

The Stalking Artists

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The idea of stalking has had, over recent years, a curious habit of cropping up in descriptions of contemporary art. This was the term which Susan Kandel used for the dynamics of Sherrie Levine's form of 'violent appropriation', for example.¹ But one of the oddest ways in which stalking became linked to artistic practice occurred a few years ago during a rather unseemly spat between the conceptual artist Tracey Emin and the novelist Philip Hensher in 2003, when both accused each other, without foundation, of stalking. Having taken exception to Hensher calling her too stupid to be a good conceptual artist, a wounded Emin stated that she has 'responded' to Hensher's attack, without giving any details.² Hensher then jumped to an extraordinary conclusion and publicly accused her of being behind a homophobic campaign he had been enduring, receiving unsolicited junk mail and porcelain figurines in the mail. Emin promptly accused Hensher of stalking *her*, of harbouring a 'pervy and creepy' obsession with her. She said: 'He's coming from somewhere I don't understand; from weirdoland. [...] he's been thinking about me, and imagining that I'm thinking about him. He's imagining me stalking him, and stalking me in turn through the media'.³ She threatened legal action.

It turned out that Hensher was entirely wrong, and an apology was published. The mysterious response Emin mentioned had been simply a 'flattering' front-page interview with *The Independent*, the newspaper in which Hensher had published his original attack. But what is interesting is that Hensher was clearly indulging in a fantasy version of Emin, perhaps the very definition of an entirely 'other' kind of artist to himself: female, heterosexual, working-class, the producer of avant-garde visual art, whereas he is male, Oxbridge educated, and the writer of character-driven novels. Hensher justified his accusation by stating that Emin's art 'resembled the sort of thing which schoolgirls used to write on the back of their blotters', and this meant it was possible she was 'the bigoted illiterate persecuting me'.⁴ His attack also revolved around the kind of impulse towards self-exposure which typifies contemporary stalking culture, by which people are willing to display their private worlds – emotions, habits, and desires, etc. – openly, publicly, on Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, or on 'reality' TV programmes. This generates a counter-impulse that everyone has a right to know, that those who expose themselves in this way are fair game for intrusion. Hensher writes in his original article: 'One wouldn't normally talk about something so personal, but Tracey made us all go and look at her dirty knickers at the Tate Gallery, so I don't see why we shouldn't go on talking about her underwear more or less indefinitely'.⁵

The interface between celebrity and media and the way it massages stalking behaviour is parodied by an art-theoretical project which is entirely self-conscious about its resemblance to stalking, the Canadian artist Jillian McDonald's *Me and Billy Bob*. In this work she stages a crush on the Hollywood actor Billy Bob Thornton. On her website, which masquerades as a fansite, one can view digitally manipulated scenes from his movies, or click on photo sequences such as 'Making Billy Bob Jealous', in which she appears kissing other actors, or see the Billy Bob tattoos she has had done. Her interest here is in what she calls 'misplaced intimacy', which she regards as 'a symptom of our heavily mediated culture. Via fantasy and extensive popular media, the general public imagines secret affairs with favourite celebrities. The crush is a familiar experience'.⁶ Contemporary culture, she implies, invites us, indeed implores us to indulge in fantasies about the other.

McDonald's piece is a playful but serious enquiry. Part of its seriousness is that it deliberately bears a striking similarity to real stalking behaviour. It is effectively a 'one-way' relationship – or one person's attempt to force a relationship. During the project the website updated statements intended to provoke Thornton into a response, such as congratulating the actor on his Star of Fame award in 2004. But he steadfastly refused to respond – suggesting that he was indifferent as to the motivations behind the project, or it was something that made him uncomfortable.

To what extent ought we to see the kind of 'stalking art' as produced by McDonald as a problematic blurring of the boundary between reality and art?⁷ Here we should acknowledge that *Me and Billy Bob* must be placed in the context of a 'tradition' in conceptual art since the 1960s which incorporates stalking behaviour as something approaching an aesthetic 'practice'. In *Following Piece* (1969), for example, Vito Acconci, over a period of twenty-three days, selected people

at random on the streets of New York and followed them more or less clandestinely wherever they went until they entered a 'private' space, such as car, office, or home.

He recorded the subject's movements and activities in typewritten reports which he then sent to various figures in the art world. In 2001 Laura Blereau turned the tables on Acconci and followed him in her video piece, *Following Vito*. More recently still, Christina Ray and Lee Walton's *Following the Man of the Crowd* project in 2004 involved both artists tailing strangers for twenty-four hours inspired by Poe's story 'The Man of the Crowd' (which has good claim to be the first modern stalking story). But the most famous work of 'stalking art' is undoubtedly Sophie Calle's *Venetian Suite* (1980), which documents her pursuit to Venice of a man she had briefly met at a party. She tracked him down and tailed him for thirteen days, compiling an extensive dossier about his movements and her experiences shadowing him, accompanied by photographs.

Calle's and Acconci's works resemble real cases of stalking and in a sense they are real cases of stalking since each of the subjects had no choice in their involvement. But not all cases of stalking involve literal pursuit, though episodes of following and surveillance do certainly feature.⁷ More generally, stalking is a series of violent intrusions in the life of another, the force and frequency of which usually escalates. Crucially unlike the works of Acconci or Calle stalking requires the victim to be aware of the harassment for it to have the desired effect. And what is desired is that the stalker gains *recognition* by the stalked person (here McDonald's parodic stalking campaign conformed to its model). There is no identikit picture of a likely perpetrator of any stalking campaign. Nevertheless, stalking can be explained to some extent as the defence mechanism of the pathological narcissistic personality, a way to put it in psychoanalytic terms a damaged individual can dominate an internalised object which promised to gratify them but instead has hurt and shamed them. Pathological narcissism involves relating to objects in a double way, veering wildly between excessive admiration and extreme hostility. This means that, in the mind of the stalker, the other figures almost exclusively in the imaginary register, in Lacanian terms. Thus, most obviously, it is a question of identification, of feeling someone is 'just like me', a fellow human being, etc. what the psychiatrist J. Reid Meloy has called 'the narcissistic linking fantasy'.⁸ But it can also involve competition, resentment, and hostility. What we tend to see in stalking cases is a characteristic ambivalence about the object of fantasy what we might call the 'double fantasy'. The allusion to the album Mark Chapman asked John Lennon to sign on the day he shot him is intended here, as Chapman was simultaneously in awe of Lennon and despised his 'phoniness'.

Stalking thus bears out Slavoj Žižek's conviction that fantasy tends to be split into two co-dependent dimensions, linked like the two sides of a coin. On the one hand there is the 'stabilising' fantasy, something which emphasises positive elements about the desired object, and imagines a harmonious, mutually nourishing relationship with them. On the other hand there is the 'destabilising' fantasy, which is the opposite, and:

encompasses all that 'irritates' me about the Other, images that haunt me about what he or she is doing when out of my sight, about how he or she deceives me and plots against me, about how or she ignores me and indulges in an enjoyment that is intensive beyond my capacity of representation, etc.⁹

The destabilising fantasy functions as a 'support' for the stabilising one by reminding the subject that the stabilising fantasy is unrealisable or unsustainable: it is a safe way of acknowledging that it is only a fantasy, without directly having to recognise this fact.

What I am concerned with here is the way the destabilising fantasy, while it still involves responding to the other in the Imaginary register, also threatens to cross over into what Lacan terms the Real and that this can help us make sense of Calle's *Venetian Suite*. Like McDonald's *Me and Billy Bob*, Calle's stalking art breaks down the boundary between stalking-as-art and stalking-as-stalking. One reviewer commented of *Venetian Suite* that 'it is a good thing that [it] was shown in an art gallery [...] stalkers have been jailed for less'.¹⁰ Her speciality, at least in her earliest work in the early 1980s, is in aestheticising real intrusions into the lives of strangers, and deploying techniques of pursuit and surveillance to create a kind of pseudo-investigation. There is *The Hotel* (1981) for example, for which she took a job as a chambermaid in a Paris hotel and took photographs of the occupants' possessions in order to construct snapshots of their owners. Then there is *The Address*

Book. Having found an address book on the street she proceeded systematically to interview the people listed in it, building up an imaginary picture of the owner and publishing each interview with photograph in *Libération* in 1983. The owner was, predictably, alarmed and outraged to find his private life being exposed in a daily newspaper and threatened legal action.

The prolonged pursuit of Henri B. in *Venetian Suite* could easily have been experienced by him as harassment. But actually I think there is a different kind of approach to the other in Calle's work, which actually distinguishes her work from real stalking and points to one of the values of stalking art. In both *The Hotel* and *The Address Book* Calle resists focusing directly on the individual in question but constructs a frame around them, leaving the viewer/reader to fill in the gaps. In *The Hotel* she details the remains of guests' food, their postcards, and books they are reading. Likewise we know things about the owner of the address book, such as an argument he once had at a station about the price of the ticket, the paintings he loves, his fear of flying, his childhood ambition to be an Egyptologist. But the subjects themselves remain elusive. And while *Venetian Suite* revolves around another stranger, he is similarly inaccessible. We learn nothing about Henri B. beyond details such as his liking for cemeteries, the photos he takes while sightseeing, the cafés he visits. But he himself is never really portrayed. As Petra Gördüren writes, in a recent article, 'the aesthetic problem to which Sophie Calle skeptically devotes her attention as an artist is the potential and failure of art to make binding statements about one's own and other people's personalities'.¹¹

This elusiveness makes it clear that the obvious allusions to detective fiction in Calle's projects – especially *Venetian Suite* and its counterpart, *The Shadow/The Detective*, for which Calle arranged a private detective to follow her – are parodic. Detective-work can discover facts but it cannot pin down the mystery of the other. Besides highlighting the impenetrability of the other person, Calle also ensures that it is difficult for the viewer/reader of her work to come to any more stable a conclusion about *her*. A feature of works such as *The Hotel*, *The Address Book* and *Venetian Suite* is the disclaimer that she is uninterested in the people she investigates. In *The Hotel* at one point she admits to being bored by them. Indeed, what most struck Jean Baudrillard (who regarded Calle's art as the embodiment of his understanding of the form of seduction¹²) about *Venetian Suite* is that the artist effectively negates her own desire.¹³ In the text she insists she is not in love with her quarry, even though at times it feels like pursuing a lover, and states Henri B's feelings, 'do not belong in my story'.¹⁴ She does not intend to uncover his 'secret life'. She tries not to impose a narrative on her activities by wondering what the outcome might be. Nor does she even intend to produce a work of art, as this took place before she considered herself to be an artist. All she suggests is that it was a comfort to 'choose the energy of anybody in the street and their imagination and just do what they did', thus 'entering their life without talking to them'.¹⁵

Calle presents *Venetian Suite*, then, as a kind of blind surrender to the 'energies' and patterns of another person's life.¹⁶ On the face of it, this is something her project shares with Acconci's *Following Piece*. He says in the 'poem' which accompanies the piece that the project was an experiment in 'giv[ing] up control', in 'becom[ing] dependent on the other person' so that his 'time and space are taken up, out of myself, into a larger system'.¹⁷

This may well be disingenuous, however, and Acconci's art-theoretical ambitions merely the cover for the desire to exercise power. Likewise, Calle's disclaimer is unconvincing. Juliet Flower MacCannell has pointed out that there are two different kinds of entry in Calle's journal documenting the pursuit. Where most lines build up a fairly disciplined narrative account of the 'investigation' (as she terms it), a cross between a private eye's report and a diary, these are punctuated by sporadic, more urgent, italicised, 'interjections' which seem of a different order – almost as if they are outbursts from a more hidden self, one that acknowledges what might *really* be at stake. They tend to refer to her 'dread' or her 'fear' at being discovered. As MacCannell suggests, these lines reflect a strange contradictoriness about *Venetian Suite*:

Although there is absolutely nothing at risk for Calle in her odd pursuit of the man – no personal relationship, no legal liability – her italicised asides portray her act as fraught with panic, anxiety, and fear [...] He is under her special surveillance, yet it is she, the private eye with a panoptic surveillance of his every movement who is terrified.¹⁸

MacCannell speculates that her fear is more than simply the sense the project will end if she is caught. 'We must ask', she writes, 'what it is she fears might be revealed if she got too close to him, watched him too intimately?'.¹⁹ MacCannell's answer is that this is a consequence of both pursuer and quarry being out, exposed, in the city streets. What Calle fears – and from what she wishes to protect Henri B. – the impersonal, 'all-seeing yet blind' gaze of *das Ding*: the impossible object of desire, the Thing.

MacCannell uses the term *das Ding* to denote a general, detached gaze, not coincident with that of any individual, issuing from the forbidden object of desire which lies beyond symbolic and imaginary. Yet there is also a sense in which, in his sheer otherness, his impenetrability (which Calle of course preserves and respects), Henri B. embodies the radically unknowable aspect of the other person, which psychoanalytic critics have also associated with *das Ding*.²⁰ Intersubjectivity is primarily a matter of relations of sameness and difference: this enables us to empathise with others and to understand their motivations or behaviour. Thus it primarily takes place in the Imaginary; our relations with other people are founded upon self-images which we identify in others. On occasion, however, relations with others exceed this structure: we are unable to understand another person's motivations or behaviour because they do not conform to the narcissistic imaginary logic of identification. At such points we are faced with the *che Vuoi?*, the question of the Other's desire: what do they want. We are confronted with the 'real' other – that is, other *qua* Lacanian real – the entity Žižek calls 'the impossible Thing; 'the inhuman partner', the Other with whom no symmetrical dialogue, mediated by the symbolic Order, is possible'.²¹ This is the other who reveals to us that at our most interior or intimate points there is something exterior – or 'extimate', the troubling alterity which lies at the heart of the inner self. 'Nullifying extimacy' is, according to Jacques-Alain Miller, the function of the Biblical injunction to love our neighbour: it is meant to confine us to engaging with the neighbour on an imaginary level, emphasising how we can identify with the other so that we can be protected from the radical, unfathomable depth of another personality.

What is distinctive about Calle's *Venetian Suite*, in the context of stalking and stalking art, is that it strives to resist indulging in a fantasy about the other – even though it acknowledges that some fantasies are clearly suggested by her behaviour (such as the uncovering of a 'secret life' or that she is in love with Henri B.). But at the same time, while she works to preserve a sense of the other as other, that is an image of the other person which is not structured by a narcissistic logic of identification, she is also afraid of what this otherness might represent. In this respect Henri B. figures as a version of the neighbour, the figure who is to be kept at bay by the injunction 'love thy neighbour', that other whom – as Žižek has recently put it – 'no matter how far away it is physically, is always by definition 'too close'.²² Although on the surface it is the exemplary piece of stalking-art, *Venetian Suite* resists the artificial intimacy which characterises stalking cases and our more general stalking culture and instead asks us to acknowledge extimacy. Where the work of an artist like Tracey Emin and that of one like Sophie Calle might seem similar in terms of their egotistical exhibitionism, the fact is that the other has little place in Emin's work, which is purely about a narcissistic – albeit courageous – impulse towards self-expression. The more complex engagement with the other we find in Calle, on the other hand, is a valuable antidote to the simplistic notions of otherness which are prevalent everywhere – from stalking cases to the debate about the War on Terror – in the contemporary world.

NOTES

1. Susan Kandel, 'Sherrie Levine', *Art-Text*, 9, November 1997-January 1998, pp. 66-70, p. 70.
2. *The Observer Magazine*, July 2003.
3. Amelia Hill, 'The Artist, the Critic and a War of Words', *The Observer*, Sunday 17 August 2003.
4. Philip Hensher, 'Give Me a Break', *The Spectator*, 16 August 2003.
5. Philip Hensher, 'Bad News, Tracey, You Need Brains to be a Conceptual Artist', *The Independent*, 27 April 2001.
6. Jillian McDonald, *Me and Billy Bob* (2005), <<http://www.meandbillybob.com>> [accessed 15 November 2010]
7. See Bran Nicol, *Stalking*, London: Reaktion Books, 2006.
8. J. Reid Meloy, 'The Psychology of Stalking', in *The Psychology of Stalking: Clinical and Forensic Perspectives*, San Diego, CA, London: Academic Press, 1998, pp. 1-23, p. 18.
9. Slavoj Žižek, 'The Seven Veils of Fantasy', in *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Dany Nobus, London: Rebus Press, 1998, p. 192.
10. Richard Derment, 'Self-Portrait of a Gifted Artist', *The Daily Telegraph*, 24 June 1998.
11. Petra Gördüren, 'Sophie Calle, The Shadow (Detective)', *CTRL [SPACE] Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother*, ed. by Thomas Y. Levin, Ursula Frohne and Peter Weibel, Karlsruhe: ZKM Center for Art and Media/Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: MIT Press, 2002, pp. 410-5, p. 414.
12. See Bran Nicol, 'Detective Fiction and the 'Original Crime': Baudrillard, Calle, Poe', *Cultural Politics*, forthcoming, November 2011.
13. See Jean Baudrillard (1983), *Fatal Strategies*, tr. by Philip Neitchman and W. G. J. Niesluchowski, London: Pluto Press, 1999; 'Please Follow Me', tr. by Paul Foss, *Art and Text*, 23:4, March-May, 1987; *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, tr. by James Benedict, London and New York: Verso, 1993 [1990].
14. Sophie Calle, *Double Game*. London: Violette Limited, 1999, p. 91.
15. Sophie Calle, 'Sophie Calle in Conversation with Bice Curiger', *Talking Art 1 (ICA Documents 12)*, ed. by Adrian Searle, London: ICA, 1993, p. 29.
16. Calle has expanded on this, stating: 'What was interesting for me in this whole project is how you can take a completely arbitrary idea, like following a person for whom you have no feeling, no emotion, and just by the strength of the fact of obeying the rule you set yourself, just the strength of the recall, something that's completely arbitrary can become completely obsessional' (Sophie Calle, 'Sophie Calle in Conversation with Bice Curiger', p. 33). A similar sense of the arbitrary choice becoming obsession also underscored McDonald's otherwise very different *Me and Billy Bob*: 'It started as research. I was interested in the idea of having a crush on a celebrity, which I've never had [...] working on the project [...] I actually developed a crush on him' (WPS1 Art Radio, 8 May 2006).
17. Vito Acconci, 'Following Piece: Documentation of the activity', in Thomas Y. Levin and Ursula Frohne (eds), *CTRL [SPACE]: Surveillance Culture from Bentham to Big Brother*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MA: MIT Press, pp. 402-5.
18. Juliet Flower MacCannell, 'Death Drive in Venice: Sophie Calle as a Guide to the Future of Cities', (*a*): *the journal of culture and the unconscious*, II:1, 2002, pp. 55-80, p. 60.
19. MacCannell, 'Death Drive in Venice', p. 60.
20. See Richard Boothby, *Freud as Philosopher: Metapsychology After Lacan*. London & New York: Routledge, 2001, pp. 191-240; Slavoj Žižek, 'Neighbors and Other Monsters: A Plea for Ethical Violence', *The Neighbor: Three Enquiries in Political Theology*, ed. by Slavoj Žižek, Kenneth Reinhard and Eric Santner, London & Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, pp. 134-190.
21. Slavoj Žižek, 'Neighbors and Other Monsters: A Plea for Ethical Violence', p. 143.
22. Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, London: Granta Books, p. 38.