

Gabrielle Amodeo

KEEPING SECRETS AND
STEALING THINGS

ARTSPACE^{NZ}
MEZZANINE



In a recent conversation with a friend I asked her whether she had ever stolen anything as a youngster. For my part, I do have a memory of standing in the dairy on Vauxhall Road thinking about stealing something while the proprietor was busy (after being dared to by my older brother), but I didn't, I chickened out.

I boldly claimed to my friend that I was such a geek I had never stolen so much as a lolly. Not long after, though, I found a few pieces of detritus in my studio research boxes, the first of which put a lie to my words.

When I was at school in Form Two, I stole this A4 ink drawing off the art-room wall. I'm pretty sure a Form One student drew it. Even though afterwards the teachers discussed the theft with us, I never owned up to my pilfering.

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Week One (An Introduction)

*Infractions, Contraventions, Transgressions
(or Some Minor Peccadillos)*

Week Two

*Some carelessness and some cowardice - including - My grossest
moment of carelessness*

Week Three

*Not mine, but not not mine, part one (particularly, the things
that I don't know how I acquired, and some ideas I 'borrowed'
(after a fashion))*

Week Four

*On being an absent-minded friend - including - Four
unfortunate stories relating to [one friend] that make me feel
quite uncomfortable*

Week Five

*On the tricky flow of objects between family members (not mine,
but not not mine, part two)*

Week Six

All my secrets, all my lies

Epilogue

My very small and hypocritical list of grievances

Amelia Hitchcock

A GUILTY CONSCIENCE, COMING CLEAN

Keeping Secrets and Stealing Things, (28 November - 20 December 2013 & 14 January - 1 February 2014) by Gabrielle Amodeo, presented an archive of personal discomfort in the Artspace Mezzanine.

Over the course of the show, Amodeo created a series of installations. Each week a set of objects – imbued with secrets and possibly misappropriated – were introduced into the space, accompanied by hand bound texts detailing their acquisition. Tales of disquiet, as well as of further objects similarly obtained but now misplaced, were also revealed.

The first installation, *Infractions, Contraventions, Transgressions (or Some Minor Peccadillos)*, introduced an eclectic set of objects into the space: spaghetti coiled extension cords borrowed for a project and never returned; a dead orchid shedding debris; a transistor radio, found in the back of a car after its service and now subsumed into the artist's collection of things; binoculars in leather cases; unreturned Tupperware, labelled “*spag bog for one person.*”

The individual acquisition of these objects seemed harmless, but became more uncomfortable when displayed in the company of its fellows. The rationale employed in justifying each possession, described in the accompanying text, became increasingly hollow and repetitive. The accumulated guilt seemed to echo the viewer's own transgressions.

Some carelessness and cowardice followed, including what the artist described as *My grossest moment of carelessness*, although viewers were never explicitly told what this moment was, and were left to sift through the week's archive and decide for themselves. The dead pot plant remained, relocated closer to the entrance. Framed prints with broken glass, lay flat upon the table. Partial sets of retro glassware, stacked alongside a set of dated postcards and a box of assorted ornaments. The objects had an op-shop feel: pre-loved, abandoned, missing handwritten price-tags. Institutional high tables were unable to neutralise the domesticity, despite their hard edges.

The hand bound book, painstakingly typed on an antique typewriter found under the artist's house, provided more frank admissions and detailed descriptions.

“Although I remember Justin buying one copy of this book, we have two. One of them doesn't belong to us.”

Not mine, but not not mine, part one (particularly, the things that I don't know how I acquired, and some ideas I 'borrowed' (after a fashion)), articulated an ethical grey zone: if an object's origin or owner is unknown, what can you do?

A tower of '*not not mine*' books sat near the table's edge - each title's acquisition documented with varying degrees of ambiguity. Postcards received at the artist's address from an unknown sender to a previous tenant, lie alongside an invitation, complete with raffle stub 22C, to the Farmers 20 year club 68th Annual Function. This last object offered a point of tension; out of all the objects displayed, this one clearly had a return address. Dated 2006, the letter must have moved house with the artist at least once.

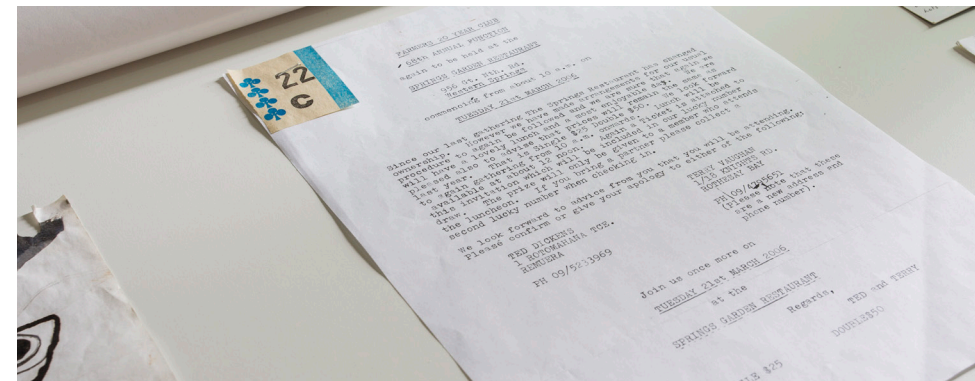
On being an absent-minded friend held fewer objects, but with heavier, more personal stories revealed in the week's chronicle. With so few things to look at, the emphasis shifted to the textual component and visitors were observed lingering in the Mezzanine Space, browsing Amodeo's anecdotes.

The spaghetti coils came back for *On the tricky flow of objects between family members (not mine, but not not mine, part two)*. Originally borrowed from Amodeo's father, the orange cord offset by a full sized road cone stolen by her brothers, but somehow in her possession. The binoculars too made a re-appearance with other family heirlooms and items of (in)significance. These repetitions were only evident if a viewer was returning to the show, although the classifications in the volume reappeared, unedited, with only the title of the installation to reframe them.

This was also true for *All my secrets, all my lies*, where Amodeo brought every object back to the space, and catalogued the lot in a single volume.

On the final day, *My very small and hypocritical list of grievances*, saw a few lonely items on the tables and a thin chronicle of Amodeo's own lost or unreturned items, offset, at the other end of the space, by the stack of chronicles from the previous weeks.

During the creation and exhibition of the work, conversations between the artist and Artspace Curatorial Assistant, Amelia Hitchcock unfurled.



Amelia Hitchcock & Gabrielle Amodeo

ON NEGOTIATING FINE LINES

AH Let's start with the introductory tale, which, in the spirit of the show, I shamelessly lifted from your original proposal. The fish drawing theft is such a good hook into this work – it effectively stands in for any embarrassed reflection on childhood misdemeanours. It seems you feel uneasy about the acquisition of this object, but not so much so that you have avoided displaying it for this exhibition, without the knowledge of the original artist. I believe most of the objects on display also appear without permission. I'm curious as to how you draw the line with this kind of appropriation in your practice?

GA Drawing that line is something that plays on my mind a lot. I suppose I've always tended towards the 'appropriate' end of appropriation. I think there's something rather pleasing in that internal ambiguity of the word 'appropriate' – that it at once means suitable and proper, but also something taken and not necessarily with permission. The word echoes its own problems. I have always relied on the current acceptance of appropriation. This era of art has sort of cleaned up appropriation. Once it was controversial, but it feels like now artists almost have it '*carte blanche*'. So I guess I'm interested in at least touching on that point where appropriation can become a little unethical again.

Out of interest, have you ever stolen anything?





AH Technically, yes, I suppose so, although nothing that pricks my conscience enough to disclose further details. I feel like there's safety in withholding the specifics of my transgressions – which gives me a greater appreciation for what you're doing in revealing your snippets of shame. Incidentally, I was on the other end of a story much like your fish one. I remember in primary school, we were asked to draw an astronaut to put on the class poster of the solar system. A boy stole mine, erased my name and tried to pass it off as his own. The experience really put me off the idea of 'stealing' at a young age.

GA How curious that there's this inversion between us. It must have been very affecting in that wasn't merely the object being stolen; it was that the boy tried to pass off your content, your drawing skills, your ideas as his own. The object was still present in the classroom, but he was removing you from it.

The purpose I've put the drawing to seems to be straying into your classmate's territory, but with a gap of some two decades and in a far more calculating and self-serving manner. Even though initially I only lifted the object, through this project I really have started to appropriate far more than a piece of paper with some ink on it. This full appropriation of someone else's work and skill is quite different from, say, my brother and I swapping price tags at a King's Plant Barn:

On reading the text for this show on the Artspace website, about my older brother daring me to steal something from the dairy, my Mum called me to remind me of a time, about 10 years ago, when Jonathan and I were buying a gift for someone (possibly her) at a King's Plant Barn: we swapped the price tag of the selected object with the price tag of something much cheaper. We then made the mistake of letting it get back to Mum what we had done. She was not impressed at the time, and reminded me today that, although perhaps lead astray by an older brother when I was a child, I was very much complicit and responsible for my own actions during the King's Plant Barn incident.

Gabrielle Amodeo - excerpt: *Thoughts of Discomfort*, 2013

AH I'm sure I've price tag swapped before too. It raises complex questions about ethics – why is it that we feel that some of these acquisitions are acceptable?

GA I think there is a lot of grey area in something that, at a young age, we're taught is black and white. All the language we have around stealing alone indicates how subtle, complex and situational it is: plagiarism compared to appropriation, to commandeer versus to steal, mugging compared to embezzlement. When it's something that is ingrained so deeply into our own language, I don't think it's unusual that people have their own ethical scale.

AH Still, I think this show sits in fairly murky territory really. The work is reliant on your ethics and authenticity as a cultural producer. We're taking your word for it that these are genuine objects of discomfort, not op-shop acquired. The stories too, could potentially be completely fabricated, although they seem to be heavily imbued with your personal history.

GA Obviously, there are shifting lines in this show: not everything is stolen, but I have felt a certain level of discomfort around how my friends and family will feel being unknowingly involved in this show. As much as these personal narratives and these particular objects are part of my autobiographical signifiers, they are also often shared events/trusts/circumstances and I am divulging their secrets as much as my secrets. I'm lifting/pinching their stories even if the objects aren't stolen. I suppose that's the ethical conundrum of using autobiographical material.

I found Stephen Fry's *Moab is My Washpot*¹ a particularly interesting, if awkward, example of that conflict between the private and the public in autobiography because of the blush-inducing level of detail in his recounting of young sexual exploits with other schoolboys. The epilogue qualifies the use of these stories with describing the lengths he had gone to disguise these people's identity and the importance of doing so. Nevertheless, these are shared events that he has co-opted

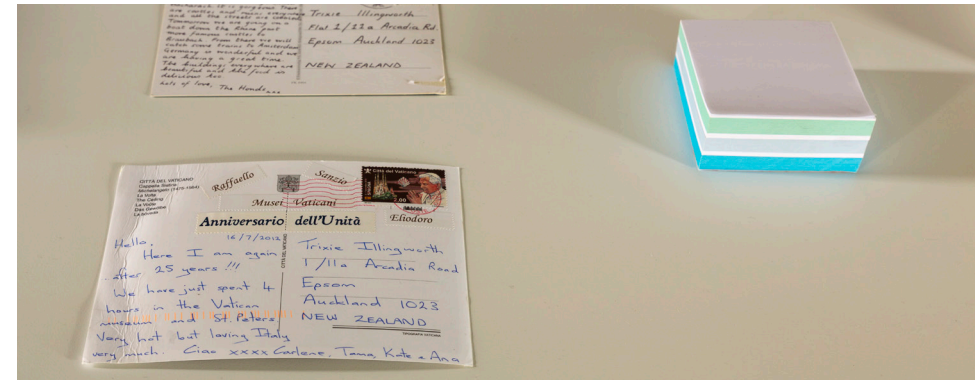
from the other person for his own ends, and does a condition of anonymity for one party really give permission for the other party to divulge the secret?

AH Your *Thoughts of Discomfort* exploit this tension, whilst functioning as catalogue for the objects on display. However, the written texts also function as artworks in their own right. I'm interested in this dual functionality of text, and how you situate narrative in your art practice.

GA I remember a fellow artist once saying that the job of an artist was easier than the job of a writer, because an artist could put an object between themselves and their audience, whereas a writer didn't have that luxury, it was just the writer in the spotlight. I don't agree with him; as someone who does both, I don't feel any more or less exposed in either camp. But, as art and words are inextricable for me, it's an interesting moot. Text and reading/writing is an aesthetic experience, and looking at or making artworks is an act of speech or writing. Art and words carry the weight of having meaning and they share the ability to communicate and miscommunicate.

Before, you mentioned the show's reliance on my ethics, that you're taking my word for it that the relationship between these stories and objects is real. What do you think would change in your reading of the show if it were fabricated?





AH I suppose authenticity was something that crossed my mind because of the volume of objects and stories – you’re so present in the work maybe it’s almost feels too real to be genuine. That said, the real-ness of the work does seem to resonate nicely with the current culture. We’re quite used to being offered digital windows into each other’s lives now through social media; obsessively observing each other without having to make direct contact. With this project, it seems you’ve translated this habit from digital to analogue. Absentminded browsing through the photos of a friend of a friend online seems to lay the groundwork for audience members to be comfortable reading your chronicled confessions in their entirety. I think the Mezzanine Space is facilitating this as well; one feels largely unobserved up there. There’s a guilty pleasure in discovering other’s stories without being forced to disclose your own; a comfort – and revelling – in the hidden-ness of your own misdeeds.

Obviously, it would be a totally different show if it was apparent it was fabricated – I think it would slip into different conceptual territories. Ethics would still be called to question, but it would be the ethics of authenticity in art, rather than the ethics of displaying personal objects of dubious origin and other people’s stories. I can think of similar projects, Mike Kelley’s *The Harems*² for example, that also profess to present archives of personal ephemera – and these could also be fabrications – but that’s not what’s important to the work.

GA In that regard, I think this show is probably quite heavily influenced by On Kawara³: both in terms of the viewer having to take for granted that the details of the work are genuine, and also the push and pull between how much autobiographical details are a construction and how those details can and should inform a reading of the person. Kawara’s work is so imbued in minutia of his existence – when he woke up; what the date is; the newspaper articles he’s read; who he meets; that he is still alive – but then he, himself, is absent: he doesn’t attend openings; he rarely gives interviews; he keeps a level of anonymity that belies the level of detail he presents. I like that. He occupies and exacerbates the necessary and unavoidable distance that occurs between what is public and what is private about a person, and calls to question what it is that makes a person. His work is undeniably autobiographical, but what do we actually know of him?

AH That’s an interesting observation in the context of your objects. Alone, they’re just things, ephemera, but with the stories, they create you – through memory. The text gives viewers an access to the specific memory, but without the wider context of your life. One can glean certain relations and connections through the stories and they feel deeply personal, but you’ve definitely held a lot back. How did you find the process of deconstructing your own narrative?



GA It certainly made me reconsider my own memories: how the event slips away like a dream, taken over by the memory that has been constructed and formed from the internal retelling of the event. This strikes me as an interesting part of autobiography, how we edit and construct our own lives based on what we choose to tell; how certain memories will inflate out of proportion to their actual importance, gaining an undeserved weight on our perception of self; and others will fade, or will be misconstrued, or will be actively pushed to the back of our mind. So, the value of my stories is a knotty matter because of the mind's ability to conflate, inflate and deflate memory. I tried to be honest.

AH About being dishonest?

GA Well, yes.

1. Stephen Fry, *Moab is my Washpot*, Hutchinson, London, 1997.
2. <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-liverpool/exhibition/mike-kelley-uncanny/mike-kelley-uncanny-room-guide-harems>, accessed 20 January 2014
- 3 <http://www.davidzwirner.com/artists/on-kawara/biography/>, accessed 20 January 2014



Gabrielle Amodeo
GLOSSARY OF STEALING

Annex	Embezzle	Knock off
Appropriate	Extortion	Larceny
Arrogate	Fiddle	Lay claim to
Assume	Filch	Lift
Blackmail	Forge	Loot
Burglary	Fleece	Misappropriate
Cadge	Flimflam	Mugging
Capture	Fraud	Nab
Claim	Grab	Nick
Commandeer	Heist	
Con	Hijack	
Confiscate	Holdup	
Cozen	Housebreak	
Crib	Hustle	
Defraud		
Defalcate		
Despoil		
Dispossess		
Divest		

Palm
Peculate
Pilfer
Pillage
Pinch
Pirate
Plagiarize
Plunder
Poach
Pocket
Purloin

Racket
Ransack
Requisition
Robbery

Scam
Scrounge
Seize
Shakedown
Shoplift
Skim
Snatch
Sneak
Snitch
Steal
Strip
Swindle
Swipe

Take
Take over
Theft
Thievery

Usurp

Whip

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