

Capturing the Last Moments

Recording the Dying Body at the Turn of the 21st century

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Résumé

Dans cet article, j'examine l'installation vidéo *Pas pu saisir la mort* (2007) de Sophie Calle de différents points de vue. Cette œuvre fonctionne de manière indépendante, mais circule aussi dans différents réseaux de l'œuvre de Calle, en particulier l'exposition *Rachel, Monique* (2010), et compose avec *Douleur exquise* (2002-2004) et *Prenez soin de vous* (2007) une trilogie sur la souffrance. A l'intérieur de l'ensemble de l'œuvre de Calle, cette installation souligne et redéfinit des thèmes et des préoccupations présentes dès le début. Par la suspension du moment de la mort de Monique Sindler, qui reste présente dans l'installation, le corps de la mère devient un objet que l'artiste peut utiliser à sa guise. En même temps, Calle utilise cet objet zombiesque comme point de départ pour reconstruire sa mère comme personnage. *Pas pu saisir la mort* peut être considéré comme un commentaire sur les théories de la photographie qui lient photographie et mort, et sur les explorations récentes des rapports entre l'immobilité et l'image mobile (cinéma). L'œuvre s'inscrit aussi dans une longue tradition d'œuvres d'art à propos de la mort et du mourant. Enfin, le projet artistique de Calle révèle des changements culturels plus larges concernant la manière dont les sociétés se rapportent à la mort et le rôle de la technologie dans ce processus.

Abstract

In the present article I examine Sophie Calle's video installation *Pas pu saisir la mort* (2007) from various perspectives. This work functions independently, but it also circulates within different networks in Calle's work, most importantly the large exhibition *Rachel, Monique* (2010) and the trilogy on suffering, along with *Douleur exquise* (2003-2004) and *Prenez soin de vous* (2007). Within Calle's oeuvre as a whole, it belatedly highlights and redefines themes and concerns present from the very beginning of the work. By suspending the moment of Monique Sindler's death and keeping it present in the video installation, the mother's body becomes an object that can be used at will. At the same time, Calle uses this ambivalent, zombie-like object as the basis to reconstruct and animate her mother as a character. *Pas pu saisir la mort* can be regarded as a commentary on theories of photography that link photography with death and on recent explorations of the relationship between stillness and the moving image (film). The work also fits within a long tradition of artworks dealing with death and dying. Finally, Calle's artistic project also reveals wider cultural changes in the way in which societies deal with dying and the role of technology in that process.

Keywords

Sophie Calle, Iconography of Death/Dying, taboo, multimedia and the representation of death, spectrality & art, ethics & aesthetics

When Sophie Calle's mother was dying from breast cancer, Calle put a camera in her mother's room because she did not want to run the risk of not being present at the actual moment of death.

I didn't want to miss her last word, her last smile. As I knew I had to shut my eyes to sleep, because the agony was very long, there was a risk that I might not be there. I put a camera there, thinking if she gave a jump or start, a last word, at least I'd have it on film. (Chrisafis)

Although it may not seem self-evident, art historian Helen Ennis demonstrates that more and more people are using digital cameras to photograph or film their loved ones after their death, often in a kind of impulse. However, Ennis emphasizes that in most cases, these vernacular images remain private and even secret as well as highly individual (142-143). Calle, however, is a conceptual artist who is well-known for her autofictional work that combines subject matter and events from her own life with a practice of self-imposed constraints and rules. In the light of her oeuvre, it is therefore perhaps not surprising that Calle used the camera footage in an art installation presented at the Biennale of Venice in 2007, *Pas pu saisir la mort*. This title can be understood literally, she was "unable to capture the instance of death": it is impossible to see on the images when exactly death has set in. Metaphorically, it refers to the impossibility to grasp or understand death.² On the one hand, the work fits in with a longstanding pictorial tradition of images of death. On the other hand, filming and watching someone die on tape, without strong motivation (even in a political or educational context) is still highly taboo, as Calle is well aware.³

(The audience has) gotten used to descriptions of agony and death, in literature, painting, photography – just look at the photos of children's corpses in Louisiana, this has become a common iconography. Yet, with a moving image it is different. In the case of my mother's video, perhaps it was the fact that at the beginning she isn't dead, but then, she is. (Calle in Pfeiffer, "Sophie Calle's Rachel, Monique")

In spite of their content, the images shown in *Pas pu saisir la mort* are not unbearable, they are remarkably uneventful and serene. What struck me as "intolerable" in the sense indicated by Rancière (cfr. De Winde, Maes and Philipsen 3), is the concept of exposing a doubly unfamiliar body – a body that becomes radically alien after life has withdrawn from it and the body of a person whom we have no personal relation with in one of the most private, intimate events imaginable – in an aesthetic context. Moreover, as the images circulate, not just in different networks within Calle's work, but also on the internet, artist,

1. I sincerely want to thank the editors of this issue and the reviewers for their very helpful remarks on this article.
2. In addition to the connotations of technological and epistemological failure, Marceline Block also argues that the truncated form of the title can be interpreted as "a form of resistance to the phallogocentric structure of patriarchal language"(Block 76).
3. One can think of the controversy surrounding the cell phone images of the execution of Muammar Gaddafi in September 2011. In 1996, moreover, the BBC was forced to defend its decision to film death for a documentary on terminal illness (cfr. Macdonald). In the case of the snuff or mondo movie, a subgenre of the horror film that seldom contains real footage, the images of death and dying are even considered pornographic (cfr. Kerekes and Slater). See also Staudt.

viewer as well as the dead body are implicated in an uncomfortable relation.⁴ Although unease is quite “normal” for an audience accustomed to Calle’s highly ironic artistic practice, the nature of this particular work does seem to constitute a limit that is being transgressed. Finally, the paradoxical fact of recording a dying, immobile body adds another twist to the longstanding relation between photography, film, death and animation that has been recently re-examined by various art historians and film theoreticians such as Thomas Macho and Kristin Marek, Rebecca Schneider, Laura Mulvey and Helen Ennis.

2.

Pas pu saisir la mort is a multimedia installation that combines video, text, music, photography and painting, shown in an intimate setting (Rabaté 2010). In a first room, a short text explains the context of the words, alongside a porcelain panel that details the mother’s ritual preparation for death. Her last journey, her last wishes and encounters, the books she read, music she wanted to hear while dying, her epitaph, her last words, smile... are presented in the form of a poem (Block 74). Finally, there are a few photographs and a painting of the mother. In the second room, a 13-minute video in loop shows the mother on her deathbed, with Mozart’s clarinet concerto on the background. The installation is neither shocking, nor abject. The *mise-en-scène* refers to the classical pictorial topos of the deathbed and the beautiful death. The camera zooms in on the profile of the dying woman’s face. She is lying still with her eyes closed. The light falls in sideways from the left through the closed curtains. Beside the bed, in the foreground is a vase with pale roses. In the background, there is a burgundy pillow and a small cupboard. At the same time, the scene is ordinary and contemporary: the surveillance camera footage is grainy, the bed linen is somewhat faded and there is a small stuffed cow on the bed. At the end of the video, a nurse checks the body and someone, presumably Calle, strokes the face.

In spite of initial misgivings, Calle was encouraged by Robert Storr, the curator of the Biennale, to show the installation at the Biennale: “I thought the only way I can make her be there is if she’s the subject” (Calle in Chrisafiris). The general responses were positive. The work had a powerful emotional impact, with people reportedly staying in the room for hours (cfr. Kennedy, Güner). However, there were some questions too. Did Calle, who is notorious for using every element of her life in her art and for mixing fact with fiction, go too far by showing her dying mother in a loop on this giant art fair? Jean-Michel Rabaté singles out *Pas pu saisir la mort* as a contemporary example of “bathos”, bad pathos that arises when something that is supposed to be elevated or sublime becomes pathetic and ludicrous:

A taboo-breaking subject work portraying the death of her mother for voyeuristic consumption, *Pas pu saisir la mort*... has, even more than Calle’s other installations, immediately generated controversy. For me, the video of her dying mother was indeed very hard to take, and I felt it verged on “the exploitative side of the sentimental thing”. (165)

When Rabaté, by no means a prude or conservative, is confronted with other viewers who were deeply moved by the piece, he examines his negative response. His description of the way in which Calle’s dying mother is indefinitely suspended in an ethereal moment between life and death, reinforced by the

4. The video is available on Youtube in a version filmed with a mobile phone at the Biennale of Venice in 2009.

music and the cultural references, makes it clear that he grasps the subtlety. Still, he keeps wondering: “Can one bury one’s mother in a video installation?” (168) In spite of the emotional content and a general sympathy for the subject, Rabaté feels that the installation lacks depth and that there is no punctum: he is not invited to this funeral. As a result, what should be an experience of sublimation or catharsis is drab and sentimental. Through a reflection on the sublime and sublimation, Rabaté realizes that he feels this way because for him the work lacks beauty (the ordinary quality of the photography is a characteristic feature of many of Calle’s works).⁵

Only when he looks at the work through the lens of Freud and Lacan, Rabaté discovers how *Pas pu saisir la mort* does escape bathos. Like a modern-day Antigone, Sophie Calle has taken her mother’s regret that she couldn’t be there at the Biennale in the most literal way possible and has created the installation so that her mother is able to be there after all. Her mother’s wish becomes an ethical injunction that exceeds all other, common ethical standards. Although she honors her mother’s requests to die in a beautiful way, Calle has not turned the video itself into a work of beauty, nor is there a kind of punctum through which the reader can identify with it. As Rabaté puts it, by *not* seizing the moment of death to make it into something grand or sublime, Calle’s gesture – like Monique’s body – remains suspended, “between art and private mementos, between spectacle and sublimation, between aesthetics and ethics” (181):

What she was looking for but failed to catch, what is not represented, the last gasp or horrific death throes, had in fact to be refused both on ethical and aesthetic grounds. It was the gesture itself that was beautiful, that is still beautiful, even if no object displayed in the installation is beautiful. (181)

3.

Rabaté’s argument about Sophie Calle as a modern-day Antigone is compelling and convincing. However, she is at the same time also an anti-Antigone in the sense that she perpetually postpones the burial and keeps her mother’s dying body on display, or as Marceline Block puts it, “in limbo”. According to Block, in their recording of their mother’s death, both Simone de Beauvoir and Sophie Calle, respond to the stupidity of death, to the fact that their mothers did not want to die.

In the case of the representation of Françoise and Monique who remain unburied at the ends of the works commemorating them, they are resurrected through their daughters’ literary and artistic renderings. (Block 85)

Marceline Block looks at *Pas pu saisir la mort* as an isolated case. However, as with all of Calle’s works, it is important to bear in mind that her installations are permanently restaged in different context, settings and sequence. These new incorporations can profoundly affect the meaning of the works.

As a video-installation, Monique Sindler’s suspended dying body becomes like an(y) object that

5. In her reading of the work, Block emphasizes the aesthetics of the mother’s death, compared to Simone de Beauvoir’s narrative of her mother’s death that focusses on the abject dying body. Rabaté focuses on the aesthetic quality of the artwork.

can be circulated within different networks and reanimated at will. In Venice, the work was presented along with another, very large and baroque installation, *Prenez-soin de vous*. In this work, 107 women were asked to interpret a break-up email that Sophie Calle had received, ending with the words “take care of yourself”, from their professional perspective (a judge, a literary scholar, linguist, psychotherapist, police officer, but also a novelist, singer, actress and even a parrot...). Daniel Buren staged the installation as a visually overwhelming, highly ironic spectacle. Whereas Rabaté remarks how his enthusiastic response to *Prenez-soin de vous* negatively influenced his appreciation of *Pas pu saisir la mort* (165), to me the juxtaposition of the two works added to the unease of watching an unfamiliar person die in an artistic context. The wry irony of the spectacle of *Prenez-soin de vous* somehow infected *Pas pu saisir la mort*. Belatedly, it also highlights the complexity of *Douleur exquise* (2003), a previous installation dealing with suffering (Jordan; Masschelein). The three works can be considered as a trilogy dealing with trauma and mourning, which negotiates between private and public, truth and fiction, suffering and bathos.

However, later on *Pas pu saisir la mort* was displaced into another series of works in Calle’s oeuvre, all focusing on her mother. In 2009, it was shown in a large overview exhibition in Bozar, which included several new works related to her mother’s illness and death (amongst others series of texts and photographs documenting journeys to Lourdes, to seek a cure for her mother’s illness, and to Cabourg, one of her mother’s last wishes, as well as a trip to the North Pole after Sindler’s death, to deposit her jewelry). Two years later, these works were all integrated in *Rachel, Monique*, a huge show in the crypt-like cellars of Palais de Tokyo. The show was restaged in Avignon in 2012 in the church of a monastery, with a performance of Calle reading from her mother’s diaries (see Barbieri for a description). The texts, photographs of the works and of the show in Paris were collected in an artist book, entitled *Elle s’est appelée successivement Rachel, Monique, Szyndler, Calle, Pagliano, Gonthier, Sindler. Ma mère aimait qu’on parle d’elle* (2012), which will serve as the basis for my discussion.

The exhibition in its crypt-like setting was staged as a giant tomb for Monique Sindler, but, like *Douleur exquise*, it is also a ‘soft monument’, i.e. a commemorative practice that depends on the participation of the audience (cfr. Jordan).⁶ *Rachel, Monique* evokes a multifaceted image of Sindler’s life and personality, in words and in images. Dominant graphic techniques are those of engraving (on various materials), embossing and sewing (the cover of the book). These techniques are formal repetitions of *Douleur exquise* (cfr. Jordan; Masschelein). Here they reinforce both the motif of the tomb and that of the psychic imprint or memory trace that is part of the mourning process. It seems as if Calle wants to imprint her mother’s image, both dead and alive, in the psyche of the audience, as a kind of graft. In doing so, this strangely familiar woman can become part of a collective memory and live on in forms that ultimately escape the artist’s control.

The book contains neither page numbers nor chapters; the different series are separated by white embossed pages that detail the circumstances and the constraints, in the sparse style of narration typical for Calle. The main order is chronological. First, there is a combination of photographs of Sindler, accompanied by her own captions, with selections from her diary. Secondly, the focus shifts to the

6. The practice of participative mourning, in which the audience becomes almost a co-author, is typical for postmodern memorial practices, both material and in cyberspace (DasGupta and Hurst).

mother's death, from the ritual preparation to the funeral rites performed by Calle. Thirdly, a number of works symbolize the mourning process. Whereas the photo series of *Tombes* repeats the word 'mother', the various engravings of 'soucis' refer back to Sindler's last words, "Ne vous faites pas de soucis".

4.

On its own, *Pas pu saisir la mort* can be regarded as a suspension and postponement of the mother's death, in an intermediary realm between life and death. In *Rachel, Monique* this state of stasis has reverted into an endless repetition of burials. Moreover, Sindler is now resurrected as a character, triggering a narrative desire for closure or for "the end" (Brooks). Both in the book and in interviews, Calle defends her projects, lest not to be accused of "utilizing her mother's corpse" (Pfeiffer, "All About her Mother. Sophie Calle"; Pfeiffer, "Sophie Calle's Rachel, Monique"). The first section of the book explains:

Sa vie n'apparaît pas dans mon travail. Ca l'agaçait. Quand j'ai posé ma caméra au pied du lit dans lequel elle agonisait, parce que je craignais qu'elle expire en mon absence, alors que je voulais être là, entendre son dernier mot, elle s'est exclamée: "Enfin". (Calle, *Elle s'est appelée successivement Rachel, Monique*, n. p.)

Likewise, the selection of the mother's diaries and photographs is also preceded by the implicit consent of the mother: "Ma mère n'était pas dupe de ce qui pourrait arriver si elle me les abandonnait. Sinon je me serais pas permis". These hedging remarks are contradicted by the stamp on the final page of the book: "Ce livre a été volé à Monique Sindler", which complicates the authorship of the book.

The first and longest entries from the diary are presented in facsimile, the later ones are typeset fragments of different length, generally opposing photographs of her mother. A large span of time, from 1981 until 1996 is covered at a relatively fast pace. The photographs are mostly black and white posed portraits and holiday pictures that bear no direct relation to the text. Captions in Sindler's handwriting provide space and time, and an occasional funny comment. There are relatively few photographs of Monique with her family. A notable exception is a color photograph with Sophie as an adult. As the text progresses, the contrast between the images of the happy, active woman and the sorrow in later years expressed in the fragments increases. After the first diagnosis of breast cancer in 1985, Sindler's complains about the lack of interest of her children:

Inutile d'investir dans la tendresse de mes enfants entre l'indifférence tranquille d'Antoine et l'arrogance égoïste de Sophie! Seule consolation. Elle est tellement morbide qu'elle viendrait me voir sous ma tombe qu'à la rue Boulard.

The inclusion of this fragment complicates a simple reading of Calle, the mourning daughter, devoting herself to her mother's memory.⁷ Besides guilt and a morbid personality, another motivation for

7. In the earlier work and interviews her father seems to play a greater role, although her mother collaborated in some of the works. She was one of the sleepers in *Les Dormeurs* (1979) and she hired the detective following Calle in *La Filature* and received his reports (1981). A photograph of her at *Les Dormeurs* is included in *Rachel, Monique*...

publishing the diary can be gleaned from an entry written in July 1992.

ECRIRE!

Je crois bien que je mourrai avec ce projet. NON accompli

(...) J'ai pourtant mené à bien mon autre projet qui était de relire la *Recherche* de Proust.

Je ne l'ai toutefois pas encore terminé.

Mais en ai lu dix volumes.

Pas mal.

Je me demande encore ce que je fais bêtement de ma vie, sans projets, sans projets, sans futur avant d'aller... à la tombe. Je continue à apprendre par cœur *Le bateau ivre*, qui me prendra beaucoup de temps.

The following page is a facsimile of the title page of a book. The stamp "ce livre a été volé à Monique Sindler" is imprinted on the left side as an ex libris. On the other side, in a barely legible handwriting, a friend has dedicated *Les bleus à l'âme* to Monique-Ana, Calle, Pagliero Gonthier Sindler "qui en a eu aussi et qui en a su faire des roots". This insert invites us to read the fragments as the book Monique never wrote. The ironic or bathetic title "bruises on the soul" is in tune with the fragments and the style of the other texts in *Monique, Rachel*. The following entry introduces a more historical perspective. Musing about the elections, Sindler remembers her mother saying: "à propos de tout événement politique. 'C'est bon pour les Juifs? Ou pas bon?'" A year after the unexpected death of Monique's brother in 1994, she travels to Fond-de-France with her son, to visit the farmers who hid the Szyndler children during the war:

Ensuite, à l'intérieur de la modeste cuisine, j'ai retrouvé une autre sœur et un frère. Je leur ai appris la mort de mon frère qui était passé les voir il y a trois ans et qu'ils avaient reconnu tout de suite sur le chemin...

In 1996, almost a decade before her death, Sindler takes leave of her diary: "Mon cher Journal (peut-être le dernier), au revoir. Je ne t'ai pas apporté grand-chose mais tu me l'as bien rendu..."

A footnote at the beginning of the diary indicated that Calle selected and edited the diary fragments, therefore, it is uncertain whether this fragment was really the last, or whether it was chosen to close the narrative. Hiding behind the fragments, as an editor, performer as well as a thief, Calle lets Monique do the talking. In this way, the daughter posthumously makes her mother write the book of her life that she never managed to finish. At the same time, the narrative, the layout, but also the tone of the fragments, are distinctly Callean. In making Monique write, Calle writes and speaks Monique like a ventriloquist. Calle, who strongly resembles her mother, has become interchangeable with her, adding another name to the list of names in the title. Moreover, in the following parts of the book that focus on the mother's dying body, Calle can be seen to perform another act of theft: in recording her on her death bed, the camera not just captured the mother's image but also in a way also stole her soul.⁸

8. It is often documented that many "primitive" people believed that taking a photograph meant stealing one's soul. (Spyer)

5.

Sindler is reproduced in various forms and materials and distributed over the earth. The series of funeral rites ends with a stuffed giraffe – as it also figures in a framed childhood picture of Sindler (or Calle) – that Calle bought after her mother’s death: “Je l’ai prénommée Monique. Elle me regarde de haut, avec ironie et tristesse.” In this way, Sindler in her absence-presence is taken along with Calle. Her death is not the end, but neither is it the beginning of something new, of a new phase, as in *Douleur exquise*. Sindler/Calle’s idiosyncratic *ars moriendi* – the careful preparation of her death and afterlife – throws an interesting light on the traditional notion of ‘the last’ that hovers between the myth of a deeper truth in the face of death and absolute contingency (Geimer, “Das Letzte”; Geimer, “Vorlaufen in den Tod”; Ennis). The last words and images of the dying are elevated to a specific status, by and for the living only, revealing nothing about the dead. In *Rachel, Monique* the staging of ‘the last’ suggests a control that echoes the first words of the title: “Elle s’est appelée successivement”. As the names adopted by Sindler were for the most part given to her, but also chosen, the careful preparation of her death cannot conceal the ultimate arbitrariness of death, which is the subject of *Pas pu saisir la mort*.⁹ The core of the project, Sindler’s suspended body, defies the inevitable teleology that ultimately ends in death, and collapses life and death into an impossible vortex, perpetually postponing the end.

After Sindler’s death, the last rites just continue. The obituary in *Libération* is the list from *Pas pu saisir la mort. Cerceuil* shows her mother in her open coffin half buried under the objects that she will take into her grave, as did the Egyptian pharaohs. These objects symbolize her passions and tastes: the dress she chose, a scarf, the toy cows she collected, her favorite book and music, paper and pencil representing her desire to write, postcards and photographs, alcohol, cigarettes and the word “soucis”.¹⁰ The funeral is not shown, but after images of the closed coffin and the gravestone, Calle buries her once again, dispersing some of her jewelry and a photograph in the North Pole. This trip can be regarded as an animistic gesture of magic: by dispersing some of her mother’s jewels, which represent a family history, she sends her off on new voyages and endows her with new lives.

Les changements climatiques l’amèneront-ils vers la mer, pour faire route au pôle? Se retirera-t-elle dans la vallée, vers la calotte glacière ? Demeura-t-elle sur ce rivage comme la trace de l’existence d’un glacier du Nord durant la période de holocène?

In a magic way, Calle multiplies and redistributes the spirit of her mother in various objects, images, installations, a book.¹¹ Even her mother’s last words – “Ne vous faites pas de soucis” – are turned into objects. Inverting the logic behind *Pas pu saisir la mort*, Calle again takes her mother’s words literally but does not obey the injunction. Instead, she multiplies them in various materials, at the same time

9. On the tension between control and arbitrariness or stupidity in *Pas pu saisir la mort*, see Block 84-86.

10. Ennis discusses the importance of highly individual, prosaic details, such as stuffed toys, and close-ups in vernacular digital death bed photography, stills and video (Ennis 137). Pictorially, Calle conforms thus to the practice of digital death scenes. However, she doubles the practice by the narrative component of her work and sets in motion a process of narrative understanding and transcending of the particular that is not present in the vernacular tradition.

11. On the animistic and auratic quality of ‘the last’ in relation to art, see Taussig.

expulsing the grief and embodying it.

Rachel, Monique thus becomes a kind of baboushka: a series of tombs within tombs. Both hard and soft, the installation is monumental and momentary, its most durable form paradoxically is the fragile paper of a book. It can always be restaged, at other locations and in other constellations, each new exhibition being both a reanimation of Monique Sindler, through the indexicality of her writings and photographs, and a reenactment of her death. The last photo series of the book, *Tombes*, also foregrounds matter. Different headstones in which ‘mother’ is engraved are positioned on various surfaces (cobblestones, leaves, sand, etc.), simultaneously symbolizing universality and uniqueness. Moreover, the inclusion of *Tombes* also entails a return to Calle’s first work, which according to Nachtergaele already contains the core of her obsession with absence and death (Nachtergaele 248). In Nachtergaele’s reading, which does not yet take into account *Rachel, Monique*, Calle’s dealing with family has from the beginning been haunted by their death. Of the “litany of family ties” in Calle’s work, only the obsessive repetition of ‘mother’ and ‘daughter’ remains.¹² Two new photographs have been added in this project. The first photograph of the book is a full-page, black-and-white picture of Calle sitting on a grave with the word ‘mother’ on it. Her bare legs are crossed, in an almost provocative pose and she looks straight into the camera. Later on, the *Tombes* series opens with a polaroid of Calle lying on another ‘mother’ gravestone, in the same clothes, staring into the sky.

The end of the series – and of the book – is a tomb with ‘daughter’ on it. Calle, the mourning daughter, is not a mother herself. The likely conclusion of the series and of the project is Calle’s own death, which she is already preparing and staging (cfr. Barbieri). In this way, *Rachel, Monique* is, like Calle’s other works, dealing with absence and disappearance, a “nécrologie anticipée” (Nachtergaele 244). Here, the collective dimension of the project becomes clear and the injunction is passed on to us – audience, readers, friends.¹³ No matter how self-enclosed Calle’s mythology may seem sometimes, the network she sets out far exceeds the circumstances of her own family or romantic life, opening up more general dimensions and concerns. In many ways, Calle’s project is in tune with changes in contemporary mourning culture, especially under the influence of cyberspace. Research about the US, that can probably be somewhat generalized to other Western cultures in which internet plays an important role, shows how mourning becomes more visible and participatory in a curious interplay between public and private. However, as Calle’s allusions to theft also highlight, there are also ethical concerns about the digital and other afterlives of the deceased that we create, about the degree of control over one’s memory, and about the commercial aspects of public memorial practices and services, especially on the internet (Walter a.o.; DasGupta and Hurst; Brottman). Calle’s work also resonates with various theories of photography, via the mediation with two important figures in the theory of photography that haunt her work, Roland Barthes and Hervé Guibert.

12. It is interesting to read the inclusion of the new photographs against Nachtergaele’s reading of *Tombes*, before *Rachel, Monique*: “Chez Barthes, la photographie de la mère, après sa mort, ne peut être montrée justement parce que pour les lecteurs elle ne représentera rien (...). Sophie Calle, s’il faut montrer la famille, choisit alors une mise-en-scène directe devant le caveau (avec son père) ou devant les tombes où sont juste gravés les mots ‘mother’, ‘sister’, ‘brother’, formant une litanie de liens familiaux anonymes” (Nachtergaele 256).

13. Quite fittingly, the book – dedicated to Sindler’s friends – actually ends with a thank you-list of various collaborators to the project and the reverse ex libris “Ce livre a été volé à Monique Sindler”.

6.

As Nachtergaele has argued, Calle's mythological universe is deeply indebted to the work of Roland Barthes, nowhere more so than in their respective works dealing with mourning, the mother and photography. However, there's a crucial distinction between Barthes's treatment of his mother's death in *La chambre claire* and in *Journal de deuil* and Calle's *Rachel, Monique*. Whereas Calle shows everything, from the mother's diary to her agony and her laid-out corpse, Barthes only evokes his mother as total absence. Neither her image, nor anecdotes are provided.¹⁴ When Barthes painstakingly examines his mourning, he turns it into an act of phenomenological-aesthetic reflection that famously leads to the concept of indexicality – the photograph's physical relation to the object represented – that constitutes the aura of photography. As a “*medium bizarre*”, photography captures imminent death but at the same allows for some kind of animation of the past, in a kind of shared hallucination (Barthes, *La chambre claire* 177).

Although he does not feel the need to show his mother's image, Barthes does share with Sophie Calle “un désir d'apparition dans la disparition, une volonté de créer une présence spectrale, une tentative de faire apparaître ce qui a été, de redonner le monde à la vie, mais en tant que disparu” (Mavrikakis 136). Because of the power Barthes attributes to photography, the image of the dead is a transgression for him:

Dans la photographie, la présence de la chose (à un certain moment passé) n'est jamais métaphorique; et pour ce qui est des êtres animés, sa vie non plus, sauf à photographier les cadavres; et encore: si la photographie devient alors horrible, c'est parce qu'elle certifie, si l'on peut dire, que le cadavre est vivant, *en tant que cadavre*: c'est l'image vivante d'une chose morte. Car l'immobilité de la photo est comme le résultat d'une confusion perverse entre deux concepts: le Réel et le Vivant: en attestant que l'objet a été réel, elle induit subrepticement à croire qu'il est vivant, à cause de ce leurre qui nous fait attribuer au Réel une valeur absolument supérieure, comme éternelle; mais en déportant ce réel vers le passé («ça a été»), elle suggère qu'il est déjà mort. (Barthes, *La chambre claire* : 123-124)

Photographs of the dead are truly bizarre objects. They are indexes of indexes: if we do animate them, we create truly uncanny beings, like zombies or monsters of Frankenstein. This is the point where *Pas pu saisir la mort* enters into dialogue with Barthes, who, in the lines preceding the quote above, strictly distinguishes photography and film.¹⁵ Calle not only *shows* her mother, but she explicitly transgresses Barthes' taboo in creating a super-zombie image, doubled by the use of video.

In *Death 24X a Second*, Laura Mulvey returns to Barthes and other theories about photography and death to examine the uncanniness of the filmic image that has become more apparent as film became

14. Even in *Journal de deuil*, the posthumous diary of his mourning process, which typographically resembles the fragments of Monique Sindler's diary, Barthes provides very little description of his mother and uses mainly general, abstract categories, like “goodness” to characterize her.

15. “(...) au cinéma, quelque chose *est passé* devant ce même petit trou: la pose est emportée et niée par la suite continue des images: c'est une autre phenomenology, et partant un autre art qui commence, quoique dérivé du premier.” (*La chambre claire* 123)

a historic object.¹⁶ On the one hand, video and digital film have changed the viewing experience, making it technically possible to freeze the photographic image at the heart of the original filmic experience of 24 images a second at any moment. This still image makes us aware of the indexicality and of the warped temporality of film. On top of the bizarre, hallucinatory experience of seeing “live” what is in fact long dead, we also become aware that the filmic action in fact never occurs as such and is created by cutting and pasting in the editing room. If photography provides the technical means to seize the exact instant of death and the retreat of life from the object,¹⁷ filming death as it were reverses or rewinds it and the departing is brought back to life in a suspended duration.

The images of Sindler’s corpse may be bizarre and uncanny, but they function within an old pictorial tradition on the one hand, and within a contemporary culture of the death on the other hand. Images of the dead abound in the history of art and of the image itself. According to Hans Belting, they were made to give the dead an *ersatz* body and keep them among the living (de Bruyn). Besides preserving the dead, other motivations for depicting death are found. The image of the dead body not only helps us to imagine what is according to Freud unimaginable, one’s own death, but also to understand the death of the other. In this view, the dead body becomes an object of contemplation and even of study, as in the famous case of Claude Monet’s portrait of his wife Camille on her deathbed in 1879:

“I caught myself watching her tragic forehead” he wrote afterwards to a friend, “almost mechanically observing the sequence of changing colours that death was imposing on her rigid face. Blue, yellow, grey and so on... my reflexes compelled me to take unconscious action in spite of myself.” (Sharrock , see also Gedo 208-209)

Painter Daphne Todd describes the *Last Portrait of Mother*, a painting of the emaciated body of her 100-year-old mother, propped up in the funeral parlor after her death (shortlisted for the BP prize of the National Portrait Gallery), as “a form of finding out, of analysis (...) People do change and move after death. They sink into themselves, they continue on their way.” (Todd in Higgins)

The medium of photography brought new technical possibilities. The corpse could now be accurately captured after death has set in with only minimal intervention or distortion by the painterly imagination and by time. In the Victorian age, photography took over both the function of keeping the dead alive through representation and the visual topoi for representing them in an appropriate manner (the pieta, the deathbed...). Post-mortem photography was very popular as a kind of souvenir of the dead. Sometimes the dead body, a child, was staged in a family context and made to appear lifelike through posture and makeup. In other cases, the photograph zooms in on the face, like a death mask, or on the upper body of the deceased whose eyes have been closed. The laid out body is presented as a

16. In so doing, Mulvey takes her clue from Barthes but continues in a long tradition of associating the moving image or the film camera with the magic power of bringing the image to life, with all the uncanniness that this entails (cfr. Gunning).

17. In Jean-Luc Nancy’s view, the photograph not so much captures the life of the object that is about to die, rather, it captures how life has withdrawn from the object. Whereas the image was thought to embody the soul of the dead person, the photograph embodies the disappearance of life, the presence of absence, and the strangeness at the heart of the familiar (cfr. Kaplan).

peaceful and sleeping.¹⁸ There were also photographs of the dead in their coffin, but both the depiction of the dead as alive or as completely dead was soon felt to be sentimental, tasteless and uncanny. The practice all but disappeared in the 20th century, with the exception of photographs of famous people on their deathbed (e.g., the portrait of Marcel Proust by Man Ray).¹⁹ Post-mortem photography became mostly a forensic practice.

In *Die neue Sichtbarkeit des Todes* (2007) Thomas Macho and Kristin Marek argue for the renewed presence of death and the dead in the 21st century. Dead bodies have made their return in art and popular culture, in new ways. Forensic pathologists are becoming the new detectives in popular fiction and a popular series like *Six Feet Under* (2001-2006) treats the family life of undertakers. From the 1970-80s onwards, artists like Andres Serrano, Sue Fox, Theresa Margolles or Jeffrey Silverthorne photograph anonymous dead bodies in the morgue. Although this photography was initially regarded as ‘shock art’, depictions of the dead are no longer out to shock, even if the results can be hard to watch. The dead, in various states of post-mortem manipulation or decay, are shown in a distanced way, unadorned, as objects in themselves. These photographed or filmed corpses are presented with barely any comment or motivation, as a part of life, a presence in life.

Symbolizing or signifying nothing other than itself, the corpse becomes a kind of mise-en-abyme for the image in general. As Maurice Blanchot puts it in “Two Versions of the Imaginary”, an essay that serves as a manifesto for Macho and Marek’s project, the radical muteness and strangeness of the corpse is in fact like the image itself. Like the discarded object severed from its use-function, the corpse shows a person that has been, but that has become radically other with no possibility of return. Therefore, it must be regarded as an image only of itself and not of the person that it was (Blanchot 29). To put it in another way: in death, the body becomes radically severed from its referent and the index becomes a relic, an object that both is and is not human, a material remainder and reminder of the dead person that is at the same time completely other and transient, on the verge of total disappearance. Neither here, nor somewhere else, both the corpse and the image are suspended in an ontological realm between existence and non-existence.

More recently, there have been other revisions of the “scene of death” as a sign of changes in contemporary culture and local signifying practices (Buchan, Gibson and Ellison). Helen Ennis documents the return of postmortem photography in Australia, especially using digital cameras. While Macho and Marek foreground the objectivation of the corpse professional photography, intended for public display, Ennis focuses on the deeply private nature of vernacular photography and films. Digital cameras in cell phones offer a renewed secrecy to take photographs of the dead in various states and stages. These photographs and films mostly exist on screen and are never printed. Ennis’s research highlights the renewed possibility of secrecy that comes with digital photography, as an important

18. Several online archives of this practice exist, where the photographs are even for sale, see e.g. <http://thanatos.net/> and <http://www.paulfrecker.com/collections.cfm?pagetype=library&typeID=1>. A good overview of this practice, with a focus on Australia is found in Ennis..

19. This coincides with a gradual disappearance of death from society, as is described by Ariès and Certeau. Rather than a collective experience, with the dead surrounded by friends and family, dying has become medicalized and excluded. In the 20th century, most people die alone at the hospital. According to Certeau, this is the case because the dead embody the scandal of not being productive in a society that is exclusively defined in terms of work.

counterpoint to the emphasis on the blurred boundaries between public and private in most research on contemporary mourning and death cultures.

7.

In her overview of postmortem photography, Ennis demonstrates that the renewed interest in death and in the sick and dying body was not solely motivated on theoretical grounds. She also points out an important turning point in the 1980s and 1990s when the AIDS epidemic hit hard in artistic communities in the West (Ennis 135). Very young, mostly male artists were faced with a terrible disease – “gay man’s cancer” as it was called – for which there was neither a cure, nor much political goodwill to find one. The only thing left for these dying men was their body. The stages of the illness, the ravages of the emaciated corpse-like bodies, which were called to mind “living dead” or holocaust victims, their despair and courage, and the hopeless search for medical and political support were recorded in various artistic media, including video, by artists and activists.²⁰ These very emotional, shocking images were used in documentaries and art installations as a memento mori as well as a stark political statement.²¹ A moving account of the practice is given by artist David Wojnarowicz, who after the death of his lover Peter Hujar captured Hujar’s body in a variety of media: photography, film and also writing.

I flashed him a sign and then turned away embarrassed and then moments later Ethyl said, “David... look at Peter”. We all turned to the bed and his body was completely still; and then there was a very strong and slow intake of breath and then stillness and then one more breath and he was gone. I surprised myself: I barely cried. When everyone left I closed the door and pulled out the super-8 camera out of my bag and pulled a sweep of his bed: his open eye, his open mouth, that beautiful hand with the hint of gauze at the wrist that held the i.v. needle, the color of his hand like marble, the full sense of the flesh of it. Then the still camera: his amazing feet, his head, that open eye again – I kept trying to get the light I saw in that eye – and then the door flew open (...). (Wojnarowicz 102-103)

The motivations behind this artistic practice are complex. There is the desire to live the disease and what’s left of life until the very end, in a self-chosen way, refusing both the heteronormative morality of guilt and punishment and a renewed retreat in the closet. Many of the recordings, moreover, are embedded in strong queer narratives of love, care and solidarity in alternative love relations and families.

This brings us to the second interlocutor of Calle’s *Pas pu saisir la mort* and her other works on absence and mourning: Hervé Guibert. After Guibert publically unveiled and documented his struggle with Aids (as well as that of Michel Foucault), he became a public figure in France in a series of notorious autofictional novels and television interviews. In a long video-essay, *La pudeur ou l’impudeur* (1992), broadcast on French television a few months after his death, Guibert not only showed the physical ravages of Aids but also staged his own suicide – after a game of Russian roulette, he poses for a few

20. Cameras for home use (like Kodak’s Super 8 camera in the 1960s and Sony’s Camcorder technology in the 1980s) made it technically possible to record the process of death in the privacy of one’s home.

21. One of the best known examples of this practice is Tom Joslin’s video journal *Silverlake Life: The View from Here* (finished by his former student Peter Friedman) that painstakingly records the final stages of the disease, including the agony of death and the days following death (see Phelan 153-173 and Chambers 61-80).

minutes as a corpse – prefiguring his actual suicide a few years later. There are many thematic and formal resemblances between the autofictional, photo-narrative practices of Guibert and Calle, most importantly a preoccupation with absence, vision and premonition (Mavrikakis; Nachtergaele 233, 238-239, 248). Moreover, there is an ongoing complicated dialogue between them, that throws yet another light on *Pas pu saisir la mort*.

Guibert appears in several of Calle's works, most notably, in *No Sex Last Night*, *Disparitions* (2000) and *Douleur exquise* (2003).²² In the early works, Calle focuses on the disappearance of Guibert, who had just died. Absent both at the moment of his death and his funeral, Calle performs a private funeral ritual for Guibert, throwing flowers in the sea and calling his answering machine. In *Douleur exquise*, Guibert occupies a prominent place, both in image and in narrative. She evokes his presence through the story of their encounter in Japan in 1984. In 1990, Guibert had offered his version of this event in *A l'ami qui m'a pas sauvé la vie* (1990), where Calle was fictionalized as Anna.²³ The encounter hinges on a photograph of Calle as a child that Guibert, who had written an article about her work, had lost. In Tokyo, Guibert gives it back, but Calle "understood that he was going to make me pay for it" (*Douleur exquise* 76). Guibert's revenge is the account in *A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*, in which the character of Anna is depicted as a sort of madwoman, who tags along for a visit to the temple. After they almost get locked in in the temple, they become friends and visit another temple together in Kyoto. Calle, who includes a facsimile of Guibert's account in *Douleur exquise*, confirms this narrative by providing photographs of the visits. She also adds a second, rather abject anecdote, in which Guibert takes a bath in the water just used by Calle and tries to strangle her when she shows him her naked body (84-85). The whole episode is closed with a large two-page photograph of Guibert, that is very Barthesian in the way that it shows Guibert as a beautiful young man who is about to die.

The whole story mixes the serious and the comic, sex and violence, intimacy and transgression, in a way that is characteristic for the artistic persona of both Calle and Guibert. What makes it stand out is the timing. Calle seizes the opportunity to have the last word in their quarrel in 2003 when Guibert has no more chance to reply, in what appears to be an anecdote in a travel journal. *Pas pu saisir la mort* belatedly helps to understand what is at stake here. What may seem to be petty power game is in fact a denial of Guibert's death. Like Monique Sindler, Hervé Guibert liked to be the center of attention. Continuing their dialogue, that always centered on death, and continuing the power game is a way of keeping him in the realm of the living and of denying the logic of succession, in the double sense of seriality and survival (Mavrikakis 137).²⁴

8.

Pas pu saisir la mort suspends Monique Sindler's body between life and death, between subject and

22. Nachtergaele also cites Guibert's criticism of Calle's first work on *Tombes*, which she considers as the core of Calle's mythology.

23. In *Le protocole compassionnel* (1991), she will reappear as the same character.

24. Brottman also notes how cyberspace and digital culture create a sense of telepresence, where there is an actual belief that the dead are still somewhere in cyberspace to receive and respond to messages. The same can be said about Sophie Calle's artistic universe, where there is a constant tension between the simulacrum and the material embodiment.

object, and captures her spirit. In itself, this gesture is profoundly uncanny, even when regarded within a longstanding pictorial tradition that links the image to death. Although the installation partakes of many traditional topoi – ars moriendi, the deathbed, the sacralization of the last, the image as a double and the practice of image making as a form of contemplation – it is fundamentally ambivalent. Using video allows Calle to graft another 19th-century painterly aspiration onto the tradition of the image of the dead, namely that of capturing the “decisive moment” (Mulvey 20). However, as the title indicates, she fails to do this – the last breath cannot be seen – and the moment of stillness is stretched out. In this strange twilight zone the end can be perpetually postponed and the difference between life and death, between subject and object collapses. The disturbing implications of Calle’s gesture are toned down by the inclusion of the work in the soft monument *Rachel, Monique*, in which Monique Sindler becomes a character that we can mourn, with Calle, even if we have never known her. Although Sindler is not familiar, the universe in which she appears is, as is her most general and generic role as mother. Becoming part of this universe, however, entails that we all become – like Calle herself – doubles in a sequence that will eventually draw us into the vortex of inevitable death.

Sophie Calle is famous for turning her life, and everyone in it, into art. In time Calle’s work has become more and more populated with spectral presences. Although she downplays grief and tragedy in her works on absence and mourning, always bringing them back to their ordinary, all-too-human dimensions, they resonate and reverberate in unexpected directions, in art history and contemporary culture. Intensely private, *Pas pu saisir la mort* is also deeply political. Profoundly ethical, it is highly ambivalent. Strangely familiar, we are ultimately unable to capture it.

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