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THE RULES DON'T APPLY TO ME SYNDROME



THE ANATOMY OF A SCANDAL

While I was in school in the mid-1980s, I had a part-time job at a bank doing administrative work relating to house closings. Not only was the work mind numbingly tedious, the pay was woefully inadequate. When it came to reporting my hours, after a period of time I began to fudge the numbers, increasing my wages commensurately with what I thought I deserved. My rationale was that I was extremely thorough and proficient at my job and at the very least, entitled to as much. My boss begged to differ. A dour woman on the best of days, who appeared (if possible) more redoubtable than usual, she called me into her office one afternoon.

“SOME PEOPLE ARE INCAPABLE OF FEELING CONTRITION WHEN CAUGHT RED-HANDED DEEPLY DIPPING INTO THE COOKIE JAR.”

The computerized entry system of the building had flagged the discrepancy between my claimed hours and the amount I actually worked. The joy of modern technology. Needless to say, I was swiftly and unceremoniously dismissed. The remorse I experienced lasted for years. A decade later I made a video about the incident, entitled “The Rules Don’t Apply to Me Syndrome,” where I reenacted getting exposed with my pants down (so to speak) and the ensuing humiliation and guilt that resulted. I contacted my former employer to act in the film but surprise-surprise, she elected not to. If only I could find a copy now.

As Sartre famously related in his philosophical treatise *Being and Nothingness*, you don’t suffer shame peeping through a keyhole unless you are observed doing so by another. Nevertheless, some people are incapable of feeling contrition when caught red-handed deeply dipping into the cookie jar. Which, in an admittedly roundabout way, brings me to the topic of this piece, which is why a perfectly clever and capable person would come to breach the trust that others had invested in him and break the law—that someone being my former friend, art dealer Inigo Philbrick.

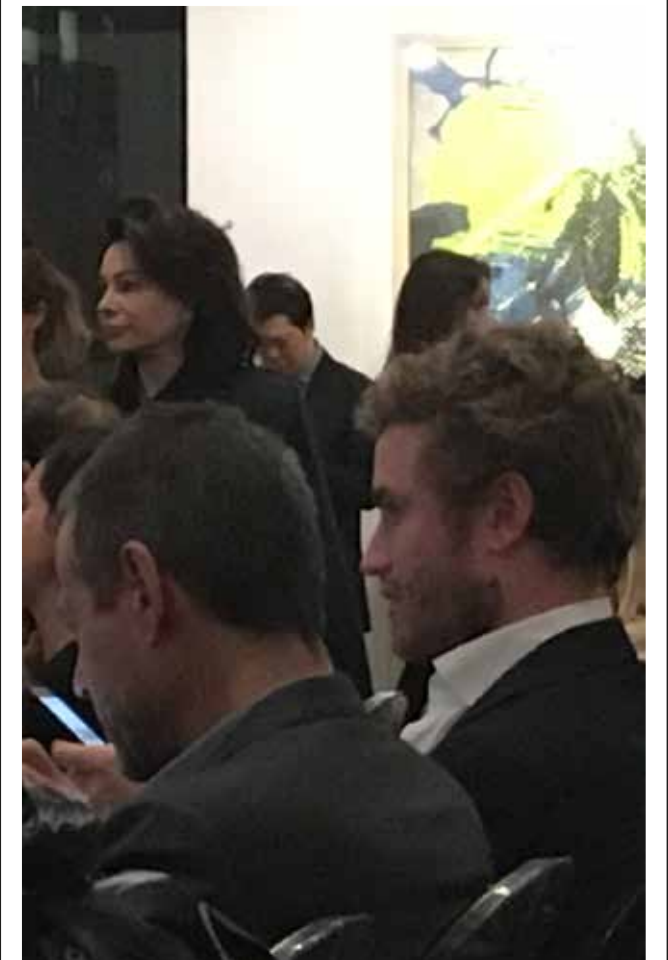
I don’t want to get into the background of the whole Inigo criminal enterprise; for that I refer you to the feature I wrote for *New York* magazine in the March 16th, 2020 issue (<https://www.vulture.com/2020/03/inigo-philbrick-art-dealer.html>), reprinted in its entirety in *The Times* (UK) *Saturday* magazine, May 30th 2020 (<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/inigo-philbrick-and-the-scam-that-shook-the-art-world-jc3qkbw8b>). But, suffice it to say, Philbrick sold art he didn’t own multiple times (whereas I can’t sell crack to a crackhead) and fi-

nanced numerous loans with the same collateral, to the tune of what could amount to well over \$50 million.

Having known Inigo rather well—too well for my own good—considering he stole about \$1.7 million from me, I find there are discernable psychological dynamics at play. When I first met Philbrick in 2012 he had what almost assuredly was a legitimate and thriving business reselling top works of contemporary art. He had a knack for ferreting out great paintings by Christopher Wool, Mike Kelley, Wade Guyton, Rudolf Stingel, and others.

In and around 2016, there was a seismic shift in the market away from the pantheon of white male artists in favor of female and black practitioners. After undergoing a meteoric rise, sometimes as a direct result of his incessant trading at ever escalating prices, the artists Philbrick so aggressively dealt began to plateau and trend lower. His rise was so brisk at such an early age (I met him when he was all of 25) that perhaps he was not able to adequately process the cash that came along with it.

In disproportion to the extent of his earnings—or anyone’s for that matter—Inigo began to live large, displaying a level of conspicuous consumption that was simply unsustainable, especially in the fluctuating landscape of the fickle art market. With his ever-rising extravagant lifestyle came an increase in drug and alcohol intake, not the best recipe for a nimble mind to negotiate a progressively uncertain and inconsistent market.



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My dad, who I never particularly go along with, imparted some sage advice that I always took to heart, imploring me not to believe my own lies and admonishing me not to take on excessive debt. These notions were completely lost on Philbrick as he sank further into turmoil in relation to his finances and also his way of life, not to mention the mental and physical abuse he heaped on himself and all who crossed his path. In that regard there were the well-documented private planes, plethora of illicit drugs, obscenely expensive red wines, and choice tables at Ibiza’s priciest clubs. And the harsh mental anguish he imparted on the hapless victims he stole countless millions from, not all of whom were stinking rich, though many were.

The American Psychological Association defines Antisocial Personality Disorder as “the presence of a chronic and pervasive disposition to disregard and violate the rights of others. Manifestations include repeated violations of the law, exploitation of



others, deceitfulness, impulsivity, aggressiveness, reckless disregard for the safety of self and others, and irresponsibility, accompanied by lack of guilt, remorse, and empathy. The disorder has been known by various names, including dyssocial personality, psychopathic personality, and sociopathic personality. It is among the most heavily researched of the personality disorders and the most difficult to treat.”

“INIGO BEGAN TO LIVE LARGE, DISPLAYING A LEVEL OF CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION THAT WAS SIMPLY UNSUSTAINABLE, ESPECIALLY IN THE FLUCTUATING LANDSCAPE OF THE FICKLE ART MARKET.”

Emily Zitek, assistant professor at the Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations in Ithaca, New York, writing on psychological entitlement asserted people motivated by a powerful sense of indignation that feel like they deserve good things and special treatment¹. In “A Status-Seeking Account of Psychological Entitlement”² the authors wrote of “an inflated and pervasive sense of deservingness, self-importance, and exaggerated expectations to receive special goods and treatment without reciprocating.” All of the preceding quotes could have headlined Philbrick’s résumé as they describe his behavior to a T.

Some further insight as to what turned a relatively good dealer bad (in relation to his peers, anyway) could be gleaned from the crimes of another fraudster, equally as young yet way more ambitious, the Malaysian Jho Low, who robbed an entire country of billions, dwarfing Philbrick’s misdeeds. Like Low, Inigo began to believe not only that he never did anything wrong but in addition, that he would never be caught. However, he was apprehended on the South Pacific island of Vanuatu strolling in a local market, where it’s claimed he took tennis lessons (in his own name) and bragged to locals of his art exploits.

Also Low-like, rather than putting together a scheme to pay back his creditors, Philbrick continued to pursue the standard of living he was well accustomed to; such as staying at the outré pricey Aman hotel in Tokyo while on the lam (I know because he boasted to me of the fact via Instagram Di-

rect Message where we remained in contact while he was a fugitive). As mentioned about Low in the “Billion Dollar Whale,” believing the myth of his own profitability and legitimacy was “a survival instinct, for sure, but perhaps after years of fabrication, he found it hard to perceive the hard line that divided truth from falsehood.” (*Billion Dollar Whale: The Man Who Fooled Wall Street, Hollywood and the World*, Tom Wright and Bradley Hope [New York: Hachette Books, 2018,], p. 306).

“WHAT WILL A FORMER ART DEALER AND (IN ALL PROBABILITY) CONVICTED FELON BE ABLE TO DO GOING FORWARD, IN A BUSINESS BASED PRIMARILY ON A SOLID REPUTATION?”

Also, described was a scene of Jho Low taking a helicopter to a private plane to a yacht (no less) to visit a National Geographic campsite in Greenland (probably the least green trip to a nature preserve recorded in history)—all in the face of mounting evidence against him and the knowledge that prosecu-



tors were closing in. In the book it was portrayed as being: “like a gambling session, a short break from people calling and demanding answers” (*Billion Dollar Whale*, p. 322). Philbrick too carried on his merry way trying to do deals and, to quote Prince, partying like it was 1999. While Jho Low remains on the loose, allegedly hiding in China outside the reach of the law, Philbrick has been stewing in a federal prison since mid-June, awaiting trial.

So how will this end? Inigo is just 33-years-old and when this episode is all said and done will probably be, at most, around 40—with a long life ahead of him. So, what will a former art dealer and (in all probability) convicted felon be able to do going forward, in a business based primarily on a solid reputation? Like his dad, noted institutional curator Harry Philbrick, both father and son attended art school at London’s noted Goldsmiths University where former alumni include Damien Hirst. A pathologically arrogant, egotistical personality lacking in empathy has but one career path that embraces all the above traits that is sure to lead to unbridled success—that of an artist of course. Just you watch.

1 <https://www.ilr.cornell.edu/news/entitlement-more-complex-you-think>
2 A Status-Seeking Account of Psychological Entitlement, Lange J, Redford L, Crusius J. *Pers Soc Psychol Bull.* 2019;45(7):1113–1128)