

The Transformative power of Theft and Appropriation:

Issues with Ownership, Authorship and Larceny.

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Word count: 5027

Illustrations

Figure 1: *After Walker Evans: 4*, Sherrie Levine, 1981. Accessible from:
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/267214>

Figure 2: *Alabama Tenant Farmer Wife*, Walker Evans, 1936. Accessible from:
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/284685?searchField=All&sortBy=Relevance&ft=Allie+Mae+Burroughs&offset=0&rpp=20&pos=7>

Figure 3: *America*, Maurizio Cattelan, 2016. Accessible from:
<https://www.guggenheim.org/exhibition/maurizio-cattelan-america>

Figure 4: *Bye Los Angeles!*, Amalia Ulman, 2020. Accessible from:
<https://www.instagram.com/p/B7CZPuVnMVj/>

Introduction

The skylight gently creaks open, one figure dressed in black descends from the ceiling on a wire. The Louvre is still this time of night, all of the guards are either asleep or not paying close enough attention. The thieves stop just before the laser tripwire and swings towards the *Mona Lisa*. The job was too easy from the beginning they think after grabbing the painting and ascending to the roof, looking at their prize. It softly glistens in the light of their torches; the smell of turpentine hits their noses. The thieves realise as they are surrounded by guards that indeed *they* might be the ones being robbed. They drop the "Mona Lisa", hands wet with oil paint!

In this essay, I intend to explore how we perceive theft and how our perception of theft changes things. How theft itself can become part of an art piece and transform a work in a unique way. I aim to look at different aspects of theft ranging from physical theft to conceptual theft and how we, as a society, and the establishments of law look upon this. I will be using examples to explain my ideas to create a discourse and show the power of larceny in art. In addition to this, I will explore where we draw the line between theft and fair use. The line these days may be heavily blurred, however I think it is important to know where we sit and what is right, not in the eyes of the law necessarily, but what is, morally, fair use.

Appropriation is a keyword in this topic; it is used in many different contexts to imply taking without asking, however theft and appropriation are not the same thing, but when does taking change from appropriation to theft? I will be using a range of information and evidence to support my ideas from legal articles to philosophers in order to effectively analyse the effect of appropriation and theft in different fields of artistic practice.

When you steal something, you take that which is not yours and make it your own (Participation, 1968). In order to prevent and punish those who would steal from us all societies have invented laws against doing such things. In the twenty first century, with the Internet and despite the latest General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) rules (Information commissioner's office, 2020) so much of our own information seems to be available to be taken and used by companies for their own profit. Theft is becoming more pervasive whether we know it or not and it is my belief that we should be exploring how theft affects fine art and question even if you are the author of a work are you always still the owner?

Context

Appropriation Art has a very significant place in modern art history. Many famous artists such as Andy Warhol(Gilbert, 2019) and Picasso(Jones, 2019)have been known to appropriate images into their work. In LA you will find ‘the most famous artist(The Most Famous Artist, n.d.) ’who appropriates images of brand logos and takes other people's paintings and alters them slightly to make his own. The Pictures Generation were a loose group of artists who worked mainly in New York from the 70s to the 80s working primarily with either found images or photography.(Eklund, 2009, p16) Controversially, a number of this group have been accused of unfair use of others‘ images including Sherrie Levine’s *After Walker Evans: 4* (see figure 1) which was appropriated from Walker Evans (see figure 2). This is unsurprising, perhaps, as they have essentially used an image produced by someone else and have made money from it. Is this fair use? When looking at their work from a current day perspective back to events that took place 40 to 50 years ago can my opinion be valid? Am I wrong to judge past events by contemporary standards? Furthermore, my geographical and cultural positions are different. The contexts are, therefore, radically different.

Another facet of theft is the effect an act of theft can have on an art piece. We can discuss authorship of work and originality however but one aspect of the work that I think that is often not considered is the effect of having an artwork stolen on how we, as viewers, observe an art piece. This is where my more contemporary example of Cattelan and his *America* (see figure 3) comes in.

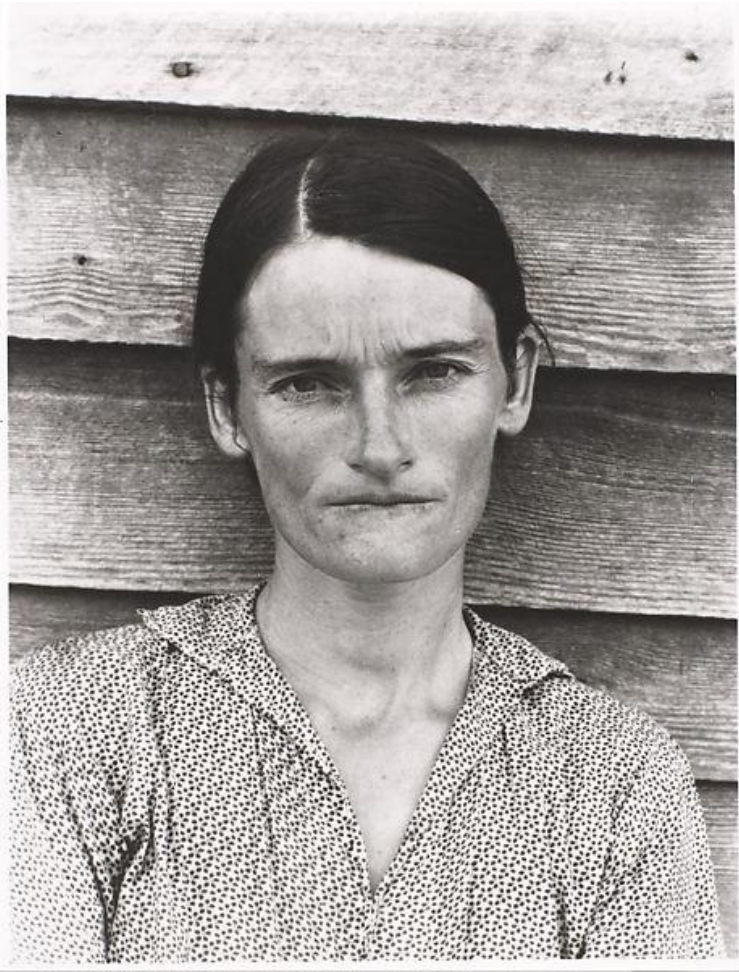


Figure 1: *After Walker Evans*, Sherrie Levine, 1981

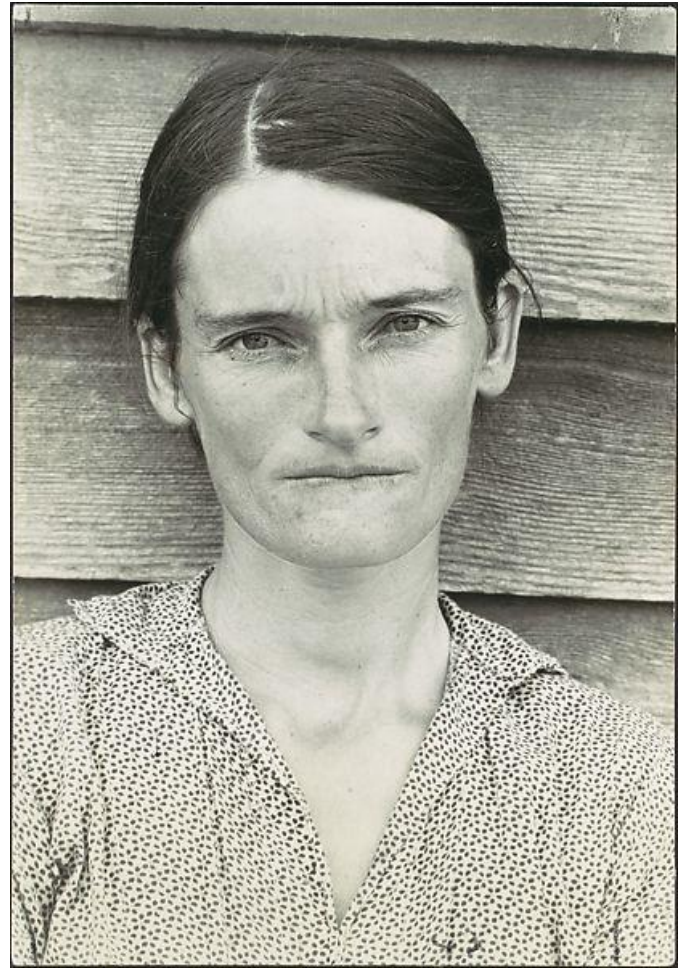


Figure 2: *Alabama Tenant Farmer Wife*, Walker Evans, 1936

The golden toilet *America was* recently stolen from an exhibition at Blenheim Palace (Green, 2019). Most people had not heard of Cattelan or *America* before it was stolen, however now that it has been taken everyone knows about it. In a world of fake news, do we believe that maybe it is possible that Cattelan stole it himself for more press? This also brings up the question of value. The toilet was stated to be worth a million pounds but, is it still worth £1 million now that it has gone? I have chosen to focus on Cattelan's *America* and Levine's *After Walker Evans: 4* for this essay as they have much in common in the way that a viewer observes them and how crime transforms them.



Figure 3: *America*, Maurizio Cattelan, 2016

When discussing ownership, authorship, and theft it is important to include philosophical discussions on the matter for example Barthes and Baudrillard. In this essay I intend to challenge the notion that Barthes states in *The death of the author*“ the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.“ (Barthes, 1977, p. 148)I want to explore how, not only, appropriation, and Larceny, but also the creative process can continue even past the point of a creation’s completion.

In Baudrillard’s *Simulations* (Baudrillard et al., 1983) he talks about the order of Appearance of Simulations I wish to use this model including the Counterfeit, Production and Simulation to explore how this informs our view of contemporary artworks. I believe that the model of Simulations can provide alternative methods of viewing appropriated or stolen artworks as we see them for what they represent rather than what they are.

Creativity, at its core could be regarded as essentially copying. Everything we do has a history somewhere; all that we are and do is informed by everything that came before us and we can never escape from what has already come to pass. Since we, the living, work in the present everything we do is informed by what is now the past and things that have now ceased to be. No matter how original you think your idea is, I am sure someone thought of it before you (Staff, 2016). Originality is a complete misnomer and all we can ever be is inspired. This assumption, I believe, provides context for my view on the topic of copyright, appropriation and art theft. As the old saying goes you cannot create in a vacuum (Salmon, 2018) and there will always be inspiration taken from somewhere, to what degree you let it inform your practice, however, probably determines whether it is copying or not.

Within fine art as a genre copying is intrinsic to its history add reference. Before the days of modern art copying was an essential part of the learning process as this is the way an apprentice would develop technique and "learn" from their master (Boundless world history, n.d.). In contemporary art, copying someone's technique or method of practice is not intrinsically stealing, however it is the appropriation of the idea that forms the crux of the issue. This brings me to my first case study. Sherrie Levine (1947) and specifically her piece *After Walker Evans: 4*.

Appropriation: Sherrie Levine, *After Walker Evans: 4* (1981)

Artists draw on many sources for inspiration in their work, we all surround ourselves with unique spheres of people, cultures and information. As discussed by (Leski, 2016, p.51) in *Storm of creativity* “because there is no real protocol governing the way artists gather or research, the range of how gathering happens in creative practice is vast in the arts.” In my view, this is important to understand because the place an artist can draw visual inspiration from can be from all elements of their environment which can also be other artists. Levine took inspiration and used images from a variety of artists including (The Art Institute of Chicago, n.d.) Egon Schiele and Walker Evans(The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.). In my opinion, I believe that copying is an essential part of art. If we begin to restrict the fields in which we can and cannot work and the directions we can develop, can we truly call our work creative?

Sadly, I feel that there was quite a strong opposition to the case made for Levine's work. I might be tempted to play the devil's advocate and entertain the possibility that actually what Levine has done is theft. In *Simulations* John Baudrillard explores the notion of reality and simulations and how sometimes the difference is hard to tell.

“go and simulate a theft in a large department store: how do you convince the security guards that it is a simulated theft? There is no objective difference: the same gestures and the same signs exist as for a real theft; in fact, the signs incline neither to one side nor the other. As far as the established order is concerned, they are always of the order of the real.” (Baudrillard et al., 1983, p.38)

I think the same is true of Levine's *After Walker Evans: 4* as technically they are the same thing, albeit one is a documentation of the other. Is it unfair for the audience to say that two pieces of art that are identical are somehow different? On the other hand, this does not refute the notion that Levine's work is a simulation however it does make it difficult for an audience to tell the difference.

One aspect of *After Walker Evans: 4* that I think is important to recognise is the question it poses as to the morality of the laws surrounding copying/theft. One quote I believe succinctly sums up my view on the matter is from Free Culture.(Lessig, 2005, p.306)

“The law should regulate in certain areas of culture- but it should regulate culture only where that regulation does good. Yet lawyers rarely test their power, or the power they promote, against this simple pragmatic question “will it do good?” when challenged about the expanding reach of the law, the lawyer answers, “why not?” We should ask, “why?” show me why your regulation of culture is needed. Show me how it does good. And until you can show me both, keep your lawyers away.”

Based on this quote, I ask is what happened to Levine right? Did it “do good?” I believe this is a pervasive problem and won't stop being an issue as long as there is law and art in conflict. In conclusion, I believe there will always be slight delay between contemporary art and updating the law however to ask the question “does it do good?” is one that should not be forgotten.

In my opinion the US legal system's response to Levine's *After Walker Evans: 4* didn't do a lot of good. Both appropriation and Larceny are active changes; you have taken one object and made it into another whether you like it or not. The taking is transformative and now that it is your own it becomes something else. Levine's work does just that; subtly done however still a change. In *Art after appropriation* they say that Levine's work (Welchman, 2001, p. 10) "constitutes 'an act of theft', but, importantly, still makes it an artwork; many artworks have involved illegal activities but still count as an artistic product of culture. The work has changed conceptually by the taking; the piece you are now seeing might be thought of as an echo of its original. The fact it is a photograph of the photograph exaggerates this further, as metaphorically speaking, you create this cyclical loop of photographs. Let's say a tourist took a photo of the piece in the gallery then the echo chamber carries on, the subject of the photograph is almost lost as the subject being photographed is so far removed from its conception, but would all those gallery visitors be prosecuted for theft? I think not.

This further brings up questions about the notion of "The Original" as some would say *After Walker Evans: 4* is not an original. I believe however, it is as its original as subject matter is different. The work is an artistic re-creation of the photograph and although by its technical nature is a copy, it is still original in its subject and concept. Every copy you make of a photograph will be unique as it was created in a different period of time and has been interacted within a different way. You would not call a twin brother a copy, even if genetically identical they have both experienced wildly different things. I feel it's the same for works such as *After Walker Evans: 4*.

I want to step away from a legal perspective now and I asked the question, can an artwork ever really be stolen? In the *Death of the Author*, Barthes says, “The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.” (Barthes, 1977,p. 148) You may be able to steal the artwork as an object but intrinsically the value is in its notoriety and its fame. If you steal an artwork the financial value may come with it, but its cultural value does not as all you have taken is its physical form. I liken it to martyrdom, when the martyr dies, the idea, the legend, carries on. Stealing a piece of work only makes it more notorious and possibly gives it greater cultural value, as shown by the infamy of Levine's *After Walker Evans: 4*. In conclusion, I think it's important to understand that if the Walker Evans estate had not had an issue with Levine creating her work or even if the case had come to trial in a different country, then nobody would care, and the artwork could be simply regarded as fair use appropriation. Perhaps, it could be said that you cannot steal a concept, but can you change its author?

Being original and unique is difficult, as we are all very similar creatures, we all like to sleep and eat for example. I think it is important to remember that other people exist outside of academia. If you asked a lay person, someone not involved at all in the art world, what is the difference between *After Walker Evans: 4* and *Alabama Tenant Farmer Wife* you might be surprised if they could identify it. This is indicative of the fine art world and certain level of exclusivity has as. If your lay person didn't know the pieces and the story behind them they probably wouldn't understand the difference. Law was not made by artists, it was made by governments, art lay people, so how can we expect them to understand the art worlds' views

on originality and include that in a legal system? Walravens Makes a similar point made the Dear Images book when they say

“Contemporary artistic practices reveal a tendency on the part of the artist to rid their works of their directly perceivable personal stamp. In the event of a dispute, it is possible to question the originality of a work if it does not ‘show ’its author’s personality. This is because copyright law has remained tied to a nineteenth century approach to art as being representational or figurative in nature.”

(Walravens, 2002, p. 173)

The impact of theft and appropriation of art seems to directly affect a small group of people. It could be thought that there are no wider political ramifications and so it has very little to do with society generally so why would you bother changing a law that affects a whole country because of one problem? However, artists are part of society; creativity is integral to culture so I might argue that allowing creativity to be constrained by law does have an impact on us all. The clash between creativity and originality is complex and subtle, creativity strives for originality however, to be original is almost unattainable. Artists have to continue to think of new ways to be original and I wonder whether Cattelan has managed to do this due to the theft of some of his pieces. This is to where I shall now turn.

Theft: Maurizio Cattelan, *America* (2016)

America, land of the free! Where you can be whatever you want to be even if you want to be a horrible person. Cattelan summarizes his view of America in one simple object (see figure 3) and does it in a terribly succinct way. Recently *America* has been stolen from the exhibition it was at in Blenheim Palace. Surprisingly unfazed by this, the artist has moved on to do many more controversial things. Cattelan is a playful artist, for example, his most recent fiasco of the £100,000 banana has caused an uproar (Vigdor, 2019). This may be due to the general public's dislike of someone eating a hundred thousand pounds worth of a single banana or that a banana should ever be priced at £100,000!

However, here I would like to reflect on the theft of *America* and how it has been changed by its theft. Now I don't think that Cattelan did steal the piece however, if he did what he has done is added to the story of this piece and created an interesting continuity within it. The piece, now magically stolen, is featured in newspapers and articles all over the world, not only does gain infamy but creates a narrative in which the finding of this piece becomes a pseudo-end goal on this "timeline" of the piece. As said in *The storm of creativity* (Leski, 2016, P. 165) “ if creativity continues; an artefact formed through relative practice is not an end point but rather a point along a never ending way.”. I think it is important to reflect on not just how this has done wonders for his celebrity, but *America* is now durational; it is more than a static sculpture, it can be seen as an idea and creation in motion as well.

Following this line of thought I wish to counter my last point and say that instead of being one stolen art work it could be thought there are now two pieces of art. Let me explain, as stated here *The storm of creativity* (Leski, 2016, p. 95)“ perceiving and conceiving can be

understood as the root processes behind discovery and invention, which in effect is what creativity is.” Using this to understand Cattelan’s work I believe we can draw a distinct divide between *America* as it was originally intended and *America* post theft.

America is a commentary on the political state of The United States being like a very expensive toilet. It was a sculpture, however, once it had been stolen, the piece became an intangible idea. It had changed form and was now viewed through a totally different lens. The viewers will now not see it as commentary on America's political system but, its true value to the public lies mainly in the spectacle of expensive art theft. In this way, I believe that through the theft of *America* the work has been changed. This transformation has manifested itself into what I would call a whole new piece. If this is the case then comes the tricky question of who created this, and is *America* post theft Cattelan’s property anymore?

I know this may seem like a ridiculous question but hold on. Speaking legally, of course Cattelan owns the physical toilet. This is unquestionable. However, I ask does he have authorship of *America* post theft now that it has been stolen? He has no part in the process now, whatever he does there's no effect on the concept of the stolen £1 million toilet. As discussed in *Art after Appropriation* (Welchman, 2001, p. 10) they draw upon the legal requirement in order for you to claim the work is yours then it must have your ‘signature’ or something that clearly identifies it is yours. Albeit a dated view from a time when people thought of art as only a product, the techniques used not the conceptual idea. I believe the ownership principle holds true in certain examples. (Welchman, 2001, p. 10) “most works today do not seek to describe a situation or a feeling and have no representational function in them-selves... It becomes a delicate matter, therefore, to access the stamp of the artist’s personality as required by the law and, consequently, the originality of a work”.(Beckenstein,

2017) The significance of this quote is saying that it is out of Cattelan's hands now.

Whatever happens to the artwork is not up to him and he has no choice or ability to lay his "stamp of the artists personality" on *America* post theft. In conclusion I say can *America* post theft ever really be his, as the work he made originally is not the art piece we understand today post theft.

In (Walravens, 2002, p. 183) they say "the proposal to adopt an objective approach does not reflect the specificity of artistic creation. Accordingly, a refinement of the subjective conception seems more appropriate." Artistic creation cannot be done by one person alone, there needs to be people who agree that what you make is art too. And I think that it is important to consider the people and factors that go into making an artwork what it is. Whether it be critical recognition or celebrity press. *America* has become so much more than it originally was and has developed this way because of the world around it. For example, in (Beckenstein, 2017) they reference to the audience popularising the toilet on social media. "Some private moments have gone viral, including one sitter posed on the toilet like Rodin's *Thinker*. All of which must delight Cattelan, whose work is perfect for an age with so little regard for the sanctity of privacy. In granting everyone the opportunity to own a precious artwork." This gives the work a new level, the piece is not interactive and can be re-created and captured in a unique way every time someone takes a photo of it. With the presence of technology and social media-based artwork, you could simply post a picture of yourself on the toilet and call this art. Amalia Ulman uses social media as her medium to create artwork so for her, her work only exists on the internet (see figure 4). In summary the work is developed and takes on a public persona when situated in this way.



Figure 4: *Bye Los Angeles!*, Amalia Ulman, 2020

Following this train of thought “how did the public respond to this artworks theft?” I hear you ask. Well reader let me tell you, in ways that I’m sure could only make Cattelan smile.(Marshall, 2019) "It's a hoax," said Jackie Blake, 72, a retiree. Mr. Cattelan had "probably got it sitting somewhere to see what the reaction of us people is." The important part to draw from this is how the work has been affected by its physical absence. Because the work is gone people now speculate, hypothesize and invent reasons. It feels like the beginning of myth and folklore; in 100 years it could be a local legend of the town, the magical disappearing golden toilet. I believe this indicates the power of absence and the ability to make a piece of art go from unimportant to infamous.

Due to the development of this mystery around the toilet, *America* has become an icon to some people and has begun to manifest physically again, but in a different form. .(Marshall, 2019) Mr. Phillips said he had decided to make the replica toilet -- which cost around \$60 -- to tease one of his customers, who worked at the palace.” The cult of the toilet is evolving

and has now manifested as an idol of the work. *America* lives on through the lives and pranks of others, just as Cattelan would want. I feel the irony of the replicability of the object and how it has now become a small cult phenomenon, shows not only the transformative power of theft but how *America* has become a part of a sub-culture. For example, Robin Hood would not be Robin Hood if people did not tell his stories as actions become legend through the people who hear about them. The celebrity factor of the piece and the sensation it created manifests in a number more ways too.

America has now formed part of a folk ritual, as described by locals (Marshall, 2019) "One of those (image of a golden toilet) was in Off The Hook, a fish and chip shop. Another had been in the bar of The Woodstock Arms, a local pub, until some merry patrons stole that one, too, said Ross Phillips, the pub's manager." I suggest this as hypothetical but what if this toilet stealing became a tradition, a ceremony like Easter egg hunts, the 'Obby 'Oss (cornwall guide, 2009) or Guy Fawkes night where people parade around an old replica toilet? I feel the distinct impact that the theft of *America* has had on the town of Woodstock displays the magnetism people feel towards drama, mystery and Larceny.

So, my last question is, well is it all real? did it actually get stolen or did Cattelan take it just to cause a news fiasco. I think there are two important factors here, one is that there is a very real possibility is it a hoax. As said (Beckenstein, 2017) "In 1996, he stole the contents of an art gallery in the Netherlands, then presented them as his own work. "It was meant to be a comment on displacement," he said at the time, adding, "We took everything including the garbage cans." If the larceny was fake it would seem quite on brand with his £100,000 banana (Vigdor, 2019) being eaten fairly recently too. However, I would now refer to Baudrillard (Baudrillard et al., 1983, p. 38), who asks, how could you show someone the

difference between a real or fake theft? Let's say it was stolen by Cattelan, that would relieve him of any legal issues however, that does not mean it was not stolen. To everyone else the truth is that it was stolen and whether simulated or not it is what people believe that makes the difference.

To put the icing on the cake I will say this, Cattelan, if he did steal his own work, still stole from everyone. As Barthes implies, (Barthes, 1977, p. 148) once you publish your work, it is not exclusively yours anymore. So once this piece was set in a gallery, it was no longer his to take. Even if he had created it, the audience made it the artwork as they observed it, so in a way, if Cattelan did indeed steal *America*, he stole a little bit from everyone who saw it.

Conclusion

In this essay I have shown to you the transformative power of appropriation and theft and how they affect the world around us and our perceptions of artworks. Sherrie Levine and Maurizio Cattelan are two very different artists however they have one common link, this being theft, whether they were the thief or victim of theft. Both works are infamous but not for the actual artwork itself, but the controversy surrounding the ownership and legality of the situations they found themselves in.

On the other hand, I think the line between appropriation and theft stays as hazy as I started. Fine art will never be easy to pin down, it is elusive by nature, if you try to define anything there will always be someone else with a perfectly valid counter argument. This is why Fine Art can struggle in legal systems which tend to deal in objective truths and absolutes where ownership, authorship and originality are clearly defined. Levine's *After Walker Evans: 4* will always be at odds with the law as the objective law and subjective fine art bash heads.

Following this, Cattelan's *America* which was objectively stolen but subjectively could be considered to have developed and been re-born, as it were. Authorship can be an issue for many artists, having an original idea is difficult and someone has probably done it before. When someone takes your idea, it does seem unfair but, yet it is an essential part of the artistic process, that of fair use appropriation and being inspired. These two aspects of life as an artist seem to create a dichotomy; can anyone really own an idea if someone can take it from them freely?

To conclude this essay, we now go to a private view in a famous gallery in London. Anyone who is anyone will be there, a show of all the famous forgeries through art history. People Gawk over Monet and ogle Rembrandt as collectors, gallerists and ‘wannabe’ artists looking for someone to talk to mill around the main hall of the show. The curator struts through the exhibition, avoiding journalists and greeting old friends who just have to get a coffee with you some time. The curator stops by their favourite painting of this exhibition, pride of place at the entrance to the show and number one in the catalogue. Titled the *Mona Lisa no.280* its plaque reads “one of hundreds of full-size prints of the work bought from China.” An old army major with a handlebar moustache sidles up beside the Curator and barks “it’s quite a good copy isn’t it, almost uncanny!” the Curator shrugs his shoulders, saying “yes, I suppose so.” As a wry smile curls across his lips.

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