

RACHEL, MONIQUE... SOPHIE CALLE



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As I Lay Dying, Sophie is setting-up a camera at the foot of my bed.

...so might Monique Calle's diary entry have read, had she been able to write during the final month of her life. Given to literary allusions and loving to be paid court, the mother of French artist Sophie Calle in fact exclaimed: "Enfin" – "At last". Monique, who was of antic spirit and annoyed she had never featured in her daughter's work, might equally well have meant: "About time too!"

Sophie Calle, one of France's foremost artists, had heard that the dying sometimes wait for loved ones to leave the room before taking their last breath. Desperate this might happen during a moment of absence from her vigil, Calle set up the camera so that no last word or sign from her mother would be missed.

Monique Calle would not have been surprised by her daughter's act of recording the most intimate moments of all. Calle's practice has always been to test the boundaries between the inside and the outside, the personal and the public. Sometimes she does this collusively, inviting people to take part in a proposition of her own devising (*The Sleepers*

1980). Sometimes she does so compulsively – following a man incognito from Paris to Venice whilst photographing him clandestinely (*Suite Venitienne* 1979); or just plain intrusively – finding an address book in the street belonging to an unknown stranger, contacting everyone in it then publishing what they said about him (*Address Book* 1983). On other occasions the work is intensely personal, acts of emotional confession and exorcism – a formalized way of "getting over" men who have jilted her (*Douleur Esquisse* 2003, *Take Care of Yourself* 2007).

Rachel, Monique.... (Editions Xavier Barral Juillet 2012), Sophie Calle's latest publication, is a meticulously curated selection of excerpts from her mother's diaries, family photographs, stills and accompanying text from the installations and rituals Calle has created in response to her mother's death.

The cover is of white sateen with gold, embroidered lettering, suggestive of the liturgical, whilst the full title is anything but. It reads: "*She was successively called Rachel, Monique, Szyndler, Calle, Pagliero, Gonthier, Sindler. My mother liked to be the subject of conversation.*"

The text on the endpaper, to explain the bedside camera, is engraved into the paper's thick surface – white on white, like a tombstone. The dedication to Monique's many girlfriends (untranslatable from "ses copines") follows, and then a flimsy page suggestive of marble or leather, with the single word "souci" – "worry" – this time black on black.

It's a mystery that will be revealed.

Monique left her diaries, which she'd written over a 20 year period to Sophie Calle, in no doubt her daughter would be impelled to make them public. This happened "*For the First and the Last Time*", as the event was called, when every word was read aloud, in murmured voice over many hours by Calle and transmitted through microphones at the Rencontres d'Arles 2012.

Telling, often aphoristic, extracts from the diaries appear in the book. The picture is of a perceptive, unconventional, sexy, dark-haired woman. A serial seducer of men, she lists four husbands, two fiancés and lovers too numerous to count that have slept in her bed, but remains impatient of the conjugal and the quotidian.

In 1985 she's operated for cancer; in 1986 her mother dies, in 1994 her brother dies – and this seems the worst to bear.

Mortality is always in view.

Jewish, she and her family hid in France throughout the war. In 1996 she revisits the village that sheltered them and is deeply moved.

She reads a lot; commits chunks of Proust and Rimbaud to memory; inks honest, witty captions to photographs of herself; loves clothes; loves to drink and smoke; fears failure and mourns the lack of a meaningful creative "project" to which she can abandon herself before "going to her grave". References to "Sophie" are loving, irritated and seem to want from her daughter more than the daughter wishes to give. The diaries and photographs of Monique Calle suggest a lover of life, with an absurdist humour jousting constantly with melancholy.

Then her diary entries end.

Sophie Calle, perennially obsessed in her work with the noting and recording of the "last" moment of occurrence from the banal to the sublime, shows us photographs of a grey, windswept beach in Northern France marking her mother's last visit to the sea at beloved Cabourg, the imprint of last steps to the water's edge just visible in the sand. Other "lasts" are chronicled: music heard, choice of clothes for burial, utterance, word.... last breath? This last impossible to know with certitude.

"Ineffable" writes Calle.

Then three stills from the last tape recording of her mother on her bed, perhaps already dead. Funeral announcements, flowers, photographs of installations – a wooden shed inside which the film of her mother's last moments as it was shown in Tokyo, and in Venice at the Biennale; the word "souci" on various objects and forms; a photograph of her mother in her coffin with all the symbolic things, playful and serious, Sophie has selected to accompany her mother to the grave, and an image of a reconstruction of her tombstone bearing a kooky portrait photo and an inscription of her mother's own devising: "I'm already bored".

It's 2008, two years after her mother's death, and Sophie Calle is one of an illustrious group of artists invited by the Crafts Council to sail to the Arctic to reflect on the impact of climate change and create work in response to this wilderness. The Arctic, it so happens, was a talismanic place for Monique, yearning to see it yet never really expecting it would happen – a Shangri La of the soul perhaps.

Calle has said: "In my work it is the text that has counted most. And yet the image was the beginning of everything."

Calle boards the vessel – felicitously called the Cape Farewell – and takes with her a necklace of pearls and red stones, a diamond ring and the photographic image of her mother, taken in winter and wrapped in furs. "I waited to reach the most Northern place of this trip, where I could go ashore with my mother," Calle has explained in an interview. Finding a nook beneath a rock amidst the Arctic scree, Calle laid these objects in the drifting snow whilst Martha Wainwright sang a Marilyn Monroe song, another passion of Monique's.

The book shows photographs of an arctic range seen through the porthole of the ship with a still-life of the objects displayed on the window ledge; then a close-up of the snowy shrine and, pulling back, an image of the vastness of "nowhere". Calle muses as to what future explorers, should they chance upon them, might make of these incongruous gemstones.

Back in Paris, in her studio, Calle has bought and mounted a stuffed giraffe's head upon its long neck and called it Monique. The next images are of the animal which "looks down at me with irony and sadness".

There are then several pages of depressing black and white photographs of American tomb stones, bearing the single word MOTHER, and nothing else.

Calle's mother's last word was "souci" – "worry". But her last sentence – "ne vous faites pas de souci" – roughly translates as "none of you need worry". A case, perhaps, of the last word not being the final one.

Calle has pushed the envelope of multi-media conceptual art to radical, sometimes dangerous, but always wholly original limits. Whilst her work is self-referential, it's never solipsistic. It is in a true sense a voyage of discovery which, at its most powerful, is transformative of both subject and artist. Nowhere is this more movingly expressed, more fully realized, than in this valedictory work to her mother. It seeks to understand what made her mother who she was, to capture her essence and know her nature, rather than impose a construct of "Mother" of the artist's own imaginings upon the raw facts and materials of her life.

In waiting for her mother's death before making her the subject of this incomparable work, Calle was waiting perhaps for sufficient self-knowledge to be able to execute it with compassionate yet un sentimental eyes. And in using her mother's diaries and Monique's own account of her history as the warp to Calle's weft, Calle has completed the "project" her mother longed so much to achieve yet, in unwitting ways, had in fact already begun.

— Sophie Balhetchet

Elle s'est appelée
successivement
Rachel, Monique,
Szyndler,
Calle, Pagliero,
Gonthier, Sindler.
Ma mère aimait
qu'on parle d'elle.

Sophie Calle
Rachel, Monique...

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