



# Sophie Calle Interview May 2009



# Interview

NEWSLETTER REGISTER SIGN IN  
SEARCH  GO

- HOME FASHION MUSIC **ART** FILM CULTURE VIDEO NIGHTLIFE CALENDAR BLOGS ARCHIVES



## Sophie CALLE

By LOUISE NERI  
Photography CRAIG MCDEAN



Sophie Calle's art mixes image and text to provoke the kind of intense emotional response usually inspired by epic literature or film. Her most extraordinary works address rather ordinary human tendencies, from the morbid curiosity informing *L'Homme au Carnet* (*The Address Book*, 1983) to the amorous betrayal of *Douleur Exquise* (*Exquisite Pain*, 1984–2003), but Calle knows how to up the ante and amplify a generic foible into a tragic flaw. She's a master manipulator who has taken the pushing of personal buttons to the level of fine art.

Following the resounding success of her introspective retrospective "M'as-Tu Vue?" ("Did you see me?") at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2004, Calle moved into new territory with *Prenez Soins de Vous* (*Take Care of Yourself*, 2007), the talk of the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007, which goes on view at Paula Cooper Gallery in New York this month. It is a tour de force of feminine responses to a breakup letter that Calle received by e-mail from a man. The 107

Advertisement

38 YEARS OF VIDEO ART

www.eai.org

### RELATED

ART  
**Kelley Walker**  
By CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN  
Photography CRAIG MCDEAN

ART  
**Seth Price**  
By REENA SPAULINGS  
Photography CRAIG MCDEAN

ART  
**Richard Prince**  
By GLENN O'BRIEN  
Photography CRAIG MCDEAN

ART  
**Cindy Sherman**  
Photography CRAIG MCDEAN



# Sophie Calle Interview May 2009

contributions that she solicited from a diverse group of professional women are executed in a wild range of media including song and dance, scientific analysis, crossword puzzle, origami, a shooting target, and a forensic study. The extraordinary breadth of response to this seemingly simple—but universal—dilemma is a testimony to the diversity of the feminine spirit and the triumph of imagination over negative emotion. Here Calle discusses art and life and her exploration of the shifting space between them.



LAUNCH MEDIAPLAYER »

LOUISE NERI: *Take Care of Yourself* is not the first time you've created a work that involves a large social response. Can you describe the difference in your approach to works that involve you personally constructing a story—such as *Suite Vénitienne* [*Please Follow Me*, 1983], where you followed a man through the streets of Venice; *L'Homme au Carnet*, where you contacted all the people in an address book that you found and published their impressions of its owner in weekly entries in a newspaper; *Où et Quand?* [*Where and When?* 2008], where you obeyed the advice of a clairvoyant—and your broader pieces that incite any number of unimagined responses?

SOPHIE CALLE: The rules of the game are always very strict. In *Take Care of Yourself* I asked the participants to answer professionally, to analyze a breakup letter that I had received from a man. The parameters were fixed. For example, I wanted the grammarian to speak about grammar—I wanted to play with the dryness of professional vocabulary. I didn't want the women expressing sentiment for me. Except maybe my mother . . .

NERI: Yet, typically, she was one of the least sentimental! [*laughs*]

CALLE: I have my own sentiment—I don't need that of others. This work was not about revenge. Even so, all the women spoke from their own points of view and, probably, many of them had been abandoned by men at some point in their lives.

NERI: The various professional text analysts were particularly tough on the subject.

CALLE: These women each took their job very seriously, but they were also playing with me. I wanted to avoid any pathos or pathology. I really enjoyed it, for example, when the whole discussion would turn around a single comma, like the philologist, who discusses the world existing between two sets of quotation marks. The more detailed and specific the analysis, the more I liked it. I could have gone on and on. There was no reason to stop—other than the opening date of the Venice Pavilion!

*Damien Hirst*  
By ANTHONY HADEN-GUEST  
Photography CRAIG MCDEAN



## CURRENT ISSUE:



MAY 2009  
FEATURING:  
EMMA WATSON  
MARC NEWSON  
ROBIN WRIGHT PENN  
ED WESTWICK

SUBSCRIBE NOW

## NEWSLETTER

Get updates from Interview on the latest fashion, film and art news

YOUR EMAIL



## Sophie Calle Interview May 2009

NERI: How did you find all the women?

CALLE: First I asked two girlfriends, one of whom happens to be a journalist, the other a writer. And that's how I got the idea. I told them, "Speak from where you are." I began to think about the more obvious jobs whose work it is to analyze words—the psychoanalyst, the corrector—then I tried to specialize: the philosopher, who then gave me the philologist, who in turn gave me the moral philosopher, and so on. Each one said, "Did you think about this person or that person?" After a while, the process became more distant from me: I found a crossword writer because she works with words, a markswoman because she works with targets, and so on. Initially I wanted only one actress and one singer, just as I had chosen only one psychoanalyst. I ended up with 33 actresses, singers, and dancers, from Camille to Nathalie Dessay to Sussan Deyhim.

NERI: Why?

CALLE: This was largely because of the situation in Venice: The work had to be in French, because it was the French Pavilion, but most people visiting Venice don't speak French. So I faced the problem of translation that I face all the time with my work, but in Venice this would have meant translating the texts into 20 or more languages. So I introduced nonverbal responses to make things easier.

NERI: *Nonverbal* meaning performance, like the Indian classical dancer, the Bunraku, and the ballerina?

CALLE: Yes, exactly. As usual, problems bring solutions. This problem brought so many responses that I couldn't have imagined before. I think about this process in terms of the French word *interpréter*, which has a double meaning: to think about meaning or analyze, and to act theatrically. An actor is *un interprète*. All the women were between me and the letter, as *interprètes*.



NERI: You conceived *Take Care of Yourself* for the French Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2007. Why did you advertise for a curator for the project and then ultimately choose the artist Daniel Buren from among the candidates?

CALLE: For the French Pavilion, the rule is that the artist chooses a curator. Normally for a one-person show it isn't really necessary, but the Venice Biennale is a complex situation. What I needed was not so much a curator as a complice, someone to stand by me. Daniel did much more than that. He protected me, and, more importantly, he helped me to think about the work.

NERI: How?

CALLE: He began by telling me that he loved my work but that many of my shows looked like open books on the wall.





## Sophie Calle Interview May 2009

NERI: That's a provocative criticism to make to an artist who has always worked with words and images. You are a distinctive writer, much admired in literary circles.

CALLE: Daniel said this after he visited my house and saw my walls [*The walls of Sophie's house in Paris are adorned with groupings of artworks and artifacts*]. He thought they were more playful and free than many of my shows. His criticism wasn't about my writing—it was that for many works, I chose one format and repeated it many times. He wanted me to be less strict. As a result, I had much more fun in Venice. I played so much that I was even afraid to be too much like a student who wants to experiment with everything!

NERI: It's interesting coming from an artist like Buren, with his rigorous conceptual-art background . . .

Calle: That's precisely why he could be my curator. He could be objective about the work. It would have been impossible if our work were too similar. Our differences were what made us get along. And he took his job very seriously, right down to the detail of each work.

NERI: Was he involved when *Take Care of Yourself* was shown again in Paris in 2008?

CALLE: Yes, but more for pleasure. I invited him because Paris is our city, and because it was just after Venice, and we had had such a nice time together. I thought it would be lively to go on with him.

NERI: How did the Paris show come about?

CALLE: There were six months between the close of the Venice Biennale and the next planned exhibition of the work at the DHC/ART Foundation for Contemporary Art in Montreal. Knowing how difficult it would be to place the work between the two at such short notice, we hoped for a miracle. Bruno Racine, president of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, responded, saying that he had a new space that could be ready, so I went to see him. I am not crazy about the Bibliothèque nationale in the 13th arrondissement, and in the end it didn't seem likely that the new space could be finished in time, so I proposed to Bruno to use the Labrouste Reading Room at the Richelieu site of the Bibliothèque nationale. He agreed to try and managed, in just 10 days, to relocate people to other offices, and put the money and resources in place. The show opened two months later. Incredible!

NERI: How did the work differ in Paris from in Venice?

CALLE: For Paris, my thinking was just the opposite than for Venice. In Venice, I was not interested in the building, so we did everything to give priority to the work. In the Bibliothèque nationale, the room was spectacular so we gave priority to the place, being careful not to spoil it. We were not allowed to put one single nail in the walls, so that was also quite a complex problem to solve. I was a little sad afterwards, as I thought that this ideal relation between the place and the work will never happen again in such a way.

NERI: In New York, *Take Care of Yourself* will be installed at Paula Cooper Gallery, where in 2001 you invited the public to supply potential ideas on suggestion forms for your art.



## Sophie Calle Interview May 2009

CALLE: In that instance I was asking for directions to obey. Here the man said, "Take care of yourself." So I did, through my work. My answer to him was the sum of the 107 women's readings, not any single reading. Many of them responded in ways that I never would or could, as in the case of the physicist using scientific language. Many of them made readings that I would have never made and that I did not approve of as individual readings of the text. I asked all these women to respond, and I used whatever they gave me without rejecting or censoring anything. I had to edit some of them for the wall, but in the book they are complete and unedited. For example, in the case of the Talmudic exegete who wrote a 12-page text, I put just her conclusion, "Cowardice or sublimity?" on the wall, then printed the entire text in the book.

NERI: Louise Bourgeois once said that art allows you to re-experience the past in a proportion that is objective and realistic. I could say the opposite about this work because one letter gave rise to an entire universe of response and nuance. It's both a torture and a tribute!

CALLE: Yes! At the beginning, one of the titles I had in mind was "The Muse," because this man was, in fact, a muse. Finally I didn't, because "Take Care of Yourself" was more ironic. And, more strictly, it's what I did.

NERI: A few years ago, when you were in London for a performance by Forced Entertainment based on your work *Exquisite Pain*, your blow-by-blow recollection of a failed love affair, you did a public interview with a psychoanalyst. Like many other people, he seemed to be completely fixated on whether your story was real or not, imposing a whole moral slant on the discussion. Can you comment?

CALLE: If I am asked, I say it is all true—I am not able to invent. Afterwards it is other people's problem, not mine, if truth or fiction is a necessary criteria for them. I called one of my works *Histoires Vraies* [*True Stories*] to try to get rid of that question, but then I was asked, "Are the true stories true?" So how can I answer? [*laughs*]

NERI: But does this question imply that as an artist you are bound to truth-telling?

CALLE: When I did *The Address Book* for *Libération* newspaper there was a huge discussion because the 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. Many people liked it because they thought it was a fiction, but when the guy answered and gave his name, proving that he really existed, it became evident that it was not a fiction, and the same people started to dislike it because of the outrage. Then others, who didn't like it initially because they thought it wasn't risky enough, started to like it. It was a complete mess! Take the movie *No Sex Last Night* [1996] that I made with my then-husband Greg Shephard: We lived together for one year; we filmed 60 hours; of those 60 hours we chose just 90 minutes. We could have made 20 movies, all saying different, even opposing things. We chose to put the emphasis on me and my solitude and him and his car, whereas we could have chosen to speak only about food, or only about traveling cross-country, or only about the disgust we had for each other, or only about the beautiful moments we shared. So any one version is never "true," it just works better than another. But I can say that it did happen. True? No. It happened.



## Sophie Calle Interview May 2009

NERI: You were just a bit too early for reality TV.

CALLE: It's true that when I speak in public, everyone asks me about life and I always have to bring them back to the fact that it's a work of art. The difference with many of my works is the fact that they are also my life. They happened. This is what sets me apart and makes people strongly like or dislike what I do. It is also why I have a public beyond the art world. I don't care about truth; I care about art and style and writing and occupying the wall. For me, my writing style is very linked to the fact that it is a work of art on the wall. I had to find a way to write in concise, effective phrases that people standing or walking into a room could read.

NERI: At times, art struggles because reality can be so overwhelming . . .

CALLE: Art is a way of taking distance. The pathological or therapeutic aspects exist, but just as catalysts. I didn't make *Take Care of Yourself* to forgive or forget a man—I did it to make a show in Venice. The show came to my mind because I was thinking, What can I do to suffer less? But once I got the idea, it took over, and I didn't care about the therapeutic aspect anymore.

NERI: Would you agree with Louise Bourgeois that pain is the ransom of formalism?

CALLE: I know that when I started to be happy with a man, everyone said, "God, this pink period is going to be a disaster for you!" [*laughs*]

NERI: What was it like to work simultaneously on *Take Care of Yourself* and *Pas Pu Saisir la Mort* [*Couldn't Catch Death*, 2007], the film you made of your mother's death—one a very sociable work, the other deeply introspective?

CALLE: I made the film of my mother's death really because of Robert Storr. He invited me to show in the Italian Pavilion at the same time that I was occupying the French Pavilion. Initially, for the French Pavilion, I had the idea to work on absence, perhaps because of the nostalgia of Venice—about missing persons, missing things . . .

NERI: These are issues you have always worked on, thinking back to the project *Disparition* [*Last Seen*, 1991], in which you "reconstructed" the presence of stolen artworks from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in verbal descriptions by museum guards.





## Sophie Calle Interview May 2009

CALLE: Rob knew I had filmed my mother's death and he suggested—and then insisted—that I deal with the subject. I didn't feel ready to watch the 80 hours of film that I had taken of her dying, but then I remembered the 11 minutes between her life and her death during which I was really wondering where she was. Once I accepted to do it, I had to put the footage on my screen to find the passage and edit it. So it became a kind of background while I lived and worked . . . And then it became a work—I was able to take distance with it. Then when I finally came to show the film in Venice I was busy with all the usual technical issues: sound, lighting, painting, and the size of the image. It was only when it was installed and I went to look at it that I realized that this was my mother, and I started to cry.

NERI: In some ways this follows the dramaturgy of death itself . . .

CALLE: Yes, in its aftermath, you are taken in a maelstrom of technical decisions. During the filming, I had to face particular issues regarding my mother's pleasure. My mother was quite special; she was an exhibitionist, and she wanted it to happen. Initially it was pragmatic—it was not at all an artistic gesture. I was living my mother's death, not trying to imagine it for a project. I was depressed. I was afraid. I was very involved. Consciously, I wanted to catch her last word. Later, once I had decided this, I realized that it was a way to take distance from it. Somewhere in the back of my mind I was probably thinking about what I could do with it—also, that my mother would love it. She always complained that I never did something about her, that I didn't think she was a good subject. When I asked her to participate in *Take Care of Yourself*, she absolutely wanted to be part of it. And I dedicated the project to her. When the film was finished, I controlled where it would be seen, in a quiet sanctum. It's a work that I want to continue to control carefully. I don't sell it, and I have already refused to show it in several other contexts because I could not be there.

NERI: In the story *The Mermaids in the Basement*, Marina Warner describes a scene where a dying girl is weighed before death and after, to try to determine the tangibility of the soul. I was reminded of this in *Pas Pu Saisir la Mort*, although you deal with this elusive moment in terms of time rather than substance.

CALLE: It is a moment that you cannot touch. Obviously in the film when we—me, my cousin, and the nurse—are feeling for my mother's pulse, we are not performing. We really could not determine whether she was dead or alive. But in the film, we look like we are out of our minds!

NERI: In the movies, they always seem to tell in a second when someone is dead.

CALLE: Yes, but this isn't how it is at all. The nurse was as unsure as we were. Afterwards I could see it better onscreen than when I was in the room.

NERI: Have you ever made a work where you regretted taking something from life and using it in your art?



## Sophie Calle Interview May 2009

CALLE: Only once, with *The Address Book*, as I did not anticipate how badly the man would react. But if I am being really honest, I didn't regret it. I hesitated, but the sense of excitement was much stronger than the guilt. The man asked me never to publish it in France, so I didn't. He said, "When I am dead, you can do what you want, but not now." He died and now I am doing it as an edition for Gemini G.E.L. in America. So in a way I obeyed—his anger, at least. If I were to do *The Address Book* again, I would take out one or two of the people who spoke to me about him, but not more. So even if I had small regrets, I would still do it and keep the regrets. I realized that I made someone suffer who I didn't know. I may have made the man of *Take Care of Yourself* suffer, but I knew him. And he had also written about me and played with my character in a book.

NERI: Just as Paul Auster based his character Maria in *Leviathan* [1992] on you?

CALLE: No, that was a collaboration with him, just as *No Sex Last Night* was a collaboration with Greg Shephard. I was not working against them—I was working with them. The people whose possessions I photographed for *L'Hôtel* [*The Hotel*, 1983] never knew that I was in their rooms; the people who participated in *Les Dormeurs* [*The Sleepers*, 1979], where I asked friends and strangers to spend eight hours in my bed, and *Les Aveugles* [*The Blind*, 1986], where I asked people who were born blind what their image of beauty was . . . I never had victims. Well, there were only three cases, twice with lovers: *Exquisite Pain* and *Take Care of Yourself*, and *The Address Book*.

NERI: Have you ever been interested or tempted to work with a psychoanalyst?

CALLE: Yes and no. At one moment I thought to work with a psychiatrist on memory problems, but I never did it. In theory, I could be tempted to work with anybody if the idea is good.

*Louise Neri is an editor, curator, and writer working in the visual and performing arts. she is a director at Gagosian Gallery, new york.*

« 1 2 3

PRINT

EMAIL

SHARE

ADD TO MY LIBRARY

ADD A COMMENT

VIEW ALL COMMENTS