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## **Through Artobiography**

*On personal narrative and emotion as a feminist strategy in the work by  
contemporary artist Sophie Calle*

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### **Abstract**

*This master thesis investigates how the usage of personal narrative and working with emotion might be understood as a feminist strategy in the work True Stories, an autobiographical project by contemporary French artist Sophie Calle. This is done through the application of Judith Butler's theory on heteronormativity, performativity and subversive acts, as well as Sara Ahmed's thought on emotion.*

*The result shows how personal narrative can function to expose not only how norms and emotion work on us as socially constituted subjects, but also how new possibilities and orientations are formed. The artistic process is emphasized as a place where new orientations and formations are made possible, such as through the healing of emotional wounds, or through acting upon our desire.*

*Keywords: Autobiography, art, feminism, emotion, True Stories,  
Sophie Calle, Judith Butler, Sara Ahmed*

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## 1.0 Introduction

Let me begin this work by telling you about a piece of my history, and a couple of encounters that I made in the fall of 2013, and spring of 2014.

In 2013 I began to study at a preparatory art school in Sweden, attending a 2 year program in sculpture, installation and performance art. This was the beginning of a surprising, and at times challenging, relationship with my own creativity and intuition. As well as with many other aspiring artists and creatives with whom I had the privilege to share conversations on what art is, and perhaps more importantly, what art *does*.

One of my classmates, a woman whom had very recently lost her mother to cancer, and thereafter chosen to change course with respect to her studies, was one of these people that I got to follow from her initial projects as an art student. During our first year of knowing each other she made a moving installation piece dealing with death, identity and belonging. The installation consisted in a projection of an image of her, resting peacefully in a bed, accompanied by a recorded conversation between her two siblings discussing which clothes they would choose to dress her in, in the event that she would pass away. In relation to this project, and others that came to follow, we began a conversation on the role of the artist in art making, and more specifically about the potential power in working around one's own feelings and experiences. We were both attracted to autobiographical work, while at the same time strongly identifying as feminists and wanting to make art that would reflect this conviction. But as much as we felt the power of personal narrative and emotion driven art, we were also concerned with questions of boundary setting, worried about self-indulgence and eager to understand why some projects had such impact and effect on its audience, while others fell more flat.

During these years I also made another encounter that left a deep impression on me. This fascinating meeting was with the work by contemporary French artist Sophie Calle. Calle is an artist that has continuously challenged the boundaries of social convention through her works that are often described as conceptual and

performative, in general documented through photography and text. She began her path as an artist through following strangers with her camera, taking notes on their whereabouts and her own responses to them. She continued her career by (among else) documenting strangers sleeping in her bed, telling the story of her journey through a painful breakup, drawing the picture of an unknown man through interviews with contacts found in his address book and asking blind persons to tell about their perception of beauty (Calle, 2004; 2012; 2011). In 2007 she was representing France at the Venice biennale of contemporary art with *Take care of yourself* (Calle, 2007), an installation piece consisting of contributions from 107 women of different professions. Calle had received a break up email from a former lover that she let the participants interpret, dissect and translate for her. Three years later, in 2010, she won the Hasselblad prize for her autobiographical work *True Stories* (Calle, 2016), a project consisting of stories and reflections from her life.

The work by Sophie Calle left a deep impression on me not only because of how she was able to transgress, and thereby challenge, social boundaries, hierarchies and the divide between the public and private. But also for the courage she was showing in blending art and life, using her own desires, curiosities, sorrows and anger as catalysts for, at times, large scale art projects. For the purpose of my master thesis I would like to return to, and expand upon, questions around the role of emotion and personal narrative in feminist art making, and I will be doing this through seeking a deeper understanding of the role emotion and autobiographical practices have for the feminist potential of the work by Sophie Calle.

### **1.1 Aim**

The aim of this thesis is, as described above, to reach a deeper understanding of the way that emotion and personal narrative can be used, and understood, as a feminist strategy in art making. And by a feminist strategy I here mean a strategy that functions to destabilize a current and oppressive gender order, while

expanding the space and possible directions in which subjects can relate, act and feel in this world.

## **1.2 Research question**

How can personal narrative and emotion be understood as a feminist strategy in the autobiographical work by Sophie Calle?

## **2.0 Previous research**

The artistic practice, as well as the personality, of Sophie Calle have apparently been intriguing to many, and there is a lot written about her and about her work. For the purpose of this chapter, we shall take a closer look at texts that could be regarded as *research* about her work and practice. Before that can be done, it is however of relevance to consider the concept of research in relation to art and artistic practice. If it is reasonable to assume that such research concerns itself to a large extent with the act of interpretation, then the question also arises about which interpretations that can in fact be regarded as research. In *Konstteori – en introduktion* (2006) Cynthia Freeland defines an interpretation as an explanation of how a piece of art works, how it functions. She goes on to point out that a good interpretation is based on well grounded arguments, proofs, and give a complex and enriching explanation for a piece (Freeland, 2006, p 140). Although it could be assumed that such interpretations might be formulated from many different positions, there is a further limitation set to what texts that can be included in this chapter, and that is their status as *academical research*. This requirement has limited the scope of works here referenced to those that can be found as peer reviewed articles in scholarly magazines and papers, and to dissertations within the humanities.

Another limitation has been that of language. Since Sophie Calle's mother tongue is french and her country of origin France, it is likely that there are texts written about her in french that could have been of interest to include here, but that I have not been able to access due to the fact that I don't read french. With

that said, it should also be added that the overview that here follows is in no way complete or exhaustive, but meant to give insightful perspectives on ways in which Calle's work is, and has been, understood.

## **2.1 Dissertations**

When searching for previous research on the work by Sophie Calle I found several doctoral dissertations and master thesis' written at foremost North American universities. While a couple of them were not dealing with her work exclusively, or were very hard to get full access to, I will here present two such works that I believe offer interesting perspectives on her practice.

The first one is a master thesis called *Conceptual production in the work by Sophie Calle* (Kaplan, 2015) in which the author argues for an understanding of Calle's work as conceptual, rather than emotional. She describes how Calle depicts real people like characters in a mystery novel, while at the same time positioning herself, through reflection and action, as another character among them. Kaplan also notes that the characteristics of the artist, such as being a white middle class woman, has enabled her to access certain worlds or stories, whereas others may be out of her reach.

The second work I'd like to mention here is a doctoral dissertation with the title *Sophie Calle: Her(e) but not her(e)* (2008) by Mya Mangawang. In it Mangawang shows the way that Sophie Calle's engagement in politics and alliance with philosopher Michel Foucault has informed and influenced her work. She takes as her starting point two organizations in which Calle was active in her youth, the GIP (prison information group) and MLAC (movement for liberation of abortion and contraception). Mangawang points out that the founder of GIP was Foucault and that an important strategy of the organization was to expose injustices through media, thereby disrupting the authority of control by using and manipulating its own tools and mechanisms. This is a strategy that goes in line with the theories of Foucault, and also something that Calle can be said to do in that she functions as a system of surveillance in some of her works, monitoring people, but at the same

time exposing her own fragility through her personal reflections and failures. She is through that performing a parody of a system that is in itself a construct and parody.

In the two works mentioned above, the work of Sophie Calle is in one instance described as a conceptual practice, and in the other a manifestation or reflection of political and philosophical ideas.

## 2.2 Articles

In the article *Phototextuality in Sophie Calle's Des histoires vraies* (2017) Catherine Roy observes how stories happen in the process of narration. She describes autobiography as a practice through which one tries to understand one's existence in the world, and finds that Sophie Calle is, in her autobiographical work, reflecting on, exposing and sharing herself, communicating vulnerability and a sense of humor. This view of Sophie Calle as a story teller reoccurs in many texts written about her work, although framed in slightly different ways. In *Public Places - Private Spaces Conceptualism, Feminism and Public Art: Notes on Sophie Calle's The Detachment* (2002) Malene Vest Hansen is explaining how Calle has worked with the relationship between personal stories and public places. This has for example been done in east Berlin, where Calle asked people to tell their memories of communist sculptures that had been torn down. Vest Hansen sees this replacement of monuments with memories as a feminist strategy, where the stories of private spaces are brought out into public places.

Another article that deals with the way that Sophie Calle works with memory is *Exhibiting pain: Sophie Calle's Douleur exquisite* (2007) by Shirley Jordan. Jordan sees Calle's work *Exquisite pain* as a soft monument over a lost relationship, where Calle is describing the move towards the known disaster, as well as the work it takes to come through the pain thereafter. Jordan points out that Calle's self reflective practice and self irony encourages others to do the same, her vulnerability enables her to touch that which is common to all of us.

In *Accumulation and Archives: Sophie Calle's Prenez soin de vous* (2014) Natalie Edwards sees Calle's work in *Take care of yourself* not as a monument, but an archive, where she is calling upon experts, women of different skills and professions, to interpret the email of a lost lover. She thereby challenges the authority of institutional archives, using the form and logic of an archive, while only inviting women contributors, and making the emotional and relational the subject and object of concern. Anna Watkins Fisher takes the feminist reading of *Take care of yourself*, and other works by Calle, one step further in the article *Manic Impositions: The Parasitical Art of Chris Kraus and Sophie Calle* (2012). She views Calle's position as that of a feminist parasite that's festering upon its host, patriarchy. This is for example done through the use of emotion (a supposedly feminine attribute) to overwhelm.

Janet Hand has another take on the work by Sophie Calle in *Sophie Calle's art of following and seduction* (2005). Here Calle is again said to be creating fictional worlds in public locations, while at the same time displaying a clear lack of passivity in the way that she is participating in and shaping these worlds. She acts upon her desires and through that she challenges our ideas of for example the role of the chambermaid, by monitoring and documenting the belongings of the guests, or by following strangers with a passion that is close to religious.

In the final article that I will mention here, *Photography as Social Encounter: Three Works by Micky Allan, Sophie Calle and Simryn Gill* (2014) by Daniel Palmer, Calle's work is described as primarily self-portraiture. Although she is at times trying to reverse the relationship between the one depicted and the one depicting, for example in the project *The Shadow* in which a private detective is hired to spy on her, while unknowingly also being led and observed by the artist. Palmer argues that Calle is, through this strategy of involvement, trying to overcome the distance and separation created by the gaze of the camera.

While some see the work by Sophie Calle as that of a seducer, parasite or story teller, certain themes seem to be reoccurring in many of the works mentioned

above, such as a tendency to read her work as feminist or political and critical. There is a focus on the way that she creates spaces or relations, and on the role that vulnerability and the willingness to expose herself has. These themes are also ones that I will focus on in my work, bringing them together in an attempt at understanding the way that personal narrative and emotion works in forming the critical and feminist potential in her work.

### **3.0 Theoretical approach**

In helping me understand the way that personal narrative and emotion might be understood as a feminist strategy in the work by Sophie Calle I will need theories that allow me to consider art as a practice, as well as gender and emotion as a part in this practice. In the following three sections I will take a closer look at how art and the artistic process might be understood, while then moving on to how gender might be seen as not only represented but (re)created in the artistic process, and finally to a theory of emotion that takes into account its social and cultural nature and implications.

### **3.1 Art**

In *Konstteori – en introduktion* (2006) Cynthia Freeland gives an introduction to how art might be viewed and understood. What is it? Which function does it have? How can we interpret it? She describes an institutional definition of what art might be, which says that art is that which the *art world* agrees for it to be (Freeland, 2006, p 63). This means that context and consensus would be important for the definition of art, as art. She goes on to point out that art has an important and central role in dealing with the greater questions that we have as humans and as a society, and presents several perspectives, or views, on how art does this - how we might interpret it.

A cognitive theory of art sees art as a language that communicates thoughts and ideas. This would make the artistic process a process equal to that of thinking, and finding a medium and technique that helps us to communicate our sentiments or

arguments. In contrast to this view, there is another theory of art as expressive, art as a way for us to express our feelings and emotions, or possibly even broader ideas. Whereas the cognitive model seems to emphasize a view of the art maker as a rational and linguistically inclined, or constituted, individual, the more expressive approach seems to stem from a view of the art maker as in touch with her more intuitive or instinctual depths. This is, not unexpectedly, taken one step further by Sigmund Freud and other psychoanalysts who see art as a channel for, and expression of, our repressed desires (Freeland, 2006).

Cynthia Freeland mentions several interesting perspectives on art making that expands upon, repudiates or develops the theories described above, and I will here mention a couple of those. She presents a theory by R G Collingswood who sees art not only as a way to express our feelings or ideas, but also as a way to understand them. This is based on the notion that we can not fully understand our feelings or sentiments until they are expressed, and art making is thus a way to reach such an understanding (Freeland, 2006, p 149). Other theorists, such as Nelson Goodman, takes this even further, and in seemingly emphasizing a more cognitive stance, declares art as a way to reach and develop knowledge. The artistic process can thus be seen as one related to the ones used in other types of research or knowledge production (p 154). Finally, critical philosophers such as Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault urges for a change of focus from the art maker to the context in which art is made. The subject, as well as her activities, are according to such perspectives constituted by the power relations shaping the time and place where she is active (p 152).

While some of the perspectives described above seem to be contradictory, Freeland argues for a theory of art that takes into account both its communicative and expressive qualities. My view is that art manifests in such diverse shapes, and art making is conducted in so many ways and for so many reasons, that one single theory of what art is and does could never be sufficient. Rather I believe that different theories allow for different interpretations and that they have the potential to enrich, enlarge and make each other more complex, and at times

complicated. For the purpose of this thesis art and art making is seen as an interplay between language and emotion, constituted by the power relations and conventions that shape their position in time and space, but not inevitably determined by them. There is an intriguing possibility in the idea of art as a way to understand ideas or emotions, and to create knowledge. A further question is however if yet more can be done through the artistic process.

Just like feminist art theorist Griselda Pollock argues in her essay *Modernity and the spaces of femininity* (1998), it might be of importance to focus not only on the art piece made or the subject that makes it, but the whole process that art making entails. What is made in the process, when considered from a feminist perspective, is clearly not only a piece of art, but relations, positions, questions and (inevitably) emotions.

### **3.2 Heteronormativity and subversive acts**

To assist me in the process of understanding the way that gender works and is worked upon in the artistic practice of Sophie Calle, I will be using Judith Butlers theories on heteronormativity, performativity and subversive acts.

Butler's ideas are based on a view of the subject as socially constituted within regulative, as well as productive, discourses of power. According to her, we can never stand outside of the system that has constituted us as subjects, and the goal can never be to dismiss or discard relations of power, but merely to reorganize them (Butler, 2007, p 199). She puts an emphasis on the fact that a subject that is constituted by a discourse does not have to be determined by it, but it is rather in the social nature of a discourse that it can be reorganized and reformulated. The discourse that Butler is focusing on is the norm of heterosexuality, which says that there should be a correlation between what is perceived as anatomical sex, social gender, and sexual orientation. A man should be masculine and desire feminine women, a woman feminine and desire masculine men. But the regulatory script of heterosexuality does not only request a congruence between sex, gender and sexuality, but also that these be performed in a way that is in accordance with

decency and good moral. What this means exactly is of course dependent upon the context, but Gayle Rubin is in her article *Thinking sex: notes towards a radical theory of the politics of sexuality* (2008) presenting a model called the *Charmed circle*, which describes how some sexual behaviors are privileged by society, whereas others are regarded as bad. While the model might seem a bit out dated in a society that for example no longer condemn sexual activity outside wedlock, many of Rubin's points are still applicable, such as the idea that good sex, and good sensuality, is not performed in exchange for money.

According to Butler, the way that the gendered subject is being made within the discourse is through the endless repetition of performative acts. This is an idea that reoccurs in feminist thought, but Butler takes it one step further by arguing that not only gender identity, but also sex is shaped and made to seem natural through repetitions of acts (not least linguistic ones). However, this performative nature and prerequisite of our constituted existence leaves the opportunity for acts being performed against the regulative script. When such acts are performed, as in the failure to live up to the ideals of the heteronormative, they reveal the norm as fiction and fantasy. Butler argues for the use of subversive acts in trying to change and reorganize the structures of power. Such an act would be the use of parody and play to dismantle the naturalized norms, and opening up the possibility for new positions and acts (Butler, 2007).

Now, the question might have arose in the reader: Why queer theory? Why have I chosen Butler, when there are other feminist theorists and philosophers that have gone more in depth with the role, function and potential of emotion in the artistic or poetic? Especially considering the fact that we are dealing with an artist that so clearly works with her own history and experience, and who uses text as one of her primary mediums. Would it not be more suitable to look at the work by for example french poststructuralist feminists and philosophers Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva or Helene Cixous? Wouldn't Irigaray's theory on the potential of novel language as a challenge to the patriarchical one, Kristeva's thoughts on the role of

the semiotic or Cixous' focus on the body and a feminine writing be of better use (Irigaray, 1985, 1985; Kristeva, 1980; Cixous, 1990)?

My answer would be three times No. First of all, it would be to approach the work by Sophie Calle from a perspective that sees not only her, but also her art, as coming from one of two positions in a binary, and that has as its starting point the constitution and construction of this position. Although both Irigaray, Kristeva and Cixous do argue against essentialist stances in different ways, they still employ what could be called strategic essentialism, or focus for example on the relationship to the mother and the feminine. I do not wish to argue against such a stance, or the usefulness of it in analyzing artistic expression, but here I wish to look at the work by Calle from a position that enables me to critically, and openly, view her use of acts and performative play. As I see it, Butler offers a theory that allows for, and encourages, an open consideration of the implications and consequences of an action, shifting the focus away from its origin. I therefore see her theories as useful in this context.

Second, Butler has been criticized for idealizing movement and presenting a theory of gender that gives the idea that it would just be to *do* differently, and differently it would *be*. This seems of course absurd, or at best too idealistically utopian, to most people that have inhabited this world as a bodily and socially constituted presence. There are physical diversities, emotional histories and ties, as well as norms, conventions and the threat of psychological and physical violence that strongly limit the possibility or desirability of such movement. However, I propose that Butler's theories make (even more) sense when applied in the context of art. The example that Butler gives when arguing for her theory of subversive bodily acts can in fact be seen as an artistic one; the drag show. As an example of a stage show, the drag performance is not only a play with and parody of (heteronormative) gender, it is also taking place in a space that can be seen as an artistic one, and as such it is a space where expectations and conventions are slightly altered. I do not want to go as far as to suggest that Butler's theory would be a theory of art, but I would like to argue that a critical feminist perspective on

art and artistic practices has much to gain from a closer reading of her. In her thoughts around the drag show there are two interesting observations that will be highlighted here. The first one is how she points out that the drag artist does not only embody the possibility of an anatomical sex and a gender identity, but also a gender agency, a possibility of *acting* gender (Butler, 2007, p 216). It seems to me that this possibility is strongly encouraged by, although not necessarily dependent upon, the artistic space in which it takes place. The second point is the way that she describes the amazement created in the audience at the sight of the drag show, a reaction that she explains by the fact that in that very moment the viewer perceives and realizes the constructed nature of, and relationship between, sex and gender (p 216). Feminist theorist Sara Ahmed further expands upon this idea in her description of feminist wonder, the reaction that we might get when realizing something that astonishes, deeply affects us and makes us move in new directions (Ahmed, 2004, p 179). The drag show can thus be seen as an act that opens up a moment of wonder and realization for the audience, an idea that is much in line with the thoughts presented in the previous section about art as a place where understanding and knowledge can be reached, or made.

Third, the theoretical perspective on emotion that will be used here is Sara Ahmed's. Ahmed does not only relate to Butler in the way she talks about wonder, but her theory on emotion is clearly influenced by, and can even be said to in part build upon, Butler's theoretical ground. In the following section Ahmed's views on emotion will be presented, as well as how they relate to Judith Butler's theoretical work.

### **3.3 Emotion**

In *The cultural politics of emotion* (2004) Sara Ahmed is presenting a theory that considers the way that emotions work to move us and to shape the surfaces of bodies. Just like Butler, she sees the subject as socially, and emotionally, constituted, and she considers emotions to be performative. By that she means that emotions are the effect of actions and orientations, rather than an origin that

precedes the movement or relation. But at the same time she also claims that actions and orientations are the effect of those very same emotions. How might this be?

As Ahmed (2007) points out, emotions have been regarded as standing beneath reason, and an emotional person is often considered to be at the mercy of impulses that might blur her thought and rationality. However, Ahmed claims that it is pointless to make a distinction between sensations, emotion and thought, since we can not experience them as distinctive. And an orientation away from something is still an orientation caused by the impression that this object, or subject, has left upon us.

The impressions that we get from an object or other becomes attributed to that same object or other, and when we reencounter them, we experience the same kind of response again. If we have learnt through repetitious acts of speech that something is disgusting, we will react with disgust upon seeing it, and this response will confirm and strengthen our belief in the disgusting nature of the object. The result is that emotions are an effect, but also a cause, and as such they move us towards or away from objects or others, but they are also what attaches us to others. They are crucial to our formation as psychological and social beings. As Ahmed puts it, *what moves us is also what keeps us in place* (Ahmed, 2004, p 11).

Through reorientations, an object or other might be replaced by another, possibly similar one, and in that way emotions sticks to, or slides over, objects and others. Concerning stickiness, Ahmed puts an emphasis on how language and words are a part of the performative acts that form our emotional orientations. Different namings of emotions involve different orientations in that they stick different signs to objects and others. Signs that moves us toward or away from that object or other (Ahmed, 2004, p 195). She also considers memories to be a form of object, to and from which we are orientated. Since emotions in themselves are performative it would however be impossible for actual emotions to be

circulated or shared, but rather it is the object of emotion that can be received by, or passed on to, another (p 11).

Just like Butler, Ahmed has a norm critical perspective. In relation to what she calls compulsory heterosexuality she describes the way that the norm is upheld through everyday acts and interactions, as well as through ceremonies such as birth, marriage and death. She describes the way that a body that experiences pleasure is opening up towards the world, whereas one in pain is turning in on itself. And she considers the way that comfort, as the one achieved through norm conformity, makes a body stretch out and take up space, whereas discomfort is experienced as disorientation or unsettledness. However, she also sees the way that relations and moments that go against the script of the normative might work as a disturbance or resistance when they are embraced as possible alternatives, as *queer moments*. To challenge a norm also means to form a different emotional orientation and relation to it (Ahmed, 2004, p 146).

In the end of her book *The cultural politics of emotion* (2004), Ahmed declares that a good scar is not one that is invisible and discreet, but rather one that consists in a visible mark on the one that has been shaped by it. In this way the scar will be a place that is not overlooked, but worked through and on. Just as challenging norms involve a different emotional orientation in relation to them, a scar can be worked upon, and perhaps slowly healed. For some, this might involve feelings that are often seen as negative and destructive, such as anger or shame, but that might be what enables an individual to reorientate and form new relations to the world.

#### **4.0 Method**

In *Konsforskning – en guide till feministisk teori, metodologi och skrift* (2009) Nina Lykke writes about feminist research that its innovative power lies in its experimental stance on choice and application of method and theory (Lykke, 2009, p 174). And the aspiration of this project has been to keep an open and

flexible mind in terms of theoretical and methodological tools that might help in conducting it. An inspiration has been other feminist interpretations of art.

In *Modernity and the spaces of femininity* (1998) Griselda Pollock is choosing to make her analysis based on two different analytical axis, the room and the gaze. This approach has the qualities of being effective and straight forward, something that is helpful when working with several theoretical perspectives. In the image and text analysis here conducted I chose to look at the material from on the one hand an axis of theoretical concepts relating to gender norms, such as sexuality, public/private, the body, femininity/masculinity and ceremonies, and on the other hand an axis of emotion, such as anger, wonder, amusement, shame etc. This approach allowed for a critical perspective on the way that emotion work and is worked upon in the art by Sophie Calle, while putting it in relation to concepts that are of relevance to a feminist analysis. Within the result gathered from this analytical process was then identified patterns and critical points that were further developed into three broader themes that are presented in the result part of the thesis. And those were then critically discussed in relation to their implication, but also their possible application, in contexts of feminism, art and research.

Another important choice was to limit the scope of the research to focus only on Sophie Calle's autobiographical work *True Stories* (Calle, 2016). While she can be said to consistently work with emotion and personal narrative in different ways, this is a project that both touches upon some of her other artworks, while clearly claiming its place as a work of autobiography.

A challenge in the process of analyzing and treating *True Stories* has been how to see it's different parts and where to put focus. Every story consists of a text and an image, and while it has been hard to not put most focus on the textual narrative, I have tried to consider the visual interplay as well. As I see it, the photographs function as proof or visual clue, and in that way they are intimately bound up with the written story. They form a whole, a collage of parts that accentuate and rely on each other.

Here I would also like to reflect upon my position in relation to the project that I am conducting. Howard S Becker writes about how we need to be aware of the image we have of what we are studying, but also about whether we are projecting a *neat* story upon our research (Becker, 1998, p 33). In carrying out my research I have tried to be aware of the way that my previous experiences, and understanding of feminist theory and art, have influenced my choices. I have tried to be clear and transparent in formulating the research problem and motivating the choices I have made, recognizing my personal interest in the issues at hand. However, I do not believe that a personal interest need only to be a limitation in the process of conducting research, but that it also motivates to find new paths, being critical and innovative, and staying accountable in every step of the process. But it should be clear to the reader that I am operating from something that could be described as a hypothesis, that I seek to prove through the use of feminist theory. This hypothesis, about feminist and critical potential, is however, as we have seen, reoccurring in research and writings around the work by Sophie Calle.

Finally I'd like to say something about the role of theory in this project. It should be emphasized that what is done here can be described as an interpretation that is strongly guided by the chosen theoretical perspectives. This approach creates an intimate relationship between theory and the studied phenomena, that might not only shed light on the chosen material, but also on theoretical possibilities and potentialities. It is a study about art, but in a sense also about how the chosen theories might be applied in a situation that consists in autobiography and art. Lykke writes about transdisciplinary studies that its' definition is the usage of theory and methods from different disciplines, and that this is what enables it to be a ground where something new might grow (Lykke, 2009, p 34).

## **5.0 Presentation of material**

As previously mentioned, many of the works by Sophie Calle involve personal narrative and emotion in different ways. In the pieces where she is following or documenting strangers, she is at the same time revealing her own feelings about

the process and project. And in quite a few of her works, such as *No sex last night* (Calle, 1996), *Exquisite pain* (Calle, 2004) and *Take care of yourself* (Calle, 2007), she is dealing with her own intimate relationships. The reason to analyze her work *True Stories* (Calle, 2016) is not only that it is (presumably) telling true stories from the artist's life, but also that it does incorporate reflections on some of her other works. This allows for an insight into the way that personal narrative is used and emotions are worked with and upon in her artistic process.

What follows below is a short introduction and description of the project *True Stories*, that was the winner of the Hasselblad award in 2010.

### 5.1 True Stories



(Borchardt, 2004)

*True Stories* is a collection of 50 short stories, each accompanied by a photograph. In *Phototextuality in Sophie Calle's Des histoires vraies* (2017) Catherine Roy writes about the way that images are used in the project that they function as an explanation for the text rather than the other way around. According to her the photographs have the role of metaphor in that they are often not documenting an

actual event, but rather function to illustrate or expand upon the story. Calle started the collection of stories in 1988 and it seems to be continually growing. Today it includes for example a story called *To Victor Hasselblad* (Calle, 2016, p 89), that was written after she won the Hasselblad prize and exhibited the work in Gothenburg. The image in this section is showing the way that the collection is exhibited in a gallery space, but there are also several publications of it (or parts of it) in the form of art books.

The stories deal with Calle's childhood and youth, her parents and grandparents, and it mentions or touches upon her art works and her romantic relationships, most notably the one with American photographer Gregory Shepard.

## **6.0 Result**

In the following three sections will now be outlined the result from the analysis of *True Stories* (Calle, 2016). The first one deals with the way that Calle is, through her art, exposing and negotiating the regulative norm of proper heterosexuality, the second section describes the way she works with, or rather around, emotion, while the last one looks at reorientations and orientations described in, but also perhaps made through, her art.

While all stories in the book were treated in the initial stages of the analysis, I will only be referencing some of them here, to highlight and describe the broader themes found.

### **6.1 Exposing**

There are many stories in the collection that deal with Sophie Calle's relationships to men, and several of them describe attempting and failing at marriage. In the story *The Wedding Dress* (Calle, 2016, p 29) she is going to the house of a man she admires, carrying a wedding dress in her bag that she wears during their first night together. The story is accentuated by a photograph of a wedding dress lying on a bed, presumably the one mentioned in the story, but this is something that we can not know for sure. The image is black and white, focusing on the object,

resembling the esthetics of a documentary photograph, and therefore the very symbolic object is also read as a proof.

In the sequence of ten stories called *The Husband* (Calle, 2016, p 55), she is describing her relationship to Gregory Shepard. In *The Resolution* (p 57) he is showing up one year late to their first date; in *The Hostage* (p 59) she is asking him to give her a treasured object as a guarantee that he will come back; in *The Argument* (p 61) he is in anger throwing objects into the wall, causing a hole that she covers up with their wedding photograph; in *The Erection* (p 65) she convinces him to spontaneously marry her; and in *The Fake Marriage* (p 69) she is gathering family and friends for a mock wedding, fulfilling her dream of wearing a wedding dress. The marriage does however end with *The Divorce* (p 73), but there is yet another attempt at matrimony described in the story *Dream Wedding* (p 77), following right after *The Husband* sequence. Here she is telling the story of how she wanted to marry a man before he was going to China for three years, and how the entire wedding was planned and prepared to take place at the airport right before he boarded the plane. In the end they are refused permission by the state prosecutor, but Calle insists on going to the air port in her wedding dress at the decided date. The photograph is showing her in a red wedding dress with a long veil and she is holding a bouquet of red roses, standing beside the chairs at an airport gate, gazing out the window.

What makes these stories interesting here are perhaps not how they are told one by one, but how they together form a narrative of the repetitious act of trying and failing to live up to the ideal of the culturally sanctioned heterosexual union. As Butler has shown, the forcing norm of heterosexuality is revealed as constructed through our failures to live up to it. The ideal is shown as unattainable (Butler, 2007). However, in this case I do not only want to stress the fact that these marriages fail in themselves, either through divorce or through never taking place at all, but that the woman, the feminine subject, is here displaying a strong desire in pursuing, convincing, creating and directing these events. Through continuously staging and failing at the ceremony of joining in matrimony, she

exposes not only herself but also the constructed nature and seeming unattainableness of the ideal of the blissfully married couple. She is undermining the symbolic importance of the ritual, but also revealing what seems to be reversed roles in terms of who is expected to act as the pursuer and initiator. According to the heteronormative script, the woman should act and display markers that are in according to the ideal of the feminine (Butler, 2007). And if passivity and *waiting to be asked* can be considered such acts, then Calle is failing completely.

Butler does however emphasize the possibility of acting in ways that are subversive, and challenging to the norm (Butler, 2007). The act of wearing wedding dresses at staged encounters or rituals could be seen as acts that are having the possibility of subverting the norm. This is done through using the symbols and institutions of the norm for pleasure and thereby, at least on a surface level, shifting it's meaning from institution to something more of a spectacle.

Just like Ahmed (2004) states, the norm of heterosexuality is entangled with ideas about ceremony, as well as reproduction, not least through the physical act of childbirth. In *Today My Mother Died* (Calle, 2016, p 105) Calle is showing a picture of a statue of a woman lying down on her side in the grass, and the text tells how her mother, as well as she herself, were able to write in their diaries: *My mother died today*. But when Calle dies no one will be able to write this. In this statement Calle is revealing how she has failed in carrying on the family line through reproducing. While this story can be read as an expression of grief or melancholia, *To Victor Hasselblad* (p 89) is abruptly modifying that impression. Here she is telling the story of how seeing a couple with a baby carriage might cheer her up, not because of the happiness they exhibit, but because of the relief she feels from not having any children of her own. In fact, she begins the story by exclaiming that she never wanted them at all.

Ahmed writes about queer moments that they happen when a queer life is embraced as an actual and ethical alternative, thereby challenging the norm and claiming space for a norm non-conforming subject (Ahmed, 2004, p 146).

Although it can be discussed whether Sophie Calle embracing, or even celebrating, her childlessness could be described as queer, it is more the act of embracing and thereby creating not only space, but also an alternative emotional orientation to the phenomena that I would like to highlight here. Through exposing her story and sentiment she challenges an idea about the heterosexual woman's desire to reproduce and continue the family line, while at the same time displaying acceptance, relief, or even pride.

The way that the act of exposing and embracing the non-normative is done through new emotional connections and orientations is perhaps even more clearly displayed in the story *The Striptease* (Calle, 2016, p 17). Here Calle shows a picture of her performing a striptease act, and the text tells about how she used to excitedly undress in the elevator and run into her grandparents home naked when she was a child. She likens this memory to the way that she is performing naked on stage as a grown up. By connecting her work as a striptease performer not to a negative experience, like a lack of money or any other type of forcing circumstances, but rather to a joyful and playful memory, she is orientating us towards reading her work as such. This is to be seen in contrast to a norm about sexual behavior that does, as Rubin (1998) has pointed out, consider sexual, or sensual, acts performed for money as bad or improper. Calle does however point out that as a grown up she has to wear a wig, in case her grandparents would see her, since she is performing in the area where they live. Through this she is both acknowledging and adjusting to the norm and expectations, while refuting and challenging them. The final act of this challenge is of course the making of the art piece, which exposes both her performance and fear of being seen by the wrong audience.

## **6.2 Mapping**

Although emotions are named or clearly described in a few of the stories in the collection, I would like to disagree with Anna Watkins Fisher's claim in *Manic Impositions: The Parasitical Art of Chris Kraus and Sophie Calle* (2012) that

Sophie Calle is in her work challenging patriarchy through overwhelming with emotions. I have not been looking further into any of her other works, but in *True Stories* (Calle, 2016) the narrative is often *lacking* emotion in a notable, or perhaps even radical, way. Although it may be argued, and I would be ready to at least partly agree, that her artistic practice might have a foundation in emotion, those are not articulated in her work. I would rather argue that one of the strengths in her work *True Stories* is the absence of named emotion, and the blanks or ambiguities that this creates.

Ahmed argues, in line with Butler, that emotions are performative, which means that they shape subjects and bodies, but also that they are recognized and understood in relation to the way that we have been impressed upon before. This means that emotions can never be transferred from one subject to another, but rather it is the object of emotion that is shared (Ahmed, 2004, p 11). In her stories, Calle is not naming emotions, but rather mapping, and passing on, objects, circumstances and movements, which leaves the emotional interpretation up to the reader. Here follows some examples of this.

In *The Plastic Surgery* (Calle, 2016, p 11) Calle is using a photograph of her own face in profile, and a text that tells about how her grandparents wanted her to do plastic surgery when she was 14, to among else straighten her nose. The appointment was booked, although Calle states that she had some doubts. The procedure was however cancelled due to the fact that the surgeon committed suicide. In this example Calle is telling the details of how her face will be modified, by for example using a part of her ass, in an act of violence towards her body, aimed at creating a face that lives up to feminine beauty ideals. This planned event, and the way it is stopped, might be assumed to cause distress, fear and insecurity in a teenage girl, but Calle is not mentioning any emotions or emotional reactions. Instead she is only mapping the movements of objects and others.

There are more examples of how events that can be assumed to cause much distress are described in a detached and matter-of-factly manner. One such story is *The Razor Blade* (p 21). Here Calle tells the story of how she posed nude for a

drawing class every day between certain hours. She did this for twelve days but did not go to work on the thirteenth day due to the fact that there was a man in the class that drew her every day, and then slashed the drawing with a razor blade. The photograph for this story is a mended drawing, where cuts are centered over the neck, vagina and legs of the depicted woman. Although it can be assumed that it was unease and fear that made Calle's body shrink out of the space by choosing to not go to work on the thirteenth day, the number of bad luck, no such feelings are mentioned, or any other ones either. Instead there is again a space left to be filled by the emotions and reactions in the reader/viewer. I would however like to argue that the mending of the drawing and act of exposing the story might be a way for Calle to work on and through this wound, creating another orientation in relation to it by claiming authorship and making it a part of her narrative.

Another example of how emotion makes the body turn in on itself in a quite literal sense is to be found in *Young Girls Dream* (Calle, 2016, p 13). This story deals with an event where a young Calle orders a dessert with the same name as the story. The photograph shows the dessert; a peeled banana on a plate with two round scoops of ice-cream at one end, resembling the male sex. Calle does not name her emotional reactions to this dessert, or the amused waiter that brings it to her, but she tells us how she closes her eyes, in the same way that she would later close them when she saw a naked man for the first time. The way that she was moved by this incident was to close her eyes, in an attempt to not only shrink away but erase the scene altogether. As Ahmed writes, a comfortable body is a body that stretches out in space, while a body in distress turns in on itself (Ahmed, 2004, p 148). Through telling us her physical reaction and showing the readers/viewers what she saw, Calle is invoking the associated feeling, possibly shame or embarrassment. Through her act of mapping and exposing acts and objects she pushes us to feel, fill in the blanks, consider consequences. Just like Ahmed (2004) is asking for, she exposes events that can be assumed to have strongly affected her, working on and with her wounds, rather than desiring for them to be invisible and worked over.

### 6.3 (Re)orientating

In the third, and last, section I would like to further expand upon the way that Sophie Calle is in her work (re)orientating in relation to objects and others. This might, as Ahmed have suggested, be done through the creative potential in anger, but also through parody, play and irony, something that is also argued for by for example Butler and Irigaray. An example of this is *The Pig* (Calle, 2016, p 31), a story in which Calle tells about a man that approaches her because he perceives them to be making similar art work. He brings her to a party where she spends the night cooking and tending to the other guests. Thereafter the man tries to kiss her on their way home, but she rejects him, whereby he declares that she eats like a pig. The photograph accompanying the text shows hands holding a knife and fork, as well as Calle smiling, dressed in a toy pig's nose. In the text she mentions how his words are still haunting her, but through the use of play and parody she is here exposing the wound created by the insult. Again she is claiming authorship and agency, working with and through her wound, possibly allowing for healing through the reorientation to a humorous response instead of one of shame or anger.

Another example in which she is more directly acting upon an uncomfortable feeling is *The Rival* (p 67). Here she is telling the story of how she asks her husband for a love letter, but doesn't receive one. Instead she finds the draft for a letter addressed to the signature *H*. She is not mentioning her emotional response to this discovery, but it might be assumed that it would arouse feelings of shock, anger or sadness. The way she moves in relation to this is however not away, as might be expected, but instead she crosses out the letter and replaces it with an *S* for Sophie. Thereby she is claiming not only authorship, but ownership, over that which moves her to uncomfortable feelings. In this instance the object that moves her to uncomfortable feelings is also that which she strongly desires. As Ahmed emphasizes; *that which moves us is also that which holds us in place* (Ahmed, 2004, p 11).

In the final part of the analysis I would like to put focus on a strong orientating power that I feel that I am lacking the theoretical tools to understand in a satisfying way. And that is precisely desire. Feelings such as anger brings Calle to claim authorship, and sometimes ownership. But in other stories it seems that desire in itself, coupled with a vision of the unexpected, is strong enough to radically move her, and those she impresses upon and is impressed by, to unlikely places. Perhaps this is part of the magic, and the thing that makes her art so fascinating and at times unruly. Examples of it can be found in many stories, but to return to the subject of love letters, there is a story called just that; *The Love Letter* (Calle, 2016, p 23). In it Calle is revealing that she has always desired to receive a love letter, but no one has sent her one. Instead of waiting for someone to come along and feel inspired to fulfill her desire, she pays a writer to produce a love letter of several pages, addressed to her. This unexpected movement does not only pose as a parody of the gestures of romantic love, but it can also be seen as opening up and expanding the possible orientations and shapes that a subject and body might take. Butler argues for the use of subversive acts to disrupt the norm, by disrupting the repetitious acts performed in accordance to it (Butler 2007). Surely the act of ordering a love letter for yourself and thereby not needing for a man to come along and write one for you can be considered as such an act, and in that case, I believe that this example opens up the question of the role of desire in bringing someone to perform such disrupting acts.

In the story *Room with a view* (p 83), acting upon desire is accentuated even further. Here Calle is telling her story through a picture of her leaning against a pillow at the top of the Eiffel tower. The text is explaining one of her art projects, where she spent a night in a bed at the top of the tower, while visitors came to tell her stories of approximately five minutes each. She seems to be rather impressed by this possibility, exclaiming that she *asked for the moon and got it*. And she also acknowledges the way that this event changed her emotional connection and attachment to the Eiffel tower, that can now be considered as a place almost like home. This act of claiming a public location as home is something that can be

related to both Malene Vest Hansen's article *Public Places - Private Spaces Conceptualism, Feminism and Public Art: Notes on Sophie Calle's The Detachment* (2002) and Janet Hand's work with the title *Sophie Calle's art of following and seduction* (2005). Both authors emphasize the way that Calle is working with personal stories in public locations, and Hand also mentions how she is creating worlds in which she acts upon her desire. The story told in this work is revealing how such artworks might be affecting the artist herself, who is displaying amazement and wonder at the possibility of making a foreign location a space of comfort and familiarity. As Butler has pointed out, in the artistic expression of the drag show, it is possible to act, to perform in new ways within the logic of the space created for and around it (Butler, 2007, p 216). And it seems clear here, that the act of sleeping at the top of the Eiffel tower is made possible only through the process of making art, dependent upon the orientations and acts that are allowed within the logic of such a process.

The last example that will be included here is *The Tie* (Calle, 2016, p 37), a story that not only tells about an act directed by desire, but also how this desire is directly and physically working upon another person. In this story Calle is encountering a man that she finds attractive, but she thinks that he has an ugly tie, so she decides to anonymously send him a new one. When she sees him wearing it, and notices that it clashes with his shirt, she decides to send him a new item of clothing every year for Christmas, until he is fully dressed by her, at which point she wishes to be introduced to him.

## 7.0 Conclusion

*We mostly understand ourselves through an endless series of stories told to ourselves by ourselves and others. The so-called facts of our individual worlds are highly colored and arbitrary, facts that fit whatever reality we have chosen to believe in. . . . It may be that to understand ourselves as fictions, is to understand ourselves as fully as we can.*

Jeanette Winterson (1996)

*Trust me, I'm telling you stories. ... I can change the story. I am the story.*

Jeanette Winterson (1993)

I wanted to start this concluding chapter with the above quotes by the English writer Jeanette Winterson. I believe that she elegantly describes the way that story telling might work to help us understand ourselves and how we relate to objects and others. While also pointing out that if you tell your story, and especially if you do it through artistic means, it opens up for the possibility of it to be told in a different way to the one you, or others, might have expected. These sentiments land not too far from what I have come to see as the heart of this thesis.

In conclusion to the analysis of *True Stories* (Calle, 2016) can be said that Calle is exposing her life and through that also her failure to live up to the norm of the married heterosexual woman with children. Just like Butler has stated, acts performed against the regulative script of heteronormativity have a possibility of disrupting and challenging it (Butler, 2007). And here, the act of exposure shows how Calle is deliberately embracing other alternatives that enable her to stretch out and form new orientations. This can be seen both in relation to how she pursues and subverts the ceremony and institution of marriage, but also in the way that she is negotiating norms and regulations around a proper sexual or sensual behavior.

Further more she is mapping the objects and movements *around* emotions, rather than naming or describing emotions in themselves. She does this through using, what might be assumed to be, an emotional event around which she chooses to tell the details, while leaving a blank space for the viewer or reader to fill with her response. Calle is in this way causing movement in the receiver of her work, through offering a map, but no (emotional) answer. This way of working with memories of events relates to the idea of art as a place where understanding might be achieved. But it could perhaps also be understood within a feminist tradition that includes methods for awareness raising and research, such as memory work, a technique through which memories are written down in a detached manner before they are analyzed (Widerberg, 2013). In this way of working with and creating understandings of remembered events and responses, Calle can be seen as working through and with her wounds. Wounds that are inflicted by both norms, and the actions of others. Something that Ahmed has shown the importance of (Ahmed, 2004).

In the last section of the analysis, that might be described as slightly less coherent than the previous two, I am showing how Calle, in her art, creates reorientations through humor or anger. But also how her desire guides her and brings her to initiate movements towards unexpected locations and others. These movements and acts can, in line with Butler's (2007) arguments, be seen as subversive, and through their subversive nature they also change our emotional connections and orientations. However, it seems that the role of desire in the act of subverting and (re)orientating could be theorized and emphasized further.

So how can the use of personal narrative and emotion be understood as a feminist strategy in the work by Sophie Calle? In *True Stories*, personal narrative might be seen as a way to expose the norms that regulate our existence, while also pointing to alternatives and radical possibilities created through wonder and acts guided by desire. Working with our wounds and mapping the place of their birth might create not only an understanding of the mechanisms of their origin, but also help in healing through the forming of new orientations. It should also be added

that it seems apparent that some of these (re)orientations are only made possible through the very process of art making.

## **7.1 Critical discussion**

In this section I will discuss both how this thesis relates to previous research, but also what implications it might have for feminism, art and future inquiries.

In relation to previous research, and how the result of this interpretation differs from it, could first of all be said that here Calle is not only a story teller or creator of worlds, as suggested by Kaplan (2015). Her stories want to do more than that, they want to move us. I find it hard not to think, considering the way she tells her stories and how she has placed them in relation to each other, that Calle's work is informed by a critical understanding of power. I see the relevance in the contribution of Mangawang who in her dissertation, *Sophie Calle: Her(e) but not her(e)* (2008), shows how Calle's work is informed by, or formed in relation to, the theories of philosopher Michel Foucault. I also believe that Calle's engagement in politics has been an important influence on how she deals with her subjects and objects of interest.

Although I agree that Calle works with, or through, emotion and wounds, I would see it as insufficient to say that she creates archives or monuments, as is suggested by Jordan (2007) and Edwards (2014). Although she might be doing that, I think that the way that these monuments and archives are created, and most importantly, what these monuments and archives *do*; how they move her, and how they move the subjects and objects that they encounter, are questions that needs to be asked.

Considering the implications and possible application of the result of this thesis I would first like to focus on the way it combines theoretical perspectives. I believe that combining Judith Butler and Sara Ahmed creates a theoretical framework that is able to encompass a view of a broader context of norms with an understanding of specific and personal experiences and responses. While Butler offers a clearer

framework for understanding norms, Ahmed's theories enables a deeper understanding of their effects; and in this way they complement each other. Ahmed brings that which is lacking in Butler's theories, but on the other hand her theory of emotion as performative can be seen as building upon the ground work of Butler. This combined perspective has been useful when looking at art and autobiography, or what I've playfully chosen to call *artobiography* in the title of this thesis. This is due to the fact that a feminist analysis of such work require both the ability to see bigger structures, but also to understand how personal stories relate to these structures. I would also like to here point out, the perhaps apparent conclusion, that queer theory is not only a theory for queer subjects and phenomena, but a tool that can be used to understand the way norms work upon us all as bodily, socially and emotionally constituted subjects.

Underlying the whole project of this thesis is the idea of art as a process, that starts long before a work is produced and that does not end as long as the work, or it's power to impress, exist. The artwork is in itself part of performative acts, and has effects on other objects and subjects, stretching far outside its physical manifestation as an actual piece of art.

In *Conceptual production in the work by Sophie Calle* (2015) Kaplan is pointing out that certain worlds are, or are not, available to Sophie Calle due to her social position and markers. This is something that is important to consider when discussing the implications of the result of this thesis for art making in general. Institutional art spaces and opportunities for making art are not available to everyone, at least not in the form that Calle has access to. A challenge would therefore be to consider how we can make art and creative practices available as critical tools and imaginative opportunities for more individuals and groups. But for those that make art using personal narrative and working around emotion, or have a desire to do so, it might be learned from this project that there need not be any opposition between personal and political art. To work with personal stories and emotional wounds might rather be seen as a political strategy, and healing

through art might be a way to also put focus on, challenge and shift orientations in relation to, that which has wounded.

For feminist work and initiatives it might also be emphasized how art can be used as a tool to understand and challenge structures of power, while at the same time opening up the possibility for new creations. This potential in art is something that for example Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva argues for in the use of novel language or the semiotic. But also, as I have argued, something that Butler is highlighting through her example of the drag show as an arena where gender might be acted in new and subversive ways. I believe that it would be of interest both to explore and further research the role of artistic expressions and art spaces for the feminist subject and movement.

Regarding suggestions for further research I would also like to put a focus on that which I felt that the theories here used could not really encompass. And that is the role of desire; in art making, in feminism, in the constitution of individuals. I think that the way that Ahmed describes movements resulting from wonder might be the closest to an understanding of desire that I have encountered here. But I think that it would be of relevance to investigate the role of desire, and how it's forces throws us both into and out of our positions, and into or onto objects and others. bell hooks writes in *All about love – new visions* (2001) that a definition of love is to stretch out oneself for the purpose of one's own or someone else's growth (hooks, 2001, p 4). But what would a definition of desire be? And how might we understand it and the force it has in shaping our lives and realities?

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