

THE DIFFERENT AUDIENCES OF SOPHIE CALLE

Alyssa Grossman's article raises important questions for enquiries around 'border crossings' in anthropology and contemporary art. The problematics of these relationships have been accurately summarised as erasures of difference, appropriations (whether of methods or around 'representation'), or as fraught with irreconcilable conflict over divergent approaches to ethics and aesthetics (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2015); it is the latter with which I am concerned in this brief response. So much might be shared, as Grossman indicates: method, subject matter, attention to self-reflexivity. Some of these issues are not only raised but also embodied by this essay, which asks how we might draw on Sophie Calle's work ('we' meaning anthropologists, since this is a journal of anthropology; hence, we acknowledge our audience). Grossman's argument and the experimental collaborations she describes are useful and interesting contributions to interdisciplinary efforts, with which I am also engaged, efforts that acknowledge but aim to move beyond obstinate, but valid, critique: such practices still too often appropriate contemporary art's methodologies (processes or crafts), too frequently without an awareness of the politics and aesthetics of contemporary art. Another issue is the current trend in 'popularising' anthropology by creating novel or non-traditional outcomes, as Grimshaw and Ravetz (2015) also acknowledge. Can the directions suggested in Grossman's article, specifically the potential in examining the work of Sophie Calle, help move the argument, and the practice, forwards? What can we learn from Calle's approach?

I very much agree with Grossman, and those that she cites, that anthropology

can take inspiration from contemporary art practices. One aim, which I share, is to *enact* rather than explain or describe, an effort which I call anti-ethnographic, speaking to Tim Ingold's distinction between ethnography and anthropology (2008). Another is to be 'disruptive'; and here we arrive at the obvious, but vital, question of ethics. At the heart of much criticism and excitement about Calle's work is the question of whether it is ethical. This rather obvious point is what makes her work interesting for anthropology. According to what criteria can we judge? And what can this say for an anthropology that wants to do more than borrow techniques, that desires to be disruptive, or, further, moves toward the fictional as a means of this *enacting*? I argue that Calle's work can be considered profoundly ethical—but only in the terms of art, not of anthropology. The ethical uncertainties around her work are obvious. Famously, *The Address Book* is possibly the most challenging; it is impossible to imagine an anthropologist getting ethical approval to do this, or many of her other works. Yet Calle's work is ethical in that it raises vital questions about human behaviour; while it is about 'the ethics of creating work out of other people's lives' as Grossman describes (p. 29), it does so in the terms of art, not anthropology. This is evident in crucial differences in how elements—the audience, *aesthetics*—are understood; Calle is concerned with 'occupying the wall' as the article pinpoints (p. 28). Clearly, anthropological fieldwork is riddled with ethical questions, but ethics is not problematised in the same way in contemporary art (Jelinek 2016) and Calle is fearless in her (debateable) disregard. This said, Grossman's article arguably generalises art, in

a way that anthropologists often do; if Calle does things that, ethically, anthropologists ‘cannot’, can this be generalised (to the respective disciplines)? However, we do need to explore what it is that gives the aesthetic realm its ‘radical potential’ (cf. Grimshaw and Ravetz 2015: 420), and how we might draw on this, and Grossman’s essay begins to do this.

Calle’s practice is wrought through rules and routine, Surrealist or Situationist in spirit, in its conscious transformations of everyday practices. In diverse ways her projects fuse reality with fiction, existing at the edges of criminality: stalking, illegal abortions, etc. Her work is a form of self-portraiture, even when it is about the intimate lives of others; she often makes an object of the relationship with the subject, reversing the gaze, or as Grossman points out, ‘turning the gaze upon herself’ (p. 29) perhaps to *escape* the gaze. But what happens in the reversals between subject and object that are enacted? By making an object of people, making a subject of oneself? Could anthropology draw from this?

Art, for Calle, is about action and about feelings, not about generating data—an aim perhaps shared by some contemporary anthropology. It is important to note, as Grossman does, that Calle does not make any claims to the ethnographic or the anthropological (so is it appropriative for us as anthropologists to make the claims with which Grossman begins?) And does it only ‘look like’ anthropology (cf. Grimshaw and Ravetz 2015)? It is the relationship between text and image that makes Calle’s work anthropological, as Grossman identifies, but I would like to carry the argument further to suggest we can draw inspiration from it partly because it holds to an understanding of aesthetics currently peculiar to art. Here aesthetics is understood differently to the way it is currently understood

in anthropology, which focuses on sensory experience or embodied engagement (or, still more traditionally, on ‘beauty’), whereas aesthetic decisions in contemporary art practice begin with the balancing of form and content (cf. Jelinek 2016) in relation to context. While we might draw inspiration from Calle’s work, it is also interesting to note that—as an untrained artist—she has been criticised for the weakness of her visual, photographic elements, which are subordinate to the text, as Grossman’s essay acknowledges. And yet there is a strong aesthetic to the forensic, detective-like detail, to the disruption of singular narratives, to the multiple interpretations produced in works like *Take Care of Yourself* or other forms of fictionalisation. Critically, artistic work such as Calle’s could inform a different engagement with (our) audiences, as Grossman’s interesting approach that draws on Calle’s collecting memories of missing monuments or artworks proves. It is a good thing to pursue an anthropology that has an openness to such multiplicities.

REFERENCES

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