Surveillance as Performance:
Documentary Debates in the Work of Sophie Calle

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The term ‘documentary’, originally used by the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham, is synonymous with the medium of photography itself. As a record of something, as a trace of an occurrence, the photograph is always in one sense or other a ‘document’ and it was this referentiality that allowed photography to become the perfect vehicle with which to deal with ‘real life’. Indeed, when the term ‘documentary’ was first used with reference to photography, it reflected social reformist and humanistic connotations, as was seen in the work first of Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine and later, that of Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange. Their work, amongst others, has shaped how we understand photography’s documentary history and what it is that photographers, or more specifically ‘artists using photography’ now try to question and critique, as they endeavour to avoid recurring visual tropes and clichés and undermine the accepted belief in the photograph as the arbiter of objective truth (Bright, 2007).

With the advent of digital technology and a shift in thinking away from the authorial voice of modernist art photography, documentary work in the postmodernist age allows for images that are now more open to interpretation by the viewer, using ambiguity as a strength rather than allowing this ‘authorial voice’ to dictate meaning. Green and Lowry highlight this paradox within documentary photography’s development when they note that at the point where the force of critical opinion believed the medium’s privileged status as a measure of reality was threatened by the advent of new technologies, young photographers developed a fascination with those qualities of the medium most at risk, leading to attempts to recuperate that particular engagement with reality that photography seems to offer (Green and Lowry, 2003).

The roots of such an approach lie in the conceptual art of the mid 1960s and 1970s, as the photographs role as the disseminator and communicator of an artist’s performance became central. However, as Green and Lowry note, the full implications of conceptual art’s use of photography have been obscured and its value underestimated by positioning it simply in the realm of documentation (2). Rather than blithely accepting the notion of the photograph as documentation, artists have subjected it to either a form of ‘playful critique’; by undermining its function as documentation, applying it to phenomena of the ‘utmost triviality’ or to forms of ‘wholesale deconstruction’; by exposing the tenuous hold the photograph has over the real by employing a systematic investigation of the technical parameters of the medium (Green and Lowry, 2003).
Within this framework, it can be demonstrated that many of the arguments discussed with reference to the older forms of ‘social documentary’; the notions of authorship, truth, representation, reality and ethics are still as pertinent now, even in an age where as Solomon-Godeau remarks, ‘the rules have been changed’ (Solomon-Godeau, 1983). Newer issues too may be raised. The aesthetics of a photograph are less associated with an argument relating to the anaesthetizing of what Sischy, (referenced by Levis Strauss), refers to as a ‘call to action’ (Sischy, 1991), but instead are more caught up in arguments rooted in the notions of artist merit and the role of the photograph, given the proliferation in art photography fields of a more diarist, ‘amateur’ style and in the notion of what Fried terms ‘theatricality’.

Discussions of the role of the photograph as an index in postmodernist practice also abound, raising the question of whether the photograph, as a document of a performance, can stand alone as a work of art or as simply a ‘residue’ of that process. Finally, the rise of a more intimate, diaristic approach raises the question of the ‘personal archive’, and with it Sekula’s notion of text and language to contextualize, or possibly in Derrida’s terms to ‘deconstruct’, with linguistic paradigms ultimately leading to misinterpretation and a challenging of our concept of reality.

With a body of work that blurs the boundaries of truth and fiction, that encapsulates the notion of a diaristic approach, that raises the question of the role of, and ethics associated with, surveillance in our society and that is wholly rooted in the idea of the photograph as an indexical trace of a ‘performance’, the work of the French conceptual artist and photographer, Sophie Calle, provides the perfect platform upon which to discuss the above mentioned arguments.

One cannot begin a discussion of Calles work without noting its performative nature. And with regard to the photograph as an indexical trace and performative gesture, Barthes Camera Lucinda, cannot go unmentioned. Bound as the work is to the photograph as a chemical trace, to its relationship with time and absence, the work has to some degree distorted the notion of the trace as something linked more to discussions on memory and death, than performance. It is, as Green and Lowry note, easy to forget, within the overall drift of the text that Barthes does touch on the performative nature of the photograph when he states: ‘Photography is never anything of an antiphon of “Look”, “See”. It points a finger at certain vis-a-vis and cannot escape this pure deictic language’. (Barthes, 1980).
However it was Green and Lowry who also note that CS Pierce first demonstrated that the indexical sign was less to do with its causal origins and more to do with the way in which it pointed to the event of its own inscription. That is, that photos were indexical because ‘they were taken’. The very act of photography points to an event in the world, is a performative gesture, drawing reality into the image field and thus is indexical (Green and Lowry, 2003).

While both forms of indexicality, the physical trace and the performative gesture that points towards it, both allow us to invest a sense of belief in the image as real, they also simultaneously cause us to challenge our commitment to this belief. It was the use of photography to document conceptual art of the 1960s and 70s that brought this dualism to the fore. Jeff Wall states that conceptual art’s turn to photography represents a curious pursuit of a modernist ideal of the self reflexivity of the medium in the attempt to locate its defining characteristics (Wall, 1995). This self reflexivity being its documentary recording and evidential capacities. Wall argues that conceptual art came to engage with a photojournalistic tradition of photography as reportage. In citing Ed Ruscha’s *Twenty Six Gasoline Stations*, with its systematic visual documentation produced with little regard for aesthetic considerations, as the seminal work in the pre-history of conceptual arts use of photography, Wall states that this use was less to do with presenting photographic documentation as art but more with a self-conscious parody of the mediums use as record.

Green and Lowry go on to demonstrate the performative elements of conceptual documentary with reference to Robert Barry’s *Inert Gas Series*. Barry’s production of a photographic record of a non visible phenomenon (the release of an invisible gas into the atmosphere) is significant for our understanding of the limitations of this form of indexical inscription. These images are at the limit of documentary capacity, providing us with an indexical trace of the moment of the gas’ release while gesturing towards the impossibility of recording it. Our attention moves instead to the photographic act as the moment of authentication. The photograph instead points us towards the gas, in order to declare its existence (Green and Lowry, 2003).

What is key here is the idea that if photography played a major role in problematizing dominant notions of art and the art object, it did not simply provide a means by which this process was to be recorded, but provided the arena within which it was to be acted out. Green and Lowry argue that the photographs were not merely the residue of that process but constituted it’s ‘actual realisation’ (Green and Lowry, 2003). This is in direct contrast to the
opinion of many authors, who on discussing the role of the photograph relegate it simply to a secondary biproduct of the performance, privileging ‘art-as-activity’ over ‘art-as-product’ (Bright, 2007). And yet in contemporary practice, and especially in the work of Barry, the visual is, in an interesting way, in excess of the intended significance of the photograph, having a ‘supplementary’ role. At the level of signification the visual is suppressed and yet returns in what Barthes calls a presence that ‘fills the field with force’ (Barthes, 1980). The apparent irony of this disregard for the photograph is highlighted by Bright, who states that with the photo as a mechanical recorder of art, it in time is all that remains and so in turn it becomes the art object rather than the intervention, as originally intended (Bright, 2007).

Cotton goes on to discuss this playing down of the photograph as secondary with reference to the apparent lack of ‘craft and authorship’ practiced, in direct contrast to modernisms insistence that a work of art ‘be accessible to eyesight alone’ (Cotton, 2006). Or as Solomon-Godeau states, ‘such work takes as its departure, not the hermetic enclave of aesthetic self referencing...but rather the social and cultural world of which it is a part. Post modernist practice hinges on the assertion of contingency and the primacy of cultural codes...animated by a critical deconstructive impulse’ (Solomon-Godeau, 1983). In making an asset of photography’s unshakable capacity to depict things, contemporary art practice took on a distinctly ‘non-art’ look, often to provide an unpremeditated feel, to counterbalance the level of pre-conceptualization of the idea or act that the photo seemingly casually represented.

While also acknowledging the spontaneous forms that performance could take. Green and Lowry also remark on the aesthetic nature of much of contemporary documentary work, stating that while the ‘style-less style’ of artists such as Jeurgen Teller and Wolfgang Tillmans may not be original, its studied casualness ‘foregrounds the notion of personal testimony in the evidence of an embodied vision’ (Green and Lowry, 2003). What this anti-aesthetic style succeeds in doing is to assert the physical presence of the photographer within the sensory field, which cements a reading of the image as an utterance of a first person experience, this form of photographic practice not so much representing the world, as declaring it to exist.

This ambiguity with which photography has placed itself as both document, performative gesture and work of art is the heritage that Sophie Calle has come to use imaginatively. In The Hotel (1981), Calle worked as a chambermaid in a Venetian hotel, learning about the lives of the tenants by going through and photographing their belongings. Calle scrutinized every object in the room, meticulously searching through the tenants' baggage, diaries, and
even the garbage to piece together their lives, documenting the smallest details (Calle, 2004). Here Calle explores the idea of trace, using photography as both a means of physically documenting the traces left behind by various guests, but also as a way of documenting and pointing to her own ‘performance’, in part a form of conceptual art. She also makes use of text to document her findings as she tries to piece together the traces of the personalities unknown to her.

Derrida explains trace as the absence of presence. Within linguistics it is seen as a play of differences; that which is actual, inferred and absent. Derrida noted difference to be, ‘a systematic play of differences, of traces of differences, of the spacing by means of which elements are related to each other’ (Niall, 2004). Calle plays with this notion in a visual way in *The Hotel*, as she notes the details of each occupant’s rooms as signifiers, making assumptions about these people in their absence. As Calle enters room 25, the sight of a navy pair of pajamas and brown leather slippers signify the occupant as male, further established by her finding and photographing a dirty comb in the bathroom (Fig 1). What Derrida asks within his theory of deconstruction and what Calle is asking us here is that in our reading of this hotel room are we making assumptions about the inhabitant on the basis of trace and difference? Are we deferring one meaning for another based on signs presented as photograph and text? Without the whole are we reading this event as incorrect from its original intent? Dermot Morgan states ‘All signs are in effect traces, the act of signifying itself can only be understood as a trace’ (Morgan, 2000). Women wear nightgowns not pyjamas, women brush their hair with brushes, not combs. Thus, it is through the difference in these objects as signs that assumptions about the sex of the inhabitant are made. Traces are arbitrary and without the presence of the occupant they can only be determined in relation to what they are not- the difference. This difference for Calle, is always open to interpretation and questioning.
Not only does Calle ask us to call into question our own long constructed notions of ‘other’, she also playfully critiques our conceived notion of the photograph as a documenter of truth and reality. The photographs are taken in the style of criminal evidence material, in an ad-hoc way, clearly placing the photographer in what Green and Lowry earlier called the ‘sensory field’. We feel as though she was there at that moment, taking those pictures and this assures us of some notion of authenticity. This however may not be the case. In The Hotel she justified the fact that she included a fabricated scenario by saying that it was something she would have liked to find but didn’t, Calle stating at one point, ‘Everything is real, everything is true in the works, there is just generally one lie included, but that lie is related to a frustration. I took an empty room and I filled it with what I would have wished to find’ (Searle, 1993).
The key intent here is that by employing the photograph performatively to designate the real rather than represent it, Calle does not confirm the documentary nature of the photograph but instead ironises it. Performativity here is central, not so much for providing us with an index of the real, but because it deictically invokes reality through pointing to the event, and thus declares it to be the case.

The indeterminacy between these two forms of indexicality allows Calle to subtly put into question the ways in which notions of the real are discursively produced. Her work consistently grafts fact to fiction and in a manner ‘probes reality’s tissue’. Bois comments on her work that ‘It has often deliberately confused levels of reality,- or more precisely, it has successfully transformed reality (the archive) into fiction (narrative) and vice versa (Bois, 2000), leading us towards a place where the real is no longer required. The imaginary becomes more persuasive than the real world and Baudrillard’s ‘simulacrum’, now determines reality. The copy becomes more desirable than the original. In the postmodernist world of photography truth becomes no more than Nietzsche’s ‘army of metaphors’ and existence his ‘palimpsest of fictions’ (Kearney, 1998). Kearney speaks of this situation leading to a crisis in the contemporary arts and of the artist becoming a bricoleur, ‘someone who plays around with fragments of meaning he himself has not created’. The postmodern artist is at a loss and ends up wandering about ‘in a labyrinth of commodified light and noise, endeavouring to piece together bits of dispersed narrative ‘(Kearney, 1998). Others find this to be the strength of her work as Sante remarks, ‘Uncertainty, is the footprint of truth. It is the only aspect of any information that can always be relied upon and that diminishes information’s value as a commodity. It is nearly always inconvenient, it is often dangerous. And that is why it is so beautiful, as Calle repeated demonstrates in her work (Sante, 1993).

While endeavouring to question our notions of the real, Calle draws us into these narratives and eliminates completely the idea of the passive viewer. The work’s meaning is made contingent upon the audience’s engagement with it, this engagement in a complex manner revealing the ideological structures undergirding the institutional frameworks within which the audience lives, works and views art. Bourriaud defines this form of art practice as ‘relational aesthetics ‘ (Bourriaud, 2002), and nowhere is this more apparent than in Calle’s work, The Shadow. In The Shadow (1981), Calle had her mother hire a private detective to follow and photograph her for a day. She then proceeded to take him on an exhaustive chase through Paris in a type of flirtatious game. She wanted to "show him" the places she loves, such as the park where she received her first kiss. For Calle, the day was imbued with
meaning; for the detective, the day was merely reporting the facts. Presented as a series of photographs and accompanying text, a woman, grainy, is performing some quotidian action--speaking to a man, sitting in a park (Fig 2). On either side of the image are two pieces of text. One describes what 'the subject' is doing, time and place--a detective's perspective. The other text is by the artist herself, describing in a diary what she had done that day, her colourful description of the day sharply contrasted with the banal photographs and text of the detective. Calle being aware of being followed, in turn spied on the detective who was oblivious of being an object of surveillance. Her work captures the sense of seeing someone live a life and that essential inscrutability and mystery of never being able to know exactly what the experience of someone else's lived life is like. (Calle, 2004). Calle here addresses the theme of the failure of the "myth of information". Despite his professional routine, the detective gains little insight into her personality, not even when she deliberately organizes her day to include meaningful encounters. Only the spectator who views Calle's notes gets some idea of the artist's efforts to shape the course of her day so as to produce a representative image, and thereby acquires insight into her individuality. Ultimately it is here that the art-theoretical dimension of her work becomes clear: her investigative pursuits, be they real or invented, bear witness to the failure of art to penetrate a stranger's life, to understand and grasp it through observation.

As Calle detects and enacts the various dynamics of seeing and being seen, she explicitly calls on an engagement with the viewer. In investigating the parameters of surveillance as performance, Calle again opens the debate on the merits of theatricality within art and more specifically contemporary art photography.

According to the conviction shared by Michael Fried and Clemence Greenberg, modernist art had the property of being ‘entirely present and accessible’ to the viewer, who ideally should be able to ‘capture’ the work with a single instantaneous glance. The aesthetics of theatricality however, conceive the relation between spectator and artwork as one diluted in time, open and not fully determined, which requires the active presence and participation of the spectator in order to develop. Theatre is a time based performance and the viewer’s relationship to it is likewise time based, coterminous with ‘everyday life’. Art, on the other hand, (or at least art in Fried’s terms), is removed from real time, inhabiting an ideal space and stopped time that radically distinguishes it from ‘everyday life’. In Michael Fried’s modernist analysis, ‘Art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theatre’ (Fried, 1967).

Although this ‘degeneration’ into theatre is commonly discussed firstly with reference to the emergence of the phenomenological sculpture of Richard Serra and Robert Morris in the 1960s, theatricality in photography can be traced back to the work of much earlier documentary photographers. The surveillance as performance of Sophie Calle, for example, has roots in the earlier ‘Subway Portraits’ of Walker Evans, made with a hidden camera on the New York subway in 1938-1941 (Fig 3) and the 1960s street photographs of Gary Winogrand.
Barthes too touches on this notion of anti-theatrical criticism in observing that the detail that strikes him as his punctum could not exist as such if it had been placed there by the photographer. This claim being ‘anti-theatrical’, as it implies a fundamental distinction (which goes back to the Diderotian standpoint of Fried), between ‘seeing’ and ‘being shown’. The punctum is observed by Barthes, but not because it has been shown to him by the photographer, for whom it does not exist. As Barthes notes, ‘...it occurs only in the field of the photographed thing’ (Barthes, 1980), (or as Fried calls it ‘the pure artefact of the photographic event’ (Fried, 2008)) ‘...[the photographer] could not not photograph the partial object at the same time as the total object’. This is in keeping with the Diderotian notion that the viewer be treated as if he were not there, that nothing be felt by the viewer to be there specifically for him.

In both the subway work of Evans, the street photographs of Winogrand and also the surveillance work of Calle (particularly her work, Suite Venetienne, which will be discussed presently), all of the figures are photographed unbeknownst to themselves. This is of course an anti-theatrical ideal in itself. Absorption in what they are doing, thinking and feeling, being the antithesis to Fried’s ‘theatricality’. Interestingly however, for Barthes, such a
strategy does not strike him as anti-theatrical, but rather, theatrical, in that although the subject appears unaware of what the photograph has revealed about his or her state of mind, for the photographer the images that are produced are ‘so many performances’ (Barthes, 1980). Thus for a photograph to be conceived as truly anti-theatrical for Barthes it must carry with it some form of ontological guarantee that it was not intended to be so by the photographer. Fried suggests that it is the punctum that is this guarantee (Fried, 2008).

In her work, Calle takes the theatrical notion of surveillance and pushes it to its ethical and moral boundaries. *Suite Vénitienne* opens with the above text,

‘For months I followed strangers on the street. For the pleasure of following them, not because they particularly interested me’.

‘At the end of January 1980, on the streets of Paris, I followed a man whom I lost sight of a few minutes later in a crowd. That very evening, quite by chance, he was introduced to me at an opening. During the course of our conversation, he told me he was planning an imminent trip to Venice’ (Calle, 1988)

It then proceeds to document Calle’s pursuit of this man ‘Henri B’ through a labyrinthine Venice, in a detailed photographic and written report that captures and orders the full range of feelings the endeavour provokes in her (Fig 4). Calle likens the excitement of the chase to the thrill of being in love. There is a contagious pleasure infiltrated through the narrative, though as Calle herself notes, it is less about looking at someone one loves and more about a scopophilic desire to watch.

‘I must not forget that I don’t have any amorous feelings towards Henri B.’ (Calle, 1988)
Calle reverses the traditional role of the gaze in patriarchal society, when she takes on the active gaze of the male spectator. In Rosler’s terms the photograph becomes a ‘power transaction’ between photographer and subject, as the subject is transformed into and object and image of Otherness for visual consumption (Rosler, 2006). Yet, within the text she documents the power relation and struggle between this gaze and that of Henri B, with Calle reverting to the passive role of the traditional female gaze upon confrontation. She states in the text,

‘if he should see me...’

‘I lower my head, hand a bill to the waiter, and leave quickly’(Calle, 1988).

Here, Calle, investigates the limits of an almost Freudian scopophilic gaze in documentary photography and the connection the viewer has with such images. Mulvey states that ‘[scopohilic pleasure], through narcissism and the structure of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen’ (Mulvey, 1989). And this pleasure, similar to that experienced in classical cinema, the viewer gains from such identification.

The pleasure that the voyeuristic nature of documentary photography imparts is nothing new and can be derived not just from a simple pleasure in watching but also from a realisation of our own privileged status as passive, detached viewer (or as Sekula puts it ‘a look down at one’s inferiors’ (Sekula, 1992). Levis Strauss, (quoting Galeano) in his debate on the anaesthetizing effects of over aestheticized social documentary images notes, ‘As an article of consumption poverty is a source of morbid pleasure and much money’. Such pleasure being derived from the notion that ‘anybody who is nobody confidentially congratulates himself; life hasn’t done too badly for me in comparison’ (Galeano, 1990). Thus raising the question for us, as in the intrusive work of Calle, ‘Are we allowed to view what is being exposed? Although Calle’s work does not fall into the category of social documentary per se, it does however still deal with similar issues, including those raised by Rosler amongst others, regarding the artist’s vision taking precedence over the situation, with particular reference to the observant, voyeuristic tendencies of artists currently using the documentary medium.

Although historically Rosler saw the infiltration of social documentary in the 1960s by a more disengaged, less responsible form of ‘street photography’ as a ‘reduction’ of the documentary medium to ‘art’, this is not to say that current documentary practitioners do not
still have a socially conscious message to communicate. Through the use of more
deconstructive means, contemporary artists, Calle amongst them, use documentary to reflect on how surveillance has developed in society. Though the main motive for her surveillance work is a personal quest for information carried out through various tasks and the evidence or proofs gathered in the process, in questioning the validity of different interpretations of surveillance she questions our beliefs in the real and the fabricated and how the space between words and images is treated in society through the media. And as we move further towards a society trapped within a virtual panopticon, the question of who is watching becomes more and more pertinent.

This voyeuristic work does however provoke questions about the artist’s code of ethics and her seeming lack of moral boundaries. There is no evidence within her work that she adheres to any guidelines or rules outside of herself. The rules Calle does recognise are self imposed and often associated with bizarre, obsessive rituals. These rituals the artist claims are present to aid her overcome feelings of fear or shyness (Searle, 1993). The rules by which she lives, appear to be arbitrary, a common postmodernist trait, the postmodernist world being described as, ‘contingent, diverse, unstable and indeterminate (Eagelton, 1996). In a world where nothing is definite or fixed, there exists no universal moral code that determines what is right or wrong. There are only subjective interpretations of morality. Each person sets their own standards, leading to an ethical relativism whereby all moral beliefs are of equal validity. Moral judgements are impossible to establish and moral language becomes meaningless.

Lyotard supports this view stating that postmodern artists are ‘in the position of philosophers’. He stresses that their work cannot be governed by pre-established rules. He states, ‘Those rules and categories are what the art itself is looking for. The artists and writers then, are working without rules in order to establish the rules for what will have been done. Soon, those rules must appear to them as a means to deceive, to seduce and to reassure, which makes it impossible for them to be ‘true’’ (Harrison and Woods, 1992). Some critics feel however, that her approach to art is dangerous, putting her own life at risk and infringing on the privacy of others. Zellen claims, ‘picture making motivates Calle’s voyeurism yet voyeurism and obsessive behaviour are not always so safe. They can lead to murder’ (Zellen, 1989). According to Danto, ‘It’s as if Calle’s artful inception of others’ lives constitutes a form of theft or violation (Danto, 1993). Zellen summarised by concluding that, ‘While
Calle’s desire to follow people is more of a game, it is a dangerous game because her subjects are not aware of her intentions. Although Calle is allowed certain liberties because her voyeurism is part of her artwork, it doesn’t absolve her from the responsibility of invading others’ privacy’ (Zellen, 1989).

This intrusion into the personal space of an unwilling participant is replaced in the final work to be discussed, *Dolouer Exquisite (Exquisite Pain)*, with an intrusion and an insight into the artist’s own personal life. Although autobiographical, Calle removes herself from normal reality and repositions herself as part of the audience as she details a journey she took in 1984. This 92 day journey from Paris to New Delhi culminated in a break up with her lover, and it is the exquisite pain she felt at this loss that is the centre point on which the story pivots and which is the driving force for the subsequent exhibition she produced.

In the first half of the journey exhibited in Luxembourg in 2007, a daily record of photographic images and texts with everyday social observations confronts the viewer, each image stamped in red with the number of days left as ‘days to unhappiness’ before her lover dumps her (Fig 9). These photographic diary entries snake around the exhibition hall, through an installation that is a mix of architectural design and visual art, introspective and intimate, designed by Frank Gehry and Edwin Chan. The images moving almost like the train carrying her to that day of unhappiness, as the viewer counts down nervously through her personal archive to that day (Fig 5-8).
Fig 5 Sophie Calle
Exquisite Pain (Douleur Exquise) Exhibition
Luxembourg Cultural Capital 2007

Fig 6. Sophie Calle
Exquisite Pain (Douleur Exquise) Exhibition
Luxembourg Cultural Capital 2007

Fig 7 Sophie Calle
Exquisite Pain (Douleur Exquise) Exhibition
Luxembourg Cultural Capital 2007
In the second half of the exhibition, her approach becomes more systematic, with each left hand section of the text displaying a repetitive photograph of Calle’s hotel room with a red telephone (that she subsequently receives the bad news on) on her bed, and the right hand section detailing the retold stories of suffering by her friends. It is the repetitiveness of the words that allows it to become established as part of a whole language, so the pain experienced is established as the driving force for the work. Through this constant repetition and listening to others pain Calle’s painful memories slowly dilute. The importance of this text underpinned by Calle nothing that, ‘It’s not important if someone else takes the photograph. But the texts are mine. No one can add a word to them’ (Riding, 2003).
Fig 9. 54 Days to Unhappiness. Sophie Calle. Published in *Exquisite Pain* (2005)

One cannot discuss the art of Sophie Calle without mentioning the importance of text in the social and institutional contexts within which her work is seen and understood. Visual art differs from language, because one approaches art with a set of unresolved questions, rather than assuming that there is a given structure of meaning to be interpreted. Artists take these given structures and deconstruct them. Calle does this by spanning language as a visual means, using language as written text under the auspices of art. Calle employs the standard tools of Conceptual art: black and white photographs and texts—but to different ends.

Whereas conceptual artists used these techniques to record perceptions of language, time and space as objectively as possible, for Calle they function as a means to register a range of subjective, psychological responses. This visual language allows for the viewer to formulate his or her own perceived ideas, allowing a space for ‘the voice of other’. Visual language can provide a means for diverse takes or inclusion of the other, allowing all to come to an understanding under a commonality.

A paradox can occur however when text becomes the artwork and is exhibited/viewed. Particularly when text is identified with one particular nationality or identity (in this case, the French language of Calle) then this ‘other’ is excluded, the understanding of the work alluding non-French speakers. It is not until the work is translated that art, which is to consider all ‘others’ as part of its interpretation can be fully understood. Thus on these occasions text based art becomes less inclusive of the ‘other’ and refuses an understanding under a commonality.

The way in which Calle presents her work acts as a reflection on the distance between the image and the written word. The difference between what we see and what is written being disguised through the documentary style presentation, whether in the form of a book or exhibition. In all of the works detailed Calle puts her past fanatically into files and images. In *Exquisite Pain* this is done in the style of a very detailed personal album, Calle using the work to piece together a sense of her own identity, to frantically and precisely document her memories as a means of retaining them (Calle, 2005). Photography thus becomes a mass produced original of memory. In *The Shadow, Suite Venetienne* and *The Hotel* the works are presented as ‘authentic’ documentary material in the form of photos and descriptive text, detailing her inner thoughts on being followed, following others and piecing together the personalities of others through their belongings. Each of these surveillant ‘performances’ is preserved in the form of a book, itself an object to be looked at. The act of surveillance is almost always performed in solitude, similar to the act of reading a book. With the style of
narrative and images directly transporting the reader into Calle’s world, the reader indirectly becomes the voyeur. The reader’s surveillance however, is conducted at a safe distance, the book form offering the same scopophilic pleasure as the cinema offers, with its separation of spectators from one another, watching something which is private to oneself. Several authors even liken these books to a literary version of classic voyeuristic films, including Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* and Antonioni’s *Blow Up* (Bourriard, 2002).

Both the gallery and book presentations of her work allow Calle to deal with the documentary medium in a more fluid way and allow the genre to come to mean something more wide reaching. As Bright notes, the slippage between the photographic document and the art photograph is expanding and both the gallery and the book remain one of the few environments where the approach is not threatened as magazines become ‘increasingly fascinated with celebrity and the space for ‘stories’ decreases’ (Bright, 2007). This return to documentary practice can also be seen in the rise in younger artists returning to black and white, also a reaction to the large scale colour works that have dominated the art scene in the last decade. Calles novel use of the diaristic entry, the snapshot, confession and surveillance has greatly influenced much contemporary work concerned with self-documentation and the investigation of ritual, fantasy, anticipation, desire and the boundaries between truth and fiction.

As Susan Bright quotes:

‘Contemporary documentary has not lost its power to convey information as it did in the past; it has just moved on’.

Nicola Whelan, February 2010.
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