

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF SOPHIE CALLE

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STEALING SOPHIE CALLE

CALLE, THE 'ANTHROPOLOGICAL' ARTIST?

The work of the contemporary French artist Sophie Calle is not easy to pin down. She writes, she photographs, she performs, she lives. Often labelled a practitioner of conceptual art (Bishop 2008: 95; Hand 2005: 465), Calle will choose a subject or a situation to investigate, and establish a series of rules or guidelines to structure her inquiry, presenting her findings through combinations of images (usually photographs) and texts. As seen within the traditions of relational art (Blazwick 2009: 11), she gives viewers of her work glimpses into interpersonal realms, with a spotlight on the intersubjective dynamics between herself and others. Through her interrogations of individuals' lives, her questioning of social norms and customs, and her documentations of the residues of lived experience, Calle's artistic practice has variously been described as 'sociological' (Ali 2013: 39), 'anthropological' (Storr 2009: 42), and 'ethnographic' (Kuchler 2000: 95).

Probing intimate and idiosyncratic facets of ordinary human interactions, Calle engages in methods of inquiry and investigation that in many ways are reminiscent of the anthropological processes of fieldwork and participant observation. She immerses herself

in carefully considered social contexts, revealing the hidden sides of everyday objects and actions through her practices of defamiliarisation. Beyond methodology, Calle also deals with subject matter shared by many anthropologists, including topics such as memory, materiality, the senses, social encounters and relations, traditions and beliefs, and processes of looking and representation. Her images and texts are invariably as self-reflexive as any contemporary ethnography aims to be, acknowledging her own position in situating her objects of scrutiny, and the biases in her interpretations. Calle's artworks also convey sensory impressions and embodied understandings through her ongoing associations and entanglements with the people and things around her, in a way that evokes Tim Ingold's (2013) notion of anthropology as a process of corresponding with the world.

Making contributions to the canon of anthropological knowledge, however, is not a deliberate priority for Calle. 'I don't do any of my work for sociological reasons,' she stated in one interview, 'I do it for artistic reasons' (Shaw 2014). In a different interview she said, 'I don't care about truth, I care about art and style and writing and occupying the wall' (Neri 2009: 154). On another occasion, she acknowledged that she is 'constantly in search of rituals,' but then added, 'I try to invent them' (Brøns 2009: 139). These rituals play out in her work in diverse

ways, often involving close and systematic surveillance of herself and others. 'I carry out the assignment like a bureaucrat,' she writes. 'Step by step. I log my hours' (Calle 1999: 267). Her images and texts contain comprehensive, exhaustive, even 'forensic' descriptions of her processes of inquiry (Sante 2009: 73), yet these records are imbued with irreverent, confessional, and at times exhibitionist undertones.

Her methods can also be highly intuitive, unorthodox, unplanned. One of Calle's earliest pieces, *Address Book* (1979), stemmed from her happening upon a lost address book on the streets of Paris. Finding inside the name and address of its owner ('Pierre D.'), she mailed the book back to him, but not before photocopying its contents. She then proceeded to track down all of the contacts listed in the book, interviewing each one about their impressions of the book's owner. Every week she published parts of her findings in the French newspaper *Libération*, building a composite narrative of a person she had never met. When Pierre D. discovered Calle's articles dissecting his life and personality, he was furious, and in return publicized a nude photograph he had found of Calle, threatening to sue her if she reproduced any of her articles in book form. She agreed to refrain from republishing the compilation of texts until after his death, but not before the project had generated considerable public debate regarding the ethics of creating work out of other people's lives. As Calle herself observed, 'Journalists wanted to know why, as an artist, I was allowed to do something in their newspaper that they were not allowed to do: to intrude into someone's life' (Neri 2009: 153). This question, to which I will return, deserves some real consideration.

Calle's first work, *Suite Vénitienne* (1979) grew out of her somewhat arbitrary decision to trail strangers around the streets of Paris. One

day she followed a man ('Henri B.'), whom she coincidentally saw again later that evening at an art opening. She heard him mention that he was going to Venice the following day, so she resolved to follow his entire trip secretly. Armed with a blonde wig, sunglasses, and a camera, she painstakingly tracked Henri B.'s whereabouts in Venice, first calling hundreds of numbers in the phone book in order to find his hotel. Once she found him, she photographed his daily routes through the city, staking herself out in spots where he would be likely to pass, taking pictures of the same things he photographed as a tourist, and meticulously recording her own processes of data gathering over a period of two weeks. Calle's documentations veer between time-stamped lists of the various activities and scenes she witnessed, evidential photographs of people and locations she encountered, and more personal notes about her ongoing labours of seeking and wandering. Her publication of this project reads partly like a detective's account, and partly like a diary, an unusual assemblage of facts, objects, landscapes, memories, desires.

At times, she turns the gaze upon herself, as if she were constructing a kind of auto-ethnography; yet instead of assuming full authorship, she involves other people in the writing of her own story. In one instance, she requested her mother to hire a private detective to follow her around the streets of Paris and document her activities. In this piece, *The Shadow* (1981), the detective's written reports and photographs are displayed next to Calle's own detailed accounts of her daily movements that she knew were being tracked. These notes include both parties' factual descriptions of her actions and whereabouts, but also Calle's private musings and sentiments about her stalker, who was not aware that she had been the one to commission his assignment.

In setting up the terms for these works,

Calle creates her own rules, assuming the role of master of ceremonies; she decides when the rules are to be followed or broken. For instance, in her collaborations with the novelist Paul Auster (*Gotham Handbook*, 1994; *The Chromatic Diet*, 1997), she re-created some of the artworks that were produced by one of the characters in Auster's novel *Leviathan* (1992), a fictional figure named Maria that Auster had based on Calle's own life and work. Calle and Auster then developed a series of exchanges, borrowing from and correcting each other's readings of themselves, further blurring the lines between fabricated and actual experience through their continued interventions into life and art.

While Calle's narratives, intertwining ethnographic and autobiographical accounts, challenge the boundaries between fact and fiction through both documentation and invention, her images can be viewed as secondary to her written texts, with her photographs described as amateurish and haphazard (Macel 2003), or having a 'snapshot' quality (Blazwick 2009). They are not illustrative; they rather betray a type of observation and attention that is less revealing of what was actually 'there', and more indicative of what is impossible to express or be seen (see Macel 2003). At the same time, despite their imprecisions and unreliability, Calle's images work integrally with her texts to 'collaborate and trap meanings between them', opening up what can be seen as valuable sociological insights into everyday routines, dynamics, and interactions (Ali 2013: 44). According to sociologist Erkan Ali, the anthropological meanings of Calle's projects are dependent on what he calls the 'laminated' relationship between text and image, the spaces between them, and ways in which they borrow from each other to produce a larger narrative (ibid.: 47). As the anthropologist Susanne Kuchler has argued, Calle's visual and verbal documentations of the 'familiar, the

strange, and the forgotten' reveal crucial cultural and material aspects of personal interaction; from a Strathernian perspective of the inherent sociality of object-person relations, they draw us powerfully into other people's lives through their substantive re-activations of Calle's own interpersonal encounters (Kuchler 2000: 103). Once again, we return to the relevance of Calle's work to the field of anthropology, and its particular bearing on the conditions of relationality.

ADJACENT ENGAGEMENTS?

Yet, while Calle's explorations of rituals and social relationships may be discussed as anthropological by art critics and social scientists alike, not many anthropologists would be likely to describe their own role of participant observer as akin to Calle's 'stalker-provocateur who enters into the lives of others... by isolating and pressurising the otherness of those on whom her attention settles' (Stoor 2009: 106). Particularly when it comes to addressing notions of self and other, alterity and authority, obvious ethical considerations arise in relation to the negotiation of power relations and the crossing of certain boundaries with interlocutors in the field. At the same time, these are the types of challenges that give the aesthetic realm its 'radical potential within anthropology' (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2015: 420). As Grimshaw and Ravetz note (ibid.), while anthropologists have traditionally tried to 'discipline' the aesthetic, artists attempt to transform it, specifically through acts of disruption and indiscipline. To consider Calle's provocations in relation to the field of anthropology thus gives them a heightened tension and import that they do not necessarily attain within a purely artistic framework.

In certain cases, Hal Foster's critique (1996) of the 'ethnographic turn' in contemporary

art can still be applied, where artists who profess to have an anthropological outlook lack a grasp of the actual practices and perspectives of contemporary anthropology. As Foster (1996) argued, these artists often end up doing ‘pseudo-ethnographic’ work that inadvertently perpetuates their own authority, and contributes to the proliferation of myths about the ‘cultural other’. As anthropologist Tarek Elhaik writes (2013), contemporary artists would benefit from reading their own anthropological practices as ‘assemblage-work’, shifting from a focus on relations of difference and alterity to a recognition of the multilayered interconnections between ‘adjacent people and things’. But with the current surge of interest in the relationship between art and anthropology (see Clarke 2014; Grimshaw and Ravetz 2015; Sansi 2015; Schneider 2017; Rutten, Van Dienderen and Soetaert 2013), contemporary artists are increasingly moving away from reductive and dichotomising ‘self/other’ paradigms. From studies of the insights and perspectives that global artists beyond the limited Euro-American perspective are bringing to anthropology (Schneider 2017), to investigations of specific art projects that engage with anthropological issues such as time, memory, exchange, migration, and belonging (Rutten, Van Dienderen and Soetaert 2013), scholars are pointing to more complex ways that anthropological matters and methods are mobilised and problematised in contemporary art.

If, as Roger Sansi argues (2015), the ‘ethnographic turn’ from the 1990s and early 2000s has given way to conceptions of ‘relationality’ and ‘post-relationality’ in artistic practice today, then the affinities between the disciplines of art and anthropology can be identified not just in similar methods or objects of study, but rather in a common desire to activate

socio-cultural exchanges and generate new forms of interpersonal alliance and political engagement. Rather than having encounters with pre-existing communities, both artists and anthropologists are creating new communities through their involvements (Kwon 2002; Ssorin-Chaikov 2013). This idea speaks to Tim Ingold’s assertion that an anthropological practice facilitates knowledge that comes from the ‘inside of being in the unfolding of life’, rather than from an analysis of subjects-turned-into-objects (Ingold 2013: 8). Like artistic work, anthropology can invite viewers to look *with* it, bringing forms into being, rather than shedding light on a fixed or abstract intention (Ingold 2011).

Just as artists are beginning to incorporate more nuanced understandings of anthropology into their work, anthropologists are attempting to more innovatively integrate art into their own repertoires. In her presentation of the concept of ‘art-anthropology’, Jennifer Clarke argues for conceptualising the doing of anthropology ‘*with* art’, rather than merely ‘drawing on’ artistic methods or approaches (2014: 186). Steering away from the notion of ‘borrowing’ from art, and instead exploring the potential for building upon the inherently artistic dimensions of anthropology, is something I have also suggested (Grossman 2014). Nonetheless, these two fields should not be automatically conflated; as Grimshaw and Ravetz maintain (2015), their tensions and differences can be as revealing as their affinities. By acknowledging their divergent priorities and concerns, new prospects for active, living collaborations can emerge.

FOLLOWING WHOSE RULES?

So... if social scientists were to seriously engage with Calle’s anthropological-artistic practice—not simply borrow from it—what might this

involve, and what might be revealed? I am not suggesting copying Calle's 'fieldwork' methods such as assuming disguises and trailing people around, or going so far as to seek employment as a maid in order to scrutinise and photograph people's possessions (which Calle did in her 1981 project *The Hotel*). I am thinking more about Calle's intuitively structured and spontaneous lines of investigation, letting the terms of each social context dictate the direction and focus of her work. I am thinking about her attention toward the 'management of information' itself as an artistic medium (Sante 2009: 72), and the ways in which her dossiers of facts, dates, clues, and other data explicitly incorporate gaps, uncertainties, and contradictions. I am thinking about her forms of self-expression that problematise the relationship between observer and observed, confronting the taboo emotions of loss, disillusionment, and frustration that overshadow any ostensibly objective analysis. I am thinking about her voyeuristic incursions that are at once predatory and compassionate, operating 'shamelessly, unreservedly, and even uproariously' (Pacquement 2003: 15).

I am thinking about these elements as a social and visual anthropologist myself, someone who has been incorporating filmmaking and other sensory and experiential methods into my research. In my work on everyday practices of memory in post-communist Romania, I have been experimenting with ways to interpret not only specific anthropological frameworks of individual and cultural memory, but also the complex sensibilities and elusive operations of remembrance itself (see Grossman 2015). How can I—as a social scientist—adequately analyse and convey the social effects and the poetics of memory, a phenomenon that is palpable and visceral but at the same time so immaterial, invisible, and subtle?

When I look at Calle's projects *The Blind* (1986), *Color Blind* (1991), and *Ghosts* (1989–1991), I recognise the ways in which they speak to my own endeavours to render through image and text what can only vaguely be grasped at by visual and narrative means. These first two works address blind people's conceptions of beauty and colour, while the latter contains museum staff-members' pieced-together recollections of paintings temporarily on loan from their collections. Through combinations of interviews, photographed objects, swaths of colour, and curtained-off museum displays, these pieces reveal glimpses of things that simultaneously can and cannot be seen. Calle's pieces point to the worlds of possibility in this apparent impasse, gripping us with rich and sensuous details as we behold them visually, but also reminding us that our vision is limited, our perceptions are partial, and our memories are disjointed, contradictory, and incomplete.

In Calle's piece *The Detachment* (1996), she interviewed residents of former East Berlin about their memories of specific street monuments that had been removed after the fall of the wall in 1989. The piece includes archival photographs of the monuments, contemporary images showing their absence, and transcribed extracts of narratives from individuals who give diverse and often conflicting accounts of what they remember about the physical details of these monuments and their significance (see Marven 2007). Again, Calle's work highlights the unreliability and subjectivity of memory, calling attention to its range of emotional and personal undertones. Through fictionalising her own role as researcher in this process and removing her interlocutors' quotes from their broader interview context, she accentuates the tensions between authoritative history and personal memory. Through its formal

arrangements of photographs and text, the piece emphasises the multiplicity of individual longings, projections, and interpretations of the past, questioning and challenging the authority of established state narratives and official histories.

Calle's work came up again when I was brainstorming about an upcoming project with Selena Kimball, an artist with whom I have been collaborating over the past decade. Kimball and I had been planning a workshop called 'Seeing Through Objects' at the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg to experiment with looking at artefacts of ethnographic archives in new ways. With the aim of unsettling and disrupting the colonial categories of knowledge that have come to dictate the meanings embedded in such collections, we sought ways to deliberately unfix objects from their scientific labels, to unlearn their anthropologically-given histories, and engage with them as living artefacts, connected not just to an institutionally defined static past, but to an open-ended and shifting present (see Grossman 2017).

As we planned to invite scholars from diverse—and potentially incompatible—disciplinary backgrounds to our workshop, Kimball, a mixed-media artist based in New York, suggested Calle's installation, *Take Care of Yourself* (2007), as a model. *Take Care of Yourself* developed in the wake of a break-up, when Calle received an email from her partner telling her that their relationship was over. She introduces the piece in this way:

*I received an email telling me it was over.
I didn't know how to respond.
It was almost as if it hadn't been meant for me.
It ended with the words, 'Take care of yourself.'
And so I did.
I asked 107 women (including two made
from wood and one with feathers),*

*chosen for their profession or skills,
to interpret this letter.
To analyse it, comment on it, dance it, sing it.
Dissect it. Exhaust it. Understand it for me.
Answer for me.
It was a way of taking the time to break up.
A way of taking care of myself* (Calle 2007).

Women from multiple professions—a philosopher, a criminologist, a clairvoyant, a clown, a chess player, an accountant—all responded differently to Calle's letter. A crossword puzzle maker constructed a crossword using all of the words in the email. A sharpshooter set up the text and fired bullets at every place the word 'love' appeared in the document. A copy-editor analysed the text's grammar and syntax. An actress performed the narrative on stage. Calle then gathered these interpretations into a single exhibition, generating 107 new objects from the original one, eliciting alternative understandings of what it was and what it could potentially mean.

To social scientists, such a collection of ambiguous and incongruous statements might seem more perplexing than meaningful. They might wish that something more would be *done* with these findings, as 'data' to be employed in the pursuit of further research. But these are data that provoke us to understand *through*, not in spite of, what we feel. They take us to visceral and imagined places we were not originally expecting to go. They can be seen as 'disruptive' knowledge practices that are not seeking to describe or explain, but rather to 'present' or 'enact' (Johnson 2011). In this sense, the works of Calle are relevant to emergent strains of social science that resist the neoliberal pressure to function primarily as a means of knowledge production, aligned instead with the post-conceptual notion of art as a 'place where things can happen,' not just a 'thing in the world' (Fisher 2013: 12).

Kimball and I wanted to use a similar tactic in our 'Seeing Through Objects' workshop, to splinter open the meaning of the artefacts in the Gothenburg Museum of World Culture's archives. We wanted to encourage individuals with different backgrounds to approach these objects through their own lenses and reflect upon them in new ways. In preparation for this workshop, we collaborated with one of the museum's archivists, selected a handful of artefacts from the collection, and invited researchers from the fields of psychology, archaeology, earth and space sciences, microbiology, poetry, conservation, and photography to our workshop. At the event, the contributors were asked to conduct a literal observation of these artefacts according to their own disciplinary traditions, reflecting upon the materials, tools, and bodily practices involved, and the various apparatuses of categorisation at work. Kimball and I filmed the day's events and discussions, and collected written notes and responses from the participants. We are currently strategising about the potential forms and methods of the next stages of this research.

Which parts of our findings are important, and to whom? What *are* the findings, exactly? Did we generate raw material that could feed into a scholarly publication, or be shown in a gallery, or possibly end up somewhere else entirely? It is easy to imagine this sort of workshop as a valid first step both as an academic project and as an exercise in artistic research. What might be the next steps for the academic, if they were to continue alone, and how might these differ from the next steps of the artist? Could both practitioners find some common ground in their continued individual work with this material? If so, would that common ground be called art or anthropology, or both, or neither? And aren't these questions as important as the actual 'findings' of the research itself? Stepping

back to consider the bigger picture, how could we become more involved not only in reflecting on the potential intersections and divergences between contemporary art and anthropology, but in *doing, performing, and developing* these very intersections and divergences? And how might such activities steer us toward genuinely new outlooks and practices within these established frameworks?

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