

L'Hotel Soficalle Vera Greenwood
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Conceptual artist Sophie Calle made her reputation in the early 1980s by invading people's privacy. She stalked strangers, and took a job as a chambermaid so she could photograph the rooms and belongings of the absent guests (*L'Hotel*). In *La Filature* she turned the tables, sort of, by hiring a private detective to shadow her. As an homage and subtle critique, Vera Greenwood went to Paris to follow Calle without her knowledge. The resulting exhibition, *L'Hotel Soficalle*, and small book, *L'Hotel Soficalle: the Whole Story*, documents Greenwood's misadventures.

The installation is laid out like an ethnographic display. There are three freestanding vitrines and five wall mounted display cases filled with artifacts from the investigation—binoculars, maps, plane tickets, an umbrella, an anti-stalking brochure, French/English dictionary, detective novels. Other items, her disguises, are also displayed—a coat, a wig, a scarf, make up. Text comes in three forms: didactic cards accompanying the artifacts; some titles on the wall that correspond to chapters in her book—*The Disguises*, *The Stake Out*, *The Detective Agency*, etc.; and there are dozens of framed diary entries supported by ink jet photographs. The photographs include a few awkward ones of Calle taken with a “spy camera.” There is also a large light box picture and enlarged photo booth shots of Greenwood in her disguises.

L'Hotel Soficalle's narrative is divided into nineteen chronological stations. If you are resistant to reading your art (it does take some time to get through everything) you might first try to survey the sights. Very disappointing. The sober display and banal objects are not aesthetically interesting. The photographs are a little more engaging but meaningless without the diary. So read, and in order, you must. What emerges is delightful. The diary is a breezy, funny account of an artist who has a good idea, gets funding and a studio in Paris, and is condemned to realize her project. Our hero is a procrastinating, easily distracted observer-type who struggles to overcome inertia, illness, shyness, poor planning skills, and lack of money to fulfill her dubious project. It's a fun read made all the more poignant because it is true.

Alfred Hitchcock coined the term *McGuffin* to refer to a plot device that drives a movie's action but ends up being irrelevant or upstaged by character development. Such is the case with *L'Hotel Soficalle*. While the search for Sophie Calle gets our attention, the real subject is Vera Greenwood—or *Vera Greenwood*, the character. The plot is minimal. After weeks of half-hearted attempts, Greenwood finds her prey at the premier of a film Calle directed (tough detective work!). She tails her outside and takes her picture from across the street (with a flash, at night!). Greenwood is spotted and gently confronted by Calle: “Vell, I guess I vill juust pretend that I deed not see you.” Later, Greenwood tries to squeeze some information out of the detective agency that Calle hired for *La Filature*. She is somewhat successful but lets her project fizzle out; the three-month residency is over.

Of her motivation, Greenwood only offers: “My work focuses on the study of the voyeuristic gaze—to be seen without being seen—camouflage, invisibility, the occupation of the unselfconscious position.” This sounds like the right sort of vague near-theory to get you a grant. (In fact, a conceptual artist proposing to give another conceptual artist a taste of her own

medicine would be winning enough to a jury of artists.) Of course, her work is exactly the opposite: a Canadian with poor French, she is conspicuous in Paris; a clumsy detective, she is easily detected; and her diaries show her to be very self-conscious. As a plot device, desperately seeking Calle is thin. It initiates the action, but because Greenwood does not explain or wrestle with her reasons for doing this strange thing, it is difficult to get excited about the mystery. Greenwood is not an obsessed fan, or even an obsessive artist. She is a fairly normal person on a working holiday. While the mystery plot is only mildly engaging, Greenwood's quirky character is very amusing.

Greenwood narrates herself as a barely tethered consciousness floating through the world in matter-of-fact wonder, occasionally breaking inertia to get on with her project. The diary is a stream-of-consciousness that is often more interested in being available for the next sensation than in moving the action. Greenwood offers a consciousness fascinated by its own inner workings, and a body that when it isn't wondering what is going to happen next, is getting in the way. The shaggy dog detective story gets bogged down right at the start. The diary records the first ten days as primarily a struggle with sleep. It is a week and a half before she hits the streets! Greenwood begins by retracing Calle's *La Filature* steps only to quit part way in. She goes to bed, sleeps in, resumes the next day only to encounter a comedy of errors: missed addresses, getting lost, etc. She gives up, is sick for a week, then goes to England for a vacation. So much for the first five weeks!

On the non-mystery side, we have the hilarious story of a sex-obsessed Cambodian monk Greenwood meets on the plane and invites to her Paris apartment—and he comes: “He wanted to know my opinion on whether penis size mattered. ‘Of course,’ I replied, watching his eyebrow jump.” And then there is the case of the ghostly piano, and the naked man in the window. There are also less exotic reports: “I had to get out of bed by 13:00 because my kidneys and hips ached from lying around so much. The gas continued but I only have one accident to report.” More Bridget Jones than Marcel Proust.

Greenwood is a comic, almost fictional, figure. She is allowed to do and say things the rest of us wouldn't dream of. She is given money and a studio in Paris by the government to pursue her indefinite task. She commits an act, stalking, that would be considered criminal if she weren't an artist. It's a dream world. But, apart from the initial idea, *Greenwood* is a character without a script. She makes it up as she goes along only to find that fiction (her detective novel models) are useless, and even her initial idea is suspect. At every turn she seems inadequate to the quixotic task. Nevertheless, she redeems the project through her honest reports. Threaded through her installation is a subtle critique of both Calle and how grant culture constructs artists.

Just as Greenwood's diary is obsessed with money—not having enough—the installation is obsessed with accounting. The vitrines ostensibly offer the viewer evidence of what happened. But the items are so banal (lipstick) and redundant (do we really need to see her plane tickets to know that she went to Paris?), that something else must be at play. She seems to be showing these things (half-comically) to justify her expenses to the Canada Council. And, as the lines between vacation and research and between ordinary things and research tools is so fine here, the accounting tends to be hyperbolic. Most over-the-top is the display of yellow rubber gloves that Greenwood bought to root through Calle's garbage. She didn't use them in the end but she meant

to so they must be a deductible expense, right?! This is symptomatic of another issue. There is throughout the installation a sense of the tenuous and ephemeral nature of both a conceptual artist's work and life. When you are the subject of your work, where does the self end and the work begin?

Finally, Greenwood strikes me as a moralist. Though coy about motivation, she seems to have gone to Paris to treat Calle as she has treated others, only to find herself incapable of the same sort of detached voyeurism and exploitation of the unaware. Her inertia, clumsiness, various escapes and avoidances, and bouts of illness, seem an unconscious and visceral revolt against her clever but mean-spirited concept. By documenting her wish as well as the nature of her failure, Greenwood has elegantly solved her moral and artistic problem. She has dramatically critiqued Calle's ethical breach while not quite replicating it. And by seducing us into the process—we find ourselves nosing through her diary and private things—she makes us aware of our own proclivities to voyeurism.

David Garneau