The Art of Ethnography:
The Case of Sophie Calle
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The art of ethnography turned artwork is the subject of projects by many a contemporary artist. Among them, though, the French artist Sophie Calle excels, with her witty and candid visual explorations of the ethnographic in contemporary culture. Through an engagement with her work we may learn vital lessons about the dilemma facing visual culture today, in which memory and materiality are losing their bearings.

Calle and the American writer Paul Auster, with whom she entered into a creative partnership in the late 1970s, have recently been the subject of heightened critical attention. Calle, colluding with Auster, has set out in numerous projects to investigate the subjectivity of those who pry into the lives of others. Mingling fact with fiction, Calle became the basis for the Maria Turner character in Auster's novel *Leviathan*. In the descriptions he made of Maria many elements correspond to Calle's life; but Auster has also introduced rituals that are totally fictional. Typically, installations of Calle's many projects document a process of observation and data gathering which uses strategies of surveillance, reportage and documentation that are represented in the form of photographs, lists and obsessive text.

There is a marked difference between Calle's early work, and her later work (post-1992). Her earlier work, such as *Suite Venitienne* and *L'Homme au Carnet*, make art out of other people's lives. *Suite Venitienne* is a diary of a project she undertook in the Bronx. It initially uses photographs and a short text in order to document Calle's approach towards the passersby who, every day at the same hour, take her to their favorite places. One day in January 1980 she follows a man in the street but loses his track. The same evening, in a party, she meets him again. He goes to Venice and she decides to follow him. This activity formed the beginning of the Venetian Suite, eventually published in book form. Wearing a wig, Sophie follows him in Venice. She tracks him down with a camera and makes an hour by hour photographic and written report of her days. Sometimes she loses his track or finds herself face to face with him. She reports her shivers, her fears with the excitement of a love affair.

Calle's use of the ethnographic present tense and also her staging and manipulation of self/other relations draws heavily on the ethnographic model, in which fieldwork is used in order to reconcile theory and practice and to reinforce the basic principles of the participant/observer tradition. While this early work appears to be a new narrative written for her by Auster about a fictional character called Sophie whose story she would proceed to live out. The result was a three-part volume, *Double Games*, part of which is the *Gotham Handbook: Personal Instructions for Sophie Calle on How to Improve Life in New York City*.

Both Auster and Calle are concerned with how the social space surrounding people frames them. In particular they highlight the dependency of the subject upon the construction of an object, which alternately, turns persons into objects and objects into persons. Typically, installations of Calle's many projects document a process of observation and data gathering which uses strategies of surveillance, reportage and documentation that are represented in the form of photographs, lists and obsessive text.

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concerned with the condition of the postmodern subject (by using photography as a method of ethnography), Calle's later work shifts to a concern with the person-like qualities of artworks which become the nexus of social relations. For example in *Double Games*, living out Auster's fictional character Maria, Calle takes to the streets of New York, smiling at strangers, letting them talk to her for as long as they like, distributing food and cigarettes, and cultivating her own spot on the city streets. Calle chose as her base a phone booth, which she then faithfully reconstructed in her installation, making it comfy with a chair, small change, reading materials, food and drink, and decorating it with flowers and photographs. The most important parts of this installation are the lists in which Calle notes the number of times strangers smiled at her and returned her smiles, cigarettes were offered and taken, the number of minutes each conversation lasted, and so on. In *Double Games*, ethnography thus emerges not just as a method of making art out of others' lives, but as a site of commemoration which frames social relations.

As well as the obsessiveness which characterises much of her work, Calle's trademark remains consistently that of 'the self-styled ethnographer of the everyday.' Ethnography is generally understood as a method of 'participant/observation,' a concept developed in the 1920s by Bronislaw Malinowski, who became one of the key figures in the development of modern research techniques in anthropology using such observation methods 'in the field.' Participant observation has continued to be used as the basic method that enables one to capture how others live their lives, uncovering the salient dynamics of social relations, of attitudes and beliefs, by noting the many verbal, gestural and material exchanges which compose the minutiae of everyday life. As participant observation necessarily reflects a subjective experience, the diary which forms the basis for secondary listings of observations says as much about the ethnographer as it does the site and subject of the fieldwork.

Calle appears almost self-consciously to work through the method

All images courtesy of Camden Arts Centre.
of ethnography, dissecting it, as it were, into a number of consecutive stages, each taking the form of separate projects. Her early projects concentrate on situating the ethnographic. Here, the ethnographic is ‘found’ in situations which are born out of chance and yet become the platform for recollections whose documentation and installation turns the project into an artwork. In L’Homme au Carnet she builds a profile of Pierre D. – a stranger whose address book she finds by chance – by contacting everyone in it and asking for their thoughts about him (these were then published in Liberation). Similarly, L’Hotel is composed of a series of photographs Calle took while working undercover as a hotel chambermaid, each portraying the incidental, like the clues observed by Sherlock Holmes at the scene of a crime – shoes thrown beside a bed, tissues spilling out of a handbag, dirty linen, etc. Peculiar to these projects is that Calle draws herself into the setting, from an image of the artist – topless, veiled and sporting a blonde wig – performing striptease in a Parisian dive, to photographs taken of her by a private detective hired by Calle herself. Initially intended “to provide photographic evidence of my own existence,” such a technique also draws attention to the ever-changing viewpoint of the follower and the followed. This idea receives its heightened articulation in Suite Venitienne, whereby Calle follows Henri B. to Venice, only to turn the project around in The Shadow in which she arranges to have herself followed.

Comparing her early installations with her later work, we can see that the evidence for situations which mark the plot of each project increasingly comes to consist, not of words or images, but of the materiality of things. This retraces a tradition which reaches back to such ostensibly diverse figures as Giovanni Morelli, Sherlock Holmes and Sigmund Freud, all of whom changed the nature of what evidence can be. In Suite Venitienne, evidence still takes the form of photographs which obscure rather than reveal their object, betraying more about the follower than the followed. In her later work, Double Games, however, and even more so in the subsequent Birthday Ceremony (1998), materials figure as active components of social relations, providing clues which entice the viewer to reconstruct the site of ethnographic intent. Here, the ethnographic emerges as an incremental part of the installation, consisting of allusive thought processes which are difficult to reconstruct.

Calle has not only created new pieces of work, but she has also reworked existing installations in ways which have led to, for example, different incarnations of Suite Venitienne. These installations range from the photographic to the aural, as exemplified by the 1999 version of The Confessional Piece, in which Calle sits in a confessional box narrating the diary of Suite Venitienne. Other installations are also inter-articulated, as they explore the relation between the indexical and the material, the subject and the object. In Double Games, for example, the things given or taken, be it a smile or a cigarette, are present in the installation merely in the form of a list, thus suggesting the primacy of the indexical in the fashioning of social relations. In Birthday Ceremony, a poignant shift is made towards exploring how a thing, anything in fact, may be both active in social relations and simultaneously turned into an artwork.

This insight, namely that a thing given provides not just a clue for a social relation but is already an artwork (Birthday Ceremony is the only installation which is not represented by photography, but by the objects themselves) foreshadows the most recent anthropological theory of art formulated by Alfred Gell in his posthumously published Art and Agency. Challenging the logocentric paradigm still rampant in anthropological theory, Gell argues for the primacy of the object-person relation as articulated in the act of exchange in which objects become person-like, capable of agency in relation to other persons. The object-turned-person, displaying ‘abductive’ tendencies, is none other than what we conventionally term ‘art’ – an insight which brilliantly confounds the remnants of the distinction between art and craft made in the nineteenth century which still lingers on in so many definitions of art.
Birthday Ceremony consists of a series of cabinets containing a myriad of differently textured things, each one serving as evidence for an unfolding self-other relation. This work is Calle’s first major sculptural installation, conceived especially for “Art Now 14” at the Tate Gallery, London. Although made in 1998 the work’s origins are in the years 1980 to 1993, when Calle invented and sustained a series of private rituals around her birthday. Over this period, with the occasional exception, Calle held an annual dinner party on or around the evening of her birthday. To each celebration she invited a group of friends and relations, the precise number of invitees corresponding to the age reached on that day, but with one additional, anonymous guest.

The Birthday Ceremony brings together fifteen medicine-like cabinets based on the design of the original, which had been given to Calle by her father. Thirteen individual cabinets, and one pair, each contain the gifts of a single year. The gifts, which are displayed unwrapped, range from the banal to the bizarre. They include works of art, tokens of affection, books and letters, junk and antiques, plastic trivets, items stolen from a restaurant, bottles of wine, chocolates and so on. Most cabinets are crammed full, reminding one of images of curiosity cabinets in the age of Enlightenment. One has to strain one’s eyes to see through the glass on which is etched a list of items contained in the cabinet from 1981. The first part of the list reads: bouquet of flowers, book by Mario Vargas Llosa La Maison verte, a construction by David Rochline (mirror, gilded wood, marshmallows, chocolates, candies and plastic doll), a pair of Jean-Charles Brosseau cream coloured knitted cotton gloves, a bottle of eau de vie labelled Pour les 28 ans de Sophie Calle, a compass, and so on. After the list Calle has included the following remark on it: “All twenty-eight guests appeared. The stranger gave me the black mask. Because of its irresistible utility, the washing machine is represented by a manufacturer’s guarantee. By giving me this present my clever mother managed to subvert the ritual.”

Framed behind the glass, the gifts appear to arrest the relationships they evoke. The effect of the gift marking a passage and thus even ‘making’ time is heightened by the ‘absent’ gift, notably identified as the one presented to Calle by her mother, which, too large to put behind glass and/or too ‘useful’ for Calle to sacrifice it to the cause, is substituted by a guarantee. Here, a relation of ‘kinship’ is marked as absent, while those who are included in the form of their gifts remain anonymous, as in Double Games, where those who exchange smiles or cigarettes remain without names. In Birthday Ceremony names of things take the place of names of persons, allowing abductive reasoning to trace the mysterious donor, even in the case of ‘mother’ and ‘father,’ who appear as a listing of named things to which Calle became attached. Calle appears here to point to the place that knowledge and things hold in the way Euro-Americans deal with kinship relations. Because, as Strathern recently pointed out, “of its cultural coupling with identity, kinship knowledge is a particular kind of knowledge: the information (and verification) on which it draws is constitutive in its consequences.” Kinship knowledge in Calle’s world remains concealed within the gift, which does, however, simultaneously reveal more than words can ever do.

One may evoke any number of anxieties, such as Calle’s self-acclaimed fear of being forgotten, to explain the Birthday Ceremony. Yet the theme of the gift, accentuating the mutability of subject and

object and dramatising social relations as they unfold, is too consistent with Calle's other projects to allow subjective reasoning to have sufficient explanatory force. In fact, if she did not actually think of the Birthday Ceremony as an artwork more than a decade ago, Calle would have had to have invented it as a logical and epiphenomenal conclusion to her work.

The gift has been given the most outstanding treatment by generations of ethnographers writing in the tradition set by Marcel Mauss’ well known and influential Essai sur le don which first appeared in 1924. Whether inscribed within this tradition, or one that traces itself to George Bataille’s articulation of a general economy of expenditure, philosophers, literary critics, and literary theorists have, with increasing frequency, reflected upon questions of gifts, gift giving, reciprocity and exchange." Yet, perhaps equally as important for a perspective on the relation between the artwork and the gift, is recent historical research on collecting. For this body of research has brought to light an intrinsic relation between the gift, the collectible, and the notion of the ethnographic as it emerged at the close of the eighteenth century. Not only was the object that was collected and housed in curiosity cabinets simultaneously the object of ethnography, but it was also a gift to be given or received as a memento of indebtedness. As Pomian reminded us, it was the exchange value peculiar to these objects which enshrined their unceasing potency as the inner workings of a sacrificial economy that came to form the bedrock of the institutionalisation of the arts. The importance of a sacrificial, gift-based object, visibly arresting pure exchange value, had been heightened by the efflorescence of industrial economy, and yet many studies barely considered its role beyond the confines of mercantile forces." The intense revival of interest in the gift in anthropology and related disciplines in the early 1970s coincided with the demise of proprietary rights extended to objects and the impending shift to an intellectual economy where rights were extended to invisible resources and assets.

The Euro-American understanding of the gift defines gifting as “transactions within a moral economy, which [make] possible the extended reproduction of social relations.” Recent anthropological theories of gifting illuminate the very idea of there being part-societies ('moral economies') that “typically consist of small worlds of personal relationships that are the emotional core of every individual’s social experience." Instead of gifting being defined as an altruistic gesture towards an environment/society which contains persons, anthropology points to the global dimensions of persons, sociality being integral to them. The partner in such exchanges is always another specific person and, as all such encounters are interpersonal encounters, “they convey no special connotations of intimacy. Nor of altruism as a source of benign feeling.”

Calle’s installations resonate the dismantling of Euro-American notions of gifting and of the person fuelled by ethnographies." The small worlds of personal relationships, composed of the familiar, the strange and the forgotten, are carefully documented in the photographs and lists of which her artworks are composed. The details of the everyday she records, though always specific in terms of place and time, have also a universal quality, thereby negating the notion of an environment containing persons. Most importantly, the installations create a picture of Calle, the person, comprised of social relations of which we, the spectators of her installations, are a part. Such relations are either made to appear, or do appear, in their making, as every installation displaces a former one. As Calle’s identity as a person is part of the process of enchainment, Calle does not emerge as a free agent. It is not her desire/drive/need that propels the installations into existence, but “those other persons” – from Henri B. in Suite Venitienne to the character Maria in Auster’s novel or to ‘mother’ and ‘father’ in Birthday Ceremony. As all encounters are thus interpersonal encounters, they convey no special connotations of intimacy.

The small worlds of relationships comprise activity of a cosmic order in photographic installations such as L’hôtel, in which details of
character) eats in Auster's book *Leviathan* from 8-14 of December, 1997, with each day of the week corresponding to a different colour, suggest the pivotal role of the person-object relation in the expression of sentiment. Sentiment, we are led to see, is not emanating outward from the person, which appears as autonomous and charitable, but is an inseparable part of a process of personification "that converts for and objects and people into other people."

Calle's installations trace successive moments of displacement of fact and fiction, and of persons and property. The response to her installations has been overwhelming, evolving out of contemporary revisions of such concepts that have been shaped to a large extent by Marylin Strathern's now famous notion of fractality. Fractality applies to persons and objects alike in ways that radically challenge the assumption of person-object relations with which we are familiar. Our own expectation of the way persons extend rights to objects is embedded in Hobbes' theory of society which asserts the need for moral, religious and legal law and practice to integrate persons into existing social networks. Social relations, we assume, are the result of the successful mediation of person-object relations and are thus external to them. In contrast, Strathern asserts the pre-existence of sociality within the concept of person and object. Composite, individual and androgynous persons take the place of the individual while asserting the importance of processes of 'decomposition.'

The decomposition of persons is effected in acts of exchange by the gift's capacity to externalise internal relations.

The model of the fractal person serves as an enlightening commentary on Calle's photographic installation of *Suite Venetienne*, which appears to miss its object or to capture it obscurely, betraying more about the follower than the followed. The artwork enables Calle to 'find herself' for the moment captured in the scene in which the other appears (albeit as a forever vanishing object of desire).

Calle emerges as a discreet person in the act of separating out the social relations of which she is composed. Yet, in no other installation
is this idea carried forward with as much clarity as in *Birthday Ceremony*. Here, the act of separation, which allows internal relations to appear in object-form, is part of a ritual process (the birthday), which although a temporary phenomenon, is internalised and embodied as image. The cabinets, within which the relations thus decomposed are enshrined from year to year, are the material evidence of such processes of embodiment. Described as ‘gifts,’ each assemblage appears as a memento of Calle’s world of personal relationships which are replaced through the substitution of a counterpart. Although Calle elicits each such substitution, the gifts she consumes are not coming from the ‘outside’ as an abstract impersonal matrix which may contain other persons or things as its context (environment/society), but from partners/friends whose relationship has been nurtured. Calle’s growth, or the time whose passing she comes to embody, is thus registered in the actions of other, specific persons.

As in her early installations, the ‘stranger’ plays a significant role in *Birthday Ceremony*. The apparent obsessiveness of pursuit, which gradually turns the stranger into the partner of an interpersonal encounter in *Suite Venitiennne*, is declared as metaphorical and strategic in *Birthday Ceremony*. Here, the stranger appears as the significant object which externalises hidden future relationships which come to comprise Calle. Yet the stranger’s act of gifting also works to substitute effect, in that this gift is a substitution of a previous, impersonal one. A significant shift is thus achieved from the consideration of the changing Euro-American concept of person to processes of personification in which objects play an incremental part.

This inclusion of the impersonal matrix of environment/society into the personal space of the cabinets and the cycle of gifting they represent adds a new twist to Calle’s reflections on personification. Not only are we witnessing the dismantling of the Euro-American notion of person as the autonomous well-spring of desire, but we are led to question the autonomy of objects that take on person-like qualities as artworks and gifts. As the stranger’s gift serves as a kind
of signature within each cabinet, making it unique in comparison with the others (while simultaneously subsuming it into the cycle of gifting) so the cabinet as a whole appears at once as personified object capable of actively eliciting new substitutions, and as dependent upon the acts of others.

In Birthday Ceremony, moreover, the stranger's gift is merely part of a 'technique of enchantment' which attracts attention to the object and turns the cabinet within which it is contained into an artwork. While it appears that 'any' object may serve as 'gifts,' in fact the objects which are contained within the cabinets are carefully selected and strategically placed. As our eyes wander back and forth between the listing of items etched on the glass of the cabinet and the objects contained within, we cannot resist attempting to reconstruct the thought that went into the choosing of each item and its positioning within the cabinet. Before we know it, we find ourselves drawn into an interpersonal encounter as the cabinets bring Calle close to us. They appear to reveal more about Calle and her relationships than a direct observation of her world would allow us to see.

The list, which in previous installations served as evidence of an ethnographic method which makes art of other people's lives, emerges in Birthday Ceremony as the technique of situating the ethnographic. Etched into the glass of each cabinet, the list holds our attention and draws us further into the small world contained within. And suddenly, as by chance, we see that what we thought was an artwork - designed as installation for and within the abstract context of the gallery environment - is in fact "the living person personified."11

As it finds its subject in objects turned art, ethnography may never be the same again.

Footnotes

1 Shown at the Camden Arts Centre in London February-April, 1999.
2 Although Malinowski is probably the anthropologist to whom historians of anthropology have devoted most attention, recent work has shown that his work expresses merely a period of professionalisati3on of concepts that originated in the late eighteenth century as part of the Enlightenment endeavours to create some order in the growing body of data on peoples in the world of that era. At that time concepts of ethnography and ethnology were coined to represent a "science of nations and peoples" which, when established in ethnological societies (1834-1843) had already been given a different meaning. The insight that ethnography reaches back to particularly German Enlightenment thought of the years 1771-1787 challenges standard views according to which anthropology started as a discipline with either the foundation of ethnological societies or their academic institutionalisation by means of university chairs in the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century.


4 A classic diary of this kind is that written by Malinowski, whose recent publication as Malinowski Among the Magi, London: Routledge, 1988, had a profound impact on the self-reflective anthropology of the 1980s.


10 Strathern, Property, p. 68.


Susanne Kuchler
15 Strathern, "Partners and Consumers," p. 303
18 Strathern, Gender, p. 306.