

PRESSBOOK

Sophie CALLE

Dazed

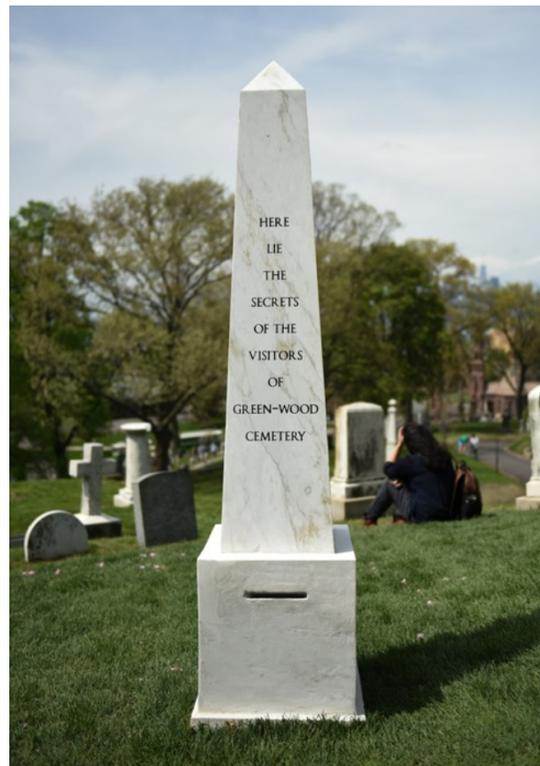
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DAZED

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We asked artist Sophie Calle to take our secret to the grave

By Michael-Oliver Harding



Sophie Calle is dead silent as she scrutinises my apprehensive face. She looks at me with soft yet insistent eyes, the kind of look that implores you to fulfill what you've come here to do. I already knew the famed French conceptual artist was not one to engage in polite chitchat with the strangers she encounters in the name of Art, but even by those standards, she's particularly sparing in her use of words today. We're sitting opposite one another on wooden chairs in the heart of Brooklyn's majestic Green-Wood Cemetery, a national landmark and the final resting place of artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat and Leonard Bernstein. Just a stone's throw behind Sophie, a capacity crowd has queued up to unburden private thoughts and TMI outbursts of every sort at the request of the artist. It's all part of her latest, 25-year-long experiment in life-meets-art: *Here Lie the Secrets of the Visitors of Green-Wood Cemetery*, co-presented by public arts organisation Creative Time and Green-Wood, and which launched last weekend with Calle in attendance. By the time we meet, late in the afternoon, she's

already heard from dozens if not hundreds of strangers unloading intense feelings, so her brevity is crucial to keep moving things along.

Here Lie the Secrets taps into many of Calle's signature fascinations and obsessions: the blurred lines between confessions and concealments, freedom and control, facts and fabrications, aimlessness and intent. It all began with her book *Suite Vénitienne* (1980), wherein she documented with forensic precision the experience of following a stranger around from Paris to Venice to spy on him, blonde wig and camera at the ready. Since then, she has always proven game to gleefully abide by the rules of her off-autobiographical, self-made rituals: documenting the belongings of patrons as an undercover hotel chambermaid ("The Hotel"); asking 107 women to respond to a curt break up text she'd received ("Take Care of Yourself"); inviting the number of guests matching her age to an annual birthday party, and requesting they bring a gift to be permanently displayed ("The Birthday Ceremony").

In true conceptual fashion, Calle has always prioritised process over end result, trusting her instincts at every step to extract moments of singular – never sentimental – poetry. So when the opportunity presented itself to take part in her latest exercise in performed intimacy, my generally private self couldn't resist. I also couldn't think of a better stranger with whom to exhume a leftover skeleton in my closet. The woman has literally invited passersby to occupy her bed ("Les Dormeurs") and others to share their worst memory ("Douleur Exquise"), so she's probably seen and heard it all. As I began playing the role of "secret bearer" in this staged dynamic, I was immediately won over by Calle's commitment. My words were meticulously transcribed onto paper, which she'd later deposit into a marble obelisk – the sole physical trace of this site-specific installation. (The artist has pledged to return periodically to cremate the public's secrets.) And after answering Calle's two incisive follow-ups, sensing all had been said, I got up and reached for my bag. Her goodbye was brief but no less potent: "bonne chance." A few days earlier, in the lead-up to the project's launch, I spoke with Calle on the line from her New York hotel room about the romance of graveyards, the only secret she's ever purchased and real life as creative fodder.

***Here Lie the Secrets* invites people to meet you at Green-Wood to let you in on a secret. If the tables were turned, would you do it?**

Sophie Calle: It depends who the person is. There are people with whom I would never share secrets with – ever. Maybe I would do it with a complete stranger in an awkward place. Say in an airport, with somebody I don't know. If I saw a sign in an airport that read, "would you tell me a secret," maybe I would. If I like the face of the person, the way they're sitting, it's all about the context. It's not only about sharing a secret. It's the poetry of the moment.

The spark for *Here Lie the Secrets* occurred when your ex-lover H. shared a terrible secret with you – and only you – as a final farewell. How did that leave you feeling?

Sophie Calle: To me, that was the total definition of trust. I was amazed by the generosity of this man, who gave me power over him after breaking up by sharing this secret. It made the pain that much more tolerable. Sometimes, when you're dumped, you don't know if the pain comes from love or humiliation. In this case, there was no humiliation, which was quite a gift for me. It was very brave of him.

Trust has always played a central role in your body of work. I'm thinking specifically of your late mother, who not only let you record her last breath on camera ("Pas pu saisir la mort") but also gave you her diaries, which you then read aloud during a marathon 30-hour performance at the Avignon Festival.

Sophie Calle: My mother wanted to be centre stage, she wanted to be talked about, so when she gave me her diaries, she knew I'd use them. She could have asked to have them burned. But she just gave them to me. And she knew me more than anyone. So that's her saying, 'please Sophie, do something with it.' That's already a demonstration of trust, of wanting to be the subject of my work somehow.

You've often said that your projects, no matter how personal, never stem from a thirst for therapy, but rather a desire to create a moment of poetry. What's the impetus for this cemetery project?

Sophie Calle: I've always loved cemeteries. Because we don't have many gardens in Paris, we have cemeteries instead and my mother would always take me to the graveyard when I was younger. The cemetery was a way to go for a promenade. It's this romantic place from my youth with all these objects, sculptures and benches. There's a certain quality of silence there. When I spend time in a city I don't know, I often understand a lot about it through its cemeteries. You understand the city's past and its wealth or poverty by looking at the graves, the sculptures, the way the site has been maintained. There is a lot of information there...

Any particular reason why the project is set to last 25 years?

Sophie Calle: I didn't decide that. It's that in France, when you're given a grave "for eternity", that means 25 years. After that, if a grave has no visitors, it might go to someone else.

The act of confession is rife with meaning, and I'm sure many people's contributions will make for emotionally resonant exchanges. But some may just show up to gawk at you, too. Are you okay with that?

Sophie Calle: For the two days I'm there, there might be ambiguity. There might be people who really want to tell me a secret, others who want to say hello or just stare at my face, or people passing through the park who decide it's something funny to do. I don't know what people's motivations will be. Do they really want to unload a secret, or will they feel playful that day and maybe invent a secret? This is okay, you know, people do what they want. But the real *raison d'être* of the grave will be the next 25 years, when people go by themselves and keep dropping in secrets. Then, they have no reason to lie, invent, or simulate, because there will be no audience. It'll be a silent, lonely gesture.

Last fall, you launched a similar project at the Cimetière des Rois in Geneva, entitled *Ici reposent les secrets des promeneurs du cimetière des Rois*. What did you enjoy most about your encounters with people there?

Sophie Calle: Well, it's what I heard, but I can't tell you any of it. I cannot share the secrets, obviously. What surprised me is that after only a month, we had to exhume the grave and cremate the secrets. It was already full! It's a little, historical graveyard in the

centre of Geneva – you have Jean Calvin, Jorge Luis Borges, Robert Musil, the writer, all buried there. It's an amazing place. People come to picnic, it's a lively place. So it seems the project has a reason to exist, because the grave was full.

Whether it's an address book found on the street or a chance encounter with a stranger, unpremeditated events often serve as the raw material to your projects. Are you open to someone's secret perhaps triggering your next endeavour?

Sophie Calle: Listening to people's secrets will be my little pleasure. I won't tape them or photograph the people. Maybe one of them will stay in my memory forever, and maybe that will lead me somewhere else, someday... This, I don't know. But I'm not planning on using the secrets. I cannot announce 'tell me a secret' and then go public with them! Even if I'm told a best-ever secret, I am handcuffed. Well, perhaps if a person tells me something that just drives me crazy, maybe I'll speak to that person, ask if I can take down their number to meet again... You see? Everything is possible.

Has that ever happened?

Sophie Calle: I once tried to buy a secret from a stranger at a random bar. And what he told me was so terribly scary... I think the guy was a murderer. Truly. And as soon as I learned his secret, I just left the bar, immediately, hoping he knew nothing about me, not even my name, to track me down.

From what I understand, your project *The Address Book*, where you got to know a total stranger by calling up every name in his address book and asking them to describe this person, also left you a little shaken.

Sophie Calle: Well, I made many enemies as a result of it. A lot of people were very aggressive after that because they thought it was a real intrusion into the life of this man. I can remember calling my father and telling him I had received lots of letters – email didn't exist at the time – of people who were angry with me. That shaped me because I found out I had enemies I didn't even personally know. Wherever I would go, people would talk to me about the work, because it was being published daily (in the newspaper *Libération*). I suddenly existed in people's conversations, people that didn't know a thing about me.

Thankfully, that hasn't stopped you from trusting your gut and moving ahead with transgressive projects like *Prenez Soins De Vous*, where an awful break-up text from an ex prompted you to reach out to 107 women for their varied responses. How quickly did you know that was worth pursuing?

Sophie Calle: I really trusted that project as soon as I began, whereas sometimes I start things I'm not sure about. I felt it was taking me somewhere, whereas the relationship with this man was a disaster. If it would have been an amazingly beautiful relationship, I would not have wanted to move forward with the project. But the fact is that it was extremely difficult and I knew it needed to end. So I immediately saw all the possibilities. Sometimes you instantly know a project is going to work, other times you spend 20 years with it. In this case, I found the idea three days after he left me and the first person I interviewed, I knew exactly what I was doing and where I was going. It's never happened again that easily, mind you. I've never found an idea as quickly as that.

Would you say the instinct to draw from your real life has gotten sharper over time?

Sophie Calle: Well yes, now, because I am 63, I'm used to sometimes using my life as inspiration for my art. I'm shaped like that, but it wasn't always that way. It's the result of knowing myself, of time and experience. (Relying on my artistic instincts) is all I know how to do. It's my job, so I better rely on that if I want to keep going.

Every single one of your projects operates according to a set of unusual rules or rituals. Where does this strong sense of play come from?

Sophie Calle: My mother was very playful, so growing up, we played, danced and had lots of rituals. The house was truly a playhouse. We had huge funerals to bury our red fish, where we had to prepare a eulogy for each fish and make a ceremony. You know, these kinds of things. My mother was imaginative, totally wild and extremely funny, so I guess that helped.

Lastly, I want to ask you about our increasingly blurred boundaries between private and public, as a result of social media technologies. Your work is often lauded for its foresight in exploring and exposing these ambiguous borders. Has your understanding of privacy shifted over time?

Sophie Calle: Well, nobody knows my private life. I never tell journalists what restaurants I eat at, which books I'm reading, what movies I've seen... I never say these kinds of things, I only speak about my work. I never speak about my boyfriend, except when I can make a story out of it. I've had more than three lovers, but I've only included my love life three times in my stories.

And what you're describing is not really my generation. I mean, people can follow all my work but they still don't know anything about me. I control what I say. It's fiction, even if what I say really happened, because I choose certain words and situations. When I made my movie "No Sex Last Night," it was one year of life with this man: we had 60 hours of footage for a one-hour film. We could have made 10 different movies telling the opposite and it would still hold true. For me, my work isn't about sharing my life. It's about creating stories and making art. I use things that happen, but I try to write with style and take nice photos. They're edited moments.

You can take part in [Here Lie the Secrets of the Visitors of Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn until 2042](#) by depositing your secret into the gravestone

<http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/35813/1/sophie-calle-here-lie-the-secrets-of-the-visitors-of-green-wood-cemetery>