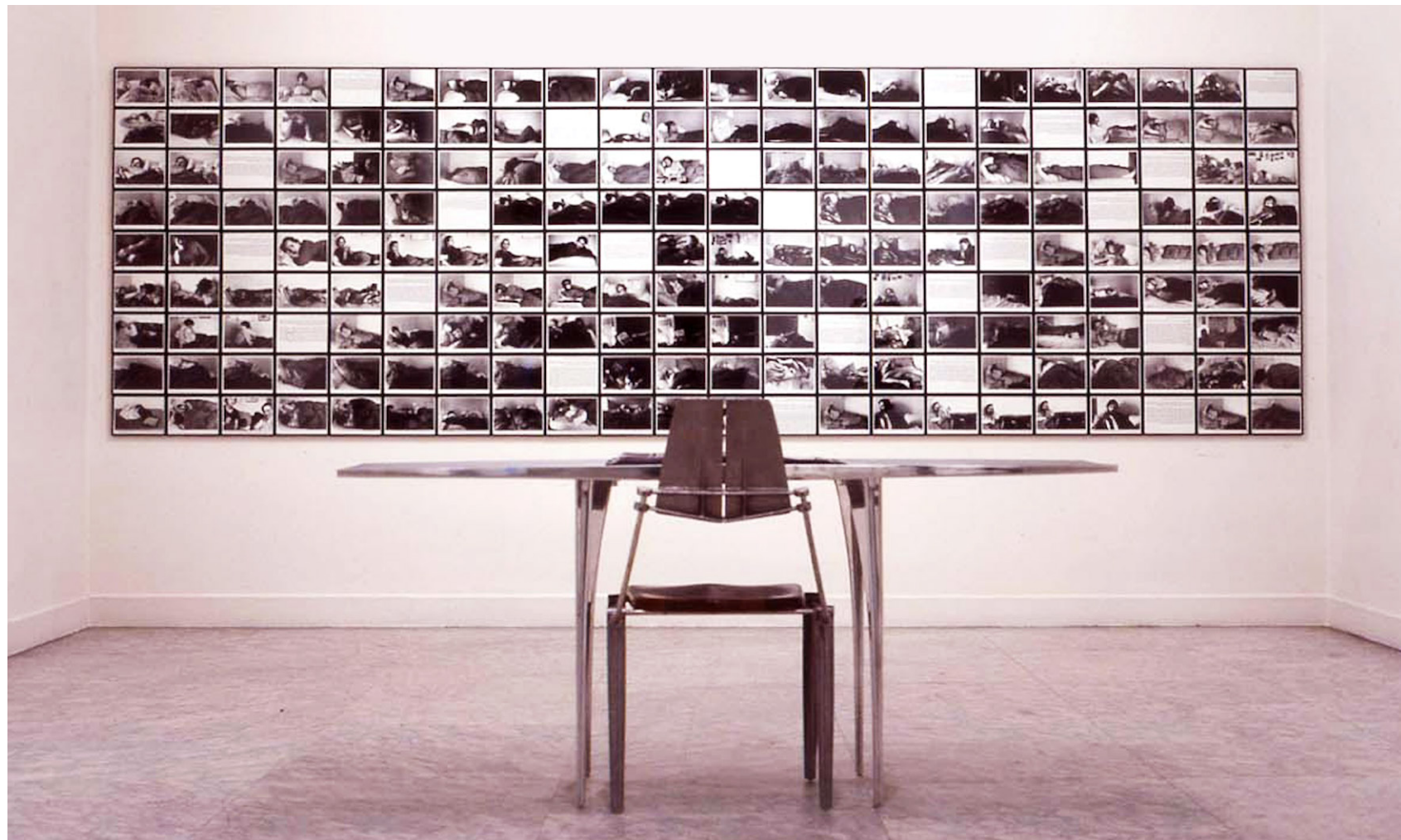


Sophie CALLE

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Sophie Calle's work *The Sleepers* | *Les Dormeurs*, 1979.

Eye Spy

Sophie Calle's intimate, quietly transgressive photographs have made her a favorite of the art world for decades. A new survey of her work examines the depth of her vision. By William Middleton

Portrait by Tim El Kaïm

A couple of days before I was to meet Sophie Calle, a friend from New York who is a collector had an observation about the French artist: “She’s a hard one to categorize.” That thought hangs in the air as I make my way to Calle’s apartment and studio, in the Paris suburb of Malakoff. Inside an unremarkable industrial building, an overgrown terrace leads to a loft-like space filled with a fascinating collection of paintings, photographs, drawings, ephemera from the artist’s life (a photo of her with her father, collector and art historian Robert Calle; a dead bouquet of flowers from Frank Gehry), and dozens, if not scores, of taxidermy animals. Above the front door, a large peacock sits on a perch, its long tail dangling toward the floor. The main wall of the salon is dominated by the graceful neck and noble head of a giraffe named Monique, which Calle acquired shortly after the death of her mother, Monique Sindler. Not unlike Calle’s work, the rooms are bold and somewhat unsettling. Sitting in such an astonishing interior, as though it were the most natural thing in the world, the artist is thoughtful and engaging. So, I decide to begin our conversation with that question: How does she characterize herself? “It’s not up to me to determine my category,” says Calle, seemingly bemused by the idea. “I don’t really give a damn!”

The 71-year-old Calle has been an art world sensation for decades, creating conceptual works that are often spun out of her personal experiences (the French newspaper *Le Monde*, in 1998, termed her “a fetishist of her own life”). For *The Sleepers* (1979), she invited a series of friends and strangers, over the course of more than a week, to spend hours in her own bed while she photographed them. For *The Hotel* (1981), Calle persuaded a hotel in Venice to hire her as a maid for three weeks, which allowed her to photograph what she found in the rooms and write texts that imagined

the lives of the guests. *No Sex Last Night* (1992), a collaboration with her former boyfriend, the filmmaker Greg Shephard, is a series of videos documenting a disintegrating relationship as the couple drove from New York to Oakland, California.

Calle is now the subject of a major retrospective, “Sophie Calle: Overshare,” at the Walker Art Center, in Minneapolis (through January 26, 2025). Although she has had no shortage of museum exhibitions in France and across Europe, this is her first major retrospective in the United States. The title, “Overshare,” is certainly apt, given the biographical nature of much of Calle’s work. “One of the points I’m making about this whole notion of oversharing—which is a word that is most often used pejoratively and usually about women’s writing—is that this is actually a strategy that is very clearly honed, and she’s in complete control about the extent of what she’s disclosing,” explains the Walker’s chief curator, Henriette Huldish. “The title ‘Overshare’ is a bit of a strategic conceit, and a provocation in that sense. Sophie Calle very much controls the narrative.”

The artist—sitting at her dining room table, next to a 15th-century Flemish portrait, *Luce de Montfort*, that her parents gifted her for her first birthday—is delighted to take on that issue. “I am both very much about oversharing but, at the same time, not at all,” she explains. “I am not on social media; I don’t have Instagram or Facebook. So, I am saying a lot less than anyone who is writing about what they had for dinner last night, or where, or with whom. There are a lot of people who think that they know me, but that is completely false. In fact, I choose a moment, but it is just a moment—I don’t tell what happened before or after. I have been with the same man for 20 years, and I have never written one line about him or shown one photo of him. For 20 years, no one has known how I really live my life.” »

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Calle in her home studio with a taxidermy piece and several personal artworks.



Assorted works in Calle's home studio. Photographed by Tim El Kaim.

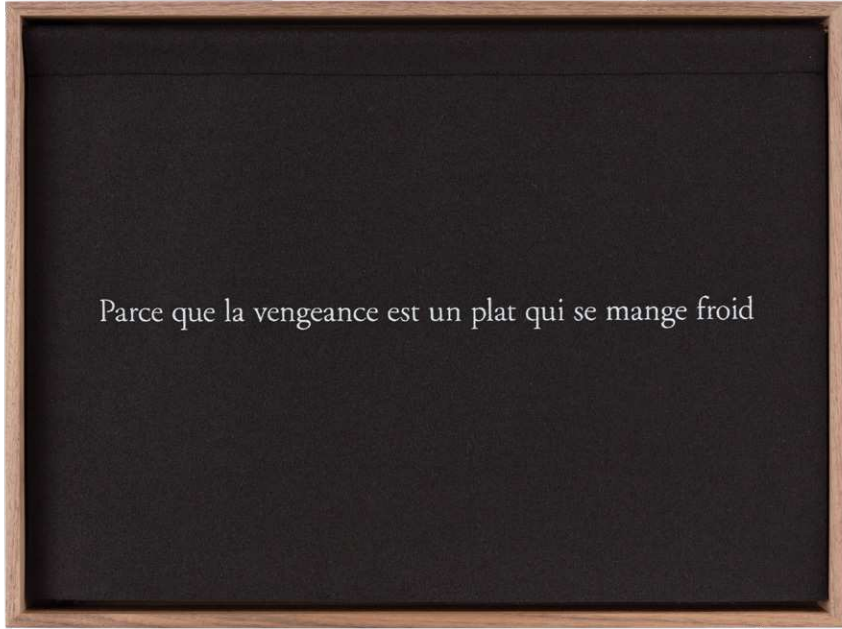


Calle at the derelict Orsay Hotel in 1979, a few years before the building was resurrected as the Musée d'Orsay.

Calle has been something of a faux exhibitionist, giving only the impression that she is revealing everything. “In any situation, I will take one very small moment that I feel will have something to say—that will be poetic, have depth or humor—but I do not tell the whole story of the scene.”

France fiercely protects individual privacy. Calle's approach can seem particularly transgressive in her home country, and she has often pushed the limits. In 1983, she found an address book on the street, copied its contents, and returned it anonymously to its owner. She began calling those listed in the book, meeting with them, taking photos, and writing about her sense of the owner; she then published the project serially in *Libération*. The subject of the piece was furious, demanding that in return the newspaper publish nude photos that he had found of her. (After the man died, in 2005, Calle turned the work into a book, titled simply *The Address Book*.) “I have never been sued,” notes Calle. “Once, I ran into a lawyer whom I liked very much, and he said to me, laughing, ‘It always surprises me when I see you on the street. I expect you to be in prison!’ It was a joke, but still.”

In many ways, Calle is the most American of French artists. She has spent a total of about four years living in the United States—mostly in New York and Bolinas, in Northern California's Marin County—and her confessional tone can seem closer to the American approach to self-revelation; many feel that her work foreshadowed social media by several decades. Her first major gallery exhibition, which happened thanks to an introduction by Frank Gehry, was at the Fred Hoffman Gallery in Los Angeles in 1989. She had met the architect when she was out in L.A. doing a piece for the 1984 Olympics. “Frank Gehry was the first person to decide to help me,” says Calle. “And I started to have important shows in the United States, at a time when my work did not interest many people in France.... I presume they thought it wasn't art.”



Father - Mother | Mother Father, 2018.

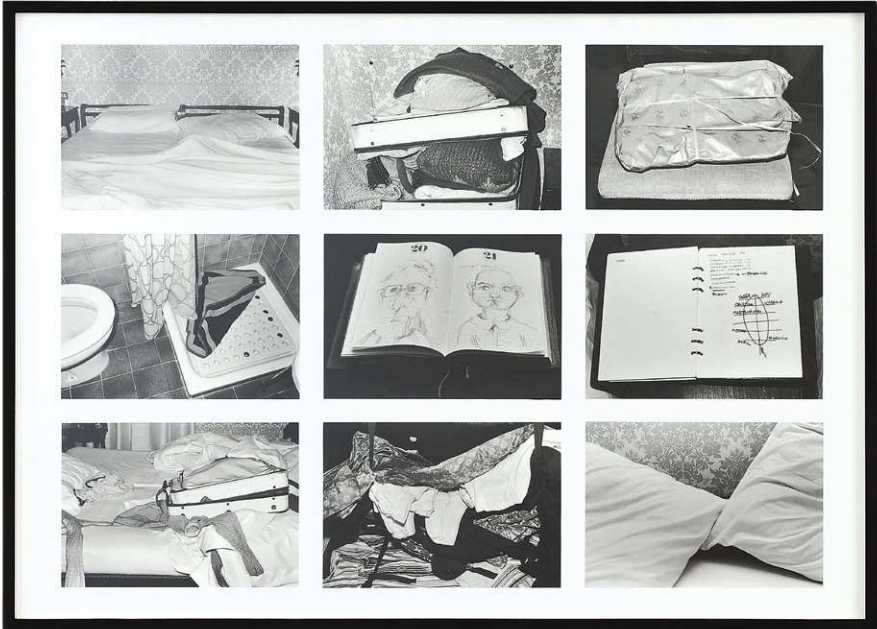
Even when Calle pulls material from her own life, she tends to use biographical elements to make a larger point. For her entry for the 2007 Venice Biennale, she was inspired by the final line of a breakup email from a former lover: “Take care of yourself.” Calle asked more than 100 women, known and unknown, to interpret that line using whatever medium they chose: text, video, dance, song, and photography. The sprawling piece, *Take Care of Yourself*, became a chorus of voices countering the carelessness of the phrase. Although Calle uses multiple media, she works most often with photography paired with illustrative text. “I've seldom used photography without writing, and I've never written without images to accompany the texts,” she explains. “At first, it was because I didn't think I was a good enough photographer to deserve the photography category. I also didn't think I could write well enough to merit the writer category. So, I found a way to help my photographs with my texts and to help my texts with my photographs.”

No such modesty is required today. Calle has imposed her artistic vision through decades of exhibitions and retrospectives. She has made a pop video for R.E.M., “Walk It Back”; published many critically acclaimed books of her photography and writing; and, in 2002, spent one night in a bed perched at the top of the Eiffel Tower for the piece *Room with a View*, with visitors entering to tell bedtime stories meant to be lively enough to keep her awake.

But not all of Calle's work is centered on her life. *Voir la Mer*, from 2011, was inspired by an article in the newspaper saying that there were people living around Istanbul who, primarily because of poverty, had never been to the sea. “They didn't have the means to see the ocean, even though they lived in the mountains some 10 miles away. I was so struck by that,” says Calle. Working with a local support organization, she put together a trip to the Black Sea for a group of men, women, and children, filming them from behind as they stared out to the water for the first time. She asked them to turn to the camera after whatever amount of time they wanted to take, so she could register their reaction. “That is one of the most moving pieces for me,” says Calle. “From behind, it is as though we are seeing the sea with them for the first time. You can see the shoulders twitch, feel the emotion.”

Another nonbiographical work in the Walker exhibition, and the only new piece, is *On the Hunt*, which she completed this year. As Calle explains in the text for the retrospective: “I drew up a catalog of the main qualities sought in women by male individuals, and in men by female individuals, through a selection of dating ads published for the most part in *Le Chasseur Français* between 1895 and 2019.” One ad in the hunting and fishing magazine, from the early 20th century, begins, “Sincerely serious advertisement: 45-year-old lady having encountered great setbacks, fond of elderly men. Will she find one? Octogenarian, disabled, ugly, doesn't matter.”

As for gender, Calle has a nuanced take on how it has impacted her career. The first section of the Walker show, called simply “The Spy,” has her following men she saw on the street, secretly taking photos, and even pursuing one to Venice (in *Suite Vénitienne*, 1980). “If everything that I did had been done by a man, it would have been something else entirely,” explains Calle. “If a man followed women on the street, there could have been problems. I am often asked if it is difficult to be a female artist. It is true that economically, in terms of recognition, it is more difficult for women than for men. But, paradoxically, for the type of work that I do, it has helped—I have been able to be so intrusive, I think, because I am a woman.” ♦



L'Hotel, Chambre 43. 28 Février/3 Mars, 1981-1983.