Active pursuit

LUCY SCHOLES

Sophie Calle

Suite Vénitienne

96pp. Siglio. £34.95. 978 1 938221 09 5

It is something of an odd omission given that this, of course, is her story, not Henri B.’s, despite the starring role he plays in it. Before finding him in Venice, Calle describes her reservations: “I’m afraid of meeting up with him: I’m afraid that the encounter might be commonplace. I don’t want to be disappointed. There is such a gap between his thoughts and mine. I’m only one dreaming. Henri B.’s feelings do not belong in my story”.

This new edition of Suite Vénitienne is a beautiful work of art in itself, from the eye cut out of the front cover, to the double-page black-and-white photographic spreads and the colour reproductions of maps of the city. But it is also something of a theoretical text, one that raises important questions about the artist and his or her work: about the relationship between artists and their subject, particularly in terms of the subject as a construct of the artist’s desires, and the central element of voyeurism implicit in this kind of immersive and investigatory artistic process.

Michael Hampton

UNSHIELMED

Reconceiving the Artist’s Book

176pp. Uniformbooks. £12. 978 1 910100 06 8

of an annotated photo album, and its anthology of illustrated entries could almost be a collection of family mugshots, highlighting ancestral resemblances as well as dissimilarities, mutations and black sheep.

Hampton’s intention is to expand parameters rather than circumscribe or limit, and his refusal to be drawn into terminological nip-tickling allows the artists’ book to become an exuberantly protean form, spanning media and millennia. “The roll call is endless”, he states, and the “formal diversity of the artists’ book’s shape-shifting tendencies provokes more than explains, then all to the good. Michael Hampton – himself a book-mangler of some repute – is a knowledgeable and pleasingly idiosyncratic guide, trenchant and droll in equal measure and fond of lexical as well as bibliographic oddities. Perhaps the real achievement here is not so much to bring into focus a new corpus of artists’ books but, more intriguingly, to create an almost converging effect. It’s the familiar outlines of the bound and printed codex volume that start to blur. Blinking insistently in the background is the digital screen, promising a technological apotheosis of the book’s shape-shifting tendencies and reminding us that the codex was only ever one evolutionary variant among myriad forms and media.

GILL PARTINGTON

The Wordsworth Trust and the British Library, with the generous support of the Michael Marks Charitable Trust, present The Michael Marks Awards for Poetry Pamphlets 2015, in association with the TLS. The Awards are designed to raise the profile of poetry pamphlets, recognising the enormous contribution they make to the world of poetry.

The Michael Marks Poetry Award

Shortlist

Alan Jenkins Clutag Five Poems Series No. 2 Clutag Press

Anja Konig Advice for an Only Child Flipped Eye Press Flap Poetry Series

Gill McEvoy The First Telling Happenstance

Peter Riley The Ascent of Kinder Scout Longbarrow Press

David Tait Three Dragon Day Smith Doorstop

The Michael Marks Publishers’ Award

Shortlist

Eyewear Publishing

Mariscat Press

Smith Doorstop

The Emma Press

The winners will be announced, along with the winner of the inaugural Illustration Award, on Tuesday 24th November at the British Library.

www.wordsworth.org.uk/poetrypamphlets

The Michael Marks Awards for Poetry Pamphlets 2015

The diary of a stalker? The account of an ambitiously immersive art project? An intimate portrait of an obsession? Sophie Calle’s first book Suite Vénitienne, originally published in 1983 and reprinted again now in a new edition for the first time in many years, is open to a variety of different interpretations.

“For months I followed strangers on the street”, Calle begins, setting the scene for the odd endeavour she is about to recount. “For the pleasure of following them, not because they particularly interested me. I photographed them without their knowledge, took note of their movements, then finally lost sight of them and forgot them.” Then something changes. The physical distance she has previously maintained between herself and her subjects, along with the lack of emotional investment implicit in their multiplicities, is lost as she embarks on a concentrated assault on a single figure:

At the end of January 1980, on the streets of Paris, I followed a man whom I lost sight of a few minutes later in the crowd. That very evening, quite by chance, he was introduced to me at an opening. During the course of our conversation, he told me he was planning an imminent trip to Venice. I decided to follow him. The pages that follow trace her footsteps as she pursues her quarry (referred to as Henri B.) through the streets of the Italian city, over bridges, across piazzas and along the canals for the next two weeks – no mean undertaking. Calle’s written account of her experiences – and reflections printed in blue ink, rather than the usual black, in order to distinguish them visually from what becomes a meticulous narration of her footsteps – is elegantly set alongside the monochrome photographs she took along the way, both those snapped surreptitiously of her subject, and cityscapes and portraits in passing of other people captured in the course of her wanderings. To describe it as the chronicle of a flâneur is certainly one way of reading it. More pointedly and accurately, Calle could be called a flâneuse: her predatory activity positions her in direct opposition to her passive and objectified Parisian female predecessors of the nineteenth century.

The first images of her subject (it takes her a few days, and the help of a friend, to locate her prey) are, at first glance, innocuous enough. A couple (Henri B., when she discovers him, is in the company of a woman) walk arm and arm; there is nothing obvious to distinguish them from the other people on the streets around them, bar the composition of Calle’s images – the fact that these same two figures are always the central subjects. Some have clearly been snapped in a hurry, and are slightly blurred. Her subjects are sometimes in the distance; at other times, she seems to be right on their heels.

The photographs themselves have a creepy atmosphere, graphically, because we know they have been taken on the sly, without prior consent. Aesthetically, because we never fully see the subjects’ faces, they are often half-obsured by another person, or the corner of a building. Calle herself never features in any of the images, but she is always there, lingering on the sidelines. (It is difficult to resist the temptation to picture her in a grimm raccoon.)

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