Forty years ago, a discussion was started in Europe about the restitution of European museums’ colonial holdings back to Africa. Yet, the debate fizzled out; talks were forgotten, or rather, successfully repressed. This was perhaps the most important finding that emerged from the work I conducted in 2018 together with the Senegalese economist and writer Felwine Sarr on behalf of the French president Emmanuel Macron. Not only did we gain fundamental insights through our work in Africa itself; we also discovered entire reams of documentation buried in administrative and press archives in Paris and Berlin confirming that a detailed debate about collections from colonial contexts in European museums had already been held before, when we were both still children in school, reaching its apex between 1978 and 1982.

During those four years, politicians, journalists, museum and culture professionals all over Europe, “applied their intelligence”—as the inspector-general of the French national museums Pierre Quoniam put it in 1981—to finding a fair and appropriate position on the restitution issue. The impetus came from African intellectuals, politicians and museum professionals just after 1960—the so-called Year of Africa in which seventeen colonies belonging to Belgium, France and Britain gained independence. Whether in Lagos, Kinshasa, Paris or elsewhere, voices pleaded for restitution. Demands were restricted to a few objects but raising them emphasised the role culture played in the decolonial process of shaping newly formed national identities and advocating against merely a Western understanding of the universalism of art.
From the middle of the 1970s, these voices were echoed widely in international organisations like the United Nations. Restitution was discussed on television and in newspapers. Those in the art trade were irritated; museum staff groaned. For example, Stephan Waetzoldt, the director-general of the Staatliche Museen Berlin, Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Berlin State Museums, Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation), the cultural umbrella organisation for the Berlin state museums, gave an interview to the magazine Der Spiegel in 1979 in which he declared that it would be “irresponsible to give in to the nationalism of the developing countries.” For his part, David M. Wilson, director of the British Museum in London from 1977 to 1992, put forward the usual legal arguments against the restitution project: “Everything we own we received legally.” The dangers of nationalist desires and good old common law were the arguments put up in Europe in order to rebut demands from Africa, to stifle debate and to derail solutions.

Yet, representatives from civil society, the media and politics in Africa and Europe at the time were not discouraged; they persisted. Archival research shows that the mobilisation for or against restitution forty years ago did not take place simply along national or continental divides (Africa vs. Europe) and it cannot be solely explained by institutional reflexes or political templates (museums against politics, Left against Right). Divisions ran differently, for example owing to real or imagined knowledge about Africa, between generations, even between genders—it was often women in Europe who showed solidarity with the claimant African countries. However, ultimately the efforts of civil society failed.

It is hard for historians to write about a period of missed opportunities, about the stifling and repression of history. Text-based sources are often absent as lobbying with an agenda to undermine often takes place outside the coordinates of written frameworks. In the case of restitution, however, a surprising volume of material lurks under the carpet of oblivion. It allows a glimpse of the actors and structures, arguments and pathos formulas that contributed to the failure of an orderly and fair restitution of the “Third World’s” cultural property in the 1970s and ’80s.

In many ways, the initial restitution debate in Europe and the collective amnesia of its existence resembled the climate debate, which also gained momentum at the end of the 1970s. In 2019, in Losing Earth, the US author Nathaniel Rich reconstructed the history of the failure to take steps to tackle climate change in the face of emerging science, describing how climate change came to be flatly denied until today, with well-known consequences. He showed how scientists in the 1980s tried to make their alarming research understood by political and economic decision-makers to encourage them to take measures, and how they tried to win over public opinion with the help of activists and almost
INTRODUCTION

succeeded—almost.7 Significantly, in historian Frank Bösch’s recently published book Zeitenwende 1979, he states that our present world began in the year 1979.8 This is also true for the question of the restitution of non-European cultural goods, as novel as it may seem to us. Theoretically and methodically, this book’s reconstruction of the history of restitution is indebted to those studies.

What role did museums play at the time? Or the press, politics and international organisations? Who were the actors in offices, on the telephone and in committees, who made the question of restitution disappear so successfully? What alliances were formed? At what point did the discussion about the colonial past of collections fall silent? Is it even possible to tie historical mechanisms of forgetting, renunciation and silence to people and institutions? One thing is certain, the restitution debate of the 1970s and ’80s disappeared from collective memory so completely that Hermann Parzinger, the president of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, was able to declare in an interview in 2017 that “the provenance of ethnological holdings is a relatively new subject.”9

However, nothing about this subject is new. In the archives of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz alone there are thousands of pages from the period between 1972 and 1982 about (unrealised) restitutions documented in correspondence, memoranda, strategy and position papers, press cuttings and statements. The same applies to museums in Paris, London, Stuttgart, Brussels and so on. The archives speak for themselves: the twenty-first-century idea to return cultural goods that were taken en masse to fill European museums during colonialism, in the spirit of postcolonial and post-racial solidarity, is anything but radical or groundbreaking. We have been there before. The impact of this subject on many societies today is boomerang-like: it is an exponential return to the historical stage of something that had been repressed and cannot be ignored again. Restitution, decolonisation, social justice and the question of racism go hand in hand.

This book is dedicated to the objects of repression. It begins with one of the first calls for the return of art to Africa in 1965 and ends in 1985 on Museumsinsel (Museum Island), in what was then East Berlin, where the non-aligned state of Nigeria made a guest appearance at the Pergamonmuseum with an exhibition of its archaeological treasures—having lost any hope of restitution after a two-decade fight. For the first time, this book attempts to tell the coherent story of a postcolonial defeat, based on a wealth of material scattered across countless European archives and African publications. However, this was a defeat shared by both sides, because the refusal to restitute cultural objects to African countries during the first decades of their independence was certainly not a credit to Europe.
INDEX

Ad Hoc Committee for Restitutions, 57, 67, 69–71, 91–92, 127
Adorno, Theodor, 131
“Afo A Kom” case, 54
Africa, 5–6, 118–19, 130–31. See also specific countries
Africa Centre, 11–15, 106–7, 109–11
Africa Report (magazine), 35–36
Agorsah, Emmanuel Kofi, 64
AICA (International Association of Art Critics), 29, 30–31
Algeria, 6, 45
Amrehn, Franz, 20–21, 24–26, 27
Apollinaire, Guillaume, 7
Appell, Reinhard, 132
Ardouin, Claude, 131
Art from Zaire (Kunst aus Zaire), 99
Art of the Congo, 10
art trade, international, value within, 36–37
Asante regalia, 39–43
Ashford, Nicholas, 40
Assembly of Ministers of Education of the German States (Kultusministerkonferenz (KSK)), 21, 27–28, 37, 44
Attinelli, Lucio, 69
auctions, 100, 106
Auer, Hermann, 76, 78–81, 82, 94, 97, 105
Austria, 16, 32
Bab-Ahmed, Mahmood, 66
Baer, Gerhard, 96
Bagherzadeh, Firouz, 75
Bandung Conference, 4
Bangladesh, 92
BBC, Whose Art Is It, Anyway? 111–12
Belarus, 45
Belgium, 5–6, 10, 32, 33, 96, 99, 119
Benin, 22–27, 48, 99, 133, 154n32
Benin Art, 9
Benin City, 9
Berlin, 17, 124–25
Berlin Congo Conference, 130
Berlin Senate Administration for Science and the Arts, 37
Bertram, Wilhelm, 93
Biafra War, 18
Bingo (magazine), 6
Black culture, 5
Black Panther (film), 67
Bley, Helmut, 132, 133
Blumenthal, Susan, 36
Boahen, Albert Adu, 40
Bodenstein, Felicity, 62
Bonn, Germany, 20, 82, 122. See also Foreign Office
Bonn Commission, 83–86, 93–97
Bösch, Frank, 3
Boyer, Robert, 88
Boyhus, Else-Marie, 131
Bozimo, Willy, 66
Brandt, Willy, 17
Bremen, Germany, 126–29
British Museum, 12, 39–43, 62–63, 73, 106, 111, 112
British Museum Act, 6, 129
British Museum Trustees Liberation Bill, 129
Bulgaria, 58–59
Burundi, 32

208
Cahen, Lucien, 10, 111
Cameroon, 51, 54, 125
Canada, 32
Canaday, John, 30
Catalogue of Antiquities and Other Cultural Objects from Sri Lanka (Ceylon) Abroad, 103
Central Archive (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin), 136
Césaire, Aimé, 5
Chad, 32
Chamberlin, Russell, 128–29
Channon, Paul, 117
Christian Science Monitor, 47–48, 52
Civil and Public Services Association, 110
colonialism, 86, 120, 127
colonisation, 31–32, 130–31, 139–40
Commonwealth Arts Association, 107
Congolese government, 10
cost-benefit relationships, 80
cultural property, 70–71, 79, 92, 100
culture, 5–6, 20, 64, 101
Dahlem, 26
Dahlem museum, 125
Dakar, 8, 9, 69–75
“Declaration of Mexico,” 117
Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, 4
decolonisation, 20
de-emotionalisation, 94–95
Degenerate Art order, 25, 26
Democratic Republic of Congo. See Zaire
Denmark, 32, 119
derain, André, 7
Der Spiegel (magazine), 5, 60, 75, 106, 121
diallo, Tirmiziou, 131, 132
Die Restitution von Kunstwerken (The Restitution of Artworks), 128
Die Welt (newspaper), 68, 112–13
diyabanza, Emery Mwazula, 139
Dolo, Akonio, 74
Douglas-Scott-Montau, Edward, 42
Dresden museum, 53–54
dyroff, Hans-Dieter, 118
East Berlin, 17, 135–37
East Germany (German Democratic Republic (GDR)), 17, 32, 123, 135
Eberl, Wolfgang, 132
Ebony (magazine), 66
Egonu, Uzo, 12
Egypt, 45, 73
Elgin Marbles, 121
Engler, Helmut, 137
Ethiopia, 103
Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, 33, 48, 124–25, 141
European Cultural Convention (1955), 88
Ewing, Humphrey John Frederick Crum, 41
“Exotic Art—Back to the Third World” (Lommel), 86
Eyo, Ekpo: background of, 62; invitation from, 16; leadership of, 61–62, 70, 99, 135–37; quote of, 54, 63, 99; request from, 19; Treasures of Ancient Nigeria, Legacy of 2,000 Years and, 98; viewpoint of, 63; visit by, 45; Whose Art Is It, Anyway? and, 111; work of, 14, 75
fabricius, Wilhelm, 71
fasuyi, Timothy Adebayo, 18
Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) (West Germany), 17, 32, 37–39, 44–45, 48, 95–96
Feni, Dumiile, 12
films, significance of, 11–12
Finland, 32
First World Congress of Black Writers and Artists, 5
Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO), 62
Foreign Office, 39, 50, 53, 56, 76, 81
Foundation for Prussian Cultural Heritage (Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz): archives of, 3, 17–18; Benin artwork within, 22–27; criticism of, 87; establishment of, 17; objection of, 28; political pressure of, 20; quote from, 37, 77, 103; request to, 19, 75–76
France, 5–6, 32, 73, 104, 119, 122–23
Francis, Jeff, 14
Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 56, 89, 96–97
French National Film Commission, 11
Gansmayr, Herbert: Ad Hoc Committee for Restitutions and, 57; background of, 48–49; exclusion of, 69; leadership of, 49–50, 51, 53, 82, 91, 92, 105, 127–28; “Lost Heritage” symposium and, 107; quote of, 47–48, 52, 99; report from, 160n7; on talk show, 131
Gathercole, Peter, 107, 109–10, 111

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Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Secret State Archives of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation), 53
German Commission for UNESCO, 53
German delegation, 118
German Democratic Republic (GDR) (East Germany), 17, 32, 123, 135
German Federal Republic (GFR), 80, 141
German Museum Association, 37, 33, 78
German museums, authority of, 27
German printmaking, 95
Germany, 16–17. See also Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) (West Germany); German Democratic Republic (GDR) (East Germany)
Ghana, 11, 36, 39–43
Gicquel, Roger, 74, 75
Gil, Gilberro, 59
Giorgis, Feleke Gedle, 119
Gisborough, Lord, 42
Göbel, Peter, 137
Golden Stool, 40
good shepherd motif, 27
Goronwy-Roberts, Baron, 42
Gowon, Yakubu, 18
Greece, 32, 45, 121–22
Green Party, 137–38
“Group 77,” 116–18
Guiart, Jean, 74
Guimiot, Pierre, 112
Guinea, 32
Gussone, Carl, 21–22, 27
Haberland, Eike, 55, 56, 82, 93, 131
Hallstein Doctrine, 17
Hamm-Brücher, Hildegard, 116, 117–18, 120, 123–25
Haque, Enamul, 92
Hargrove, Charles, 75
Held, André and Ursula, 63
Heller, Peter, 132
Helms, Siegfried, 112
Hinz, Manfred, 127
Hitler, Adolf, 26, 31, 45
Hoeller, Wilfried, 130, 132, 133
Höpfnner, Gerd, 103
Horkheimer, Max, 131
Horn, Klaus, 132, 133
House of Lords (United Kingdom), 42–43
Hughes, Joanna M., 41
Humboldt-Forum, 136
Hume, Tom, 92
Idia (Queen Mother), 9, 60–61, 62–63, 64–66
image politics, 17
Imasuen, Lancelot Oduwa, 67
Institute for Foreign Relations, 95
Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to Its Countries of Origin or Its Restitution in Case of Illicit Appropriation (ICPRCP), 87, 89, 102–3, 114–15, 126
international art trade, value within, 36–37
International Association of Art Critics (AICA), 29, 30–31
International Council of Museums (ICOM), 14–15, 19, 57, 102
International Monetary Fund, 119
Invasion 1897 (film), 67
Iraq, 103, 112
Ireland, 32
Isar, Yudhishthir Raj, 107, 131
Israel, 45
Italy, 32, 119
Jahn, Janheinz, 10
Japan, 32
Jenkins, Hugh, 129
Jeune Afrique (magazine), 52
Joachim, Paulin, 6–7, 8, 27, 88
Kamian, Bakari, 70
Ketterer, Wolfgang, 132
Kinshasa (Zaire), 30, 99
Klausewitz, Wolfgang, 76, 77–78, 82, 87
Kløy, Ernst J., 105
Knopp, Werner, 77, 82, 83, 87, 91, 93
Kohl, Helmut, 125
“Kolonial-und Übersee-Museum,” 127
Konaré, Alpha Oumar, 92
Koné, Ibrahima, 70
Koschnick, Hans, 127
Krieger, Kurt, 45
KSK (Kultusministerkonferenz) (Assembly of Ministers of Education of the German States), 21, 27–28, 37, 44
Kumar, Chandra, 108–9
Kumasi, 40–41, 133
Kumasi Traditional Council, 36
Kunst aus Zaire (Art from Zaire), 99
Kußmaul, Friedrich: background of, 38; leadership of, 30–52, 76, 82; quote of, 38, 48, 51, 53, 54, 55, 77, 81, 93, 96, 104, 114, 128; on talk show, 131
Lagos, 58–67
Lagos Federal Department of Antiquities, 99
Lagos National Museum (Nigeria), 98
Landais, Hubert, 57, 91
Lang, Jack, 117, 120
Laurien, Hanna-Renate, 118
Lee of Asheridge, Baroness, 42
Le Figaro (newspaper), 72–73
Le Monde (newspaper), 59, 66, 73, 75, 103
Léopoldville (Zaire), 6, 30
Les statues meurent aussi, 11
Lewis, Geoffroy, 57
Lindau, Germany, 93–97
Linden-Museum, 137
Loko, Edoh Lucien (El Loko), 59
Lommel, Andreas, 86
London, 11
Loot! The Heritage of Plunder (Chamberlin), 128–29
Losing Earth (Rich), 2–3
Lost Heritage, 107–8
“Lost Heritage” symposium, 107
Loudmer, Guy, 100
Louvre, 73
Lüderwald, Andreas, 96
Luxembourg, 32
Mackensen, Götz, 92
Maheu, René, 45–46
Makambila, Pascal, 57, 91
Makeba, Miriam, 59
Mali, 32, 92
Mandu Yenu (film), 132
Manhemier Morgen, 55–56
Marker, Chris, 11
Marx, Karl, 89
The Mask (film), 12, 14, 67, 101
Matisse, Henri, 7
Mauretanien, 32
M’Bow, Amadou Mahtar: background of, 46; criticism of, 87; at Festac, 59; Hammer-Brücher and, 117, 124; leadership of, 68–70, 102; quote of, 71–72, 73–74; Whose Art Is It, Anyway? and, 111
McKenzie, John, 107
McLeod, Malcolm, 111
Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, 88
Meinel, Hans, 83, 93, 118
Mel, Frédéric Grah, 118
Menck, Clara, 97
Menelik II, 119
Mercouri, Melina, 117, 120–22
Mexico City, 116–18
Ministry of Culture, 6, 123
Ministry of the Colonies, 6
Ministry of the Interior, 75–76
Mitterand, François, 120
Mobutu Sese Seko, 29, 30, 31, 99
Modigliani, Amedeo, 7
Moulefera, Tayeb, 57, 90
Muhammed, Murtala, 63
Müller, Kurt, 93–94
Mungo, Charles, 111
Musée National des Beaux-arts d’Alger, 6
“The Museum and the Third World” conference, 93–97
Museum für Völkerkunde und Schweizerisches Museum für Völkskunde (Basel), 19, 104
Museumsinsel (East Berlin), 17, 123
Mwamuyinga, Mkwayinyika Munyigumba (Chief Mkwawa or Makaua), 96
Nairobi, Kenya, 56
Nairobi Resolution, 69
Namibia, 51, 127
National Museum of Mali (Bamako), 53–54
Ndumbe, Kum’a, 20
“negro,” term use of, 5
Netherlands, 32, 119
Niger, 32
Nigeria: art from, 8, 135, 136–37; auction presence of, 100; Biafra War within, 18; commercial film industry within, 11; GDR and, 135; intellectual reappropriation focus within, 64; loan request from, 16–17; museum contributions within, 18–19; negotiations by, 98; permanent loans to, 14; restitution neglect criticism to, 62; United Kingdom and, 100; vitality within, 59
Nigerian Central Bank, 61
Nigerian Department of Antiquities, 61–62
Nigerian Federal Ministry of Information, 9
Nigerian National Museum, 59
Nigeria Today (magazine), 9
Njóya (King), 48, 132
Nofretete will nachhause (Nefertiti Wants to Go Home), 128
North-South alliances, 123
Norway, 32

INDEX 211

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INDEX

object lists, 92–93, 102
Odenthal, Kerstin, 101
Osendare, Niyi, 12, 64–65, 101
Owoow, Nii Kwate, 11–15

Palace of Culture and Sports (Bulgaria), 58–59
Palermo, Italy, 74–75
Pan-African Cultural Manifesto, 10
Pan-African World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (Festac), 58–67
Papandreou, Andreas, 117
Paris, 6, 8–9
Parthenon frieze, 121
Parzinger, Hermann, 3
Patemann, Helgard, 127
People’s Republic of Congo, 32
Permanent Representation of the Federal Republic of Germany (UNESCO), 49
Perrot, Paul N., 57
Picasso, Pablo, 7
Poland, 45
Political Archive (German Foreign Office), 53
Pontual, Roberto, 59
Portugal, 32
Pré, Jean W., 91
Présence Africaine (magazine), 5, 11, 108
“Property of a European Private Collector” auction, 100
Prussia, 130–31
Prussian collections, 17

quasi-scientific methodology, 78
Quoniam, Pierre, 1, 75, 102, 122

Raffelberg, Jochen, 47
Rankine, Jean, 111
Rebeyrol, Yvonne, 75
recover, term use of, 23–24
Red Army Faction, 18, 154n32
Renais, Alain, 11
restitution: alternatives to, 80; appeal for, 7–8; cooperation and exchange within, 141; cost-benefit relationships within, 80; debate of, 2–3; defence regarding, 77–88, 91, 119; defined, 32; as fair gesture, 41; flexibility within, 129; form for, 114–15; modern accomplishments within, 142; offense regarding, 69–75, 122–23; pause within, 89; secrecy regarding, 27; term use of, 140
The Restitution of Artworks (Die Restitution von Kunstwerken), 128
‘Return of cultural assets’ document, 83–86.
See also Bonn Commission
Reuters, 52
Rich, Nathaniel, 2–3
Robinson, Alma, 64, 66
Roudillon, Jean, 74
Royal Museum for Central Africa (Tervuren), 10, 33
Russell, John, 99

Salahi, Ibrahim el, 12
Schade, Günter, 136
Schettler, Renate, 55–56
Schiller, Friedrich, 64
Schmidt, Doris, 57, 97
scholarship, as benchmark, 81
Schulze, Dorothée, 128, 131
Schutztruppe, 51
Schwar[t]z, Adolph, 100
Schwarz, Elisabeth, 88, 102, 118
Secret State Archives of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation (Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz), 53
Seidlitz, Peter, 68
Seligman, Charles Gabriel, 9
Senegal, 32
Senghor, Léopold Sédar, 7–8, 59, 90
Shepard, Ben, 107, 111
Shinnie, Peter, 43
Silva, Pilippu Hewa Don Hemasiri De, 103
Silverstein, Nate, 36
South Africa, 32
Soviets Union, 154n32
Soyinka, Wole, 58, 61, 66
Sri Lanka, 103–4, 112–13, 126
Staatliche Museen Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 82
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 135–37
“Standard Form Concerning Requests for Return or Restitution,” 114–15
Stétié, Salah, 90, 107
Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Foundation for Prussian Cultural Heritage): archives of, 3, 17–18; Benin artwork within, 22–27; criticism of, 87; establishment of, 17; objection of, 28; political pressure of, 20; quote from, 37, 77, 103; request to, 19, 75–76
Stoecker, Heinz Dietrich, 18
Stoecker, Holger, 123
Structural Adjustment Credits, 119
*Study on the Principles, Conditions and Means for the Restitution or Return of Cultural Property*, 67, 70
*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 124
Suez Canal, 73
“Support for Museums in the Third World,” 75–77
Sweden, 32
Switzerland, 104–5

Tailobi, Gordon, 100
Tanzania, 32, 68
*Ten Theses on Cultural Encounters and Cooperation with Third World Countries* (Hamm-Brücher), 117
TF1, news coverage of, 74
Thatcher, Margaret, 109, 117
Third World, emergence of, 4–5. See also specific countries
*The Times* (newspaper), 40, 41, 42, 43, 75, 102–3, 112
*Treasures of Ancient Nigeria, Legacy of 2,000 Years*, 98–99
Tuggar, Yusuf, 142
Tüllman, Adolf, 124

Übersee-Museum, 48, 53, 92, 99, 105, 128, 131
Uganda, 32
Ugbomah, Eddie, 12, 67, 101
Ulbricht, Walter, 17
Ulshöfer, Waltraut, 137–38
UNESCO: crisis within, 131; FRG’s viewpoint regarding, 44–45; Ganslmayr and, 49; General Assembly (Paris) of, 69–75, 82–86, 87; General Conference of, 47; within Mexico City, 116–18; North-South alliances within, 123; Palermo meeting of, 74–75; resolution from, 56–57; “Standard Form Concerning Requests for Return or Restitution” and, 114–15
United Kingdom, 5–6, 22, 32, 39–43, 100, 107–8, 114
United Nations, 95
United States, 32
universalism, 108
Van Beurden, Sarah, 27
Van Elslande, Renaat, 33
Van Geluwe, Huguette, 75
Venice, Italy, 49–50
Versailles Treaty of 1919, 96
Vistel, Jacques, 91
Vlaminck, Maurice de, 7
Völkerkundemuseum, 16, 25, 53–54, 154n32
von Bismarck, Otto, 130
von Clausewitz, Wolfgang, 93
von Pacznskey, Gert, 52, 104, 127
von Simson, Otto, 82, 90–91, 93, 95, 118

Waetzoldt, Stephan, 2, 20, 21, 28, 37–38, 39
Wallace Collection (London), 39–43
Ware, Otumfuo Opoku II, 40, 111
Wendt, Albert Tuapepe, 92
West Africa, 7–8, 53–54
*West Africa* (magazine), 14
West Berlin, 17, 27
Western Samoa, 92
West German Foreign Office (AA), 16, 116
West Germany (Federal Republic of Germany (FRG)), 17, 32, 37–39, 44–45, 48, 95–96
*Whose Art Is It, Anyway?* (documentary), 111–12
Wilson, David M., 2, 106, 107, 110, 111, 113, 121
Wilson, Harold, 129
Wolseley, Garnet, 40
Wonder, Stevie, 59
“Working Group of Africa,” 122–23
World Bank, 119
“World Conference on Cultural Policies,” 116–18
World Festival of Black Arts, 8
Wormit, Hans-Georg, 19–20, 21, 22–27, 32–33, 56

Year of Africa, 1, 4
*You Hide Me* (film), 11–15, 107
Yugoslavia, 166n8
Zaire, 10, 29, 30, 31–32, 45, 99
Zambia, 32
ZDF, broadcast of, 131–34
*Zeitenwende* (Bösch), 3
Zwernemann, Jürgen, 37, 54, 82

INDEX

213

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