

**PERROTIN**

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**Sophie CALLE**

*The Brooklyn Rail,*

*SOPHIE CALLE with Jean Dykstra*

*September 2025*

Because I found a seven-word definition of me online: "Sophie Calle, artist without child by choice."  
Out of sheer mischief, since one happens to be around





Portrait of Sophie Calle, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

# SOPHIE CALLE

## with Jean Dykstra

Sophie Calle, the iconoclastic and irreverent French artist who regularly combines text and image in works that can be both provocative and poignant, is the subject of two concurrent exhibitions in New York City—one at Perrotin, the other at Paula Cooper Gallery, both on view through October 18. Her series “On the Hunt,” on view at Paula Cooper Gallery, premiered at the Walker Art Center last year, in her exhibition *Overshare*, which goes on view at the Orange County Museum of Art this coming January. Calle’s body of work is a blend of fact and fiction—or rather, a series of fictions play-acting as fact, curated representations of reality. Her work can be (or seem) intensely autobiographical, and in other instances highly collaborative. In works that are often characterized by absence, Calle seems to be on the hunt, herself, for ways to understand people in all their complexity, through the accumulated bits of evidence she collects.

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*On The Hunt*  
Paula Cooper Gallery  
September 5–October 18, 2025  
New York

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*Behind the Curtain*  
Perrotin  
September 4–October 18, 2025  
New York

**Jean Dykstra (RAIL):** So, I thought we could talk mostly today about your works that are in the two shows that are opening this week, one here at Perrotin and the other at Paula Cooper Gallery, and I wanted to start with *In Memory of Frank Gehry’s Flowers* (2014), which is so beautiful. My understanding is that you met Frank Gehry in 1984.

Sophie Calle (S.C.): I did a work called *Los Angeles* (1984). It was one of the first times that I showed in America—during the Olympic Games—and I decided to ask people I met where the angels were in Los Angeles. One third of them were strangers I just asked on the street. One third were officials, like the mayor of the city, the chief of police. And the last third were artists whose names were given to me by friends. Frank Gehry was one of them. The following day, he called me, saying, “Do you want me to become your impresario?” So, I said

yes, obviously. And not long after, the dealer Fred Hoffman offered me a show. And that’s how Frank became my guardian angel.

**RAIL** And when he offered to be your impresario, did he just mean to introduce you to people?

S.C. I think it was maybe a joke—a way to express the fact that he was interested in my work. I guess he just thought he could help me. After then, for each of my solo shows, he sent me flowers, and I kept them in boxes for years and years and years, until I made this homage.

**RAIL** When you were in Los Angeles, you asked all sorts of different people where the angels were, which is an example of how collaborative your work often is. You’ve collaborated with well-known people like Frank Gehry or Paul Auster, or Laurie Anderson, or with the more than one hundred women who interpreted the last line of a breakup email you received (*Take Care of Yourself* [2007]), or with people you meet on the street.

S.C. Well, in ninety percent of the cases, it’s people in the street; in ten percent, it may be a private collaboration, but otherwise it’s just random people, like the one I followed in *Suite Vénitienne* (1983), or *The Hotel* (1981), or the people who

described the paintings in “Phantom Picassos” (2023).

**RAIL** And what is it that draws you to collaborative works like that?

S.C. I don’t know, I’m not a psychoanalyst. I have no clue.

**RAIL** [Laughs] Okay. In a way, you’re giving up control, to some degree.

S.C. I’m giving up control, and at the same time keeping the control. I’m the one that’s going to write the text at the end, edit it, choose what I want to erase.

**RAIL** The Frank Gehry piece has the feeling of a memorial, or kind of an altar. The idea of death and dying has been sort of a thread throughout your work.

S.C. Well, the dried flowers are dead.

**RAIL** Right. But even the way that the work is set up, with the large photograph of the dried flowers and the smaller photograph of flowers in vases, made by Gehry, on a shelf below, it feels a bit like a memorial. Is that something that’s been part of your work from the beginning?

S.C. Well, I’ve always worked around what’s not there anymore. You know, a man that leaves, a mother that dies, a breakup, ghosts. Generally, it always comes into my work... but it’s not something that’s planned in advance. It’s just what I’m driven to. I’m attracted by what’s not there.

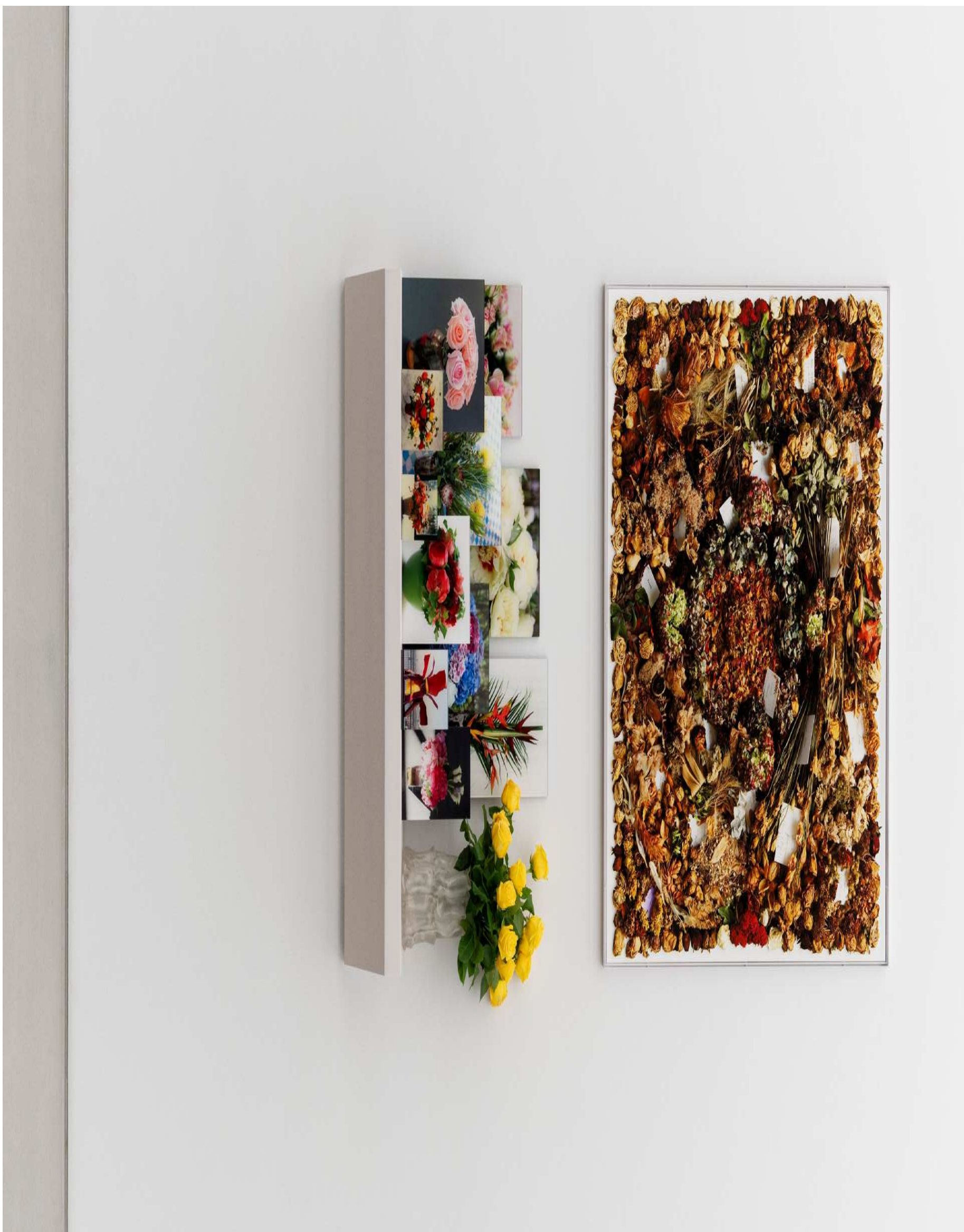
If I am absolutely happy, everything is nice, I’m spending a nice moment with friends, then I am not going to distance myself from the situation. I just want to live it. What I want to describe is what I can’t accept. To look at it and describe it is a way to step to the side. When I want to live fully in a moment, I’m not thinking about photographing it. I just want to be in it, not be watching it.

**RAIL** That actually leads me to the works in your series, “Because,” several of which are on view at Perrotin. In an interview, you said that those photographs were orphans.

S.C. They were orphans because, since the beginning, I have matched text and images, maybe because I thought my images were not good enough, or because I thought my texts were not literary enough. By putting them together, I found a way for my words to help my images and my images to help my words. Because of that, when I take a photo, it seems to me that it’s an orphan. Even if I like the image, I don’t know what to do with it.

Also, people now seem to photograph a situation before experiencing it. They go to a concert, and start filming before listening. So, I thought that hiding an image with a text explaining why I took it was a way to slow down the immediate contact with an image, like: “Stop, wait a minute, see my reasons first.”

**RAIL** To me, one of the great things about that series is that within a relatively simple structure, so much is going on in terms of the viewer’s engagement. Not only are you flipping the way, as you just said, that the viewer normally processes or interprets a photograph, because there’s the text



Sophie Calle, *In Memory of Frank Gehry's Flowers*, 2014. 1 digital color photograph with handcut edge, framed; 11 two-sided plexi-framed color photographs and text arrangeable in a painted wood; grooved, wall-mounted shelf; glass vase by Frank Gehry; 41 ½ x 54 ½ inches. © Sophie Calle / ADAGP, Paris & ARS, New York, 2025. Courtesy the artist and Perrotin. Photo: Guillaume Ziccarelli.

first, but your texts are such beautiful little poems. And then the viewer has to physically engage with it by lifting the curtain, which is very theatrical. And it also implies that the photograph beneath is something precious.

This series undercuts the way we usually look at photographs, and undercuts the truth-telling idea of a photograph, which we should all be past, but we're not, somehow, right? There's one piece in the series that I really love, which is the one of the woman with the baby, with the quote: "Because I found a seven-word definition of me online..."

S.C. Yeah, it's me, the woman.

RAIL It is?

S.C. Yeah.

RAIL Oh, I didn't know that!

S.C. I asked a friend to loan me her baby for one minute.

RAIL That's so great. And then the quote continues: "Sophie Calle, artist without child by choice. Out of sheer mischief, since one happens to be around." The word "definition" really struck me.

S.C. It's real. I really opened a computer. I was looking for something about me—I don't remember what it was—and I read this online.

RAIL How did you feel when you read that online?

S.C. That I found a good phrase. [Laughter]

RAIL The word "definition" seems so fixed. Instead of a "description," say, the word "definition" seems so determined—society's way of categorizing someone. Did I read that you have a collection of Victorian-era "hidden mother" photographs? Those are amazing images, and it goes to the theme of absence throughout all your work.

S.C. Absence has always been a subject for me.

RAIL Am I right that your father was an art collector?

S.C. He was a doctor, and on the side an art collector, but his job was a doctor.

RAIL And he collected work by Duane Michals?

S.C. Yeah. That's how I started to see image and text together. There were other artists but Duane Michals was definitely an influence.

RAIL Your exhibition that was at the Walker is opening at the Orange County Museum of Art in January. It's called *Overshare*, and I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about the title of that exhibition. The reason I wanted to ask you about it is that people seem to think that you share so much of yourself.

S.C. I don't think I share so much. I control what I share. When I tell a story, it happened. But, by the fact of not giving the context, not saying if it lasted two years or one day, how it ended, by editing the story... I don't tell the truth! I say much less than anyone on Instagram or Facebook!

I use moments, situations that I'm interested in, that give me a possibility to photograph or to write, but they are very framed moments. It's not my life. I've been with the same man for twenty-two years, and I've not written one phrase about him. It's not that I lie, but I'm not telling the full truth either.

RAIL Henriette Huldish, the curator of *Overshare* at the Walker, suggests that your work prefigures what's happening on social media and reality television, in terms of the blend of fact and fiction and public and private. Does that ring true to you?

S.C. It's not that I disagree, but something strange happened with that show. She invited me when I was preparing the Picasso Museum show, *A toi de faire, ma mignonne* (2023). I knew I had no time for the Walker, because I was in a tunnel that would last three years. So, I decided to trust her, and I did something I had never done ever before, which was to say, "Listen, imagine I'm dead. It's yours!" I am a control freak normally, but I'm reasonable, and I knew that without her, there would not have been a show. So, I'm not discussing her choices, and I really liked her show.

RAIL You mentioned the Picasso Museum. I wanted to talk about your Picasso pieces at Perrotin. The show is called *Behind the Curtain*, and there are all sorts of different interpretations and meanings of things being covered and hidden or absent. You talked about the fact that the Picasso Museum invited you to do a show—

S.C. Three years before I accepted, Laurent Le Bon, who was director at the time, proposed that I do a show, and I refused. Because I was afraid to be crushed by Picasso. You know, it's very hard to see a masterpiece by Picasso and go and put your little photo next to it! So I refused. Then there was COVID, and during COVID, I would have gone anywhere to get out of my house [laughter], with permission, because France was very tough on the rules, really. So I went to the museum, and that's how I found out that you could not see any Picasso works at the time, because they were all hidden under protections: I was in a ghost museum. The three floors were full of hidden Picassos. I could not believe what I saw. And I understood that, actually, I could show in the Picasso Museum if there were no Picassos [laughter] but only ghosts. I imagined Picasso telling me, "Okay, you want my museum, take it, show me what you can do." And I did accept the show when I got this idea of working around his absence....

RAIL In some cases, museum guards and curators and others are describing missing works, but did you imagine that viewers seeing the covered works would also fill those in, in a way, with their own memories or conceptions of Picasso's paintings?

S.C. Yes, because those paintings are in everybody's heads—maybe not precisely, but they're there.

RAIL For sure. In the pieces in which you have the descriptions or recollections by people, did you have rules for yourself about which texts to use, or who to ask?

S.C. By interviewing many different people, who have a different relation to the work: curators, historians, but also the people who carry the paintings or light them, or clean the frames, paint

the walls... it becomes naturally a *portrait robot* [composite sketch].

RAIL Some of the comments are really wonderful and poignant and also really funny. In the piece *Paul drawing* (2023), one of the quotes is: "Paul annoys me a lot." Your work is very playful, in terms of your own language, but also the way you include other people's language. It's like a way of looking at an artwork from 360 degrees.

S.C. When the robbery happened in Boston at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, they also described masterpieces that were not there anymore... They described an empty wall, an absence, a tragedy.

RAIL And so they were describing their memories.

S.C. Memories or experience, and with a different vocabulary!

RAIL I don't know if you would agree with this, but I feel like there's an anthropological quality to your work, and that carries over for me into the work at Paula Cooper Gallery, *On the Hunt*, which originated at the Musée de la Chasse. Why did that museum invite you to show there to begin with? It seems like such an unlikely venue.

S.C. They had a director at the time who was inventive and wanted to bring some contemporary artists into the collection. So, he asked me if I was interested in working around the theme of hunting. And I said, "Yes, but I'm not a hunter. It's not really my subject." Then I thought *chasse à l'homme*, hunting for men... The museum is extremely picturesque and beautiful and full of taxidermies that I really like, as well as curiosities. And then I thought I could find my way through a different hunt, so that's how I started. And they helped me with access to the magazine *Le Chasseur français* which had published personal ads since 1890!

RAIL Oh, really? Because I was going to ask, how did you even know to look in them?

S.C. They were very well known in France.

RAIL And, so, you not only looked at personal ads in that magazine—

S.C. I looked in that magazine for the first sixty years, because that's all there was. Then in the seventies, there was the *Nouvel observateur*, and I finished with Tinder.

RAIL When you first exhibited the "On the Hunt" series at that museum, it was just text, am I right?

S.C. It was just text and it was only men. The archival research takes a huge amount of time. But then I realized that there was something missing—images—and also I found out that there were as many women as men using those ads.

RAIL How did the images find their way in?

S.C. I found images taken by motion-activated cameras that hunters put by highways and places like that to observe wildlife. Then I photographed hunting stands. And I made all the images reversible. On one side, you're the prey, on the other, the hunter.



Sophie Calle, *Without child*, 2018. Color photograph, embroidered woolen cloth, framing, 15 x 19 inches. © Sophie Calle / ADAGP, Paris & ARS, New York, 2025. Courtesy the artist and Perrotin. Photo: Tanguy Beurdeley.



Sophie Calle, *On the Hunt, 1950–1960 (Good Catch, Able to Replace Late Mother / Essentially Kind and Gentle)*, 2024. Diptych of two text panels and four photographs (color, black and white) in two double-sided frames, 46 1/8 x 72 3/4 x 3 1/2 inches. © 2025 Sophie Calle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris. Courtesy Sophie Calle and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. Photo: Steven Probert.



**RAIL** Are they displayed in a way where you can turn them and see both sides?

**S.C.** No, you only can see one side. But anyone can decide which side they prefer!

**RAIL** It's such an incredible history of dating and searching for a mate. Did anything surprise you about these ads?

**S.C.** The style surprised me because, you know, they pay by the word, so they have to be short and economical, and I love that language. It's like a little haiku. And I found it really interesting how somebody described themselves or described what he or she wants with minimum words. Sometimes it's extremely poetic or extremely vulgar, or extremely funny.

**RAIL** Like the true variety of people.

**S.C.** Really. I mean, like the man that looks for a woman to replace his dead mother... okay. [Laughs] Maybe it attracted someone? [Laughs] So it was quite interesting, because it was sad and hilarious, which are two things I like. [Laughs]

**RAIL** Absolutely. There's also a thread of surveillance in *On the Hunt* that runs through a lot of your work, which actually captures so many different identities of photography—as a surveillance tool but also as a fine art. You draw on vernacular imagery, on archives. There are many different ways that photography functions in our world, and somehow you have found a way to use all of them.

**S.C.** I'm not a good photographer—I mean, there are better photographers. It's the idea that interests me the most. Whatever fits with it, you know, it can even be a stolen image, a found image. But it has to be *juste*—how do you say—from the

word justice. But it's not about justice. *Juste* is like, *right*, in a way. It's more complex, but it has to be right for the idea. It has to convey the idea.

**RAIL** Right. And just to get back to the whole idea of surveillance and observing or watching when someone doesn't know that you're observing or watching—and you had someone observe you at some point—why does that draw you, that dynamic?

**S.C.** I don't know. Again, I'm not a psychoanalyst. And it's not your business. [Laughs]

**RAIL** Fair answer. Because you were talking about the museum, and what a jewel it was, and all of the taxidermied animals, I did want to ask about your own collection of taxidermied animals.

**S.C.** It started with bullfights, with the ritual to keep the head of the dead bull. Also, I live in the countryside part of the time. And, for example, an owl died in my chimney. And I don't know why, but I started to give them names. And since I have more than one friend, I wondered: what about Françoise and Jean? They need their animals, too. So, I started to look for the animals corresponding to the friends around me. And now when I have a new friend, I immediately wonder what animal they could be? So, the collection grows. But I don't taxidermy my own animals, I bury them. To keep a memory of them full of life.

**RAIL** It's sort of what you were saying earlier about how if you're with your friends, you're living in the moment. You're not stepping aside to make an artwork about that. But if it's your real cat who you love—

**S.C.** Then I bury him.

**RAIL** I read a quote that you may or may not agree with. There was a critic who put your work in the context of a French practice of proximate ethnography—the idea of turning anthropology upside down, so you're focusing your gaze and your study more on the everyday.

**S.C.** I like details. For example, when people slept in my bed for *The Sleepers* (1979) I loved learning the fact that a certain stranger sleeps on his left side, but I don't know what job he has, how much money he makes, if he is married. I may know things that his wife never noticed, but I know nothing about what kind of person he is. I like this kind of sideways approach.

**RAIL** In a sense, it's about the unknowability of people, ultimately. You can only know certain parts of people.

**I always end an interview by asking if there's anything that I should have asked you that I didn't ask you.**

**S.C.** Oh, this I don't know, because I don't have patterns for what should be a good interview. But I'm sure you missed a good question.

**RAIL** I guarantee I missed at least one good question.

**S.C.** Yes, I think you missed an incredibly good question, but I cannot say which one. [Laughs]

Jean Dykstra is a photography critic and the former editor of *photograph* magazine.