

Sophie Calle: Intrusive or Inquisitive

27 November 2017

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Research Statement and Introduction

This proposal serves to introduce our group's research of the artist and writer Sophie Calle. Calle's work, often controversial, questions how personal an artist can become with their audience. Often times without their consent, Calle places an unknowing subject inside of her artwork, documenting their comings-and-goings, photographing their belongings, and contacting their family and friends to discover personal information. *The Address Book's* "Pierre D.", *Suite Venitienne's* "Henri B.", and the guests of the Venice hotel during the three weeks Calle posed at a chambermaid, began as oblivious subjects and, at the hand of Calle, became characters to a narration -- a narration of their own lives. Calle's intentions behind prying herself into the personal lives of strangers is ambiguous; the question behind her work is not how, but why. Walking the line between genuine curiosity and unequivocal invasion, Calle's work opens the door for discussion on not only why one would have an interest in pursuing strangers, but more importantly questions how the act of documenting the pursuit transforms an activity of stalking into a work of conceptualist art.

Our research is focused on Calle's signature approach to uncovering the personal lives of strangers. We chose our own technique of encountering and selecting strangers, one that is relevant to the twenty-first century and a culture saturated by social media, Tinder. Our approach is parallel with Calle's in the same respect as these: we have agency over our subject, we document our subject using analog writing and film photography, and we do not have their consent to publish a work on their personal life. The body of this research paper will be composed of Calle's biography, an analytical description of our own remake of her work titled *I*

Hope This Finds You Well, the art historical context of Calle's work, and its current relevance and contemporary reception.

Biography by Caterina

Born in Paris, France in 1953, Calle's artistic career began in the late 1970's when she began to follow strangers on the street, acquainting herself to cities she was visiting for the first time. The primary focus of her work seeks to expose the private experiences of herself and others, and central to the creation of her work is to infer information about people through their personal property and affairs. Calle often presents the information she gathers in a layout combining written text with film photographs. After creating *Suite Vénitienne* in 1979, she began to produce various artworks that involved intruding inside of the intimate and private spaces of individuals that are unknowingly being followed or observed. Calle continues this theme throughout her career; *The Hotel* from 1981 has a similar method¹.

Calle chose to base her work in the stories of other people's lives. To uncover these stories, she often played the role of a detective. Similar to a hunter and a deer or spy and a suspect, in order to catch her subject at their most vulnerable, intimate, and true state, her work requires a chase, a hunt, and for her to become a shadow. The concept of disappearing is familiar to Calle; her work intentionally places the spotlight on her subject while she plays the stage manager. She seeks to submit herself to her work, becoming a secondary character.² For Calle, attempting invisibility is a voyeuristic thrill.

¹ Eva Wiseman, "Sophie Calle: 'What attracts me is absence, missing, death...'," *The Guardian*, November 2017

² Cybelle McFadden, *Gendered Frames, Embodied Cameras*, (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2014.)

Historical Context by Kathryn

Following the philosophy of Marcel Duchamp and his 1917 work *Fountain*, Conceptualism was a major transformation that occurred in the art world in the late 1960's through the mid-1970's. Conceptual art is a movement which places greater value on the concept of the work over the final resolved art work. In contrast to when the word "art" referred solely to paintings, drawings, and sculptures and "how best [an artist could] express their idea using paint or sculptural materials and techniques, a conceptual artist uses whatever materials and whatever form is most appropriate to putting their idea across"³. Similarly, Calle's work pushes the boundaries of standard ideas of not only what art is in itself, but also rejects traditional techniques used to create art. Just as Conceptualism weighs an ideas-based approach over an aesthetics-based approach, the depth of Calle's work is rooted in creation. "The articulation of an artistic idea suffices as a work of art -- implied that concerns such as aesthetics, expression, skill and marketability were all relevant standards by which art was usually judged"⁴. The philosophy and intent of the artist, and often times, the extremes they would place themselves into in order to create art, as Calle did, was in higher esteem than the final resolved product.

Following the end of the height of Conceptualism, in February 1979, Calle followed a man to Venice to document his comings and goings for her own pure curiosity. *The Hotel* and *The Address Book* soon followed in 1981 and 1983. For each of these works, Calle inserts herself into her work. Although not all conceptual artists work on creative impulse, Calle's work is rooted in intellect and imagination, and her exploration of intimacy and privacy cannot be

³ "Conceptual Art," *Tate*, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/c/conceptual-art>, November 2017

⁴ "Conceptual Art Movement", *The Art Story*,

<http://www.theartstory.org/movement-conceptual-art.htm>, November 2017

expressed in a painting or sculpture. Although nonetheless received with controversy (and even anger -- one of Calle's subjects published a nude photograph of her after discovering her work on him), Calle's work would have not been accepted into the art world without the Conceptualist movement paving the way in the decade prior.

In order to understand Calle's work today and its relevance to the present, it is important to have an understanding of its relativity to the past. Long before social media, mobile phones, and even the invention of the internet, Calle's work questioned the definition of privacy, challenged the boundaries of intimacy between strangers, and explored the fantasy of meeting somebody off the street -- whereas today would equalize as meeting somebody off of the internet.

Analytical Description by Renata

Our remake *I Hope This Finds You Well*, most resembles Calle's *Suite Vénitienne*⁵, however it also draws inspiration from *The Hotel* and *The Address Book*. These pieces are united through Calle's intrusion of the privacy of strangers; this element is what we sought to recreate.

We took to Tinder to find strangers before meeting them for a coffee, a drink, or a meal, and then later entering into their living spaces to photograph and document elements of their personality and lives. Our intention was to reflect Calle's documentation of people's things in their private space. This is relevant and suits the style of *Sutte Venitienne*, *The Address Book*, and *The Hotel* because as Calle did, we crossed a line of privacy.

We chose to use Tinder because it was a modern way of finding strangers. Our use of Tinder was different to the traditional use -- we were not attempting to find *real dates*. Our

⁵ Sophie Calle, *Suite Vénitienne* (Paris, 1983)

choice to change from following a stranger on the street or getting hired as a chambermaid to the use of a dating app was to make our work relevant to the twenty-first century. However, as with Calle, the question of *so, why do this?* is ambiguous. *If not to go on a date, why use Tinder?* Our objective was to firstly contrast the traditional use of Tinder with sheer curiosity, and secondly, to parallel it with Calle's traditional invasion of a stranger's privacy.

Each person documented their process individually. We wrote texts in a similar analog style to Calle's *Suite Vénitienne*, and an emphasis was placed on writing in a similar tone to Calle's work, using short, succinct and detailed sentences to describe the experience. A storyteller, Calle's account of her own experience is straightforward and pragmatic with an occasional inclusion of her own inner thoughts. The simplicity of her writing is what makes it captivating, subtly allowing for the reader to gain a deeper understanding of not only the persona of her subject, but of herself.

In *I Hope This Finds You Well*, spoken text was recorded in italics. The date and time were formatted in a similar way to Calle's work to give the experience of a running commentary and a diarised experience. We used disposable cameras to mimic a more old fashioned style of Calle's work, contrasting with the exploration of using a modern day technique to find strangers.

The individual pieces were then combined into a singular fictional story with one constant voice. This was vital to our remake of Calle's work; it not only flows better as narration to have singular voice, but Calle's work is documented in a singular -- almost monologue -- voice. Our unnamed narrator explores the personal lives of four different men over the course of three weeks. The final project was presented in a book, with photographs and text placed in a

similar style to the *Suite Vénitienne*. Inside the book, the text is placed sporadically and the photos as well.

The choice of our title *I Hope This Finds You Well* mirrors the ambiguity of the intention of Calle's work. It does not hint towards a specific objective or aim, but is left open to the interpretation of the reader, much like a lot of Calle's work. Whilst considering a way to finish the project, it was suggested to send a copy of the book to each subject met on the dates, however, we chose not to follow through in the end. The title still reflects this idea, suggesting that the book will find each of them well. Furthermore, it explores the idea that whoever finds the book and reads it will each have their own, most likely, different interpretation of the story dependent on their current life situations.

Overall, *I Hope This Finds You Well* encompasses the idea of Calle's intrusion into somebody's private life, however we took our own perspective on her work by utilising a more modern approach, through Tinder. The intrusion not only happens between the narrator and the subject but also between the reader and the narrator.

Contemporary Receptance and Relevance by Konstanze

The centered concept of Sophie Calle's artwork questions what defines privacy and our personal relationship to it. Her work questions what we value, where the line is, and how curiosity can shift to intrusiveness. As a society and culture heavily influenced by the popularity of social media and mobile phones over the last two decades, we also are asking ourselves these same questions on a near daily basis. From typing our credit card information while making an online purchase to our Google searches to our Facebook messages, the internet holds an infinite

amount of information -- but is infinite too much? As Calle documented her subjects every move without their consent, the internet documents ours, and in contrast, we allow it.

While constantly asking ourselves what information we should release to the public on social media, we subconsciously try to alter other's opinions of ourselves and manufacture an idea of perfection. In *The Hotel*, Calle was not only pushing the boundaries of personal space, but she was searching for the stories, truths, and imperfections our objects hold. In *The Address Book*, possibly the equivalent of going through one's phone in the present, she explores how we are perceived by others and questions if a portrait can be made of us simply by the opinions of our friends and family. In *Suite Venitienne*, Calle follows the every move of a random man she encountered firstly in Paris. In a modern context, when government officials monitor our activity at all times and when we often share our location on social media, one questions if today, we are more liberal with sharing personal information or more protective over our data. One can question if we have grown accustomed to the intrusion of our personal lives.

Serendipity is Calle's methodology to meeting new people, lovers or friends. She examines the limits of privacy and intimacy, which follow us in our everyday being not just as we conversate with strangers (while ordering coffee, at the supermarket, etc.) but also as we try to reimburse a glorified virtual version of ourselves. The connection is drawn through the guests in the hotel exposing objects of value and relevance to them, yet in contrast to social media, without any opportunities towards self-appointed filters.

These elements draw a strong and evident relation between Sophie Calle's critique upon privacy and our understanding of privacy in our daily being in the 21st Century. The use, access and sharing of virtual information exposes modern men and women to even greater risks than it

did back then. This makes the concept not just contemporary but also necessary in order to establish a personal relationship to technology.

Conclusion

Overall, our research paper explores Sophie Calle's early works and her career as an artist. Her work has always played with notions of intimacy and intrusion⁶. Our goal of creating *I Hope This Finds You Well* was to gain a deeper understanding of her questioning of privacy and the process in which she uncovered information of the personal lives of strangers. Through the creation of our remake, we echoed important aspects of Calle's work, such as her ambiguous approach and her method of documentation. Understanding her biography and historical context allowed us to understand her choices that she makes in her works. We were able to recreate these choices and make our own artistic choices that developed from her influence, such as choosing to use a film camera to document our photographs. Our choice to use Tinder allowed us to bring our remake into the present time, making it contemporary and relevant to the audience. The way in which Calle explores the intrusion of privacy is questionable, and *I Hope This Finds You Well* allowed us to create our own interpretation of the line between an honest interest in the behavior and lives of four men, which therefore exposes their humanity, and the insensitive intrusion of their personal lives.

⁶ Rebecca Kaye "Sophie Calle: Hotel Room as a Medium", *Bomb Magazine*, 27 November 2017, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/sophie-calle-hotel-room-as-medium/>

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