

Sophie CALLE

Flash Art,

Cover Story

March 2025

Flash Art

Image Arena



SOPHIE CALLE

in conversation with Gea Politi
photographed by Joshua Woods

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Cover Story
Not (Not)
An Autobiography
**SOPHIE
CALLE**
IN CONVERSATION WITH
GEA POLITI
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
JOSHUA WOODS





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Arriving at Sophie Calle's studio in Malakoff on a rainy day, one steps into a quiet courtyard where an urban-yet-wild garden unfolds. Just before the glass entrance to the building, the garden holds a few curious details: a furry white cat, a grave of another cat, a miniature Eiffel Tower, and a street sign for Le Cailar — Calle's hometown in the south of France (not far from Arles, so I've learned).

Upon entering the living area, visitors are greeted by an unexpected sight: a taxidermy monkey version of Laurie Anderson. The walls showcase more peculiar decor — a giant giraffe neck representing Sophie's mother, a wolf symbolizing Emmanuel Perrotin, and a baby white tiger standing in for Paula Cooper. It becomes apparent that in Sophie Calle's studio, everyone is represented by an animal. Hundreds of these animal figures are scattered throughout, from the living room to the kitchen and bedroom. Calle also displays her Praemium Imperiale art prize from Japan, which she recently received in the category of painting. This comes as a pleasant surprise; given her renowned work in photography, one might expect the award to be more aligned with that medium. Through the lenses of her pointy spectacles, Sophie Calle's keen, mischievous gaze is discernible. With an air of authority, she directs our photographic endeavors, delineating the boundaries between public exposure and private sanctum, all while asserting her prerogative over certain subjects. Her refreshing demeanor is immediately captivating. Amid the ebb and flow of the photoshoot, and the comings and goings of Tokyo — the feline companion of a neighbor, and presumably the bosom friend of Calle's own cat, Milou — we find moments to delve into the intricacies of her oeuvre and personal narrative.

Gea Politi: What insights into humanity have you gained since you began immersing yourself in your subjects' lives?

Sophie Calle: One significant realization is that people are more inclined to participate in unconventional experiences than we might assume. For instance, when I initiated my first project, “The Sleepers” (1979), wherein I was asking strangers to sleep in my bed and be photographed, I didn’t expect such interest in getting involved. I’ve learned that people often say yes because the request is unexpected. It’s not a typical favor, like asking for help moving. When faced with an unusual proposition, like “Would you please sleep in my bed while I photograph you?” people tend to think, “Why not?” There’s an inherent desire for novelty and play.

GP Were there instances when someone agreed but then didn’t show up?
SC Yes, occasionally. Sometimes they changed their minds, or their alarm failed to wake them. I recall another project where I wanted to interview blind people about their concept of beauty. For a year, I hesitated to start, fearing the potential cruelty of asking someone who had never experienced sight to describe beauty. One day, I spontaneously asked a blind man on the street, and his immediate response was profoundly beautiful: “To see so far that you lose sight of it.” This experience taught me that I shouldn’t fear asking difficult questions. People always have the choice to respond, and if the approach is playful, many will engage.

GP Do you still refer to your work as “project games”?
SC I prefer to call them “rituals” now. I’ve learned to trust my ideas and simply try them out. It’s about creating a situation that allows others to respond in unexpected ways.

GP Your work often blurs the line between reality and fiction —
SC [interrupts] No, everything is real. However, it becomes a form of fiction through the process of selection and presentation. For example, in my film *No Sex Last Night* (1996), I documented a year-long relationship, filming sixty hours of footage, but the final product was only seventy-five minutes. Inevitably, this becomes a kind of fiction because we choose specific moments and lines, and we could have fabricated multiple different narratives from the same material. It’s fiction in the sense that it’s a curated representation of reality, but everything depicted actually happened. There’s no invention of situations or dialogue. The same principle applies to my autobiographical work. I might choose a single phrase to represent a sixty-five-year relationship with my father. It’s not a comprehensive life story, but a carefully selected moment or reaction. So, while it’s based on reality, the selective nature of the presentation creates a form of fiction.

GP Speaking of the line between fiction and reality in your work, I know you are not into social media, but I was wondering if you have a point of view on social media?
SC My view is simple: I don’t want to be involved in it.

GP Let’s revisit the concept of sharing in your practice, because your exhibition that’s about to conclude at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis is titled “Overshare.”
SC Indeed. However, my experience with Walker Art Center has been unique and unprecedented. This exhibition feels as if I were already deceased. When they decided to organize it, I was deeply immersed in my project for Musée Picasso in Paris, “À Toi De Faire, Ma Mignonne” (2023–24); I was completely absorbed by it. When Henriette Huldish (Walker’s Chief Curator) approached me, I explained that I couldn’t curate a show so she offered to handle it herself. It was the first time I’ve relinquished control of an exhibition, with everything determined by someone else. She selected the works, secured them, and designed the installation. My role was limited to approvals or disapprovals, such as expressing my preferences between projects or roles. I only worked for three days prior to the opening to make minor adjustments. Henriette made all the decisions regarding the exhibition – the title, photographs, press materials. I completely surrendered control. It’s the first time in my life there’s been an exhibition as if I had passed away and someone curated a show about me. Collaborating with Henriette was a wise decision because it was either this approach





or nothing at all – I couldn't do it myself. Consequently, it's a different exhibition than if I had curated it personally, as I might have allowed myself more liberties than she did. She adhered to very specific installation guidelines, and I just made some small modifications in the final days. For a small exhibition, you typically send instructions and specify details — like, "It's just a line, fifty centimeters apart" — while others execute it when you can't be there in person. But for a semi-retrospective, I had never done this before. And I was extremely satisfied with the outcome.

GP Your "Autobiographies" series has been ongoing since the 1980s. How has your approach to autobiographical work evolved over the decades?

SC I don't think it has changed significantly. The form may have evolved because I have more money now, so my fabrication is less basic. Otherwise, it's always by chance – something suddenly happens, or I read something, or I daydream. Rarely — maybe once or twice a year — I have a new story to add. It can also be an old souvenir that I suddenly see working as a short story. Sometimes it just comes to me as a phrase. Some stories are based on just one answer, one phrase, or one word.

GP You mentioned *No Sex Last Night*, produced with your then-partner, filmmaker Greg Shephard. The movie captures a couple's precarious relationship during a road trip from New York to San Francisco. How does the medium of film allow you to explore themes of intimacy and relationship dynamics differently from your photographic and text-based works?

SC *No Sex Last Night* is unique in my work. I've never done anything like it, either before or since. It was the first time I didn't have an idea for a project before doing it. In fact, I made the movie because I never thought there would actually be a movie. The man I was with dreamed of making movies and was planning to leave me. I realized that if I pretended to make a film, he would stay. I pretended to shoot because it cost nothing — it was just a video cassette. When we reached California, I kept up the act, pretending to edit the footage simply to keep him close. Until then, everything was like a carrot for him to follow. Then we edited the first ten minutes, and suddenly I realized there might actually be a movie. My perspective changed completely, and the movie became the focus. But up to that point, I never thought I had one. It was just an ongoing project just to keep him. I made a movie because I wanted to keep the guy. This is what makes it different from all my other projects. And, in a way, it worked — we stayed together for one year while we edited. Then we split. But I got what I wanted, which was to marry him. And he married me to give a climax to the movie, because on his side he was really trying to make a movie while I was pretending.

GP Did you feel that your treatment of intimacy was very different from your other works?

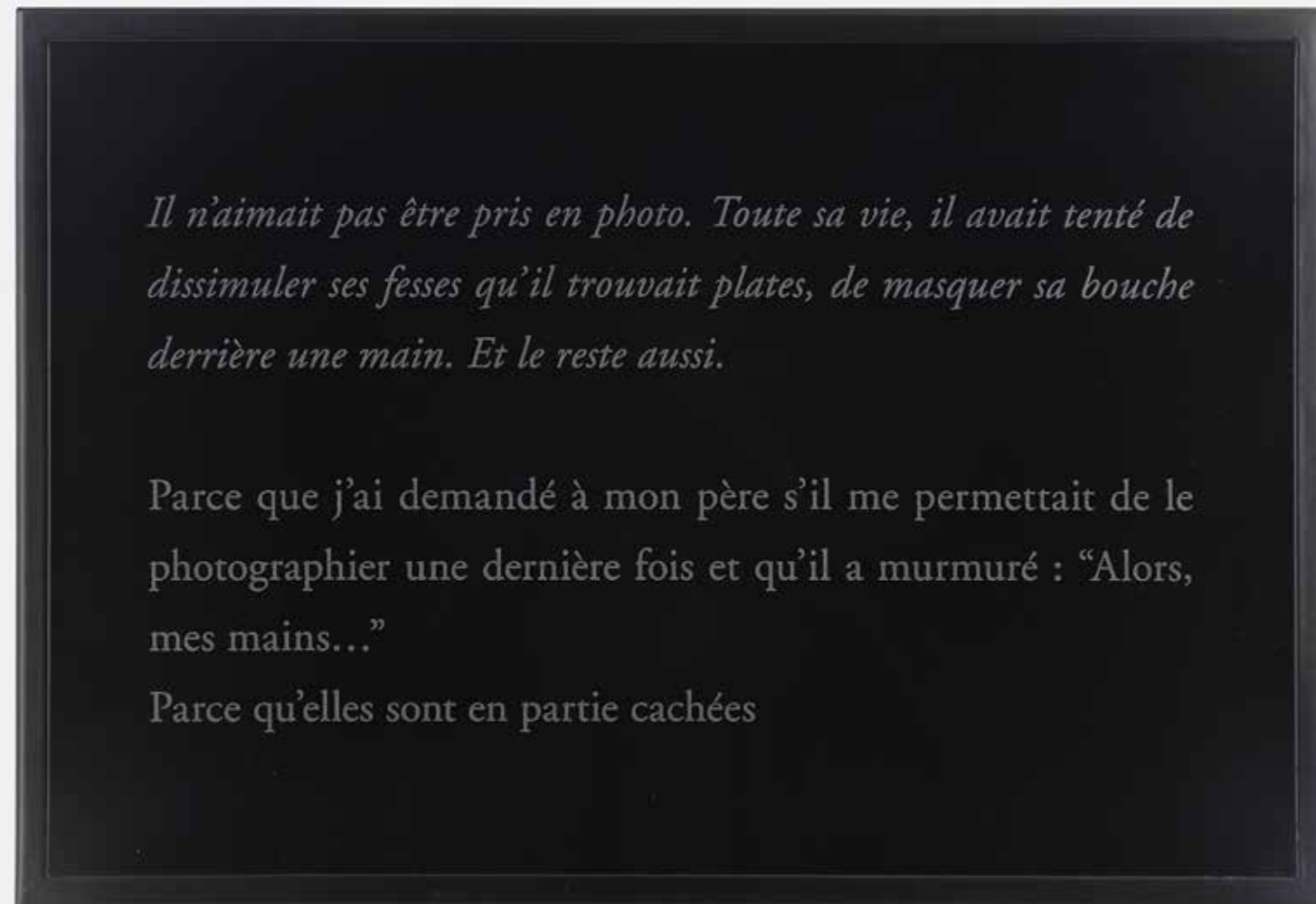
SC Yes, because I was truly suffering while I was filming. Normally, I observe situations and take a step back. I photograph and write, so I create distance by turning it into a story — it's no longer my life. It's a way of transforming suffering into a project so that I don't suffer anymore, like when I made this book called *Take Care of Yourself* (2022). I asked one hundred and seven women to interpret my breakup letter. But with *No Sex Last Night*, I was inside the pain. It wasn't a project; I was just trying to save myself.

GP Your installation *North Pole* (2009) pays tribute to your mother. Have your personal losses influenced your artistic practice and themes?

SC Everything influences my artistic process. Whenever I want to reverse a situation or gain distance from it, it influences my work because it's a way for me to process it. When I made *North Pole*, her memory was with me constantly. I created a project that she would have liked, which made me happy. Then I became pleased with the project itself. So yes, it obviously influenced my life, but not just for therapeutic reasons. I also did it because I saw the potential for a project I'd enjoy. Indirectly, I felt better because instead of crying alone at home, I created something vibrant. This approach influences my life positively because I'm doing something productive with my emotions rather than being passive.



My father, who planned everything, insisted that I shed no tears
at his funeral. I held them back. The following night, half asleep,
on my way to the garden I forgot to open the glass door
and took his death smack in the face.
I woke up with a black eye in the shape of a teardrop.



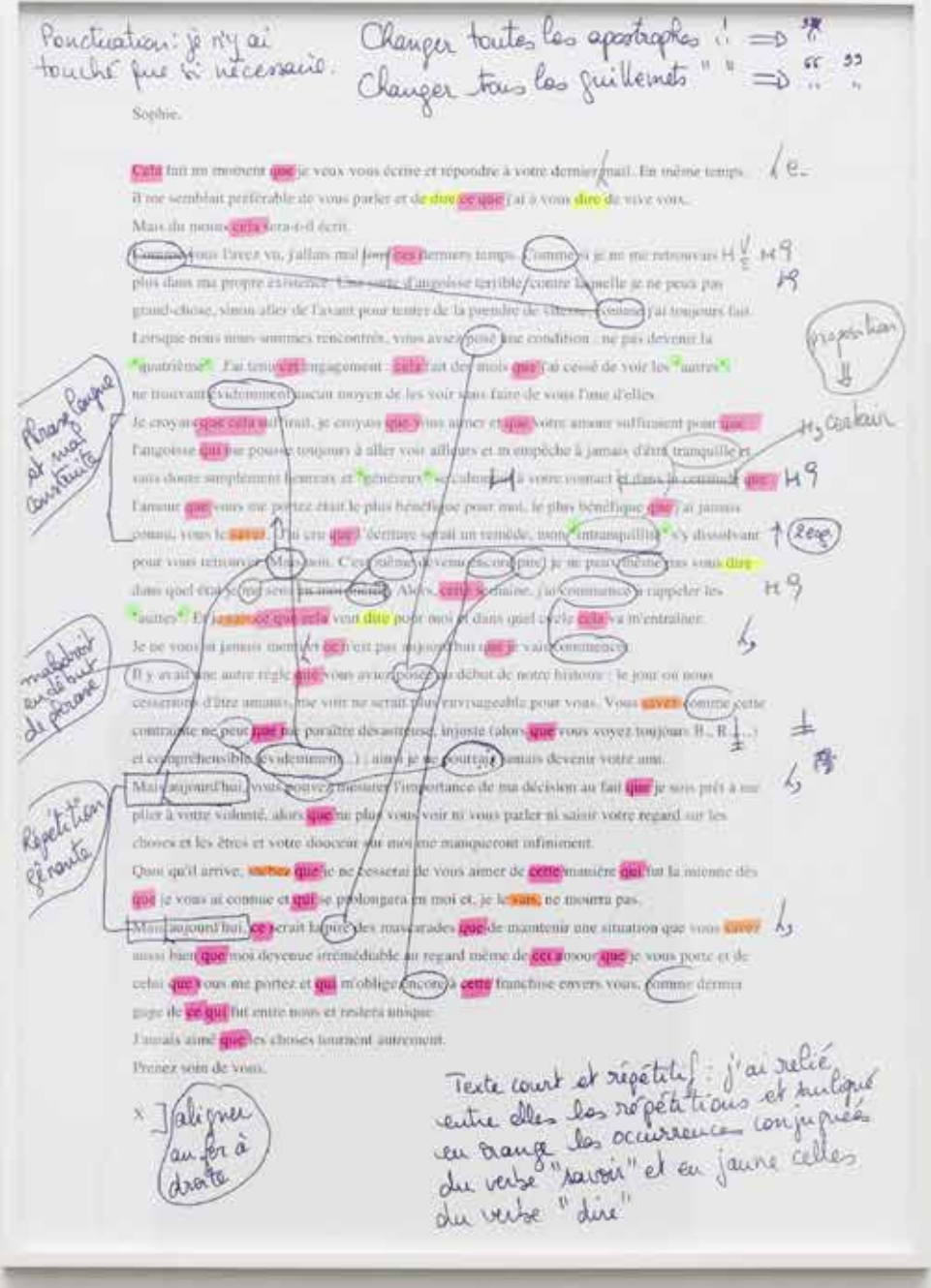
GP How do you decide which stories become artworks?
SC I choose the ones I feel have potential in terms of text and image. Sometimes I have texts waiting for their image, or images waiting for the right text. It can take me a year to write three lines because I'm searching for the perfect phrase.

GP How do you determine the appropriate medium for each project?
SC The project itself dictates the medium. For instance, with *On the Hunt* (2017), I had all the text completed, but for two or three years there were no accompanying images. When I exhibited it at the Musée de la Chasse, Paris, it was presented without visuals. I felt the text stood on its own, and I couldn't envision suitable imagery. So I displayed it as such at the museum. I then set it aside until inspiration struck. In contrast, *Voir la mer* (2011), which features people seeing the sea for the first time, is silent because I believed any text would diminish its impact. I thought it more compelling to let viewers imagine the subjects' thoughts rather than state them explicitly. Sometimes, I prefer to leave things unsaid. On occasion, a striking image I capture leads to the subsequent creation of text. When my cat passed away, I photographed him in his grave. I hadn't planned to create an autobiography of my cat; I simply took the photo because of the circumstances.

GP *Voir la mer* seems to encapsulate the concept of longing. How do you approach capturing and conveying such intangible emotions in your work?
SC The idea originated from a newspaper article about impoverished people in Istanbul who had never seen the sea despite living near it. This notion of being so disconnected from one's surroundings intrigued me. Then I was invited to do a project in Istanbul, so I collaborated with an association to find these individuals. As I don't speak Turkish, they assisted in locating people and proposing the opportunity to see the sea for the first time. To preserve the authenticity of their first glimpse, I had them approach the sea blindfolded. I then asked them to look at the sea, and when finished, turn towards me to reveal eyes that had just beheld it for the first time. The camera placement was crucial. I chose to film from behind because I felt that filming from the front would make them see the camera first, not the sea. Filming from the side seemed too emotionally manipulative, like television. Filming from behind allowed us to share the moment with them, observing subtle emotional cues like trembling shoulders. For this project, I collaborated with cinematographer Caroline Champetier. I knew I couldn't ask the subjects to repeat their first view of the sea, so I needed someone skilled enough to capture the perfect shot on the first take. This approach exemplifies how each project determines its own requirements — whether it's the medium, perspective, collaborators, or timing. When I followed people on the street forty years ago, I had to take the photos myself. But when photographing stolen paintings, I could take my time and even enlist a professional photographer to capture the image without reflections. It all depends on the urgency of the situation and whether there's time to prepare. The project itself knows what it needs.

GP Could you elaborate on your relationship with Le Cailar, your birthplace?
SC Le Cailar is a village where I spend half of my time. It's my father's birthplace and where I grew up. My family still resides there, and I spend four to five months a year in the village. It's a completely different life from my urban existence. My friends there are farmers or laborers, not artists. Nightlife is nonexistent in the winter; everyone retires early. And the opposite in the summer. It's truly my alternate life. I typically spend August there, inebriated at the local bar. That's my August routine.

GP I noticed the grave of your first cat just outside in your garden.
SC Yes, I buried Souris here because all of the animals inside are taxidermy representations of people I've met in my life, living or deceased. However, these taxidermy animals aren't those I've lived with. I couldn't bear to have Souris stuffed. The other animals I cohabitate with I never saw alive, so they're merely objects to me. They represent individuals who resemble them or have some connection to them. People choose them for various reasons.





- 01, *Double blind / No sex last*
- 02 *night*, 1992. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin. © Sophie Calle / ADAGP, Paris, 2025.
- 03 *The Giraffe*, 2012. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin. © Sophie Calle / ADAGP, Paris, 2025.
- 04 *Shiner | Coquard*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin. © Sophie Calle / ADAGP, Paris, 2025.
- 05 *Les Mains de mon Père | My Father's Hands*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin. © Sophie Calle / ADAGP, Paris, 2025.
- 06 *Take care of yourself. Proofreader, Valérie Lermite | Prenez soin de vous. Correctrice, Valérie Lermite*, 2007. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin. © Sophie Calle / ADAGP, Paris, 2025.
- 07 *Voir la mer. Old Man | Voir la mer. Le Vieil homme*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin. © Sophie Calle / ADAGP, Paris 2025.

For instance, when my mother passed away, I sought an animal that reminded me of her. I found this giraffe, which looks down at me from above. It has a somewhat ironic and melancholic gaze, much like my mother's demeanor. The white wolf represents my father because he has a gentle look but a scarred face that reflects my father's numerous lives and fights.

GP When did this concept of spirit animals begin for you?

SC It started with the bulls, as bullfighting is traditional in the Camargue. When a bull performs exceptionally well, the matador or owner often has it taxidermied. I grew accustomed to seeing these in people's homes. I named two bulls after bullfighter friends of mine, which sparked the idea of naming other animals in my house. Now, whenever I make a new friend, I seek an animal to represent them. Conversely, when I'm drawn to an animal, I search for a human connection. I maintain a list of animals awaiting human counterparts and friends who haven't yet found their animal representations.

GP That's quite an innovative way to forge new friendships.

SC Indeed. Currently, I'm in need of someone who could be a donkey...

Artist: Sophie Calle
Photographer: Joshua Woods
Editor in Chief: Gea Politi
Creative Direction: Alessio Avventuroso
Photographer's Assistants: Quentin Farriol, Peter Keyser
Production: Flash Art Studios
Hmu: Rudy Martins
Location: Artist's home, Malakoff

Jacket: Chanel



Sophie Calle (1953, Paris) lives and works in Malakoff. Alternately described as a conceptual artist, photographer, video artist, and even detective, Calle has been the subject of numerous exhibitions around the world since the late 1970s. In her rituals, she blurs the boundaries between the intimate and the public, reality and fiction, and art and life while leaving room for chance. Recent solo exhibitions include: Mitsubishi Ichigokan Museum, Tokyo; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Gallery Wilson Sapiana, Copenhagen; Les Rencontres d'Arles; Musée National Picasso, Paris; Fotografia Europea 2023, Reggio Emilia; Art Institute of Chicago; Musée d'Orsay, Paris; Centre Pompidou Malaga; Perrotin, Paris; Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco; and Kunstmuseum, Ravensburg. Her work has been included in group exhibitions at MACVAL, Vitry-sur-Seine; Arken Museum of Contemporary Art, Copenhagen; Galerist, Istanbul; Jameel Art Center, Dubai; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Le Bal, Paris; Fitzwilliam Museum of Cambridge; Akron Art Museum; Kunsthau Zurich; Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn; Musée International de la Parfumerie, Grasse; Getty Center, Los Angeles; Arthana Foundation, Düsseldorf; Josee Bienvenu Gallery, New York; Louisiana Museum, Humlebaek; Kunsthalle Mannheim; and Hot Wheels, Athens. Calle's solo show "Séance de rattrapage" will be on view at Perrotin, Paris, from April 26 until May 28, 2025.

Gea Politi is the editor-in-chief of *Flash Art*. She lives and works in Milan.