



# SOPHIE CALLE

Text **Jill Magid** | Photography **Timothy Greenfield-Sanders** | Images courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

## The Legendary Artist on Life, Love and Cruelty

For nearly 30 years, French Conceptual artist Sophie Calle has confronted conventional ideas of art. Her body of work is indivisible from her life, and she moves towards exposing complicated questions of how and when art goes too far. In 1979, Calle invited people to sleep in her bed for hour-long slots, photographing and interviewing them when they awoke (*The Sleepers*), and clandestinely followed a man she met at a party on his trip to Venice (*Suite Vénitienne*, 1980). For *The Hotel* (1981), she documented the belongings of hotel guests while posing as a chambermaid; in *The Address Book* (1983), she called people from a lost address book and printed the results in a Parisian newspaper. In 1992, she ventured into film with *No Sex Last Night*, a collaboration with filmmaker Greg Shephard on the nature of their relationship. Most recently, she was behind the most talked about exhibition at the 2007 Venice Biennale, *Take care of yourself*. Calle analyzed an ex-boyfriend's break-up email by asking 107 women to interpret his words. As with most of her works, Calle described a world where desire, fantasy and pain are expressed in terms of memory, privacy, therapy and cruelty. (The show was turned into a book of the same name, published last year.) While Calle returns to certain themes, none of them can be described as central to her work—like anyone else, her life cannot be defined by keywords. Only by entering her works, can you enter her world.

35-year-old Jill Magid is an American Conceptual artist who follows Calle in many ways. Her work, also taking form in photographs and words, describe desire, permission, observation and relationships. Her latest piece, *Article 12* (2008), was commissioned by AIVD, the Dutch Secret Service, in an attempt to humanize the organization for the public. Magid spent three years interviewing members of the AIVD, and displayed the results through framed silk-screened texts, sculptures of neon light and archived materials. The recent Creativity Now alum sat down with Calle at a small East Village café and asked her about her rich career and the life she's led to achieve it.

**Jill Magid:** You incorporate a few different methodologies in your work. One of them seems like this natural catalyst—something happens in your life, and then you set [up for] yourself what you call a 'game.' So, *Take care of yourself* was something that happened—a break-up—and then you set up a game—**Sophie Calle:** And they have a therapeutic motor aspect, just as a start: 'What can I do not to suffer?'

**You don't think you start this process as a work?**

No, there are different categories, as you say. The category in which it is my life, many times starts as a reaction to something. Like, I received that love letter, what can I do [to] counter it, not just to be a victim of it. Maybe the first step is therapeutic, but if it's only therapeutic, I may as well go buy a dress at the corner of the street. So, immediately [I think], 'Would [it] stand on the wall?' If I think yes, I go on.

**And then you have another category where I'd say it seems you have the idea or concept first, and then you enact the game, like in *Hotel*.**

For those, it is a chain. For example, I started to follow people because I was lost. Back in Paris after seven years away, I had no friends, no job, no money, nothing. So I started to follow people to see what they were doing with their day. So this is a reaction to a situation. Then, there is a reaction to the work itself. I'd been following people, and I'd like to know what it feels like to be followed. Then, the man I followed in Venice, I dreamed about sleeping in his hotel. Then I thought about the *Hotel* works; that was a chain.

**Is permission to make a work (from your subjects) important?**

No, the last work I didn't get the permission of the man; it was his letter. After he heard I was doing it, I went to see him to tell him exactly what it was. He said that he didn't like to be the subject of the work, but he respected the work.

**I read that you said he wrote, 'Take care of yourself,' and you said, 'He knows the way I take care of myself.'**

He'd made a book about me, because he's a writer, and he knows perfectly what I do. Maybe it was self-sabotage, and he didn't realize. But I think in the back of his head, he knew how I take care of myself. Especially in love. He knew that I did *Exquisite Pain*; he was at the opening.

**Because the work comes from unhappy events, do you ever find yourself trying to be more aware of unhappy things in your life so that you have a resource to work from?**

No, because at the same time if I want so quickly to do *Take care of yourself*, it was also because I was afraid the man would come back. And I knew if he came back I would prefer him to the work. On the contrary, now, since I forget this man, I prefer the art to his presence.

**I read that when you did *The Sleepers*, you hadn't even thought of it as art.**

It's true, those two works, I didn't know it was art: *Follow Me* and *The Sleepers*. For me it was a way to play.

**And now that you know it's art, once that transition happened for you, did the quality of the experience change?**

It's just better, because it's more professional. Now that I know I can use it [as art], I know I need the image, I know I need the text, so I'm more precise. I know someone is going to look at it. It's not just a personal game. For example, when I did the *Suite Vénitienne*, I didn't know it was art, so I only took a few pictures. I had to go back six months later, when I decided it was, and photograph some missing images.

**How does your mindset change when you're making a work for the wall?**

It's a job.

**That's a great answer.**

Let's say a man leaves me. For one week, I cry. Once I have an idea, it's a job, so in a way it puts distance with the feelings. It works in terms of therapy, because you just look at it like it was a text, not your own letter. At the same time, it's a work; it has to be well done. It gives a structure, it gives an intensity.

**Is there a line for you, when you say, 'Oh, I don't know if I can actually make work about this'?**

[I consider] the relationship between the interest of the work and the cruelty of it. For example, the work that I just did is cruel—for the guy, it's a nightmare. He has 107 women tearing at mistakes. I really wondered at the beginning, is it just a revenge? I would have thought it was more on the revenge side if the work was not that good. *The Address Book* was the only project where I went too far.

**Do you think you went too far now?**

I think that for the guy it was very cruel, and [as opposed to] the one that sent me the let-

ter, he had not done anything to me.

**During the process, did you know that you were going too far?**

I could feel it. Sometimes when the scenes were coming out in *Libération*, in the morning I was sweating. But if it had to be redone, I would redo it because the excitement was stronger than the guilt.

**To me, your work is so ingrained in your lived experience, how does fiction play into that?**

It's complicated what fiction is, because everything is fiction, in a way. Take the example of the movie *No Sex Last Night*, because that's the easiest one. The trip lasted three weeks, the man I stayed with [for] one year, the movie is one hour. We could have done one hundred, two hundred, three hundred absolutely different movies, all being through editing the moment you choose. In a way, I don't have the capacity of invention. If I could invent, why not? Except, I don't.

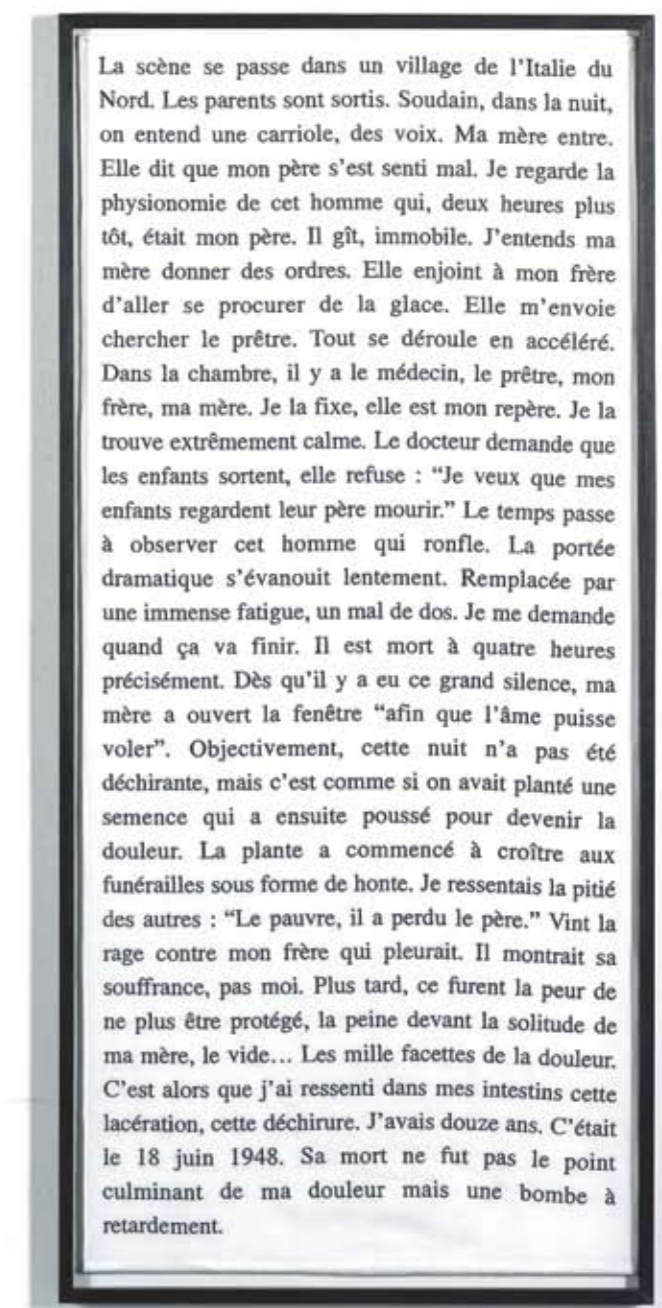
**Do you think you make boring work?**

No, but I make work about banal things.

**You're often described as a writer, and you've made many books, but they're distributed in the art world rather than as literature.**

For me, the wall comes first, for two reasons. First, it's the wall that makes me live, as an artist. That's important for me, because it's what allows me to go on. Second, I came to the wall because of my father. My father was an art collector; I wanted to seduce my father when I came back in '79 in France. I watched what was on his walls and I saw photos and text, and I just decided to copy [that] to seduce him. My father was a very chic collector in Paris. He liked skinny girls, and he liked artwork. I had no job, no money, I was fat and I had to come back to Paris. The wall was my challenge.

**And the wall has maintained that position for you?**





ROOM 24

Monday March 2, 1983. 10.30am. Ignoring room 24, the post man. The train beds have been slept on. A stronger feeling of "being in" comes over me. Various images blend together, they don't all run together in my mind. Haven't I already stated these? The first things I notice are the books on the table; Aldo Gebler's *La Couleur Orangée* and *Forme d'Indien* dictionary; in the chest: the usual clothes of an ordinary couple, photographic equipment in a camera case, empty suitcase. The drawer is stuffed with handkerchiefs, medication for a deficient pancreas and Gaspard Gaspard cigarettes.

Empty the handbag on the floor: sunglasses, Tampax, pink lipstick, painted checks made out to Pauline R., old tickets for a Venetian concert and an opera. On the first page I read: "In the event of my death, everything I own will go to Mr. François G. exclusively." Signed Pauline R. in a childish, scolding handwriting. Under the heading Notes, this figure: 2285.00, the address of rest home in Versailles, a sentence: "Between the page of one year to twelve months, the house is called an 'hôtel', plus a quote from Mallarmé: *J'ai fait l'hôtel indigène, il est l'hôtel français*." "C'est bien la première circulation de ce mot c'est aussi la façon d'attribuer à un mot un sens. Avec à l'esprit que son sens est: *il s'agit de l'hôtel*." *l'hôtel* est une des premières notes écrites de phrases d'écriture. Incluse dans le dossier des *Phéas* est une offre de l'absence d'un *châli* *l'absence* de *l'hôtel*. A. Malraux, NRF, 1954, page 93.

On the spreads are the following notes: 30.1 Unemployment Bureau, 6.2 "The use of bags" (the staff) hour, 19.2 Unemployment Bureau, text of words, 11.2 Unemployment Bureau, 20.2 Unemployment Bureau. Further on is a list of responses, in particular for the trip to Venice: departure 200,000, or 3.450 (20.2) gasoline 270, road E, highway toll 103.1.3; train 50, exp. Visa 80, total 90, total 200. In the bag is also the reservation at the Hotel C, and March 6, a customer's certificate from a flower in the house, a blue paper in the name of Pauline R., born May 1, 1936: it is a "baccalauréat" diploma, "cette madame", dated July 1956. Nine other registration cards, all out of date, for the years 1961 to 1969. A letter sent from Mexico to Pauline R. in 1972, which reads in French: "Voilà ce que j'ai fait pour votre anniversaire. J'ai commencé à regarder les choses. J'ai regardé dans cette maison à l'hôtel, quelque chose de nouveau. Je vous en parle dans les semaines, les jours prochains... Je suis sûr que vous allez aimer... Il faut trouver un endroit où ils ont des choses, des sacs, des boîtes, des boîtes, des boîtes, des boîtes, des boîtes, des boîtes... et ce que j'ai fait par 1976, la première fois que j'ai pu me occuper et travailler pour moi-même. Restez-y, s'il vous plaît." Then there is a postcard mailed the same year: "In your case we're looking for Italy, this year for five months. It is slightly late in December. We're doing a thorough job of visiting this lovely city and we're now about to spend our time in the city. Rest regards, Manique!" "That was nine years ago... On the floor are two suitcases, one on top of the other, the top of them is spilling over with clothes. For last night, I don't go through it. The other is locked. It belongs to a certain G., a confiding captain who lives in



I keep the books, because it is very exciting to do a book. It's more sensual. Actually I had a big conversation with [artist and curator] Daniel Buren. When I chose Daniel Buren as a curator—you know I made an ad in the paper? I was invited to show at the Venice Biennale. I represented France in the French Pavilion. The rule in France is that you choose your curator. I didn't know which curator to choose, because I didn't have strong links with any curator. I published an ad that was in *ArtForum*, in *Le Monde*, in *Libération*, in German papers, Italian, saying, 'Sophie Calle, artist, invited to represent France at the next Venice Biennale, is searching for a curator. Please send a motivation letter and a curriculum vitae.' I got 200 answers (some being pathetic), and hardly any curators had the courage to answer. Maybe they were all afraid I would use their letter to make fun of them.

[Buren] answered more for political reasons. He was interested by the way it was, in a way, to attack curators in a subtle, gentle way. Because now there is such a power of curators, it's the curator who has a name.

Like this show last year in the Grand Palais with 16 curators, there was no artist named. I refused that show because it was a curators' show. My way was to say, 'I hire you.' By luck, Daniel Buren answered, and I took him.

He really thought about the structure of the show, he drew it, he more than did his job. He saved me. We discussed the show for six months. And he made me a critic. He said that, for him, my problem was my work on the wall was like a page of a book. He wanted me to make more separation between books and wall, to think more of the wall. He saw that even if I was starting with a wall, I was doing on the wall the pages of a book. Which was true. *Take care of yourself* is a very different work from the book.

For example, 'the Feminist' has one page in the book where she describes the finished creation. In the work, she finished her text by, 'PheW.' The work is only a mirror that says, 'PheW.'

**Without the text?**  
In the show, you have the text in front. But my

work is just the 'PheW.' That's one example. Each work I try to work in terms of what they say.

**You thought about aesthetics in a whole different way.**  
Not only aesthetics, but instead of thinking about the 106 answers, I thought about one at a time. In the book, it's 106 [answers], because it's a page of the book. It's really, seriously different.

**Did the approach you discussed with Buren give you quite a bit of freedom?**  
It was much more playful. I was even afraid to be too much like a student in art school...

**Let me try this, let me try that...**  
Exactly. Because it was new for me to try this, so I had to restrain myself.

**You also must have felt a security from knowing that while [Buren] pushed you, he was also there to help you edit and choose what to show.**  
He really protected me, strongly. I had no fear

in Venice when it was a big challenge because I felt he was protecting me. The show went to Paris, in a very, very difficult place [the Bibliothèque Nationale]. The place was more beautiful than anything I have ever had. Venice and Paris had exactly the opposite problem. In Venice, it was how to put my work, in the best way, in a very classical environment. In Paris, it was how not to destroy the environment and show my work as discretely as possible.

**[Buren] lives in Paris?**

He lives in Paris, but last year he took the plane 300 times.

**I thought / traveled.**

I didn't travel for three years. I had the show at Paula [Cooper Gallery] three years ago. At the time, my close friend was kidnapped in Iraq. Then my mother died, and after that I was invited to Venice... So I could not travel when my mother was dying, I could not travel when my girlfriend was kidnapped... Actually it's quite interesting, the story. She's a journalist from *Libération*—now she's at the *Nouvel Observateur*—and I wanted to do a project with her, because I wanted to compare her vision as a journalist to my vision as an artist. We chose as a subject 'people that disappeared,' and she was kidnapped in the beginning of the project. We were working on disappearance and we found it...

**Would she be, besides Paul Auster [for *Double Game*, (2000)], the only other person you've collaborated with?**

[The piece with] my husband was a collaboration—with Greg [Shephard for *No Sex Last Night*]. Ah! I'm doing [a collaboration] now. There's a show in September at Emmanuel Perrotin. I've been working [for] three years with a clairvoyant [for *Où et Quand* (2004/2008)], and I ask her where she sees me. I'm trying to go in the direction of my future.

She took the card and said, 'I see you in the north.' So I went to the north. I took the train, and I said, 'Where do I go now?' She said such a city, then I sent her a photo and I said, 'What do I do now? Do I take the yellow hotel or the blue one?' So, she looks at the picture: 'Take the blue one.' She directs me through the photos and the cards in Paris. I went to two cities already and I could not go further. The idea was to be much more free. The problem was that there was my mother and Venice. And now [this] trip. I don't have the freedom to go

and see her and say, 'Okay, you have the next year, it's yours.'

**How did you pick this clairvoyant?**

I went to see her one day long, long ago, and I loved her vocabulary. I love the way she talked. Not what she said; I don't particularly believe in clairvoyants.



**People always ask me with my work, 'Why do you think people participate?'**

If you ask somebody [something] that they are used to, like, 'Please can you help me to move from my apartment to another?' they will say, 'Why would I help you? You have a truck, you can pay people to do it.' But if you ask them something they were not expecting: 'Would you please sleep in my bed?' they are not prepared to say yes or no because it is something that is not in the sphere of their use. They don't say yes or no, they answer, 'Why not?' And 'Why not?' means yes at the end.

[*Où et Quand*] is a collaboration with two

different purposes. For her, it's to step out of what she does; for me, it's to play with the idea of obedience. It's a little like the work [with] Paul Auster. You ask [for] a script to be written, and you just obey. You don't have to think. You can just let yourself go and follow the script, and no matter what happens you are not responsible. There you go, and wherever it goes, it goes.

**Do you ever stop in the middle of a project?**

I've never had to. I wish one day I don't [have] control, [to] see what happens. When I stopped following the man in Venice, I stopped when he came back to Paris. It seemed logical. Many times the ends come by themselves. [With] Paul Auster, for example, I gave him one year of my life. This would have been a heavy rule. It means to leave your house, your friends. If he decided to put me in Alaska, [for] one year I stop working, being in my house. It never happened, because the two or three people I proposed to give them a year of my life refused the responsibility, but I was ready to do it. And the clairvoyant, I gave her a long time, but she understood that with my mother and Venice that she could not play with that.

**But you have rules in your life?**

My rules are in very indeterminate periods of action, of time. It's interesting [when] you say 'Okay, [the rules] will start January 2nd at 2:00 and stop January 16th at 4:00.' That's very practical, for that time you just don't even have to choose what you do. If it's boring, it's not your fault; it's part of the rules. It's so restful. Me, I have no children, no husband, no obligation, no job—I mean, except the one I'm doing—so nothing obliges me to wake up. I only have a cat that I am responsible for, but if tomorrow I want to disappear or sleep for six months, except for my cat, I can do it.

I've arranged my life to have no obligations of any kind. I refuse most—not Venice. When they tell you in one year you have Venice, you don't say no. But, for example, I have propositions for lectures in many places. I don't say yes ever, because I don't want to have any obligation in my life except an obligation you cannot refuse.

As I say, nothing obliges me. I have no family, nothing, and I like the feeling of that freedom. I don't use it. I stayed in Paris three years without traveling, but I need the feeling of that freedom.

