

EVA AND FRANCO MATTEI  
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# Stolen Pieces

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On July 28, 1995, at the age of 19, Eva and Franco pulled off their first heist. Eva was the lookout, making sure that the guard was sufficiently distracted, and positioning herself to cover the line of sight between him and Franco. Franco slipped between the stools and bottles, slowly stretched out an arm and removed a bottle top. There was no alarm system, and with a theft so small that it would not be immediately noticed, there was no reason for anyone to examine the CCTV footage, which would then be deleted in the space of a few days. Franco put the booty in his pocket and moved away calmly, careful not to draw attention to himself. Once outside the two examined their trophy and smiled at each other, thinking just how easy it had been.

That museum and its massive Edward Kienholz installation were now minus one little element, a bottle top that the artist had chosen to place there, in that

particular spot, in the midst of his rationally created chaos. Who knows what made Eva and Franco undertake this first theft? It certainly wasn't the desire to possess a part of the work, the fetishism typical of the collector mindset. It was the period when the pair, using false names, were engaged in their first sorties in the unspoiled wilds of the Internet, free to explore databases with scant protection and raid sites with a prehistoric level of security, at a time when the term hacker was not yet in common use. They were soon to take up cloning and altering the sites of important organizations. From the conceptual point of view, however, the difference between making off with a museum exhibit and cloning the site of an important organization is minimal: both the organization and the museum are guardians of values, certainties that the world of the Internet seemed intent on annihilating piece by piece. Considering that the first site they cloned was that of the Vatican, the museum job can be seen in a different light, with the spoils acquiring a relic-like aura. From then on the thefts continued apace. In every city they visited, from New York to London, Venice to Paris, Eva and Franco entered the most eminent museums of contemporary art, carefully selected a target and took note of the positions of the guards and

## Stolen Pieces (from Edward Kienholz)

1995-97

Bottle top

3 x 3 x 2 cm





Franco stealing a piece  
from a work by Joseph  
Beuys  
1996

the security systems. On some occasions this called for hours of observation, and the operation would be postponed for a few days if their presence could have aroused suspicions. They began to focus mainly on masterpieces by famous artists, works already belonging to art history: Kandinsky, Duchamp, Beuys, Rauschenberg, Warhol, Koons, de Chirico... They lifted elements of varying dimensions, from simple threads of canvas with traces of color, to actual objects of considerable size. When the museums detected the thefts, sometimes they restored the works and sometimes they even encased them behind glass. But in most cases no measures were taken and the missing pieces can still be discerned. One work by Gilbert & George presents a visible small rectangular hole on the bottom right. One of Penone's tree trunks is missing a branch. George Segal's *La Caissière du Cinéma* is minus a splinter of wood. One of César's compressed cars has lost a piece of dashboard. Joseph Beuys' suit is a little more worn, as a few filaments of felt are now part of the collection of stolen pieces. Oldenburg's deflated toilet is missing a string. *Three Ball Total Equilibrium Tank* by Jeff Koons lacks a little plaque that was attached to the structure. A work by Duchamp is without the date written on a label by the artist himself.

And even his urinal, the famed *Fountain*, is missing a piece, a ceramic fragment from around the hole for the piping.

Are the works diminished as a result? Opinions differ, depending on whether the value of a work of art is deemed to lie more in its material presence or in its act of creation. Hearing that their works had been looted in this way, some artists would probably be angered. Others would probably take it in an ironic vein. Duchamp might have said, as he did when his *Large Glass* accidentally got broken, «It is exactly how I wanted it. Now the work is finally complete».

The last extraction was carried out on July 29, 1997, two years and one day after the first hit. It was a small piece of burned plastic from one of Burri's *Combustions*. Eva and Franco always carefully documented every situation, photographing the work before and after they struck, and at times photographing themselves in front of the masterpiece. Some of the photos were even taken by unwitting guards. There is a video of the last heist. This work has remained a secret for 14 years: Eva and Franco have never revealed its existence or exhibited it. The collection of pieces is kept in a black box that goes everywhere with them. But it is quite likely that the work consists less in the collection than in

**Stolen Pieces (from César)**

1995-97

Speedometer

12 x 9 x 0.5 cm



the actions that led to its creation. The striking thing about it is the realization that works we have continued to see in exhibitions, magazines and catalogues, works we believed consigned to eternity, have actually been modified and altered, even if only slightly, in the meantime. Making a mockery of our faith in the sacrality of art. Works of art change over time, as we know. They change in their physical form and their conceptual definition. A few years back there were many complaints about the restoration of the *Sistine Chapel*, which had removed the signs of the passing of the centuries on Michelangelo's original work. The yellow staining from candle smoke and damp had become an integral part of the "true" image of the work. Bachtin asserted that Gogol's novel *Dead Souls* acquired even greater meaning after serfdom ended in Russia: the term

"dead souls" was no longer a simple bureaucratic classification for the peasants who were counted together with the land, but became elevated to the status of metaphor for the universal condition of the human race. Eva and Franco were never caught red-handed. But they had prepared a defense strategy to use if busted. In an interview that has never been published they cite examples of works reused by other artists, from the *Mona Lisa* of Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* to Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing*. The compelling thing about these early affirmations is the fluid concept of art they evince. «The concept of original is overrated» they assert. «What we see in museums is just one of the infinite aspects that a work has taken on». I don't know whether this statement would have let them off the hook, but it

**Stolen Pieces (from  
Claes Oldenburg)**

1995-97

Shoelace

9.5 x 0.5 x 0.5 cm



**Marcel Duchamp**

*L.H.O.O.Q.*

1919

Postcard reproduction  
with added moustache,  
goatee and title in pencil  
19.7 x 12.4 cm

springs from a vision that undoubtedly contributes to changing the way we see art. A work of art does not reside in the object, but in the system of relationships it gives rise to. A viewer appropriates a work of art when he or she comprehends it, but the type of comprehension changes according to the place, time, culture and even the dominant technology. The act of removing elements from these works, rather than genuinely affecting them, posits that they now exist outside the museum dimension, in the millions of images, descriptions, citations and concepts regarding them that circulate in our networks of communication.

The work disappears behind its simulacra, which now represent it much more than the so-called original does, perhaps glimpsed behind thick glass in a museum amid a throng of visitors. Missing some part that no one actually notices.

Even this operation, which may have been the occasion of Eva and Franco's discovery of their artistic dimension, probably does not require to be displayed in the form of the pieces themselves. But perhaps, who knows, the day might come when their collection ends up in a museum. It would then become a kind of taunt, an eternal return, an inevitable transition from the life to the death of art.





**Stolen Pieces (from Alberto Burri)**

1995-97

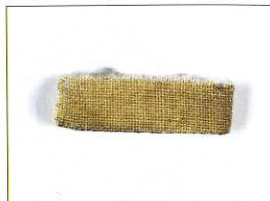
Burned cellophane, 1.5 x 5.5 x 0.5 cm



**Stolen Pieces (from Robert Smithson)**

1995-97

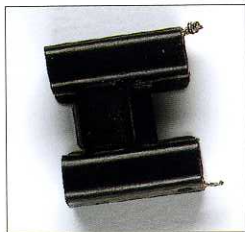
Limestone, 1 x 2 x 1.5 cm



**Stolen Pieces (from Gilbert & George)**

1995-97

Canvas, 2.6 x 7 cm



**Stolen Pieces (from Nam June Paik)**

1995-97

Piece of electrical device, 2.3 x 2.5 x 0.9 cm



**Stolen Pieces (from Daniel Spoerri)**

1995-97

Crushed paper, 2.5 x 5 x 2.5 cm



**Stolen Pieces (from Jean Tinguely)**

1995-97

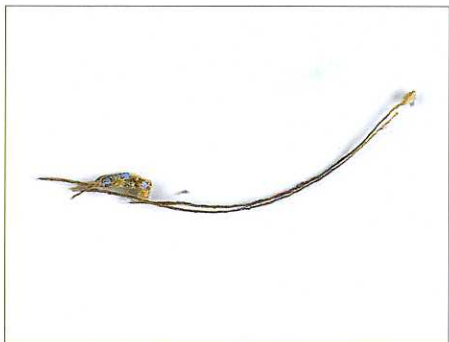
Plastic tape dispenser, 6.2 x 4.9 x 0.5 cm



**Stolen Pieces (from Joseph Beuys)**

1995-97

Molten metal, 1.9 x 5.4 x 0.3 cm



**Stolen Pieces (from Andy Warhol)**

1995-97

Canvas with traces of blue paint, 4.5 x 0.4 cm



**Stolen Pieces (from Richard Long)**

1995-97

Volcanic rock, 2 x 2.5 x 3 cm



**Stolen Pieces  
(from Tom Wesselmann)**

1995-97

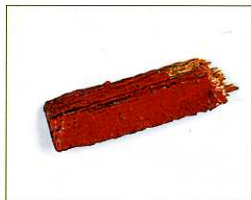
TV Button, 1.5 x 1 x 1 cm



**Stolen Pieces (from Jeff Koons)**

1995-97

Rubber label, 1.3 x 4 cm



**Stolen Pieces (from George Segal)**

1995-97

Painted wood, 3 x 0.9 x 0.2 cm



**Stolen Pieces (from Robert  
Rauschenberg)**

1995-97

Fabric, 1.5 x 1.3 x 1 cm



**Stolen Pieces (from Joseph Beuys)**

1995-97

Paper tape with handwriting, 23 x 2.5 cm