



## What Does It Mean to Own Art?



Lisa Brice:  
*Untitled* (detail)  
2021, Oil on  
tracing paper  
41.9 × 29.6 cm

“What does owning art mean to you?” Gerd Presler once asked the now-deceased auctioneer Eberhard W. Kornfeld. “To tell you the truth, 70 percent of life. In terms of quality of life, owning art is highly valuable.” Let us consider, in this context, Neil MacGregor’s 816-page book *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, published in 2011. As the long-time director of the *British Museum* in London and later the founding director of the *Humboldt Forum* in Berlin, MacGregor wrote that the “recovery of past cultures is an essential foundation for understanding our shared humanity.” Among other things, this richly detailed book recounts how the palace of the Oba in the Kingdom of Benin was adorned for centuries with cast copper plaques glorifying his rule. Tons of brass and coral jewelry from the Mediterranean, worn by the Oba in these depictions, were brought to West Africa as payment for his continuous supply of slaves. In 1897, during a British punitive expedition, hundreds of “Benin Bronzes”—primarily cast in brass—were looted, and the Oba was forced into exile. Museums in many countries acquired these sought-after works, which were sold from Britain. Shared humanity? After long debate, this form of collecting is no longer justifiable—neither in museums nor in cultural journalism. **The Eurocentric idea, prevailing for centuries, that collecting art in museums ensures a scientific ordering of art-historical facts and a poetic act of preservation is now being seriously questioned. International attention shifted to the “Benin Bronzes” in 2018 when President Macron vowed to return 26 artifacts from French museums, originally taken from the former kingdom.** Their possession could no longer be celebrated or taken pride in. At the time, the Cameroonian political scientist Achille Mbembe directed harsh words at public institutions: “Is there even a single Western museum whose fundamental concept is not built on African bones?” According to the consensus of the *International Council of Museums* (ICOM), collecting means preserving and researching, as well as interpreting and exhibiting cultural heritage. **A general suspicion is growing among critical observers that whatever we collect may ultimately be derived from social positions that we have either abused or perhaps acquired illegitimately.** The issue extends beyond Africa, beyond Nazi-era looting and expropriations to the no less scandalous topic of how Europe and the U.S. have historically neglected, suppressed, destroyed, and stigmatized indigenous cultures as “primitive” since the colonial era.

Consider the most recent issue of *Artforum*. Both its editor, Tina Rivers Ryan, and the political scientist Christine J. Winter regard Britain's behavior as a settler nation in New Zealand as the epitome of "violent oppressive lies." For the Indigenous population, these were lies "carefully framed as logical, reasonable, truthful, and factual." **Can a high quality of life for collectors even be imagined anymore? What sense do we make of the financial value attached to collecting? What could be a way out of the dilemma of guilt and atonement?** In addition to Eberhard W. Kornfeld, let us recall the late David Graeber. His still-relevant 2011 book *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* argues that "debt" has always meant more than just a financial burden. It contains the hauntingly beautiful line: "If our political and legal ideas really are founded on the logic of slavery, then how did we ever eliminate slavery?" **In 2012, Graeber supplemented his text with an almost redemptive remark: "I think that's what we've lost—the notion that we're sedimented beings created by endless configurations with others."** Mbembe, on the other hand, writing in 2018, put it bluntly: "Restitution is not enough." France, Germany, the Netherlands, Britain, and other nations should not only return their "Benin Bronzes" but also allocate funds for exhibition spaces and research institutions in Africa. Ultimately, embedded in Mbembe's uncompromising demand, there was an equally mitigating suggestion: "We must learn to remember together and, in doing so, mend the fabric and the face of the world." Let us now turn to art itself. It was—and remains—a *fait social*. **While in Europe and much of the Americas, the individual is regarded as the originator of a work of art, and owning it implies legal possession and thus a form of control, for the first time in a very long while, artists who see themselves as part of a collective are coming to the fore.** These are artists who aim to share material and immaterial resources. Their works are now being exhibited and are winning awards. Gradually, they are finding a market. In 2024, the *Golden Lion* at the *Venice Biennale* was awarded to a Māori artist collective—four women from New Zealand—for the installation *Takapau*, made of reflective straps spanning the entrance of the *Arsenale*. The group claimed joint authorship. The most recent auction results continue to favor Belgian artist René Magritte and Japanese artist Yoshitomo Nara, while the white South African Lisa Brice is emerging as a new market success. Little by little, the art of Etel Adnan from Lebanon, Jenny Holzer from the U.S., El Anatsui from Ghana, and Ahmed Mater from the Arab world—work that calls for justice and collective reconciliation—is also gaining increasing recognition. We are entering a phase of deeper reflection on the role of art. We can continue to trust that collecting fosters understanding and enhances the quality of life. What is ultimately at issue is nothing less than our increasingly shared understanding.

DR. THOMAS KELLEIN  
*Head of Art Consult*  
 thomas.kellein@bergos.ch

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