



Affective Atmosphere in an Art Fair Jewel Heist

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Abstract

In mid 2022, social media videos of an armed jewel heist during opening hours at the TEFAF art fair baffled the public. The thieves wore seemingly absurd costumes, and the art fair attendees only showed muted reactions to a violent and dramatic crime. Drawing on first-hand observational research at TEFAF before and after the heist, and on an extended observational methodology focused on the atmosphere of art commercial spaces, we argue that the affective atmosphere of the art fair had a direct influence both on how the thieves committed and how onlookers experienced crime. Within the art fair space, thieves conformed to art world conventions and fair attendees experienced dangerous events as being significantly less sinister. With this paper, we contribute to the growing concept of sensory criminology and the role that atmosphere and affect play in crime.

Keywords Atmosphere · Affect · Sensory criminology · Art fair · Art crime · Heist

A Jewel Heist at TEFAF

On 28 June 2022 at around 11 am, a group of five young men made their way to an antique jewelry dealer's stand within the MECC conference hall at the edge of the TEFAF art fair (Marshall, 2022; Shaw, 2022). Mobile phone videos taken by bystanders show these men violently smashing a protective case with a sledgehammer, removing jewelry, and then exiting the scene. While the smashing is occurring, several of the men appear to act as lookouts. At least one appears to be holding a large gun. At the time of writing (early 2023), none of these men has been detained in relation to the heist, and the jewelry they stole, reportedly including a diamond pendant from the London-based jeweler Symbolic & Chase, has not been recovered.

A dramatic jewelry heist always draws public intrigue and media attention as it plays into a societal narrative of elite crime exemplified by jewel-focused heist films and media. Popular films such as *Raffles* (1930), *Jewel Robbery* (1932), *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950),

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Jewel Thief (1967), *Jack of Diamonds* (1967), *Le Cercle Rouge* (1970), *The Hot Rock* (1972), *The Thief Who Came To Dinner* (1973), *The Usual Suspects* (1995), *Heist* (2001), and *Ocean's 8* (2018), to name just a few, provoke public imagination with plots centered on the theft of jewels. Even the 12-film *Pink Panther*¹ series which began in the mid 1960s, and *The Great Muppet Caper* (1981) and *Muppets Most Wanted* (2014) parody the jewel heist genre. “The Jewel Thief”, then, is a popular cultural trope which is reinforced by rare occurrences such as the TEFAF heist. The TEFAF heist was big on social media and was carried by print and video news agencies around the world.

Initial public commentary on the TEFAF heist centered on two elements seen within the videos. First, the thieves appear to be wearing costumes. Four out of the five thieves wear what collective social media termed “Peaky Blinders” flat caps, referring to the Birmingham, England, criminal gang from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and to a BBC TV crime drama which focused on that gang. Three of the men wear dark rimmed glasses, three wear ties, two wear vests, and all wear button-up shirts and blazers. Social media thought these outfits were comical. Second, while there is some bystander reaction in the videos of the heist, it is limited. Several art fair attendees appear to not move away from an armed and violent heist, including an older man who is seen sitting with his legs crossed on a bench in the middle of the action. No one screams, shouts “gun”, or runs away. Obviously, several people have their phones out and recording. Outside the context of the art fair, costumes and muted reaction to hammers, flying glass, and guns seemed absurd and irrational. We argue here that inside the context of the art fair, the costumes and muted reactions made perfect sense.

The authors of this paper are criminologists employed by Maastricht University, and our office is located approximately 8 min from the TEFAF fair by bicycle. Our research involves art crime, and prior to the TEFAF heist, we had been conducting observational research at the fair to consider elements of atmosphere and the affective qualities of objects as they interact with senses beyond sight. Within this framing, we have been developing an understanding of the strange affective atmosphere of the art fair, considering it as a potentially criminogenic space (see Bērziņa 2021, [forthcoming](#); Yates & Mackenzie 2021; Yates & Peacock [forthcoming a, b](#)). We certainly did not predict a smash-and-grab robbery would occur at TEFAF less than 24 h after we visited the fair to conduct fieldwork. Yet, in the moments after the heist, in a series of frantic text messages that we exchanged, we could see how our work on crime and art fair atmosphere, even our own experimentation with art fair costume, related to this incident. Further, being both local and well-connected to the participants at the fair, we were alerted to this crime in the minutes after it occurred: an experience that most academics studying art crime have not had. Our closeness to the fair, and the objects and people within it, brings with it a certain positionality: we are part of and influenced by the atmosphere we are studying. Far from being a drawback, as we will discuss below, we attempted to harness our own experience during data gathering and interpretation. All told, after having ensured that friends and loved ones were unharmed, we cycled back over to TEFAF and gathered more data.

In this paper, we discuss the two elements of this heist that baffled the public (the costumes and the limited bystander response) within the atmosphere of the art fair. First, we argue that the particular elements of the affective atmosphere of the art fair had a direct influence on how the thieves committed their crime. They felt the atmosphere, responded

¹ The Pink Panther is, of course, a pink jewel which has a tendency to be stolen.

to it, conformed to it, and became part of it, ultimately to their benefit. Second, we argue that the particulars of the affective atmosphere of the art fair created a distorted and even fantastical lens through which some onlookers experienced the crime. Within the art fair as a crime setting, some witnesses incorrectly interpreted this violent crime as something else entirely and reacted accordingly. Inside this space, people were able to experience dangerous events as being significantly less sinister. With this paper, we contribute to the growing concept of sensory criminology and the role that atmosphere and affect play in crime.

Atmosphere, Affect, and Senses in Criminology

While our goals here are not primarily theoretical, and we have discussed the importance of atmospheres and senses for criminology from a place of theory development elsewhere (e.g., Bērziņa [forthcoming](#)), here we will briefly discuss a few ideas from sensory research that we believe are beneficial for exploring the TEFAF heist.

Despite the demonstrably true statement that law governs various senses through regulations (e.g., noise control or offensive odor ordinances), law still remains occularcentric as do forensic investigations which are visually oriented (Lam, 2012). If our conceptions and responses to the crime are primarily based on sight, this would indicate that there is a clear separation between the different senses. However, in reality, humans “do not experience the world singularly” (Herrity et al., 2021, p. xxiv). We are guided not only by the visual but also by other “sensorial interaction (...) [that] condition and configure human interpretation and meaning-making” (McClanahan & South, 2020, p. 3). The implication of this for our work is twofold: first, it means that to truly understand a phenomenon, we need to immerse ourselves in an experience as closely as possible; second, it means that sensorial stimuli will affect how people experience the world, including how they experience crime.

McClanahan and South (2020) contend that one way how we can approach the sensory dimensions of crime is through the concept of atmospheres. Atmospheres are “spaces configured in the totality of sensory information” (McClanahan & South, 2020, p. 13). Their affective qualities “emanate from the assembling of the human bodies, discursive bodies, non-human bodies, and all the other bodies that make up everyday situations” (Anderson, 2009, p. 80). Returning to crime prevention strategies and more broadly to criminology, it is important to note that that physical environments are never only about structural, observable things. Law is all around us, and it guides our behaviors. Even though we might not think about all the regulations governing our daily lives, it does not mean that the law is not there. Instead, our lives are so saturated with it that it becomes invisible; law is “there but not there, imperceptible yet all-determining” (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2013, p. 36). Law also determines atmospheres by allowing certain sensory responses, while suppressing others and therefore affecting human response to it (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2013). We believe that to understand the TEFAF heist it is important to embrace the “a panoply of senses” (Herrity et al., 2021, p. xxiv).

In other disciplines adjacent to criminology, research focused on atmosphere has proliferated (e.g., Anderson, 2009; Bille et al., 2014; Böhme, 2013; Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2013; Trigg, 2016; Urbach, 2010). Yet, apart for a few notable exceptions (including but not limited to Fraser & Matthews, 2021; Herrity et al., 2021; Young, 2019a, Young, 2019b, Young, 2021), criminology has not widely explored this perspective. We believe that by incorporating the concepts of atmospheres and senses into our analyses, we can better understand the aspects of the TEFAF heist that externally seemed absurd. Both

criminals and onlookers responded to the atmosphere of the fair, mediating both parties' actions and responses. Further, we believe that considering atmosphere may have positive potential implications towards understanding crime more generally.

Studying TEFAF's Atmosphere: Methods and Reaction

As noted above, the TEFAF heist occurred in the middle of observational fieldwork that we were conducting as part of the larger European Research Council-funded Trafficking Transformations (TRANSFORM) project which has been granted ethical approval by Maastricht University's Ethics Review Committee Inner City Faculties (ERCIC). TRANSFORM seeks to understand the role that agentic objects play in the development of criminal networks, with a special focus on objects that seem to exert almost an overwhelming pull on (some) people. Among the types of objects within our research focus are artworks.

The following discussion is based on our wider program of data collection related to this topic, specifically observational experiential fieldwork. Our approach was inspired by sensory ethnography (Pink, 2009) and research on atmospheres by Young (2019a) and Fraser and Matthews (2021). To articulate experience, we need to be able to immerse ourselves "in sites of other people's experiences" (Pink et al., 2016, p. 21). To do this, we strategically place ourselves within target spaces, in this cases art and art commerce spaces, to experience elements of atmosphere and observe the actions and reactions of others.

This is a reflexive approach that does not aspire to objectivity. Rather it sees the researchers' own experiences as a tool to understand the less tangible qualities of the settings we are studying. We use our own senses to experience the space, consider its implications, and then watch how people appear to navigate what we, too, feel. These observations are supplemented in the moment by unstructured and incidental interview in the form of conversations with people who are also experiencing these spaces. They are also supplemented by limited, but targeted and planned, conversations with art market actors, both within the art spaces, or in other contexts. We emphasize that our primary source of information for this paper are the experiential observations.

We conducted targeted fieldwork visits to museums and art commerce spaces in the Netherlands, the USA, New Zealand, the UK, and Latvia, and at the Venice Biennale (2022) and the art fairs Art Basel (2021) and BRAFA (2022). As noted above, the authors live and work in Maastricht where the primary TEFAF fair takes place, making TEFAF a primary and convenient research location for us. We conducted research at TEFAF 2020 during the fair's exclusive invitation-only preview day, a digital observation of TEFAF Online in 2021, and three visits to TEFAF 2022 by two researchers. One visit occurred three days before the heist, one occurred the afternoon before the heist, and one occurred the morning after the heist.

During our first two visits to TEFAF 2022, we did not focus our observations on elements of the fair related to the heist. Obviously, we had no foreknowledge that such a dramatic heist would occur. And yet, some of the topics we sought to cover in our observations are of direct relevance to this discussion. First, one of our observational subjects was the concept of security and the experience of security within and as part of the art fair atmosphere. We documented what security looked like and felt like, how we ourselves experienced security, and how security was physically manifest within the space. To some extent, we "cased the joint", potentially at the same time as the actual thieves, and we were

well placed to experience how the atmosphere of security changed (and did not change) after the heist.

Almost presciently, one of us spent our fieldwork on the day before the heist experimenting with costume and dress. As will be discussed below, TEFAF attendees typically dress a certain way with almost no exceptions; any disruptions to that unwritten but felt dress code being immediately noticeable. Yates deliberately chose to attend TEFAF on Monday 27 June 2022 wearing new sneakers, neat jeans, and a neutral T-shirt: appropriate clothing for the hot weather but not what one expects at the fair. Yates' outfit was just on the edge of appropriate without going too far, and our goal was to slightly disrupt the art fair atmosphere to see what would happen. Despite almost oppressive heat, Yates was one of very few people at the fair at that time dressed in that way. When communicating with an art market actor that she was trying to locate at the fair for a planned discussion, Yates said "don't worry, when you get to the bar you will immediately see me"; they did. All told, we are uniquely placed to discuss the costume aspect of the TEFAF heist because less than 24 h before the crime occurred, we experienced what it was like to attend while NOT wearing an art fair costume.

We note that our post-heist visit to the fair, which occurred approximately 24 h after the heist, was different in important ways from our prior visits. While we did focus, again, on observational and experiential aspects of atmosphere using the same methods as before, we also had something specific to look for and to talk to people about. We walked the pathway the thieves took to exit the fair, considering the implications of their chosen path. We spoke to the occupants of stalls along that pathway about their experience of the heist and their feelings about the fair afterward. These conversations were aided by the fact that the thieves exited TEFAF via a pathway that passed market actors that the authors have a positive and long-standing relationship with, meaning that they were perhaps more open with us about the event than had we been strangers. We also had conversations with art market actors that were within the fair during the heist but did not directly witness it. We did this to judge the vibe or tone of the post-heist fair, and again, this was aided by the fact that we had so recently conducted conversations with these people. Many of these conversations started with "Are you okay? How are you feeling about this?" drawing on genuine concern about the potential emotional trauma of having been close to violent and armed crime. Several brought up the heist upon seeing us, before we said anything about it, noting that as criminologists and art crime researchers this must be big for us.

Finally, but perhaps a bit controversially, on the day after the heist, we casually listened in on conversations that were being held in public at TEFAF among attendees including dealers, buyers, etc. While the people we spoke to directly knew about our research and consented to our discussion, the people speaking to each other at the fair would not have known we were researchers. We will not directly quote what we heard in these conversations, but by being a fly on the wall in a public space where people were discussing this big event freely, openly, and often loudly, we got a strong sense about how people who directly witnessed the crime (and those who were nearby) experienced the event as it occurred and interpreted the aftermath. The aural aspects of these discussions were part of the fair's atmosphere. The heist was *almost* the talk of TEFAF, the subject of most discussion that was occurring. However, as will be discussed below, there was a counter-discussion going on about a mundane matter, the heat, that competed with the heist within these conversations. Yet again, that this seemingly trivial topic almost overshadowed an armed heist is confusing externally but makes sense within the art fair atmosphere.

The Costumes

Bizarre “Peaky Blinders heist” sees well-dressed men rob Dutch global arts fair TEFAF in broad daylight

Headline, ABC News Australia, (Smit, 2022).

Bērziņa (12:11): <link to twitter post about the heist>

Yates (12:13): *Holy Jesus!*

Bērziņa (12:13): <link to *lilburg.nl* breaking news story about the heist>

Bērziņa (12:13): *Must have happened recently or just now*

(12:13): *Whoa*

Bērziņa (12:14): *I found out about [it] on fencing chat and then Twitter only had 3 recent updates, Google had nothing*

Bērziņa (12:14): *So must be super recent*

Yates (12:16): *I'm texting people to tell them to stay away*

Yates (12:20): *[REDACTED]'s dad's there now. She's calling him*

Yates (12:39): <link to Twitter post containing heist video>

Yates (12:39): *Her dad is fine*

[Bērziņa boards a plane]

Bērziņa (18:31): *That's good, wild thing that something like that happened there*

Bērziņa (18:32): *Also not gonna lie the guy chilling in the background is definitely something*

Yates (18:42): *What else can one do in the situation.*

Bērziņa (19:15): *I would have expected him to move away*

Yates (20:20): *If someone near me has a gun I'm making no sudden moves*

Whatsapp chat transcript between the authors, 28 June 2022

In the moments after the TEFAF heist occurred, one of the authors (Bērziņa) was in an airport and the other (Yates) was at her desk at the Maastricht University Faculty of Law, attending a digital conference related to art provenance research. Our initial source of information about the heist consisted of phone messages from people inside or near the fair and social media. As videos of the heist emerged on the platforms Twitter and Instagram, public commentary about the thieves' outfits was almost instantaneous. People who, we presume, had not visited TEFAF and likely had never visited a high-end international art fair interpreted the costumes as absurd. Yet, these five men were able to enter the fair with large weapons and sledgehammers, then walk all the way to their target stall unnoticed. They fit in perfectly. TEFAF has no published dress code and entry is contingent on simply buying a ticket or having been given an invitation. Yet despite the lack of posted rules, nearly all fair attendees automatically conform to certain expectations for dress that both enhance the atmosphere of the art fair and are shaped by it. In other words, people dress for the fair and the fair dresses them (Figs. 1 and 2).

As far as we can tell, there is limited if any literature on dress within art fairs; however, media features covering the fashion of art fair attendees appear sporadically within media outlets that report on fairs, and within the media produced by various art market entities. These articles present elite and expensive fashion as associated directly with both the artworks for sale and the act of buying those artworks. The clothing one wears



Fig. 1 The five suspects in the 2022 TEF AF heist. Image circulated by Dutch Police



Fig. 2 Period mug shots of five members of the original Peaky Blinders street gang. Image from the West Midlands Police Museum

to the fair becomes a display of not only the financial ability to engage in the world of high-value art, but also becomes an objectified manifestation of the embodied cultural capital of the wearer (Bourdieu, 1986). Attendees of art fairs attempt to dress towards

the art that they are meant to appreciate and afford. Those who cannot afford the art still attempt to dress like they can.

One newspaper article within this “fashion of art fair” genre is a *New York Times* piece entitled “What to Wear When Shopping for \$1 Million Old Master Paintings” (Ortved, 2019). Set at TEFAF New York,² the article profiles nine fair attendees of various genders and ages. All of them present wearing luxury fashion and beautiful jewelry and are photographed among the artworks they are viewing. The structure of the article allows for numerous quips implying the expense of both the artworks and the clothing people are wearing:

- “You look like a million bucks. I’d better say 10 million, in this room.”
- “[Q:] And your sparkly top? [A:] From Zara [the budget fast fashion retailer]. [Q:] Wow. Was not expecting that. [A:] A few years old. That’s the way I roll.”
- “I hate ties. I’m only wearing one because I have to go to La Grenouille for dinner later.
- “[Q:] This is a nervy question, but how many bespoke suits do you have? [A:] Every one of my suits is bespoke. [Q:] I feel so poor right now.

In 2018 Christie’s, the high-end auction house, published a blog post by one of their Old Master painting specialists commenting on fashion at the TEFAF New York opening (O’Reilly, 2018). The author first describes the setting with “patrons wandering around the booths sipping champagne and enjoying oysters while viewing the paintings” and where “fair-goers were dressed to impress” (O’Reilly, 2018). They then discuss a series of “best dressed artworks” next to the impeccably dressed art dealers who are selling them:

- “I absolutely have an art-fair uniform—suit, tie, and shirt.” (Patrick Williams quoted in O’Reilly, 2018)
- “We have a kind of sobriety and self-restriction in our clothes at art fairs.” (Laura Kugel quoted in O’Reilly, 2018).
- “This jacket is handmade in Paris. It’s my year-round uniform, not just at TEFAF.” (Adrien Chenel quoted in O’Reilly, 2018).
- “This dress is Victoria Beckham, I bought it about two weeks ago, specifically for TEFAF.” (Valentina Rossi, quoted in O’Reilly, 2018).
- “It’s preview day at TEFAF, and so of course I like to wear something special.” (Cristina Uribe quoted in O’Reilly, 2018).

Many of the dealers emphasize the uniformesque quality of their art fair attire. Clothing is specially selected for the fair, but there is an air of restriction that, again, calls back to what is felt within the atmosphere of the fair as a requirement to conform. We see the art fair uniform as a convention in the Becker (1982) sense, defining an edge of an art world and indicating who is inside the art world and who is outside of it.

Within our own observations at TEFAF, we noted a prevailing style of muted wealth. TEFAF’s clientele is “more conservative wealthy buyers” who are attracted to “museum quality excellence” (Gerlis, 2021, p. 35). Men typically wear blazers, tailored shirts,

² TEFAF originated in Maastricht in 1988 but has also held art fairs in New York since 2017.



Fig. 3 a, b The TEFAF “uniform” within the visual atmosphere of the fair; TEFAF 2023 entrance (left) and TEFAF 2022 bar (right, the afternoon before the heist). The outfits from 2022 are noticeably more casual, but the attendees still wear long sleeves and blazers. The reader should note that in June 2022, it was approximately 29 degrees Celsius outside and the TEFAF venue had no climate control. Photos by Yates

well-fitting trousers, leather shoes, and muted but expensive tie clips, rings, etc. Some wear exceptionally fitted suits. Women, too, wear exceptionally fitted suits, designer dresses, or blouses with expensive trousers or skirts. Many wear heels and jewelry, and the norm is impeccable makeup and hair. TEFAF attendees skew older and more conservative dress-wise, with the artsy and streetwear styles seen among attendees at Art Basel, for example, usually not present at TEFAF. Particularly among younger fair attendees, dark rimmed glasses are ubiquitous. Flat caps are observably present (Fig. 3).

When we evaluate the thieves’ attire in relation to the unwritten TEFAF “uniform”, they largely conform. They appear to be men who are somewhere between their late 20s and late 30s, and they dress like typical male fairs goers in that age range (although one appears to be on the sloppier side). Specifically, they are dressed like men that are working at the fair in some capacity rather than buying art as they are smartly and artily dressed, but do not portray extreme wealth. Perhaps the one criticism that could be made about their costumes are their shoes. Several of the men appear to wear moderately priced and generic sneakers which could be seen as slightly too casual for the fair. At TEFAF 2020, we recorded a possibly apocryphal story about dealers who judge potential art buyers by their shoes. Expensive clothing, we were told, can be mimicked and wealthy people might dress down some days, but the shoes were considered a financial giveaway. People without expensive shoes on were not, we were told, worth the dealers’ time. However, particularly for men, what the thieves wore was not a significant

deviation from the norm as some fair workers and attendees who must be on their feet all day opt for comfort: we observed sneakers at the fair. From the thieves' perspective, blending in was important, and they blended in. Yet what does "blending in" mean at TEFAF? Or, rather, what would it mean to not blend in?

One of the authors made the intentional decision to attend TEFAF in non-uniform clothing on the afternoon before the heist. Yates was neatly but casually dressed in sneakers, blue jeans, and a solid-colored cotton T-shirt with a slightly untraditional cut. This was clothing that was appropriate for Yates' office, the warm summer weather, and the bicycle ride Yates took to the fair, but it was also clothing that the author knew would mark her as different within the art fair space. Prior to this occasion, the author had always "dressed up" for art fairs (an "arty" dress, heels, make-up despite not wearing any in day-to-day life, an attempt at kempt hair). However, in this instance, our goal was to feel the atmosphere of the art fair by slightly challenging it; to observe the boundaries of the norm by not quite conforming to it. It should be noted that the author wears thick and colorful "arty" eye-glasses but could not abandon them for the sake of experimentation.

At the fair, Yates employed our usual observation methods by moving through the space, querying certain concepts, observing human/object and object/object interactions, and noting aspects of security. Concurrently, she kept track of any subtle reactions to her presence within the space and observed the clothing others were wearing. At that time, the author observed no other T-shirts and limited other jeans. The jeans Yates did see were primarily on women, were designer and were paired with blouses and heels. Reactions to Yates's outfit were limited but present. A disapproving glance, a barista that could never be flagged down, and gallerists (*all* gallerists) that ignored Yates entirely as being seemingly not worth their time. In stands with no other customer and no prior connection to the researcher, gallerists would opt to check their phone over greeting Yates. While we cannot be sure that this was due to Yates' casual dress, it is worth noting Yates had a different experience at TEFAF 2020, where she was greeted by several dealers and, at times, invited to touch the artworks on display.³

The affectations of "eliteness" are a primary contributor to the atmosphere of the art fair. They are created and maintained in number of ways. Within TEFAF in 2020 and 2022, this included a fair-wide decorating theme centered on massive and opulent display of flowers, some of which feature prominently in the heist videos. Champagne and oysters are available at points throughout the fair. Gerlis reports that visitors "tend to stay for many days at TEFAF," with the "lavish booths, flower-lined walls, deep carpets, and fine canapés mean that people are happily trapped inside [the fair] during the day" (Gerlis, 2021, p.36). Everything feels expensive and that is the point, with the idea being that people who like to feel expense also like to spend. Trapped in the web of oysters, orchids, carpets, and canapés, people respond to the pressures of the atmosphere and buy art for a lot of money (Fig. 4a and b).

We believe that the TEFAF uniform is a direct response to that atmosphere and to the requirements of the space. Despite no formal written dress code and no policing of clothing upon entry, fair attendees simply follow the unwritten rules. The elite atmosphere cannot exist if people do not create it through their clothing, and people dress in response to the atmosphere: it is a self-sustaining phenomenon. The art fair atmosphere through clothing

³ This may also have been because Yates attended the invite-only preview day in 2020, meaning she was already pre-selected as being potentially worth a dealer's time simply by being there.



Fig. 4 a, b Extensive displays of flowers contribute visually and olfactorily to the atmosphere of TEFAF 2020 (left) and TEFAF 2022 (right; taken the afternoon before the heist). Photos by Yates

is so ingrained, and these affective expectations are so expected, that challenges to the uniform take the form of apocryphal stories that dealers share.

As if to prove the rule, there is a shared fear that if dealers ignore the people who do not conform via dress, they might lose sales. This relates to ideas of a shifting customer base as new and younger money enters the art market. An apocryphal story that one of the authors was told at TEFAF in both 2020 and 2022 involved an unnamed art-professional snubbing a man dressed in sneakers and a hoodie who had been lingering in front of an artwork, only to have another dealer share that the scruffy man was a well-known tech billionaire. When attendees conform to the TEFAF uniform, dealers know how to evaluate them. When attendees do not conform to the TEFAF dress code, they disrupt the atmosphere of the fair and dealers do not know how to properly react.

The heist thieves, of course, did not stick out. They conformed perfectly to what was expected of male art fair attendees reacting to the art fair atmosphere. They did not violate the feel of the space; rather, they blended in with and disappeared within it. This clearly aided in their ability to go undetected by security before the crime occurred. It also may have helped to inspire the muted reactions to this violent crime that some of the onlookers in the social media videos appear to have exhibited.



Fig. 5 a, b Stills from the first heist video. Left: the thieves violently smash glass with a sledgehammer as a crowd of onlookers forms in the background. Right: The crowd has grown as the thieves place the jewels in a bag; note the man on the left appears to be holding a gun. Screen shots by Yates, 14 Feb 2023



Fig. 6 a, b Stills from the second video. Left: onlookers casually enter the frame to watch the heist. Right: the older man in the gray suit sits as the heist occurs around him. Screen shots by Yates, 14 Feb 2023

The Reaction

At the time of writing, the authors are aware of two mobile phone videos taken of the TEFAF heist as it occurred. They were shared widely on social media, so widely so that we admit that we do not know who took them and, thus, who to attribute them to. We are writing here from our observation of the videos as well as our walk-throughs of the area the day after the heist.

In the first video, the shorter of the two, the thieves are seen from the right of the stand that they are targeting. Few onlookers are visible from this angle; however, a group of people are seen standing in the distance to the left of the stand. The second video is the longer and more detailed, taken from the left of the stand, presumably within the group of people who can be seen in the first video. This video is taken from further away and the person filming zooms in after a few seconds. During this video, several onlookers are seen casually walking through the frame, glancing at the heist action, and then casually walking out of the frame. A man in a gray suit and an exhibitor's badge walks through checking his pockets and glances at the glass being smashed almost as an afterthought. Another suited man with a notebook under his arms walks up, takes some steps towards the unfolding heist, and then walks off. A woman wearing a suit watches for a while, ducks out of the frame, then leans back in as the thieves trot away. Finally, and most baffling to commentators on social media, an older man in a gray suit appears to casually sit almost among the thieves with his legs crossed through the entire heist. As the thieves exit on either side of him, the man turns to watch them go (Fig. 5a and b, Fig 6a and b).

This lack of reaction captivated the immediate traditional and social media cycle, and we consider here what inspired the muted responses seen in the videos. Before we proceed, we assure the reader that our intention here is not to evaluate how people should or should not respond to the witnessing of crime. There is no correct or incorrect way to react to a crime, and we do not believe that anyone in this video did anything wrong. The discussion below does not and cannot encompass the experience of crime felt by all witnesses and attendees. Indeed, within the second video, we can see someone react: a remarkably casually dressed fair attendee is seen picking up one for the opulent vases of atmosphere confirming flowers and starting to throw it at the thieves. After two of the thieves brandish what appears to be guns at the man, he resets the vase, appears to consider what he wishes to do, and eventually exits.

We are aware of the extensive and divisive literature on the “bystander effect,” but we argue it is of little relevance to either this situation or our discussion. The bystander effect, first described by Darley and Latane (1968), holds that “the more bystanders to an emergency, the less likely, or the more slowly, any one bystander will intervene to provide aid” (Darley and Latane 1968, p. 378). While the bystander effect might be used to force an explanation as to why only the vase-grabber seems to come to the aid of the jewels, we personally feel that jewels are not something a reasonable bystander would place themselves at risk for. There is no reasonable motivation for intervening. Furthermore, meta-analyses of the bystander effect show that it “does not hold in violent or dangerous emergencies” (Levine et al., 2020, p. 274). In this paper, we have consciously chosen to use the word “onlooker” rather than “bystander” both to distance this discussion from saturation from the bystander effect, and because we believe this better describes the actual experience of the heist.

What we are interested in here is why so many onlookers seemingly did not attempt to protect *themselves* from a violent armed robbery. So, why people casually walk through the video frame, why the older man continues to sit, why people start filming and continue to film the event, and why there seems to be a lack of anyone taking the heist seriously. To understand this, we return to the context of the art fair and understand this crime as situated within a deeply effective space constructed of meaningful associations that extend beyond TEFAF to other art fairs and museums.

On the day after the heist, we both discussed the event with witnesses and we observed the vibe of the post-heist fair through visual observation and casual listening. Having seen the videos, we knew that we wanted to probe this muted reaction and seeming lack of self-preservation actions exhibited by onlookers. Having spent over an hour at the fair, insight came from an overheard conversation between an exhibitor who was an onlooker to the heist and another person. The exhibitor expressed that they initially felt no fear whatsoever as the heist was occurring and simply stood there to watch it happen, up to a certain point. When asked why, the onlooker responded that they thought that they were *witnessing art*, and that the possibility that this was an actual robbery had not initially occurred to them.

We believe that this onlooker was not only person to interpret the heist in this way. Within the unique atmosphere of the art fair, the ability to interpret crime events correctly may be hindered. In that setting, in a space dominated by deeply affective artworks, onlookers thought that they were seeing *art* and not *crime*. To understand why this is not an unreasonable interpretation of the heist, it is important to understand the wider art world context.

Eaten Bananas

In late 2019, absurdist artist Maurizio Cattelan exhibited the work *Comedian* at the art fair Art Basel Miami Beach (Trebay, 2019). The work, of which there were three “editions,” consisted of an actual banana duct-taped to a wall and priced at \$120,000; all three editions sold (Taylor, 2019). This caused a significant stir on social and traditional media (likely the artist’s intent) as the public grappled with the thought of paying so much money for something that they could produce with the contents of their kitchen and that was just going to rot. Due to the publicity around the piece, lines reportedly formed to see the artwork which required direct management (Taylor, 2019), and “there was near pandemonium from selfie-takers” near the piece (Hoffman, 2019) (Fig. 7).

On the last day of the fair, performance artist David Datuna approached *Comedian*, pulled the banana off the wall, peeled it, and ate it, posting the video of this on the platform Instagram (Vigdor, 2019). Videos posted by onlookers on Twitter showed Datuna smiling as he was slowly escorted out of the fair by security. Numerous other onlookers are seen taking his photograph or videoing the event. Datuna explained in an Instagram post that his actions were an “Art performance by me” stating that the work was called *Hungry Artist*.⁴ In discussing the performance with a reporter from *Vogue* a few days after the event, Datuna stated that “Conceptually, I ate the concept of the banana” and when asked what it tasted like he said “It tasted like \$120,000. It was delicious.” (Datuna quoted in Taylor, 2019).

The Shredder

On October 5, 2018, a work by Banksy was offered for sale at Sotheby’s auction house consisting of a painted version of his famous *Girl with Balloon* mural. Bidding for the

⁴ See: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B5yIFp2hyE/>

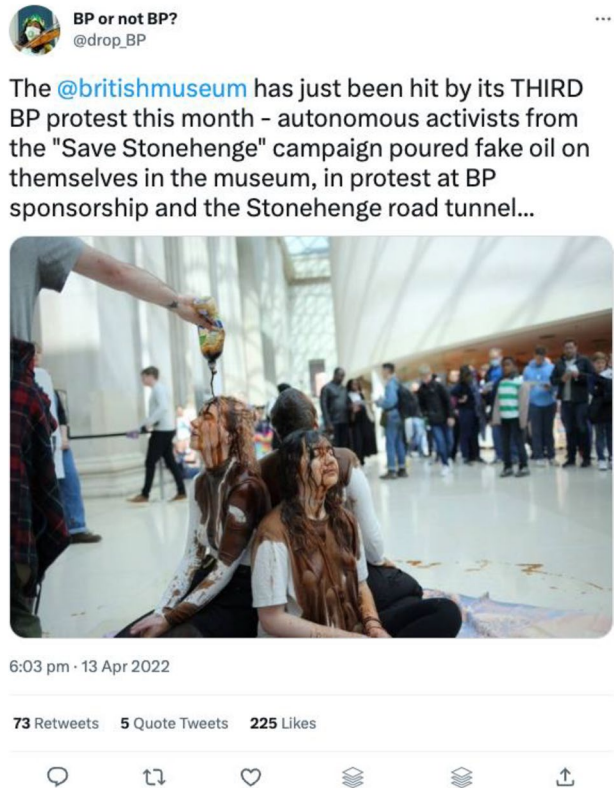
Fig. 8 *Love is in the Bin* by Banksy, note the shredding. Photo posted by Sotheby's on Twitter, 11 October 2018 (<https://twitter.com/Sothebys/status/1050434176414035968>)



chanting (Honigman, 2018). In July 2018, protesters staged another pill bottle scattering and “die-in” at the Harvard Art Museums, one of which is the Arthur M. Sackler Museum (Weber, 2018). These were followed by a “die-in” at the Guggenheim Museum in February 2019 (Bishara, 2019a), a protest in July 2019 outside the Louvre’s I. M. Pei pyramid (Bishara, 2019b), and another “die-in” at the Victoria and Albert Museum in November 2019 (Thorpe, 2019) (Fig. 9).

Around the same time, protests started taking place in museums related to the acceptance of donations from oil companies. Around 350 people protested oil company sponsorship within the British Museum in February of 2019 while clapping and chanting. Some wore suits and or blazers, white shirts, and ties while a black substance symbolizing oil dripped from their mouths (Busby, 2019). In May 2021, the same group staged concurrent protests in London at the British Museum and the Science Museum. At the British Museum, protesting violinists in green costumes played while a group of people in orange and yellow, a “choir of fire,” sang (Storer, 2021). In April 2022, in the lead up to TEFAF, protestors at the British Museum covered themselves in a black substance symbolizing oil in protest of plans to modify roads near Stonehenge (Velie, 2022).

Fig. 9 Protest action in the British Museum from the BP or not BP? Twitter account (https://twitter.com/drop_BP/status/1514273022030618625). Screen shot by Yates, 7 Feb 2023



Even closer to TEFAF, at the end of May 2022 at the Louvre, a man sprung from a wheelchair and in front of a large crowd, pounded on the glass that protected the Mona Lisa, and eventually smeared the glass with cake (Victor & Cramer, 2022). The man threw roses at people who were filming the incident and made statements indicating that this was an environmental protest. Videos of the aftermath of the incident show a sea of people holding up their phones to film the artwork as a man, presumably security, unsuccessfully attempts to wipe the pastry off the glass. Also relevant is a series of museum protests that involved people gluing themselves to artworks which began almost at the same time as the heist at TEFAF and within the same wider atmosphere. On 30 June 2022, the day after the TEFAF heist, climate change activists glued themselves to a painting in the Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery in Glasgow (Tremayne-Pengelly, 2022). In the weeks that followed, protesters glued themselves to other artworks, including paintings located in the Manchester Art Gallery, the Courtauld Gallery, the National Gallery in London, and the Royal Academy of Arts (Tremayne-Pengelly, 2022). This was followed by a string of incidents in later 2022 where protestors threw soup at famous artworks (e.g., see Gayle, 2022) (Fig. 10).



Fig. 10 Protesters glued themselves to a painting at the Kelvingrove Gallery in Glasgow on the day after the TEFAF heist, image posted on the just.stopoil Instagram account (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CfbWRYwN5vq>). Screenshot by Yates, 7 Feb 2023

Strange Events in an Art Context

Although the events described above occurred outside of TEFAF, they happened within parallel art spaces, contributing to the wider atmosphere of the art world at the time. The art-loving crowd at TEFAF was certainly aware of every event noted above. These events were specifically aimed at violating the rules of the art world and to harness the intangible power of artwork to either make further art or signal protest. The events were active, destructive, tactile, oral, and aural. They were recorded, posted on social media, and were newsworthy. While some actors were arrested, few of the events were easily dismissed as crimes. Within the context of bananas, shredders, pill bottles, oil spills, cake smearings, and seen as part of a timeline that would soon include hand gluing and soup tossing, the art world of late June 2022 was a setting where the unexpected was expected to happen. Further, those unexpected things were likely to be socially significant and art fair attendees had been trained to be observers of these events, onlookers who would, themselves, play a planned role by posting videos to social media (Fig. 11).

The “protest or performance art” evaluation of the heist was the prevailing interpretation in the immediate aftermath, and the lack of reaction spread to much of the fair. Several art fair participants that we spoke with the day after the heist expressed variations on “I didn’t think it was real at first”. At the time, some of these participants (as well as the authors) had not ruled out that there would be some sort of public reveal where the thieves would identify themselves as artists or activists. Few fair participants expressed feelings of being in danger or of increased insecurity, with several stating that everything was back to “business as usual”⁶.

⁶ Multiple fair participants independently used that exact phrase.

Fig. 11 “Business as usual”. By the day after the fair, all evidence of the heist had been erased, the stand that was robbed had been neatly covered by a dark gray space, the flowers had been rearranged, and suited men were once again sitting in front. Photo by Yates



The prevailing counter concern at the fair the day after the heist among dealers was how very hot it was in the exhibition hall. Several fair participants said something along the lines of “I care more about this heat” than the heist. That the heat was the primary concern of multiple people we spoke to is, perhaps, not what an outsider would predict in the wake of a violent armed heist. However, within the context of the art fair, that too made sense. TEFAF usually takes place in March but had been postponed to June in 2022 due to the COVID pandemic. The facility’s lack of climate control in the June heat made numerous exhibitors upset. To recall back to the previous section, the TEFAF uniform of a blazer or suit did not work well at those temperatures, and some dealers were concerned with how the heat would affect their artworks. Others felt the heat discouraged buyers from buying.

What did change in the immediate aftermath of the heist was the visible presence of “security” which altered the way that some parts of TEFAF were experienced. Before the heist, security was present but subtle. The entrance to the fair was moderately controlled by young people dressed in black and scanning tickets. Inside the fair, security consisted of (primarily) men wearing earpieces and dark suits who were posted at doors and key points. At the exit, people dressed in dark suits casually glanced into bags to ensure no obvious

art heist had occurred. Far from projecting an over-securitised feeling of being observed, this form of suited security served to enhance the elite atmosphere of the art fair. Security guards in suits are equated the public consciousness with important people and valuable things. The implied necessity of elite security guards and their physical presence, in combination again with the oysters, champagne, flower arrangements, gold frames, and lighting design, enhanced the experience of the art towards reaffirming high monetary value. Had the security guards been absent, it would imply that the art was not worthy of protection.

On the day after the heist, a change had taken place within the fair's human security. The smartly dressed youngsters scanning tickets and checking bags were replaced with career security guards wearing branded uniforms. Guards in the branded uniforms were seen walking through the fair from time to time, and although the suited guards were still there, branded security was posted at most doors, including those that were not in use. Within the section of TEFAF reserved for jewellery dealers (note, Symbolic & Chase's stall was not located in this section), large, male, suited security guards with earpieces were a felt presence within individual dealership stalls and in the walkway between them.⁷ Visitors were made to feel looked at and scrutinized. This, at least to us experiencing it, felt like a change. Before the heist the art was being both protected and affirmed as valuable, after the heist at least in certain locations within the fair, people were being scrutinized.

Summing this up, reasoning art fair onlookers, upon seeing five men in costumes brandishing sledgehammers against glass were likely to interpret those actions as protest or performance art when the event occurred *within an art space*. In such a context, they would not feel their safety was threatened, and many would feel drawn to watch the event. In contrast, we believe that the same onlookers, upon seeing the same group of thieves bashing the window of Symbolic & Chase's storefront on Old Bond Street in London (or the jewelers' neighbors Tiffany & Co, Cartier, etc.), would likely assume a violent and armed heist was occurring. While the security fabric of the fair was modified in the immediate wake of the heist, few fair participants felt insecure as a result, few felt surprised by the costumes, and few saw anything strange in the reactions of onlookers. Within the atmosphere created by the ongoing possibility of interventionary art events, we believe the actions of the onlookers in the heist videos make sense. We wonder, had the heist occurred during our observation work, if we would have reacted in the same way as the onlookers in the video.

Art and Crime in Art Spaces

In other work of ours, we are considering the art fair and similar spaces through the lens of a *desirescape*, a network of highly agentic objects whose relationships with each other and with humans provoke lure and a desire, at times to the point of disrupting reason (Yates & Mackenzie 2021). Through this work, we have considered such diverse topics as how *T. rex* specimens become artified when they enter art spaces (Yates & Peacock, [forthcoming a](#)), how the same *T. rex* specimens consistently disrupt human lives (Yates & Peacock, [forthcoming b](#)), and more directly how the sensory aspects of the art fair can allow for an experience that borders on being criminogenic (Bērziņa, [forthcoming](#)). As noted above, we did not predict that this heist would occur in the middle of our fieldwork, but our fieldwork let

⁷ The authors note that they did not specifically conduct security observations in this section of TEFAF before the heist occurred; the atmosphere of security may have not changed.

us better understand this heist. Here, we can see that interpreting crime through an atmosphere lens allows a certain richness of understanding that more traditional approaches lack. While we admit to being at the early stages of exploring the wider implications of this work, from the perspective of crime prevention we believe that a starting point would be to say that within certain spaces with certain affective atmosphere, red flags are not so easily spotted and crime can be misinterpreted by onlookers, including by security.

Few are immune to the power of the space, and art fairs have been specifically designed to influence people. The atmosphere of an art fair is a deeply affective one. Within the fair humans and objects interact with each other and with the tangible and intangible qualities of the space to create an overwhelming feeling of elite exclusion, luxury, class, and safety. Crimes that are committed in this space are affected (and effected) by this atmosphere, and they conform to it. The same atmosphere affects how onlookers experience and interpret crimes that occur, and likely affects the perception of those tasked with security. Crime occurs differently within this space than it does outside of it and further exploration of the atmospheres of crime will help untangle what that means practically and theoretically.

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Declarations

Conflict Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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