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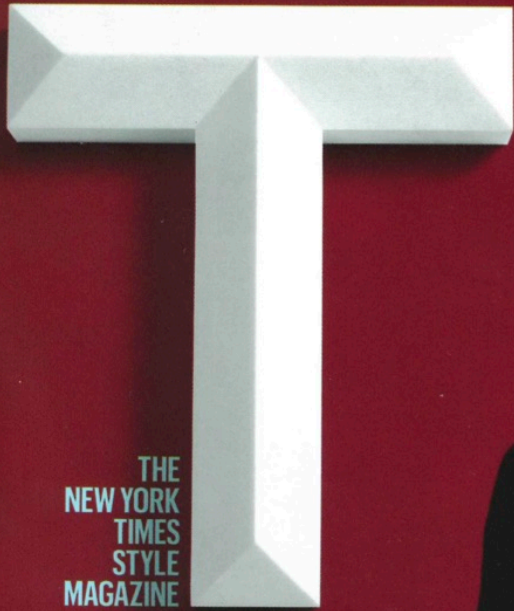
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**PRESSBOOK**

Sophie CALLE

*T Magazine*

*April 2017*



THE  
NEW YORK  
TIMES  
STYLE  
MAGAZINE

Hiroshi Sugimoto Builds a Museum  
David Lynch Says Nothing About 'Twin Peaks'  
Sophie Calle Gives Birth to a Cat  
Dave Chappelle Gets Happy  
& the Influence of Russian Fashion

# Mother of Invention

IT'S POURING WHEN the taxi leaves me in front of Sophie Calle's building in Malakoff, a working-class suburb 10 minutes from Paris. At first I question the address: The building — gray and nondescript — is as dreary as the day. It's not the home you'd expect for a conceptual artist whose work can be uncommonly frisky. But inside, there's a leafy courtyard ringed by ateliers, one of which is blazing with light. I spot the artist through her studio's floor-to-ceiling windows. She meets me at the door looking classic kooky-sexy Calle: low-cut black cocktail dress, elaborately crocheted black tights, massive tinted glasses and sheepskin slippers.

She is smiling broadly and caressing her stomach. Judging by its shape and size, she's eight months pregnant. Calle is 63, so this is surprising. On the other hand, given her affection for the flagrantly absurd, it is not surprising at all. After we exchange kisses, she ushers me in, explaining that she has turned the photo shoot for this story into an opportunity to fulfill a project she never got around to: giving birth to her beloved cat, Souris ("Mouse"), who died three years ago. (I can't possibly do justice to the explanation for this, so please turn to page 118.) This makes sense: Calle's work is famously first person; why not manipulate this situation into a piece of art?

The loft is a spectacular trove of *stuff*. There are paintings and photographs clustered on every wall, but also eccentric collections — many bowls of fake food (the kinds you see outside cheesy restaurants), prosthetic arms and legs

hanging from a curtain rod, Victorian baby photos, religious artifacts, some turned into lamps. Her home is as precisely curated as her work. "Every day I change one picture. I move things nonstop," she says. "It is maniacal."

As we settle in her living area, Calle springs up to adjust logs in the fireplace, cradling her belly, nearly forgetting that it is a conceit. "I think I'm going to stay like this for a month," she says. "I find it attractive. I want people to give me a seat on the bus." Later, she will lift her dress to reveal a fur collar stuffed inside her movie prop belly and specially constructed underpants.

CALLE IS OFTEN DESCRIBED as the most celebrated conceptual artist in France, and the most French of artists. Both are true. She is *huge* in her country. And what is more French than an artist who has stated that the impetus for her work was the metaphorical seduction of her father? There is also her matter-of-fact approach to sex, her preference for ideas over reality and her deep affection for rituals and rules. At various points in her 38-year-long career, she has invited people to sleep in her bed ("The Sleepers"), posed as a stripper ("The Striptease"), secretly followed a man she'd met once through the streets of Venice ("Suite Vénitienne") and worked as a hotel chambermaid, documenting the belongings of guests ("The Hotel"). In 2007, for her best-known work, Calle asked 107 women to respond to a breakup email from her ex-boyfriend; they did, through song, dance, the written word, even crossword

The  
fertile  
mind  
of  
artist  
Sophie  
Calle.



BY MARY KAYE SCHILLING  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUERGEN TELLER

**RULES OF THE GAME** Sophie Calle in her home studio in the Paris suburb of Malakoff. Her playful life-as-art work doesn't stop with magazine photo shoots. Here, she is "pregnant" with her late cat, Souris.

**THE PLOT THICKENS**

Near right: Calle's mother in an image from the show "Rachel Monique." Far right: "Voir la mer," at the Musée d'Art Contemporain in Montreal in 2015. Below: one of Calle's birthday celebration vitrines, with gifts from the guests at her 1983 party. Opposite, bottom: a scene from the 1992 film "No Sex Last Night (Double Blind)," Calle's collaboration with the artist Greg Shephard (pictured), which played off and on for six years in a Paris movie theater.



puzzles. Her ex's cavalier signoff became the show's title: "Take Care of Yourself."

Absence is her reigning theme: boyfriends leaving, parents dying, things going missing. Ghosts and secrets, cemeteries and tombstones. More is made of these preoccupations — often dismissed as matters of morbid curiosity — than of her playfulness. But it is the latter that first hooked me. The annotated book "Double Game" included her interpretation of the work of Maria, a fictional artist based on Calle in Paul Auster's 1992 novel, "Leviathan." In a profoundly meta move, she created work guided by Maria's strict, eccentric rules, like spending a day living under a letter of the alphabet. (The cover of the book, featured on the opposite page, is Calle dressing up as Brigitte Bardot, for "B.")

As with many artists, you either get her or you don't. To detractors, her voyeurism and life-as-art approach are the definition of TMI — exploitative, invasive, silly if not simply crazy. (One male critic likened her aesthetic to that of a "mental disorder.") For others, Calle's freewheeling imagination, coupled with an ability to turn emotional chaos into compelling narratives, is thrilling. So too is her disregard of gender limitations; her fearless lack of vanity and indifference to what is considered appropriate (again, see page 118) is reminiscent of her fellow countrywoman Isabelle Huppert. "Sophie gives me a sense that there's room for me in the world," says Miranda July, a writer and artist who has taken similar hits for her so-called strangeness.

Though Calle works in a variety of media, she favors photographs with text, written or edited in her precise, detached style, with its poker-faced humor. Some projects live only in books, small works of art unto themselves. Her writing has long been acclaimed, her pictures not as much. That began to change in 2010, when she won the Hasselblad Award for her photography. And she is currently shortlisted for the Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize (the winner will be announced on May 18) for 2016's "My All," a petite portfolio of postcards covering her entire oeuvre. Four of her most recent projects, with arguably her best pictures — including "Take Care of Yourself" and 2011's "Voir la mer" — will be part of a major show in June, when Calle takes over four buildings at San Francisco's Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture.

The Fort Mason exhibition is extensive, yet given Calle's international stardom and aesthetic reach, it is puzzling that she has never had a full-career retrospective here. America has, to some extent, kept Calle

at a distance. I suspect she is too cerebral, that her work is too reliant on text. (You can spend hours at her shows, soaking up every word on the walls.) And yet her art, in various ways, has predicted our current cultural moment, from the staged intimacy of reality TV and the faux intimacy of social media to the autofiction of Karl Ove Knausgaard and Chris Kraus. Even Taylor Swift's boyfriend-dishing pop songs owe something to Calle. Consciously or not, her influence is everywhere.

"THAT'S MY BOYFRIEND," says Calle, pointing to a stuffed spider monkey dangling from the horn of a bull's head over the fireplace. She means that the monkey is named for the architect she has been seeing for 12 years because "he is very sweet like that, skinny also."

Taxidermy animals take pride of place in Calle's home. By the dining table is a startling tableau, a grouping of beautifully preserved animals — foxes, kittens, dogs, a bear cub, a baby zebra, some tricked out with jewelry. "How you start collecting, I don't know," she says with a shrug. "But then I start to give them names of friends — Dominique, Florence, Rafael. Every time I have a new friend I have to find an animal that looks like them." The effect of all these stuffed creatures is incongruously cheerful, perhaps because, as Calle says, to her they are "totally alive, people I see every day." Well, most are. "My father has since died," she says, pointing to a tiger wearing a crown. (A giraffe, named for her mother, reigns over the studio.)

With her parents gone and a distant relationship with her brother, Antoine, Calle's life now revolves around her friends. She has a lot of them. "I would be quite lonely otherwise," she says. I ask what is missing from her life. "Children — for the good," she says. "I am very happy that is missing — the trouble of children." She finds the expectation that she would want them — from women in particular — a kind of tyranny. "I hate when people take out photos of their children at dinner!" she says, and often responds by sharing shots of her cat. Are there children that she likes? "When they are 18, rarely before."

Calle's work often features family and friends. A fear of being forgotten on her birthday prompted 13 years of elaborate dinners in which she would invite the number of people that equaled her age. (The fear disappeared at 40 and so did the dinners.) Guests were directed to bring a gift, to be displayed permanently in a vitrine, resulting in the photo series "The Birthday Ceremony," from 1998. Her mother, Monique Sindler — described by Calle as a "coquette," and notably quixotic — would invariably give her something practical, like a stove. "I think because she knew it wouldn't fit in the vitrine," Calle says. "It was like a game, outwitting me."

You are like your mother, I offer. "I like rituals, to make games, not only in my



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: SOPHIE CALLE; "RACHEL MONIQUE," EPISCOPAL CHURCH OF THE HEAVENLY REST, NEW YORK, NY, 2014; INSTALLATION VIEW, SOPHIE CALLE. PARTICIPATION OF PAUL AUSTER; "DOUBLE GAME," COURTESY OF VIOLETTE Editions, NEW YORK, 2014; PHOTOGRAPHY, NEW YORK. COURTESY OF URSUS BOOKS LTD, SOPHIE CALLE; "RACHEL MONIQUE," COURTESY OF URSUS BOOKS LTD; SOPHIE CALLE; "SUITE VENTENIÈRE," COURTESY OF SIGILLO PRESS AND DAP PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK.



work but my life, so I took this from her," she agrees. What about humor? "I'm not as funny as my mother," Calle says, "not by far."

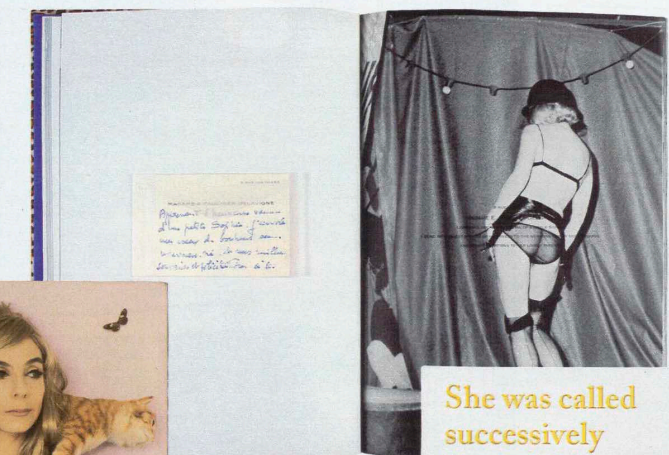
Of her parents she says, "They really were my life." In the 2012 documentary "Untitled," directed by Victoria Clay Mendoza, Calle is seen buying a cemetery plot in Bolinas, Calif., where she lived at 18, when she taught herself photography. Mendoza asks her what she'll put on her headstone. Calle pauses before answering, "Daughter."

Why not "Friend" or "Artist," I ask. Calle thought of those, too, "but 'Daughter, Friend, Artist' — that's becoming a bit much, no?"

Anyway, there is time for epitaphs. "I don't feel close enough," she says, though she adds that a friend recently sent her the perfect one-phrase biography. It was "something a person had written on Instagram or Facebook: 'Sophie Calle, artist without a child by choice.'" She laughs. "I would never dare to do this, but I loved it."

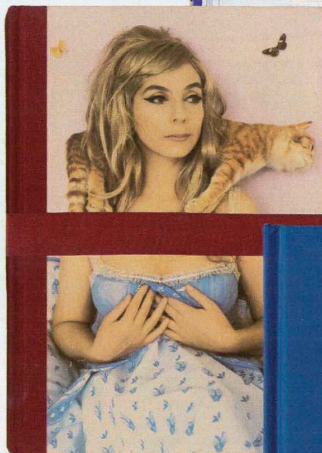
CALLE'S NEAT TRICK is to create art as a way of distancing herself from emotion while provoking great tides of it in viewers. She does this by tackling themes that anyone can relate to, but her approach, with its rigorous exclusion of sentimentality, has something to do with it, too. Calle specifically asked the women responding for the project "Take Care of Yourself" to avoid pathos or pathology, to analyze rather than vent, resulting in a work that champions imagination, and is all the more moving for its lack of negativity or bitterness. For "Voir la mer," what Calle calls her "first silent work," she abandoned text altogether, limiting the project to photographs. Calle's idea was to transport poor Turkish men, women and children to the sea for the first time in their lives. "They were too moved [for me] to ask questions," she says. "And what can you say about the sea? Even speaking very well they would say banalities. The horror was that they've never seen the sea, not what they think of it."

For the Börse prize show in London, Calle created a new work, "My Mother, My Cat, My Father," an exploration of mortality through her own losses. The piece includes elements of Calle's larger work, "Rachel Monique," about her mother, a film publicist who died in 2006. One photo, of a young, carefree Monique, is captioned with text from her diary: "No use investing in the ten-



**She was called successively Rachel, Monique, Szyndler, Calle, Pagliero, Gonthier, Sindler. My mother did not appear in my work, and that annoyed her.**

**PAGE TURNERS** Calle's enormously popular art books include, clockwise from top, the limited-edition "The Doctor's Daughter," 1991, with her piece "The Striptease"; "Rachel Monique," 2017; "Suite Vénitienne," 1983, her first book; and "Double Game," 1999.

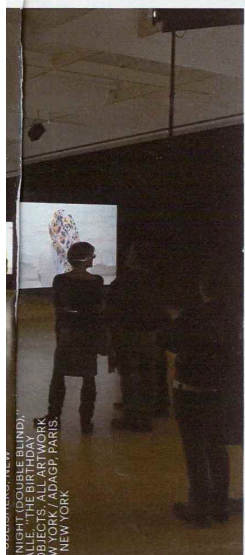


derness of my children, between Antoine's placid indifference and Sophie's selfish arrogance! My only consolation is she is so morbid that she will come visit me in my grave more often than on Rue Boulevard."

"Rachel Monique," which has evolved over the years (and will be included in the Fort Mason show), debuted at the 2007 Venice Biennale, and is as powerful an evocation of the complex mother-daughter relationship as I have ever seen. The 2012 Avignon Festival included a marathon performance by Calle: a 30-hour reading of 20-years' worth of her mother's diaries. She didn't look at them before and she has never read them again. "I knew the only way to read it was in public, in a performance," she says, "otherwise my heart would have stopped." There was also an 11-minute video capturing the last moments of Monique's life. For those offended by this, Calle says, "They didn't know my mother. I asked everyone who was close to her if they thought this was O.K. All of them said she would like it. She knew what I was doing; she gave me the diaries, she knew the camera was there." Indeed, when it was installed at the foot of what would be her death bed, Monique — who had always wanted to be a character in her daughter's work — said, "At last!"

Given this, I wonder if Monique might have been jealous of her daughter's fame. "No, no, not at all," Calle says. She tells me about an opening in 1991, for the group show "Dislocations" at MoMA. For Calle's contribution, "Ghosts," she asked the museum to remove paintings from their usual locations, then had members of the staff describe them from memory. At the opening, Monique turned to her daughter and said, "You fool them all!" Which meant, Calle clarifies, "that she thought what I did was not real artistic work, that I was so bright that I had manipulated people into thinking it was art. She was not jealous, she was super proud." This strikes me as a pretty backhanded compliment. "Did you agree?" I ask. "No, no," Calle says. "My work is my work. The goal was the wall, the quality of the work, not to have fun." Eventually, she adds, her mother came to see her as a "serious artist."

Her father, Robert, a doctor and early collector of Pop and Conceptual art,



YORK: SOPHIE CALLE AND GREG SHEPARD, "NO SEX LAST NIGHT (DOUBLE BLIND)," 1992. FILM IN FRENCH WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES; SOPHIE CALLE, "THE BIRTHDAY," 2007. COURTESY OF SOPHIE CALLE / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK; ADAGP, PARIS. COURTESY OF SOPHIE CALLE AND PALLA COOPER GALLERY, NEW YORK



'Years ago, as I was proclaiming my lack of desire to have a child, a friend remarked that my behavior toward my cat, Souris ("Mouse"), was that of a mother. So I decided to come full circle and give birth to my cat. I bought a fake movie prop belly and a small black-and-white stuffed animal that resembled him. The idea was to simulate pregnancy for between 62 and 67 days (the normal gestation period for cats), and then symbolically give birth to Souris. I never acted on this. The summer heat proved rather uncondusive to wearing a fake belly. The winter didn't work either; I was traveling and installing exhibitions. ... While I kept delaying my pregnancy, Souris became too old. He died.'



never needed to be convinced. For Calle, her career, from the start, was a way “to do something he would love. I looked at what he had on his walls and did what he liked.” Her parents separated when she was young; she lived with her mother in Paris and saw her father every Sunday. “He was much more serious — a hard worker, practical, thoughtful. I don’t even know how they spent one day together.”

After Robert died, at 94 in 2014, Calle suffered a heart attack. “For two years I was with no ideas. I was paralyzed,” she says. “I felt fine about it, but my boyfriend says I was not so fine. He could feel I’d lost something.” To her mind there was a logic to her work ending with her father’s death. “I’d lost my eye,” she says. “No need to seduce anyone anymore. I thought, I’ve accomplished a few things. It’s O.K.”

Then the ideas started coming again. “I realized, it’s not true, because I was getting excited. Maybe I was slowly falling asleep.”

CALLE IS DIGGING through the piles of books stacked on her dining room table. She finds what she’s looking for — the catalog for the Börse prize. She wants me to read the artist Laurie Anderson’s essay about her. The two met at the Telluride Film Festival, at a 1996 screening of the film “No Sex Last Night (Double Blind),” Calle’s collaboration with the American artist Greg Shephard. (A document of the couple’s cross-country trip and high-concept marriage at a drive-in church in Vegas — they later divorced — it has the prickly wit and poignancy of one of Richard Linklater’s “Before” films.) Anderson was riveted by the short feature, and the two became great friends and traveling companions, to the point of exchanging mock vows at a San Francisco church in 2015.

So, Anderson’s essay: “Read it,” Calle says. “It’s funny.” Whenever I laugh, she looks up expectantly. “What?” she says. I read Anderson’s description of Calle’s methods for cheering her up: “I would say sometimes that I don’t have any energy. I keep getting lost and I don’t know where my work is going. ‘Of course you’re depressed,’ Sophie would say. ‘You look [awful].’ And off we’d go to Century 21.” Calle laughs hardest when I read this bit: “When Sophie tries out her American accent with ‘Enjoy,’ or ‘Have a nice day,’ her mouth looks like it’s full of battery acid and nails.”

Calle, who has lived in America at various points, is perplexed by aspects of it, like our obsession with social niceties. Currently she is irritated by young women speaking in high, childlike voices. “I don’t know where they invented this,” she says, after making a hilarious squawking sound. “Women weren’t talking like that when I first lived there at 18. Where does it come from? That confuse me completely — an invention that is so not sexy and yet is so fashionable and which is a construction.” If a waitress speaks like that, Calle can’t ask for food and won’t return to the restaurant.

We get on the topic of social media. A fan has created a Sophie Calle Facebook page that she approves of, but other than that she has no interest in or familiarity with virtual sharing. “It’s funny coming from me, who is supposed to be so indiscreet and voyeuristic,” Calle says. But, as she points out, the intimacy of her work is highly controlled, even staged; when she’s talking about her cat, it is not about Calle, it’s about writing good text or composing an image. Of her real life she says, “I don’t even answer requests from magazines asking for lists of the books or movies or bars that I like — I’ve never felt that was interesting. I only speak about my work.”



**STILL LIFE** Above: in Calle’s home, one of her many taxidermied animals. Right: a table displays her collection of fake food, as well as her latest book, “And So Forth,” featuring a portrait of Calle as a child. The book includes projects from the last 10 years, such as “Take Care of Yourself” and “The Phone Booth,” in which Calle randomly called a public phone to initiate conversations with strangers. Opposite: Calle with her surrogate Souris. Her most recent show, “My Mother, My Cat, My Father,” includes a text sent to Calle as Souris was being buried: “Sophie, I am sorry about your cat. Could you ask Camille to pick up some vegetables, maybe leeks or turnips?”



Before I leave, Calle shows me a project she’s starting, for an October 2018 show at the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature in Paris. “It’s all around ideas of hunting,” she says, but with a typically sardonic twist: Men hunting women, not animals. A portion of the show will be based on personal ads from the French newspaper *La Chasseur Français*. “It started in 1895,” she says, “so I decided to study what men look for in various years.” For example, “In 1895, most of the text is about wanting women with money; from 1905 to 1915, it’s about wanting a virgin.”

As I go, Calle points out Souris’s grave in the garden. Why hasn’t she gotten another cat? “Because I discovered complete freedom,” she says. Last year she spent four months in Bolinas. “I could not have done that with a cat, or when my father was old.” His death, she says, has proved less painful than she thought it might be. “I lived most of my life with the fear of not being able to accept it,” she says. “I’m more fearless now.”

Her parents are buried at Montparnasse Cemetery, home to the graves of Baudelaire, Samuel Beckett and Serge Gainsbourg. Calle would play there growing up, a sort of garden of cement flowers. She lived on one side of the cemetery, school was on the other, and she crossed it four times a day. Calle has the plot in California, and she recently bought another, at Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, for a site-specific project in April with the New York arts organization Creative Time. But she is torn: A devout Parisian, she would like to be buried in Montparnasse.

Calle speaks of the logistics of death with typical pragmatism. “I have no idea what happens,” she says. On the other hand, it would offer an opportunity for new rules and another game. “If I managed to get one in Montparnasse,” she says, “maybe it should be the start of a new cycle. I’ll get one in every place I love. And then the problem will be for my friends. Maybe they can put my hair somewhere, and my hand in another place.” Calle laughs. “I think I should leave them with the trouble, that way they have to spend a little time around me.” ■