



15 Stavropoulou, Athens. Building and plot for Maria Eichhorn's *Building as unowned property*, 2017. Photo: Stathis Mamelakis.

1000 WORDS

## MARIA EICHHORN

TALKS ABOUT HER FORTHCOMING PROJECTS AT DOCUMENTA 14, *BUILDING AS UNOWNED PROPERTY* AND *ROSE VALLAND INSTITUTE*

**MEETINGS, CONTRACTS, REGULATIONS**, the intricacies of official protocols, and the arcane workings of government agencies: Maria Eichhorn deploys the components of the administrative everyday in radical and counterintuitive ways, using whatever resources are available to her—an exhibition budget, say, or access to a building or site—to create works that perversely elude easy definition and anarchically tilt at the impossible. Her projects are often the result of lengthy negotiations that reveal and trouble systems of value and redirect flows of power and capital. The effects of these interventions are both real *and* symbolic. Her images of agency and her singular gestures resound as durational events that slow down time, as performative acts that open up new spaces for meaning, as aesthetic propositions marked by a formal intelligence of the highest order. They also redistribute wealth, enable new forms of communal knowledge and organization, concretely change people's lives. Nor are they static—they continually evolve in response to the facts on the ground. Her works are rooted in the frank facing of such facts. They are not utopian; rather, they enable us to think differently about the here and now.

Making that which was private public and inquiring into what is seen and what we are not allowed to

see are constants in Eichhorn's work, crucial aspects of her excavation of the present. Not surprisingly, given these concerns, she has a long-standing interest in issues of provenance and restitution. Tracing the ownership of valuable things is a reliable way of uncovering suppressed histories within and beyond the institutions of art. Eichhorn's two projects for Documenta 14, one located in Athens, the other in Kassel, address such histories, elucidating the legal frameworks that define what it means to own, to steal, to possess. In Athens, she intends to have a vacant building declared unowned—not abandoned or derelict, which would mean that the building belongs to the state, but genuinely unowned, the property of no one. In Kassel, she is establishing an institute that will work to restore to its rightful owners property stolen by the Nazis. In both locales, she will be dispelling the discursive and legal occlusions that prevent us from seeing the links between great fortunes and great crimes.

—Polly Staple

**THE ECONOMIC CRISIS** that unleashed social, economic, and political chaos in Greece is clearly reflected in the urban space of Athens. Owners have abandoned

their buildings for any number of reasons—because they can no longer afford the property taxes, for example, or because tenants can no longer pay their rent. The buildings are left to themselves and the inevitable process of deterioration begins. Real estate speculators have long since taken advantage of the situation, purchasing countless properties in Athens and elsewhere in Greece in hopes of profiting from these dire circumstances.

*Building as unowned property*, my work for Documenta 14 in Athens, operates against this aspect of disaster capitalism. I'll be converting a building's legal status, so that the property will be recognized as unowned, and the project consists of all the activities—from research to bureaucratic interactions to the processing and notarization of official documents—involved in that effort. When we began, it was unclear whether the project was legally possible. We weren't sure whether any code of law, either in Greece or internationally, recognized the concept of a genuinely ownerless building or piece of real estate. The work is an attempt to use the law, as a proper language, to produce, or rather to reproduce, something that doesn't exist. And we've succeeded. The Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Zurich has agreed



Max Liebermann, *Zwei Reiter am Strand nach links* (Two Riders on the Beach to the Left), 1901, oil on canvas, 28¾ x 36¼". Property restituted to the heirs of David Friedmann.

to purchase this artwork, so that I can purchase the building and the plot I selected for the project, and the legal issues have been resolved.

The building is a two-story stone structure built in the late 1920s, located behind Plateia Amerikis [America Square], in an area known for its typically Athenian Neoclassical-revival buildings. Though it used to be a sophisticated neighborhood, with the passing of time it has become less fashionable. The building will retain its unowned status for an unlimited period. It will remain protected against gentrification and acquisition for commercial purposes, will be maintained in accordance with minimum standards, and will have a caretaker who is entered in the register of deeds as the custodian, not the owner. I worked with lawyers, scholars, and, from the Documenta 14 team, Michelangelo Corsaro to bring all this to fruition, and the research we conducted yielded unique findings that point toward new possibilities both for international legal processes and for the creation of public space.

Taking my previous exhibition projects *Restitutionspolitik/Politics of Restitution* [2003] and *In den Zelten . . .* [2015] as a starting point, my second project addresses unresolved ownership and property claims relating to Nazi expropriation of Jewish citizens' possessions in Germany and across occupied Europe. The properties in question are artworks, parcels of land, patents, all manner of things that were

illegally seized and that to this day have not been restored to their rightful owners. This work entails the founding of an organization that will actively pursue resolution of outstanding claims while studying the complex issues involved. Called *Rose Valland Institute*, it's named for the French art historian who secretly recorded the Nazi plundering of Paris. After the war, she worked for the Commission de Récupération Artistique and, with the lists she'd compiled, helped to find and restitute art collections. During the exhibition, the institute will be headquartered in Kassel's Neue Galerie and will employ historians, political scientists, and provenance researchers. The researchers' case studies—including an investigation of the fate of a collection owned by a family right there, in Kassel—will be on display, and visitors will be able to peruse documentary materials such as auction records and inventory lists. A small library will bring together volumes listed in the bibliographies of Sarah Gensburger's *Witnessing the Robbing of the Jews: A Photographic Album, Paris, 1940–1944* (2015) and my own 2004 book *Politics of Restitution*. Also on display will be excerpts from an interview I conducted with David Toren, heir to paintings that had belonged to his ancestor David Friedmann and that were found in the possession of Cornelius Gurlitt—this obscure man in Munich who in 2012 was discovered to have an enormous trove of artworks that his father had stolen from

### *Building as unowned property operates against disaster capitalism.*

Jewish owners—along with related archival documents. And there will be an open call inviting people to speak about any property in their possession that they know or suspect to have been looted by the Nazis.

The widely publicized Gurlitt case eradicated any doubt as to whether stolen art and other property seized during the Holocaust remains to be found. While some of these stolen items are held by Germany's public institutions, we can be sure that many are in private collections. Gurlitt literally concealed his art, hoarding it in his apartment, but an artwork can also count as "hidden" when those in illegitimate possession of it omit or mask its provenance. Of course, it's not just artworks. Bracelets on wrists, furniture in living rooms, books in libraries, even buildings: Property looted by the Nazis is part of our everyday lives, right now. The objects are passed from generation to generation in German families, openly displayed, while their histories remain secret. This covering up, this not knowing, this preferring not to know, is what allows stolen property to hide in plain sight. This property is often referred to as lost, but in this context, *lost* is a euphemism. The institute's mission is to find what was "lost" by revealing what was hidden—not only the objects but the injustice. □

*Documenta 14 will take place Apr. 8–July 16 in Athens (where Building as unowned property will be on view) and June 10–Sept. 17 in Kassel (where Rose Valland Institute will be on view).*



Library of books looted by Nazis and purchased in 1943 by the Berliner Stadtbibliothek (Berlin City Library). From a case study for Maria Eichhorn's *Rose Valland Institute*, 2017. Photo: Jens Ziehe.