Art of Loss: 
Madame d’Ora’s 
Slaughterhouse Photographs and 
Haus Doranna

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Many people know about Madame d’Ora (Dora Kallmus) for her outstanding fashion photographs and portraits of fin-de-siècle cultural luminaries. Some even know that in 1948 she began what would become an eight-year project, making the rounds of Parisian abattoirs, capturing hundreds of images of animal carcasses lying in glistening pools of blood, shapeless heavy masses of skin and fat, rough hides, and severed heads. But scarcely anyone knows that during that same year, Dora Kallmus became one of the few former Austrians who managed to reclaim Aryanized property, winning a protracted legal battle for the return of her and her older sister Anna’s house in Frohnleiten, Styria (a state within Austria).

Nobody knows the story of the restitution of her house because the recovery of material assets after the Holocaust is typically seen as a footnote to the supposedly more meaningful events in the life of a victim of Nazi persecution. Tangible belongings that remain after a person’s death seemingly carry little weight when it comes to the deeper and more permanent loss of life. But material property is not an empty signifier of value: it also represents a relationship between owner and what is owned. Both its loss and its return can be painful, traumatic experiences. Thus, the restitution of property after the Holocaust engages a complicated set of emotions for its original owners—especially when, as in the case of Madame d’Ora, its return is implicated in the fate of family members.

Anna bought “Haus Doranna”—as the two sisters called it—in 1919 and moved in immediately, while Dora maintained her apartment and photography studio in Vienna. In 1923, Dora moved to Paris, a city she preferred for its cosmopolitan flair and taste. In 1931 Anna transferred ownership of one-half of the property to Dora, suggesting that the two of them—neither of whom ever married—
eventually planned to live there together. But after the Nazis marched into Austria in 1938, Anna was forced to deal with new regulations designed to expropriate Jews’ assets and force emigration. Like many others, the sisters were trapped in this vexing process. The hundreds of letters they exchanged discussing the increasing danger to which they were exposed suggests the depth of their emotional investment in the house. In 1939, Anna was finally forced to sell Haus Doranna and move to Vienna.

On April 26, 1939, the day before the move, Anna wrote to her sister: “I am sitting in the verandah, the only place all over the house, where one finds a chair and a table. This morning we had all the furniture sent off to Graz, where it will have to wait for the permission to go off. So it only took us 3 and a half days to pull all down, what has been raised with much pain love and money in 20 years, such is life. ...This evening or tomorrow morning I shall say good bye to our mayor, who was especially friendly to me he is the true son of his mother, for whose loss he often cried here, when he was working at papering the rooms or laying carpets and linoleums. Tomorrow at 2pm we leave, on my first day in Vienna you shall get a letter.” (Dora Kallmus archive, Preus Photography Museum, Norway.)

The placid tone and ironic language of the letter belie Anna’s pain and humiliation as she is not only forced to strip the home of its furnishings, but also to make polite conversation with the Aryanizer, who, if we read between the lines, is a real “son of a bitch” who cries for his own losses as he “redecorates” the house he has forced them to sell. Anna wrote to Dora for the last time on October 25, 1941, informing her sister that she was taking a trip and pleading with her to find a safe hiding place. On November 7, 1941, friends in Vienna
informed Dora that Anna had been deported to Lodz ten days earlier. She was likely deported from there to Auschwitz and murdered.

Meanwhile, in Paris, Dora faced dangers of her own. After 1939, she was forced to sell her studio and live confined to her apartment, a deeply lonely experience. In August 1942, she managed to escape to a hiding place in the village in the Ardèche, where she remained until after the war. She filed a claim for the return of Haus Doranna in 1946, just after the Austrian government passed its first, but largely ineffectual, restitution law. Dora faced significant hurdles when, incredibly, both the town and province contested her claim, insisting that the German Reich had expropriated it from them after 1939. But with the help of a local lawyer, she managed to obtain its restitution in 1948—significantly, the very same year she began her slaughterhouse series, two events deeply connected to the loss of her sister.

Laws establishing restitution in kind for expropriated Jewish property after the Holocaust were designed for restorative justice: to put things “back to normal” by returning property to its rightful owners. These laws are necessary in order to ensure that those implicated in Jews’ deaths did not also inherit the spoils from their victims. But property restitution can also force the recipient to recognize the rupture of loss, a break that—on the surface—appears healed once the original object is returned. If we consider the return of the house as not merely restorative, but also retraumatizing, we can understand Madame d’Ora’s slaughterhouse photographs as generating an accompanying visual rhetoric of loss that works through the trauma as they refuse to represent any “back to normal” experience. In doing so, she creates, in effect, a particular art of loss that suggests the limits of both art and law in redressing the Holocaust and its aftermath.

Madame d’Ora resisted returning from Paris to live in Frohnleiten until October, 1959, when a motorcycle hit her and left her unable to work. Neither a nostalgic longing for a childhood home, nor any desire to see Austria’s breathtaking landscape, had brought her there. Rather, she was finally unable to avoid any longer coming back to a house that had never been her home, and that, without Anna, never would be. She died in Frohnleiten in 1963, with no heirs. She left Haus Doranna to a friend.