Art, Dispossession, and Imaginations of Historical Justice
Thinking with the Works of Maria Eichhorn and Dilek Winchester

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ABSTRACT Drawing on the works of artists Maria Eichhorn (Berlin) and Dilek Winchester (Istanbul), this article focuses on artistic responses to the twin processes of violence and dispossession in Germany and the late Ottoman Empire and Republican Turkey, respectively. Their artistic practices respond to what is irrecoverable in loss, in contrast to dominant discussions on material restitution as a process that always projects a reversibility of past injuries and that remains limited to the logic of possession. The article argues that these practices pose an aesthetic challenge to the conceptual frameworks within which both dispossession and restitution are usually understood. They produce forms of aesthetic redistribution that open paths to alternate ways of envisioning historical justice in transformative rather than recuperative terms.

KEYWORDS art, dispossession, restitution, historical justice, aesthetic redistribution

In response to growing attention to art in armed conflict, not least due to the ongoing plunder and destruction in the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, and to the increasing calls to decolonialize museums and to restitute art looted during colonial rule, museum anthropologists and art historians have recently experimented with different terminologies for looted and expropriated art objects. The term “survivor objects,” for instance, put forth by Heghnar Zeitlian Watenpaugh aims to account for the multilayered meanings that objects might acquire in processes of violence. While this term is primarily in dialogue with scholarship that centers on the “agency of objects,” it also raises the question of what kind of testimony these artworks can give on the violence they survived without disclosing the conditions that enabled their transmission and circulation. It raises the question of how we...
can conceptualize their survival beyond discourses of trauma and move towards understandings of how the very violence they were subjected to has shaped both the art world and knowledge production on art. Dispossessed artworks have been described as “translocated”3 or “orphaned”4; such terms highlight their status in the present and their “second lives”5 at their new designation rather than the violent conditions under which they were “lost.” While many of the debates about dispossessed art and artifacts have centered on the question of the object’s restitution—and importantly so—other modes of response that consider the loss of the contexts of sociability or the interpretative communities in which these objects were once situated still need to be explored.6 Looking at selected works by artists Maria Eichhorn and Dilek Winchester, I read the entanglement of the art world in state violence through the erasures and redistributive processes that accompany dispossession. Their artistic practices tend to these erasures by insisting on different forms of implicatedness created by dispossession that transcend the dualism of victim and perpetrator. The aesthetic redistribution that both artists model not only differs from the disenfranchising redistributive function of dispossession and the seeming repair projected by restitution but might also be helpful in exploring alternate ways of thinking and writing about dispossessed art. What paths might there be to imagining historical justice beyond material restitution, which always projects a reversibility of past injuries and remains limited to the logic of possession? Focusing not just on the moment of dispossession but also on its longitudinal effects on art and its worlds, their works present an important point of possible intervention in debates on historical justice.

It has become somewhat commonplace to cite Walter Benjamin’s proclamation that “there is no document of culture, which is not at the same time a document of barbarism”7 in inquiries that tend to the role of artworks, artifacts, and antiquities (often called “cultural assets”) in times of war and armed conflict, to instances when these objects become war booty (dispossessed) or even weapons of war themselves—as they are turned into symbols of political dominance of subjugated populations in the hands of wartime victors. It is, however, the next and notably often neglected sentence from this passage in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” that draws attention to the longue durée of dispossession, its aftermath, and its continued reproduction through the process of transmission: “And just as such a document is not free from barbarism, barbarism also taints the manner in which it is transmitted from one owner to the other” (Und wie es selbst nicht frei ist von Barbarei, so ist es auch der Prozeß der Überlieferung nicht, in der es von dem einen an den andern gefallen ist).8 The German noun Überlieferung, perhaps more so than reflected in its English translation as “the manner in which it is transmitted,” harbors meanings beyond the mere transfer of ownership. Überlieferung also refers to lore, to stories about the past—often triumphalist in nature—and to the
ways in which they are told, retold, and passed on from one generation to another (schriftliche Überlieferung, for instance, is often translated as “written tradition”). Focusing on how “documents of culture” change hands opens up the question of what happens to frames of perception and to art historical narratives when the transmission of artworks is rooted in, or enabled by, the twin processes of violence and dispossession. Or, asked differently, what kind of loss does artistic dispossession engender?

To approach these questions, I look at dispossession—different mechanisms of expropriation encompassing looting, confiscation, and sales under duress facilitated by legal or extralegal means, or both—beyond the lens of disenfranchisement. I propose conceptualizing dispossession as a contradictory process that at once produces absence (i.e., loss) and presence (i.e., the redistribution of things, objects, and artworks). This redistribution not only obscures the contexts out of which things, objects, and artworks emerged and the violent conditions under which they changed hands; it also creates complex networks of beneficiaries and different forms of implicatedness. More broadly, dispossession fundamentally shapes the knowledge production and perception of artworks, as well as the institutional contexts of the art world including museums, art historical narratives, and archives.

In what follows, I take up works by Maria Eichhorn and Dilek Winchester as artistic practices that, by intervening upon the nexuses of transmission and redistribution, approach loss and dispossession outside of the framework of restoration, repair, or restitution; in doing so, these works open up different imaginations of historical justice. Located in contemporary Germany and Turkey respectively, both artists’ works take up historical episodes of war and state violence that have entailed processes of large-scale dispossession and that have shaped the art world significantly. These parallels, like the long and troubling history of economic and intellectual exchange and political allegiance between Turkey and Germany, are today largely obscured by a focus on the labor migration from Turkey to Germany that began in the 1960s.  

In the case of Turkey, where Dilek Winchester is based, episodes of violence are located in the particular context of nation-building: the transition from a multi-ethnic, multireligious, and multilingual empire to a homogenously envisioned nation-state and its periodic consolidation. In the course of the Armenian genocide (1915–17) that marked the late Ottoman Empire (1453–1922), artworks were looted, confiscated, and lost, along with farmlands, businesses, and places of worship. This dispossession continued in the state violence against non-Muslims in the Republic of Turkey. In 1942, the “wealth tax” was imposed, ostensibly to close the state deficit that Turkey incurred during World War II. Yet this excessive tax overwhelmingly targeted non-Muslims who frequently saw their monetary assets
and entire households, antiques, and artworks confiscated, or who had to auction off their belongings under duress to meet the levy. A state-organized pogrom on September 6–7, 1955, similarly entailed the looting of non-Muslim businesses, residences, and places of worship, including artworks and other “cultural assets.” In 1964, most of the remaining Greek-Orthodox population was expelled from Istanbul; they were allowed to take only twenty kilos of luggage and twenty dollars with them; the remaining belongings and the homes they were forced to abandon frequently fell prey to looting. These confiscated and looted artworks and antiques are now hidden away in private collections, obscured in plain sight in (public) museums, or circulated—their stories undetected—at art auctions and other outlets of the art market, as their origins have been rendered illegible. Here, dispossession and redistribution have created absence and forgetting that have shaped art historical narratives by obscuring the life and works of non-Muslim artists, art dealers, collectors, and audiences. While some faith-based community properties, unlike individual belongings, have been restituted, often through long-winded legal and bureaucratic processes, the question of how these massive waves of dispossession have shaped the making of contemporary Turkey still needs to be officially addressed.

Maria Eichhorn’s works take up a particular part of the German past: the Nazi art-loot and its reverberations in the present. Today the issue of art looted by the Nazis is discussed mainly in terms of restitution as acts of historical justice and remembrance. Yet this focus on restitution has produced its own blind spots and dynamics of forgetting, especially when it comes to acknowledging the wide-reaching networks of actors that not only facilitated the looting but also established (inter)national trading networks for dispossessed art, both during the Third Reich and after the end of World War II. A second blind spot concerns the issue of modernist art and its place in German history and institutions. Already deemed “degenerate” and indeed anti-German during the German Kaiserreich (1871–1918), modernist art had been purged from public museums and confiscated from private collections during the Third Reich and (with some exceptions) sold abroad to fill German war coffers. After the war, establishing Germany’s modern and Western belonging (something that was highly contested within Germany even before the advent of National Socialism) politically, culturally, and artistically became paramount and led to a policy of “resupply” (Nachkauf) of German modernist art. Far from being a simple buyback, the “resupply” of German modernism actually fashioned art historical narratives that firmly situated Germany in the trajectory of “Western modernity.” Not unlike restitution, the notion of rebuy projects a kind of “repair” and a reversal of past wrongs. Both restitution and rebuy are understood as restorative and hence have reinforced both a fictitious notion of continuity with regard to pre-1933 German public collections and a fictitious rupture
of a “zero hour” (Stunde Null) with regard to the German art world’s Nazi connections. The vested interest in this narrative and its political stakes in normalizing Germany’s past become clear when looking at a recent initiative established by the German state to export the concept of the zero hour to other areas of the world. Since 2016, the German Foreign Ministry and the German Archaeological Institute have spearheaded a project that aims to “facilitate identification of looted objects that are being traded illegally on the art market” and the “reconstruction of cultural heritage in Syria.”13 Notably, the initiative is called Stunde Null, a term hitherto reserved for a particular narrative of German history. This transference helps to present the Nazis’ rise to power, their genocidal violence, and the Second World War as a twelve-year deviation from a supposedly linear and progressive path to modernity. This narrative not only evades questioning the conditions that made the Nazi art theft possible but also promises a similar narrative arc for a pre- and post-war Syria.

The notion of Nazi art theft as an aberration is especially curious because of its centrality in the legal realm. Along with the destruction of cultural heritage sites in the course of World War II, the scope of Nazi art theft motivated the 1954 iteration of the “Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict.” Germany has signed both the Washington (1998) and the Berlin Declarations (1999) that suggest guidelines for restituting Nazi-looted art but are not legally binding—tying restitution claims and protocols significantly to the discretion of respective courts where claims are lodged or to those of negotiating stakeholders. In contrast, the Ottoman and Turkish cases are largely made invisible by (inter)national law: although the Armenian Genocide informed the “crimes against humanity” legislation, it is denied by Turkey and has not been internationally prosecuted. The subsequent episodes of dispossession are rooted in structural violence or discriminatory practices that have remained largely obscured, and the few existing restitution cases have addressed community rather than private property. Despite this difference, the official remediations and restitutions of Turkey and Germany promise a temporal, legal, or conceptual closure that Winchester and Eichhorn critique. Considered alongside colonial constellations and the fallouts of current wars, the ways in which Winchester and Eichhorn address these parts of Turkish and German history illuminate the extent to which dispossession is constitutive of the art world.

Maria Eichhorn: Inverting the Politics of Restitution
Berlin-based artist Maria Eichhorn’s (1962–) practice frequently questions the inner workings of the art world, the operating logics of its institutions, and the markets that sustain it.14 Part of her engagement has focused on how Nazi-looted art has shaped private and public collections and what the continued circulation
of such looted art might reveal about cultural policy and politics, and Germany’s engagements with its past.

Eichhorn’s first intervention in the topic emerged when she was invited to put together a show for the Lenbachhaus—part of the public gallery network of the city of Munich—in 2003. Interested in working with the museum’s holdings, she came across fifteen works that were marked as “on loan from the German Federal government.” Struck by this demarcation, she learned that these paintings were remainders of the Munich Central Collecting Point that the Allied Forces had established for art confiscated by the Nazis from Jewish collectors and from museums across Europe. Commissioning historian Anja Heuß to research their provenance, Eichhorn learned that some of these paintings were dispossessed from private and public collections by way of confiscation or sale under duress. Others were acquired and destined for the planned Führermuseum in Linz. Often called “Hitler’s vanity project,” this museum was intended both to hold a historical record of and a promise for a “truly German art” yet to come. This art, quite in contrast to modernism and in accordance with National Socialist aesthetic preferences, generally dabbled in “völkisch” romanticism.

The research on the provenance of the works was mainly guided by markings on the backside of the paintings. These biographic markings included stamps by frame makers and art dealers, documentation numbers by the Reichsgruppe Rosenberg, the Nazi regime’s administrative unit in charge of confiscating artworks, by the Allied Collecting Point, and by the West German Ministry of Finance to which they were transferred in 1963 when the initial time to file restitution claims by survivors or the heirs of Nazi victims elapsed. Each painting received a final mark when being transferred to the Lenbachhaus: “F. H.,” followed by a catalog number. The “F. H.” stands for Fremde Habe: foreign belongings or possession. There is something unsettling about this demarcation, not only because the “someone” whose belongings these paintings are remains unnamed, but because it stresses their “foreignness.” This notion of foreignness inadvertently mirrors the way in which Jews were designated as foreign to the German population as an integral part of Nazi genocidal policies. Why are the paintings not marked as Nazi-looted art or at least as art from Nazi collections? While Eichhorn noted at the time that the paintings “ought not to be considered images but objects,” their display on freestanding wooden pedestals allowed for viewing both front and back, and thus for reading Nazi-sanctioned German romanticism alongside the traces and markings of state violence, dispossession, and loss (figs. 1 and 2).

There has been a flurry of exhibitions on Nazi-looted art and objects following the discovery of the “Gurlitt art trove” in 2012. Yet, Eichhorn’s *The Politics of Restitution*, as the show was called, remains striking—not only because it was one of the earliest exhibitions that focused on dispossessed art, but because its form of
display uniquely highlighted the unresolved and unresolvable aspects of dispossess- 
sion. The exhibition also featured documentation on the provenance of the paint-
ings (as far as ascertained to that point), reprints of legal proceedings connected
to them, catalogs giving insights into their exhibition histories, a broad selection
of books on Nazi-looted art and restitution, a report on the state of provenance
research at the Lenbachhaus, and a lecture series. Eichhorn chose to stage the
exhibition in the museum’s subterranean annex at Königsplatz, the very square
serving as the art collecting point for the Nazi regime and then for the Allied
Forces—a choice emphasizing the spatial continuity of Nazi (art) policies with
their reverberations in the present. The different elements that Eichhorn brought
together expressed her insistence on the limitations of restitution in the form pur-
sued by the German state and German art institutions—a process that at the time,
part from periodic high-profile claims, was seen as more or less complete due to a
supposed lack of concrete leads, of claims made by lawful owners, and of funding for further research.24

Eichhorn’s contribution to the Kassel leg of *documenta 14* (2017) employed some of these elements again. At the spatial center of the exhibition was a bookcase with titles confiscated from Jewish homes that are now part of Berlin’s public library system (fig. 3). They represent only a fraction of forty thousand confiscated books. Soberly titled “Unlawfully Acquired Books from Jewish Ownership,” they were accompanied by documentation on the state of provenance research at the Central and Regional Library Berlin (Zentral- und Landesbibliothek Berlin). All of the assembled books were marked with a “J” as part of their accession record.

The bookcase was surrounded by photographs documenting what the Nazis called “Operation Furniture” (*Möbel-Aktion*). Conducted between 1942 and 1944, “Operation Furniture” was responsible for emptying about thirty-eight thousand Parisian homes as their former Jewish inhabitants were being deported to concentration camps.25 The photographs show the looting of the homes and how the objects they once housed were sorted by Jewish slave laborers before being transported to Germany to meet their new “owners.” Most unsettling, perhaps, were the images of an intermediary step depicting the storage facilities in which objects ranging from pianos to cutlery and linens were assembled and photographed. The sheer size of the warehouses and number of these objects is overwhelming. Their arrangement and display that evokes those of upscale showrooms eerily aestheticizes the daily administration of dispossession, theft, and genocidal violence (figs. 4 and 5).

The bureaucratic traces of violence and terror also appear in another part of Eichhorn’s presentation, a video capturing thousands of auction records from Berlin (1935–42) that reflect sales of artworks and other objects confiscated or sold under duress. In addition to a reading area with literature on Nazi-looted property, it also includes documentation on the fate (as far as Eichhorn and her team could trace it) of a Kassel native, Jewish arts patron Alexander Fiorino, and his collection,
accompanied by a call to visitors to pass on leads on the current whereabouts of the bulk of his works that remain unaccounted for to this day.

The idea that restitution is not just a responsibility of survivors or victims' heirs, of the law, or of government and art institutions, but of visitors and by extension society at large is also at the heart of the Rose Valland Institute that Eichhorn inaugurated as part of documenta. Along with a workshop on Orphaned Property in Europe, the institute began with a call to the public to join their search for Nazi-looted property, including artworks, land, real estate, assets, businesses, movable objects and artifacts, libraries, and scientific works and patents. Here, Eichhorn inverts the standardized process of restitution by asking, “Why do those who have been looted have to attempt to retrieve their possessions, instead of the looters having to locate those robbed in order to return the loot to its rightful owners?”

Reconceptualizing restitution as a broader social and participatory process of “discovery and disclosure of unlawful possession,” Eichhorn pushes the boundaries of what is deemed feasible with regard to existing provenance research and procedures for Nazi-era restitution. In doing so, she also pushes the boundaries of what is imaginable in terms of historical justice. The field is notoriously difficult to navigate, given that the 1938 law that regulated the confiscation of artworks has never been revoked. In addition, restitution claims are frequently hindered by different national and international interpretations of the statutes of limitation in an arena that is governed by nonbinding declarations rather than legal frameworks and by the aforementioned long lack of funding for sustained provenance research throughout German and international arts institutions.

Eichhorn argues that dispossessed objects (including those that she assembles) cannot give or act as testimony because as a whole they continue to be concealed in German public and private collections. This concealment, I would argue, works on three levels: Firstly, the questionable provenance of individual objects is erased, unless thrown into crisis through specific restitution claims. Secondly, the actual extent to which Nazi-looted art has shaped German collections and the institutional landscape of the art world is concealed. And finally, the conditions that made dispossession and certain kinds of redistribution possible remain unaddressed. In essence, Eichhorn’s proposition follows Adorno’s argument that Germany’s fascist past cannot be faced without addressing the very conditions that enabled it. Her practice oscillates between tracing the immense scope of dispossession by the Nazis and the intimate details of how dispossession actually worked. Challenging the notion that Germany has extensively faced its past, it addresses those who have benefited from it, be it directly or indirectly by way of redistribution. Although Germany officially has approached indemnification as “justice, [that] is in part, a form of remembrance,” Eichhorn suggests that the narrow focus through which
restitution is pursued serves obscuration and forgetting instead of memory and remembrance.

By marking these artworks (or books) first and foremost as looted objects, Eichhorn continues to search for new forms of display. Refusing to reduce dispossessed objects to manifestations of problematic property relations and putting them together with different kinds of documentation, public programs, and reading rooms, Eichhorn’s displays reference another meaning of the term “dispossession” put forth by Athena Athanasiou and Judith Butler: that of being transported “outside oneself.” This transporting outside of oneself emerges in how Eichhorn unsettles dominant perceptions in which individual artworks, for instance, exist in an interrupted but nonetheless linear (art) historical narrative of the triumph of “Western modernism” in Germany. It is also in this way, as a transporting outside of a given frame of perception and action, that I understand Eichhorn’s call to invert the standardized process of restitution.

Eichhorn has repeatedly expressed concern about the tendency to sensationalize cases of Nazi-looted art as such sensationalism makes it easier to relegate these cases to the past and to divorce them from their present implications. She maintains that “the strategies of concealment and obfuscation need to be examined and processes of disclosure set in motion by artistic means.” I see this insistence on artistic means, along with the multiplicity of media that she employs, as a way to confront the trappings of—or tensions between—the historical and the aesthetic that conventional avenues of memorialization tend to evade. This insistence also works against dominant discourses on dispossession as a one-time event that is temporarily bounded, rather than an ongoing process. Ranging from the most mundane to the most prized objects, including photographs of everyday items, linens, furniture, and cutlery, and assembled alongside dispossessed books and artworks, her works leave the viewer with the sense that not only these objects but the beneficiaries of dispossession too (i.e., the new owners) continue to be (among) them. I will return to the question of the beneficiary again below but want to end this section by noting that while Eichhorn does not explicitly use the term “justice,” her works nonetheless are redistributive in orientation. They pose an aesthetic challenge both to the temporality within which dispossession is usually understood and to perceptions of what restitution entails.

Dilek Winchester: To Learn Reading and Writing Anew

Whereas Maria Eichhorn’s works focus on art and material objects lost through dispossession, Dilek Winchester (1974–) has been interested in reading and writing, in letters and alphabets, as sites of loss. This loss was facilitated by the mass violence, structural violence, and discriminatory practices that have been constitutive of Turkish nation-state building and consolidation. Although artworks have
been part of these waves of dispossession, Winchester’s works register this loss at the site of language and with it literary practices and artistic expressions that have become illegible. While Eichhorn deals primarily with the circulation and reception of already existing objects, Winchester suggests that language as a vital tool of future artistic production has been lost, consequently opening an even deeper and wider view on how dispossession creates everyday forms of implicatedness.

In this context, I want to briefly dwell on two works from her ongoing series On Reading and Writing (2007–). The series takes as its point of departure the multitude of linguistic practices that characterized the Ottoman Empire and the rupture that the republican “language reform” along with other measures of social engineering engendered in the establishment of modern Turkey (1923).\(^4\) The first comprises three blackboards, each featuring a text written in Armenian, Greek, and Arabic script, respectively, and hence referencing some of the languages spoken and written in the Ottoman Empire that were integral to its linguistic landscape (fig. 6).

For most visitors, it is only when they read the ledgers or listen to the recorded versions of the texts from the headphones placed next to each blackboard that they understand that despite the different alphabets each text is in fact phonetically written in Turkish. Each blackboard describes a child’s experience, and the surprise, confusion, and disappointment when they notice that their own language is not shared by others: the first day at school when nobody else has a “secret language” that they only speak at home, a neighborhood friend who learns a different
language—and different alphabet—at school, the sense of annoyance and discomfort when a discovered correspondence between the parents is undecipherable to the child because it is not written in Latin script. Winchester explains that she chose a text-to-speech software to transliterate the text for the recordings to highlight that these anecdotes and the linguistic practices they represent have been severed from the interpretative communities and social contexts to which they once belonged, and in which they were spoken and written.\(^42\) The alienation that the computerized voice produces in the viewer is not unlike the one that the protagonists of the anecdotes experience. As a medium, the blackboards themselves speak in multiple registers. At first sight, they index formal education outside of the family or the neighborhood, the schooling that is the cornerstone of the nation-state’s pedagogy. More particularly, they reach back to a historical precedent and to images that have long been part of the official iconography of the Turkish state.

When introducing the “language reform” that entailed a shift from Ottoman, a composite of Arabic and Persian script,\(^43\) to the Latin alphabet in 1928, Mustafa Kemal cast himself in the role of “head teacher” posing for photographs in front of blackboards and addressing officials or a classroom full of schoolchildren going over the new alphabet. These photographs aimed to popularize a measure deemed to modernize Turkey, and like other modernization measures the language reform expressed an organized rejection of internal difference that marked the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey.\(^44\) The language reform engendered not only a notable rupture from the Ottoman Empire and its perceived political, cultural, and artistic failures but also a dispossession of its archives and literary and artistic practices. Among these diagnosed “failures” was the empire’s ethnic, religious, and linguistic pluralism, which was identified as unmodern and unconducive to establishing a nation-state. The blackboards and the moment of recognition they produce restage this particular historical rupture, in which script made unintelligible what previously had been said or written and thus paved the way for erasures of the Ottoman past. This disconnect from what has been said before becomes even more pronounced in Winchester’s \textit{as if nothing has ever been said before us} (2013). The phrase \textit{as if nothing has ever been said before us} is taken from a passage from Oguz Atay’s novel \textit{Tutunamayanlar} (\textit{The Disconnected}),\(^45\) in which the protagonist meditates on the loss engendered by the language reform that separated modern Turkey from its Ottoman past. Written on the wall in Greek, Armenian, Hebrew, Arabic, Assyrian, and Latin letters (fig. 7), the respective alphabets once again reference some of the languages spoken and written in the Ottoman Empire: Greek, Armenian, Ladino, and Ottoman Turkish. These languages continue to be spoken today by shrinking communities subject to continued discrimination. Following the agglutinative structure of Turkish, the expression...
kendinibegenmiscesinesankibizdenoncehichibirsyesyolenmemiscesinegillerden is a part of the following passage: “We are knocking on your doors with an emotion and arrogance unparalleled in world history and without fear of seeming like those who are conceited and behave as if nothing has ever been said before them.”

As in Atay’s novel, the loss transcends that of script as such. Winchester locates loss in the ways subjects speak and write, in ways of relating to each other and to the world, to stories, and to ways of knowing. And she locates this loss in the possibilities of expression that have become delegitimized through this official break in linguistic practice, through state policies and official history that have denied this constitutive violence and that have aimed to refashion the Ottoman past to ethnicize Turkish belonging. At the same time, the notion that nothing has ever been said before us speaks to conceptualizations of Turkey in politics and scholarship that are rooted in the discipline of orientalist studies and hence remain wedded to “the themes of ‘failure,’ ‘lack,’ and ‘inadequacy’” through which the non-West is so often described.46 As Talal Asad and Roger Owen put it, this body of knowledge production describes non-European “political life by looking for absent kinds of concepts—‘liberty,’ ‘progress,’ ‘humanism’ which are supposed to be distinctive of Western civilization.”47 Contingent on the narrative of radical alterity between the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey, the notion of “belated modernity” rather than state violence has become an explanatory model for almost all political, economic,
and social predicaments in Turkey. Meltem Ahıska, for instance, has argued that the reification of an “always-already late” political structure has long served to deflect attention from persistent political issues, such as the “Kurdish question,” by displacing them from state policies of violence and oppression onto a purported social backwardness and traditionalism of the Kurdish provinces of present-day Turkey.\(^{48}\)

Against this background, Winchester’s as if nothing has ever been said before us challenges a series of interlocked narratives of the Ottoman and Turkish past, including regimes of memory that deny the existence of non-Muslims and the violence they experienced. Together these narratives reenact the notion of rupture from the past and perpetuate discourses of lack that reiterate “that nothing has ever been said before here.”\(^{49}\) The perception of contemporary artistic production in Turkey likewise battles with the notion that nothing has been said before us, in part because Ottoman art and its diverse landscape and actors do not fit into the nationalist frame of “Turkish” art history and have been largely discounted.

As I have argued elsewhere, Winchester’s works trace how the daily practice of reading and writing today are implicated—and even outright complicit—in the histories of violence and dispossession that have been constitutive for the nation-state, histories that are continually disavowed.\(^{50}\) It is in this attention to implicatedness and its reverberations that Winchester and Eichhorn’s works speak to each other. Their works address those subject to violence and dispossession as well as those who have—on different scales, directly or indirectly—benefited from such violence and have been complicit in it, if only by being invested in the very structures that made such violence possible.\(^{51}\) Such complicity can range from owning dispossessed objects to benefiting from conceptions of Turkish citizenship not as an equally distributed right but as a privilege predicated on the forgetting of, and silence on, state violence.\(^{52}\) Winchester’s works tease out the intricate mechanisms of the nation-state’s economy of denial and forgetting in which official language as well as everyday practices of reading and writing folds one into\(^{53}\)—and perpetuates one’s investment in—histories of violence. Her focus on reading and writing challenges the temporality of complicity, framing complicity not as something of the past but as a practice with present-day, and daily, implications. In a gesture of aesthetic redistribution, Winchester’s works present the possibility to find “what has been said before us” and enact the recognition that indeed “everything might have been said before us” in a language not so different from Turkish today, or in languages of those who largely have been exiled from Turkey or have been subject to mass murder, displacement, and dispossession.

**Aesthetics of (Re)Distribution, Imaginations of Justice**

Within legal frameworks to which artistic dispossession is often relegated, restitution is conceptualized as a kind of repair.\(^{54}\) Even when limitations are acknowledged, restitution becomes a determinable endpoint that projects a reversal of
injury and ultimately justice—however flawed. That this understanding impacts public discourse and state policies becomes clear in the handling of restitution cases by both Germany and Turkey. In Germany, Nazi-era restitution is limited to individual artworks, while (art) historical narratives are left untouched, as are the networks of actors and arts institutions that have benefited from dispossession and redistribution. In the case of Turkey, the few restitution cases of non-Muslim community property that have gone forward have done so without any official acknowledgment of past or present state violence. They thus tend to be reduced to disputed property relations: that is, framed in legal terms that evade broader questions of historical justice. In contrast to these state discourses on restitution, Winchester and Eichhorn grapple with ways to register loss, dispossession, and its longitudinal dynamics in the form of open-ended inquiries into questions of historical justice through the redistributive capacities of the aesthetic.

In the last two decades, the redistributive quality of art and aesthetic practices, and their potential with regard to imaginations of justice and equality have been taken up repeatedly, and I would like to end by turning to two scholars in particular. In her essay On Beauty and Being Just, Elaine Scarry notably defines beauty, be it in art, nature, or the world of objects, as “fairness of everyone’s relation to one another.”55 Scarry thus brings distributive aesthetics to the center of this debate. Other parts of her argument are problematic; for instance, I read her notion that beauty has the capacity to repair injury as akin to how the practice of restitution has thus far largely been understood.56 Her critics have focused on Scarry’s reliance on symmetry, and on notions of aesthetic judgment and taste that are taken for granted and remain undiscussed in her work.57 And they have criticized its favoring of the individual, sovereign subject over a relationality created through art and aesthetic practice without considering disagreement, or the dissensus so central to Rancière’s thinking, in which distribution is related to the possibilities of equality—a point to which I will return shortly.58 But perhaps most troubling for the argument at hand is that both Scarry and her critics exclusively focus on the artwork or the object as such, rather than the practices that enable the production of art and objects and the broader contexts that bear on the redistributive capacities of the aesthetic.59 They do not question the conditions of the transmission, circulation, or display of art: that is, the larger structures of the art world.

In his contemplations of the political capacities and limitations of art, Jacques Rancière too has identified aesthetic (re)distribution as an integral part of working towards more just futures. For Rancière, part of this political capacity lies in the equality between the production and the reception of art and in the “promise of a life reconfigured” that the distribution and redistribution of the sensible in aesthetic practice offer by creating experiences that oppose the dominant, unjust order.60 The distribution of the sensible carries a double meaning. It delimits what
is sayable, audible, and visible, and what is not, and hence has an exclusionary function for certain communities. However, it also opens up the potential for partaking in and moving the lines of the sensible to reconfigure what is sayable, audible, visible, that is, the sensible.

In their own way, Eichhorn and Winchester open up the question of redistribution in its different facets and capacities: as an integral part of dispossession, of aesthetics itself, and of imaginations of and struggles for justice. Their artistic practices trouble the processes of transmission and redistribution that characterize dispossession. Eichhorn emphasizes the scale of “unlawful possession” of Nazi-looted objects, be it those of seemingly mundane domesticity, of land, buildings, or artworks, and identifies the beneficiaries beyond the Nazi state, its functionaries, and their descendants. Her work speaks directly to the art world, its markets and institutions, and hence its complicity in dispossession, but also calls on a wider German public to respond to and disinvest from these structures of possession. Winchester uses the site of the transmission or nontransmission of language and literary practices to presence absence and to delineate the implicatedness of reading and writing in larger processes of dispossession and loss. Her gestures of aesthetic redistribution work through both memory and the limits of recoverability in the daily practices of reading, writing, and speaking. These gestures divest from the certainties of “what has been said before” by official history.

Protests against the institutional politics of the art world or the financial sources that sustain it, for equity in artists’ representation and pay, and for art and museum workers’ rights are not uncommon. Hito Steyerl’s performance lecture “Is The Museum A Battlefield” (2013), in which she questions the entanglement of the art world and the international arms trade, or the protests led by Nan Goldin since 2017 against Sackler wings and galleries in various museums (the Guggenheim, the Met, and now the Louvre) to draw attention to the Sackler family’s responsibility in the opioid crisis, are just two recent examples. But beyond this critique of individual actors or patrons, Winchester and Eichhorn pull the question of dispossession into the center of the art world rather than positioning it as an aberration. In their insistence on implicatedness, Eichhorn and Winchester’s works do not offer the kind of “conceptual solace” that characterizes notions of restitution as individualized and temporally bounded acts of return. Nor do they provide the kind of conceptual solace that lies in differentiating between artworks and the institutions of the art world. Viewed through the lens of transmission, histories of violence and dispossession have shaped not only the art world but also frames of perception, making them inseparable.

Dispossessed art lies at the complex intersection of aesthetics, material politics, the art market, knowledge production, heritage regimes, property, the law, and questions of restitution and historical justice. But to speak of dispossession (of
art and beyond) also means to “describe a life” taken or affected by such violence and to account for the larger structures in the art world in ways that fundamentally unsettle assumptions of the moral superiority of art and by extension assumptions of the art world as ostensibly free of the kind of violence that enables dispossession.

When “everywhere is a crime scene,” as popular graffiti in Turkey proclaims, it is all the more vital to think about different responses (or responsibility in the sense laid out by Athanasiou and Butler) to the intertwining of dispossession and art: modes of response that do not attempt to master loss or re-relegate it to the logic of possession; and modes of response that address the loss of the contexts of sociability in which these artworks, objects, or texts were once situated, and that imagine historical justice beyond a restitution of individual artworks premised on the reversibility of past injuries. The works discussed here suggest that looking closer at the nexus of transmission might be one step along the way to address these contradictions without trying to resolve them. The open-endedness of Winchester and Eichhorn’s works can perhaps act as a guide towards transformative rather than restorative understandings of loss, of the impossibility of recuperation, and of imaginations of justice.

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**Notes**

1. Watenpaugh, “Survivor Objects.”
4. The term was coined by Nathalie Neumann and Małgorzata A. Quinkenstein. See Rose Valland Institute, “Call for Papers.”
5. The notion of “second life” is taken from Adorno’s contemplation of what happens to objects, including art, when they move from their contexts of origin into the museum; see Adorno, “Valéry Proust Museum.”
6. An important step in developing such responses is the report “The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics” prepared by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy (2018) on the invitation of French President Emmanuel Macron. The report proposes a roadmap for creating the conditions for restitution not just in legal but also in art historical terms. The report also sketches how memory and engagements with the past can and should shape restitution, including the “resocialization” of artifacts and artworks into their contexts of origin. While my inquiry shares the report’s concern with restitution as an open-ended process, my focus here is on how to grapple with what remains irrecoverable in histories of dispossession and how dispossession in general and dispossessed art in particular by way of absence—and redistributed presence—have shaped (art) historical narratives. This also means that I am specifically concerned with
how the conditions that made dispossession possible continue to exist and bear upon the present.

10. While my ongoing research on dispossessed art has thus far focused on the Armenian case, it is important to bear in mind that in the same time period Assyrian and Rum populations were likewise targets of genocidal violence.
11. These latter two events played out on the back of tensions with neighboring Greece over the island of Cyprus, which Turkey invaded in 1974. For a study on the affective workings of ruination and abjection in the aftermath of large-scale dispossession and redistribution in postwar Northern Cyprus, see Navaro-Yashin, The Make-Believe Space.
12. For historical inquiries into the role of dispossession for the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, see Der Matossian, “The Taboo within the Taboo”; and Üngör and Polatel, Confiscation and Destruction. Zerrin Özlem Biner’s States of Dispossession: Violence and Precarious Coexistence in Southeast Turkey grapples with how the history of dispossession has shaped subjectivities in Southeast Turkey, and the Mardin Province more specifically.
13. For a more detailed description of the project, see Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, “Stunde Null: A Future for the Time after the Crisis.”
15. The core collection of the Lenbachhaus centers on nineteenth-century art from Munich but features regular exhibitions of contemporary art as well.
16. For a detailed historical study of the Munich Central Collecting Point, see Lauterbach, The Central Collecting Point in Munich.
17. See, for example, Michaud, The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany.
18. The initial deadline for claiming these artworks was December 1948 in the American Zone and June 1950 in the British Zone and Berlin. After that time, artworks were transferred to the Finance Ministry. It was only in 2000 that the Koordinierungsstelle der Länder für Kulturverlust (Coordination Office for Lost Cultural Assets) was established and only in the wake of the Gurlitt case in 2012 (see below) that more serious and long-term financial resources were earmarked for provenance research in German art institutions.
20. Modernist art designated as degenerate by the Nazi regime was mostly sold abroad to fill German war coffers. See Petropoulos, Art as Politics in the Third Reich.
22. Found in the Munich home of Cornelius Gurlitt in 2012 and amassed during the Third Reich by his father, art historian and dealer Hildebrand Gurlitt, the “Gurlitt art trove” encompasses around 1,400 artworks. Many of these works were confiscated or sold under duress by their Jewish owners. Others were entrusted to Gurlitt by the artists themselves for safekeeping from the authorities. However, Gurlitt failed to return those paintings after the war, claiming they had been destroyed in an aerial bombing.
23. Earlier exhibitions had been organized by the Allied Collecting Points, for instance, in Marburg (1945) and Munich from 1946 onwards. See Lauterbach, “Central Art Collecting Point (1945–1949).” These exhibitions were both seen as part of the Allied project of German re-education and as a measure “to boost the morale of Allied troops” (see National Gallery of Art, “The Monuments Men and the National Gallery of Art”).
24. Eichhorn’s project also stands in stark contrast to recent exhibitions such as *Bestandsaufnahme Gurlitt* (Gurlitt: An Inventory, 2018) at Berlin’s Martin Gropius Bau. The latter displayed Nazi-looted art according to art historical periods rather than, for instance, the current state of provenance research. The labels detailing provenance or other information on how the works had been dispossessed and from whom were displayed rather low on the walls, hence pushing into the background the very information that had originally motivated the exhibition.

25. For an in-depth historical study of these photographs, all part of the so-called “Koblenz-Album” assembled by the Nazis, see Gensburger, *Witnessing the Robbing of the Jews*.

26. Art historian Rose Valland (1898–1980), while employed at the Jeu de Paume Museum, secretly recorded details of the Nazi art loot during the German occupation of Paris. After the war, she worked for the Commission de Récupération Artistique (Commission for the Recovery of Works of Art) and played a decisive role in the restitution of Nazi-looted artworks of French provenance. Since October 2018, the Rose Valland Institute has been based at the Käte Hamburger Center for Advanced Study in the Humanities “Law as Culture” at the University of Bonn.

27. For further information on the workshop in which the author took part, see Rose Valland Institute, “Lecture and Workshop: Orphaned Property in Europe.”

28. For the full call, see Eichhorn, “Open Call.”

29. Eichhorn, “Open Call.”


31. Indeed, as Jeannine Tang emphasizes in her reading on the place of provenance in the works of Hans Haacke and Maria Eichhorn, “Munich had suspended the budget for ongoing provenance research and was only responding to specific requests” at the time of Eichhorn’s exhibition. Tang, “Future Circulations,” 182.

32. Dultz, “Fremde Habe.”

33. Adorno, “Was bedeutet.” In this text, originally given as a lecture in 1959 to the coordinating council for Christian-Jewish Cooperation in Wiesbaden, Adorno argued against notions of “mastering” or “overcoming” the National Socialist past that had gained currency in postwar Germany. Cautioning against the legacies of fascism within Germany’s nascent democracy, he argued that meaningful ways of facing the past must address the fundamental conditions that had enabled it.

34. Booth, “The Unforgotten,” 777. For the development of the German notion of indemnification (*Wiedergutmachung*) and how it relates to ideas of forgiveness and justice, see Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations*.


36. Butler and Athanasiou, *Dipossession*, 106. This is just one of the many different, sometimes contradictory but always related facets of dispossession that Butler and Athanasiou attend to in their dialogue. Their discussion ranges from dispossession as disenfranchisement to notions of dispossession as setting the terms of different kinds of vulnerability and relationality, and hence different possible forms of political responsiveness.

37. Established in 1955, *documenta* played an important role in (re)acquainting German audiences with modernism and its history, or rather a certain version of it, after it had been purged from German collections, both public and private, by the Nazis. As such, *documenta* has also shaped the way in which the history of German modernism has been written.
under the conditions of the Cold War and in competition with the German Democratic Republic that formulated its own claims on modern art.

41. For a more detailed discussion of these and related works by Dilek Winchester, which were first shown in Athens in 2013 (National Museum of Contemporary Art) and then in Istanbul in 2015 (SALT Beyoğlu), see Karaca, “When Everything Has Been Said Before.”
42. Dilek Winchester, personal interview with author, January 15, 2016, Istanbul.
43. Although often conceptualized as a one-time rupture, the “Turkification” of language practices in Turkey has been an ongoing process. After the language reform, the Turkish Language Association was established in 1932 with the mandate to “Turkify” the language, for example, to eliminate Arabic and Persian words and replace them with ostensibly “originally Turkish” expressions.
44. See Ertürk, Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey.
45. Atay, Tutunamayanlar.
46. Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, 34.
48. Ahıska, “Occidentalism,” 352. Despite the seeming shifts in these narratives under the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has aimed to reclaim parts of the Ottoman past for political purposes, orientalist and occidentalist explanatory models, as Ahıska has described them, continue to have political currency.
49. At the same time, the history of military coups in Turkey has also engendered ruptures in art historical memory, with the decades between the 1950s and the 1990s only slowly being rediscovered.
51. Michael Rothberg analyzes implicatedness as a mode of responsibility that is not captured by legal frameworks and that complicates the duality of victim and perpetrator. He distinguishes the complex—and often contradictory—subject positions and alignments with power and privilege of implicatedness from complicity, not least by way of temporality. While this is an important distinction, for the purpose of this article, I use implicatedness and complicity to capture a continuum of different kinds of responsibility and ways of benefiting from and being invested in dispossession; see Rothberg, The Implicated Subject.
52. For a more nuanced discussion of the beneficiary, see Meister, After Evil; Mamdani, “Beyond Nuremberg”; and Robbins, The Beneficiary.
53. See Sanyal, Memory and Complicity, 10.
54. For a more detailed discussion, see Barkan, The Guilt of Nations.
58. Rancière, Dissensus.
59. In his review of Scarry’s On Beauty and Being Just, Alexander Nehamas tackles her example of the Athenian trireme—the beauty of which Scarry sees as expressive of Athenian democracy—as an instance of the “frequent alliance of beauty and oppression.” He notes that these war ships “were a spectacle of cruelty and terror, not beauty and equality” (Nehamas, “The Return of the Beautiful,” 397).
60. Tanke, Jacques Rancière, 73.
62. Crapanzano, The Harkis, 7. Across his works, Vincent Crapanzano describes conceptual solace as a way to maintain disciplinary fabrications or romances that either avoid or aim to resolve uncomfortable tensions (for example, see “Reflections”).
63. English, To Describe a Life.
64. The graffito that appeared anonymously in stencil form across Istanbul a few years ago frequently has been employed by feminist media outlets in reporting on violence against women and organizing against sexualized violence. Given that Turkey’s foundation is deeply rooted in genocidal violence and dispossession, the graffito renders itself open to other readings as well, especially in a cityscape like Istanbul, where many buildings have been dispossessed from their former Armenian, Greek, and Jewish owners.
65. Butler and Athanasiou, Dispossession.

Works Cited


