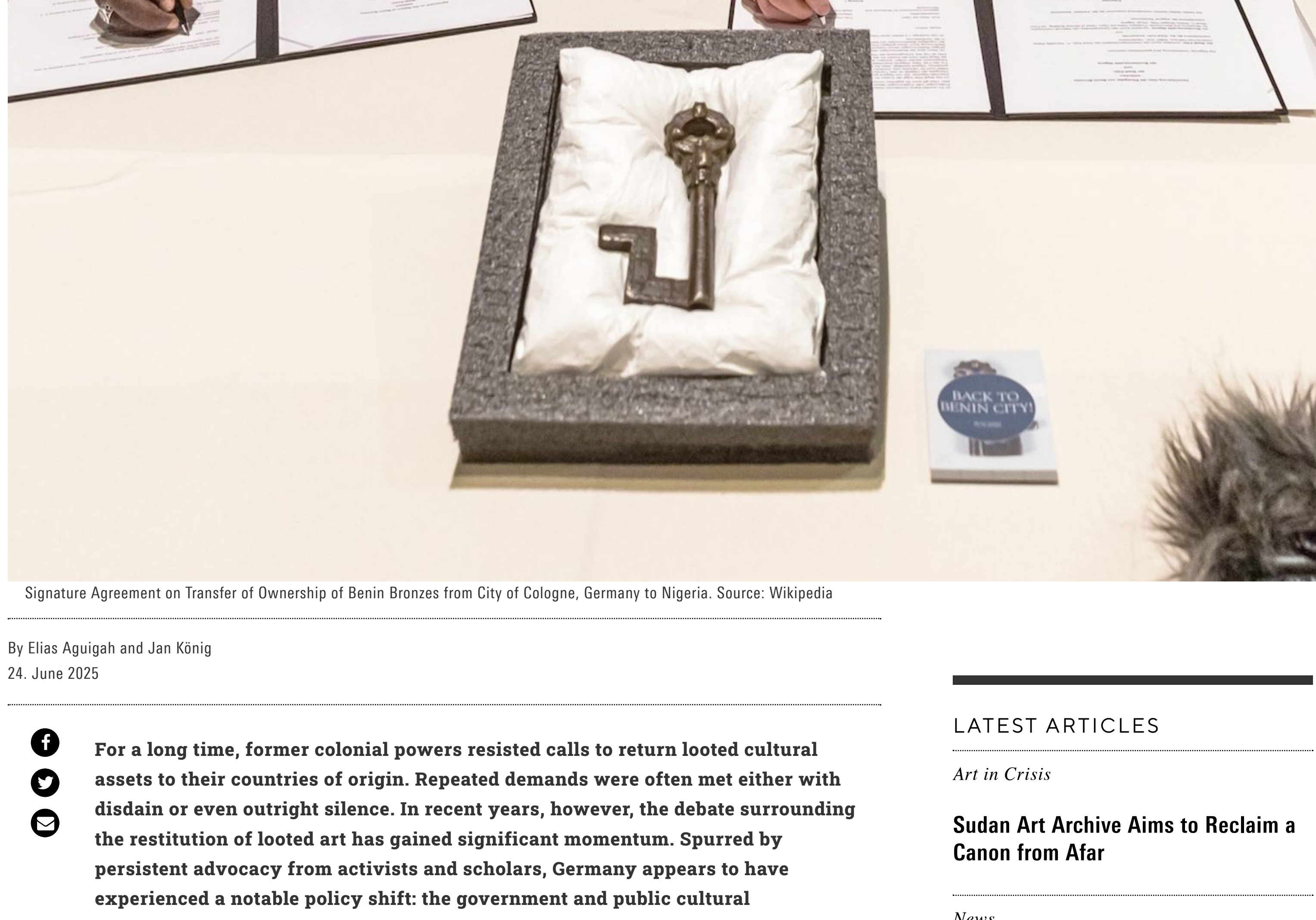


C& x Académie des Traces From Bronze to Hydrogen – The Geopolitics of Restitution

Germany has embraced the return of looted cultural assets as a symbolic gesture of reckoning with its colonial past. But how deep does this commitment go? Elias Aguigah and Jan König examine how restitution serves not only as a cultural gesture, but increasingly as a strategic tool in Germany's foreign policy — revealing the selective and often contradictory nature of its decolonial commitments.



Signature Agreement on Transfer of Ownership of Benin Bronzes from City of Cologne, Germany to Nigeria. Source: Wikipedia

By Elias Aguigah and Jan König 24. June 2025

For a long time, former colonial powers resisted calls to return looted cultural assets to their countries of origin. Repeated demands were often met either with disdain or even outright silence. In recent years, however, the debate surrounding the restitution of looted art has gained significant momentum. Spurred by persistent advocacy from activists and scholars, Germany appears to have experienced a notable policy shift: the government and public cultural institutions (e.g. museums) present restitution as a step toward addressing the legacy of supposedly past German imperialism and colonialism. Yet, this narrative remains plausible only if restitution is framed as a purely cultural gesture, detached from its broader geopolitical implications. Upon closer examination, we argue that such acts – heralded as 'door openers' to new forms of partnership, as former German Culture Minister Claudia Roth phrased it in relation to the return of the Benin bronzes – often serve capitalist interests, expressed through economic agreements, military cooperation, and symbolic politics.

Then-Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock (Green Party) gave a speech on 16 July 2024 at the opening of the Goethe-Institut in Dakar, portraying the return of cultural assets as a symbol of equitable partnership. According to Baerbock, the returned artifacts represent 'a piece of the identity of a country, of a population group'. Among her examples, she positively refers to the restitution of artifacts to Namibia – despite Germany's century-long refusal to recognise the genocide of the Ovaherero and Nama until 2021, and its continued rejection of legal consequences such as reparations, reducing the act into a purely symbolic recognition. Another case she cited was the return of four items to the Kaurna people in Australia. A revealing Instagram post on 3 May 2024 bluntly illustrates the connection between the restitution of looted cultural property and German geopolitics and security policy. Images of Baerbock dressed in indigenous incense attire during a restitution ceremony are followed by visuals of her at the Australian Cyber Collaboration Centre and aboard an Australian Navy patrol vessel built by a German company.

When discussing *Aufarbeitung*, Germany's effort to confront its colonial legacy, Baerbock expressed particular pride in the December 2022 restitution of the Benin bronzes to Nigeria. That this return became a high-level diplomatic affair is no coincidence – and not merely because of the fame of the pieces. British forces looted them during the 1897 military expedition and later were later sold into German collections through the art market, without direct German colonial involvement. Consequently, the German government is spared the question of reparations – in this case, returning the bronzes suffices to redeem itself without the risk of further responsibility. Meanwhile, Nigeria – Africa's largest economy and Germany's second most important trading partner south of the Sahara – plays a strategic role as a gas supplier. An energy partnership was forged in 2008 involving German energy giants such as Eon-Ruhrgas, EnBW and Siemens. In August 2018, following pressure from the Merkel administration, Siemens signed a six-year agreement with Nigeria, also aimed at curbing migration towards Europe. Siemens, a company whose historical profits stem from the atrocities during the Nazi era and whose corrupt activities in Nigeria, for example, by bribing government officials to secure contracts, are well known also funded the Digital Benin platform, aggregating data on Benin bronzes held in collections around the globe. In 2021, the same year the restitution of Benin Bronzes in public German collections to Nigeria was confirmed – the German-Nigerian Hydrogen Office opened in Abuja in the name of the German-Nigerian energy partnership. As part of a global 'scramble for green hydrogen', Germany seeks to secure cheap production facilities for hydrogen to meet its 2045 climate-neutrality target and to strategically prepare for the Chinese competition, the current leader in hydrogen output. During her Dakar speech, Baerbock explicitly referenced Chinese and Russian activities in Africa, warning that the 'autocrats of this world' [*Die Autokraten dieser Welt*] would also seek to 'instrumentalize the wounds left behind by Europe across the world, particularly here in Africa' [*Dabei versuchen sie auch, die Wunden zu instrumentalisieren, die Europa in der Welt hinterlassen hat, gerade auch hier in Afrika*]. Russia, in particular, would weaponize anti-colonial sentiment to turn former colonies against the West. Indeed, Russia is benefiting from the current political climate across West Africa. Among other factors, widespread anti-French sentiment has fuelled the military coups of recent years in former French colonies such as Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea, and Niger. France, as the former colonial power, continues to exert influence over domestic politics – both through its military presence or its control of the CFA franc – a currency system that remains a legacy of the colonial era in fourteen West and Central African countries. Despite widespread protests against inflation and corruption, which are met by the ruling class with repression and partially lethal police violence, Nigeria remains considered a comparatively stable partner offering inexpensive infrastructure and labour. However, its stance toward Russia is nuanced: in 2021, the two countries entered into a military-technical cooperation agreement. In spring 2024, Nigerian Foreign Minister Yusuf Tuggar – who played a key role in the restitution of the Benin Bronzes during his tenure as ambassador to Germany until 2023 – emphasized that 'Russia is not an enemy', while simultaneously issuing a strong condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. He underscored that in a 'multipolar' world 'we align with whatever benefits Nigeria'. The campaign to gain influence over the second-largest economy south of the Sahara thus increasingly revolves around the politics of colonial memory. While Russia takes pride in the fact that it was no relevant colonial power in West Africa and benefits from the prevailing anti-colonial sentiment in the region, the German government employs the restitution of the Benin bronzes to Nigeria as a demonstration of its commitment to reckoning with its colonial past.

Yet when viewed within the broader framework of contemporary German foreign policy, the role of cultural conservation and decolonisation takes on a different significance. While in Nigeria, the preservation of material heritage is mobilized to serve German geopolitical interests, elsewhere, the inverse applies: in Gaza, cultural destruction coincides with German strategic alliances. As of May 2025, Gaza has been largely reduced to rubble with the help of German-supplied weaponry and the German government is thereby complicit not only in the deaths of at least 50,000 people, but also in the large-scale devastation of archaeological sites, historic architecture, contemporary art institutions, and libraries. While Germany presents cultural conservation as a moral obligation in the African context, this imperative appears absent in the Middle East. The geopolitical logic underpinning German cultural policy thus reveals the selective nature of decolonial commitments by those in power: 'decolonisation' becomes selective symbolic politics – strategically deployed as a last resort to maintain geopolitical influence on the international stage.

Following the collapse of the German government in November, the Green foreign ministry is now passé. In the new coalition agreement, the new government, led by the conservative CDU, promises to "intensify the *Aufarbeitung* (coming to terms with) colonialism" [*intensivieren die Aufarbeitung des Kolonialismus*] notably through the continued restitution of cultural property. During an expert panel of the Committee on Foreign Affairs on 14.10.2024 on the 'Impact of the colonial past on foreign policy', Stefan Friedrich, Head of the Sub-Saharan Africa Department at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (closely affiliated with the CDU), openly criticized the restitution process surrounding the Benin Bronzes. Almost echoing Baerbock's earlier rhetoric in Dakar, he argued that "these [Russian and Chinese] and also African autocrats [...] are using Europe's colonial past as a weapon against the West." He questions why a "delegation of 90 for the past" was appointed to facilitate restitution, "but not a single representative of the German economy to address future cooperation". Therefore, there is reason to believe that the new CDU/SPD-led Foreign Ministry no longer sees the need to maintain even the façade of decolonization, instead deploying cultural policy with increasing bluntness to advance German economic interests in Africa and beyond.

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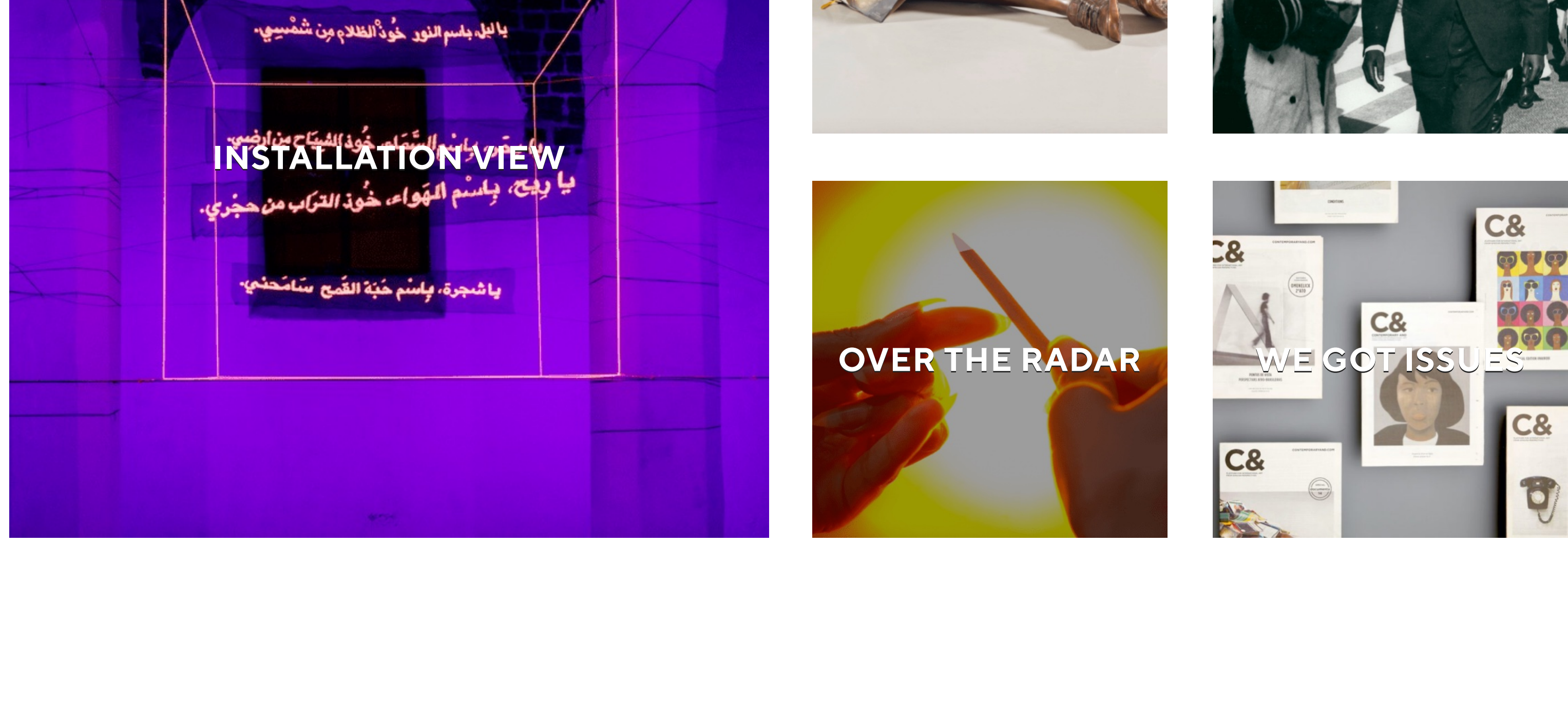
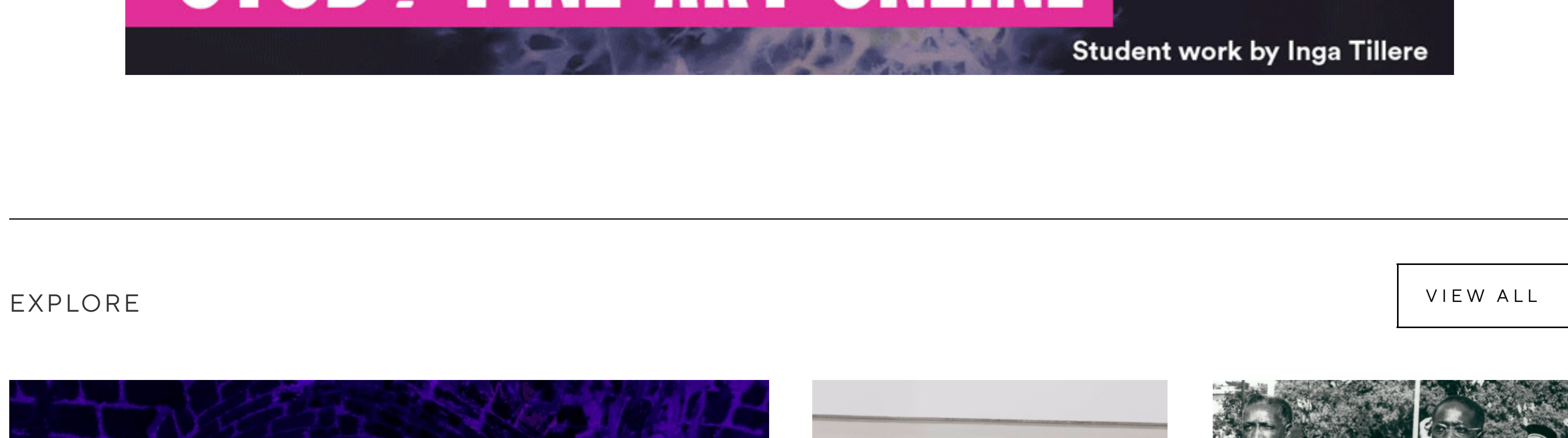
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