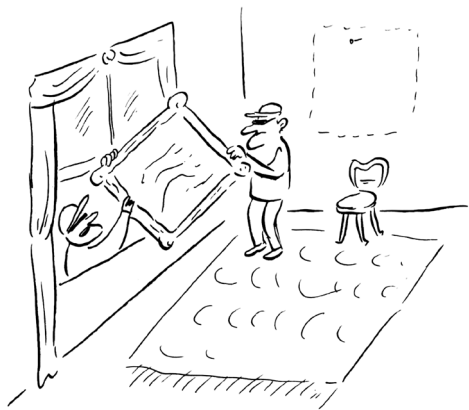


Beautiful Eccentrics

**Pablo Helguera
The Small
Inconveniences
of Art Theft**

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Inconveniences
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*How stealing an artwork
makes it invisible
—for the thief.*



“Basically, I have always found the whole idea of exchanging art for money undignified.”

In 2000 I was invited to participate at the Viper festival in Basel, Switzerland—a video, performance, and new media festival. One of the components of my participation was the exhibition of a few works in the sprawling arts complex where the festival took place. The night before the opening myself and several other artists finished installing and we went out for drinks to celebrate.

The next morning, I found that one of my works (a large digital print) was missing. Not only had I never had a work of mine stolen, but to top it off, it happened in, of all places, Switzerland! Needless to say, one of the safest countries in the world.

The festival organizers were mortified. They called the police, who showed up and were totally puzzled that the artwork had disappeared. They

took a detailed report, but—likely not very experienced in art theft—it didn't seem likely that they would ever find the work before the opening, or ever. I was deeply puzzled by the incident yet had no choice but to accept the fact that the piece was gone.

That night, during the opening, one of the artists who I had gone out to drinks with the previous night found me in the crowd. We talked for a while

again, and at some point he told me that he wanted to show me something.

He took me to the lower floor of the festival building, where the restrooms were located, next to an empty coat-check room. He went inside the room and pulled out my work, which was rolled up inside a cabinet.

I was shocked by this revelation, as he proceeded to explain that after our conversation the

previous night he had become obsessed with the work and felt the uncontrollable urge to own it. He proceeded to tell me a convoluted and nonsensical tale about his wife and his personal obsessions. It was clear that the artist was mentally unstable, but I had not realized it until that moment. I simply asked him to give me back my work, and that was the end of it.

The little episode, which was a rarity in my career, remained in my mind over the years. I was not interested in the act of stealing per se, but in the impulse behind it, and what came afterward. The motivation certainly was not financial (as the piece was worth very little if anything) nor reputational (as it was not an important piece, nor me an important artist, nor would this artist have been able to show off a work that

was publicly known to having been stolen). Instead, it was an almost irrational urge, an obsession, that compelled this person to steal: an urge that seemingly originated from a strong identification with the work. However, the most relevant question for me was this: why did he choose to reveal to me that he had stolen the work?

This led me to think about some questions around art theft in general (my rather worthless artwork not being a representative example). Setting aside the fact that stealing and reselling a famous (or even not so famous) artwork without getting caught these days is almost impossible, there are two problems of psychological, sociological, and philosophical dimensions presented by the idea of owning a stolen art piece.

First, assuming that the art thief is not insane, is the enjoyment of an artwork in solitude and secrecy worth the risk of theft? I ask this question because, if history is any guide, art thieves might be bound to go down the psychological road of Vincenzo Peruggia, the Italian museum worker who stole the *Mona Lisa* from the Louvre in 1911. After bringing the painting to Italy and hiding it inside a trunk, Peruggia eventually

“became impatient,” as it is told, and contacted the art dealer Mario Fratelli, trying to figure out if he could somehow be rewarded for returning the work to Italy (in the end, his reward was to land in jail). While this might not always be the case, the reality might be that having a great artwork all to yourself, without anyone else knowing about it, is not such a wonderful thing after all. Contemporaneous descriptions of the Peruggia

theft (as I recall them) argued that he was just in love with the work, or that he had a nationalist obsession (wanting to return the work to Italy), and later on it seemed clear that his motives were really financial. In any case, he appeared eager to be recognized for his (in his view) heroic, selfless act.

But the paradox that art thieves often can't keep their art theft to themselves may be a testament for the notion that

art can't really be art without having a relationship with society—for the average art collector, showing to others what they own is key to their identity. To add the epistemic dilemma: if no one knows you own the work, is it really yours?

The second problem stemming from stealing art is that objectification is degrading even for objects. It is related to the previous point I have

just made: since art is eminently a social activity, even if you own the object, the artwork is in some kind of suspended animation when it is extricated from society. This was, I suspect, the reason why the eccentric Swiss artist could not help himself and had to bring me to the coat check to show me how he had stolen my own artwork. Like a collector who shows off their collection as a process to affirm their own identity (and

be admired for their taste, vision, support for the arts, etc.) he appeared to be asking for validation—that is, my agreement that the strength of his obsession had merited the theft.

For the reasons outlined above (and yes, ethical and legal concerns as well), I have been generally disinclined to see any value in stealing artworks. Nor am I really interested in owning things

that others already deem treasures; I instead tend to look for things no one else wants and find the value in them (like used books).

However, I have sometimes found myself intersecting in small ways with stories about dishonest dealings.

A decade or so ago, I was approached by the assistant of the former head of a major gallery about the price of

an artoon I had made a few years earlier. This gallery, which I shall not name but that everyone in the art world knows, had at the time closed under lawsuits alleging that they knowingly sold dozens of falsified abstract-expressionist paintings for millions of dollars.

The artoon (reproduced in this book) depicts two thieves stealing a painting while one tells the other:

“Basically, I have always found the whole idea of exchanging art for money undignified.”

“She loves it,” the assistant told me in his email.

I am happy to report that I did keep my dignity. To this day, the drawing has not been sold (or stolen). Yet. But I try to be careful—just in case the Swiss artist comes to pay me a visit.

Colophon

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Vlaanderen
verbeelding werkt