

REVIEWS

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Sophie Calle and Jean-Paul Demoule, *The Elevator Resides in 501*, Actes Sud, 2022, 372 pages, paperback, ISBN 9782 3301 5948 1.

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The Elevator Resides in 501 comes wrapped in a glassine paper dust jacket, forming a pocket that holds four loose leaves: a catalogue card for the book itself written from a future without books, a scanned room number plate, a blueprint map. And there is a photograph of Calle sitting on a bed in a derelict hotel room, credited to her friend Richard Baltrauss.

Good luck finding these slips of paper in any library edition of the book; like the objects they record, they will inevitably get lost. The book describes itself as an ‘object’ in the ‘form of a 372-page paper book’.¹ You would not know that it is in fact an exhibition catalogue because it never mentions the exhibition that it originates from: *Les Fantômes d’Orsay* [The Ghosts of Orsay] by Sophie Calle and her guest, archaeologist Jean-Paul Demoule. The catalogue explores, through photographs, scanned images and text, the abandoned Hôtel Palais d’Orsay. The hotel was constructed on the site of the Palais d’Orsay, which stood from 1810 until 1871. Following this, the building became the Gare d’Orsay with a 370-room hotel above it. The train station closed in 1939, but the hotel remained in use until its abandonment in the

1970s – the period in which Calle roamed its rooms. Following a period of modernisation, the derelict building became the home of the Musée d’Orsay collection in 1986, and the space of Calle’s exhibition in spring 2022.

The title of this spectral exhibition, *Les Fantômes*, reveals the narrative push of the book: ghosts and their hauntings. The character list includes Calle and Demoule, but the real ghost of this ghost story is the hotel’s old handyman, Mr Oddo, who exists only in scraps of handwritten letters found among the abandoned debris.

Sophie Calle is perhaps most well known for her projects *Suite Venitienne* (1980) and *The Address Book* (1983), in which she undertakes clandestine information-gathering. *The Elevator Resides at 501* brings together themes prevalent across Calle’s career. *Les Dormeurs* (1979), where strangers were invited to sleep in her bed, demonstrates an interest in the politics of space. *Prenez Soins de Vous* (2007) deals with interpretation by asking 107 women to respond to a breakup Calle received over email. In *À toi de faire, ma mignonne* (2023), Calle’s entire apartment is inventoried and appraised, displayed in the Musée Picasso Paris, revealing the artist’s preoccupation with collecting and organising.

It remains a mystery whether Donatien Grau, head of contemporary programs at the d’Orsay, was aware that upon invitation

to exhibit, Calle would produce her own personal archive of photographic documents of his gallery's derelict interior from over forty years ago. Although, looking at her previous projects, it should hardly be surprising. Calle has a way of always being a few steps ahead, even if it appears that she is following a few steps behind.

In *The Elevator*, Calle prefers to use clairvoyance to look backwards, rather than forwards. The book opens with a diary entry from Calle's self-designated residency in the abandoned hotel: '1978. The last days of the year. I was back in France, in Paris, and I was walking along the quays of the Seine'.² From here, the book can be thought in three sections: the first presents black and white photographs of the hotel taken in 1978; the second produces a deluge of scan images of found objects, each with archaeological analysis from Demoule; the third section brings us to the present day, with dim photographic reproductions of canonical artworks currently hanging in the d'Orsay.

This project started in 1978, the year before *Suite Venitienne*, in which Calle trailed a fellow dinner party guest, Henri B., all the way to and around Venice. She spent two weeks looking at his back. *The Elevator* dedicates a significant proportion of attention to reproducing objects that were swallowed by the hotel's history, and there is a notable preoccupation with the back of these objects. 'Red-enamelled metal room numbers ripped from the doors, client records from 1937 to 1940, [...] relics of telephones, bells, water bills, gas bills'.³ They become 'souvenirs', remembered only by Calle. Each object is recorded, photographed from the front and the back and reproduced across the verso and recto of the page. Three-dimensional water-pressure meters are flattened into text, while

pages of notebooks covered in handwritten meter readings are translated into artworks themselves. What was once information has been rerecorded and transformed into an object. Through *Inception*-like visual reproductions and multiple textual interpretations, objects are read and text is looked at. In character, Calle plays with the relationship between art and literature. The automatic prioritisation of the front of things is denaturalised; we spend as much time looking at their backs.

The third section solidifies this. First a colour photograph, which signifies a move into the present. It shows an emergency exit sign above a staircase. It is room 501 as it stands today. This photograph forms a pair with the earlier portrait of Calle taken by Richard Baltrauss. Mimicking the documented objects, the pair forms the front and back, taken from the past and the future, of room 501. The book closes with a series of some of the most recognisable works in French art history, photographed under low-light in the Musée d'Orsay. Only one follows the project's methodology and is photographed from the back. It is Cuno Amiet's *Deep Winter* (1904). The museum's curator reveals that from this perspective there is a tiny skier, just visible, who was lost under an avalanche of white paint. Calle alludes to a connection between the hotel's ghost, Mr Oddo, and the painting's reversal 'au dos'.⁴ Calle's project brings literature's turning pages to art objects, expanding narrative across the front and back.

1 Sophie Calle and Jean-Paul Demoule, *The Elevator Resides in 501* (Actes Sud, 2022), unpaginated.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.