The relationship between the arts and politics is readily evident in today's news climate but often unappreciated is the historic nature of this bond. In his new book, Malik Gaines, an assistant professor of performance studies at the Tisch School of the Arts, explores one component of this dynamic, chronicling how black political beliefs radicalized the artistic endeavors of musicians, playwrights, and actors beginning in the 1960s—paving the way for the creation of imaginative models for social transformation through performance.

Black Performance on the Outskirts of the Left: A History of the Impossible (NYU Press), which studies the roles of W.E.B. Du Bois, Nina Simone, and Sylvester, among others, maps out the transnational nature of this dynamic, focusing on how artists negotiated the local, national, and diasporic frames through which race has been represented.

Gaines brings his analysis to the present day in considering the 2015 Venice Biennial—an examination that connects the idea of 1960s radicality to today's interest in that history, and highlights black expressive strategies that have maintained their political energy.

Exploring Nicaragua’s Artistic Utopia

In 1965, a spiritual, political, and artistic movement emerged on an archipelago of islands in the south of Nicaragua: Solentiname. This community—established by Ernesto Cardenal, a poet and priest committed to social change—is the focus of a new exhibition at NYU Steinhardt's 80WSE Gallery. The Dream of Solentiname will look at this key moment in the relationship between aesthetics and politics in Central America as well as its social impact on artists working in New York City during the 1980s.

A social and artistic utopia built around principles of art, liberation theology, and social justice is documented in Cardenal’s letters with fellow priest Thomas Merton. Primitive painting became a way of political expression, economic support, and lifestyle for the inhabitants of the archipelago. Residents of the communal society also wrote poetry and created ceramics, handicrafts, and works in wood, leather, copper, bronze, and silver. Over the years, they hosted a number of writers and artists, including Julio Cortázar, Juan Downey, and Sandra Eleta.

Solentiname’s experimental community lasted from 1965 to 1977 when it was destroyed by the Somoza regime. But two years later, the Somoza dictatorship was overthrown in the Nicaraguan Revolution. Cardenal became the minister of culture in the new government and the Solentiname experience became a model for the cultural program of the revolution.

Presented alongside a conference in collaboration with the Institute of Fine Arts, The Dream of Solentiname intends to catalyze a discussion of the importance of artists during this historical moment and how art can serve as a tangible example of massive sociopolitical transformations. Curated by Pablo León de la Barra with 80WSE Gallery, the exhibition will run from December through February.

—Rachel Harrison

Making Waves

In Ragamala Dance Company’s Written in Water, dancers activate the space by negotiating snakes and ladders—which represent the heights of ecstasy and depths of longing in Hindu and Sufi thought—to connect the human with the transcendental and reveal mysteries within the self. The show’s classical Indian Bharatanatyam dance is performed with live music that mixes Iraqi, jazz, and Carnatic instruments. Written in Water will make its Middle East premiere at the Abu Dhabi Arts Center on March 21 and 22.