

# Watching the Detectives

## On Narrative Form and Topographical Proof

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**"At my request my mother went to the 'Duluc' detective agency.  
She hired them to follow me, to report my daily activities,  
and to provide photographic evidence of my existence."<sup>1</sup>**

There is a certain discomfort to be found in the strict division of theory and practice, of fact and fiction. As Roland Barthes observed in "Camera Lucida," his study of photographic meaning, there is a place for a private discourse, a territory between the expressive and the critical.<sup>2</sup> It is with this in mind, and in the spirit of the interdisciplinary and the intertextual, that we have arrived at a set of questions for architectural practice from within the broad domain of the visual arts. This enquiry is grounded in two projects by the artists Victor Burgin and Sophie Calle.

Victor Burgin's "Some Cities" (1996), a critical topography in the form of a slim paperback book, employs photographs, text, realised and unrealised art projects, personal observations and private fantasies.<sup>3</sup> The resulting work is a form of confessional literature, a diary offering the twin delights of personal revelation and critical analysis.

Sophie Calle's "The Shadow" (1981) is an installation which utilises photograph and text in the representation of a day in the life of the Parisian artist. Through the intervention of her mother, Calle employed a private detective to follow her documenting her movements as she alternated between banal necessity and private ritual. It was in this way that she realised her desire for proof, for "photographic evidence of

[her] existence,"<sup>4</sup> thereby reiterating the perpetual ache of late Modernity, the longing for a place, a name, an identity.

The question of perception, of one's experience of the city, has remained a constant in the literary and artistic discourses of Modernity. Burgin and Calle stand at the extreme of a considerable heritage. Their attempt to describe space through a specifically "literary" subjectivity, a personal language, an idiolect, in which space is profoundly temporal, ambiguous, and laden with personal memory, follows a very particular narrative route. In mirroring the real and the psychological worlds, utilising fetishistic objects, images and words as surrogates of desire, Burgin and Calle construct an elaborate, essentially private, game. A text in the spirit perhaps of "Nadja," André Breton's Surrealist essay of 1928. For each artist the city is an allegory of the erotic, a territory to be revealed through the documentation of a journey. It is in this way that the "centered subject" is resurrected in order to ask once again the fundamental question: what constitutes the self?

This project, this topographical activity, is essentially modern. It concerns the desire for a critically self-conscious existence, a temporary space, a moment of exchange to be found somewhere between location and identity. It is this

territory, this gap, which forms the scene for the following architecturally motivated investigations.

It is in the juxtaposition of word and image that constitute the project of documentation for Burgin and Calle that the nature of the map as topographical proof, as a positioning device for a journey, is called into question. In these investigations we have identified this interchange of the visual and the literary as a form of “narrative mapping,” and in doing so we have begun to consider the possibilities of this form of mapping for a critical architectural practice.

Summarising the limitations of the geographical map as a representation of one’s individual experience of the modern city, we arrive at a working definition of narrative and photographic form. Using “Some Cities” and “The Shadow” as a point of departure we then address the concept of identity through the fundamentally spatial discourses of flâneurie and surveillance. Finally, the narrative form of crime fiction is considered as a means by which to trace the ‘desiring practices,’ the individual spatial experience, of the self-conscious subject. [illustration 2]



2.

### **The individual experience of space and time in late Modernity**

The topography of the urban map, the use of an uncompromising geometry in the depiction of the city, is a device which has been instituted for uses other than the location of the self. The map serves both to deny the temporal identification of space through memory, and the individual practices of the subject as walker, as the flâneur of the modern tradition, drifting without occasion through the Cartesian specification of the cartographer’s pen. The modern grid defines a city without citizens, without the experience or practice of everyday life. It is in this city, where surveillance is privileged and time is relegated to the status of historical resource, that the architect is required to build.

If we can say that individual identity relies on place, on the existence of ‘home’ and ‘home-land,’ for its definition then Burgin and Calle might justifiably claim that we are, at present, “homeless,” without identity. Faced with this dilemma they propose that we explicitly “re-locate” ourselves to stand outside the ‘named’ or received territories of the world. Their practice is one of re-inscription, it is a re-authorisation of the role of perceptual experience, the smells and textures of the world.

A critical architectural practice requires that one acknowledge the implications of representational form; the privileging of time over space, economy over gender, conformity over difference. In “Some Cities” and “The Shadow” Burgin and Calle explore the place of the individual imagination, the possibilities for a critical “re-presentation” of themselves, and their loca-

tion in the spaces of their own lives. Both artists explore photographic and literary models and in doing so they realise a practice which, by virtue of its form, cedes authority back to time.

As the art historian Christel Hollevoet has observed in a study entitled, “Wandering in the City: Flânerie to Dérive and After: the Mapping of Cognitive Space;” there is a precedent for this debate, for these projects and for the temporally routed re-mapping of the city.

The phenomenon of urban drifting, successively coined flânerie and dérive, is a form of spatial and conceptual investigation of the metropolis pervasive throughout modernism and extending into postmodernism.<sup>5</sup>

In a recent discussion of land artists employing maps and mapping in their work, the art historian G. A. Tiberghien described maps as “dreaming devices,” as operating devices that generate form. In this conceptualisation, the map is something that “constructs the real, more than it imitates it.”<sup>6</sup>

Where the cartographic map served as a geographical and historical plotting, Tiberghien’s model acknowledges a potentially critical alternative, a fictional topography, an essentially literary practice. In this model the map is a document which reinstates the identification of space through time and the individual practices of the subject as walker. [illustration 3]



3.

### Between narrative maps and photographic stories

In his essay “The human experience of time and narrative,” Paul Ricoeur employed a definition of narrative which lay claim to the possibility of a non-linear representation of time. In place of time as “an abstract series of now’s” which are held to occur between “this” and “that,” Ricoeur proposed a narrative agenda as a way in which we might “articulate our experience of time.”<sup>7</sup>

If one can say, again after Ricoeur and for the limited purposes of these investigations, that time has a threefold structure as the “nowness” of everyday life, the historicity of memory and future projection and the temporality of a whole, a life lived that is, then it might be possible to apply narrative to the project of self-representation.

It is within Ricoeur’s understanding of narrative that there is a space for the “reader” to wander, a terrain that allows for Michel de Certeau’s pilgrim to leave his footprints in

the practice of his journey rather than marking a line that one might follow. Such a narrative is not simply descriptive, it is generative. It moves between the threefold structure of time, it heads back into memory and forward into future, and in doing so it traces a nostalgia, a desire for beginnings which is perhaps best defined as a desire for origins, and in those origins, identity.

In the work of Burgin and Calle, in the “knowing” use of the photographic image, this literary space for interpretation finds its visual equivalent.

Employing photography as a resource for architectural theory and practice requires an acknowledgment of the place of the photographic in contemporary discourse. The role of the photograph as a scientific document, the irrefutable evidence of the presence of an individual or event, the unmediated, transparent record of an historical being is of course highly questionable. An alternative framing sees the photographic image as a form of relic, literally that which is left behind. Barthes’ poignant manipulation of the document/relic divide recognised the blurred distinction between the private subjective meaning and the shared cultural association of the image.<sup>8</sup>

This being said, and the debate being expansive to say the least, we take from photography that which is appropriate to the projects under discussion. That is to say its value as “proof,” as “evidence” of identity and location. The possibility for this proof to be subjective, illusory or constructed is, of course, acknowledged. Burgin and Calle concede and exploit a constant oscillation between these two modes of photographic form; between the document and the relic. It is primarily through the site of appearance, the public exhibition of the work, that they attempt to destabilise such a limited interpretation, removing the possibility of any definitive reading and replacing it with the momentary, the expedient interpretation.

Throughout “Some Cities,” Burgin’s photographs employ an unsatisfactory corporate filter, a material charm, a dullness of surface which is more suited to the commercial prospectus than the poetic discourse. This seeming inappropriateness performs a task which is taken up elsewhere by the more “technical” prose of project description and urban analysis. It disturbs the otherwise lyrical form of the book

by drawing our attention to the unpalatable realities of commerce and political necessity.

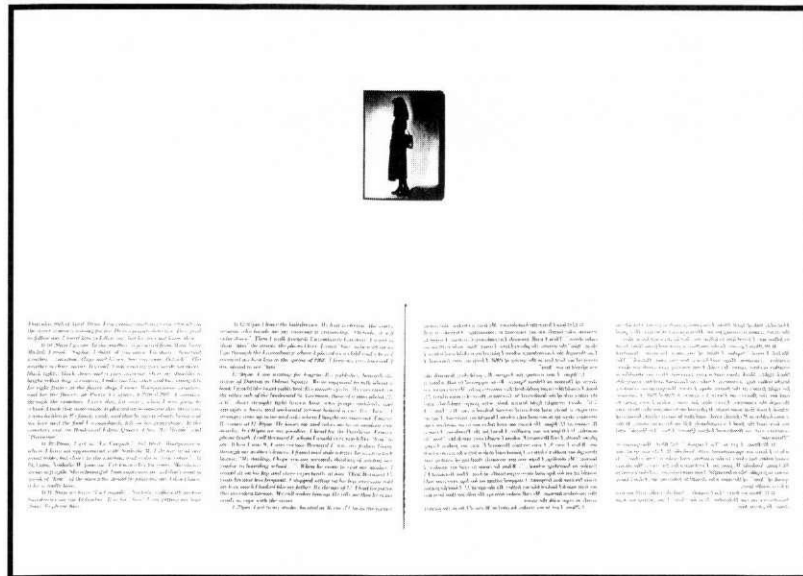
Lulled by the beauty of a single image, an expanse of road in Arizona or a passage of text relating a private fantasy, we are shocked by the context, be it in the banal familiarity of a particular topographical location, or the raw subject matter of succeeding images: posters of Las Vegas Showgirls, or studies from Berlin peepshows.

Where “Some Cities” appears before the viewer within the formal, essentially private conventions of the book and all that implies for the historical position of the reader, Calle’s “The Shadow,” a gallery installation, acknowledges another, more immediately public sphere for the photograph and the text. [*illustration 4*][*illustration 5*]

Set against a surveillance report, a necessarily dry account of a day in Paris, she juxtaposes the detective’s photographic record of the day as proof, as evidence of the written text. The formal language of Calle’s installation is that of a newspaper broad sheet, carrying with it all the self-authorisation of reportage. As a counter, and situated immediately to the side of the report, Calle’s own text consumes the banality of the official surveillance with an utterly subjective agenda. For Calle the search for self, for identity, is through the witness of another. In this manifestation of the work the viewer is required to move between the three different accounts, and in doing so to enter into the shadowing process.

Calle’s “The Shadow” challenges the authorised representation of the modern city through a complex game of “re-writing,” and within that, the purposeful allowance of “mis-reading.” Calle’s self-portrait appears twice in “The Shadow.” Once in a studio portrait above her account of her day and once amidst the detective’s documents. The pose is the same in each case. It is the context which provides the critical commentary. In neither instance should we consider the image to be finite proof. Each image identifies and opens the way to innumerable identifications of the subject and the object.

At issue for Burgin and Calle is the place of the body as viewpoint, the critical employment of the photographic device, and the relative position of the viewing/reading subject in the knowing juxtaposition of document and relic.



4.



5.

### **Desire and the representation of a critical nostalgia**

The spaces created by Calle and Burgin delight in the exchange of public and private. In this they belie Barthes' dilemma in the face of the theoretical/fictional divide.

Throughout their individual practices, their utterly self-conscious exercises, they sustain a connection with the language and material of the contemporary debate, with the travels of the flâneur and the operation of a totalising surveillance. [illustration 6]



6.

After some twelve years of wandering, Burgin's text arrives in Tokyo. In the intervening years he has traveled extensively, moving south from the singular charms of a Sheffield childhood, to the promise of a modern life in the cosmopolitan centers of London, Paris, New York and Los Angeles. In the Japanese capital, Burgin, the flâneur, witness to the spectacle of the moment, is finally allowed to stop. Visiting the city during the cherry blossom season, the annual pilgrimage to Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka to view the arrival of the new blooms, he beholds the ultimate commodification of the gaze. In Japan the cherry blossom season marks the continued presence of ritual time amidst the myriad preoccupations of modern life. For those who are too preoccupied to stop and stare, the ritual is now available elsewhere.

Beside a descriptive text, Burgin inserts two black and white photographs one above the other. In a photograph of the park an array of be-suited workers lounge beneath a canopy of blossom. The image, in its content and composition, recalls nothing less than the definitive Impressionist document of flâneurie; the watchers and the watched in Manet's "La Musique aux Tuilleries." In the midst of Burgin's photograph, a man, viewed from the rear, reclines – his head supported on his raised hand, his face inclined to one side – affecting a disinterested perusal of the passers-by. Below, another photograph records the destination of this scene as a video loop; an image of "nature" installed in the anodyne interior of a department store, amidst the potted plants, plate glass and aluminum trim of an urban atrium. In a parody of surveillance culture, the watcher, offered the

view in the warmth and comfort of the modern interior, prefers to sleep.

Whilst Burgin's dilettante delights in the passing parade Calle's detective is meticulous. He strives for the mythical objectivity of the camera. His record of Calle's day is seemingly objective, scientific and anonymous. The surveillance which we now consider a given in our urban experience through the video documentation of the city street, is here taken to fantastic lengths, but most importantly, initiated by the subject. The discourse of watcher and watched which underlies these genres and our daily practices, constantly blurring the realms of private and public space, is offered here as the ground for a poetic practice.

Throughout "The Shadow" Calle seeks affirmation in her desire for evidence. The fallibility of her project is part of its construction. She may never communicate her self. She enters the hairdresser for "him," to please "him." He, in turn, records this event as a factual sequence, an 'objective truth:'

"At 12.45 the subject leaves the Salon and crosses the road towards the Luxembourg."

Calle leads her detective to the grave of "Pierre V." in Montparnasse, and "towards the Luxembourg Gardens, where [she] played as a child." She taunts her detective, wanting to read the specificity of the city to him whilst he mechanically records her actions.

In "The Shadow" she asks the detective to "make sense" of the mirror images she presents to him, to interpret one from the other. She "writes" her story and herself on the city, leaving her text for the detective to "read" and reconstruct. Of necessity, the surveillance fails, and it falls to Calle herself to supply the layers of interpretation to another, less intimately connected audience: to us.

### **Beyond the margins of narrative: a poetics of popular fiction**

As Susan Stewart observed in "On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir and the Collection," there is a vital place for the narrative which "inscribes" rather than "describes" and this place is a project of the margins. The critical margin has been mapped throughout this investigation as the ground of the intertextual, of the individual subject and the alternative viewpoint. It is in this spirit that we have drawn a final analogy between the visual

and the literary in our exploration and exploitation of the narrative map. Detective fiction has already surfaced as a ready resource for the examination of issues of location and identity in Sophie Calle's project. Crime fiction itself provides the grounds for our final "outing."

Throughout "Some Cities," Burgin inserts a series of stills from Alfred Hitchcock's classic study of obsessive desire "Vertigo," from 1958, and in doing so he draws an analogy between the city, the story and identity.

Burgin's repeated use of a blonde female figure (the long suffering Barbara Bel Geddes' character Midge) receding down a corridor punctuates the already fragmented narrative of the text by introducing yet another element of time: the time of individual memory and private desire. Her's/the Blonde's or any blonde's is not a logical recession. Selected frames interspersed with project descriptions, photographic documents and descriptive text do not show a gradual disappearance but rather different, inconsistent moments of her leaving.

When she is not visible, her presence is actively sought in the intervening photographs, in the individuals and the cities that constitute Burgin's other concerns: a woman on the King's Road, a young girl flirting on a street corner in Malmö, or an unattainable vision in tight silk witnessed in a Warsaw restaurant but never captured on film.

All these figures recall an absence, an ache. This Hitchcockian theme carries with it the language of the thriller and the chase and within that, the unrealised desire. The time that she represents and the place that she occupies in the text suspends the reader and the narrative in a fictional space. In this context, the question may be, between Burgin, the blondes ("real" and fictional), and the reader, who is the true subject, and what is the true object?

Calle's project centers around a similar question with regard to the temporary installation of a critical fictional space. "The Shadow" forces us to confront the relationship between genre (in this case the detective story) and gender. Both depend on conforming to certain rules and expectations. They rely on convention, upon the repetition of an established pattern. As categories they are comforting because we know what to expect, they lie in the realm of the familiar. However because they are both generalizing typologies, genre and gender open themselves up to parody, to exaggeration and to conscious satirisation. Burgin engages

with the language of the thriller as a familiar exercise in flirtation. Calle positions herself inside the genre, constantly referencing it, but in recognizing the duality of the gaze and the constructed boundaries of its role assignment and performance, she allows the hidden motives of the detective story to be revealed.

For Burgin and Calle there is a time and a place for the individual desire and for the other, a ground which might be situated somewhere within the ephemeral interface of the city and body identified by Elizabeth Grosz as neither a representational nor a causal link but rather an oscillation between correspondences.<sup>9</sup>

An understanding of critical nostalgia is at the basis of any appreciation of Calle's and Burgin's projects. Both ar-

tists, through the twin concepts of identity and location, through the narrative map told through the gap between text and photograph, seek to find a home. In this there can be no promise of completion, resolution or relief; there is only a sustained erotic. This nostalgia is necessarily utopian and inherently generative; it is a desire for a return to no-place.<sup>10</sup>

"Some Cities" draws to a close with a reference to Venice, the city that Burgin cannot, and will not, represent. The topography of this city, its multiple surfaces and layers, appear to daunt him. For him it is the antithesis of the late modern city. Falling shy of the Hitchcockian chase which he has so readily employed elsewhere, he finds Venice in the fragments of other cities. [illustration 7]



7.

In 1983, Calle undertook a project in which she adopted a blonde wig and shadowed a stranger through the hotels, bars and alleyways of a Venetian sojourn. Recognising the status of authentic experience as illusory, or at least self-created, she did not want to meet him, she did not want to be disappointed, she just wanted to follow him.

In the essay which accompanied Calle's publication of the Venetian project, Jean Baudrillard described what it might be to "play the mythical role of the shadow," casting the shadow as taking over that existential burden, the responsibility of one's own life. The shadow is that which protects one from the violence of life, from the harsh glare

of the sun. In following the other, he writes, "one replaces him, exchanges lives, passions, wills, transforms oneself in the others stead."<sup>11</sup>

It is these "fictional topographies," involving the interplay of text and photograph and the space which they create for the viewer and the reader which are, we would argue potentially critical for the operation of a "self"-conscious architecture.

The nature of the map as a positioning device has been questioned, location and identity have been shown to rely upon the other, and on the desire to find one's self there. Is it then possible to speculate that identity is not found in



name, is not in position or language, but is an exchange between ourselves and an other? This exchange is not constant, it is not merely verbal or visual, but is, like perception itself, a desire for “focus” tempered by an innate delight in the possibility of the blur.

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## Notes

1. Sophie Calle *Parkett* 1993 #36 p79.
2. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Fontana, 1990), p.8.
3. Victor Burgin *Some Cities*, (London: Reaktion Books, 1996).
4. Sophie Calle “The Shadow” (1985) in *Sophie Calle: a survey curated* by Deborah Irmas, Fred Hoffman Gallery July 8 – September 2 1989.
5. Christel Hollevoet “Wandering in the city: flânerie to dèrive and after: the cognitive map ping of urban space” in *The power of the city/the city of power* (Whitney Museum of American Art : New York, 1991), p.25.
6. G. A. Tiberghien, “Maps and Inscriptions” in *Land art* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1995), p. 165.
7. Paul Ricoeur, “The human experience of time and narrative,” in *Reflection and Imagination: a Ricoeur reader*, ed. Mario J. Valdes (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1991), p.97–116.
8. Barthes, p. 25.
9. Elizabeth Grosz, “Bodies-cities,” in *Sexuality and space*, ed. Beatriz Colomina (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), p. 241–254.
10. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir and the Collection*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p.23.
11. Jean Baudrillard, “Please follow me” in Sophie Calle’s *Suite Venitienne* trans. Barry Barash and Danny Hatfield (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), p.82.

## Illustration Credits

- 1–3/6,7 Victor Burgin *Some Cities*, (Reaktion Books, London 1996)
- 4/5 Sophie Calle “The Shadow”. 1981, *Ninety: Art des Annees 90* #9 1992

## Illustrations

1. Paris, *Some Cities* Victor Burgin
2. Arizona, *Some Cities* Victor Burgin
3. Malmö, *Some Cities* Victor Burgin
4. “The Shadow”, Sophie Calle
5. “The Shadow”, Sophie Calle
6. Tokyo, *Some Cities* Victor Burgin
7. King’s Road, London, *Some Cities* Victor Burgin