Book Review

The securitization and policing of art theft: The case of London

John Kerr

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For most people, the phrase ‘art theft’ likely conjures up an image of a stealthy thief with creative technology easily bypassing a museum or a gallery’s security measures and running off to make a huge profit with the stolen artifact. This is a common scenario in the media. However, for Kerr’s book, the focus is not the heist or the criminal but something that is rarely mentioned in movies and news: the security networks that aim to prevent art theft. There is not much known about art theft in general, particularly those based on academic research, and there is even less discussed about security measures and governance in the art world. As such, the book offers a fresh take on art theft and art security and while the focus is on explaining how art is secured and policed in London through nodal governance, it provides a good background to art crime.

The book’s main argument is that nodal governance is effective in the securitization and policing of art theft in London as the governance allows art owners to embrace risk, which enlivens the art world. Displaying and lending art for others to display has the inherent risks of theft and damage, particularly with the changing global risk environment, but the value of art is tied to sharing it. A well-devised security plan helps reduce risk, but it is difficult to completely eliminate risks and one cannot depend on a single security provider. A nodal governance model runs on a complex relationship network between multiple stakeholders whose influence in securing the art world changes by situation. Each security node (that is, public police, private police, insurance, government agencies, common interest groups) is part of a matrix and the node’s role is fluid and adaptable in the co-production of security based on capacity. As the nodes are intertwined in various ways, it is crucial that the nodes work together in order for the matrix to function properly and help art owners embrace risk.

Securitization and Policing of Art Theft is based on Kerr’s field research (interviews and observations) and focuses mainly on the different nodes that are important in an efficient nodal governance. After an introduction to art crime (Chapter 1), including the scope, connection to other crimes and previous research, and background on security in a globalized risk environment, the book is divided into two parts: co-production of risk (Chapter 2) and co-production of security (Chapters 3–8). The latter part is further divided into chapters about the important nodes for art security in London, concluding with recommendations for the future based on the current environment. One thing to keep in mind is that the nodes, as well as their role and function, discussed in this book are London art world-centric.

However, regardless of how the nodes may be acting in different geographic areas or in a different time frame, the concept of a nodal governance can be applied.

Chapter 2 lays out the different theft risks the art world currently faces, including risk of theft while on display and theft while on the move from one site to another, who poses the greatest risks to art security in London and their motivations, methods to strengthen security and the importance of self-policing. Risk management options can vary greatly by available funding but not all risk reduction methods are costly. Some things to consider when situating security are technology (alarms, CCTV, display method, physical barriers), people/staff and access (entrance/exits, bag checks, electronic access, access due to other uses of location). While the art world is an unregulated field, self-policing is the best way to deal with art security. Self-policing can begin with simple measures by those in the art world, such as being proactive about creating theft barriers around art, checking databases to make sure that the art in question is not stolen before dealing it and volunteering information and expertise for art recovery. With shared knowledge and expertise through cooperation with other nodes, self-policing can help recoveries and strengthen security for the whole field.

Kerr's field research results are discussed in depth from Chapters 3 to 6, where each chapter is devoted to a security node that is important for managing risk. The role of each node within the nodal governance is discussed, along with how they are helping co-production of security, how they benefit from cooperation with other nodes and their limitations.

The public police (Chapter 3), which do not play a big role in day to day art security and policing, is still central to the network because they hold an important function that no other nodes have: formal investigative powers. They may lack in expert knowledge but utilizing other nodes has helped fill the gap and overall security benefits when they exercise their powers when the occasion calls for it. On the other hand, the private sectors that deal with security, investigation and loss adjustment (Chapter 4), are the main security providers for museums and galleries but they play a supporting role in formal investigations. They offer security services such as guards and technology that help prevent and recover art theft and have art and security expertise or have connections to people who have the expertise.

Insurance (Chapter 5) and governmental nodes (Chapter 6) are important in the matrix because they enable risk and lead governance. Insurance minimizes risk and helps embrace risk because insurance companies often require security standards to be met for insurance to apply and getting insurance helps art owners to feel more comfortable about showing and lending art. Insurance policies and their methods of crime prevention help shape regulation guidelines, as do governmental node policies. In London, national art galleries and museums cannot purchase private insurance and because these comprise a large portion of all galleries in London, governmental nodes are just as important and function similarly as insurance companies within the nodal network. The Government Indemnity Scheme (GIS), the Export Licensing Unit, and the Conditional Exemption Tax Incentive are examples of effective governmental nodes. The GIS and the Export Licensing Unit encourages art flow by indemnifying art that is loaned from non-national galleries for public interest display or granting licenses to cultural objects of certain criteria before being exported from the United Kingdom. On the other hand, the conditional Exemption Tax allows art institutions to keep art displayed to the public by giving tax exemptions on items with national interest. However, the existence and capacity of these nodes are highly affected by funding decisions.

On the basis of previous studies and Kerr's own research showing that art security in London is co-produced in a nodal governance framework, the book makes recommendations

that could enhance the framework's characteristics and supplement its limitations for better art security, starting with the fact that the nodal governance theoretical framework could be more recognized and made more explicit. Since technology has evolved and many art sales are now completed online, there is a need to reduce avenues for selling stolen art and creating an open database of stolen art information would benefit the co-production. Kerr suggests the public police play a more significant role in the co-production when needed and change the way art theft is perceived and dealt with within the force. For instance, art thefts can be recorded separately from other property crimes or there can be an indicator that it was an art crime. Other recommendations include having Council for the Prevention of Art Theft, a collaborative council that included stakeholders from different nodes, have a significant role again, more education and self-policing, more regulation within the art world, more funding for governmental nodes, and use of up-to-date technology.

Overall, the book is rich with details about the main art theft security nodes in London and provides a good overview of the art theft world. While some criminological theory is discussed in the beginning, it is a case study and the focus is on contents of the interviews and observations. Therefore, it would be useful and interesting to practitioners in the field, as well as criminologists interested in art theft or the security field. The bibliography includes the Websites of all the major nodes and affiliated nodes, which will be helpful for those wanting to find out more. For academics, one thing lacking is a thorough discussion on the study's methodology. There is a list of people interviewed and sites observed in the Preface (all anonymized) but there are no explanations of how they were recruited and chosen, where the interviews took place, how long the interviews were and whether there were multiple interviews, what time period the observations were conducted at and how the information was recorded and analyzed. A good methodology section will give more context to the research and provide a foundation for future research.

Seokhee Yoon
The Graduate Center-John Jay College of Criminal Justice,
New York, USA
E-mail: syoon@jjay.cuny.edu