



HAL
open science

“I Lost Myself in Venice and Turned it Into a Piece of Art”

Magali Nachtergaele

► **To cite this version:**

Magali Nachtergaele. “I Lost Myself in Venice and Turned it Into a Piece of Art”: Recycling Loose Moments of Life (Sophie Calle and Boredom). *The Arts in Society*, Jul 2009, Venice, Italy. hal-00558552

HAL Id: hal-00558552

<https://hal.science/hal-00558552>

Submitted on 22 Jan 2011

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

“I Lost Myself in Venice and Turned it Into a Piece of Art”

Recycling Loose Moments of Life (Sophie Calle and Boredom)

By comparing early works of Calle to the 19th-Century attitude of the dandy, I aim to test a hypothesis that came up a long time ago. The starting point was an academic dissertation on Sophie Calle, specifically on the question of truth and fiction. An aspect of her work struck me at the time, but I didn't know what to do with it. It seemed that her work was based on life itself, with a twist, I do agree, but still, it appeared to the public that she was doing almost nothing, or at least, very few. Sophie Calle, now famous French artist born in 1953, came back to Paris in the late 70's after a 7-year long travel all over the world. At the time of her come back, she had no proper job, no friends and actually, nothing to do in Paris. In his novel *Leviathan* (1992) the American writer Paul Auster borrows some features of Sophie Calle's artistic experiments to create a fictional double called Maria Turner, who is depicted as an eccentric photographer. In the novel, he narrates this come back to the city, just like Sophie Calle did, and he explains that she started to follow randomly people in the streets in order to “find new ideas, to fill up the void in which she seemed to sink”. Even if Auster rearranges the facts for his story, Sophie Calle does not disallow the substance of it (on the contrary, she appreciates the ambiguity resulting from this blurring effect). This happened indeed for real in 1978, when Calle left California for Paris, on the basis of a deal with her father who agreed to sponsor her as long as she had found a real activity. One of the reasons Sophie Calle likes to give in interviews to explain why she became an artist is that she wanted to seduce her father. He is now a retired renowned doctor and an art collector who had a flair for contemporary artists, such as Christian Boltanski or the Nouveaux Réalistes in the 60's. The legend (built by Calle herself and that the writer Hervé Guibert helped propagating) says how she discovered that she liked photography. She was living with a friend who had a photographic lab in her basement. During a visit of a Californian cemetery, with the help of her friend, Calle took some pictures of tombstones whose inscriptions were simply “mother”, “brother”, “father”. She decided it was enough of a business to turn it into an everyday occupation.

Nevertheless, and this is what drew my attention, she also mentions time to time that she always hated to be bored; that as a child, she suffered of boredom and that nowadays, anything looking boring to her is absolutely repelling. Considering some interviews or allusions in her work, Sophie Calle seems to have a long history with this question of

“boredom”, a term that embraces, according to my interpretation of her statements, also a lack of inspiration, an annoying state of mind in which nothing new or different can happen. The last time that I was in contact with her for an interview request, that was last year, she invoked again a kind of tedium: “my own answers bore me, she said, except when I make up the story again”. In a sense, we could even consider that her whole work flirts with the limits of boredom, of what is boring or not, of how something tedious at first glance can become enjoyable and exciting. In many of her autobiographical works, she shows stories of her life through pictures and texts, very short texts, which summarize anecdotes and ritual actions made by the artist. Common comments point out that “she does nothing” and that collecting birthday presents or telling memories of her youth cannot be considered as art. Many critics are about the banality of her pictures and the general lack of interest that her stories are supposed to raise. Her worldwide success proves the argument wrong, even if a layer of truth remains in these comments.

But strangely, her very first work, based on “almost nothing”, took place in Venice. Considering her official biography, *The Sleepers*, for which she invited people to make sleep-shifts in her bed, is supposed to be made earlier if we rely on the official chronology. But in fact, she realizes this “performance” in April 1979 while *Suite Vénitienne* takes place in February. She changed the date and situated it in 1980 to avoid troubles with the man she had shadowed in Venice, Henri B. The fact that Venice was the first place where she produced something close to an artwork must be in itself significant and I have the intuition that the choice of Venice was also the one of a cure against “boredom”, a modern illness.

What is the point of shadowing in Venice?

Venice is of course a well-known literary topic, an inspiration for many writers and artists. Drifting in the city has become within the last century in the collective imaginary a poetic and romantic experience. Any story set in Venice can lead to an aesthetic metamorphosis of what appears most of the time like a pointless adventure.

When Sophie Calle, during one of her idle afternoon, shadows a man met in Paris to Venice, she decides to create something most exciting, like in detective stories, starting from a moment where she seemed at loose ends. With suspense effects, Calle sharpens her small

texts to arise the interest of the reader in a very small time-span, on the model of the very-short-story or of the “faits divers” (news in brief). She explains in the prologue of *Suite Vénitienne* that during one day of her ritual “stakeout” in Paris, she started to follow a man but lost him rapidly. In very few words, she exposes the situation: “At the end of January 1980, in the streets of Paris, I followed a man whose I lost tracks a couple of minutes later in the crowd”. By an incredible chance, she was introduced to that very man in an exhibition gallery the same evening. Learning that he planned to go to Venice, she decided to resume her aborted pursuit in the Doge city.

What happens once she arrives there? First, Calle makes a great deal of finding her victim and starts to track him down everywhere. Unfortunately, it takes more time and energy than she thought, and six days pass before he makes his first appearance. We can imagine the long days spent to spot the man in vain. Eventually, she manages to find him, waiting in front of his “Pensione” and wearing a blonde wig not to be recognized. But once again, the tailing is short: the day after finding him, he notices her and strictly forbids her to continue following him. Then, she spends the rest of her stay imagining which places he would visit and she goes there, taking pictures, noting down her impressions and fantasies on the man. The shadowing lasted 2 days, although Calle stayed 2 weeks in Venice. In the case of Calle, the relative vacuity of the wandering does not lead to anything substantial, concrete, except for the narrative that comes up afterwards to build a story, which uplifts it to a real individual myth. We don’t learn anything on the man, Henri B., nor on the city. There is no crime, no love affair (except maybe an allusion of a night spent with an harlequin on a bench during the Carnival). So why isn’t it boring to read? On the one hand, the rhythm of the diary, written like a surveillance report with photographs, gives the illusion that the fifteen days passed by rapidly. On the other, she spends a lot of time rewriting the texts (the last day of surveillance is not the same on the diary and in the final version of the book, nor in the second edition). And finally, the setting of Venice always made plausible the romance that didn’t happen.

Two years later, in 1981, Sophie Calle came back to Venice. This time, she didn’t follow anybody in the streets. Though, she used another technique of surveillance: she got hired in a hotel as a room maid and inspected every personal items of the clients left in the rooms during her cleaning hours. This means also that Calle needed a “job” this time, and that in addition of this job, to make it more exciting, she spied on the clients. The results there again is a captivating display of a descriptive diary, with lists of objects, and their pictures. In this case,

Calle's style (short sentences) and invention (she tends to induce fiction around the clients, about their life and reasons to be in Venice) make what could be a dull account an exciting list of descriptions, without any visible characters, nor plot.

The reason why Venice has been the starting point of Calle's artist career comes from, to my opinion, the mythical "touristic" status that the city gained since modern times. It is not the great history of arts that has any attraction here (it is barely mentioned). Still Venice, in a sense, is not an innocent place where people come to find inspiration. It is also the symptom of boredom "outside" Venice, meaning, boredom in the modern cities (Paris), where periods of inactivity, desired or not, can happen to anybody. This new condition of modern life created an opportunity for mass boredom, characterized by the "sundays" and the apparition of amusements but also of tourism (we can read Kracauer's analysis on the question in *The Ornament of the Mass* and think, of course, about the Grand tour). In the 20th Century, when Calle goes to Venice, she appears to be part, but with distance and irony, of a kind of "boredom" business. On one of Calle's diary, she taped a newspaper headline in front of one of her surveillance report: "It is a shame for the young unemployed". And indeed, basically, following a tourist in Venice for her first piece of art was, in 1979, a very new topic in art but also, a very modern piece (maybe postmodern).

Venice, an old cure for a modern "ennui"?

As Venice seems to be a good place to "recycle" the dull moments of life, I will now have a closer look at the status of Venice in the realm of literary creation and the question of boredom.

Venice is a topic in classical literature but it also appeared in modern performances. Sophie Calle can be considered as a direct heiress of both, as she uses literary narrative patterns (detective story) but also a direct experiment with the city, which can be qualified as "drifting". Theorized as the "dérive" by the Situationists in the fifties, the activity of drifting in the streets is a preliminary statement for an aesthetic transformation of loose moments of life. The Situationists are a French group of avant-garde founded in July 1957 from, amongst others, the Internationale Lettriste and the Psychogeographical committee of London. Guy Ernest Debord, who became famous for his book on the "Society of Spectacle" was the head of the group and he theorized new practices of the city in order to fight the established

“bourgeoise” modern way of life. Their first experiments of the “derive” took place in Paris. They produced “psychogeographical reports” of the city. One member of the group was sent to Venice to make a report. Unfortunately, Ralph Rumney (who died recently) lost the battle against the city: “Venise a vaincu Ralph Rumney” announces the first issue of the review “L’Internationale situationniste” in June 1958. Rumney, gone for an exploration of the city, ended up in a “static position”. At that point, the project was a failure, according to the idea that it was supposed to “obtain an exciting use of life”, in spite of all the “defenses of a world of boredom” (“il s’agit de parvenir à un usage passionnant de la vie. On se heurte naturellement à toutes les défenses d’un monde de l’ennui”).

Wandering in the street is an antique intellectual and poetic activity that had a considerable success in the modern cities from the 19th Century onwards, and especially in the big 20th Century metropolis. From Berlin (Benjamin) to Paris (Surrealists) to New York (Vito Acconci), many writers, poets or philosophers have talked about the activity of walking in the street. As a poetic and philosophical motive, walking has indeed an inspirational power, if we only think about Rousseau’s *Rêveries d’un promeneur solitaire*, later about Baudelaire’s *Spleen de Paris* (or in the 20th Century Aragon’s *Le Paysan de Paris* and André Breton’s *Nadja*). Nevertheless, Baudelaire’s views of Paris and the apparition of modern life lead us to consider the dark side of this activity. Baudelaire is a good start to enter into the various definitions in French of the word “ennui”, which I translated “boredom”. But it encompasses more than the sensation of lassitude, as it gave in English the verb “to annoy” that implies an unpleasant disturbance. The “ennui” is also considered as an illness, which makes the body secrete the black bile. But many other words express this changing feeling: tedium, mental fatigue, worry, tiresomeness, weariness, ...

As a non-modern city, Venice has a paradoxical status in the urban imaginary starting from the mid 19th-Century. But Venice has always had a mesmerizing power on writers and artists, even if the city appears to be far from heaven for the visitor. So the cure of the “ennui” can be a poison too. For Marcel Proust, in *Search of Lost Time*, it is bound to oblivion and disappearance: when the narrator comes to Venice, he is trying to forget his lost love, Albertine, dead in a horse-riding accident. He comes to visit the city with his mother but decides to stay a little longer without her. When he finds himself alone at the terrace of a café, hearing “*O Sole Mio*” in a loop, he sees the city stumble into pieces and dissolve itself. The city has nothing more to give him and he quickly leaves to meet up with his mother at the

train station for Paris. Calle, in *Suite Venitienne*, quotes Proust while following Henri B., the last sentence of “Un Amour de Swann” (Swann speaking of Odette, his wife): “Dire que j’ai gâché des années de ma vie, que j’ai voulu mourir et que j’ai eu mon plus grand amour pour une femme qui ne me plaisait pas, qui n’était pas mon genre”.

Similarly, Thomas Mann lets a negative experience happen to his main character of *Death in Venice*. The city, stricken by an epidemic of cholera, is strangely empty. Gustav von Aschenbach, a German writer, chooses to come on impulse to the city. Once there, having nothing particular to do, he focuses his attention and desire on a young boy, Tadzio, who is there like him for vacations at the Grand Hôtel des Bains, on the Lido. His interest turns soon into an obsession, and the city becomes the décor of a tragedy between Aschenbach and the young boy. Venice, because it is a place where the remaining European nobility and the high bourgeoisie came for the arts, for luxurious Carnivals and *farniente* by the sea shore, is supposed to be an entertaining city where anything can happen. The city helps fighting a new condition of modern life described by Schopenhauer in *The World as Will and Representation*, the appearance of “sundays” entitled for boredom (that he attributes to the middle class, but also he notes that “People of Wealth and the so called upper class suffer the most from boredom”). He considered boredom and pain as the worst enemies of man, life oscillating like a pendulum between them. Starting from the 19th-Century, the vacuity of these holidays filled up the life of the dandies or “nouveaux riches” who claimed for an “otiose” life. Sophie Calle, as daughter of a doctor who pays for her to come back in Paris and sponsors her life as a photographer, is a kind of “postmodern” dandy, who makes life an art with almost nothing but attitudes and rituals. There is some Des Esseintes, the decadent character of Joris Karl Huysmans in *A Rebours*, to find in Calle, and layers of literary characters, that echoes in her work and make it more exciting than it basically is.

Two years ago, for the Biennale of Venice, Sophie Calle was representing France with a masterpiece, curated by Daniel Buren, “Take care of yourself”. Personally, if I couldn’t criticize the high quality of the work, something in it didn’t touch me. And compared to the other piece that was exhibited at the same time in the Central International exhibition, curated by Robert Storr, the comparison is hard to stand. Calle exhibited a movie in which she had filmed her mother : she was dying. The seven minutes of the video were her last ones. For this work, called “Pas pu saisir la mort” (“The Last Breath, Impossible to Capture”) Calle, as

usual, made a text to go along with the movie, explaining the context and why she decided to make it. If we think about the very first works of Calle in the Californian cemetery, there is a clear continuity in the works. But she also mentions the last wills of her mother, one concerning her epitaph that draws us back to our starting point. She wanted a single sentence on her tombstone: “Je m’ennuie déjà” - I am already bored.

Magali Nachtergaele

Conference on Arts in Society, Venice, July 2009