Sophie CALLE

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The Rules of the Game

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Sophie Calle has followed people in the street, invited women to analyse her break-up email and inspired a character in a Paul Auster novel. But although the artist has received some of photography's most prestigious prizes, she still defies definition. *Liz Jobey* meets her in Paris. Portraits by *Mark Steinmetz*

Last November, the French artist Sophie Calle was in London to receive the Royal Photographic Society's Centenary Medal. The society, founded in 1853, has been keen to update its image of late, and that night its efforts couldn't have been better served. If any contemporary artist has rock-star status among her fans, Calle has it, and she went up to whistles and cheers. Taking the lectern, she said that when she'd been told a speech wasn't necessary, "I immediately felt the desire to say a few words..." After all, she added, with a shrug: "A medal – a talk!"

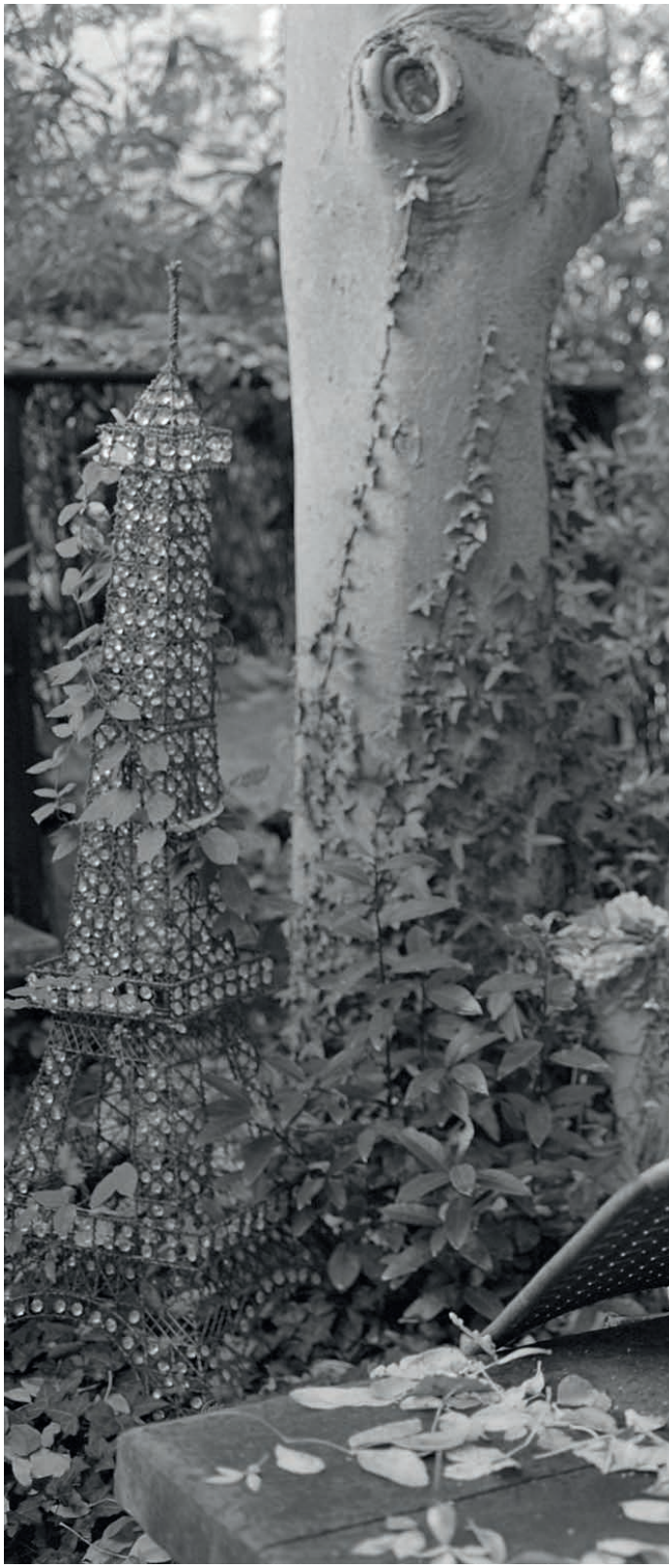
"Things didn't start so well between photography and me," she began. Her first solo show had met with "loud" disapproval from other artists. When her pictures were projected at the Arles photo festival, the public had started to boo: "For them, I was not a photographer and they were not entirely wrong." A profile in Le Monde had concluded that "she can't even take a good picture".

"So, photographer or not a photographer? I don't care any more," she told the audience. "In fact, I never did. Nevertheless, I am still surprised to receive a photo prize. And I want to sincerely thank you for, in a way, having decided for me."

It was neatly done. Because Calle is not a photographer, at least not in the traditional sense. Over the four decades she's been working, contemporary art has expanded in all directions, but it's still hard to find a category for what she does: conceptual, certainly; autobiographical, sort of. Most of her projects enjoy several lives – as exhibitions, as books, as films or combinations of all three. Most are based on some experience from her own life, but it might be a single phrase from a chance conversation or a meditation on a shared human experience – betrayal, love, memory, death. Photographs always play a part but they rarely have a leading role. Instead, they supply a layer of visual evidence for the ideas she comes up with.

Each work has its own system, a rule book to be followed, like a game. And each manages to expose some aspect of human frailty. Calle is like an amateur psychologist, digging around in the human psyche, fascinated by what motivates our behaviour.

But while their sources may be autobiographical, her projects are not confessional. We seldom learn much about her own inner ▶



Sophie Calle at her home in Paris, November 2019

◀ life. Instead, she puts her problems out to tender and solicits a response from others. Many require the participation of strangers to complete them.

A few days before she left to pick up her medal, I met Calle at her studio in south-west Paris, where she lives and works. Behind a grimy industrial facade, it's one of a colony of artists' studios built around a leafy central courtyard. As we sat and talked, the winter sun filtered through the wall of windows into her pretty living space, one wall lined with miniature art works, which she collects, the other with "swaps" from fellow artists.

She is 66 but looks at least a decade younger: attractive, dark-haired, energetic and immediately engaging. She smiles a lot, though in photographs her broad grin can seem ironic, as if the joke might be on you. She lives alone – unless you count her menagerie of stuffed animals: it includes a bear, a wolf, birds, a giraffe and a little monkey who proudly wears the gold Hasselblad medal, one of the highest awards in photography, which she received in 2010. (I wondered later which would get to wear the Centenary medal.)

Meeting her for the first time, I think it's strange how much I know about her already. Take her nose: it's a distinctive nose, with a pronounced curve, the kind that might trouble a teenager in front of the mirror. When she was 14, her grandparents suggested she have plastic surgery to straighten it. She had her doubts but she was spared the operation: two days before, the surgeon committed suicide.

I even know the name of the giraffe: Monique. She bought it after her mother died in 2006, and named it after her. These accounts come from *True Stories*, one of her many small books, which collects together seminal events from her life and presents them, non-sequentially, short text on one side, photo on the other.

At a time when the lines between autobiography and fiction are so often blurred in literature and art, it's easy to doubt the veracity of her stories, but she swears nearly all of them are true. "I don't have the ability to *invent*," she says in fast, fluent, accented English in which a few resistant French words still stick. "I can invent an *idée* but I can't invent a situation. I have to look at it, use it as material."

Sometimes, one idea suggests the next; other times, her projects come from chance events. She offers some examples. "The work I did in Turkey, about the people who never saw the sea [*Voir la mer*, 2011] – that started because somebody read me an article in a Turkish newspaper... and it spoke about people who had never seen the sea, meaning people that are so poor, so cut off from life, they had never seen it." So she took some of them to the shore for the first time and filmed them.

"Or the first time I came across the idea of asking blind people what is the most beautiful thing they saw [*The blind*, 1986] is because as I crossed an avenue, I heard a blind person talking to another, saying, 'Oh, I saw a beautiful movie yesterday...'"

Which comes first, her books or her exhibitions? "Generally, it's the wall first and then I make a book or sometimes it's [both] together. But the wall really gave me my style of writing." This was true from her first exhibition, *The Sleepers*, in 1980, part of a biennale for young artists at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. She had set up a darkroom in the garage at home, which she shared with a friend. One worked while the other slept, taking it in turns to use her bed. So she decided to extend the invitation, photographing

From the series *True Stories*: 'Le Nez', 2000; 'Wait for me', 2010

From the series *The Sleepers*, 1979

From the series *The Gotham Handbook*, 'Des journées entières sous le signe du B, du C, du W', 1998

'I don't have the capacity to *invent*. I can invent an *idée* but I can't invent a situation. I have to look at it, use it as material'

From the series *Suite Vénitienne*, 1980

volunteers and interviewing them in bed. "I wrote under the photo right away about what people did, you know, I took notes."

The husband of one of the women who slept in her bed was an art critic who was selecting work for the biennale and invited her. "So, right away, it was the wall first," she says. "I immediately had to [consider] the fact that people read standing, so it has to be short... It gave me my writing style because I had to erase, erase, erase, until each word was necessary to understand it.

"Also, my father was an art collector and I wanted to seduce my father, and for me the way to seduce him was with art on the wall, not the book. Books were more on my mother's side. My mother read a lot, she was surrounded by writers. So in a way, I made the work on the wall for my father and the books for my mother."

Calle grew up in Paris. Her father was a doctor, her mother was a journalist. Although they separated when she was three, both played an enduring role in her life and her work. "My mother was completely wild and extremely funny," she says. Her father, by contrast, "was very serious, very deep".

At 18, she enrolled at the University of Nanterre to study sociology, where one of her tutors was the philosopher Jean Baudrillard. "Baudrillard became a friend. He liked me, he thought my life was more interesting outside the university than inside, and he pushed me to travel. He thought it was much more useful for me. I told him that my father would only [support me] if I was studying, never if I was just hanging out. So Baudrillard said, 'If you want, I will pass all your exams.'" He offered to put down a pass mark for all her papers, so she would still get her degree. When she told her father about the deal, he apparently accepted it.

Calle spent the next seven years travelling in Europe, Mexico and the US, finding jobs as she went. It was in California that she first picked up a camera. The images that really gave her an inkling of a future path were of two gravestones in the cemetery: each had only one word – "Sister", "Brother" – no names, no dates, no epitaphs. It was a subject she would return to later.

She told her father she had found something she thought she wanted to do, came back to Paris and started to look for a subject. "I don't know where to go because I don't ▶

◀ know the places, or the people," she recalls, slipping into the present tense. "So I start to follow people, just to give an energy to my days. If they take me to a new bar, at least I will meet a new bar. If they take me to a neighbourhood I don't know, OK. If they take me to the Champs-Elysées, I'm going there."

In January 1979, she followed a man but quickly lost sight of him. Then, the same evening, by complete coincidence, she was introduced to him at a party. He told her he was planning a trip to Venice. She followed him, tracking him down to his hotel and photographing him without his knowledge.

She had told Baudrillard about her project, and then she received an offer of a book. "Cahiers du Cinema wanted to publish it, but my name was no name and they wanted someone to write, and Jean proposed to write it." The result was her first book, *Suite Vénitienne*, in 1983.

That year, she also landed in legal trouble when she found an address book in the street. Before sending it back to the owner, Pierre D (his first name and address were on the cover), she photocopied all the entries – more than 400 of them – and began calling the names one by one, inviting them to meet her and, if they agreed, asking them to describe the man, building up a picture of him based on their anecdotes. When it was serialised in Libération, Pierre D recognised himself and threatened to sue. She had to agree not to republish it until after his death.

It was this early work that had fascinated the American novelist Paul Auster, who borrowed some of Calle's projects for the character of Maria in his 1992 novel *Leviathan*. Almost 30 years later, his description of Maria/Sophie still fits. "Maria was an artist, but the work she did had nothing to do with creating objects commonly defined as art. Some people called her a photographer, others referred to her as a conceptualist, still others considered her a writer, but none of those descriptions was accurate, and in the end I don't think she can be pigeonholed... Her work was too nutty for that... this activity didn't stem from a desire to make art so much as from a need to indulge her obsessions, to live her life precisely as she wanted to live it."

To Maria's résumé he added some projects of his own, such as eating foods of one colour or spending the day living under a single letter: B, C and W. When Calle read the novel, she decided to complete the character and live them out. Not satisfied, she asked Auster to write her a new story so she could live it out in full.

"Well," Auster told me, "I knew Sophie well enough by then. And I realised that she would do anything. If I told her to join Hamas, she would join Hamas and become a terrorist. If I told her to jump off the Brooklyn Bridge, she would jump off the Brooklyn Bridge. I thought, I'm dealing with dynamite here and I don't want to do it. She would call me every month, 'Where's my story Paul? I'm waiting for my story.' And for two years I kept fending her off. I hoped she would just, simply, goddammit, forget the whole thing.

"Finally, I said to myself, 'All right, I'm going to keep my promise.' I thought of the most innocent project imaginable, something that could not get her into any trouble whatsoever."

The result was *The Gotham Handbook*, in which he wrote out a list of "personal instructions for SC. On how to improve life in New York City." They included: "Smile when the situation doesn't call for it... Pick one spot in the city and begin to think of it as yours." Calle responded enthusiastically, complete with supporting pictures. Only when she decorated a New York phone booth, which turned out to be a federal offence, did the project draw to a close. She and Auster had dinner together. He told her, "It's finished, Sophie. You can stop smiling."

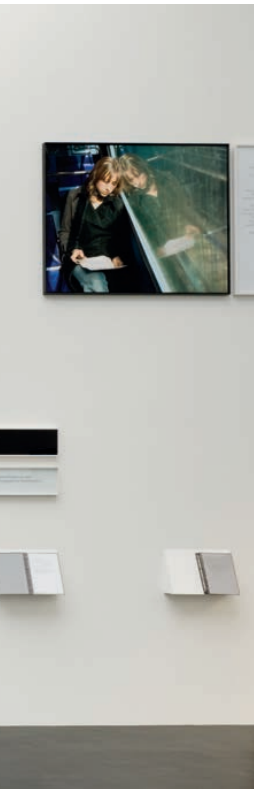
One of Calle's most wide-ranging works is "*Prenez soin de vous*" ("Take care of yourself"), first shown at the Venice Biennale in 2007. The title is taken from the last line of an email she received from a lover, ending their affair. Curious as to its real meaning, she decided to investigate. "I received an email telling me it was over. I didn't know how to respond. It was almost as if it hadn't been meant for me. It ended with the words, 'Take care of yourself', so I did."

She decided to send the letter to other women, asking them to interpret it and report back. They ranged from an anthropologist to a moral philosopher, a rapper, an expert in women's rights, a nursery-school teacher, a lawyer, a linguist, a magician. In the end, she consulted 107 women, photographed each one reading a copy of the email, and then organised all their analysis into an

From the series *The Hotel*, 'Room 24 (March 2)', 1981

View of the exhibition *Sophie Calle/Prenez soin de vous* at the French Pavilion of the 52nd Venice Biennale, 2007

Sophie Calle: 'I am still surprised to receive a photo prize'



From the series *The Blind*, 'My son', 1986

exhibition and a book. By this time, any emotional damage she might have suffered had disappeared.

"When I did it, I avoided all emotion," she says. "I stopped suffering the minute I got the project [as] it took the place of the suffering. It's not any more about a man leaving me, it's a project about a man who leaves a woman... The problem is not me any more, the problems are artistic problems, how to show it, how to say it."

Her other relationships haven't escaped scrutiny. In *True Stories* she tells the story of "The Husband" about a man she met in a bar in New York in 1989. A year later, he arrived in Paris. A year after that, they drove across America. And on January 18 1992, they were married at a drive-thru wedding in Las Vegas. By this time, the relationship was more or less over. In the film, their thoughts about each other, relayed in subtitles and voice-overs, grow increasingly bitter: she is still keen to be married – he wants to escape. It's both excruciating and funny, and arouses all the fears and expectations involved in commitment. By October, they'd agreed a divorce.

She has been with her current partner for 15 years, although they live separately. "Two houses. Yes. And we have very strict rules. We never spend more than one week in a row together. We never do trips together that are more than a week. We see each other a lot. We speak. And we do most things separately."

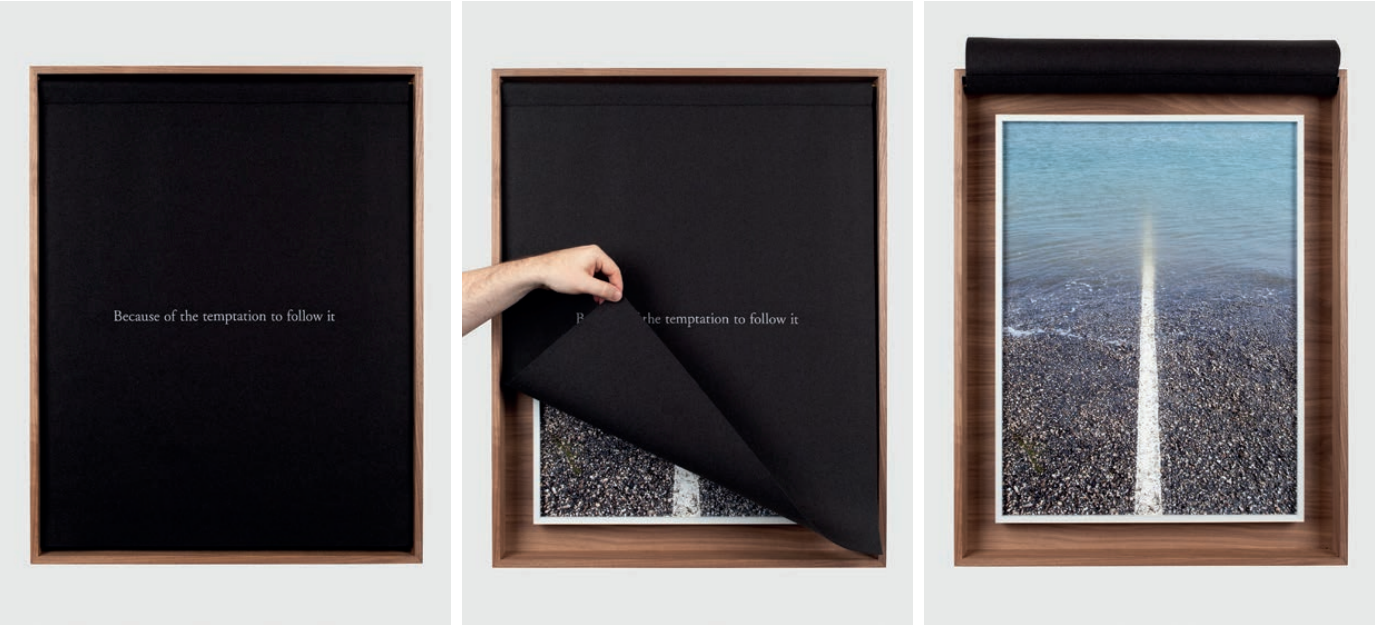
Then, in case I'm about to ask her more about him: "I am not allowed to speak about him, otherwise he leaves me." She shrugs, "It's very practical because if one day I stopped loving him, I know what to do. I just have to write a story about him..."

She has never wanted children. "I hate children. I am bored by them. I am not moved by children. All my friends, when they have children, I stop seeing them. It's just that there is no room."

I'm surprised that she doesn't find children appealing – or at least interesting. "No. I was never attracted. I see a cat, I go on the floor, I behave like an eight-year-old, I run after it. If I see a cat, the world stops existing around me."

And if a four-year-old came in? "I would want to throw up."

She offers a partial explanation. "When my brother was born, I was 11, and my life changed. Before, I was very free. I could go round and sleep at my girlfriend's. But then I became my brother's babysitter. And my mother gave my cat ▶



From the series *Because*, 'The White Line', 2018

◀ away. She was afraid it might hurt my brother. So I was stuck at home [looking] after my brother. I lost my freedom when he was born." Even earlier than that: "My mother had entrusted me to a group of children. I was the youngest and they had to get rid of me: that was their game... I ran after them, shouting, 'Wait for me! Wait for me!" This is another excerpt from *True Stories*, opposite a snapshot of little Sophie on a promenade.

Both her parents are dead now: her mother died in 2006, her father in 2015. Her mother had always wanted to star in one of her daughter's pieces and when it happened, it was at the very end of her life. She had cancer and had been given three months to live.

"I decided to stay with her. Everybody said that when people are going to die, they wait for you to go out [of the room], and I wanted to be there at the moment that she died. Also, my mother had asked me to put on a piece of Mozart when she died, so I wanted to be there to put the music on. I stayed with her. I slept there.

"But then I realised I couldn't be there 24 hours a day watching her. So I decided to put a camera next to the bed. And when she saw the camera, she said, '*Finally.*'

"She liked the camera, because she felt that when I was not there, I *was* there in a way. I know some of her friends were a little shocked, but I didn't care. She wanted it. I wanted it. My brother was OK with it. But I never thought I would use it. I did it for myself, to look at it and see if she had told me something."

And did she? "I don't know because I could never watch [all the footage]. I only watched the last hour." And in the last hour, things didn't turn out as planned. "I didn't see the death," she says. "I couldn't catch it. I realised there was this strange moment between life and death, where I could not see... There was a nurse with me, and my cousin, and we touched here and we touched there and we couldn't figure out if she was dead or alive."

The footage showed it had taken 11 minutes for her to decide whether or not to put on the music. Afterwards, she decided that she could make something with those 11 minutes. She added a text and worked the word "*souci*", the last her mother had spoken – "*Ne vous faites pas de souci*" ("Don't worry") – into a film and an installation.

When she showed it at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris in 2010 she took her father along. "He was the first to see it and I said, 'Is it OK? I am going to show my mother dying?" And he said, 'Yes, it's absolutely OK.'

"And I was laughing, because I knew my father, so I said: 'Can I do the same with you when you die?' And he said, 'Are you crazy?' They were absolute opposites. To do this about my mother was an act of love. Had I done the same with my father, it would be an act of war."

So much of Calle's work concerns death, I wondered what she felt about growing older. "I never thought about my age before. And now I have to. But I am not anxious. I am not afraid of getting short of ideas because I could accept to stop.

"When my father died, I had no more ideas. I was paralysed. So I said to all my friends, you know, it's fine. I am going to do something else. I can survive with the money I have... I pretended to everybody that it was OK. Then my ideas came back. I said to my boyfriend, 'You know, I think I have new ideas...'"

These days, she does most of her work on her laptop, and she scrolls down to show me the project in progress for her US show, which opens in California later this month, entitled *Because*.

"I usually do photos only when I have a rule of the game," she says. "I never take them randomly, I don't walk with a camera. But sometimes, like everybody, I see something – with my phone generally – and I take it. But I never know what to do with these photos because they have no stories behind them."

Nevertheless, they all had a reason to be taken. And, looking at them again, other reasons came into her head, building up layers of memory around the very simple shots. She decided to turn it into a kind of game, hiding the images behind a curtain with the reasons embroidered on it, inviting the viewer to read, then lift the curtain, then think and look again.

The combination of texts and random pictures is surprisingly effective. In some ways, it is more revealing of her inner life than many of her more complicated projects. One shows a white line painted on shingle leading out into the sea, with the text "Because of the temptation to follow it".

I wondered if regret plays any part in her work. "So far, in my work, I have no regrets. I like to look back but I don't look back out of nostalgia." If she has been drawn to ideas about absence and about death, it has been "just as a poetic element, not out of sadness.

"I don't think I'm revealing anything personal in a way. It's like I said before. A man left me. Absolutely. Everybody that visited my show, everybody has been left one day. There is no information about me. We just know he left me with a mail. So in many of those stories, they are one moment – as I said – they are not my life. They are one minute of an event that I select. I never feel I am revealing anything. No. People think they know me. But they know nothing." FT

"Sophie Calle. Because" runs at the Fraenkel Gallery in San Francisco from January 23 to March 21. "Because" is published by Editions Xavier Barral, €36