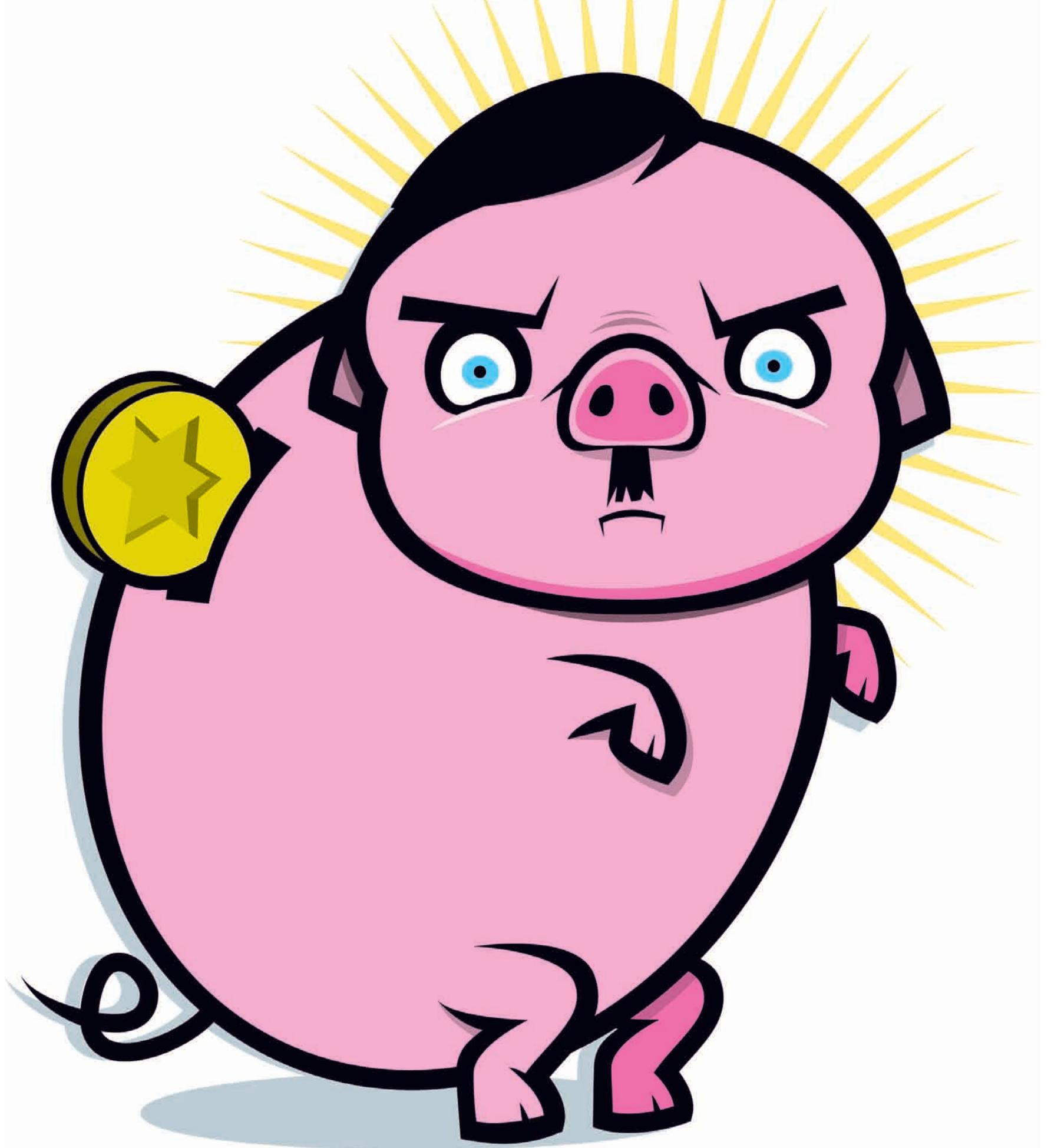


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Inside: Music,  
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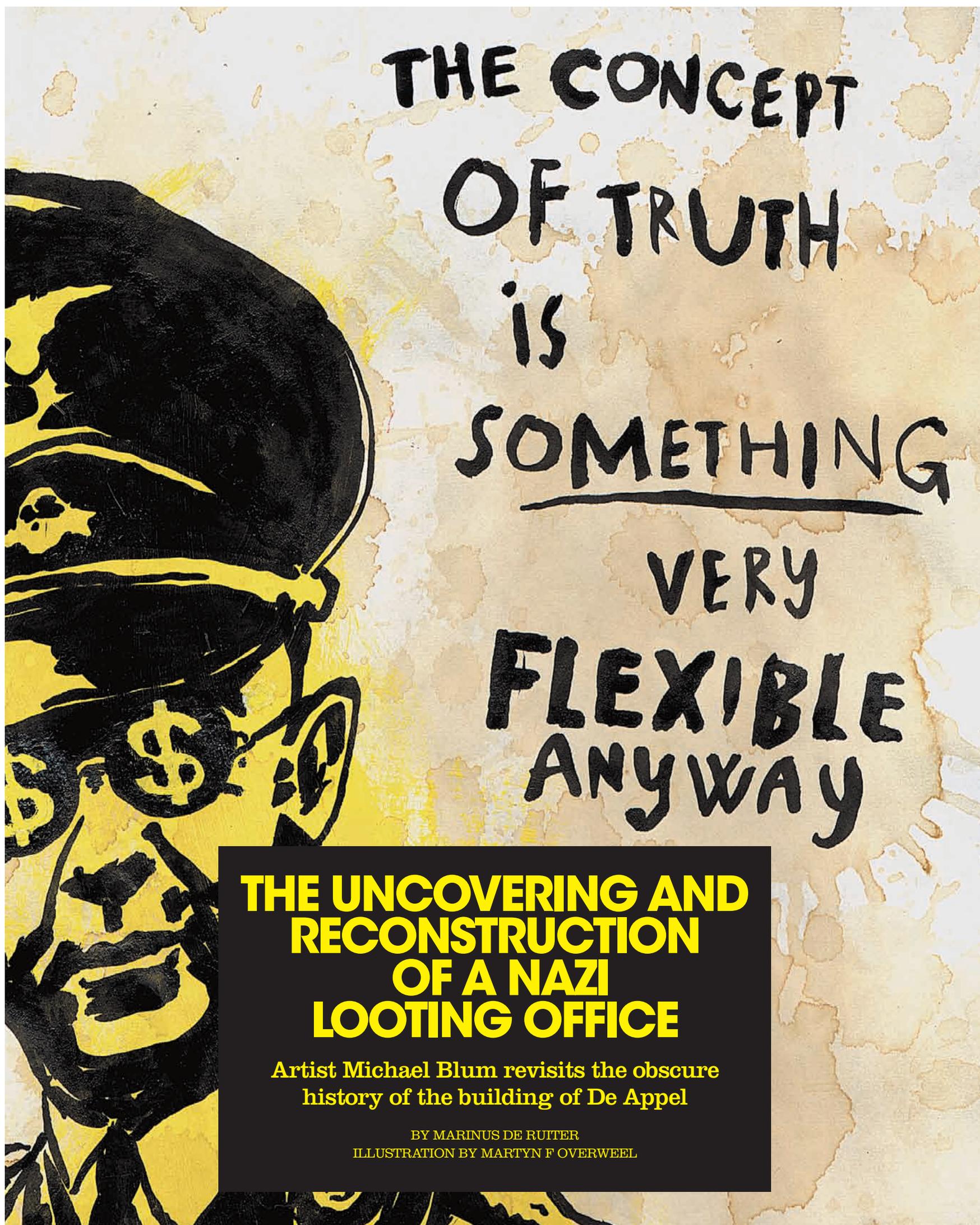


# PIGGY BANK

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## THE UNCOVERING AND RECONSTRUCTION OF A NAZI LOOTING OFFICE

Artist Michael Blum revisits the obscure history of the building of De Appel

BY MARINUS DE RUITER

ILLUSTRATION BY MARTYN F OVERWEEL

**N**azi gold, plundered masterpieces, secrets, lies and collaboration. These are the unsettling and unexpected finds unearthed at the building on Nieuwe Spiegelstraat which now houses contemporary art gallery De Appel. The grim history is highlighted by artist Michael Blum in the exhibition *Mercury in Retro-*

*grade*, where his installation 'Lippmann, Rosenthal & Co' reconstructs several rooms in the eponymous Jewish bank which once occupied the building. During WWII, it served as a cover for the Nazi looting of valuables belonging to the Dutch Jewish population.

Recently, interest in restoring Jewish property stolen in the war to its rightful

owners has been revived. This was spurred on by the Dutch's government agreement to give back over 200 paintings to the heirs of Jacques Goudstikker, the Amsterdam art dealer whose collection of Old Masters was stolen by the Nazis and later scattered across the globe.

'The Goudstikker case is so huge that it draws a lot of attention,' says Blum on

the phone from his temporary studio in New York. 'This is a moment of looking back into history and of introspection for the Netherlands now.'

'The original idea for me was not to talk about World War Two [writ] large or Nazi looting in the Netherlands,' says Blum about his work. 'I wanted to focus on the building and when I found out

about this bank, it was the trigger to start this project. The amazing thing is that Goudstikker's business was in the same block, on the Herengracht. This site contains so much history, it's quite impressive.'

#### Don't bank on it

Lippmann, Rosenthal & Co (Liro) was founded as a private bank in 1859. In 1940, it was placed under German supervision, with the hope of benefitting from its international reputation. By using its Jewish name, the Germans were able to carry out large transactions on the international market with little chance of creating suspicion that the currencies and stocks were stolen—which would have led to a major loss of value.

Before the war, the bank had four directors; the day after German occupation, two of them committed suicide. The others, Edgar Fuld and Robert May, kept working at the bank. 'Even though they were Jews it was quite amazing that they survived the war,' says Blum. 'The bank was appointed a German administrator, or *verwalter*, called Alfred Flesche, but he basically needed Fuld and May because of their contacts.'

Meanwhile, the Germans had opened a second Liro building at Sarphatistraat 55, where the looting took place. In 1941, all Dutch Jews received a decree which coerced them into opening an account at Liro, and turning in their bank holdings, cash and securities. Another decree in 1942 demanded that they hand in art, precious metals and jewels.

Although the Sarphatistraat building appeared to be a bank, not least because it was formerly owned by De Amsterdamsche Bank, it actually had more in common with a depository and sales office. Its main aim was to make profit from confiscated Jewish goods. The proceeds were then turned over to the Vermogensverwaltungs- und Rentenanstalt, the central institute where the loot was administered.

The Nazis continually gave people the false impression that the measures were temporary. Most believed that they would be able to retrieve their possessions after the war, because they received proper bank statements and receipts for all the goods they had turned in. Also, it remained possible for them to withdraw money from the bank account to support their families.

In his concise study, *Nazi Looting: The Plunder of Dutch Jewry During the Second World War* historian Gerard Aalders addresses how the Nazis kept using Liro to mislead and rob Jewish people right up to the bitter end. In Kamp Westerbork, from which over 100,000 Jews were deported to their deaths in concentration camps, Liro employees were assigned to confiscate prisoners' very last valuable possessions.

It was difficult for Blum to find out what happened on Nieuwe Spiegelstraat during the war. For research, he turned not only to Aalders' book, but also the Nationaal Archief in Den Haag and the NIOD (Nationaal Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie) in Amsterdam. 'There's a lot of information on the fake Liro bank on Sarphatistraat, but on the original there's hardly anything. It was a private bank, so the archives didn't belong to the state and they just disappeared.'

'Banking is a profession that involves a lot of secrecy, regardless of when and



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where,' Blum continues. 'On the one hand, it has to be public, but on the other, most of the serious business is done behind the scenes and has to maintain very strong secrecy.' Blum's installation in De Appel strives to express the mysterious reputation of the Nieuwe Spiegelstraat bank.

#### A psychic connection

The installation takes up half of the building. The first thing you see is the Lippmann, Rosenthal & Co plaque on the facade. On the first floor, there is a reconstruction of a corridor with closed doors. The light behind the smoked glass suggests there are people working behind them. A staircase leads to the second floor where text panels explain the story of the bank in a simple way.

Also on the second floor there are three more spaces: the first is a bank lobby, with period furniture and decor. 'This will be a re-enactment of a daily scene from the bank in a Madame Tussauds style,' says Blum. 'Two mannequins will represent the directors of the bank, Fuld and May, during the war.' The second space is an archive with documents loaned from the Nationaal Archief and NIOD.

Finally, there's a projection of a remarkable video. For this, Blum recorded a psychic who performed a reading of the site. 'We asked her to tell us about the past and the future of the building,' says Blum. The artist has worked with clairvoyants on previous projects. 'When I'm in a new city I always look for them and mostly their ads are everywhere. It was actually quite difficult to find one in Amsterdam and, interestingly enough, she's a Brit.' (Also interestingly enough, Blum found her in *Amsterdam Weekly*.)

'I personally don't believe in clairvoyants,' says Blum. 'But I do believe in storytelling and I think they're a fantastic source for stories. Also, I like their ability to transmit an experience of a space. For me, this particular psychic was good in the sense that I liked the way she walked, talked and moved. She comes across well on screen and that's important, because in the end, it's a video and nothing else.'

#### Eye of the beholder

'I'm not providing the truth,' says Blum about his approach. 'The concept of truth is something very flexible anyway. The central point is that I'm an artist and not a historian. If I were a historian, I wouldn't even mention anything I wasn't sure about, but as an artist, I'm free to speculate. As a general statement about my art, I could say that it is about re-reading myth and the construction and fictionalisation of history.'

'My intention is to bring all this information into the limelight and launch a debate,' Blum continues. 'By mixing documentation and speculation I want to motivate visitors to do their own research.' He immediately points out that an exhibition might not be the best way to reach a mass audience. 'Of course I would be happy to go far beyond the boundaries of the art field and not to have only specialists look at it or write about it, but to have it pervade the whole society, or at least a more general culture field.'

Blum's fervour could easily be linked to his Jewish background—he was born in Israel, grew up in France and is now based in Austria. He's not afraid that his new work will pigeonhole him though. 'It's always a danger,' he admits. 'It would be a problem if my intention was to teach Dutch people how bad they were during World War Two, but I'm so far from that. In the end, I really hope the work will contradict this idea.'

The artist does underline the lack of knowledge about the war in this country. 'Apparently there's still a lot to be discussed, unlike Germany for instance which did the work much earlier,' he says. 'A lot of Dutch people have no idea about [the intensity of] collaboration. It was one of the best countries for the Germans as occupiers. The looting apparently never happened so efficiently in any other country. Also because the Netherlands is small it was possible to conceal this system.'

#### Digging up dirt

New light was shed on the case in 1997 when *De Groene Amsterdammer* revealed a scandal surrounding archives that were unexpectedly found in a build-

ing which used to belong to the Finance Ministry. These archives were suppressed by the ministry's employees, who had sold unclaimed valuables from Liro at the end of the 1960s. The affair led to a surge of interest in Liro's history.

Still, the Liro on Nieuwe Spiegelstraat is a typical example of a case that remains a mystery. It has led to some interesting theories among historians and journalists about what actually took place there in and after the war. 'On paper, the banks have little in common,' says Blum. 'Flesche, the German administrator, was also on the board of Sarphatistraat. But there was a conflict between him and Fischbock, who ran the Sarphatistraat branch. Fischbock wanted to merge the two so it would look more official and serious, but Flesche supported the absolute division. As a real banker, he wanted nothing to do with Sarphatistraat.'

Flesche's motivation might not have been a moral one. Historian Wim Klinkenberg, who died in 1995, had claimed that Flesche fled to Germany carrying millions worth of diamonds and jewellery in 1944, when the allies appeared to be close to freeing the Netherlands. Although Klinkenberg's reading of history is controversial, and though he was labelled a hysterical communist in some circles, he does have an interesting explanation for the mere five years that Flesche spent in prison after the war, a fact that led other historians to conclude that he could never have stolen the property in the first place.

Aside from administrating the Nieuwe Spiegelstraat branch, Flesche was also director of the trading company Rhodius Koenigs, which was set up by companies like Deutsche Bank and the chemicals company IG Farben and was involved in the development of the German atom bomb.

Flesche's role in Rhodius Koenigs was deliberately ignored by the US when Flesche was on trial, thereby avoiding his mentioning anything about the atomic project. Because of the Cold War, any useful information about this was kept under wraps, according to Klinkenberg in his 1971 book *De Ultracentrifuge, 1937-1970*.

#### A right Royal controversy

One other point in the history of Liro Nieuwe Spiegelstraat still insufficiently researched is the involvement with Hollandse Koopmansbank (HKB), which dealt in shares stolen from the Jews. Liro Nieuwe Spiegelstraat merged with this in 1968 to form Hollandse Koopmansbank-Lippmann Rosenthal.

According to Klinkenberg's 1979 book, *Prins Bernhard: een politieke biografie*, the vagueness surrounding this connection is to do with the friendship between HKB-Director Gerhard Fritze and the Royal Family. Klinkenberg describes how Fritze and Prins Bernhard knew each other from the espionage department at IG Farben, and concludes that the Prince was a spy for the Germans before the war.

'This history is non-ending,' says Blum, who had only limited time to include his investigations in the installation. 'It always happens when you look at history from really close. Things are never extremely clear. But I'm still very interested to know these things.'

Mercury in Retrograde runs from 8 April to 4 June at De Appel (Tues-Sun 11.00-18.00), Nieuwe Spiegelstraat 10, 625 5651.