

Sophie CALLE

Sophie Call, Fact & Fiction

April 2020



ROOM 24

Monday March 2, 1961. 10:30a.m. I go into room 24, the pink one. The twin beds have been slept in. A strange feeling of "déjà vu" comes over me. Various images blend together. Days and clients all run together in my mind. Haven't I already visited these? The first things I notice are the books on the table: Alain Gerber's *La couleur orange* and a French-Italian dictionary. In the closet: the usual clothes of an ordinary couple, photographic equipment in a camera case, an empty suitcase. The drawer is stuffed with handkerchiefs, medication for a deficient pancreas and Caspard Gaulois cigarettes.

I empty the handbag on the floor: sugar cubes, Tampax, pink lipstick, postal checks made out to Paulette B., old tickets for a Xenakis concert and an agenda. On the first page I read: "In the event of my death, everything I own will go to Mr. François G. exclusively." Signed Paulette B. in a childish, touching handwriting. Under the heading Notes, this figure: 23485.68, the address of a rest home in Versailles, a sentence: "Between the age of one year to eighteen months, the chamois is called an 'eterlon', plus a quote from Malraux I find hard to decipher. What I think I read is: "C'est bien la première civilisation blanche mais c'est aussi la façon stimulante d'un monde mort. Nous n'aimons pas sans peine à l'éluder ni même à l'Odysée ces cours ou ces premiers maus coiffés de plumes d'autruche, inclinant leurs lances devant des Phédes aux seins offerts au-dessous d'un chaud bouillonnement de trilles. A. Malraux, NRF 1954, page 93."

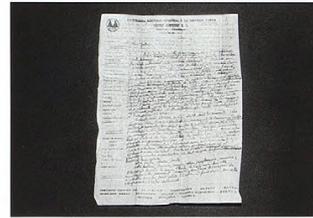
On the agenda are the following notes: 301 Unemployment Bureau, 6.2 "Heure du boap" (the wolf's hour), 102 Unemployment Bureau, text of verdict, 14.2 Unemployment Bureau, 20.2 Unemployment Bureau. Further on is a list of expenses, in particular for the trip to Venice: departure 200.000L or 3.450 F (28.2 gasoline 270, meal 45, highway toll 103, 1.3: tunnel 56, cap Venice 400, taxi 90, meal 300). In the bag is also the reservation at the Hotel C, until March 6, a customer's certificate from a cleaner in Bordeaux, a blue paper in the name of Paulette B., born May 1, 1936: it is a "baccalauréat" diploma, "série moderne", dated July 1956. Nine voter registration cards, all out of date, for the years 1961 to 1980. A letter sent from Mexico to Paulette B. in 1972, which reads in French: "News at last from your American cousin. I'm beginning to get used to things. What's good about this country is building something new, from scratch... she goes on about the wild animals, local folklore, the creation of a cooperative)... What families would need when they get here is pigs, cows, goats, hens, bananas, oranges, lemons, grapefruits, pineapples... and we think that by 1976, the first farmers will be able to come over and work for themselves. Best regards, Albert." Then there is a postcard mailed the same year: "As you can see, we've opted for Italy this year for three weeks. It is stiflingly hot in Florence. We've done a thorough job of visiting this lovely city and we're now about to go and cool off in the Alps. Best regards, Monique K." That was nine years ago... On the floor are two suitcases, one on top of the other. One of them is spilling over with clothes. I've had enough. I don't go through it. The other is locked. It

belongs to a certain G., a seafaring captain who lives in Versailles. It is heavy and full.

Tuesday 3, 10:20a.m. On the table is Gerber's book open on page 37. Beside it are two other books: the *Blus Gauche-Italy* and a bound book called *Intimité de Venise*. A red flannellette nightgown is hanging in the bathroom. Time is short. The suitcase is still locked. I don't want to linger.

Wednesday 4, 11 a.m. Nothing seems to have changed in the room. Everything is in the same place. I bend straight for the handbag. In it I find two passports. One is in the name of Paulette B. secretary, French nationality, five foot three, born May 1, 1936, green eyes, home address Bordeaux, and a single stamp for entry into Malaga in 1976. The other is in the name of François G., French nationality, born January 4, 1910, blue eyes, five foot seven, home address Versailles, same stamp for Malaga. Inside Paulette's passport are six passport photographs (she, I imagine from childhood to adulthood). In the bottom of the handbag I find a small key. It opens the suitcase, where I glimpse men's clothes and a book by Jean d'Ormesson *An Plaisir de Dieu*. I close it very quickly. I am afraid. I put the key back in the handbag and straighten up the room.

Thursday 5, 11:30a.m. They have been to see "Idomenes" at the Venice theater (I see the tickets in the wastebasket). The bed is full of crumbs, and a geometric sign on the bedsheet catches my eye. The little black scarf is still hanging in the closet. Tomorrow they'll be gone.



On Monday, February 16, 1981 I was hired as a temporary chambermaid for three weeks in a Venetian hotel. I was assigned twelve bedrooms on the fourth floor. In the course of my cleaning duties, I examined the personal belongings of the hotel guests and observed through details lives which remained unknown to me. On Friday, March 6 the job came to an end.

SOPHIE CALLE

FACT & FICTION

One of the most influential artists of her generation, French artist Sophie Calle draws on her biography and the lives of others for her expansive projects that collapse the boundaries between art and life.

FEATURE *by* HAMISH SAWYER

In his seminal 1981 book on photography, *Camera Lucida*, the theorist Roland Barthes observed that: “The ‘private life’ is nothing but that zone of space, of time, where I am not an image, an object.”¹

It may have been radical at the time, but in our selfie and social media-obsessed age, Barthes’ proposition seems remarkably prescient. As does the work of Sophie Calle, a French artist who began exhibiting around the same time that Barthes was writing his treatise on photography. Calle’s furtive snapshots of strangers she followed around the canals of Venice, or invited into her bed, paired with the artist’s own confessional texts, were unlike anything else being made in the late 1970s.

Today, Calle is regarded as one of the most singular and influential artists of her generation, continuing to push boundaries with projects that mine her own biography, as well as the lives of others. Although Calle’s work is often discussed in relation to photography, the medium fails to accurately describe the scope of her practice. Calle’s images are almost always presented alongside text, evoking the cool aesthetic of conceptual art and archives, affording her work the look of objectivity even as its content challenges viewers to question the veracity of what they are seeing.

Lacking any formal qualifications, Calle started making art in 1978 when she returned to Paris after an extended

time away. She moved in with her father, a significant collector of contemporary art. Like so much about Calle’s career, this biographical detail is important, as it was his collection that informed the development of the artist’s formal vocabulary.

Calle began filling notebooks as she wandered around Paris, making up identities and narratives for people she observed. One day, she met a stranger at a party and followed the man to Venice, where she tracked him down at his hotel and began to shadow him around the city. The black and white photographs she took of him, combined with her written records of his movements, became Calle’s first work, *Suite Venetienne* (1979).



At the end of January 1980, on the streets of Paris, I followed a man whom I lost sight of a few minutes later in the crowd. That very evening, quite by chance, he was introduced to me at an opening. During the course of our conversation, he told me he was planning an imminent trip to Venice. So I decided to follow him.

In her early works, Calle assumed the role of a detective, or perhaps more accurately, a kind of stalker-anthropologist. For *l'Hotel* (1981), Calle took a job for three weeks as a chambermaid in a hotel, also in Venice. As she was cleaning rooms, Calle would examine the personal belongings of the guests, noting down her observations and taking pictures. The resulting work presents the images and text in a series of portraits of the rooms' occupants that are marked by the subjects' absence, with Calle noting that they "remained unknown to me."

Calle has consistently pushed the limits of privacy and sometimes even the law with her work, notably causing controversy with *Address Book* (1983). Finding an address book in the street, the artist photocopied its contents before returning it to its owner. Calle then contacted people listed in the

address book, asking them questions about its owner. The artist published transcripts of these conversations, alongside photographs, in the French newspaper *Liberation*. When the book's owner, a filmmaker known as Pierre D, discovered this, he threatened legal action and, according to Calle, to release a nude photograph of the artist. Calle promised not to re-publish the articles until after his death (the project was eventually released as a book in 2012).

Text is an integral part of Calle's work; her images cannot be separated out from her writing, and vice-versa. In the artist's 2003 monograph, *M'as-tu-vue?* (*Can you see me?*), French curator Christine Macel described Calle's

work as operating in "a genre which is neither 'auto-fiction' nor photo novel, but rather innovative criss-crossings of factual narratives with fictional overtones, accompanied by photographic images."²

Calle is both the author *and* actor in her works; she uses circumstances and events from her own life but also has agency to create situations for the purposes of her art.

During the 1990s, Calle's projects became increasingly expansive, further collapsing the boundaries between life and art. In 1992, Calle released a feature film, *No Sex Last Night*, documenting her road trip across America with photographer Greg Shepherd, culminating in their marriage at a drive-thru chapel in Las Vegas. Discussing the

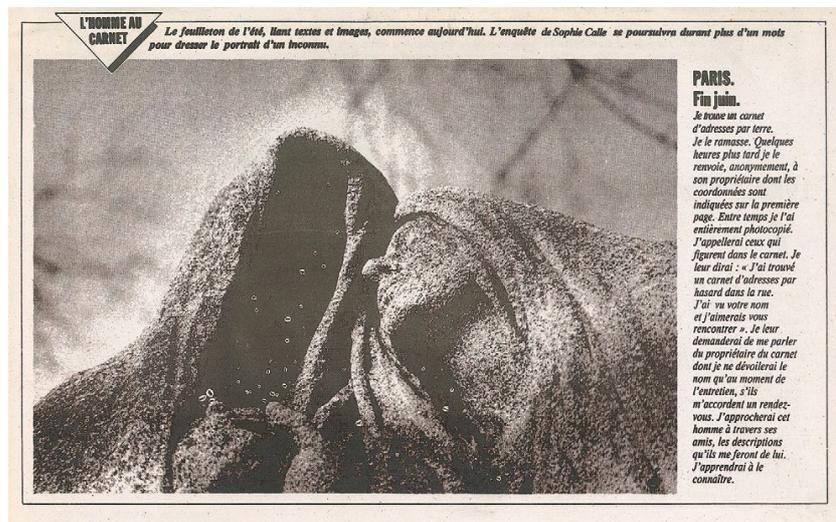




Il y a quarante jours, l'homme que j'aime m'a quittée. Le 25 janvier 1985, à deux heures du matin. Chambre 261, hôtel Impérial, New Delhi. La pièce est grise, poussiéreuse, seul le téléphone, rouge vif, détonne. Je viens de passer dix heures à tenter de le joindre, pour savoir. Cela faisait trois mois que nous étions séparés et, la veille, il m'avait confirmé notre rendez-vous en Inde. Je n'avais jamais été aussi heureuse, j'allais enfin le revoir. A l'aéroport, on m'a tendu un message. Il avait eu un accident, je devais appeler mon père qui est médecin. Tout ce que je pouvais imaginer, c'était une collision sur la route d'Orly. Et quand je l'ai trouvé, chez lui, qu'il a dit qu'il souhaitait me prendre dans ses bras pour m'expliquer certaines choses, j'ai tout de suite compris ce que cela signifiait : il me quittait. Seulement, le lâche ne s'est pas montré. Il ne s'est pas compliqué la tâche, il a fait ça par téléphone. Quant à l'accident, il s'agissait d'un panaris.

C'était une fin d'après-midi hivernale, en 1974. Je ne me souviens ni du mois ni du jour. Ce devait être un samedi. Une demi-heure plus tôt, rue Scribe, alors que j'étais follement épris de lui, T. m'avait annoncé notre rupture. Je ne sais plus quels mots il avait employés, mais ils avaient un caractère définitif. Je me suis retrouvé seul, place de l'Opéra. J'ai descendu les marches du métro, tandis que sortait de mon estomac, sortait de ma gorge, sortait de ma voix, une voix que je n'avais jamais entendue. Je poussais des braillements qui me stupéfiaient, me tordaient le ventre, ouvraient grande ma bouche. Je hurlais dans le métro. Par hasard, j'avais entre les mains une pile de quarante-cinq tours : les tubes de l'été. Je me suis effondré sur un banc. Alors, un Noir assis à côté de moi m'a retiré très doucement les disques des mains, il en a lu les titres à haute voix, en les chantonnant au fur et à mesure. *Love me Baby, Sugar Baby Love...* Le métro est arrivé, j'ai repris les quarante-cinq tours. Mes cris avaient cessé, mes larmes ruisselaient.

- 40 days ago, the man I love left me. January 25, 1985, at two in the morning. Room 261, Imperial Hotel, New Delhi. The room is gray, dusty. Only the red telephone stands out. We had been apart for three months and the day before he had confirmed our rendezvous in India. I was happier than I'd ever been before. At last, I was going to see him again. At the airport they handed me a message. He had had an accident and I was to call my father, who is a doctor. All I could think of was that he'd had a crash on the road to the airport. And when I reached him, at home, and he said that he wanted to take me in his arms to explain a few things, I knew at once what that meant: he was dropping me. Only the coward didn't show. He did it over the phone. As for the accident, it was an infected finger. - Unknown: It happened on a late afternoon, in the winter of 1974. I don't remember what words he used, but it was final. Now I was alone on Place de l'Opéra. I went down the steps into the subway and there, out of my guts, out of my mouth, out of my voice, came this voice I'd never heard before. I was coming out with these howls that stupefied me, knotted my stomach and twisted my mouth wide open. I was shrieking in the subway. I collapsed onto a bench. I happened to have a pile of singles in my hands, that summer's greatest hits. A black man sitting next to me reached over and took them gently from my hands, reading out the titles, one by one, and singing them as he did so: "Love Me Baby," "Sugar Baby Love"... The train arrived. I took back my records. The shrieking had stopped, my eyes were streaming.



film, Calle later acknowledged that she was in love with Shepherd but he did not love her, and they got married for the sake of the film (they subsequently divorced).

At Calle's request, American author Paul Auster wrote a character based on the artist for his 1992 novel *Leviathan*. Calle then produced works made by the fictional Maria in the book, including a series of colour-coordinated meals, documented in Calle's 1999 publication *Double Game*. It is interesting to note that Calle's approach of living her private life in public, for her art, predates the advent of reality television stars and social media influencers by at least a decade.

Calle's works have continued to become more complex and collaborative, with the artist ceding creative control of one her most ambitious and best-known projects, *Take Care of Yourself* (2007). First shown at the Venice Biennale in 2007, the project

presented the creative responses of 107 women to a break-up email Calle received from an ex-boyfriend, the last line of which gives the work its title. Instead of replying to the letter herself, Calle gave the letter to the women and asked them to respond, according to their profession. Alongside responses from luminaries including artist Laurie Anderson and actress Miranda Richardson, an accountant analysed the financial implications of the break-up letter, an editor proofread it, a singer sang her response and so on. Calle's installation presented these responses in film, photographs, sound and text, alongside an image of each woman reading the original letter.

In 2008, Calle staged *Take Care of Yourself* at the former Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. In presenting a personal archive inside one of France's most important public archives, Calle added another layer of inter-textuality to her

project and challenged traditional notions of what an archive can be.

Calle has presented a number of her projects in non-traditional spaces, taking her work out of the white-cube gallery space and embedding it in the real world. For example, the artist staged her 2014 exhibition *Rachel, Monique* in the Church of the Heavenly Rest, New York. The exhibition focused on a body of work concerning the death of Calle's mother Monique Sindler, in 2006. The exhibition included *Couldn't Capture Death* (2007), a video in which Calle tried to capture her mother's dying breath. It's a work about one of the most intimate and personal experiences of life and yet, as Calle explained, her mother was delighted to be finally featured in the artist's work.

Over the past decade, Calle has subsequently made works regarding the death of her father and of her cat, Souris;



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. I followed this advice to the letter. I asked 107 women (as well as two handpuppets and a parrot), chosen for their profession or skills, to interpret the letter. To analyse it, comment on it, dance it, sing it. Dissect it. Exhaust it. Understand it for me. Answer for me. It was a way of taking the time to break up. A way to take care of myself.

SOPHIE CALLE

Take care of yourself. Children's writer, Marie Desplechin, 2007
 colour print, text, frames
 99 x 123 cm (photo)
 50 x 123 cm (text)

Opposite
 Left to right
SOPHIE CALLE
Double blind / No sex last night, 1992
 film, colour, sound, partly subtitled
 Duration: 00:35:00

SOPHIE CALLE
The Address Book, 2003-2009
 serial published in the daily newspaper Libération from 2 August to 4 September 2003

Page 80
SOPHIE CALLE
The Hotel, Room 24 (March 2), 1981
 one colour photograph and one text
 102 x 142 cm (each)

Page 82

Top, gridded
SOPHIE CALLE
Suite Vénitienne (details), 1980

Bottom
 Monograph: **Sophie Calle, M'as-tu-vue? (Can you see me?), 2003**

Page 83
SOPHIE CALLE
Exquisite pain, 40 days ago, 1984-2003
 print, embroidery, flax, aluminium, frame
 191.7 x 139 cm (frame)

Courtesy the artist and Perrotin, Paris and New York © Sophie Calle / ADAGP, Paris, 2020

in 2018, the artist released an album featuring songs by Bono, Michael Stipe and The National in honour of her beloved, deceased pet.

Calle's oeuvre defies categorisation; it is difficult to pigeonhole her, or compare her output with that of her peers. Formally and conceptually, her work differs from the documentary realism of Nan Goldin's photographs of New York subcultural identities, nor does it resonate with the highly performative and stylised self-portraits of Cindy Sherman. Equally, it is hard to imagine the first-person confessional approach of an artist like Tracy Emin without Calle having come first. Fact and fiction. Public and private. Art and life. For Sophie Calle, they are all one and the same. **V**

Sophie Calle is featured in *Le Supermarché des Images* at the Jeu de Paume, Paris, until June 7, 2020; in *Was Bleibt* at Kunstmuseum Ravensburg, Germany, until June 7 and *Push the Limits*, Fondazione Merz, Turin, Italy, from April 28 until June 18, 2020.

At the time of printing the *Jeu de Paume*, Paris, Kunstmuseum Ravensburg, Germany, and Fondazione Merz, Turin, Italy, are temporarily closed to the public in response to COVID-19. All exhibition dates are current however, due to the unfolding circumstances of COVID-19, please refer to institutional websites for further details.

Sophie Calle is represented by Perrotin, Paris and New York.

perrotin.com
 jeudepaume.org
 kunstmuseum-ravensburg.de
 fondazionemerz.org

1. Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida*, Richard Howard (trans.), New York: Hill and Wang, 1980, p. 15.
2. Macel, Christine, "The Author Issue in the Work of Sophie Calle" in *Sophie Calle: M'as-tu vue*, Prestel, Munich, 2003, p. 21.