

CALLING CALLE A VISUAL SOCIOLOGIST

INTRODUCTION

Sophie Calle is a French artist whose elaborative practice is hard to be pinned down. If there is a general agreement that she can be called a writer and a photographer, these definitions have been accompanied by others like contemporary artist, narrative artist, or conceptual artist. Her exhibitions in museums, galleries and alternative spaces show her ability to use video, photographs, texts, objects and sculptures to assemble orchestrated experiences through her installations. At the same time, she is a renowned publisher which uses paper, colour, texts, textures, diagrams and images in expressive (and impressive) ways. Her books, as we will see in the subsequent sections, cover a wide range of sociological issues and are developed under strict methodological surveillance. Each publication is an investigative storytelling in which she manipulates (her own) life to offer us examples of the complexity of everyday experience. Due to characteristics of these published materials I would like to suggest another definition of her craft among the other mentioned above and call Calle a visual sociologist.

In order to find support for this assumption, I looked for *Detachment* (2013) citations on Google Scholar. Although much of her work would fulfill the requirements, most of the available articles cover subjects related with art, performance, photography, literature but none of them about its contribution to the visual sociology field. On the other hand, I could find other visual artists who are acknowledged for this. The sociologist Howard S. Becker considers Robert Frank's *The Americans* (1958), Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) and John Berger and Jean Mohr's *A Seventh Man* (1975) photographic books as original ways of understand society and proper works of scientific sociology (Becker and Keller, 2016). In the wake of this, it seems that including Sophie Calle's printed experiences and experiments in the contemporary debate in this discipline will allow us to learn more flexible ways on how to organize social science data.

Following this introduction, this essay will focus in two main topics expecting to sustain evidence that, indeed, Calle could be called a visual sociologist. Firstly, I will draw attention between sociologists' work (Marvasti, 2004) and Calle's practice. In the subsequent section, I will compare visual elements of one of her books with visual sociology theories of Becker (1995) and Bell (2012) and see how they would attempt and, sometimes, open space for new proposals.

CALLE AND HER SOCIOLOGICAL AFFINITIES

As it might be expected, one of the conditions to argue that Sophie Calle is a visual sociologist would be verifying if her production furthers the enterprise in this field and not only the Arts. Accordingly to Marvasti (2004:2), "Sociology is a social science that aims to empirically appreciate the complexity of social life". This means that due to the impossibility of capturing reality as a whole, social science researches mostly relying on observation or experiments to understand/explain why or how people behave in certain environments and circumstances.

Calle's stories emerge from project-driven experiences where she participates and interacts actively with her 'guests'. Her usual reflections on identity and human vulnerability are examined as if they were in a laboratory or test centre.

A project involves thinking up and then setting up a situation that will be allowed to run its course under certain conditions. The external boundaries of the situation will be defined by preordained limits of time and/or space, while its internal dynamic will be defined by a further set of ground rules or protocols. (Rye and Worton, 2002)

The evidences in which her books are based come from this interesting combination of self-imposed limitations, adherence to established rules and her curiosity in observing human behavior (and herself) under specific situations. Both the experimental and experiential elements of daily life give shape to what she calls 'her dares', since her projects are often provocative or skate the boundaries of social norms (McFadden, 2014:151). If it is true that sociology can be defined as an orientation that reveals 'the strange in the familiar' and 'places individuality in social context' (Macionis, 2001:2 cited in Marvasti, 2004:2), Calle looks like a social scientist in her attempt to invest time and effort to formally study the social environment (Marvasti, 2004:1).

For *Les dormeurs*, she invited forty-five people . . . to sleep in her bed . . . Each person had an eight-hour shift, and the participants succeeded one another around the clock for eight straight days. During their stay of eight hours, she offered them clean sheets, asked them questions about their expectations of the project, observed them while they slept, and took photos of them at various intervals . . . Calle explains her role in *Les dormeurs*: "I put questions to those who allowed me; nothing to do with knowledge or fact gathering, but rather to establish a neutral and distant contact. (McFadden, 2014:148)

The choice of the procedures is fundamental in her researches. In the same way that sociology investigations need "methodology (a general orientation about how research is done) and methods (specific research techniques used to study a topic)" (Silverman, 2001:4 cited in Marvasti, 2004:3) to share with the audience not the truth, but convincing accounts of what was

observed and its meaning (Marvasti, 2004:3), Calle's books play with the ambiguous relationship between fact and fiction but, in the end, the reader is convinced by the 'effect of truth' (McFadden, 2014:159) of her evidences. There is no reason to question her narrative mechanisms because they are clear and plausible. In one occasion, the investigation process was even used as a radical metalanguage exercise.

In *La filature* (1981), . . . Calle asked her mother to hire a detective to follow her for a day to prove that she existed . . . Knowledge of the other's look motivates her to undertake certain activities; the awareness of his presence is the impetus for her itinerary of actions that day. The piece consists of the detective's report of the day following Calle, including photos of her, contrasted with her narrative and telling of the events of the day. (McFadden, 2014:153)

Thus, it seems clear that Calle's art publications share with sociology some characteristics, Especially those related with methodology and objects of study. By the same token, Robert Frank's *The Americans* was considered by Becker as a work of sociology, even though none of the pictures in this book is backed up with text support. For this author, the context is implicit in the images themselves, sequenced, repetitive, variations on a set of themes (Becker, 1995). However, this opinion is not unanimous and many sociologists believe that the meaning of these photos are easily manipulated and would fail as scientific data. Opposing this suggested implicitness, Calle shows us a body of work where sociology can be explicitly found and in which visuality is creatively used.

SOPHIE CALLE VISUAL EXPERIMENTS

In sociology, the existence of a subdiscipline called visual sociology is underpinned by the assumption that the evaluation of a project can be decided by the use of certain media (Guggenheim, 2013). Historically a text-based discipline, Sociology considers 'the act of drawing letters and connecting rational thinking using words over paper', also known as writing, more objective and scientific than photographs, pictures, or sketches. This unfair hierarchy towards the text might be explained in different ways but it is likely that, due to the excess of strategies for 'picturing social theory', just a few researchers feel prepared for its use (Wagner, 2006). In my opinion, both seeing and reading should articulate and avoid any kind of subordination.

As Michel Foucault pointed out some time ago in his eloquent commentary on Magritte's *This is not a pipe*, in the movement from image to text (as from text to image), there yawns a crucial panoply of possibilities, of tensions, affirmations and contradictions. So before we give up the sociological text to the image, it might be important to think their relation a little longer. (Bell, 2012:151)

However, sociological texts with no images are easily taken as scientific while the reversed situation is less common. In this way, Becker (1995) gave a step further when he proposed a similar independency for images. He suggested that photography just needed context to be accepted in the sociology field and that it could be provided by an adequate caption or by the set images themselves. In his point of view, implicit context (or absence of enough social data) would be a characteristic of art photography, "while a full context makes it documentary, social science, or photojournalism. Not all good works of documentary provide this kind of context. Robert Frank's *The Americans* gives no more textual support to the images than most art photographs, but it is not vulnerable to the above criticism" (Becker, 1995:9). Indeed, Franks's photos can be understood as a visual statement in which the words were not necessary: "these men (large physically imposing) are the kind who inhabit such places as the club cars or trains between New York, the country's financial center, and Washington, the center of political life" (Becker, 1995:10). In the past, Becker's appreciation for the meaningful way of using pictures in sociology works led him to encourage sociologists to learn photography techniques because "photographers have studied many of the same things which sociologists routinely study, including communities, social problems, work . . . and more abstract themes such as social types and modal personalities" (Harper, 1998:29).

Visual sociology also include debates about whether it looks more 'art' or 'science' and, again, we can find "a separation that ascribes art immediate emotionality and science detached observation" (Guggenheim, 2013). The choice of calling Calle a visual sociologist (an artist whose practice is something between a photographer and a narrative artist) and produce visually original books under strict methodology is a way to increase the interchange between what would be considered art and science and to help blurring the boundaries of these specificities. Through her work, I will even transcend the traditional juxtaposition of text and photo discussion by enlightening other features like the use of colour, symbols, textures and book format. Aesthetic qualities should be taken in consideration if they are understood under scientific discourse. "They are data, in the same sense written answers to questionnaires are data" (ibid). Visual analysis of one of her books will be seen in the following section.

DETACHMENT (2013)

After reunification, Berlin Senate determined that some political monuments should be withdrawn from the city. It was announced at the Chamber of Deputies in Berlin, in 1992, that "Whenever a system of rule dissolves or is overthrown, the justifications for its monuments - at least those which served to legitimize and foster its rule - no longer exists" (Calle, 2013:6). In *Detachment*, Calle visited Berlin looking for remainings of these symbols of former East

Germany and filled their absence with memories collected through interviews of passersby.

It could be easily classified as a sociological work that involves cultural studies and social change. For this enterprise Calle used as methodology a series of interviews (we are not informed how many) and pictures taken by her and Daniel Rückert, Christian Kerber, Bernd Borchardt, Ullstein Bilderdienst and Roger Violet. All those images are unidentified but the ones in colour are assumed to be of her authorship.

The first interesting visual reference in this book is its cover. It does not only introduce or protect the pages inside, but *contextualizes* the main aspects of the research. Aside the choice of the red colour, traditionally associated with socialism and communism, there is the juxtaposition of the word Detachment with Lenin's shadowed face (Figure 1). The texture of the cover (a kind of cotton fabric) and its format are analogous with the shape of the GDR diplomatic passports (Figure 2). It also resembles the first edition of *The Communist Manifesto* in German (Figure 3). Thus, the cover anticipates, before we start reading, what the book is about: Sophie Calle's journey (a passport is the perfect symbol for this) through the remnant communist monuments of former East Germany.

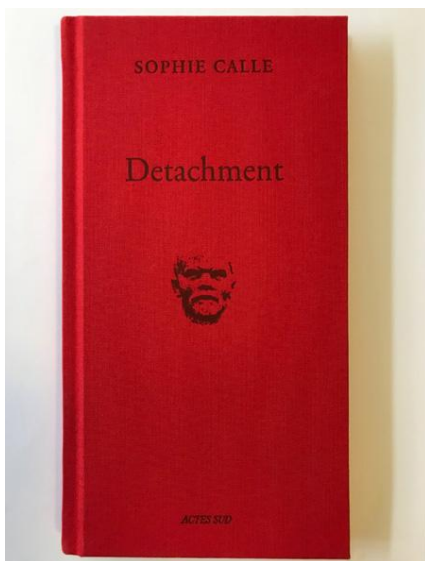


Figure 1. Calle (2013)
Detachment's book cover



Figure 2. (Passport-collector.com, 2017)
Examples of East German Diplomatic Passport

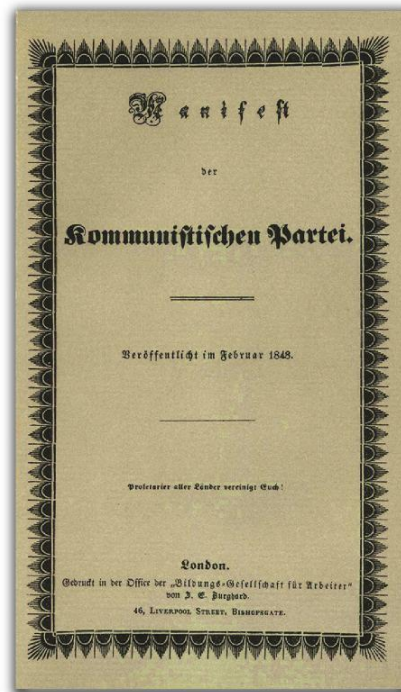


Figure 3. (En.wikipedia.org., 2018) - Cover of the first edition of The Communist Manifest in German

On the title page (Figure 4), she uses for the first time the colour red to differentiate a word inside the text. It is as if the word Detachment had become both a visual and written data. She establishes a connection between the communist reference of the all red cover and the word Detachment on the title page. Simultaneously, we can read Detachment and see which kind of Detachment is being analysed.

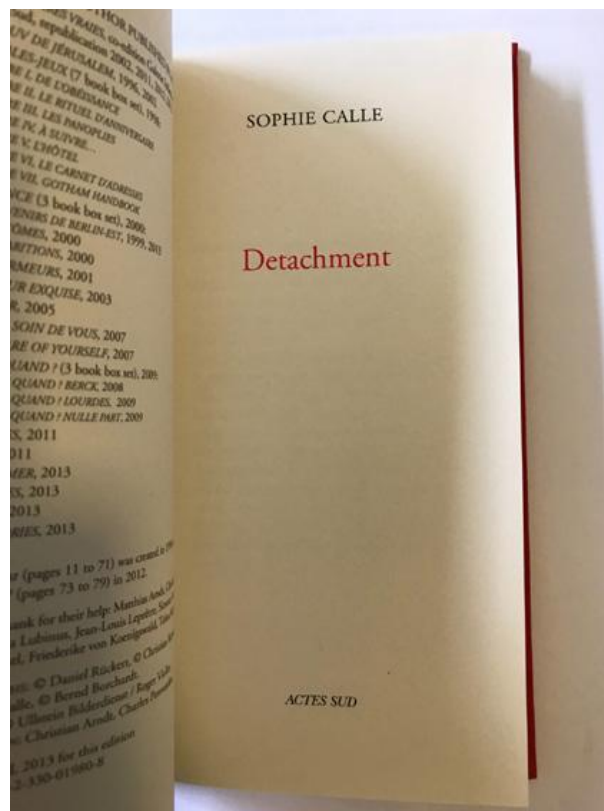


Figure 4. (Calle, 2013) Title page of Detachment

The book starts with her motivation towards this work

I didn't know Germany, and that was fine by me. In 1996 a gallerist from Berlin, Matthias Arndt, came to see me and offered me a show. I was reluctant, he asked what might change my mind. Any of the following three reasons, I answered: Love. An exhibition space too good to refuse. A project that could be done only in Berlin. Since I didn't fall head over heels for him, and his young gallery wasn't in the desired category, we immediately struck off the first two conditions. That left the idea, and being the dogged sort, he sat down and decided to tell me about his city until the inspiration came. A few days later, I went to Berlin for the first time in my life to investigate the disappearance of certain political symbols. (Calle, 2013:5)

On page 7, she listed the visited monuments during her stay in Berlin. A table was provided on pages 8 and 9 (Figure 5) to organise the mentioned monuments and the actions undertaken by the government to erase them. In order to be better appreciated, data must have significant visible faces. Tables are just one of these useful possibilities (Wagner, 2006).

CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES OF THE LAND OF BERLIN, 12th LEGISLATIVE PERIOD
Document no. 12/2743

BUILDING WORKERS (Rathaus-Passagen)	Keep for the time being, attach medallions in case of demolition.	LENIN monument (fragments in Köpenick Forest)	Cover with earth. Can also be used as landscaping material. Definitely no reconstruction.	FUCK (JULIUS) monument (Bürgerpark, Prenzlauer Allee)	Reexamine after Czech expert appraisal, prior to decision	RICHTKRONE monument (Allee der Kosmonauten)	Keep. Add information panel.
BAUM, HERBERT (Stele, Lustgarten)	Keep with another text.	LIEBKNECHT plaque (Prenzlauer-Allee)	Keep. The municipality strains responsibility.	SOCIALIST MEMORIAL Friedrichsfeld (Gudrunstrasse)	Keep circular flower bed, postpone decision on pergola avenue and SED memorial tomb. Install information panels.	SPARTAKUS monument (Chassestrasse)	Dismantle.
GERMAN-POLISH monument (Friedrichshain)	Keep. Transformations to be made in collaboration with Polish experts.	MARX-ENGELS monument (Marx-Engels Forum)	Keep, unseal, grass over. Possibly move to another locality.	FRONTIER GUARDS Monuments, etc. in various locations.	Dismantle.	THÄLMANN monument (Graefiswalder Strasse)	Dismantle. Redesign emplacement.
DUNCKER monument (Treskow-Allee, Lichtenberg)	Keep.	MARX memorial (Alt-Stralau)	No changes.	INTERBRIGADIST monument (Friedrichshain)	Keep, grass over and plant. Eliminate/replace or add extra information panels.	TRÜMMERFRAU (woman employed to clear rubble - aid to reconstruction in the GDR) (next to Red Town Hall).	Keep as is.
MEMORIAL CEMETERY to those who died in the March Revolution/Red Sailor (Friedrichshain)	Keep the cemetery, provide with annotations. Dismantle marble slabs.	NOVEMBER REVOLUTION reliefs (Am Neuen Marstall)	Dismantle and replace with tablets.	KÖPENICKER BLUTWOCHE monument (Platz des 23. April)	Keep as is.	Notes on MEMORY PLAQUES	Check the content of all plaques. Extra information, commentary, plates to be added where necessary.

Figure 5. Table with the monuments and the actions undertaken by the government to erase them.

The book is organized by the listed monuments and each one has a specific chapter. All the photos in the book are unidentified, but we assume that Calle took the coloured ones and the black and white are probably from historical archives (Figure 6 and Figure 7). Each chapter begins with one for her pictures. They are objective with no artistic intention with the exception of the use of colour. Since she was there to register the absence, the invisible, it seems that composition was not a relevant task. The chapter always ends with a black and white picture that shows the monument before its removal. By doing so, she creates an interesting situation between these two images. They work like brackets. On one side, we have the visual absence. In the middle, we can read the transcription of the interviews she collected of passersby which are the memory that remained of those monuments through the years. On the other side, we have the image that used to be in that place. At the same time, each chapter gives us the sensation of a gradual increase of visibility. We go from the 'colour blindness image', pass through the bad lit areas of memory and arrive in the 'full colourless visualisation' of the monument.

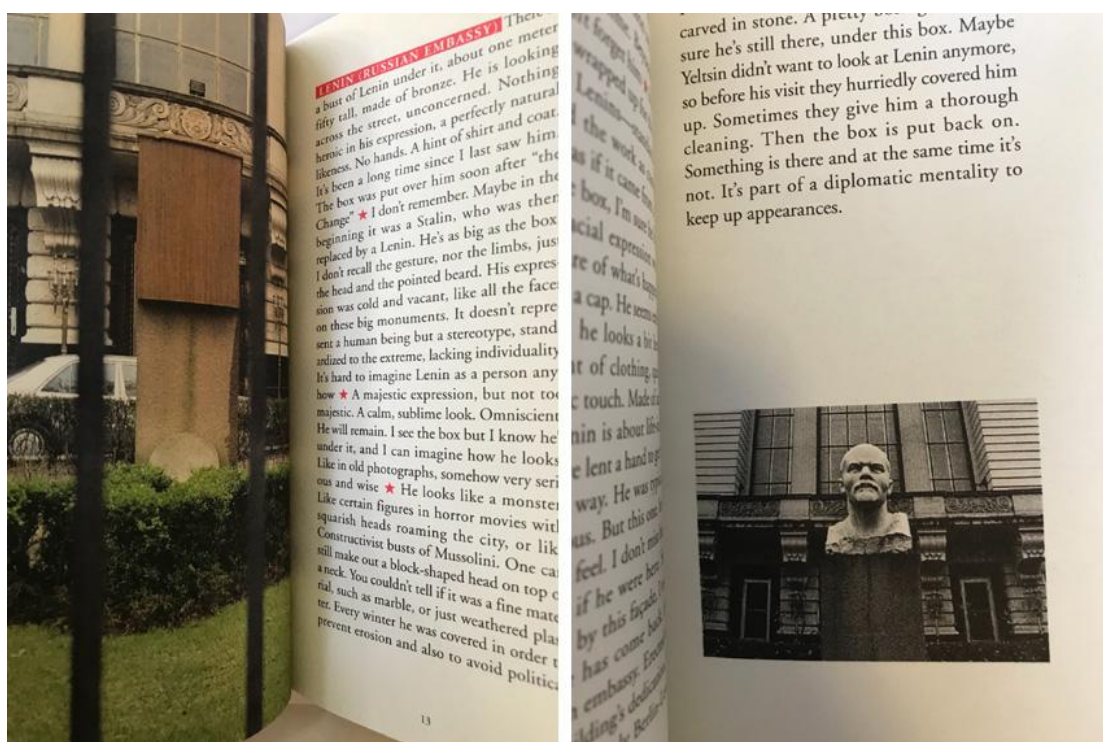


Figure 6. (Calle, 2013) Photos of Detachment. On the left, the picture that begins the chapter and, on the right, the picture that closes it.



Figure 7. (Calle, 2013) Photos of Detachment. On the left, the picture that begins the chapter and, on the right, the picture that closes it.

The text of each chapter is composed by the transcription of the interviews she conducted. Again, the text offers visual and reading interpretations. The name of the monument that is going to be depicted, appears in white over a red highlighted area (Figure 8). The option for writing in white, the same colour of the paper page, reinforces the idea of absence proposed by Calle. And this absence only appears over the symbolic colour of communism. It is certainly a narrative strategy because this effect is only used in the beginning of each chapter, nowhere else. Moreover, it always comes after Calle's photo of the absence of the monument. Another visual sign is the five-pointed red star which often served as symbol of communism ideology. It appears separating the testimonials in all pages (Figure 8). Spreaded in almost the entire book, the stars reaffirm the context from where those stories came from.

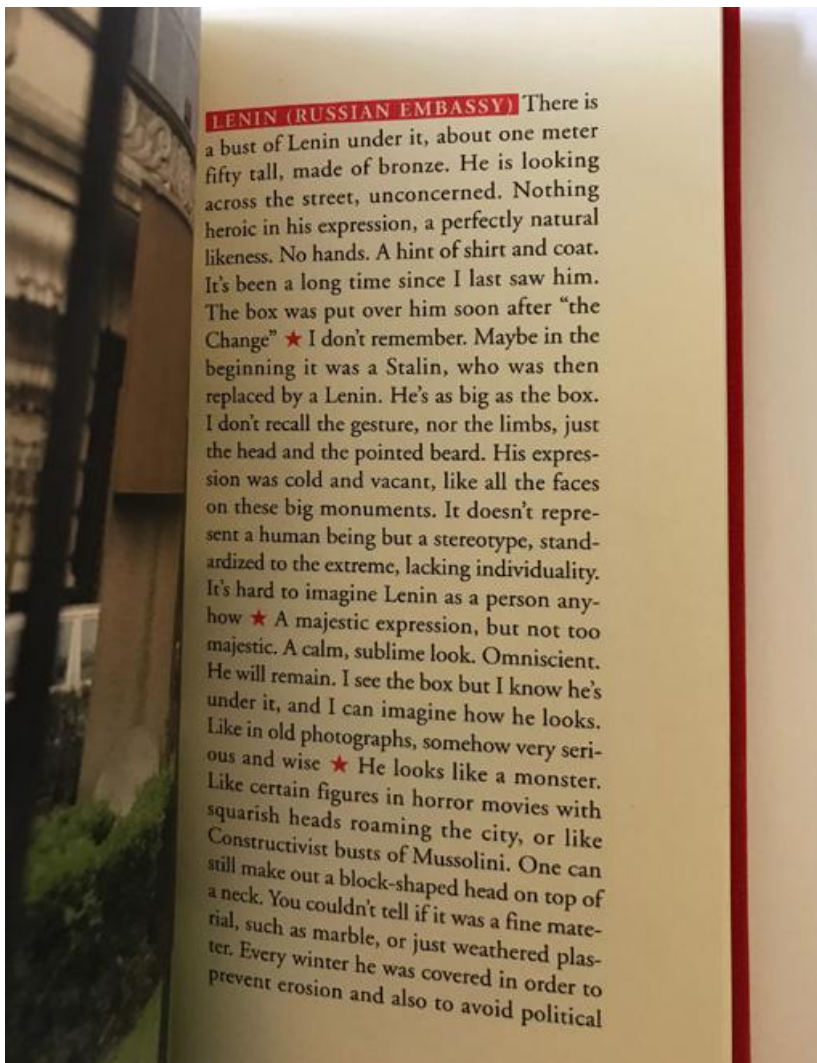


Figure 8. (Calle, 2013) One of the text pages with testimonials of Detachment

Finally, it is important to mention the connection among all visual elements with the text. Calle orchestrated a structure where several layers of meaning colliding and reinforcing each other. By reading the texts, we are taken to the photos of the past to compare what memory could be kept of the monuments that were vanished from the city. In the same way, we are aware of their fate by the coloured images taken by Calle. In each page that is turned, we remember the importance of communism in German History. Even when the book is closed, we can not forget what it is about.

CONCLUSION

Taking all these evidences into account, I think that calling Calle a visual sociologist could be another designation to refer to this artist among all the others she already has. Her process of collecting experiences and materials, the way she conducts her investigations and how she presents her outcomes into books have a strong link with Sociology. As an artist, she does not rely on one technique or believe that words are more legitimate than images and vice-versa. Each publication is a space to where different media converge, interact and support each other for research purposes. Actually, some contemporary visual studies in sociology include the

relevant use of visual productions by artists that, like Calle, are being called sociologists. In Howard Becker's *Telling about Society* (2007), he acknowledges the poet, critic and performance artist David Anting and the novelist, filmmaker and essayist Georges Perec as sociologists (Guggenheim, 2013). Recognizing Calle in this hall of visual sociologists will certainly bring more insights on how to conduct researches of social life and the visual possibilities available to express these understandings.

Word counting: 3.051

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