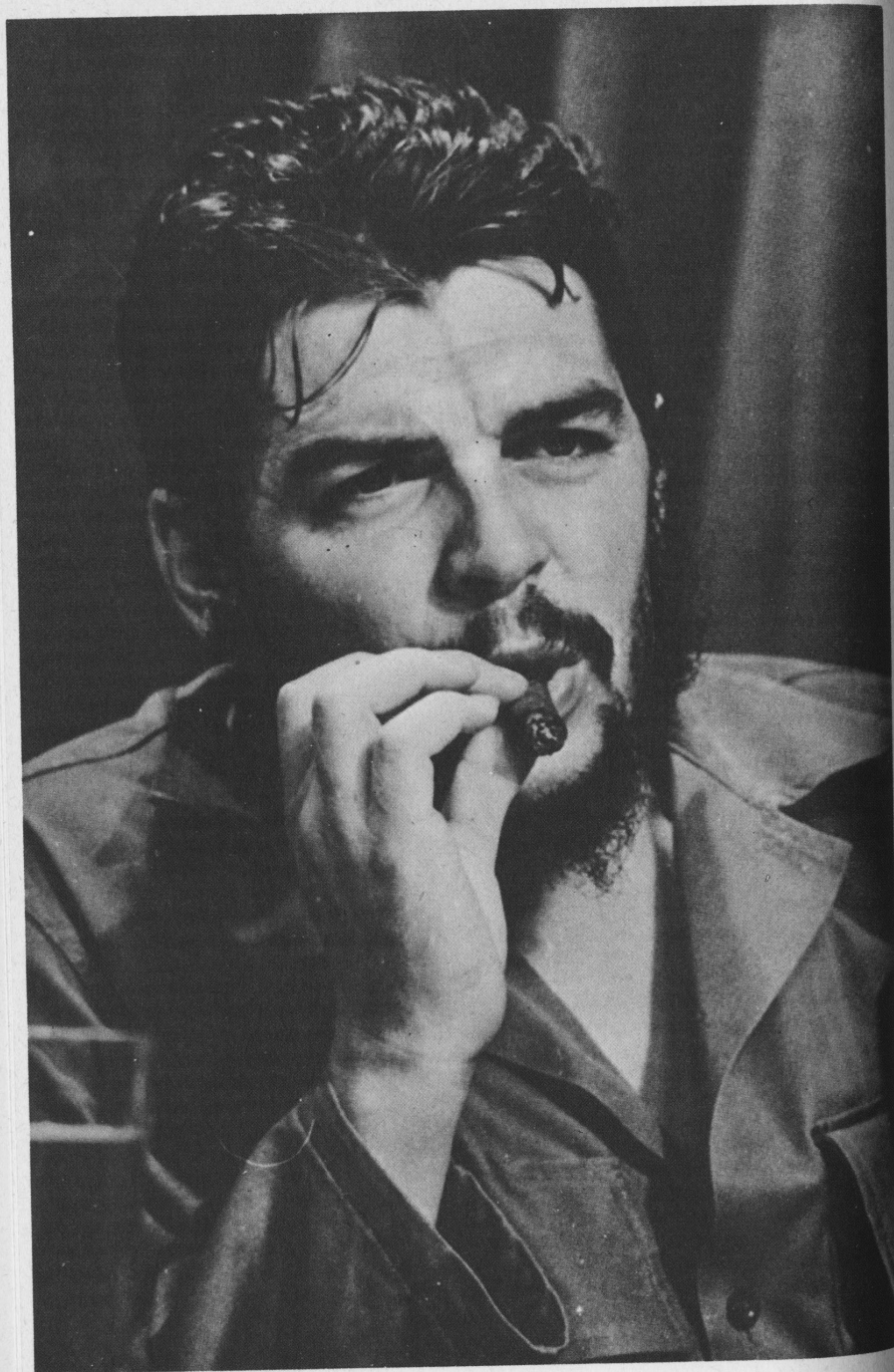
pasted up onto a mechanical, photographed *again* on a large-format camera, made into a negative, transferred onto a metal plate, and then that plate would be used for the offset print run.

Rostgaard's technical skill was sharpened by his stubborn devotion to photographic reuse. Moving through a long feature article, we might expect to see two or three illustration spreads that sync up with what's being described in the text. We instead see one or a few photos repeated and manipulated over multiple pages, a technique he called "origami," undoubtedly referring to the many cuts, folds, and tears each piece demanded. *Tricontinental* 8 (1968), an issue dedicated to the life of Che Guevara, has some great examples. Fidel Castro provides a long eulogy for his comrade, who was executed by CIA and the Bolivian military a year earlier. Castro's text is accompanied by a portrait of Guevara that progressively loads in row by row. [figs. 4–11] The article begins as a text spread. With each turn of the page, a new section of the portrait fills in such that Castro's words are displaced, and eventually Guevara's face occupies the whole left-hand page. If placed in an animated sequence, the nine spreads would show the printed portrait as a moving image that gets more complete as the article progresses. The result is a composition that emphasizes no single spread in particular. Instead, these images seem to comment on the fact that Guevara's face was then being transformed into an international symbol of liberatory struggle. Rostgaard's chosen an odd photo here; it's far from the archetypal portraits of grinning, beret-wearing, cigar-smoking Guevara. It's a close-up of him staring straight into the camera. In the same issue, we see a similar technique illustrating some of Guevara's own writing. The left-hand page cycles through a handful of photos of him being interviewed. [figs. 12–20] Instead of a single image, we read one portrait in relation to the others.

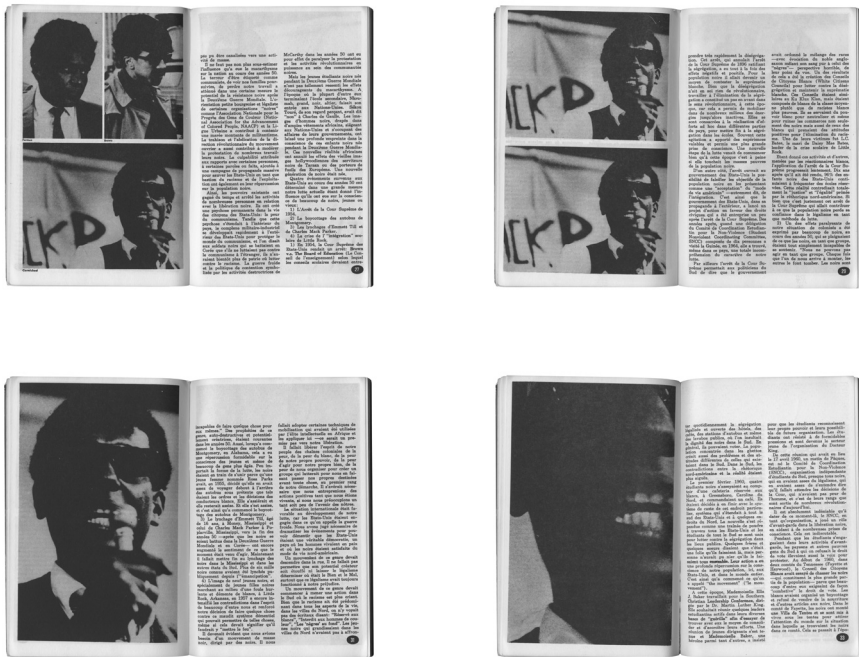
We see a similar use of the left-hand page in *Tricontinental* 3. Page 26 is divided into portraits of James Forman, H. Rap Brown, and Stokely Carmichael, then active members of the Black Panther Party and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. On page 28, Carmichael's portrait is repeated above its original position. On pages 30 and 32, we see the portrait grow to take up the whole frame, eventually ending in a close-up of the mouth. [figs. 21–24] The adjacent article recounts a brief history of the civil rights movement. As the viewfinder consumes Carmichael's face, the editors describe



Figs. 12–19: *Tricontinental* 8, 1968.



WASHINGTON, 9. OKTOBER (UPI)
 US REGIERUNGSSPRECHER ERKLÄRTEN HEUTE ABEND, DER TOD
 DES ARGENTINISCHEN KOMMUNISTEN UND FRÜHEREN CASTRI-
 STISCHEN FÜHRERS ERNESTO "CHE" GUEVARA WERDE, SOLLTE ER
 SICH BESTÄTIGEN, EINEN ERNSTHAFTEN RÜCKSCHLAG FÜR DIE
 KOMMUNISTISCHE GUERILLATÄTIGKEIT IN BOLIVIEN UND DEN
 ÜBRIGEN TEIL LATEINAMARIKAS BEDEUTEN.
 DER SPRECHER SAGTE PRIVAT, ER BEDEUTE EINEN ERNSTHAFTEN
 RÜCKSCHLAG, DA AUSREICHENDE BEWEISE IN HÄNDEN WASH-
 INGTONS DARAUF HINDEUTETEN, DASS DIE BOLIVIANISCHE
 GUERILLA ZIEMLICH DEZIMIERT SEI, UND UNTER DIESEN UM-
 STÄNDEN DER VERLUST EINES HAUPTFÜHRERS ENTSCHEIDEND
 SEIN KÖNNE.



Figs. 21–24: *Tricontinental* 3, 1968.

four key events from the 1950s: the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the lynching of Emmet Till, and the integration crisis in Little Rock, Arkansas. None of these four events is depicted anywhere in the article. Instead, a simulation of moving image over multiple spreads progressively abstracts Carmichael's face. Open questions: were these compositions merely Rostgaard's creative response to a lack of applicable photographic material? A visual game of working within self-imposed constraints? A decree from higher-ups to put individual names and faces to the vast liberation struggles circling the globe?

Rather than animating through eye movement, as with the South Africa and Brazil spreads mentioned earlier, these photos simulate motion by turning pages. There's a difference between scanning one's eyes across a spread to simulate motion, and turning pages to simulate motion. The animation of images across a single spread means the reader's eyes move to push time forward. Turning pages means the eyes stand still, and the reader's *hands* push time forward. Sometimes it's our eyes, and sometimes it's our hands, that animate the images.

Rostgaard was developing this cinematic approach to editorial design, where an image's meaning is made over many spreads, alongside an explosion in Cuba's film output. In the years following the Cuban Revolution, the country's film industry saw an intensified interest in documentary cinema. By the mid-1960s, the government-established Cuban Film Institute (ICAIC) was releasing 40 documentaries per year. ICAIC filmmakers like Santiago Álvarez, Julió Garcia Espinosa, Sara Gómez, and Nicolás Guillén Landrián directed popular features and experimental shorts that garnered excitement for and tried to make sense of the new regime. New Latin American Cinema—socially engaged and anti-Hollywood—was just coming into being, and its practitioners sought to stir their audiences into collective action around South America and the Caribbean. The Argentine critics and filmmakers Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas summarized much of this spirit in their landmark 1969 manifesto “Towards a Third Cinema.” The manifesto, published in *Tricontinental* 14 (1969), offers Getino and Solanas's 1968 film *The Hour of the Furnaces* as a cinematic model for the greater Tricontinental project. In search of a revolutionary film language, they proposed:

The man of the third cinema . . . above all counters the film industry of a cinema of characters with one of themes. That of individuals with that of masses, that of the author with that of the operative group, one of neocolonial misinformation with one of information, one of escape with one that recaptures the truth, that of passivity with that of aggressions.

It's no accident that this manifesto appeared in *Tricontinental* alongside Rostgaard's animatic photomontage. Rostgaard took part in Cuba's burgeoning film culture (he designed posters for ICAIC releases), and must have related what he saw on screen to the tradition of revolutionary photomontage and graphic design he encountered while a student at the School of Plastic Arts in Santiago de Cuba. Some *Tricontinental* covers, for instance, are clear nods to the German artist John Heartfield's satirical and anti-fascist photomontage contributions to the *Workers' Illustrated Newspaper* (*Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung*) in the early 1930s. Heartfield himself was exhibiting his photo work alongside avant garde films from the Soviet Union. Books, like film reels, are

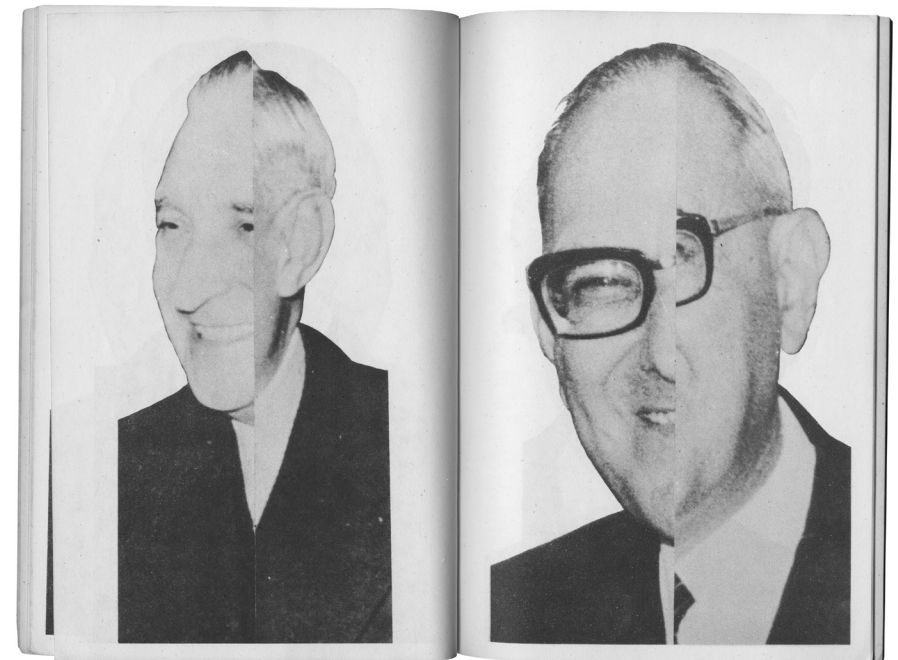
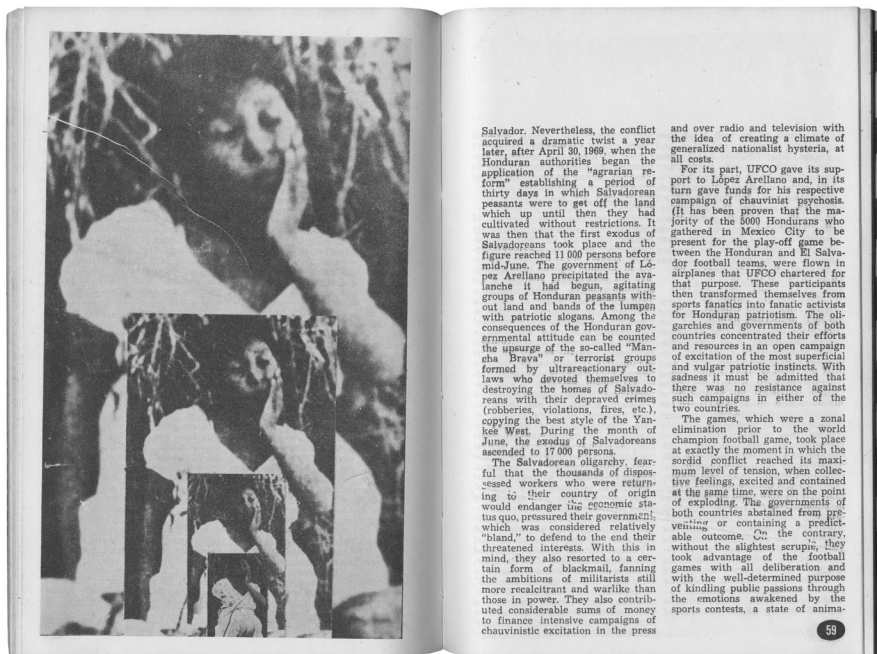


Fig. 27: *Tricontinental* 11, 1969.

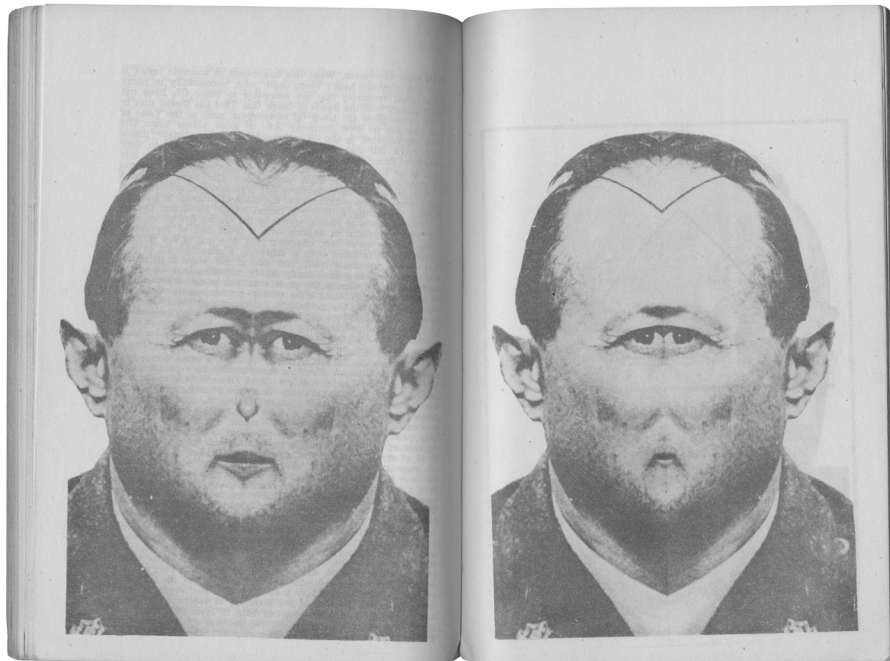


Fig. 25: *Tricontinental* 19–20, 1970.

Fig. 26: *Tricontinental* 31, 1972.

sequences. Rostgaard simply built his sequences with photographic enlargement tools rather than a movie camera.

Many of *Tricontinental's* individual page illustrations demonstrate the potential of the “origami” treatment within a single frame. In an article on Honduran and Salvadorean worker struggles against a US-owned fruit monopoly (*Tricontinental* 19–20, 1970), we see a portrait of an unnamed peasant woman repeated four times and proportionally scaled down from a central reference point. [fig. 25] This recursive composition, paired with the woman's somber facial expression, might be read as a comment on the toll that the resulting “ten-day war” between Honduras and El Salvador had taken on the working class. While he used these techniques to produce images sympathetic to the wretched of the earth, Rostgaard also employed them to identify and disfigure the butchers of the Third World. In a long interview with Nayif Hauatmeh, then general secretary of the People's Front for the Liberation of Palestine (*Tricontinental* 31, 1972), we see three pages dedicated to the Israeli defense minister Moshe Dayan, who famously oversaw the capture of Jerusalem in 1967. Rostgaard



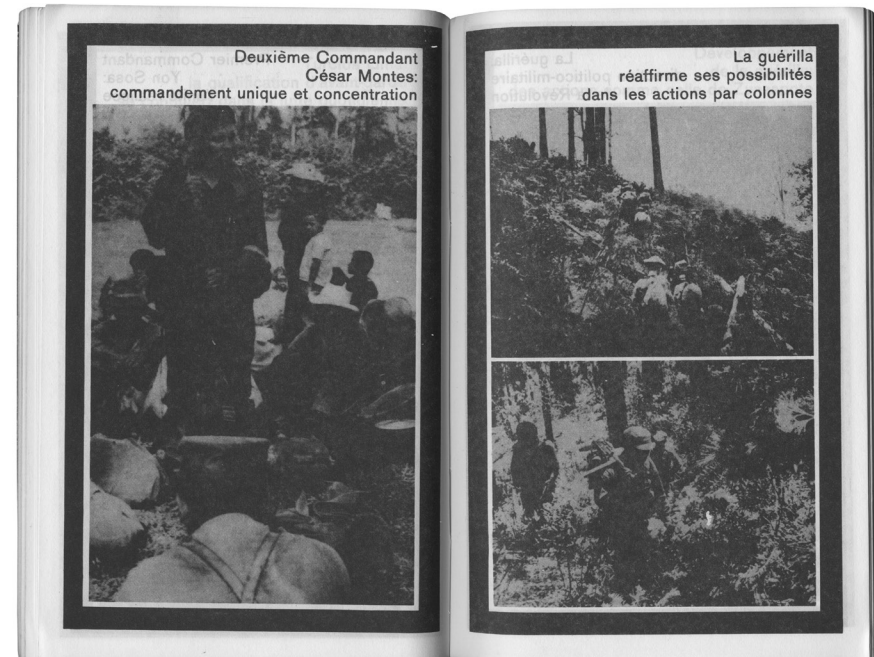
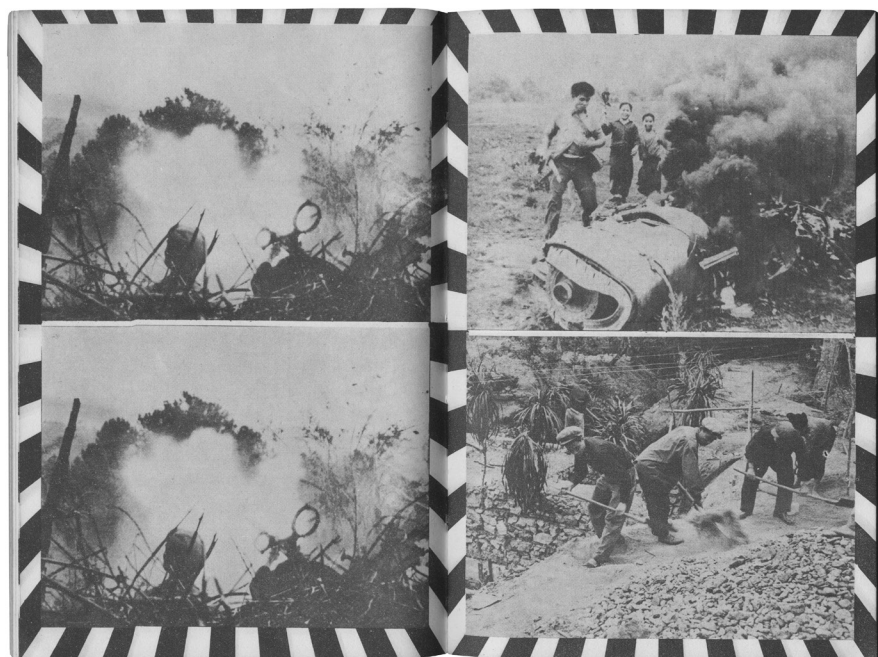
Fig. 28: *Tricontinental* 18, 1970.

Fig. 29: *Tricontinental* 19–20, 1970.



Fig. 30: *Tricontinental* 25, 1971.

Fig. 31: *Tricontinental* 3, 1968.



splits Dayan's face in half and mirrors the fragment to great effect, a simple gesture that transforms the man into a noseless cyclops. [fig. 26] Rostgaard reserved this approach for many mercenaries of empire. The Portuguese politicians António de Oliveira Salazar and Marcelo Caetano, then desperately trying to retain some of their nation's African colonies, received a similar treatment in *Tricontinental* 11 (1969). [fig. 27]

In addition to direct manipulation of the content within photographs, Rostgaard set up visual essays for the various groups that dispatched photos to the OSPAAAL offices. Often appearing in the center of a given issue, these passages were treated with custom frames that connected the images from spread to spread. A selection of photos from an encampment of Sandinista guerrillas in Nicaragua were shown in perforated white borders, as if they were snapshots from a family photo album (*Tricontinental* 18, 1970). [fig. 28] Photos of the People's Liberation Army in Laos were placed over radiating black and white lines, then a common feature of revolutionary printed matter (*Tricontinental* 19–20, 1970). [fig. 29] For a report on the 1969 riots in Belfast, we see photos of British soldiers attacking Irish protesters (*Tricontinental* 25, 1971). Rostgaard framed these photos within concentric lines that reiterate the aspect ratio of the magazine. [fig. 30] And he outlined photos of Guatemala's Rebel Armed Forces with heavy, black strokes, leaving negative space for a small caption at the top, a kind of poster series contained within the magazine (*Tricontinental* 3, 1968). [fig. 31] The featured photos would travel far beyond *Tricontinental's* pages—OSPAAAL published in Spanish, French, English, Italian, and other languages—as readers copied and then republished them. This behavior was explicitly encouraged by the editors, who stated in every issue, "Partial or total reproduction is freely permitted by *Tricontinental* magazine." The images were too precious to be proprietary.

Tricontinental 32 (1972) begins with a long transcription of a speech that Castro had recently given in Poland. His words are introduced by three portraits in profile. Rostgaard produced the profile, its inversion, and its outline by mimeographing an image of the Cuban leader and then manipulating it with various enlargement and photo post-production techniques. [fig. 32] Mimeography, then a common method of creating stencil images for screen printing, reduced a

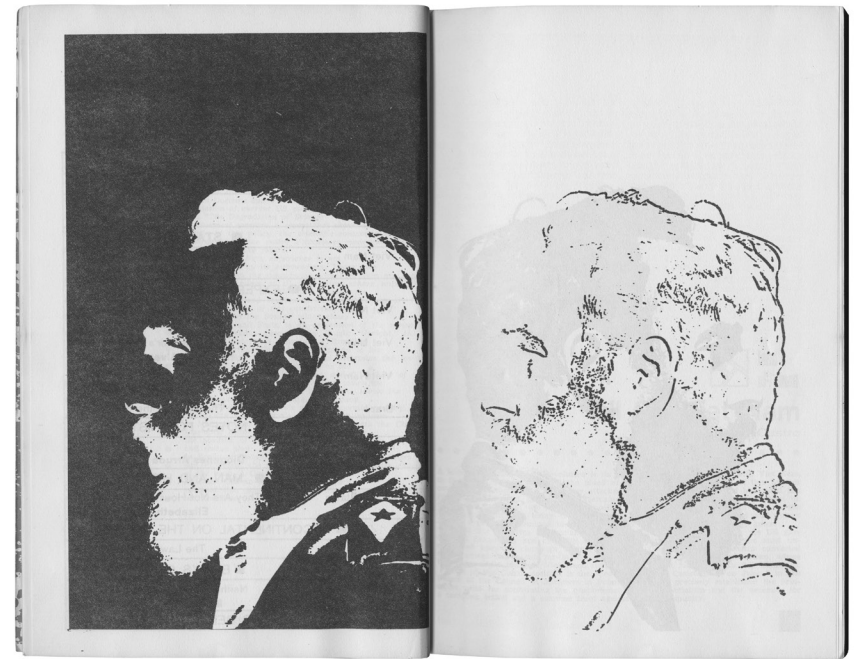


Fig. 32: *Tricontinental* 32, 1972.

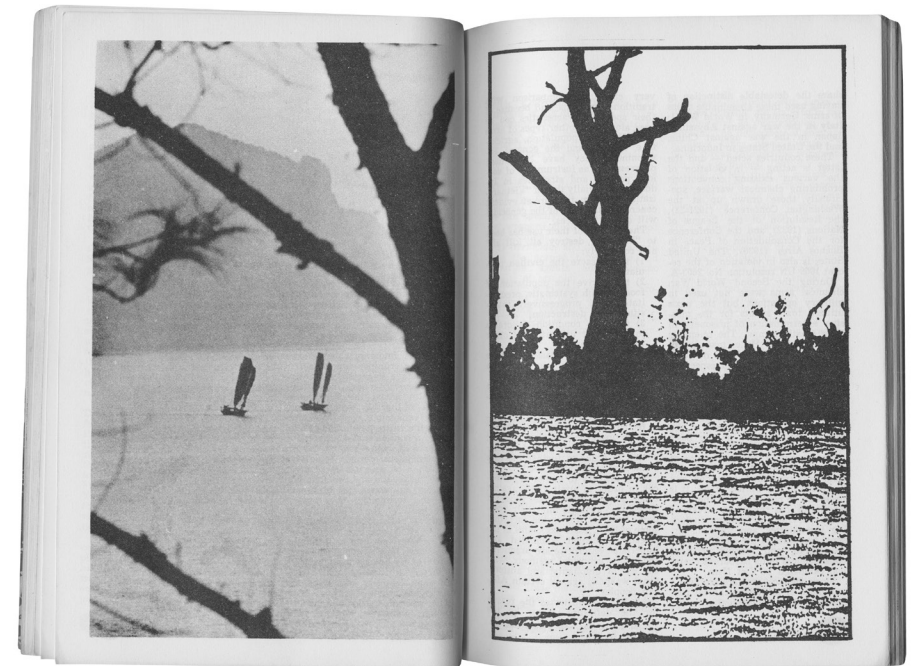


Fig. 33: *Tricontinental* 32, 1972.

photo's grainy, gray details to binary fields of either black or white. Spread across three pages, Castro's face flashes from dark to light as he declares the Vietnam War "the supreme test of proletarian internationalism." We see various uses of mimeography throughout this issue. An article on the US use of chemical weapons in Vietnam is accompanied by a diptych of landscape photos. At left, two sampans in the gulf are printed in fine photographic detail. At right, a mimeographed photo of a similar shoreline shows the landscape cut down to crumpled flora, an empty sky, and harsh scribbles of water. [fig. 33] The information loss inherent to the mimeograph process is here a graphic suggestion of the destruction left behind by American soldiers. Elsewhere, mimeography simply repeats images of Vietnamese National Liberation Front (NLF) soldiers. They march along the shoreline as they merge with their reflections in the shallows. Their indistinct, mimeographed duplicates, and the reflections of those duplicates, appear right above. [fig. 34]

It's this murky reflection of militant internationalism that I regard as a most fitting metaphor for those of us trying to understand *Tricontinental* in the twenty-first century. These photos, and the history they refer to, were evidence at the time that the Third World could coalesce to upend the empires ravaging the planet. Today the photos are subject to a most acute fetishism, this author not excluded, that risks forgetting that these struggles never ended. In 2023, I made a short video essay about the use of photography in *Tricontinental*, built around footage of me handling the magazines, and have since shown it around the country in small art spaces and universities. Each screening was followed by a discussion. Audience comments ranged from expressions of excitement about the prospect of a design movement built around international solidarity, discontent over the design discipline's obsession with advertising and technocracy in the US, and vexation at the lack of resources available for leftist periodicals in the West. Earlier this year the video screened at a University of Havana conference commemorating the 60th anniversary of the *Tricontinental*, where over 140 scholars and thinkers met to debate the legacy and future of the *Tricontinental* project. (I was unable to attend.) One week later, the Trump administration issued an executive order that escalated the 64-year US embargo against Cuba to a full-scale fuel blockade by threatening economic sanctions



Fig. 34: *Tricontinental* 32, 1972.

against any country that provides oil shipments to the island. The administration has suggested that a US-imposed regime change is soon to follow.

As it happens, I've seen that photo of NLF soldiers on the shore one other time: at the end of Heiny Srour's 1974 documentary *The Hour of Liberation Has Arrived*. Srour, a Lebanese filmmaker, spent weeks following and filming the People's Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf, a guerrilla group encamped around the Dhofar region of Oman. The film ends with a montage of adjacent struggles that supported the guerrillas in the gulf, and the NLF photo is used as a stand-in for the people of North Vietnam. Srour's camera zooms into it until all we see are its central figures and their weapons. Could this photo have been taken and developed in Vietnam, mailed to Cuba, laid out by Rostgaard, printed in *Tricontinental*, distributed to Lebanon, and then filmed by Srour? The mere possibility speaks to a complex cultural front, one where photomontage aspires to cinema on a Cuban magazine page and in turn is used in a cinematic work of agitprop on the other side of the world.

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