

Sophie Calle

As a young woman Sophie Calle once returned to Paris after a seven-year absence and immediately felt lost and lonely. To diminish her feeling of isolation, she began following strangers through the streets. She also started photographing them without their knowledge. Calle ultimately was inspired to turn these peculiar voyeuristic activities into art, typically as an account of a life experience presented in the form of black-and-white photographs paired with text.



At 3:20 the subject takes a drink at the outdoor café in the Tuileries gardens and writes.

From *The Detective*, 1981

One day Calle followed a man briefly and then lost sight of him, only to be introduced to him later the same evening at an art opening. She took this coincidence as a sign, and allowed the situation to inspire a project. After learning that the man was planning a trip to Italy the next day, she decided to follow him there. Disguised in a blond wig, she created a photographic account of her surveillance of his trip, resulting in her 1983 book *Suite Vénitienne*.

In her 1981 piece *The Detective*, Calle switched roles: she became the one being followed instead of the one doing the following. She accomplished this by asking her mother to hire a detective to follow her and take pictures, ostensibly to establish photographic proof of her existence. Calle's intimate texts recounting her activities provide a sharp contrast to the clinical report provided by the detective, ultimately revealing that even "facts" can be highly subjective.

For her project *The Sleepers*, 1979, Calle decided to ask strangers to sleep in her bed and allow her to take pictures of them. "I asked people I did not know--on the street, in the neighborhood--to come to my place to sleep. Every eight hours, one sleeper left to make room for the next. Meanwhile, I sat in a chair, observing. I was interested in photography as a tool of observation. This is still true today. I am not a photographer."¹ Calle paired these photographs with a journal of her guests' comings and goings, as well as their thoughts about the activity of sleeping.

By the mid-1980s Calle's idiosyncratic bodies of work had gained great critical acclaim. Never having been formally trained as an artist, Calle initially was surprised by the attention her work received. "I did not think about becoming an artist when I began. I did not consider what I was doing as art,"² she explains.

Calle has never been preoccupied with presenting clear-cut or factual "documentations." Instead, using a disarmingly straightforward voice, she offers a conceptual and ambiguous hybrid of portraiture, performance, and storytelling that leaves

the viewer constantly wondering: is this story fact or fiction?

In *Autobiographical Stories*, 1988-89, 1992, Calle again turned the focus onto herself, purporting to reveal intimate aspects of her past by combining short textual accounts with large black-and-white photographic "documentations" of the events described. It is impossible to ascertain if the memories are true, invented, or a mixture of both. "What is between truth and fiction is the activity. The text and images are the reports of that reality,"³ explains Calle.



The Birthday Ceremony
(1993 Continued...), 1997

In addition to *Autobiographical Stories*, also on display here is a selection from a series entitled *The Birthday Ceremony*, 1997. Beginning in 1980 and for thirteen consecutive years, Calle threw a dinner party on her birthday in her own honor. Each year she invited the exact number of people corresponding to her age, always including one stranger chosen by one of her guests. Instead of using the gifts she received, she collected them and created a chronology of fifteen white cases displaying the gifts and accompanied by text cataloguing each item. In 1993 Calle ended the birthday ritual, and created two cases: the first contains the usual selection of gifts; the other holds only a large plaster angel with a banner between its hands reading "Gloria In Excelsis Deo!!"

Recently Calle has been working on a project in which she asks people to recall the unhappiest moments of their lives. She says that people can usually recall such moments instantly. Happiness, she says, is more nebulous.⁴

Born in 1953, Sophie Calle resides in Paris.

1. Ginger Danto, "Sophie the Spy," *ARTnews*, May 1993, p. 101.

2. *Ibid*, p. 101.

3. *Ibid*, p. 100.

4. William Leith, "A Quick Calle," *Observer Life*, 17 January 1999, p. 20.