

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 multitudes, 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 –

Active pursuit

LUCY SCHOLES

Sophie Calle

SUITE VÉNITIENNE

96pp. Siglio. \$34.95.

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asides 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 dis-

tinguish 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 others times, she seems to be right on their heels.

The photographs themselves have a creepy atmosphere. Ethically, 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-obscured 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 grimy raincoat.)

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 the 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's title nicely encapsulates his thesis: that the artists' book is a misfit, defying the stuffy orthodoxy of the library shelves. Quite literally so, since the objects on show here come in all manner of awkward dimensions. But conceptually, too, they refuse assimilation into the Dewey-decimal grid of cultural forms. Part text, part sculptural object, but not quite either, they are hybrids, freaks and outliers. We find Michael Tompert's Macbook riddled with bullet-holes; John Latham's legal texts pumped full of congealed plaster; and Dieter Roth's minced pages cooked into unappetizing sausages. Tellingly, however, the foreword is provided by the head of the V & A's National Art Library, one of many collections making concerted efforts in recent years to recognize and classify these rogue tomes. Similarly, the growth of book art fairs, dedicated postgraduate courses and specialist bookshops are evidence of the increasingly fertile territory opening up between art and text. Scholarship has been slow to catch on, and this book is a welcome addition to only a handful of studies addressing a vast and varied field.

But this is no conventional linear history. Hampton's model is the *Wunderkammer*; this is an exotic menagerie of "book-like things", eschewing both chronological and thematic order in favour of the arbitrariness of the alphabet. As might be expected, we find Ed Ruscha's photobooks, Tom Phillips's treated novel, *A Humument*, and Brian Dettmer's baroquely eviscerated encyclopedias. But alongside this emerging canon are geography textbooks, computer punch-cards, volvelles (also known as rotational diagrams or spinners), Twitter accounts, illuminated prayer books and medieval wax tablets. This self-conscious heterogeneity is an attempt to trace an "unacknowledged, overlooked, missing lineage", stretching back at least as far as the book itself (the Lindisfarne Gospels may be the oldest featured entry, but there is also mention of Ice age plaquettes). Underlying this logic is a polemic of sorts: Hampton is dismissive of the oft-repeated notion that the artists' book begins with William Blake. Instead, he outlines a sprawling dynastic tree with multiple genealogies and offshoots. His project started life in the form

Michael Hampton

UNSHELFMARKED

Reconceiving the artists' book

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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 nitpicking 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 mindboggling". While marvelling at the richness of the artists' book, though, we may be left wondering at the elasticity of its boundaries, since some of these works are not recognizable as books, and some were produced not by artists but by scientists, cryptographers, early modern pedagogues, or medieval monks. And what of the ever-expanding cluster of neighbouring terms – the Art Book, Book as Artwork, Bookwork, Altered Book, *livre d'artiste* and *bibliobjet*? The quest for a single definition or label may indeed be a "red herring", but picking through this taxonomic thicket is nonetheless a necessary task. Yet if *Unshelfmarked* 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 converse 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.

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