

A case of artistic larceny that's not necessarily grand

ART REVIEW FROM C1

A clandestine video shows the then-21-year-olds completing their final theft — of a tiny chip of burnt material from one of Alberto Burri's famous "Combustion" paintings — from the Museum of Modern Art in Bologna, Italy. The artists also provide before-and-after stills of some of the works of art they altered during their game of Grand Theft Museum.

"Stolen Pieces" doesn't look like much, just a bunch of scraps, for the most part unrecognizable. Among the few things you can actually make out are a speedometer from one of the crushed cars of the French artist César and a bottle cap from an installation by the American Edward Kienholz. The bottle cap is the trophy from the Italians' very first theft, before they had fully decided that it would also count as their first work of art. (They went on to be major figures in the world of Web art, working under the famous alias 0100101110101101.org.)

'Tribute,' not 'vandalism'

Franco Mattes said Sunday that the artists' intention when they began "Stolen Pieces" 15 years ago was "absolutely not vandalism. I thought it was the greatest tribute I could ever pay to these artists."

"I loved them," he added. "We thought we were giving new life to these works — bringing them back to life from the grave of the museum."

"Stolen Pieces" may not look that great, but like so much of the work made in the 20th century — like so much art, ever — "Stolen Pieces" gets its force from the questions it raises.

Here are a few I can't get out of my head:

- Did these artists' tiny thefts much affect the works they stole from? Does it really matter that one of Kienholz's big junk piles is minus one bottle cap? How many of these museums' visitors would have ever noticed or been touched by the alterations?

- Does "Stolen Pieces" finally deflate the old cliché that a true masterpiece is something "from which nothing can be taken and to which nothing can be added without harm"? There's hardly a single work by an Old Master that doesn't look substantially different than it did when it was fresh, and yet we still find plenty to admire in them. (In fact, people objected like crazy when Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling was returned to some semblance of its original bright colors.)

- Originally, weren't most of the targeted works themselves all about *attacking* old-fashioned notions of the precious



PHOTOS COURTESY POSTMASTERS GALLERY, NEW YORK
THE SCENE OF A CRIME: Eva and Franco Mattes with one of Alberto Burri's "Combustion" paintings, from which they removed some burnt material.

work of art whose every detail deserves to be worshipped? Before he became famous, Oldenburg let his viewers touch and take away his ultra-sloppy works of art. I can't imagine that César could have seen the speedometers on his crushed cars as equivalent to so many brushstrokes by Titian, to be preserved at any cost. Did Beuys really treasure every blob

of metal scattered during one of his anti-object performances?

- By making almost imperceptible alterations to other works of art, Eva and Franco Mattes have created a significant new one. Does that leave the world of art a richer place or a poorer one? (So long as no other vandals follow in these artists' footsteps, that is. But once the Matteses'



BIT BY BIT: The Matteses' materials include bits taken (clockwise from top) from Joseph Beuys, Robert Rauschenberg, Tom Wesselman and Edward Kienholz.

move has been made, there's no reason for anyone else to repeat it.)

In 'improvement' tradition?

- Great artists have often reworked and overpainted and "improved" their predecessors' works. Robert Rauschenberg once erased a precious drawing by Willem de Kooning — with the latter's permission. Rubens famously retouched and corrected the works by earlier masters in his great drawing collection — long after their makers were dead. Could the Matteses' acts be more of the same?

- In the case of Duchamp's "Fountain," could it be that the Italians are actively helping his art do its work? The Duchamp urinals we now see in our museums are visibly handcrafted replacements for his mass-produced industrial original, which disappeared early on. By pawning off a piece of handicraft, made by a hired artisan, onto his collectors, I think Duchamp was poking fun at any fool who insisted on getting an "original" Duchamp, instead of heading to their neighborhood plumbing supplier. The chip of porcelain in "Stolen Pieces" is an extension of Duchamp's chipping away at precious art and its status as collectible commodity.

- As budding radicals, it does seem as though Eva and Franco Mattes wanted to give the finger to the art world and art history, with its hero worship, its veneration of dead objects, its stale preciousities. But there's nothing that "Stolen

Pieces" resembles so much as a holy reliquary from a medieval church — most of whose objects were themselves stolen from somewhere else, and then went on to be chipped away at by pilgrims eager for a piece of bone or holy cloth.

- The notion of a reliquary brings us to a final, crucial question to be asked by any visitor to "Stolen Pieces." Is any of its story true?

Sawon and her artists insist it is, and there's no special reason to doubt them. On the other hand, with this kind of contemporary work, part of the point is that there are never any certainties. Despite the artists' videos and photos, there's a chance that the whole display has been doctored simply to get the art world riled up.

But like a medieval pilgrim, I prefer to conquer my doubts about the relics set before me, so as not to lose my pleasure in their contemplation.

They do leave me with at least one unshakable certitude. If I'd spotted these artists messing with a work in a museum, I'd have tackled them and called the cops.

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STOLEN PIECES

Is on display, along with new Web art by Eva and Franco Mattes, at Postmasters Gallery, 459 W. 19th St., New York, through June 19. Extensive documentation is available at www.postmastersart.com.