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3.3
Awkward Art and Difficult Heritage: Nazi Collectors and Postcolonial Archives

Jonas Tinius

Introduction

“What do these objects and the colonial archive have to do with art?” Lynhan Balatbat asks me. “They are just rubbish (Schrött).” Together with a colleague of hers, Marien Schröder, the three of us sit around a makeshift table in the art space SAVVY Contemporary in the northern district of Berlin-Wedding. We have met for an interview about the Colonial Neighbours Archive project coordinated by the two and housed at SAVVY since 2011.1 Positioned in a side gallery below a former crematorium that had been repurposed as a large creative project space in 2013, the Archive consists of a collection of “objects from Germany’s colonial past”: family albums, magazines, postcards, beer bottles, coffee jars. Some of these items relate directly to Germany’s colonial history (1884-1918), while others point to its legacies and reverberations in the present. Lynhan’s qualification that the archive contains not “art objects” but “rubbish” raises an important question about the valuation and curating of problematic objects. Lynhan clarifies:

We are neither anthropologists, nor artists. We see ourselves as working on an archive that is not ours, but an archive of those that contribute to it, or those who try to engage with colonial history or histories of oppression.

She distances herself from a subjective valuation of the objects, seeking instead to offer a relational notion of the archive as constituted by those who relate to it. Lynhan describes the project as “a constant work in progress,” which builds on collaborations with its “users”: neighbors, artists, activists—and researchers “like yourself.” Marien interjects. Lynhan’s repeated distancing from a positive valuation of these objects stresses her ambivalent position: wary of aestheticizing, she tries not to “other” them as historic artifacts either. “These are commercial commodities and they may not have caused any concern for the people that used or donated them;” she underlines. “But,” she adds, “others realize that the people shown here are objectified in racist depictions.” Her colleague Marien underlines the difficulty of collecting, handling, and displaying these awkward items:

These objects are also difficult because they tend to represent one perspective. Our objects are donated to us through an open call, and this may derive them from contexts in which they were not regarded as problematic.

The difficulties the two curators encounter point to the subject of this chapter: the problematization of awkward objects. I discuss this topic by juxtaposing two unlikely yet not unrelated subjects: the aftermath of a Nazi-traded artwork saga and a postcolonial archive in a contemporary art space. As SAVVY founder and documenta 14 curator-at-large Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung comments: “Restitution is a key issue for us. Adam

FIGURE 3.3.1 A section of the Colonial Neighbours Archive, 2016. Photograph by Jonas Tinius, courtesy of SAVVY Contemporary.
Szymczak [director, documenta 14] has repeatedly voiced interest to exhibit works from the collection of art trader Hildebrand Gurlitt. By engaging with these paintings, we can open the doors to talk about reparations” (Niklung in Bloch 2017). This chapter compares these two subjects to develop a better understanding of what I call “awkward art”; that is, first, practices, institutions, objects, and discourses whose status as art is contested, and which, second, are considered uncomfortable. Such awkward art embodies relations considered problematic, and thus afford “careful” curation. What makes the category of awkwardness anthropologically interesting is that it concerns the problematization of what makes something difficult. I use this notion in the sense espoused by Michel Foucault:

A problematization does not mean the representation of a preexistent object nor the creation through discourse of an object that did not exist. It is the ensemble of discursive and nondiscursive practices that make something enter into the play of true and false and constitute it as an object of thought (1986: 670).

Processes of problematization, Paul Rabinow comments, react to uncertainty by making something into a subject of investigation (2003: 47). Awkward art describes practices, objects, and discourses that are problematized as disruptive and uncomfortable in contemporary contexts of artistic presentation, because of the way in which they have come into being, were circulated, and exhibited. Borrowing from Sharon Macdonald, on whose notion of “difficult heritage” I build this idea, “awkward art” could also be described as artistic practices, objects, or discourses that are “recognised as meaningful in the present, but that are also contested and awkward for public reconciliation with a positive, self-affirming contemporary identity” (Macdonald 2009: 1). Like difficult heritage, awkward art “may also be troublesome because it threatens to break through into the present in disruptive ways, opening up social divisions, perhaps by playing into imagined, even nightmarish, futures” (ibid.).

The ethnographic question that led me to this definition was how to approach objects in an artistic context, which became the subject of contestation not because of their formal qualities, but because the social relations they retrospectively embody are seen as troublesome and thus demand particular attention for their future reception. By extension, the colonial history and postcolonial curatorial context I describe had become a matter of concern for my fieldwork interlocutors, precisely because they experienced that others had not regarded them as problematic.

The way in which my discussion hopes to contribute to a set of new anthropological perspectives on art, then, is twofold. First, I am drawing on Alfred Gell's notion of "methodological philistinism" (2006: 161) to underline that in our analysis of modern and contemporary art, we might take inspiration from arguments in the anthropology of ethics about how we construe the subject of our studies. Building on James Laidlaw’s suggestion that the anthropology of ethics does not rest on the “evaluative claim that people are good; but] a descriptive one that they are evaluative” (2014: 3), I would like to reformulate the aim of a reflexive anthropology of art not to be an evaluative claim that art is good, but a descriptive one that it is subject to evaluative processes. Taking as its subject the problematization of art, aesthetics, and formal analyses is decentered as only one area of inquiry among others (see Finney and Thomas 2001; Weiner 1994).

The second discussion I develop concerns the “social potential” (Appadurai 1996) of objects. By this I refer to art objects as mediators, whose agency is refracted through their problematization as art. The aim of these two interlinked discussions is to offer some directions for a contemporary anthropology of art that is skeptical of implicit judgments of art as good (being critical, social, etc.) or bad (being commercial, mainstream etc.), but regards art instead as a subject of innumerable ethical conundrums that are variously embedded or foreclosed by processes of problematization. The consequences of my suggestions for an anthropological approach to art, then, would be to turn the problematization of art and its relations into our very subject, allowing and embracing what I described as the awkwardness of art as a starting point of our analyses.

The two cases I am drawing on for this chapter are very different in scope, and I shall be using them for commentary and analysis, respectively. One is the 2012 Gurlitt Nazi art trove in Munich; a shorthand for the state-led investigation into the provenance of the art collection of Cornelius Gurlitt, son of Hildebrand Gurlitt, a Nazi art dealer who partook in the organized confiscation and trade of “degenerate art,” that is, mostly modern art deemed “un-German” and thus sanctioned, sold, and devalued by the Nazi regime. As part of a wider set of inquiries into restitution and provenance, this case sheds light onto the imbrication of legal and economic issues around ownership, aesthetic judgment, and difficult heritage. Drawing on discussions of provenance research and the social life of things, my commentary on this case shows how these artworks become “suspicious” or “difficult” objects that refract, sever, and initiate social relations. By comparing a critical reading of the Gurlitt case to an analysis of SAVVY’s Colonial Neighbours Archive project, I hope to illuminate the category of awkward art through its relational and prismatic qualities. I conclude with a view to how this can help us better understand both how curatorial processes are disrupted by instances of awkward art, and how future relations can be initiated precisely on the basis of such awkwardness.
Relationality and awkwardness

The "neglect of art in modern social anthropology," writes Gell, "is necessary and intentional" (2008: 159). It arises "from the fact that social anthropology is essentially, constitutionally, anti-art" (ibid.). This intentional neglect, according to him, is a reaction against the "unredeemably ethnocentric attitude" that "aesthetic awe bordering on the religious" is the only appropriate response to art (ibid.). The "major stumbling-block in the path of the anthropology of art" (ibid.: 159), then, is its blind adherence to its own theology.

Aesthetics is a branch of moral discourse which depends on the acceptance of the initial articles of faith: that in the aesthetically valued object there resides the principle of the True and the Good, and that the study of aesthetically valued objects constitutes a path toward transcendence. In so far as such modern souls possess a religion, that religion is the religion of art, the religion whose shrines consist of theatres libraries and art galleries, whose priests and bishops are painters and poets, whose theologians are critics, and whose dogma is the dogma of universal aestheticism (ibid.: 161).

In order to establish the ground for a faithless anthropology of art, Gell suggests that we adopt a "methodological pluralism" (that is, "an attitude of resolute indifference towards the aesthetic value of art") (2008: 161). There are two aspects of his observations that I consider particularly important for the anthropological approaches to art I outline here, partly in spite of his claims. These are, first, an idea of artworks as relational prisms, and secondly, the notion of art beyond the good, or, as I called it, "awkward art."

To speak of the relational and prismatic qualities of artworks refers to the ways in which they embed, refract, sever, and instigate social relations. The idea of art, artistic practices, and art objects as "relational prisms" may offer a gesture of reconciliation between materialist tendencies, for instance, in the new sociology of art (De la Fuente 2010; Domínguez Rubio 2014), and anthropological approaches to craftmanship (Ingold 2013) with relational and conceptual approaches to art and museums (Gooden and Marshall 1999; Szarin-Chekov 2013; Sansi 2015; Thomas 2016). This distinction is not meant to rely on disciplinary divisions, but rather to point to commonalities across a spectrum of approaches to the handling of objects, the experience of social relations, and the creation of concepts.

The notion of a relational prism furthermore underlines the status of art as a contested subject of ethical concern: what "art" is, how "art" comes about, and why we care about "art" are matters of complex social, cultural, and institutional negotiations that concern questions of value. Like Gell, I here take inspiration from Georg Simmel, in Agapovin's phrasing: "Value, for Simmel, is never an inherent property of objects, but is a judgement made about them by subjects" (1986: 3). As both object and subject of valuation, then, art generates a complex kind of "social potential" (ibid.: 8). This potential is retrospectively social, because it is "promised on the idea that the nature of the art object is a function of the social-relational matrix in which it is embedded" (Gell 1998: 7). Yet it is also social in a future-oriented manner, since "it has no 'intrinsic' nature, independent of the relational context" (ibid.).

The second strand of Gell's argument I want to develop is the notion of a philistine anthropology of art. Such a position affords questioning idealized assumptions that disregard the reactionary or subversive tendencies within art traditions (see Emde and Kolczynski 2012). The skepticism also demands recognition of what Sansi (2015: 68) has described as those anti-art movements cultivated by artists themselves. Since whenever the notion of art is problematized or called into question, it refers to issues beyond itself, such as questions about curation, provenance, or the moral implications of aesthetic judgment. Art understood as a relational and problematic prism is no longer "by universal consent a Good Thing" (Gell 2006: 159); rather, it is good to think with.

The following discussion introduces a set of art objects, whose status as aesthetically appreciated art was radically challenged by a fascist ethnico-aesthetic regime. The privatization of the ownership of these artworks and the provenance inquiries they were subjected to highlight the agency of their awkwardness: they are clearly "recognised as meaningful in the present," but also render difficult "a positive, self-affirming contemporary identity" (Macdonald 2009: 1). The difficult necessity to clarify the status, provenance, and ownership of these artworks treaded and looted during the Nazi regime and unexpectedly resurfaced in the early twenty-first century, point to their uncertainty, irritation, and awkwardness.

Awkward art I: The Gurlitt art trove

"Gurlitt" has become a byword for one of the most notorious discoveries of Nazi art dealers after the Second World War. It concerns a collection of over 1,500 artworks hoarded in apartments in Munich, Germany, and in Salzburg, Austria, by Cornelius Gurlitt, son of the "certified" Nazi art dealer Hildebrand Gurlitt. Among the artworks found in his apartments were sketches and paintings by Cézanne, Chagall, Gauguin, Monet, Matisse, Renoir, five works by Picasso, a marble sculpture by Rodin, as well as a great number of pieces believed to be lost or destroyed, leading art historians and provenance
experts to declare “art history may have to be rewritten” (Isselwitz 2013). But the excitement about this discovery was overcast by questions over the provenance of these works.

My anthropological interest in this case concerns questions of valuation and problematization: how art can become subject to moral approval or disapproval, and consequently be valued accordingly, classified, and sold to end up several decades later, caught up in a complex government investigation into their ownership. This case also goes beyond itself, as it were, underscoring the interplay between governmentality, aesthetics, and object histories in provenance research (see Chappell and Hufrage 2012). What makes these works difficult is not their authorship or materiality, what Dominguez Rubio (2014) describes as the key to the legibility of an authentic artwork, but their legal status and legacy.

The Gurlitt Art Trove “saga” (Ronald 2015) began when a shy German man, Cornelius Gurlitt, was held by custom officials during a routine inspection at the Swiss border in late 2010, and, following the discovery of large amounts of money, subsequently investigated for tax offenses. In February 2012, his Munich flat was searched and authorities “secured over 1400 objects as evidence, including 121 framed and 1285 unframed artworks.” In November 2013, the German government and the Free State of Bavaria set up the Task Force Schwabinger Kunstdorf (Schwabing Art Trove Taskforce) to “research the origins of the artworks.” Just two days after the announcement of the taskforce on November 11, 2013, the first set of details on Gurlitt’s collection was published by the German Lost Art Foundation for the registration of cultural objects relocated, moved, or seized as a result of persecution under the Nazi dictatorship. This listing included “25 artworks that were suspected to have been acquired in a forced sale or confiscated as a result of Nazi persecution.” Shortly thereafter, the Taskforce, then headed by Ingeborg Berggreen-Merkel, a trained legal expert and former undersecretary of the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, announced that all artworks suspected of having been looted would be published on a dedicated website (lostart.de).

Complicating the investigations at this early stage was the unclear status of the artworks, and the difficulties of investigating seized property. While more artworks were published on the database, Gurlitt’s refusal to cooperate further frustrated progress. He was subsequently assigned a legal custodian, who mediated contact with the Taskforce. In early 2014, the Bavarian Council of Ministers passed a proposal to be “tabled” at the upper house of the German parliament, the Bundesrat, “for a bill on the restitution of cultural assets,” which challenged the statute of limitations for cases “involving confiscated objects where the current owner acted in bad faith at the time of purchase.” This bill was controversial because it suggested that this was to be effective retroactively, allowing cases that had already been closed to be taken up again (Bergmann 2015). By late January 2014, more than 500 artworks from the Schwabing Art Trove had been identified: some were attributed to the Gurlitt family (as they were bought after 1945, for instance), while others were classified as “degenerate art.”

In February 2014, further artworks had been found in a house in Austria belonging to Gurlitt; his legal custodian revealed in March 2014 that the Salzburg collection included 238 artworks, of which thirty-nine were oil paintings. Gurlitt’s custodian also decided that “Cornelius Gurlitt agreed to return all artworks identified as loot art to the descendants of their last rightful owners.” Just two weeks later, Gurlitt signed an agreement with the Federal Republic of Germany and the Free State of Bavaria, recognizing that the Taskforce would continue to investigate “the provenance of artworks suspected of unlawful expropriation, even after the expiration of the statute of limitations as a legal defense.” Following his sudden death on May 6, 2014, his last will and testament appointed the Kunstmuseum Bern in Switzerland as the sole beneficiary of Gurlitt’s estate, which accepted the bequest of this contentious collection. The prominent albeit ambivalent gift led to public debates about the inheritance, eventually concluding in a court case initiated by Gurlitt’s cousin Uta Werner, which confirmed the legality of Gurlitt’s testament and thus the valuable bequest. The Kunstmuseum continues provenance research and already restituted artworks, including a pencil drawing by Adolph von Menzel (Uneres olver gotsichen Kirchh. Opening in late 2017, two complementary exhibitions in Bonn and Bern entitled Bestandsaufnahme Gurlitt (Gurlitt Survey) reviewed the collection.

After Gurlitt’s death, meetings of the Taskforce led to two major developments: one being a publication of a regularly updated and open-access list of the artworks from the Salzburg and the Schwabing Art Trove, and the other the digitized business records of Hildebrand Gurlitt used by him between 1937 and 1941. On January 1, 2015, the German Zentrum Kulturgutsverluste (German Lost Art Foundation) was established, assuming the administrative responsibility of the Schwabing Taskforce from the Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz (Prussian Heritage Foundation). It now manages the Gurlitt Provenance Research project, which serves as “the point of contact for queries related to the artworks.” At a press conference in mid-January 2016, the Taskforce released its final report into the Schwabing and Salzburg finds, stating that approximately 200 provenance requests regarding the 1,239 artworks in Munich and the 239 objects from Salzburg had been conclusively answered, while further requests were under consideration. Berggreen-Merkel commented on the difficulties of drawing conclusions from scattered sources, noting that “It can only remain a preliminary report” (2016).
This chronology of events only hints at the fragmented, multi-governmental, and multidirectional nature of the Taskforce attempts at rendering intelligible the many traces, relations, and shadows of Gurlitt’s collection. The paintings, sculptures, and drawings were awkward in a variety of ways, among others, because they presented difficulties in handling: they resisted straightforward confiscation since they were private property, and yet they demanded scrutiny into the “the provenance of artworks suspected of unlawful expropriation.” The investigation into their provenance was complex, since it required investigating past relations, identifying future claimants, and responding to existing restitution claims (articulated in over 300 letters to date of which 200 concern partially overlapping artworks). Furthermore, their legality was inextricably bound up with notions of justice and property, since their restitution demands “fair and just solutions” (Washington Conference Principles eight and nine on Nazi-Confiscated Art), a category that raises questions about the very possibility of fairness and justice in the face of atrocities (Campagna, 2014). Additional difficulties arose from compiling object histories. As the Taskforce notes: “Unlike tracing the provenance of an object held in a museum, library, or archive, the artworks found on Cornelius Gurlitt’s premises were disorganized and not properly cataloged.” Stock-books and correspondences on family and business matters were consulted to reconstruct how the artworks had come into the collection, but only after Gurlitt’s death could these be made public for further inspection. Further archive materials that remained unavailable to the Taskforce but suspected to be relevant “fill 17 boxes and include books, annotated catalogues, photographs, correspondence.” Additionally, “some of his [Hildebrand Gurlitt] statements made to Allied Forces authorities after World War II on alleged losses of artworks were clearly false.”

Where “difficult heritage” erupts into the present as publicly as this case, moral issues become entangled with science and legal disputes, complicating provenance research. To balance politics, the media, justice, and research, conceded one of the leading provenance scholars on the Gurlitt case, art historian Meike Hofmann, “remains one of the most exacting tasks for the future” (Hoffmann in Boldt 2014). It is to some of the other moral issues, which complicate this endeavor, disrupt German heritage in the present, and raise questions about its future, that I turn now.

In his study *Inhumanities*, David Remijsen investigates the Nazis’ large-scale manipulation and mobilization of “European literature, philosophy, painting, sculpture, and music in support of its ideological ends” (2012: 2). He shows how culture became a central propaganda tool for national socialist self-fashioning and against any group or cultural current not along official party lines. The conception of the Third Reich as the apex of Western civilization was propagated by manipulating and rewriting art histories, biographies, and aesthetic canons to echo the state’s anti-Semitism and racist doctrines. Much like other cultural institutions (universities, schools, radio stations), artistic production was both censored and reinterpreted by the Third Reich. Drawing on the immense archival archive of the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the National Socialist Party’s official organ and most widely circulating German newspaper, Dennis points out how leading staff of the paper used theater and art to turn aesthetic judgments into political instruments. Writing for the *Beobachter*, F.A. Hauptmann, a leader of Nazi cultural initiatives in Lübeck, repeatedly reported and reviewed Jewish performances, such as the ones taking place at the Stadttheater of his hometown (ibid.: 352), devaluing its status as art.

This aesthetic subjection to an instrumentalist ethics was the key to official Nazi propaganda, but it was also “part of a massive and wide-ranging purge of German social institutions” more broadly —“Hitler’s Cultural Revolution” as the historian Richard J. Evans puts it (2002: 284, 381). The Nazi policies of Gleichschaltung or “forcible coordination” (ibid.: 384) encompassed primarily the judiciary and executive powers, but extended well into the arts: “Music,” for instance, “was a particularly important target for coordination” (ibid.: 393).

Although the forcible coordination appears as a top-down tool of oppression of which Dennis and Evans provide plenty of striking examples, the ethico-aesthetic regime of Nazi art re- and devaluations also actively “induced” talented and respected professionals in the art world to become accomplices of the Nazi leaders” (Petrakos 2000: 4). Following the negative “purge of artistic and cultural life,” Evans writes, “it was time for those German writers, musicians and intellectuals who wanted to lend their talents... to the creation of a new German culture” (2003: 461). From 1933 onward, museum directors who had previously been collecting modern art were laid off and replaced by directors who “banned modern art [die Moderne] into the depots... and defamed the acquisitions of their predecessors in deranging exhibitions” (Schaudeutschänderung) as a statement on the official research center for “degnerate art” at the Free University in Berlin declare. Some gave these artworks back, others sold them. The Schaudeutschänderung first shown in Dresden in 1933, subsequently toured through Germany to single out “negative examples” of the collection policies of the Weimar Republic. Similar pushes to underline the connection between a certain aesthetic and impurity included speeches, books, and curated interventions. By 1937, Goebbels was in possession of a decree by Hitler, which he used to confiscate artworks in museums with the aim of creating the 1938 Munich “degnerate art” exhibition in the Haus der [Deutschen] Kunst. On May 31, 1938, the Gesetz über Einziehung von Erbgutvermögen entferteter Kunst (law regarding the confiscation of products of degenerate art) allowed the wide-scale confiscation and subsequent sale of artworks deemed as “degnerate” and “un-German.” In the same year, a select number of works were chosen to be sold or
commercialized in vetrerated to foreign buyers, among others by the certified art dealers Gurlitt, Karl Haberdöck in Berlin, Fritz Carl Valentin in Stuttgart, and Aage Vilsrup in Hellerup, as well as the Gallery Zak in Paris (see Hoffmann and Kuhn 2016). Gooebels noted in his personal diary: "We also hope to make some money with this rubbish" (Schulz 2014). From 1938, the Kommision zur Verwertung der Produkte der Kunst (commission for the liquidation of the products of degenerate art) delegated these four art dealers, among them Hildebrand Gurlitt, to sell further artworks at 4-25 percent commission.

Unsurprisingly, Hildebrand Gurlitt could find his prominent niche in this state-coordinated process of cultural reinterpretation, manipulation, and opportunistic patronage. He was far from being the sole, albeit a self-concerned and proud mediator between auctioning houses and international art collectors. In late 2013, researcher Willi Korte found a correspondence in the Düsseldorf city archives between Gurlitt and Hans Wilhelm Hupp, director of the Düsseldorf Kunstmuseum from 1933 onwards (Rossmann 2013). Their dialogue stressed the Nazis' calculated moral strategizing with the revaluation of art. One example is a 1938 letter exchange between the two concerning the sale of a painting by the Norwegian Edvard Munch, whose work greatly influenced German Expressionism. At the time, Hupp waited for approval from the mayor of Düsseldorf to sell the painting to a potential buyer from Norway, intending to buy "German masterpieces" from the revenue. Gurlitt served as an intermediary in this case. Reviewing his activities, he wrote: "I generally have the impression that the way in which I have been dealing in art for several years now has been excellently profitable—morally and economically" (ibid.). His rhetoric stresses the entrepreneurial self-confidence and his privileged role with respect to the Nazi art market.

Thus, while the Gurlitt find was of an unanticipated scale, it would be misleading to scandalize its "singularity." While 300 galleries, private collections, and art dealers with registered companies were immediately closed in Berlin after 1933 as a consequence of "Hitler's Cultural Revolution," several hundred continued to exist and broker. Asked how surprised he was about the Schwaebisch g find, the expert and director of the in-house trust for provenance research in the Solingen Museum, Rolf Jesewitsch, responded: "Not at all. Since, as all of us who study such topics, I knew that there are more collections with interesting material" (2013). Jesewitsch underlines that exceeding attention paid to the supposedly scandalous exceptionalism of this case risks downplaying the scale of Nazi art trade.

The recent turn to Germany's role in international provenance research offers alternatives. Larissa Förster's call for a "more systematic, comparative, international and long-term approach to restitution, provenance research and the historiography of collections" (2018) in the adjacent field of postcolonial restitution and repatriation advances the relevance of international comparative studies of awkward art and difficult heritage. As she writes with a view to the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, its confrontation "with calls for a profound historical and ethical re-assessment of the collections before their re-installation" are "partly the result of international debates and international legislation on cultural property and cultural heritage" (ibid.: 49).

Sein as prims to trace Nazi art-trading mechanism, artworks can seem as mere means to an investigation of ownership claims. But the complex engagement with Gurlitt's hoarded artworks, an instance of awkward art and difficult heritage among many others, sheds light on the way in which they are entangled in wide-ranging political, aesthetic, and ethical regimes. The valuation, redefinition, and commercialization of artworks during the Nazi reign is but one example of their relational and prismatic qualities of art; neither per se good nor bad, but rather subject to value chains and carriers of difficult heritage relations, they are never "outside ethics" (Gueze 2005). Rather, they become subject to problematizations of value.

In skipping subject, time, and sensitivity from German fascism and the Gurlitt case to the Colonial Neighbours Archive, SAVVY's wish to point to other situations when awkward objects become prisms for looking at how a "difficult past breaks through to interrupt the present" (Macdonald 2009: 11). This juxtaposition is meant to facilitate a comparative view to other situations in which objects within art contexts become awkward and confront curators not just with the handling of difficult objects, but with the curating of the relations embedded in and refracted through them.

Awkward art II: The Colonial Neighbours Archive

I opened this chapter by recounting an interview with Lynhan Balabat and Marleen Schröder, who curate the Colonial Neighbours Archive project at the independent art space SAVVY in Berlin-Wedding. SAVVY, "the laboratory of form-ideas," was founded in 2010 by the independent curator and biotechnologist, Cameron-born Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung. Alongside Elena Agudo and Saskia Kibosch, he had established SAVVY to rethink categories such as "Western," "non-Western," and "affinity" through curatorial practices. SAVVY thus positions itself within the existing cultural landscape in the city as a site where distinctions between "West" and "non-West" are discussed from a point of view of form and content, rather than geographical location. As such, the space complements classic practices of "curation" as a practice or arranging objects into an exhibition, with reflections on "the curatorial," or what Rogoff described as "the staging
ground of the development of an idea or an insight." (2013: 46). SAVVY is not strictly speaking a gallery or a collection, and it is not simply a performance venue or academic outpost either; rather, its curators describe it as "a lab of conceptual, intellectual, artistic and cultural development and exchange; an atelier in which ideas are transformed to forms and forms to ideas." The notion of the curatorial, and its critical postcolonial articulation in SAVVY's infrastructure for production allows for art to emerge as a "problem," and less as an object or visual artifact.

For the Colonial Neighbours Archive, the frame of a contemporary art space is both inhibiting and productive, as Lynhan put it, "we resist framing these objects in the archive as art, because we don't want to subject them to this perspective." Her colleague Marleen pointed out that the Archive was not about collecting items, but "interviews, and stories associated with these objects" in an attempt to capture the sociality embedded within them. As the two explain, the objects are framed as Schrott (rubbish), in an attempt to "unlearn" the perspective on them as either historized or aesthetized colonial artifacts. They offer, rather, a view into interstitial everyday archives that echoes SAVVY's broader curatorial approach to difficult heritage.

FIGURE 3.3.2 Placards and flyers displayed outside SAVVY. Photograph by Jonas Timms, courtesy of SAVVY Contemporary.

FIGURE 3.3.3 Reproduced and altered pages of the family album that started the archive. Photograph by Jonas Timms, courtesy of SAVVY Contemporary.

Unlearning is not forgetting, it is not neither deletion, cancellation nor burning off. It is writing bolder and writing anew. It is commenting and questioning. It is giving new footnotes to old and other narratives. (see Fig. 3.3.2)

The Archive figures not as a foregrounded exhibition, but as a permanent installation in SAVVY. It began as a collaboration with anthropologists at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (Ndlung and Römhild 2013) and initially worked with a colonial family photo album from Cameroon, found in an attic by Ndlung’s relatives. To mark out its content, the curators invited artist Marie Kirchner to engage with the object. Together, they detached a series of photocopied pages from the album with red transparent tape. “We made it blurry to conceal parts of it,” Lynhan said to me. The album was thus estranged from its prior context. It was problematized in the sense introduced at the outset, that is, not as a stable representation of a stable preexisting object, but as a process of ambivalent investigation.

The archive aims to address what the project founder Ndlung perceived as the gaps in Germany’s politics of recognition and memory by challenging how its colonial past is remembered in public museums and archives. As such, it is not just a passive reconstruction of historical objects and their epistemic contexts during German colonialism, but an “information space,” as the SAVVY project curators describe it, that is aimed at examining “the postcolonial here and now.” Drawing on the idea of entangled histories, for SAVVY, functions as a way to muddle the distinction between African histories and European or German histories, instead focusing on their enmeshments in contemporary Berlin.
We are not trying to enlighten people about colonialism, or to reproduce
yet another discourse on the topic in Berlin, but to see what kinds of
relations people have through their everyday objects to traces of German
colonialism. (Lyhan, personal communication)

The purpose was to create a relational archive of neighborhood items.
Citing Edward Said, the curators underline that "collective memory is not an
inert and passive thing, but a field of activity." The project website further
describes the online call for donations as a "technique of crowd-archiving"
meant to create a "living archive." In doing so, they emphasize the relations
produced and evoked by the archive as constitutive of it. Although Marleen
and Lyhan retold various episodes of donors recounting how they used the
objects at home, it becomes clear that the archive ultimately points to the
future relations potentially instigated by the archive. "That's why we speak of
the archive as a collective process," says Marleen, "which includes meetings
like ours now, for instance, or the red tape intervention with artist Marie
Kirchner." Lyhan pointed out that the archive "is always present, meaning
people who come for a guided tour will necessarily pass through it." She told
me about the visit of a Swiss couple, who recounted memories of racist Swiss
everyday folklore, such as colonial puppets, upon entering the Archive. "They
regarded these objects as unproblematic everyday items," she said, but in the
context of the other objects in the Archive, "they realized just how terrible
they were." She continued to elaborate how the archive had prompted the
couple to rethink their engagement with these problematic everyday objects
and to donate several themselves. More than an exhibition of specific items
then, the Colonial Neighbours project serves the purpose of problematizing
colonialism through collective memories associated with everyday objects.
Lyhan, Marleen, and colleagues from SAVVY had curatorially framed the
archive with a "disposition that is sensitive to the impending, to revelations
yet to be produced" (Buolay 2016).

Concluding thoughts: On an anthropology
of awkwardness in art

By juxtaposing a commentary on the ethic-aesthetic quandary of the Gurfit
case with a description of the curatorial framing behind SAVVY’s Colonial
Neighbours Archive, I have offered two approaches to the category of
awkward art. To recapitulate, the notion describes, first, practices, objects,
and discourses whose status as art is contested, and which, second, are
considered uncomfortable, problematic, or as causing difficulty.

In the Gurfit case, objects whose "art-ness" were disputed reappeared as
difficult heritage, breaking through into the present through a chance
discovery, and pointing out lacunae in legal frameworks for dealing with
the aesthetic heritage of the Nazi past. The re-emergence of artworks
once dubbed "degenerate" underwent a radical transformation of
value, exposing the fragility and malleability of the notion of art, as well as
the impact of ethical judgments on aesthetic valuation. The category of
awkwardness is anthropologically productive here, because it foregrounds
the social relations entangled with these objects through their denunciation
and revalorisation as art.

The Colonial Neighbours Archive at SAVVY problematized the awkwardness
of difficult colonial heritage through detached curatorial reflections. Rather
than relying on the detailed histories and minute biographies of objects
which are central to the Gurfit case, its curators curated these objects as
relational prisms, that is, as entities whose agency relied on the networks,
experiences, and memories associated with them. They were treated as
potential magnifiers of future encounters. By establishing the possibility
of social relations as the subject of the archive, it offered a way to combine
the ambitions of a relational art space with the object-centered entanglements
of postcolonial provenance research. Its host institution SAVVY facilitated
the distributed agency of awkward objects, encouraging reflection on the
curatorial difficulty of exhibiting difficult heritage.

Awkward art is not a definite category that works to encompass a range
of definite phenomena with a nexus of qualities or traits that permit clear
identification. Rather, awkwardness describes a state of self-conscious
discomfort in response to things or practices perceived as improper or
unacceptable. As I discussed it here, awkwardness serves not as a means
of diminishing the difficulty of certain kinds of phenomena, for instance by
suggesting they are merely uncomfortable rather than outright harmful;
rather, it addresses the practice of problematizing or disputing the art-ness of
objects, practices, or discourses on the basis of a discomforting association
with these. As an analytic in the anthropological engagement with art,
awkwardness points to where the notion of art is disputed and its status as a
"Good Thing" (Gell 2006: 159) no longer self-evident.

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2014 EASA panel on relational patronage, which I co-convened with Alex Flynn.
Chapter 3.3

2 Ibid.
3 Evidently, not all art is either visual or composed of a “physical entity” (Gell 2008: 172, see Chua and Elliott 2013), but can be sensory, relational, or conceptual. Gell’s construal of the powers of art as a transcending magic furthermore risks glorifying artistic production and relying on the technological processes of art.
5 Ibid.

Chapter 3.4

1 Earlier van der Grijp 2006: 133. I labeled this drive the "cognitive motive." I now prefer the adjective "educational" in order to better distinguish it from the psychological motive.