

Sophie's World:

the Delusions of the Artist

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Walking hurriedly down the corridor of the University, late again from my ceramics workshop, I was stopped suddenly by Professor Bados, the faculty guru, who promptly answered the question that had of late become my perennial crisis: "I know what your problem with sculpture is," I looked up expectantly, because to be a sculptor was all I wished for. "You are a neurotic, that's what happens. When the real world does not match up with your expectations, you take cover in the one you have created in your head."

I was grateful to him for saving me psychoanalytic time and money, but I couldn't utter a word. Is neurosis such a bad thing for an artist? Sophie Calle, has built her international reputation on it, to the extent that she meets the medical dictionary's definition of it point by point.

1. Unattainable perfectionism

Sophie Calle tells stories where truth, desire and invention are blended together in a combination of text installations, photographs and objects. In one of her most celebrated pieces, *Autobiographical Stories* (1988), Calle narrates events of her life, illustrating them with images that, at first glance, infuse her succinct and playful description with an element of immutable reality. Her brief job as a stripper, the thought of plastic surgery, posing nude for Fine Art students, meeting strangers, quarrelling with the loved one are all within a certain boundary of normality. But it is in the way Calle introduces some of the episodes recounting her desires that we get the sense that she is not telling us things as they are, but as she would like them to be: her own idea of perfect autobiographical stories.

"Our improvised roadside marriage in Las Vegas didn't allow me the chance to fulfil the secret dream that I share with so many women: to one day, wear a wedding dress. So, on Saturday June 20 1992, I decided to bring family and friends together on the steps of a church in Paris for a formal wedding picture. The photograph was followed by a mock civil ceremony performed by a real mayor and then a reception. The rice, the wedding cake, the white veil – nothing was missing. I crowned, with a fake marriage, the truest story of my life."

Autobiographical Stories, The Fake Wedding

2. Preoccupation with details, rules, lists, orders

Twice during her artistic career, Calle employed detective agencies to follow her. She then exhibited the private eye's meticulous reports and blurred photographs next to her own account of the days' particulars (The Detective and 20 years later). To have someone else scrutinise her doings did not deprive her life of (a probably non-existent) normality. Instead, the specific definition of her actions exposed that Sophie Calle could only be herself when devising and following the rules of a game.

Her obsession with control goes as far as organizing her day's food by no other characteristic than color, then documenting it through photographs just like Maria Turner, a character in Paul Auster's *Leviathan* based on Calle, does. The beautifully pictorial natures vives, more aesthetic than any other work of hers, exposes the vague boundary between her life and work, reality and fiction. Not having any other human being with whom to establish a personal/work relationship, she experiments on herself in order to produce art.

3. Unreasonable insistence that others submit to her way of doing things

Sophie Calle manipulates people to work for her, making them succumb to the rules of her game, her art, her world. She demands that different people sleep in her bed in order to photograph them while they are unconscious, unaware and exposed (*The Sleepers*, 1979); she solicits, from her then boyfriend Greg Shephard, a film of their American trip (*Double Blind – No Sex Last Night*, 1992); she requests from born-blinds their image of beauty. *The Blinds* (1986), an installation comprising a photograph of the subject, their quote and an illustration of what they described displayed on a shelf, is one of Calle's most poignant works: she steps aside, acting only as a mediator and revealing the private obsessions of the individuals she works with.

"[...] Francis Lalanne must be tall, thin. He can only have gentle features. His hair is long. I see it fluffy, wavy, untidy. He must have big eyes. Many girls have told me he is handsome."

"[...] My room is oblong. There's nothing in it, it's clean. Just a fridge and grass outside the window. It's beautiful, at least I think so and I believe what I want to believe."

"Beauty – I've buried beauty. I don't need beauty, I don't need images in my brain. Since I cannot appreciate beauty, I have always run away from it."

Calle, having never received a love letter, paid a man to write her one. Exactly one week later, she received the several pages long manuscript that was to constitute *The Love Letter*. The disparity between the action (employment) and the object (love letter) mixed with the emotional sensibility of the artist was sure to backfire: she believed the letter,

deepening her anxieties and losing momentary control of her game. Or was it all part of the plan?

4. Overconscientiousness about matters of morality

The general public knows Calle for her obsessions. ‘The one that had herself followed’ exchanged that role to become a detective-like figure in *Suite Venetienne* (1979). Briefly meeting a handsome stranger in a party in Paris, she followed him to Venice without vacillating. For two weeks, dressed with the classic dark glasses and detective overcoat *attrezo*, she photographed him, keeping his identity, however, blurred. The game was up when the man realized what was happening and unmasked the artist.

Always conscious of the people she works with, Calle tries to protect them while getting the material she requires. In 1983, the French newspaper *Liberation* commissioned her a piece of work for publication. After photocopying an address book found on the floor, she attempted to portray the owner by contacting the numbers in the book and transcribing the descriptions obtained. France held its breath for 28 consecutive days while the stranger’s personality and identity were being revealed. This time, however, the conclusion was not to be straightforward. Returning from his holidays, Calle’s subject, a documentary maker, did not find her work amusing and counteracted by digging up a nude photo of the artist, which was also published by *Liberation*. Doubtful of its value and ethics, Calle still refuses to show *The Address Book*.

Surely one of the secret desires of Calle’s admirers is to become the subject of her art, to experience the intensity life has in her works, to be immortalised by the narrative artist, to experience something out of the ordinary happening. In her current show, Calle is not followed and does not follow anyone. The title *M’as tu vu?* (Have you seen me?) refers to a slightly more cunning cuckoo game: it is us, visitors that are, perhaps, being followed.

5. Inability to discard worthless objects

For more than 13 years, Sophie Calle has kept and displayed all of her birthday presents (*Birthday Celebration*). Functioning also as a list of mute autobiographical stories, this vast collection of pathetic objects ranging from a simple 2D bull-fighting poster to a useful-made-useless washing machine bares the vulnerability of the artist, the essential need to be loved. Why would anyone show private gifts if not as a cry for more and better ones?

Following advice from her father, Sophie Calle rang what she thought was doctor’s doorbell, only to be answered by a psychoanalyst. Surprised, she told him her father had sent her to that address in order to seek advice from a general practitioner about her halitosis. “Do you always do what your father tells you to do?” responded the doctor. It was then she commenced her psychoanalytic treatment.

Rather than actual, traumatic, transference, narcissistic or obsessive neurosis as defined by Freud, Sophie Calle's is more aspirational. Manipulating what she doesn't like from her life, buying, stealing, obtaining what she always dreamt of, this artist has achieved to convey a rounded sense of personal and artistic individuality. Conditions of the mind are a frightening thing for those who suffer them. But in the case of artists who want to make thought-provoking narrative works without being labelled conceptual, a little delusion is perhaps a desirable qualification.

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