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Robert Silberman

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Sophie Calle: Overshare

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Sophie Calle: Overshare

by Robert Silberman • 04.02.2025

Sophie Calle (b.1953) first caught the attention of the art world with a series of audacious photo-and-text works that probed the lives of others. For *The Sleepers* [FIG.1](#), she invited people to spend eight hours in her bed – an exercise that could perhaps have promised sex or danger, but instead mainly revealed the mysteries of the human psyche. Calle observed the participants sleeping, documented conversations and took photographs of them every hour. One participant brought his dog along with him, stating that ‘my dog sleeps for me’. Another remarked that she ‘continually dreams of blood and bombs’. Calle’s subsequent project, *Suite vénitienne* [FIG.2](#), arose after the artist returned to Paris following a long absence and, uncertain about what to do, began photographing strangers on the streets. In January 1980 she followed a man before losing sight of him in the crowd, only to be introduced to him by chance at a gallery opening that evening. After he informed her that he was planning a trip to Venice, she decided to go after him. Calle donned a wig and trench coat and, after eventually locating her target, observed him until, in an unsettling twist, he recognised her. For *The Hotel* (1981) Calle took a job as a chambermaid and surreptitiously investigated the guests. She recorded each room with a colour photograph of the bed, as well as black-and-white shots of personal items, accompanied by such statements as ‘the memory I will keep of them is the obscene image of the pyjama bottom, stupidly lying on the chair’.

These works – provocative, creepy, comic – provided the foundations of *Overshare* at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, the artist’s first museum retrospective in the United States.¹ It was organised into four thematic sections: ‘The Spy’, ‘The Protagonist’, ‘The End’ and ‘The Beginning’. Calle is the artist-as-participant as much as observer; a writer, director and performer who turns voyeurism into a form of self-expression and even self-observation. In *The Shadow* (1981), for example, the artist asked her mother to hire a private detective to follow her for one day; the detective’s report and photographs comprise much of the final work, set against Calle’s own narrative of her actions. The pivotal work of her career dates to 1983, when, by her own admission, she went ‘too far’ (p.18).²



Fig. 1 Installation view of *Sophie Calle: Overshare* at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2024–25, showing, on the right, *The Sleepers*, by Sophie Calle. 1979. 176 gelatin silver prints, each 15.7 by 20.8 cm. (Courtesy Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; photograph Eric Mueller).

For *The Address Book* (1983), Calle contacted the people listed in an address book that she claimed to have found on the street, and asked them questions in an attempt to learn about the book's owner, known only as Pierre D. She published her written accounts of these conversations in the French newspaper *Libération*, alongside her photographs, causing an uproar. In 1988 Calle was commissioned by a Minneapolis bank to create a work for their collection. For more than fifteen years, she tried to find a satisfactory form for the material: surveillance footage of people withdrawing money from a cash machine fitted with a camera. In 2005, with Fabio Balducci, she produced a half-hour video, *Unfinished*, which documents her serio-comic efforts to complete the project, riddled with self-criticism: 'I didn't know what to do with these images [...] Were they about surveillance, about money, about solitude? I needed time to think about it [...] I needed an idea to go with those faces'.

In the wake of *The Address Book* and, in her own words, the 'fiasco' of the bank project, Calle turned to more explicitly personal projects, initiating two overlapping bodies of work: *True Stories* **FIG.3** and *Autobiographies* (1988–ongoing) **FIG.4**. As the curator of the exhibition, Henriette Huldish, notes in her catalogue essay, these works anticipate reality television and social media in their challenge of any division between private and public, appropriate and inappropriate, fact and fiction. A selection of objects from *True Stories* is at the centre of the exhibition. Together they take on the semblance of a room: there is a coffee cup, a bra, a wig, a hotel room key and a dressing gown. Each is accompanied by a number, which corresponds to a text that details a fantastical vignette of Calle's life. The wig, for example, is paired with a text

titled 'The Striptease', which recounts a 'daily ritual' from her childhood:

I was six. I lived on a street named Rosa-Bonheur with my grandparents. A daily ritual obliged me every evening to undress completely in the elevator on my way up to the sixth floor where I arrived without a stitch on. Then I would dash down the corridor at lightning speed, and as soon as I reached the apartment, I would jump into bed. Twenty years later I found myself repeating the same ceremony every night in public, on the stage of one of the strip joints that line the boulevard in Pigalle, wearing a blonde wig in case my grandparents, who lived in the neighborhood, should happen to pass by (p.86).



Fig. 2 From *Suite vénitienne*, by Sophie Calle. 1980. 55 gelatin silver prints, 24 text panels and 3 maps, dimensions variable. (© Sophie Calle, Artists Rights Society, New York, and ADAGP, Paris; Buffalo AKG Art Museum; courtesy the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York; exh. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis).

Calle is not solely a photographer, writer, performance artist, filmmaker or conceptual artist; instead, she is a hybrid. Nonetheless, it is surprising that after her early text-and-image works and *True Stories*, the works that stand out in the exhibition are three that use film and video. *No Sex Last Night* (1992) documents a road trip from New York to Los Angeles that the artist made with the film director Greg Shephard in a Cadillac convertible, each armed with a camcorder. Their individual voiceovers, which they made during the journey, were not revealed to one another until after the trip was completed, following constant tension, occasional outbursts and then, near the end, a surprise conclusion to the psychodrama: marriage in a Los Vegas drive-through wedding chapel. Finally, in Los Angeles, Calle's refrain of 'No sex last night' is replaced by a very different announcement: 'Yes'. The related still works include

an image of Calle standing behind Shephard, holding his penis so that she can share his experience of urinating. Although they carry Calle's typical wit and skill – and shock value – they cannot match the twisted vitality of the film.

The film *Impossible to Catch Death* (2007) is in a completely different key. It is one in a series of works devoted to Calle's parents, as well as parents more generally, and, ultimately, to death, as the droll photographs in *Mother-Father* demonstrate **FIG.5 FIG.6 FIG.7**. The eleven-minute film captures the death of Calle's mother in a single, unbroken take; the artist had left the camera running so as not to miss the actual moment of death. For much of the film, the viewer sees Calle's mother lying in bed with her eyes closed. It is only when Calle appears to check for a pulse, and with the subsequent arrival of medical personnel, that one realises Calle's mother has died. As the title indicates, it remains unclear exactly when this happened. The 'extraordinarily poignant' (p.22) film is a moving testimony to a complicated relationship, and to Calle's determination to pursue her ideas, especially when they do not go as planned.

The exhibition also included the recent work *On the Hunt* (2024). It is the product of Calle's research into personal advertisements – a major instrument of calculated oversharing – drawn mainly from issues of a French hunting journal published from the 1890s onwards, as well as from a number of contemporary websites. These notices offer a remarkable social history in relation to money, bodies and sex: 'Would ignore any stain [i.e., would accept a non-virgin] if dowry is good'; 'soulmate [...] able to replace late mother'; 'I want you simple, chilled and with tattoos'. Calle's greatest gift is arguably her curiosity. Yet the excerpts, paired with photographs of animals and hunting stands, do not make for compelling art. Calle's text-and-image works have always struggled to avoid what one might refer to as 'book-on-the-wall' syndrome. In a conversation between Calle and fellow artist and friend Laurie Anderson to mark the opening of the exhibition, an audience member remarked, 'I've never seen a show that is less visually interesting but more imaginatively engaging', to which Calle responded, 'is that a compliment?'.³



Fig. 3 Installation view of *Sophie Calle: Overshare* at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2024-25, showing selections from the series *True Stories*, by Sophie Calle. 1988-ongoing. Objects and texts, dimensions variable. (Courtesy Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; photograph Eric Mueller).

Overshare culminated in *Voir la mer* **FIG.8**, a five-channel video installation that documents migrants who, despite living in Istanbul, are seeing the Black Sea for the first time. The work was initially presented in gallery and museum venues and then, in 2017, among the mammoth advertising billboards in Times Square, New York. The subjects appear facing away from the camera, looking out at the water, before turning to reveal their expressions. It is an intriguing idea beautifully executed. As Aruna D'Souza notes, 'for all the weird invasiveness and whiff of condescension contained in Calle's gesture, *Voir le mer* is undeniably - even disturbingly - potent' (p.170). Although the work does not demonstrate the 'oversharing' that characterises so much of Calle's practice and is perhaps not even immediately identifiable as hers - the artist remains off-screen throughout - it does highlight some of her long-term concerns, such as presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, which emerge in a less self-centred and more political framework. In this case, Calle did know what to do with the faces.



Fig. 4 *The Bad Breath* from the series *Autobiographies*, by Sophie Calle. 1994. Gelatin silver print mounted on aluminium, 120.3 by 170.2 cm., and text panel, 50.5 by 50.5 cm. (© Sophie Calle, Artists Rights Society, New York, and ADAGP, Paris; courtesy the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York; exh. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis).



Fig. 5 *Mother-Father*, by Sophie Calle. 2018. Pigment print, embroidered woollen cloth and wooden box, 42.8 by 57.8 by 7.3 cm. (© Sophie Calle, Artists

Rights Society, New York, and ADAGP, Paris; courtesy the artist and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco; exh. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis).



Fig. 6 *Mother-Father*, by Sophie Calle. 2018. Pigment print, embroidered woollen cloth and wooden box, 42.8 by 57.8 by 7.3 cm. (© Sophie Calle, Artists Rights Society, New York, and ADAGP, Paris; courtesy the artist and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco; exh. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis).



Fig. 7 *Mother-Father*, by Sophie Calle. 2018. Pigment print, embroidered woollen cloth and wooden box, 42.8 by 57.8 by 7.3 cm. (© Sophie Calle, Artists Rights Society, New York, and ADAGP, Paris; courtesy the artist and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco; exh. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis).



Fig. 8 Installation view of *Sophie Calle: Overshare* at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2024–25, showing, on the right, *Voir la mer*, by Sophie Calle. 2011. 14 videos, duration approx. 3 minutes, and 1 digital inkjet print, 33.5 by 52.5 cm. (Courtesy Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; photograph Eric Mueller).

Exhibition details

Sophie Calle: Overshare

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

26th October 2024–26th January 2025

About this book

Sophie Calle: Overshare

Edited by Henriette Huldish, with texts by
Eugenie Brinkeman, Aruna D’Souza and
Courtenay Finn

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Footnotes

- 1** The exhibition will travel to the Orange County Museum of Art, Costa Mesa (7th March–1st June 2025).

- 2** Catalogue: *Sophie Calle: Overshare*. Edited by Henriette Huldish, with contributions by Eugenie Brinkeman, Aruna D'Souza and Courtenay Finn. 200 pp. incl. 100 col. + 100 b. & w. ills. (Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2024), \$50. ISBN 978-1-935963-30-1.

- 3** As recorded by the present reviewer during Sophie Calle in conversation with Laurie Anderson at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 26th October 2024.

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