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Conceptual Production in the Work of Sophie Calle

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of
Arts

in

Art History, Theory & Criticism

by

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Committee in Charge:

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The Thesis of Samara Kaplan is approved and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Signature Page.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Abstract of the Thesis.....	v
Conceptual Production in the Work of Sophie Calle.....	1

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Conceptual Production in the Work of Sophie Calle

by

Samara Kaplan

Master of Arts in Art History, Theory & Criticism

University of California, San Diego, 2015

Professor Jack Greenstein, Chair

Sophie Calle's art is underrepresented in the field of Art History, despite her important body of work. Furthermore, much of the writing on Calle's practice has tended to overlook the conceptual nature of her projects in favor of a more subjective reading. This paper places Calle within the conceptual art historical narrative using visual analysis and semiotic theory based on the writings of Charles Sanders Peirce. I argue that Calle's works should not be read into on an emotional level but rather function in the construction of the artist as a character, a persona. In order to support this position, I look at two of Calle's early works from 1981 and two of her later 1990s works, presenting this conceptual production as a consistent thread throughout her practice.

Conceptual Production in the Work of Sophie Calle

In her work entitled *The Address Book*, Sophie Calle finds an address book on the street and tracks down all the people listed inside in an attempt to construct an identity of its owner. The results of her experience were published in the newspaper *Liberation* and later turned into a book. That the owner's name was known all along points to Calle's interest in playing out the process: constructing a character by piecing together an identity based on non face-to-face encounters, as is the case in many of her works. To the actual owner of the book, Calle's gesture was seen as an invasion of privacy, and he threatened to sue. Because her methods pushed the boundaries of privacy and legality, Calle's work has often been subject to this kind of controversy. The artistic processes by which Calle produced her work undermined proper social conduct and were sometimes ethically questionable. The games she created subjected ordinary people to a level of scrutiny that disrupted assumptions people might have had that they could, for example, walk down the street without someone taking notes, or stay in a hotel without someone looking through their belongings. Certainly, Calle's positionality as a young, white, middle class woman enabled her to conduct these invasive games without foreseeable consequences. I will address Calle's work with an understanding that some actions might be seen as questionable, snide, or even wrong. While much attention has focused on these social issues in Calle's work, this paper will provide an alternative model for the construction of the artist's persona based on a conceptual reading of her work.

In many of her works, Calle describes real people as though they were characters in a mystery novel, using peoples' belongings, witness accounts, and photographs as

evidence of their identity. In *The Hotel*, she works as a hotel maid and documents her own reactions as she rummages through the guests' belongings. In *The Shadow*, Calle hires a detective to follow her around in an attempt to turn herself into a suspect, rendering herself an object of obsession. Her work elaborates encounters she constructs through non face-to-face encounters, collecting information only accessible through this kind of second-hand spying. In piecing together information about a person through second-hand materials, one does not experience the embodied human qualities of a real, mundane person encountered face-to-face, but instead creates fantastic alternative versions by projecting bodily, emotional and psychic traits onto an imagined absence. Calle manipulates the spaces between people and the various representations of them to construct characters, and by gazing into her world we are asked to make a character of the artist herself.

Scholars tend to pursue broad themes in Sophie Calle's work.¹ Christine Macel, for example, addresses "the author issue"², but without in depth consideration of her particular projects. This tendency to avoid connection with the work itself is coupled with a lack of investigation into the conceptual nature of Calle's art, particularly in her early years. Rosalind Krauss characterizes Calle's process as a "search for affect, for emotion,"³ and claims that the journalistic technique Calle employs, while contrived, does not prevent feelings from arising out of her work.⁴ Krauss thus sees Calle's work as referential to her "feelings." This paper addresses the need for a more in-depth reading of Calle's work that produces an alternative understanding of her style, resisting Krauss'

¹ Yve Alain Bois "The Paper Tigress" and Christine Macel "The Author Issue in the work of Sophie Calle."

² Christine Macel.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

affective reading.

Because Calle is often the subject of her own work, she appears to operate in the vein of subjective art. Indeed Krauss argues that Calle's texts are often the result of her emotional state.⁵ Yet her work is also distinctly Conceptual, a classification that has always been attached to Calle's name. Sol LeWitts gives a classic definition of Conceptual Art:

In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.⁶

The prescribed way in which Calle presents narratives follows this conceptual mode of carrying out ideas. Calle has an idea for an experience or a ritual action and then plays it out according to plan. What surfaces, then, emphasized by the way the works are exhibited on the wall as an assemblage of media are not the individual compositions of her photographs nor the formal qualities of the writing, but instead a questioning of the relationships between media and across genres. Donald Kuspit points out that art in the 1980s has been characterized by the need to borrow or renew old ideas, the tendency toward "collage" as opposed to invention.¹ Indeed, during this time, Calle develops her practice to incorporate writing and literary tropes as well as visual materials. She also uses photography to different purposes, both as fine art and as documentary. Her use of documentary photography often mimics a film strip, calling attention to the passing of time. Calle tends to synthesize various forms as the basis of her own style. While her work is often categorized as "conceptual photography," analysis of her early work tends to grasp for an internal reading of the material as referential of Calle herself. Through a

⁵ Krauss, "Two Moments from the Post Medium Condition." 62.

⁶ LeWitt, 1967.

close reading of two of Calle's 1981 pieces and two of her later 1990s works, I argue that Calle's unique brand of synthesis cannot be "read into" as a personal narrative of emotion but is better understood as conceptual production, out of which the character Calle is constructed.

Sophie Calle (b. 1953) is a French artist and writer who is not easily categorized. Contemporary art curator Christine Macel remarks that Calle's work has often been "snubbed," "misunderstood," even feared.⁷ Perhaps this is due to her crossing over between genres: not quite literature, not quite performance art, not quite fine photography. Calle's work is said to have been influenced by the Oulipo group, a literary movement in France beginning in the 1960s that employed a mathematical structure to literature based on constraints.⁸ A form of "auto-fiction," Calle as author takes the position of being both herself and not herself, both the author and the narrator.⁹ Due to this literary influence, her work tends to exist in book format, and even her works on walls seem to work equally well on the page. *The Address Book*, for example, was a performative gesture turned into a collection of writings that was presented in the format of the book rather than up on a museum or gallery wall. The book allows Calle to slow down the time frame with which one engages with the work. Flipping through pages over time, the reader can develop an image of a character based on the information present, whereas on a wall, one might walk by quickly without taking the time to piece together any informational at all. In this way, Calle's work must be taken in slower and more

⁷ Christine Macel. "The Author Issue in the Work of Sophie Calle. *Unfinished.*" *Sophie Calle: M'as Tu Vue*. Munich: Prestel, 2003. Exhibition Catalogue, Centre Pompidou.

⁸ Peter Consenstein. *Literary Memory, Consciousness, and the Group Oulipo*. Rodopi Bv Editions 2002.

⁹ Macel, 21.

completely in order to function. Crossing between genres in her methods, media, and presentation modes, Calle's work holds a unique place in art history.

While singular, Calle began making work during a time when Conceptual photography had already been developing for over a decade, particularly through the work of Douglas Huebler, Duane Michals, and Cindy Sherman. In his 1972 work *Variable Piece #101*, Huebler photographs German photographer Bernd Becher, instructing him to pose as "a priest, a criminal, a lover, an old man, a policeman, an artist, Bernd Becher, a philosopher, a spy, and a nice guy."¹⁰ Gordon Hughes discusses Huebler's images as causing a "voiding" of the subject, "programmatically concealing the relation between identity and its representation."¹¹ Huebler's photographs, then, operate in direct opposition to the notion of photography as "fixing" or "preserving."¹² Exploring the bounds of photography, Huebler foregrounds the interest Calle would later take controlling the medium.

Controlling the relationship between photography and writing so characteristic of Calle's work also relates to American photographer Duane Michals, who uses text on his photographic images to narrate a story. His work combines text with photographic images in this way to question the veracity of photography and push the limits of its communicative capacities. In a 1987 interview, Michals states, "I don't trust reality. So all of the writing on and painting on the photographs is born out of the frustration to express what you do not see."¹³ Like Michals, the relationship between the words and images Calle employs presents layers of meaning that at once build stories and fantasies

¹⁰ Gordon Hughes, 53.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. 54.

¹³ Duane Michals.

and at the same time question both the image and its accompanying text. But Calle, unlike Michals, positions herself at the center of the narratives, claiming a level of documentary proof through her images rather than total fiction.

Cindy Sherman made photographs that raised questions about the artist's presence in her work by photographing herself, a kind of precursor to the "selfie." Laura Mulvey describes Sherman:

...not a photographer but an artist who uses photography. Each image is built around a photographic depiction of a woman. And each of the women is Sherman herself, simultaneously artist and model, transformed, chameleon-like, into a glossary of pose, gesture and facial expression.

Like Calle, Sherman positions herself at the center of her work, functioning as both artist and subject, constructing images of herself for the effect of a persona. Both Calle and Sherman are theatrical in this way, constructing scenes in which they play the lead role. But where Sherman's work sets the body and its social position at the forefront, using close-up self-portraiture, Calle's body is primarily present through her first person textual voice. Social concerns and interactions are intentionally obscured in Calle's work to open up a different kind of interpretive space.

In order to explore the meaning produced through the relationship between media, this paper takes a semiotic approach to Calle's work through theorist Charles Sanders Peirce. In two of Calle's early works, *The Hotel* and *The Shadow*, I consider the ways in which the artistic materials inform and interact with each other as indices of Calle's experience. On another level, I look at how Calle's identity as an artist unfolds from them as a symbol. Then, through two of Calle's later works, I discuss the artist's persona as a consistent thread throughout her practice.

Calle's texts and photographs operate as indices of the artist's actions. Peirce defines the index as being "physically connected with its object... the interpreting mind has nothing to do with this connection, except remarking it, after it is established."¹⁴ One of the main materials Calle uses is the photograph. As Peirce explains, the photograph "not only excites an image, has an appearance, but, owing to its optical connection with the object, is evidence that that appearance corresponds to a reality."¹⁵ The photograph is indexical by nature of its being a direct imprint of light from the source, thus making an actual connection with the object. There are also texts present in her work: detective notes, first-hand accounts from the artist, and titles. The various elements of each work are placed next to each other to create a juxtaposition. The juxtaposition between these objects is where Calle's work functions. What is the relationship between the photograph of an event and its textual documentation?

But these objects are also signs of the artist in another way, because they center around the artist as subject and 'man' is also a sign. According to Peirce, man is a symbol, a generalization comprised of "bundle of habits." Peirce refers to "habit" not as "an affection of consciousness; it is a general law of action, such that on a certain general kind of occasion a man will be more or less apt to act in a certain general way."¹⁶ When it becomes "deliberate... habit is precisely a belief."¹⁷ Calle's work centers around the display of habit. The artist invents arbitrary rules of a game, typically long term serial actions, and carries them out as rituals. These rituals are calculated and well-documented, insistent on repetition. When reading through the extensive text and images on the wall or

¹⁴ CS Peirce. 1894 (c.) | Grand Logic 1893: The Art of Reasoning. Chapter II. What is a Sign? | EP 2:9

¹⁵ 1903 (c.) | Logical Tracts. No. 2. On Existential Graphs, Euler's Diagrams, and Logical Algebra | CP 4.447

¹⁶ 1902 | Minute Logic: Chapter II. Section II. Why Study Logic? | CP 2.148

¹⁷ 1907 | Pragmatism | CP 5.480

in print, the viewer is asked to construct an image of Calle through second hand materials. So, how do these indices represent the artist?

The Hotel

On Monday, February 16, 1981, Calle went to work as a temporary maid at a Venetian hotel. For three weeks she cleaned rooms, rummaged through guests' personal belongings, and documented her observations through text and photographs. Displayed together, these texts and images constitute the *The Hotel* series. This act is blatantly intrusive; she is not only posing in a profession she does not intend to uphold, she is also crossing the boundaries of appropriate conduct by looking through peoples' personal things. Calle is operating "in bad faith" right from the set up, suggesting she might be an unreliable narrator. She has constructed the terms under which she will create her work of art and is following them out according to a pre-conditioned set of expectations for the piece, like a musician playing an improvised song, all the rules are in place.

In *Room 47* (February 22 - February 24), the viewer encounters a photograph of a double headboard, deep reddish brown, a simple but elegant design, with a red satin bedspread. The bed is neatly made, the composition symmetrical. There is something painterly about the way Calle has photographed the bed here. The subject seems to be only shape, color, precision, and texture. The close-up view of the headboard gives the appearance of flattened or abstract designs, and yet the dual form of the beds are associated with figures. Because of the artistic specificity in her approach, Calle has elevated this otherwise ordinary subject. And in elevating it, she has rendered it approachable, inviting, and communicative.

Encountering the next set of photographs in this piece produces a decidedly different effect, despite the similarities in content. Like the preceding photographs, or rather snapshots, they are of ordinary objects, only this time the objects are not glorified. Again there is the bed, but it is not made, and there are a series of other untidy things: an open suitcase, a postcard ripped up and pieced together again, an array of slippers, a pile of luggage, and a balloon. The viewer is not being corralled into seeing the tones and textures of a pristine photograph. There is no painterly attention to surface or textures, or photographic techniques of light and shadow. Calle's method for shooting these objects is not artistic but might better be described as journalistic, documentary, or archival. They are shot in black and white and any symmetry in composition appears to be for an organizational purpose, something for an anthropological study. The intent of the photographs is to document rather to communicate. As Yves-Alain Bois writes, "She treated these photographs as sheer vehicles for information."¹⁸ In this sense, they had to be generic in order to function.

Calle's anthropological approach to the objects she photographs distances her as well as their owners from them, making it difficult for the viewer to enter into the pictures from any particular perspective. In Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, the documentary photograph confirms "what has been" with certainty, without necessarily imposing any nostalgic path of memory.¹⁹ When viewing the images alone, they are proof of their own occurrence, the artist makes no attempt specify meaning, as she does in the color images. To add to this, the hotel as a site for Calle's work carries with it certain contradictions that stall the image further. Hotels are impersonal temporary

¹⁸ Yves-Alain Bois, 46.

¹⁹ Roland Barthes, 85.

residencies, yet they are designed to appear as domestic settings. In Calle's photographs, there are recurring images of beds, slippers, bathroom faucets, food remnants, newspapers, diaries, and underwear. The viewer is in a faux-domestic visual space, with displaced items belonging to unidentifiable individuals.

There are thus two types of photographs in *The Hotel* series, each functioning in different ways. The color photographs are carefully composed images of pristine interiors as might appear in a tourist brochure or advertisement for the hotel, in which the rooms are at once impersonal and inviting. Since they function in relation to well-established conventions for promoting the hotel stays, they function independently without needing texts to clarify their meaning. It is fitting, then, that they are situated physically, when exhibited, above the writing. Since the clutter in the black and white snapshots is so banal, the black and white photographs of the rooms after the guests have moved in are more difficult to read. Situated below and thus after the writing, they are re-formed, so to speak, by the texts. What has seemed banal that without any context, now appear as tokens of someone else's experiences, proof of memories that the viewer does not have. In this way, Calle strings together a narrative picture of the hotel guests.

Text and photography, when combined, impose meaning on each other. John Berger writes:

In the relation between a photograph and words, the photograph begs for an interpretation and the words usually supply it. The photograph, irrefutable as evidence but weak in meaning, is given a meaning by the words. And the words, which by themselves remain at the level of generalisation, are given specific authenticity by the irrefutability of the photograph. Together the two of them become very powerful; an open question appears to have been fully answered.²⁰

There are different ways in which text and photograph can make meaning for each other.

²⁰ John Berger, 53.

In works like N. Scott Momaday's captioned photograph from *The Names*, in which the text reads, "*My Mother (Perhaps the doll's name was Natachee, too.)*," the text appears uncontrolling.²¹ Momaday is interested in storytelling through photographs, in tradition. It is not the "I" that interests the artist here, as in Calle's work, but the imaginative space between the words and image that open up to the viewer. But in both artists' works, it is not that text necessarily finishes a photograph, or vice versa, but for a viewer the combination provides a space, a gray area in which the viewer can react.

It is through text that Calle introduces a critical element to the image, imposing her own meaning on the viewer and thereby altering the images' effects. In *Room 47 (February 22-February 24)*, the viewer sees a color photograph of the red beds, underneath which is the title of the piece followed by a text that begins, "Sunday, February 22, 10 a.m. I go into Room 47."²² Immediately Calle has usurped the viewer's perspective by inserting the "I". She goes on to describe the mundane details of the room, such as the four pairs of slippers laying out on the floor, the balloon hanging from the handle on the chest of drawers, and the French toast on the table. After what seems like only two minutes of looking around, Calle declares "I am already bored with these guests."²³ She is not interested in these people because she is not interested in their habits; the text shifts from documentary to critical. She goes on demonstrate the wastefulness of the hotel guests. They leave the bathroom a mess, towels everywhere; Calle is frustrated. She makes note that when the guests finally part ways with the hotel, all they leave behind are a limp balloon and some stale biscuits. Finding postcards the hotel guests have written out to their friends and family, she makes a point to write out

²¹ Timothy Dow Adams, 92.

²² *Sophie Calle: M'as Tu Vue*, 163.

²³ *Ibid.*

each line, exaggerating its insignificance. Each card repeats the cliché sentence “Venice is very beautiful” and we understand the source of Calle’s boredom.

In another piece belonging to the same series, entitled *Room 25*, Calle’s character develops a different relationship toward the hotel guest. She describes him as a man of about 28 years. In his room are good quality clothes, classy magazines, a book, some fruit, and his journal. Most of Calle’s entry consists of the man’s journal entries; as opposed to the couple in *Room 47*, she is interested in what he has to say in a non-critical way. She decides to “go through it” and we “take it all in” along with her.²⁴ Rather than ending the work with waste and remnants in a negative manner, Calle reverses it. She writes, “He has left his orange peel in the wastebasket, three fresh eggs on the windowsill and the remains of a croissant which I polish off. I shall miss him.”²⁵ Calle not only notices the man’s habits, but aligns them with her own, finishing his croissant as a lover would. She has formed a level of intimacy with the man through his habits alone, just like she dismissed the former guests through theirs.

Through detailed accounts of reactions to the various situations she encounters, Calle opens up a narrative space between media, creating characters out of people and out of herself. Is the artist affecting our view of these people, or are we to evaluate Calle for her snap judgments? It is my contention that this unstable element of *The Hotel* is where the work remains. Whether or not Calle means what she says or says what she sees is irrelevant. She is not using multiple, conflicting media simply to communicate an expression of feelings. Rather, it is the interaction of event, image, and text that exposes the inconsistencies of representation itself. Through non face-to-face encounters, and

²⁴ Ibid., 159.

²⁵ Ibid., 162.

through non-correlating media, the viewer is asked to piece together a story of a real person made of events that may or may not have actually happened. Calle is not interested in genuine relationships or experiences connecting people, or in separating fact from fiction, but rather in constructing a narrative of character out of the indices of ordinary, habitual actions. This is where Calle's early work lays the foundation for her later, more obviously conceptual pieces.

Regarding the artist's presence in her work, Calle might be better understood in relation to Confessional art of 1990s, whereby the artist reveals something autobiographical about his or her own private identity. In 1998, for example, Tracy Emin exhibited her own bed covered with and surrounded by "empty booze bottles, fag butts, stained sheets, worn panties: the bloody aftermath of a nervous breakdown."²⁶ This work displays an extremely personal, emotional side of the artist that seems generous in its effort to connect with "universal emotions."²⁷ Calle's work too, has been described as auto-biographical and emotional. However, although Calle's works mainly feature herself as subject, there is little sense that viewers are gaining an autobiographical picture of a person. Emin, in a sense, invades her own privacy by turning clearly personal things into public objects, claiming an authentic relationship between her work and her life. Calle, on the other hand, makes public the debris of other people's private actions and assumes for herself the role of a narrator or observer who constructs an account of their private lives. The viewer is left to construct the persona of the artist who doesn't reveal herself, except

²⁶ Saatchi Gallery. http://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/artpages/tracey_emin_my_bed.htm

²⁷ Ibid.

as a kind of voyeuristic presence whose personal memories and desires shape the way a narrative is constructed out of fact and fiction, photography and text.²⁸

The Shadow

In *The Shadow* (1981), Calle enlists her mother to hire a private detective to follow Calle around Paris for a day and report his observations, both through detailed notes and photographs. The detective does not know he is being set up, so he carries out his duties as a detective normally would. Calle too documents the day with precision, only her style is more subjective, describing the day as succession of scenes in a romantic film. Viewing this work means reading through long passages that correlate to various moments over time reflected in the photographs. The photographs are strung together chronologically, but the texts and photographs never quite match up, so the viewer is asked to piece together a narrative through second-hand materials.

Calle's work was not the first of its kind. In 1969, Vito Acconci made his *Following Piece* in which he follows strangers on the street until the stranger has gone inside, documenting the process. Produced about a decade before Calle's work, Acconci's *Following Piece* addresses a similar interest in carrying out a predetermined gesture in public space. In Alexander Alberro's "reconsidering conceptual art, 1966-1977," he points out that Acconci's conceptual work depends on an "a priori scheme that generates itself once the person to be followed is (randomly) selected." In turn, the work

²⁸ Ekran Ali provides a sociological analysis of Calle's use of photographs and text in his work "Between the Sheets: 'Lamination' and Sophie Calle's *The Sleepers*." Ali uses a semiotic approach to Calle's work to analyze the relationship between text and photograph as "laminated" in Calle's work *The Sleepers*. By *laminated*, Ali refers to the layering and ordering of text and photographs that produces various elements such as "association" and "narrative." While Ali presents a layering of text with photograph, I propose to examine the space between, opening up the divide between text and photograph, reality and construct.

is “purely descriptive,” all “interiority is negated.”²⁹ For this reason, Acconci’s work has been called a collection of “evidence” of “non-events.”³⁰ In a *Frieze* article James Trainor describes viewing of Acconci’s work as akin to “piecing together a sprawling criminal investigation.”³¹ In *The Shadow*, Calle manipulates the documentary materials so that they are not “purely descriptive” but rather elaborated upon to the point of seeming mismatched with the actual events. This inconsistency between media calls attention to the conceptual intent of the project, to act out a predetermined idea. In this way, Calle’s work, like Acconci’s, can be seen as resisting interiority. While not purely descriptive, *The Shadow* is prescribed.

Considering Rosalind Krauss’ reading of the work as “emotional,” Calle’s self-surveilling approach might lend itself to a Lacanian analysis.³² In her “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America” Krauss discusses Lacan’s “mirror stage,” a stage in child development which occurs between 6-18 months, when the self is understood through the actions directed to the baby by others, what Lacan calls a mirror image, or double. As Krauss writes, “The child initially recognizes himself as an *other*.” Identity is closely linked with identification, or one’s relationship to someone else.³³ That Calle is expressing herself through her interactions with other people might be one way of reading her work. However, I am suggesting a Peircian reading to engage a different perspective of Calle’s relationship to her work. CS Peirce argues “that there is no reason for supposing a power of introspection; and, consequently, the only way of investigating

²⁹ Alexander Alberro “reconsidering conceptual art, 1966-1977.” In *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*.

³⁰ Trainor, James, 2004. http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/vito_acconci/

³¹ Ibid.

³² Rosalind Krauss. “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America.” 69.

³³ Ibid.

a psychological question is by inference from external facts.”³⁴ Personal identity is not made up of an individual mind, as Descartes theorized, but as of a “bundle of habits,” the tendency to think and act in a certain way.³⁵ Since this consistency shapes how we interact with the world, it might be understood or made clear through the pragmatic axiom: each of us might conceive of ourselves as all the conceivable effects with practical bearings that we might have, the sum total the impact or effects of what we do, make, say, write, think, etc. Applying Peirce’s idea of identity to Calle, we might say that her persona as an artist is formed by the consistency of conception and action in her work.

Each photograph in *The Shadow* documents a carefully planned detail of Calle’s day. These snapshots, taken by the detective, are arranged sequentially, almost cinematically, with Calle as the central figure in each shot. The locations are not ones typically associated with detective accounts; she could have led him through seedy alleyways or to a motel room, places that the viewer might associate with danger or scandal. Instead, Calle has conceived her perfect “lovely day” in Paris, throughout which she performs mundane but attractive, even romantic, routines: strolling in the Tuileries, meeting with an ex lover, writing at a cafe, contemplating a painting at the Louvre. Because the detective is forced to frame her in only these ideal situations, what results to the viewer is a gaze of infatuation; she has manipulated the man behind the camera to appear enamored.

The viewer is confronted with, on the one hand, the detective’s objective or at least professionalized description, and, on the other, with the subjective account Calle

³⁴ C.S. Peirce, “Questions Containing Certain Faculties Claimed for Man.”

³⁵ De Waal, 83.

relates in reaction to it. She writes, “I’ve become a part of the life of X, private detective. I structured his day, Thursday, April 16, in much the same way that he has influenced mine.”³⁶ At 12:30 p.m., Calle gives the following account:

I am waiting for Eugene B, a publisher, beneath the statue of Danton at L’Odeon. We’re supposed to talk about a book. I would like to get published: five minutes go by. My eyes meet, on the other side of the boulevard Saint-Germain, those of a man about twenty-two years old, five feet six inches tall, short straight light brown hair, who jumps suddenly and attempts a hasty and awkward retreat behind a car. It’s “him.” A stranger steps up to me and asks where I bought my raincoat. Eugene B comes at 12:40 p.m. He kisses me and takes me to an outdoor cafe nearby. At 1:05 p.m. we say goodbye.³⁷

Calle recognizes the detective--if the man she supposes to be the detective is indeed him--through his embarrassed or awkward reaction to her, catching sight of him, and having observed him, she reverses their roles by describing his physical appearance as if he were the subject of her investigation. In the next line, Calle mentions a stranger who asks her where she bought her raincoat, which serves to distinguish “him” (the detective) from “a stranger.” Calle is making “him” familiar.

The detective’s account of the same event is different:

12:40 a man of about sixty, 5’6”, very stout, wearing a gray suit with a gray hat and spectacles with thick black frames, kisses the subject on the cheek. At 12:43 the subject and the man sit down outside La Conde, the cafe on the Carrefour de L’Odeon. They have something to drink and talk. The subject holds the man’s arm. At 1:02 the subject and the man part company.³⁸

The detective makes no mention of ‘meeting eyes’ with his subject. He repeats Calle’s life matter-of-factly, describing the appearance of the man, the actions during their visit, and the exact time they part ways, as Calle expects him to do. But just as the photographs

³⁶ *Sophie Calle: M’as Tu Vue*, 105.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 104.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

can be viewed as both documentary proof and as the gaze of infatuation, so too the meaning of this text becomes blurred. In his observations the detective often describes particular details of Calle's gestures towards different men, "the subject holds the man's arm." (106) This occurs again later in the text when Calle meets another man: "The subject and the man hold hands and walk around the museum."³⁹ As Krauss describes it, Calle is calling "up former lovers to meet her in order to parade them in front of "him."⁴⁰ In making note of the physical gestures that suggest intimacy and describing the details of the men Calle meets, Calle has turned the detective into a jealous voyeur. Calle's character is so effective in guiding the detective into the role of voyeur that the viewer is convinced Calle's final words are not unsubstantiated: "Before closing my eyes, I think of "him." I wonder if he liked me, if he will think of me tomorrow."⁴¹ This is not a "search for emotion," but rather an adherence to the game Calle has created whose rules are inherently narcissistic. The viewer cannot ignore Calle's attempt to construct a character out of the detective, to make a mockery out of a working man in order to develop a love story around herself. It seems here that she is attempting to reverse her usual game: turning herself into a suspect in the very same way she investigates other people. She is at once the subject and the narrator, puppet and puppet master, of the whole experience.

I have argued so far that Calle constructs narratives out of the spaces between modes of representation. I have also maintained that Calle is only present indirectly as a symbol produced by the works, as opposed to being emotionally or physically revealed. But later in her career, the autobiographical nature of Calle's work becomes even hazier.

³⁹ Ibid., 108.

⁴⁰ Krauss, "Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition." 8.

⁴¹ *Sophie Calle: M'as Tu Vue*, 105.

In her *Appointment with Sigmund Freud*, Calle is invited to exhibit her work in the office where Freud spent his last year. Calle exhibits objects along with texts to present a narrative history. She writes “I chose to bring objects that are sentimental value in my own life and that I have used in my autobiographical stories.”⁴² Here, unlike in her previous works, Calle claims to have real relationship to the objects and texts she presents from actual events and emotions from her life. In one piece from the exhibition entitled “The Love Letter,” Calle’s text reads:

For years a love letter languished on my desk. I had never received a love letter, so I paid a public scribe to write one. A week later, I received seven beautiful pages of pure poetry penned in ink. It has cost me one hundred francs and the man said: “...without moving from my chair I went everywhere with you.”

Calle claims a private relationship to these objects and their descriptions, yet there is a disconnect, a set-up. This is not a love letter received from an actual lover, but another game, another non face-to-face encounter with a stranger. Calle turns the personal nature of the love letter into a contract, an agreement whereby money is exchanged for words of love. One might suggest a poetic, psychological or emotional reading of Calle’s gesture, assuming Calle operates “in good faith,” and feeling sympathetic toward a woman who has never received a love letter. On the other hand, she has designed both the exchange and the anecdote, neither of which convey the gravity that comes along with love. I am suggesting that Calle’s work goes only as far as the ritual, thus reading into her psyche is beside the point as the expectations for the work are already pre-determined.

Sophie Calle’s 1994 exhibition *Absent* consists of a guided tour through a decorative arts museum scattered with Calle’s personal objects and autobiographical texts, accompanied by the music of Laurie Anderson. The objects Calle displays are not

⁴² *Sophie Calle*, Prestel.

only mundane, but generic: a black telephone, a white coffee cup, a brown necktie. In contrast to their apparent worth, she places her things on pedestals and in glass cases amongst extremely valuable art objects, asserting her presence throughout the museum. In one of the works in the exhibition *Absent*, entitled *The Bucket*, the viewer encounters a red bucket on a shelf surrounded by ancient vessels. Calle's accompanying text reads:

In my fantasies, I am a man. Greg was quick to notice this. Perhaps that's why he invited me one day to piss for him. It became a ritual: I would come up behind him, blindly undo his pants... and do my best to aim well... Shortly after our separation, I asked Greg for a photo souvenir of this ritual... This photograph was an excuse for me to put my hand on his sex one last time. That evening, I agreed to the divorce.⁴³

What seemed generic before, a plastic bucket, becomes a symbol for Calle's sexual habits. Viewers are momentarily displaced while reconciling their initial thoughts about the bucket with Calle's extremely intimate description. The placement of the bucket next to the ancient vessel marks the formerly ubiquitous utilitarian object as an aesthetic object and a token of past life, just as Duchamp's inverted display of the urinal made the urinal an object for aesthetic appreciation rather than use. Calle's anecdotal text reveals that the displayed bucket might have had a similar history as a part of a private, highly personal ritual. That such a story could never be reconstructed from ancient documents points to a disparity between history and personal narrative, public and private. Viewers are asked to consider how others perform ritual actions such as Calle's, both then and now, which fantasies are never actually lived out at all, and why stories like these die out in history, all initiated by the meaning created in the relationship between text and image.

In addition to implicating herself in the work, Calle's anecdote also references traditions in 20th Century art. Urine had become both subject and material in the art

⁴³ Sophie Calle, *La Visite Guidee*.

work, beginning with Marcel Duchamp's display of a urinal in 1917, continuing in 1958 when Yves Klein's cocktails turned his guests urine blue, appearing again in 1962 with Nam June Paik's *Fluxus Champion Contest* (for which participants stand around a bucket on stage pissing while singing the national anthem), and then around 1978, when Andy Warhol contributes his *Oxidation Paintings*, for which he experiments with the reaction between urine and metallic paint. To the well-informed viewer, the bucket together with Calle's story reference the male dominated art world, and Calle thereby positions herself in relation to it.

Absent can also be read as a continuation of the ideas put forth in Joseph Kosuth's 1965 *One and Three Chairs*, a conceptual work in which the artist displays a chair, a picture of a chair, and the word "chair" along with its dictionary definition. Kosuth explores the relationship between forms of a chair to highlight disparities in our understanding of the world through the semantic system. Rethinking this triadic relationship, Calle, on the other hand, presents a vessel, a bucket, and a personal anecdote that seems to relate to a bucket, three notions of a thing that bend not only our recognition of a thing but our ability to make sense of things objectively. Exposing a highly intimate anecdote, Calle manipulates the meaning of the bucket and the vessel. Once again highlighting the discrepancy between personal and public, Calle weaves together her own private narrative with the narrative of art history.

Here, even more than in the last work, Calle seems to break her own rules in constructing identity, sharing her personal life, making the personal private, just like Tracy Emin. Could this story be a confession? Do we get a glimpse into Calle's personal life? Perhaps. But this account can be trusted no more than Calle's description of her day

with the detective. There are no feelings suggested, there is no sense of having experienced this action at all. In fact, the action itself is consistent with the games Calle constructs for her other works, calculated and repetitive. Calle is interested in exactly this kind of ritual throughout her oeuvre. In one work, she decides to have a birthday dinner each year with the same number of people as her age, and to exhibit all the presents she receives. In another work, *Chromatic Diet*, Calle eats only one color of food every day of the week, photographing each meal. Calle has a habit of acting and thinking in terms of the rules of a game. She plans out elaborate schemes as a way of creating constraints around any given experience. One might choose to disregard the question of whether or not Calle's experiences are real, whether or not their telling or retelling is truthful. However, I argue that it is exactly this questioning which makes Calle's work so rich.

Calle's work functions like a mystery novel. In a mystery novel, the detective tracks the suspect based on second hand information. All sorts of scenarios are imagined for the various suspects, none of them certain. However, once the case is solved by determining the real motive, the detective moves onto the next case. Calle's work likewise attempts to construct motives and feelings out of the ephemera of peoples' lives and once the game is played out, she moves onto the next. But in her work, the process of detecting never reaches a real or truthful conclusion, so what we are left only with the musings or hypotheses of the investigator. It is in the ritual action that Calle's interest lies, the meeting of lived experience with fictional expectations. It seems fitting, then, that author Paul Auster inscribed Sophie Calle as a character in his 1992 novel *Leviathan*.

But Calle's character is not a sympathetic one, not at the level of a novel or a film.

It is not fleshed out, there is no chance for the viewer to get to know her. It is instead the intrigue of her habits that draws viewers in. In John Dewey's *Art as Experience*, he describes art as a whole process, not separate from "actual life-experience."⁴⁴ Dewey argues, "Experience occurs continuously, because the interaction of live creature and environing conditions is involved in the very process of living."⁴⁵ The viewer is left with a disoriented understanding of Calle's role in all this; she is at once character, narrator and author, subject and artist. This view of life as fiction and fiction as life is what distinguishes Calle's work and makes it so important to study. While some might dismiss her work as frivolous or even snide, not dealing with serious issues, I hold that her work raises important conceptual questions about representations of self.

Calle's work is particularly relevant in the Information Age as her work explores the interest we take in peoples' habits. Facebook, Instagram and blog culture capitalize on the relationship between text and image that allows individuals to create personas based on the glorification of everyday activities such as waking up or eating lunch, adding various layers of meaning and interaction to an otherwise mundane and singular activity. In an instant, a picture of someone's shoes can be spread to multiple media platforms, turning from an experience into an advertisement into an icon in a matter of seconds. A large part of what causes so much anxiety amongst our culture is the space between experience and representation, where interpretation strays too far from reality. Who is the "self" being manufactured through these social media outlets? Can we recognize our avatars as ourselves? Through mass distributed representations, people make themselves into characters, lacking fleshed out personalities but attractive in their

⁴⁴ John Dewey, 1.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

habits.

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