

PERSONAL STUDY

Often, Sophie Calle is debatably seen as an excessive, obsessive, compulsive and stalkerish photographer, with her even saying that "objects always meet your obsession. Once you have an obsession, you step on it at every corner". Despite Calle's controversy, she's received many awards, like the 'Praemium Imperiale Award', highlighting her achievements in photography and further recognising how her work artistically blurs the social line between privacy and a display of public documentation. Often, people want to hide away from the eye of public attention, but Calle's work exposes all their flaws and presents them for the wider world to see. Calle has mentioned "I have a little magnet brain that attracts the kind of things that obsess me", further enforcing her fascination on very specific themes within her work. Through her log of photos, it becomes apparent that she likes to record the traces of humans; sometimes the effect on their environment; sometimes just their presence. Both 'The Hotel' and 'The Sleepers' focus on the belongings, evidence and remains left behind from daily activities like sleeping, eating and getting dressed. However, Calle's image collection methods raise some concerns amongst viewers. In this essay I'll delve into just how controversial Calle is, and how her work has been displayed in such a way that grips her audience.

SUITE VENITIENNE



Sophie Calle's book 'Suite Venitienne' is a log of an unknown man's whereabouts, known as 'Henri B'. The infatuation for Henri came after she was following him around Paris, unaware of who he is, lost him, then was coincidentally introduced to him at an event later that day. She took this as fate, and when he mentioned he was he was planning to go to Venice, Calle jumped on the idea of following him. She took many photos of this man, occasionally with his wife, around Venice to document his every move. In order to spy on him, she concealed her identity with a blonde wig, showing her determination for the project. This specific image of Sophie Calle's work pictures a man grabbing the camera. The obscuration of this stranger's face is a brilliant display of concealing his identity, even up until the end of the series when he finally figures out he's being followed. The fact the subject matter is centre-frame represents how her whole world revolves around him and his actions, and the fact that this stranger is mainly a shadow signifies the end to the series, the end to the stalking, and the end to the infatuation, almost as if the actual gesture of the hand is hereby stopping her from

proceeding. There are a lot of midtones to this specific piece, specifically behind the silhouette, making it seem dramatic and dragging the visual weight to the man in the centre, the overall dark entity. The deep shadows present are the main shades used in the image, creating a sense of impending doom, as if the viewer was a co-conspirator the whole time, and will now suffer the consequences of bystanding this display of stalking. The main overall shape is Henri's hand covering his face, and the blurred effect is consistent with the fact the photo will have been taken rapidly with the realisation of capture. The nature of this image is that it was captured incidentally, accompanied with the quick perception that Calle has been found out. It's of great importance and signifies an end to the relentless pursuit of reporting this man's whereabouts. I suppose it also snaps the audience back to reality, as Calle's earlier images slowly bring the viewer into her world, making them lose their moral integrity surrounding stalking, yet this final image concludes the conquest to persuade people. The distortion of the man's face seems deliberate, however considering the photograph was taken in a rush with little to no regard for composition, I suggest otherwise. The photo would have been taken with a Leica camera, consistent with what she used for some of her other work such as 'The Hotel'. In the process of producing this series, she consults various people to help her search for Henri B if she loses him. In 'M'as Tu Vie?', she mentions that she waits for 'Luciana C under the clock in the piazza San Marco', where Luciana then told her she spotted him at 'Café Florian'. The fact the work is displayed chronologically creates a filmic quality, corroborating her narration alongside the images. The work affects me as the viewer, as it makes me feel like an accomplice to her surveillance of an innocent man, and it captures a mood of secrecy and invading privacy. I can imagine Calle would've been electrified in the process of gathering the images for 'Suite Venitienne', as his elusivity, shadowing him and documenting his traces on society is the very thing that makes her tick. The atmosphere of the work is calm at times, as if it's just another picture of street photography with a main focal point, but as soon as you know the backstory it becomes more sinister, which perhaps is what draws so many people in. The mood is highly dependent on the setting and movements of Henri B, as some images seem solemn and some, like the final image of him spotting Calle, have an atmosphere of fear, interrogation and finality, as that specific image marks the end of the series. The moral implications of stalking are often discussed in accordance with Sophie Calle's work, as here she even tried to rent the room he just left, so she could sleep in the bed he slept in, which is perverted and morally wrong. Some other things she did to complete this series, like phoning hundreds of hotels to locate him, and using locals houses to photograph him, are also corrupt. Whilst her work is emotionally powerful, she constantly dances the line of acceptable and barbaric behaviour, raising moral conversations surrounding surveillance and personal boundaries.

THE HOTEL



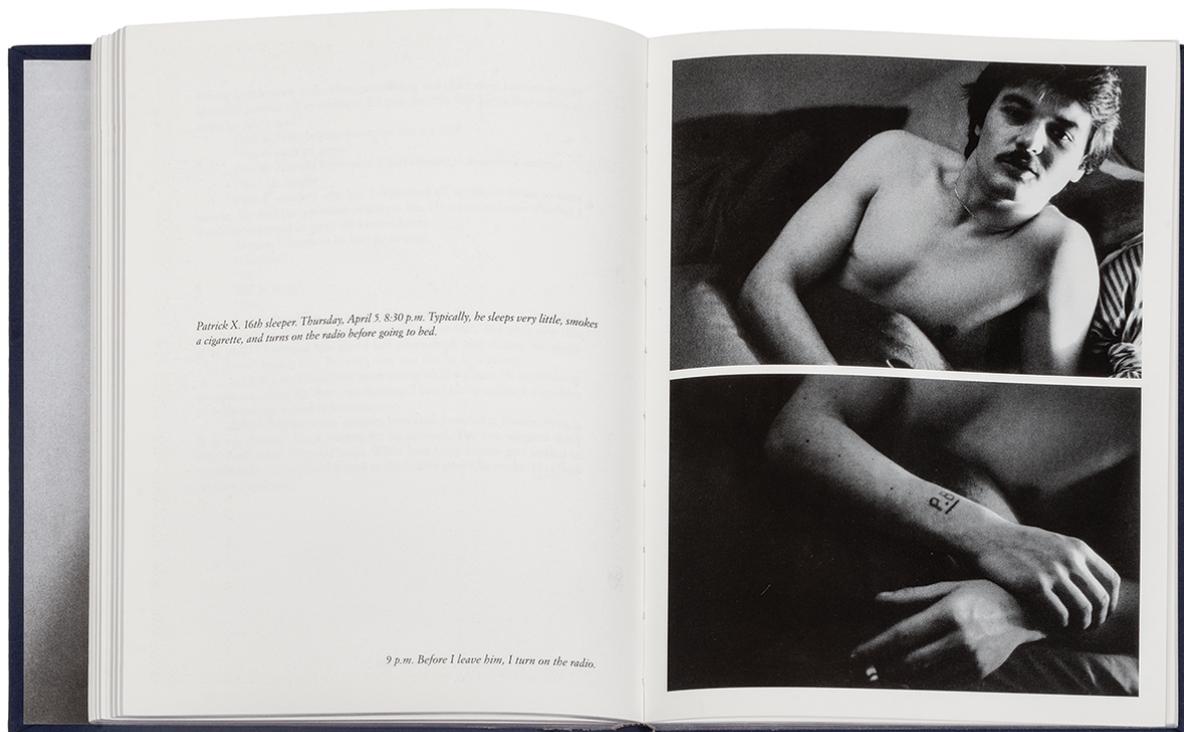
Sophie Calle's 1981 'The Hotel' series includes photos of hotel rooms in which she worked, in Venice. I have chosen to focus on this series since it really portrays her dishonourable image collection methods. She then arranges the work into nine or so images on one page in black and white, and on another landscape page she has a colour image, usually of the headboard. Underneath this, she details the times she entered the room, what she found, and she even fantasises about what person was in the room based off their toiletries, clothes and items in their suitcase. This is why 'The Hotel' is such a controversial series, as she invades privacy via unethical methods, exposing people's most inner belongings. Perhaps that's what makes her work so intriguing. We're all nosy, so why can't she be?

Her work has been arranged in a way that feels clinical, as the photos are all laid out for us in a matter-of-fact type of way. This is very in-keeping with the work, as Calle may have been trying to convince us that this is a normal practice. Her work doesn't really conform to the typical compositional elements of photography, like rule of thirds and leading lines. This adds to the messiness of the images, as it's like she didn't think before she snapped the photo. The controversial stalking aspect of Sophie Calle is very prominent in this piece, as the images not being taken in any specific way points towards her hurrying to capture the photo as she's scared of getting caught, and adds to the fast-paced feeling of rifling through belongings that the viewer gets when looking at these images laid out in a sequence, like your eyes are quickly guided through the room and its contents. She used a higher vantage point for most of the images, especially of specific items, like clothes, rather than the overall bedroom. The flash creates a sharp light on the photos and makes them seem even more clinical.

For example, the 7th image going from left to right of Room 44 is taken from a high vantage point, because in that situation it's quicker to snap a photo whilst she's standing as she doesn't have much time to frame it. This adds to the impromptu effect of these images, and the flash adds to the cold, sterile, informative feel to her work, as if it's there to explain and infer the narrative of the stranger occupying the room. The strewn clothes are the subject matter of the photo, the zebra pattern giving a stark contrast against the white bedsheets, which are also unmade. In this series, she dips more into fantasising about who may own the items, rather than focusing on a specific person, like in 'Suite Venitienne'. Sophie's work is incidental as the subject matter of this work is about the belongings of strangers, and how they leave a trace on their surroundings, and it was observed through the eyes of a documentary stalker. In some of her other work, she uses the items found

in the room, like perfume, as if she has no morals, which links into Room 44, since she logged a ladies' white undergarments drying in the bathroom, seen in the 2nd photo. I believe the intention of the work was to be as invasive as possible, without going to desperate lengths and taking it another step further by following the narrative out of the room and into the rest of the 'character's' lives. In her 'M'as Tu Vie?' book, she mentions that 'by elimination, that tells me that today he is wearing blue trousers', which further incites the idea that Calle gets somewhat attached to the narrative of these strangers, emphasising her stalkerish aspect. The work was captured with a Leica camera, and she said that she said "I spent one year to find the hotel, I spent three months going through the text and writing it, I spent three months going through the photographs, and I spent one day deciding it would be this size and this frame... it's the last thought in the process." The work as a whole was executed slowly, Sophie taking time to meticulously comb through the photographs and find the perfect hotel to work at. However, the actual capturing of the photos is rapid and she doesn't hesitate to stop and figure out how to frame the image in-situ. The work affects me, as the viewer, in a way that makes me feel uncomfortably intrigued, as I too feel as if I am intruding into the personal lives of others. Its atmosphere is very disturbing, the mood of the images depicting an unsettling invasion of the right to privacy. The work illustrates this by taking photos like crime scene photography; unprompted and irrespective of composition. Calle says that she was "hired as a temporary chambermaid for three weeks in a Venetian hotel", in which she "observed, through details, lives which remained unknown to [her]". This fascination with the lives of others gives the viewer a feeling of sonder, the realisation that everyone you pass has their own complex life. I believe this excited Calle, as a lot of her other work, such as Suite Venetienne, is about documenting another's life. 'The Hotel' book consists of rooms on the 4th floor, starting with Room 25, and includes rooms 47, 12, 44, 29, 30 and 28 onwards from February 16th, and on 6th March 1981, her job terminated. She managed to hide her tape recorder and camera in the bucket of her mop, so as to not be detected.

THE SLEEPERS



'The Sleepers' is another series created by the controversial Sophie Calle, in which she got 28 people to sleep in her bed between April 1st and April 9th 1979, and answer some questions. During the course of their stay, she took photos every hour, offered them breakfast, lunch or dinner, and provided clean bedsheets for each sleeper. Calle thrives off logging the traces humans leave on their environment, and she writes a short summary of the person's stay to accompany their images. In particular, her book 'M'as tu Vie' mentions that a sleeper named 'Patrick X', even says he only came 'because he thought there would be an orgy', further solidifying the generally sensual nature of this project. In particular, the arrangement of this image of Patrick X corroborates the raw aspect of the series, capturing small details of him, like his tattoo and cigarette. This close up of his arm is documentative, and the inclusion of these small characteristics humanises each sleeper. All photos are in black and white, making all images cohesive when displayed together. The unposed nature of each image makes it feel very true to life, recognising body hair and folds of skin, identifying the beauty of rest. The fact that Calle rarely uses traditional photographic compositional elements further adds to the idea of her defying the laws of society, reflected in her defiance of morals. The rule of thirds is used in the first 'Patrick X' photo, as his face is the main point of interest and is positioned in the top right ninth of the grid. The second 'Patrick X' image suggests the rule of thirds was also used to position his hands on the line of the right third, and a close vantage point and short depth of field was utilised to gain a close, intimate image. The subject matter of the work is the sleeper who's occupying the bed and is based on direct observation of the states of sleep and rest people go through. The content of the image is immediately apparent, as you quickly realise that this must have been somewhat an organised shoot, even if the images themselves are candid. This work aims to blur the line between publicity and privacy, challenging the ethical norms of documenting life. The process Calle uses is very meticulous, as she documents the time that each sleeper leaves to the minute, and schedules in who is next to participate ahead of time. Sophie Calle mentions she initially "contacted 45 people by phone: people [she] didn't know and whose names were suggested to [her] by common acquaintances". This work was executed slowly, taking place over 8 consecutive days in April 1979. The mood of the images is slightly disturbing, as sleeping and rest are two things society holds very private and personal. This makes the viewer feel as if they are permeating the privacy of each person photographed yet also allows for the audience to recognise the themes of life and 'sonder', which is the notion that everyone you see has a life of their own. The work tends to be quiet rather than noisy, as we often correlate sleep with silence. The moral implications of 'The Sleepers' is much lighter compared to the rest of her work, as she asks for consent to photograph and question these people and even gives them meals. Some would say it's still an invasion of privacy, but if the sleepers consented to the project, then I believe there's little harm in this series. This work is very intimate, compelling the viewer to reflect on control and artistic responsibility surrounding the collecting of images, as she invades and disrupts real lives for her projects. In an interview with Gea Politi, Calle said that "people are more inclined to participate in unconventional experiences than we might assume", and she further goes on to mention people say yes because "the request is unexpected", and they think "why not?". This insight into how the series was actually undertaken sheds a different light onto the argument of moral implications surrounding her work, as specifically with her 'The Sleepers' series, everything was consensual.

In conclusion, Sophie Calle is a significant conversation starter for the debate as to whether photography is a worthy excuse to invade people's privacy. Despite some of her work being considered harassment, she's managed to achieve awards such as the Hasselblad Foundation International Award. In 2010 she was the 30th winner, and the intimacy of her work in exposing private life in a totally original way has earned her awards and fame in the photography world. In particular, 'Suite Venitienne' blurs the line between stalking and documenting and can often be seen as overstepping societal boundaries for artistic purposes. She presents the images in the series I investigated within this essay in a very matter-of-fact way, as if she's proposing them as evidence of human existence and the fact everyone has their own life, items, events, and feelings. Both 'Suite Venitienne' and 'The Hotel' are series that arise moral implications surrounding the invasion of privacy, whereas with 'The Sleepers' it's immediately apparent that the photoshoot was staged. Despite her controversiality, I think that Sophie Calle's work is informative and representational of the parts of lives we don't see, which gives the public eye a unique perspective on other people and how each life is lived extremely differently. Ultimately, her work challenges ethical norms, breaching personal boundaries. This neglect and blatant disregard of the consent of others raises moral questions and invites debate surrounding the artistic responsibility of the photographer, and their role in how the images are collected. Essentially, Calle is a contentious artist who challenges the usual practices of a photographer, yet I believe her work is informational and depicts a well-thought-out display of knowledge and expertise in her sector, as she can think up of these bizarre motives for her work and execute them in such a way that grips her audience.

