

Notes on Theft as a form of Dialogue with the Work of Art

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«ET POUR TA PUNITION, TU FERAS DE TRÈS BELLES CHOSES. Voilà ce qu'un Dieu, qui n'est pas du tout Jéhovah, dit véritablement à l'homme, après la faute.»

Paul Valéry

Theft is one of the founding myths of Western culture. In Genesis we have Eve stealing the apple from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, while in ancient Greece Prometheus the Titan steals fire from the gods and gives it to mankind. And we could continue with a long list of myths from other cultures in which theft (or abduction) are part of the plot.

But we'll move on to a truism: if nobody does a certain thing, there's no need to ban it. And vice versa: if something is constantly banned, it's because people do it all the time. If you want to find out our most common sins, just look at the Ten Commandments of God's Law, or the Seven Deadly Sins.

Talking about theft as a form of dialogue with an artwork (or an artist) brings to mind the Catholic Church and its relics: the remains of dead saints and all the bits that their bodies had been divided into, as well as any clothing or objects that may have been in contact with them, which are considered worthy of veneration. If we accept that this entails a dialogue between the believer, the saint and the divinity, we must also admit that it has some bearing on what we are discussing here.

In the display case where they are usually kept, relics embody a tremendous paradox: they protect their contents but at the same time incite people to touch. This lesson has been thoroughly learnt by museums and shops: to multiply the value of any object, just place it behind glass. But there is a fine line between admiration, desire, and the temptation to reach out and take something. Particularly if the display cases, pedestals or baubles manage to accentuate a need for possession that may not even have existed a moment earlier.

As in the case of fetishism and amulets from other traditions or superstitions, having a relic meant enjoying special protection, and this aroused desire and a roaring trade in relics at any price. Given their strong social, economic and cultural significance, relics have always been subject to theft and falsification, just like works of art once they conquered their autonomy.

The first thing museums teach us is to admire. There is no other possible way to explain why people without any education at all can recognise a ruined Greek sculpture as being beautiful and valuable. It is the pedestal, the stairs leading up to it, with the entire building as a frame, along with the whole scenography of accumulation and variety that makes us recognise that something is valuable. And the fact is that museums –of the nineteenth century kind– have been presented to us as warehouses, our treasure trove of objects that have been displaced, assembled, stolen and dug up here and there, in the confines of every empire. The rest are not much to speak of, even those that have shed their ornamental shell, those white rooms that display the collections of magnates, always assembled in shady circumstances. Essentially, their treatment of spectators is the same: an intimidating clinical or palatial air, harassment by security cameras and guards, and admonishments to keep quiet, look and not touch. Basically, they transport us back to childhood for a while. So why wouldn't we paint a moustache on La Gioconda, start racing around the Louvre or steal a handful of porcelain sunflower seeds?

To say nothing of kleptomania, which experts describe as a disorder in which a loss of control over their impulses causes sufferers to experience an irresistible urge to steal. There are some who would

like to keep tabs on everybody, to block museum admission to card-carrying kleptomaniacs, for example. But the urge to steal something impulsively in a museum can suddenly strike anybody, when they least expect it, just like love or death. It is the thief's lack of professionalism (or sporadic attacks of kleptomania) that makes it awkward and dangerous, placing them on diffuse, hesitant ground without a clear or defined attitude. We can't give you examples because we're talking about 'criminals' who got their way. About people who we know nothing about, because they have successfully completed their mission. Even if we knew the identity of some of them, it would be whistle-blowing to mention them here... and that isn't nice.

Every age defines its own ethical-legal framework. And at any given moment, it is the dominant class that defines what is to be considered a crime. As such, the meanings of words are also stolen or hijacked («They call it Democracy and it is not»). Remember the cartoon by El Roto published in the newspaper El País: «Don't let those who steal from you define what stealing is» Because throughout history, those who have the power to decide the meaning of words have Power, full stop.

This theft of something that should be public by those in power has been common practice throughout history, backed up by all kinds of excuses and bloody lies (monarchies, churches, political parties, sport, the economy, and so on). A measure of social progress may well be the peoples' and citizens' gradual and onerous recovery of that which power has stolen or seized from them.