

Sophie Calle: Revealing the Invisible

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[See table of contents](#)

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Sophie Calle became an artist without really wanting to, accidentally, one might say. She first became interested in others out of boredom and a sense of despair. Fascinated by women at the market, then one man in particular, she followed the latter all the way to Venice. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard characterises despair as having strong positive value. According to him, despair is universal and is felt even by those who are unconscious of it. He goes on to assert that a form of despair exists even in happiness. In short, he might as well be saying that we are condemned to despair. Yet, far from being a flaw, as we might think, this state can in fact lead to creativity in resilient individuals.¹ This seems to be the case with Calle early in her career, since she only existed through the lives of those she followed, those she asked to undergo an original, strange and risky experience with her. For Calle, “despair” is the state that empties out her own identity and allows her to become interested in the identity of others, in a quasi-obsessive manner.

The exhibition *For the Last and First Time*,² contains elements already present in her work when she decided to follow individuals or to have herself be followed by a private detective. A kind of voyeurism is at work, driving her obsession with her subjects’ daily activities, her desire to enter their intimate lives, secrets and potentially unusual behaviours. Here the banal is raised to the level of spectacle. Sophie Calle seeks something unknown that she cannot identify. She is an actress seeking a role to define her identity. Is she searching for her own life through the lives of others? A fine line exists between what she imagines about others and what others imagine. In *The Colours of Our Memories*, Michel Pastoureau discusses the power of the imagination, its ability to counter absence and to fabricate images that have never been seen.

Always aiming to appropriate the intimate part of another—at first timidly, given the potentially cruel aspect of this line of inquiry—Calle nevertheless gives herself the green light when a person born blind agrees to answer her question. Calle wants to know the most beautiful mental image of someone who has never seen. This is, in a way, an imagined definition of beauty.

According to Pastoureau, the fabrication of a mental image, even before the image can be grounded in visual facts, is powerful. This is the image that persists in one’s memory, even if the representation is not true to what was observed. Pastoureau uses the example of preparing to go on a trip. The idea of the trip produces a mental image formed from reading materials, stories one has heard, promotional brochures on the destination, perhaps even dreams. According to him, this image survives even as the precise details of the actual trip fade with time. “Henceforth, this image is unforgettable. Then, why bother travelling?” he writes. “As though my memory of what I imagined is more powerful than the memory of what I experienced.”³

Sophie Calle is interested in absence.⁴ I believe that she is particularly interested in the invisible, in what happens in the hearts and imaginations of individuals. The astonishingly beautiful digital installation, *Voir la mer*, explores the sound effect of waves, the soothing effect of images and, above all, the imagination, our imagination. When entering the installation, one’s gaze can take in almost all the projection screens at once. A well-thought-out museography of screens set in a half-circle invites us to enter this world once we have grasped and felt the installation as a whole. We then meet each person individually, as they alternately turn around and stare into the camera lens, and thus, in a way, at us. Interestingly, each gaze conveys a subdued emotion, if not a very solemn one. A man wipes tears from his eyes; a woman smiles. The “imagined” invisible is conveyed through



Sophie Calle, *Voir la mer*, 2011 (detail). © Sophie Calle / Adagg, Paris, 2015. Courtesy of Galerie Perrotin and Paula Cooper Gallery.

the communication between the gazes. Hoping to find a part of our selves in the other, we either are or are not disappointed with what we imagine the other feels standing before the sea.

Moreover, it is not by chance that Sophie Calle chose to record these unique moments on digital film. In his essay titled “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin writes that through close-ups and slow motion, film makes us see completely new worlds rather than see familiar things better. He writes: “Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye—if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man.”⁵ He adds: “The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses.”⁶ Beyond the physical experience of looking at and hearing the sea, isn’t Sophie Calle actually interested in this unknown part, which exists in each of her subjects and is conveyed to us without our being able to fully define it? Perhaps Sophie Calle always seeks despair—that of others, her own or the despair that first made her into an artist.

Manon Blanchette

Translation: Oana Avasilichioaei

An art historian and arts administrator, **Manon Blanchette** is the Chief Operating Officer of Pointe-à-Callière, the Montréal Museum of Archaeology and History. She previously held several positions at the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, including Chief Curator and Director of Communications and Marketing. She also served as Director and Acting Curator of Walter Phillips Gallery in Banff, Alberta, and as a Cultural Advisor at the Canadian Embassy in Paris, where she headed the Canadian Cultural Centre. An expert in Bill Viola’s art, she has written many works and articles on contemporary art. Manon Blanchette holds a D.E.A. (Paris, 1984) and a PhD in Arts Studies and Practices (UQAM, 2003), and has received the titles of Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et Lettres (France, 1992) and Woman of Distinction (Board of Trade of Metropolitan Montreal, 1997). In 2012, she was awarded the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal. Having chaired and sat on numerous boards, she is currently on the boards of the Conseil des arts de Montréal and ETC MEDIA.

1 Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*. Trans. Walter Lowrie. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974. 155.

2 The exhibition *For the Last and First Time* was presented at the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, from February 5 to May 10, 2015.

3 Pastoureau, Michel. *Les couleurs de nos souvenirs*. Paris: Seuil, 2010. 204. [Our translation.]

4 “Sophie Calle Biography.” European Graduate School. <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/sophie-calle/biography/>. 2012. Web. 12 May 2015.

5 Benjamin, Walter. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Trans. Harry Zohn. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>. February 2005. Web. 12 May 2015.

6 *Ibid.*