



SOPHIE CALLE

[ARTIST]

“I WILL NEVER THINK ABOUT GIVING ANY ADVICE ABOUT HOW TO LIVE, TO ANYBODY.”

Things more or less as rare as a good artist:

A good meal

A good friend

A good movie

A good weekend

When I entered the luxurious suite at the Lowell Hotel, the women were setting up. There were one or two assistants, a publicist, and Sophie Calle, one of the best-known French artists of her generation, dressed in a blue and green smock over a tight black shirt, black tights, and flats. She was shaking out rice from a box onto and around a wedding cake, which was centered on a coffee table in the middle of the sitting room. In two hours, select guests and press would be invited in to see this, her latest piece, the commissioned *Room*, a weekend-long installation that was part of a contemporary-art festival hosted by the Alliance Française in Manhattan.

Calle has been exhibiting, in her home of Paris and internationally, since the early 1980s. Of her work, Roberta Smith wrote in the *New York Times*, “She makes her art by invad-

ing the lives of others, with or without their consent, recording their thoughts, shadowing their movements or examining their belongings. Her main tools are the camera and the notebook.” Some of her most celebrated pieces include *Room with a View* (2002), for which she took up residency in a bed at the top of the Eiffel Tower one night and invited people to come read her bedtime stories, and the early, controversial *Address Book* (1983). After finding a stranger’s address book in the street, she called the numbers written inside and interviewed the stranger’s contacts about him, building an imaginary profile of the man, which she published, in twenty-eight installments, in a French daily paper. The owner of the address book threatened to sue. She is also known for her birthday parties: for years, she invited the same number of guests as her age, plus one “mystery guest,” who was invited by one of her guests. Each attendee brought a present that she would display for an entire year in a glass-fronted cabinet in her home.

She stopped having the parties after thirteen years. The gifts were exhibited as The Birthday Ceremony (1998) at the Tate.

I circled the sitting room, bedroom, and bathroom, taking in the exhibit as the preparations continued. Sophie Calle asked me several times, "Have you looked around the rooms?" After many assurances, we at last sat down. She had chosen for us two elegant, cushioned chairs against the wall, close to each other yet separated by a tiny, high table. On the table was a large cup and saucer, the cup stained with dried coffee. Beside the cup was a small white board printed with a paragraph of text, situating the cup in the life (real or fictional) of Sophie Calle (real or fictional). Despite knowing this, I was disappointed later on to learn that the cup had been acquired and stained on this trip to New York, not kept by Calle from a coffee date long ago, as the caption insisted.

The cup was the most innocuous of the forty-odd objects around the suite, each accompanied by text. In the bedroom, a filmy red wedding dress lay draped across a charred bed. On the bathroom counter was a wig, and in the sitting room, where we talked, an empty baby carriage stood in the corner.

Calle sat down in a determined way, seeming neither flustered from her preparations nor nervous about the coming guests, though not infrequently during our interview she would turn to glance at an object in the room, or call out to an assistant to fix something. There was still much to be done before seven.

—Sheila Heti

I. HOW RARE?

THE BELIEVER: The first question I have is about the role of women versus men in your work. It seems to me that the place of men has something to do with disappointment, and the place of women seems to be about sharing an experience.

SOPHIE CALLE: I don't discuss it. If it's what you feel is in the work, it's fine with me. I have no message of that kind to give.

BLVR: When I saw *Take Care of Yourself* at the Paula Cooper Gallery, there was a Dear John letter you were sent. And you gave it to all these women in different fields, to interpret it—

SC: I could have asked men to interpret it. I asked women

because it was specifically, for me, a letter of a man to a woman, and since I wanted people to answer for me, it seems more logical that women answer for me, since I am a woman. I could have asked men. But I didn't do it, because I didn't want the work to become a fight between women and men. So I asked women because it was more logical, given the fact that I am a woman.

BLVR: You have said that the pain of the breakup went away within a month of starting the project. Do you think that's because the pain was shared with other people? Did making the art result in the feeling going away?

SC: I don't do the art as therapy. Sometimes it works as therapy, sometimes it doesn't. But it's not the purpose. If it works as therapy, well, good for me, but it's not.

BLVR: But it's interesting that it ended up getting rid of the suffering—

SC: Maybe I would have gotten rid of it going to Japan for a month; maybe I could have gotten rid of it buying a nice dress; maybe I could have gotten rid of it meeting another man. It just happened that in *this* case it got rid of it—but I don't say art is *the* solution to get rid of it.

BLVR: No. There is no single solution to get rid of that pain.

SC: And if the work is bad, and I get rid of the pain, then I would have destroyed the work.

BLVR: Do you ever feel like your life and what you're working on stop being in sync, so that you're working on a project you can't relate to anymore?

SC: No, because if I don't relate to it anymore, I don't do it. But sometimes the project is not about my life, so then I relate to it if I am in the mood to work.

BLVR: Do the works of art you respond to have anything in common?

SC: I don't know what's in common between Vermeer



The Room, *Prospect.2 Biennial*, 10/22/11–1/29/12. Curated by Dan Cameron. Multiple venues, New Orleans, Louisiana. © Sophie Calle/Artist's Rights Society. Courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

and Bruce Nauman. I respond to both. I don't know. I cannot *pin*.

BLVR: Do you think your idea of what an artist is has changed throughout your life? Thinking about what the word meant to you when you were ten, or—

SC: It didn't mean anything to me, specifically. I didn't have the fantasy of becoming an artist. I didn't study to become an artist. So I didn't develop dreams about being an artist. I knew a little about art because my father was a collector, so it was not completely unknown to me. But I didn't study. I didn't go to museums. I didn't dream of it.

BLVR: Today when you hear the word *artist*, do you feel, like some people feel, like Joseph Beuys felt, that everybody is an artist? Or do you feel like actually not everybody is an artist, that some people aren't artists?

SC: I cannot answer those general questions, because somebody can be an artist—make a very nice, beautiful work; very artistic, very poetic, and, after, nothing happens. Also, what does it mean to be an artist? It's more about, is it a good artist? Because to be an artist, you know, yes, maybe everybody—but a good artist, that's another story.

BLVR: Do you feel like you see many good artists, or is it a rare thing?

SC: Not more rare than a good movie, or than a good meal, or than a good friend. Rare and not that rare. You know, like the rest. A good weekend. [Laughter]

II. THE MOON

BLVR: What was the moon like the night you were sleeping in the Eiffel Tower?

SC: I don't know. It was such bad weather and raining and snow and a lot of wind. This I remember. I don't remember the moon. But I remember the extremely tough weather. Cold and rainy and snowing.

BLVR: It's not what you predicted, obviously.

SC: No, I didn't predict anything about the weather.
[Laughter]

III. THE VOW

BLVR: I wonder how you felt about the depiction of your birthday parties in Grégoire Bouillier's book *The Mystery Guest*?

SC: I think it was exact. I don't remember well, but I guess it was exact.

BLVR: Did you read a draft of the book before it came out? Did he tell you what he was writing about?

SC: He must have, because I did the cover.

BLVR: You made the cover for the book?

SC: Yes. So I must have known, since I made the cover.

BLVR: He was an old boyfriend of yours. You said that in your current relationship your boyfriend asked you not to make art about him. Does that change your relationship to somebody—man or woman—if they say, "Don't use me in your work?"

SC: No, because I didn't say I would obey.

BLVR: You just had the request?

SC: He didn't take me to a judge! I didn't have to swear on the—

BLVR: Would you ever agree not to use somebody? If somebody said—

SC: I agree! And I can change my mind! You agree to marry somebody and to be married forever, and then you want to divorce. You know: "I agree. Yes, I agree, and then we'll see."

BLVR: And he knew that it was that kind of agreement?

SC: I don't know. He knows life. He's not going to ask me to sign with my blood. He knows life. Life is "OK, I agree, and then what? If I change my mind..." What if he *wants* me to write about him? I said yes at the time. I think yes so far. And then... who knows?

IV. CONSIDER A CAT

BLVR: There's a book called *Creativity* that a Hungarian psychology professor wrote. He was interviewing all sorts of people in scientific and artistic fields, trying to understand what the creative personality was—his name is Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi—and he decided that while most people are either introverts or extroverts, or people are either smart or naive—you know, at one end of these poles—the artist actually contains both poles. They are simultaneously opposites. Do you feel this is true?

SC: [Very quietly] I don't know. I don't know. I must be many things simultaneously, but not because I'm an artist, you know. Because I'm a human. Even my *cat* is simultaneously many things.

BLVR: Do you have an idea of yourself as an object, or do you feel—

SC: As an *object*?

BLVR: Well, all around us there are these objects that you've chosen to represent different parts of your life and yourself. Do you understand yourself to be an object like the things in the room?

SC: No. I'm not an object. I'm Sophie Calle, an artist.



BLVR: I wonder if you're interested at all in the idea of an "interior," because I see so much of your work as being about this exterior—

SC: That's not interior? [*Points at the wedding cake on the table*] This? [*Points at the empty coffee cup nearby*]

BLVR: Well, I'm a fiction writer, and for me there *is* this idea that I have of an interior where there is this *deeper, deeper*, and then there is the exterior where it's more the world of things. Sometimes I criticize myself and think I should be *more* interior. Or more exterior.

SC: I don't know what it means.

BLVR: So there's no difference?

SC: It's not that there's no difference. I don't understand the question. For me, with interior things, sometimes it can be a very silly project. Or there can be very deep projects that don't express what I think. You are too much—you always think it's like *that* or like *that* or like *that*!

BLVR: [*Laughs*] It's true. My friends—

SC: I don't think this way. Maybe in a work that looks really tragic I have no feeling! You know, it's not about telling my life, it's not about telling you truth. It's not the truth, obviously. It happened, but it's not truth. Because when I tell a story, one hour after—it's not the truth. It's an editing. It's finding the nice words, writing poetically, having a style. So it's not about telling the truth.

BLVR: Can art ever tell a truth—the truth?

SC: I don't know.

BLVR: Can people tell the truth?

SC: The truth? Which truth? *Your* truth? *Their* truth? The truth today at two o'clock in New York, or the truth tomorrow at five o'clock in Paris? The truth now that

it's raining? What does it mean? Me, I would say things happened or didn't happen, but I would not say that's the truth.

BLVR: So is there a use for that word?

SC: Oh, I don't know. Ask a philosopher, but not me. This is not the kind of question I ask myself.

V. FORTY YEARS OLDER

BLVR: I'm curious about the love letter you received from Damien Hirst. You said you wanted him to send you a love letter, because you had never received a love letter before. I wonder, when you received it, did it give you the feelings—

SC: I didn't want a love letter from Damien Hirst. I happened to be in a show with Damien Hirst. I wrote a text about never receiving a love letter. And Damien Hirst, as a game, said, "Oh, I'm going to send you one." Or maybe I said, "You should send me one." This is forty years ago! Who knows what he said or what I said? I mean, maybe not forty years, but many, many years. I was not dreaming about receiving—I did not *know* Damien Hirst. I met him in that show. He said, "OK, I'm going to send you one." It was not a need I had that I went to look for Damien Hirst and asked for a love letter.

BLVR: And when you received it, did it give you the emotion of a real—?

SC: No. I knew it was not real, but it was so funnily well written that it looked—you know, I had *for a second* the feeling I was a subject of that love letter.

BLVR: Right. But just for a second.

SC: Just for a second.

BLVR: Do you feel like there are differences in the way you make art as you go along? Is it different to make art now than it was at the beginning of your career?



SC: Yeah, obviously. I'm forty years older. I'm more successful. The world has changed. It's obviously not the same. But it's not the same for me if I want to pick up a man. It's not the same when I'm eighteen as when I'm fifty-eight. It's not the same if I want to run in the street—eighteen or fifty-eight. Yes, it's not the same. Definitely. Nothing is the same. [Laughs]

BLVR: What are some of the things—

SC: I don't know.

BLVR: —that are different?

SC: I don't know. Just another world.

BLVR: And another person? Do you feel like another person?

SC: Not even! I just go along. Sometimes I have energy, sometimes I don't. Sometimes I have pleasure, sometimes I just don't. Economically it's easier. But that doesn't change—the kind of work I make doesn't change totally because of the money, you know. I don't make sculptures that cost millions. Even if it's easier economically, that I can go to the lab and choose a frame I want. But then it's minor differences. I used to pushpin the work, now I frame it. OK, big difference. Before I did the photo myself, now I give it to a lab. Does it change the work? No, I don't think so.

BLVR: Does it change the work to have an audience—to have an automatic interest from people?

SC: I don't think when you make it. I have to get excited *myself* by the work. So I don't think it changes, no. Always I thought I should write with a good, clear style, even if there were five people to read it—not to make misspellings, even if it was five people. It doesn't change. I need to find my own interest in doing it. If I think it's good, I don't care if many people are not going to like it, because *I* think it's good.



BLVR: Your project with the clairvoyant, where she tells you where to go—has anything fated-seeming or magical come out of following her suggestions?

SC: No, we've stopped.

BLVR: Why did you stop?

SC: We had played enough with it. We thought we would do it again one day when we have a lot of time and a new idea, energy—I never could obey her long enough. The first time, my mother was sick, then I had the show in Venice, and so I never had enough *disponibilit * just to completely drown in it. We thought, unless we had a new idea about it—

BLVR: How did you find her?

SC: I think somebody must have told me about her. I don't remember. But I liked her. I liked her vocabulary, the way she talked. I wanted to see her again, just for the pleasure.

BLVR: Do you feel like there's truth, in some way, in the visions of psychics?

SC: No, I don't believe in clairvoyants. She knows it. It's not that I believe or don't believe. I didn't do it to prove she was right. I didn't do it to search something. I didn't do it because I thought she would bring me somewhere and I would find out new things. I did it because it was a rule of the game that

I could follow and play and see what happened and observe. And she didn't do it with me to prove she was super-clairvoyant. She also wanted to play and see what happened with an artist. We both were on the same—we didn't use each other.

BLVR: You understood each other.

SC: Yeah. And we didn't try to corner the other. [Laughter]

VI. THE TERRORISM OF CHILDREN

BLVR: When you won the Hasselblad Award in 2010, you accepted it, saying, “Thank you, Mr. Hasselblad, for not having children.”

SC: Yes.

BLVR: I liked that. I understand you don’t have children, and I wonder whether it seems to you like there’s a similar place in one’s life for children and for making things, creating things—

SC: No. For *me*, not for—maybe if I lived in the South of France, I have no more ideas, I’m bored, I don’t know. It’s *me*. Me, I never wanted children. I’m very happy I don’t have children. I don’t like children, also. But... it’s *me*. I don’t make a statement about it.

BLVR: Do you like adults?

SC: Adults? Which one?

BLVR: Well, you said you don’t like children, so I wonder if you like—

SC: I like some adults, yes. And *maybe* I like some children, but in general I don’t like adults with children. I don’t like the terrorism of children. I don’t like the lack of freedom it gives to the parents. And I find that— I mean, it’s more difficult *not* to make children than to make children. It’s very easy to make children. Everybody wants you to make children. Everybody *pushes* you to make children. And once you have children you are obliged to say to the world how beautiful it is, because you cannot regret it. I’m not sure people are telling the truth. Maybe they lie because they *cannot* regret it. They are not allowed.

BLVR: I was in Italy and I spoke to some of the middle-aged women there who had children, and they did seem much

more honest about the experience. One said, “I had a child for my husband and now he’s no longer with me and I have this child.” There was a lot more regret than I find in North American women, who can never say that kind of thing. It’s a great taboo.

SC: I’m sure many, many parents lie totally, because they are stuck with their children. And I understand that they lie. If I had a child, I would lie. I would say how beautiful it is, because what can you say with the child there? You are not going to say you regret it. I’m very happy that I don’t have.

BLVR: I suspect every woman has felt the pressure.

SC: I would say that if I put together every single minute where I felt I was making a mistake, or I felt I should have a child—I’m fifty-eight—maybe there was one day of my life? Maybe? If I add up every minute, every hour? I think it’s less than one day.

BLVR: So there was always a great certainty in that direction.

SC: No desire! You know, I would not say this if there was not this general thing about *you must have* one. I would not even discuss it. I’m discussing it because I was exasperated with the kind of terrorism about having one. Otherwise, I would not defend not having—I would just not speak about it! You have to defend yourself. You have to explain *why* you do not want children.

Everybody wants to know, are you sick? What happened? Or you didn’t find a man? So, given that fact, I have to say, “No no no! I’m sorry, I just don’t like them.”

BLVR: I’m thirty-four and I don’t have children, and I don’t know if I ever would, and I don’t know if I would ever regret it. I have some curiosity about it because it’s an experience that people talk about in such a grand way—



SC: They lie. They lie.

BLVR: [*Laughs*] They lie.

SC: I'm sure they lie.

BLVR: Do you think people also lie about love?

SC: About love? Yes. Sure.

BLVR: What are the lies? The big lies?

SC: That they are happy in a family.

BLVR: That they are happy in a family? [*Laughter*] Do you think it's better to go from person to person than to be in a family?

SC: I don't know! I'm not giving any advice for anybody. I don't think anything! You ask me if people lie, yes, sure they lie. I will never think about giving *any* advice about how to live, to anybody.

BLVR: Why not?

SC: Because it's not my role. People are big enough to decide what they want to do with their life. I don't feel I have the right to say to anybody, "It's better this way or that way." No. Who am I to say to people how they should live?

BLVR: Even to your friends, you do not say?

SC: With my friends I discuss! I don't publish it in a newspaper, giving advice—

BLVR: [*Whispers*] Oh, that's why.

SC: I have conversations with my friends: "What do you think I should do?" "Oh, leave him, don't leave him"—like every friend. I don't answer in interviews about how you should live and who you should be with. I'm not a psychoanalyst. I'm not a doctor. I'm not a counselor. Why would anybody listen to this kind of advice from me? If you tell me something, I don't give a shit

about what you think. You know, I don't know you. You want to give me advice, what do I care? I mean...

BLVR: Well, people might look up—

SC: Well, my friends, yes.

BLVR: Do you think people lie about friendship as much as they lie about—

SC: No, because you don't have to. There is less pressure in the world to have friends. There is pressure not to be alone, and to have a lover; yes, there is a constant "Are you alone?" People don't go around asking how many friends you have, you know. So you don't have to *prove* you have friends. Nobody bothers you with that. But they do bother you with "Are you alone?" You arrive anywhere, in a bar: "Are you alone? On a date?" People don't ask you do you have friends.

BLVR: Do you think people tell the truth about being an artist?

SC: I don't know what it means.

BLVR: About the creative... process, let's say.

SC: I don't know what they say. I have no idea what people say about being an artist.

BLVR: If you didn't have any interaction with the world, could you make art? I mean, to make art, is it always in collaboration with the world?

SC: I don't call it "collaboration" when I follow, for example, somebody I don't know. There is no reciprocity, so no collaboration with the world. If I observe a hotel room, it's not a collaboration with the world, it's just an observer situation. So I don't know what you mean by "collaboration." It's a collaboration when I ask people a question and they answer me, but much of my work is looking at things. Yes, I suppose if I was living on the *moon* by myself and I was the *only human being*—that's what you ask me? ☆