



© Sophie Calle / Paula Cooper Gallery, Fraenkel Gallery and Galerie Perrotin

Sophie Calle, “Take Care of Yourself. Laurie Anderson” (2007, video detail).

Calle’s labors of love

By Charles Desmarais

The French artist Sophie Calle — I accept that she is an artist, though “visual author” may be more apt — will make you cry. She will do it with sublime efficiency. A blurred photograph. A three-word phrase. A video clip of the back of a head, the ocean’s horizon fanning from a kerchief quivering in the breeze.

Her work is not visual art, not short story, not autobiography but all three, and then some.

She is a correspondent from love’s front lines, an impresario of one-act tragedies. In her works, memory and longing become almost concrete things, subject to a kind of emotional inspection — one that yields few answers but can be as gruesomely detailed and as fascinating as a vivisection.

Sophie Calle: Missing:

Noon-8 p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sundays. Through Aug. 20. Free; advance tickets recommended. Fort Mason Center for Arts and Culture, 2 Marina Blvd., S.F. (415) 345-7575. www.fortmason.org.

Sophie Calle: My Mother, My Cat, My Father, in That Order:

1-7 p.m. Wednesdays-Thursdays; noon-7 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays. Through Aug. 26. Free. FraenkelLab, 1632 Market St., S.F. (415) 347-8366. <https://fraenkelgallery.com/fraenkellab>

Calle continues on E2

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



Andria Lo / Courtesy FMCAC

Installation view of Sophie Calle’s “Voir la mer” in the Firehouse at Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture.

Calle: works that go deeper than art

Calle from page E1

I might tell you about the plot of a book, but that would not help you to know if you would be moved by it. So it is with Calle’s installations of photographs, video and text. The themes of four projects, assembled as an exhibition called “Missing” at Fort Mason Center for Arts and Culture through Aug. 20, will intrigue you: “The Last Image” (2010) deals with the visual memories of individuals who lost the sense of sight at some point in their lives. “Voir la Mer” (2011) silently observes as people experience the sea for the first time. “Rachel Monique” (2007) is built around the death of the artist’s mother. The largest and best known, “Take Care of Yourself” (2007), enlists the aid of interpretive specialists in coming to terms with a breakup letter, received via email from a lover. The piece occupied the entire French Pavilion at the 2007 Venice Biennale. But none of this description can prepare you for the deeply intimate encounters into which you will enter. Nor will the setting, at first. Fort Mason was built as a military facility, and its concrete, steel and cinder block construction materials were not chosen for their sentimental associations. Gradually, however, the logic of the layout takes over. An exhaustive catalog of visual and verbal responses in “Take Care of Yourself” is laid out on long tables and spread out like charts and maps on the walls of the crisply functional Gallery 308. The callous email, maybe 600 words of jilting defensiveness, is analyzed through the agency of 107 women with differing expertise. It is translated into braille, stenographic shorthand, Morse and binary code. A proofreader marks its repetitions and awkwardnesses. A headhunter determines that the letter shows “a lack of courage” and “limited imagination,” but allows that the writer’s manner



Photo © Kate Elliott, FraenkelLab / © Sophie Calle / Artists Rights Society

Sophie Calle’s “Autobiographies (Mouse)” (2017, detail) documents the death of the artist’s cat Souris.

might be useful in a company that was laying off workers “with the hope that it did not stir up too much protest from the unions.” Presented in a grid on one wall are video recordings of the letter as it is acted, sung and danced. In a large projection in another room, a sharpshooter fires at it from a long distance, obliterating three occasions of the word “love” with three bullets. “Voir la Mer” (“To See the Sea”) is displayed in the firehouse, where windows open to San Francisco Bay. Five video screens are each filled with the head of a man or woman, seen from behind. Beyond them,

there are only waves and sky. The poor of Turkey are referred to as “the people that never saw the sea,” Calle told an audience at a recent talk. Those are the people Calle brought to this place from just a few miles away, and upon whose eyes, as they turn from the view, the camera sharply focuses. Nearby, another work also deals with sight. For a piece in the mid-1980s, Calle asked people blind from birth to talk about their idea of beauty. Here, for “The Last Image,” she prompted people who had lost their sight to describe memories of the last thing they saw. One remembers a sunrise on



© Sophie Calle / Adagp, Paris & ARS, New York

Calle, “Rachel Monique. Couldn’t Capture Death” (2007, detail), on the death of the artist’s mother.

the day of a botched operation. Another describes a hunter as he raises his gun. “Rachel Monique” is presented in the fort’s chapel. A video is projected at the front, where an altar would be in some churches. We are told it is a recording of Calle’s mother in her final minutes, though we have no idea from the image of any difference, any boundary between living and dying. Arrayed around the room, like Stations of the Cross, are memories and stories in photographs and text. The Jeffrey Fraenkel Gallery’s Market Street outpost, FraenkelLab, is presenting a touching, related Sophie Calle

exhibition. “My Mother, My Cat, My Father, in That Order” comprises responses to the deaths of cherished beings in the life of the artist, who has no children. One text from the chapel installation of “Rachel Monique” appears in a different format at the gallery. It reads, “On December 27, 1986, my mother wrote in her diary: ‘My mother died today.’/ On March 15, 2006, in turn, I wrote in mine: ‘My mother died today.’/ No one will say this about me./ The end.” Charles Desmarais is The San Francisco Chronicle’s art critic. Email: cdesmarais@sfgchronicle.com Twitter: @Artguy1