

Dossier | Fragility in Sophie Calle: Between Affect and Community

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Sophie Calle, « Correctrice Valérie Lermite », Prenez soin de vous, DHC/ART, 2008.
Photo: © Richard-Max Tremblay, courtesy DHC/ART Fondation pour l'art contemporain, Montréal

Fragility in Sophie Calle: Between Affect and Community **By Chantal Tourigny Paris**

Intimacy and affect are active forces in the work of Sophie Calle. The combination of self and play [je/jeu] drives a practice where ambiguity is the engine and narration oscillates between reality and fiction. These creative modes inject a dose of precariousness in her work. Thus, Calle's approach should be considered through the lens of the fragile. Her whole body of work has developed around issues and operational modes charged with fragility. She bases her art on human vulnerability and misery. Loss, pain, solitude, failure, death, absence, and emotional drifting are at the origin of her pieces, which often present themselves as an outlet for her personal stumbling blocks. The place she gives to chance, encounter and the unknown as well as her openness towards the other in the creative process are modes of production that make the work, in its outcomes, and Calle herself precarious.

Calle's beginnings as an artist seem to have laid the groundwork for the aesthetics of failings and contingency that would characterize her work. In *Les dormeurs* (1979), she successively invited twenty-eight people, mostly strangers she met on the street, to sleep in her bed in an effort to occupy it without interruption for eight days. The work compiled photographs of these bodies caught in moments of abandon, as well as the artist's notes on the unfolding of the operation, which had its stormy episodes. In a manner announcing the whole of Calle's production, sown with approximate truths that institute zones of uncertainty, the part played by chance in these astonishing encounters was questionable. However, the predominance of the fortuitous set the foundation for a production that would be riddled with erratic movements, whose subjects would bear the mark of hardships and human failings.

Trial as Material: The Shared Work

In two recent works, *Où et quand? Berck* (2004-08) and *Où et quand? Lourdes* (2005-08), (1) Calle is guided by Maud Kristen, a clairvoyant reputed for her talents and in whose hands she placed her personal and artistic fate. Although Kristen initially hesitated to participate in the project because of the power the artist conferred on her, she finally accepted to lend herself to the exercise, limiting her predictions to where and when Calle ought to go. This led her to two mythical destinations and cult locations: Berck, a therapeutic centre, and Lourdes, a place of miracles, where those who have suffered the trials of the body or of the soul go to be freed from their ailments. The two works borne from this initiatory journey recount in texts and images the trajectory of the artist who, after setting out blindly, probed the forces of synchrony to fulfil her quest for meaning. Here, the principles of chance and coincidence act again as determining forces in the artwork, with suffering, sickness, and death as their backdrops.

Similarly, the work *Prenez soin de vous* developed in the framework of a double affliction: the artist's loss of both her mother and her lover. A look back at the process allows us to grasp the import of fragility in Calle's work, how strongly it is inscribed in its material, modalities and finality, thus multiplying its possibilities. In *Prenez soin de vous*, Calle submitted the break-up letter sent to her by her ex-lover to 107 women from diverse fields, asking them to analyze it based on their professional perspective. This operation gave rise to an exercise in translation and interpretation in 107 voices, rendered in image and sound by Calle. The work stages a sophisticated and imaginary display with as many versions as there are specializations. Moreover, it would seem that such an operation also sparked personal reactions from the respondents since the letter's topic—falling out of love—stroke a sensitive chord in the makers as well as in the viewers of the work. This dynamic ensured that the initial intimate act dissolved in an accumulation and interlacing of the senses, and unburdened itself of its specificity under the tautological effect of appropriation and the taking up of the subject by numerous participants. The outcome is a defetishizing of the artwork since Calle invites interventions from multiple professional fields in a shared relation of validity. At the onset, the principle of collaboration that constitutes the work

makes it shift into relational aesthetics. *Prenez soin de vous* is an act of pure mediation, instituted by a participative dynamic that prompts different agents to take action. In this context, Calle's ultimate role consists in uniting players and activating mediation, which seems to become the purpose of the work and its discourse. It is interesting to note that the three exhibitions of *Prenez soin de vous* (2) gave rise to just as many presentations. The latitude given to the curators in terms of spatial organization produced formal modifications that also changed perception. The exhibition booklet (3), which presents the entire contents of the show, becomes itself a distinct version of a work that exists in various modes and moments of production. Although this collaborative component was already indirectly present in Calle's previous works, in *Prenez soin de vous* it reaches its peak to become a creative matrix, one of its constitutive issues. The artwork's intertextuality and interdisciplinarity explode its meanings and limits, hence multiplying its vanishing points. Such porosity, such eclecticism, and such sharing of the creative act undermine the artistic gesture.

States of Art

According to contemporary sociologist Nathalie Heinich, "an artwork can find its place as art only through the cooperation of a complex network of players." (4) Her field of inquiry takes into account "everything that occurs between a work and its reception," (5) such as the people, institutions, words, and things that effect the work and participate in its realization, to borrow Heinich's terminology. This approach, which considers art from a sociological perspective of mediation, seems completely in synch with contemporary art concerns. In our hypermodern context, various players have an actual part in a piece's development, in cooperation with the artist, or as an extension of his or her work.

Art increasingly borrows and solicits the expertise of other spheres—social, scientific, technological, and so forth—to constitute and reflect itself. In an international context, art must also depend on different collaborative networks (curators, institutional partners, sponsors, critics, viewers, and collectors) to disseminate, legitimize, and sell itself. It is dependent on this chain of partners. These modes of mediation, as well as their underlying structural and semantic hybridizations, do not fail to destabilize today's artworks and their paradigms. In a collection of her essays published under the title *De la valeur de l'art* (6) on the origin of artistic rarity, Raymonde Moulin demonstrates how contemporary art has operated a displacement of the valorization of the object towards the author and, by extension, a transfer of rarity. Once linked to materiality and evaluated on the basis of authenticity, originality, and uniqueness, the notion of artistic value can no longer operate under the same criteria. Her thoughts have reached the art of the twenty-first century. On the one hand, the principle of collaboration that conditions and constitutes a number of current artworks induces a delegation of production or of authorship that blurs the figures of creativity and author. (7) On the other hand, art's ever changing forms and contents, its evanescence, ubiquity and dependence on curators' intentions and venues beg the question: how do we archive it in order to perpetuate it?

Through the socializing process that constitutes it, *Prenez soin de vous* brings together such issues. Calle problematizes her own status as well as the integrity and finality of the artwork. Furthermore, her work sets the stage for relational dynamics and its uses in the art world and, indirectly, for the social mechanisms of our technological era. Creativity is no longer the act of a single player. The writing of history is now the privilege of all; it is inscribed and shared on the screen as it is in the media, a situation for which is largely responsible the web, its network and the ensuing breaching of boundaries. (8) These unprecedented openings impact on a form of art that is connected to the context where it finds its source. In becoming a relationship and an amalgam, art lends itself to precariousness. Its new creative paradigms are “fragilizing” factors for a discipline that struggles to define and circumscribe itself—an art form that is simultaneously thought of in terms of *malaise* (Rancière), the undecidable (*esse*), and crisis (Michaud). Paradoxically, its precariousness is also its strength, as exemplified by Calle who turns her misfortunes into constructive action. Mediation, variety of renderings, ideas and meanings constitute the fertile part of art, what allows it to innovate, evolve, feed and offer itself to us.

[Translated from the French by Vivian Ralickas]

NOTES

1. These works were presented in Paris in September of 2008. To see them, please consult the following website: www.galerieperrotin.com.
2. French pavilion of the 52nd Venice Biennale, 10 June to 21 November 2007; Labrouste room of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, 29 March to 8 June 2008; DHC/ART Foundation for Contemporary Art, Montreal, 4 July to 19 October 2008.
3. Sophie Calle, *Prenez soin de vous*, Sophie Calle, exhibition catalogue presented at the French pavilion of the 52nd Venice Biennale, 10 June to 21 November 2007 (Arles: Actes sud, 2007).
4. Nathalie Heinich, *Sociologie de l'art* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2001), 58.
5. Heinich, 58.
6. Raymonde Moulin, *De la valeur de l'art* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), 161.
7. To gain a better insight into this subject, see Jean-Marc Poinot, *Quand l'œuvre a lieu. L'art exposé et ses récits autorisés* (Villeurbanne, Genève, Institut d'art contemporain, Musée d'art moderne et contemporain, 1999).
8. This idea was developed by Grégory Chatonsky in a paper on “customerism,” presented at Vidéographe Production in Montreal as a part of the training for DAISI (Design des arts interactifs et esthétique de l'interactivité) on 11 October 2008.