

# In between Life and Death: Sophie Calle's *Rachel, Monique* (2014)

Jørgen Bruhn and Henriette Thune

## Abstract

This chapter is dedicated to Sophie Calle's aesthetically rich and existentially moving art exhibition *Rachel, Monique* (2014), representing her mother's death in 2006. Calle's well-known dichotomies between private and public, random acts and aesthetic form are repeated in a new dichotomy between life and death, and the nuances in between these. The authors suggest a combination of some of the fundamental notions of intermedial studies combined with the aesthetic theory of Mikhail Bakhtin in order to grasp the exhibition and the experience of it.

## Introduction

The art exhibition *Rachel, Monique* is Sophie Calle's artistic representation of her mother's death. It is shown in a side chapel of The Episcopal Church of the Heavenly Rest on the Upper East Side, New York City. At the back of the room, which is the sanctuary and thus the front of the chapel, there is a reading going on, emerging through loudspeakers. There are butterflies meticulously pinned on the right-hand wall, forming the word "souci"—French for "worry" or "care"—close to a large photograph of an open coffin in full size, horizontally placed on the left-hand side floor. Numerous photographs and texts are displayed on walls and floors. It is difficult not to be drawn towards a large projection on

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**Figure 1.** Photograph of the film projection of Sophie Calle’s dying mother on the wall in the chapel. Sophie Calle, 2014. Photo: Henriette Thune, University of Stavanger. License: CC-BY-NC-ND. Rights holder has not responded after repeated requests about copyright claims. Copyright claims are welcomed.

the right-hand wall closer to the altar: at first it appears to be a photograph, but at a second glance it turns out to be moving images, with a dead or dying woman in a semi close-up (Figure 1).

As visitors to the exhibition we intuitively and with pleasure follow our natural curiosity. Moving around the exhibition—which was open to visitors from May 9 to June 25, 2014—this curiosity sometimes turns into a less comfortable sensation of nosey prying. This latter sensation, however, is over and over again pushed back by the feeling that the exhibition is a crafted, formed, work of art.

*Rachel, Monique* is a complex composition of a wide range of media and art forms (which we will call “medialities” in the following).<sup>1</sup> *Rachel, Monique* analyses as well as problematizes thresholds

<sup>1</sup> In the following we employ the terms “mediality” and “medialities” (instead of “media” or “art forms”). Mediality refers to a constellation

between life and death, relations between mother and daughter, closeness and distance, and investigates the ethical implications of the distinctions between real life and aesthetic representation. *Rachel, Monique* materialises the spectrum and borders between life and death of Monique Sindler; she is dying, remembering, being remembered and even, in one of the works, she is depicted as when she was living. Our text will work through Calle's exhibition suggesting an interpretation of *Rachel, Monique*, and an important distinction will be existential or psychological content on the one hand versus what we shall call a "formal content" on the other hand. Furthermore, a second, important aim of this chapter is to demonstrate how combining an intermedial approach with the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "the aesthetic object," makes for a fruitful method for analysing and interpreting works of art.<sup>2</sup> We will only briefly refer to the entire oeuvre of Calle, and we do not go into the extensive Sophie Calle reception.

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of communicative, aesthetic and material dimensions of communicative acts that blend a limited number of medial or modal aspects. Our understanding is inspired by Rajewsky's discussion of the nature of media borders and Elleström's discussion of media and modalities. See also Bruhn's general reflections concerning intermediality and textual analysis. Irina O. Rajewsky, *Intermedialität* (Tübingen: Francke, 2002); Lars Elleström, ed., *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Jørgen Bruhn, *The Intermediality of Narrative Literature: Medialities Matter* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the aesthetic object was first introduced in "The Problem of Content, Material and Form in Verbal Art" in *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, eds. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990). Here Bakhtin introduces the concept of the aesthetic object as an interwovenness of the ethical, the epistemological and the aesthetic. The aesthetic object comes into being as the meaning produced between an author/artist and a reader/spectator in their contemplation of an external work. For a full application of Bakhtin's concept of the aesthetic object as method for aesthetic analysis—including a critical discussion of how to incorporate the unavoidably subjective experience of a work of art as an a priori prejudice to any analytical approach—see Henriette Thune's dissertation discussing this question: Henriette Thune, *Mikhail Bakhtin's Aesthetic Object: Adaptation Analysis of Sara Stridsberg's Novel The Dream Faculty and Its Theatre Adaptation Valerie Solanas Will Be President of America* (PhD diss., University of Stavanger: Faculty of Arts and Education, 2012).

Entering the chapel is a serene experience, but inside the conventionally peaceful and solemn frame, contradiction reigns. The feeling of simultaneously being attracted *and* shoved away, pulled in *and* pushed off, is particularly poignant around the beautiful but also disturbing film of the dying Monique Sindler. The film goes on and on in 11 minutes' looped circuits, leaving only three to four seconds after the image and music have faded away before it starts over again. During the first six to seven minutes, the dying woman is all we see. The only motion to be detected, if any, is a very marginal movement of the woman's chest, granted she breathes. During the last four minutes of the film, we hear whispering from behind the camera and three different persons come over to the bed, one after the other, trying to detect pulse, heartbeats or breathing. Being invited in as observers to this deeply private moment, next to a bed where she is lying to die, and at the same time being in a public exhibition in a church chapel, activates deviating sensations. These sensations are, for instance, related to the private, the sacred, the emotionally moving, the elevated, the down-to-earth, the intimate, the real-life as opposed to the aesthetic, the genuine, and the composed. The visitors are witnessing acts of personal and professional care-taking and love. At the same time, the visitors are confronted with Sophie Calle's bluntness (or exhibitionism) when she displays in an artwork the private and, particularly in modern and contemporary Western culture, extremely privatized moment of her mother dying. *Rachel, Monique* exhibits a number of contradictions that seem apt for being included in even more abstract dichotomies, but also internally contrasting and inconsistent oppositions, such as life in relation to art and private in relation to public. The exhibition's processing and negotiation of conventional oppositions such as distance and intimacy, pathos and humour, formal sophistication and banal simplicity will interest us particularly. In the following, we will attempt to stay with the contrasting sensations and impressions of both the movie and the exhibition as a whole, instead of trying to explain and thereby overcome or exceed this tension, and we wish to balance the thematic "content" with the formal aspects of the exhibition.

It is in order to better understand and describe Calle's apparently exorbitant display of the uttermost, private experience—that

at the same time, metonymically, represents each and every human being's unavoidable death—that we suggest the application of a combination of intermediality and media theory with the concept of Bakhtin's aesthetic object.

Bakhtin introduced his concept of the aesthetic object as an attempt to understand the basic form of being of a work of art. Bakhtin uses the term “the external work” for the concrete compositional forms that may be described and agreed upon by multiple perceivers. The aesthetic object, according to Bakhtin, is the dynamically produced meaning of artists or perceivers related to such an external work when they try to make sense of it. It is this aesthetic object—a dynamic meaning production going on in contemplation of an external work—we will refer to when we in the following speak of the “content” or the “meaning” of a work of art.

With the 1924 introduction of Bakhtin's concept of the aesthetic object follows his suggested guidelines for analysis. Henriette Thune has developed and operationalized these guidelines into a framework of analysis in her PhD thesis on Bakhtin's aesthetic object in 2012, emphasizing the necessity of the initial, subjective experience of a work of art for the choice of analytical strands to pursue.<sup>3</sup> Following the inner logic of the concept of Bakhtin's aesthetic object, it is thus completely on purpose when we begin this article by letting the reader follow some of our experiences of *Rachel, Monique*—even though it is not our aim here to see through an analysis conforming strictly with details of the framework operationalized by Thune.

Investigating the forms of the external work, we will nonetheless pursue what we experience as the capital meaning-producing elements of *Rachel, Monique*, attempting to describe and understand the heterogeneous, but nevertheless systematically ordered, range of different medialities that together comprise this complex art exhibition. We shall distinguish between the exhibition as the overall main work in this analysis and the respective single works that together form *Rachel, Monique* as individual constituents of the main work. Three of these stand out as particularly central.

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<sup>3</sup> Thune, *Mikhail Bakhtin's Aesthetic Object*, 320.

Having already introduced our experience of *Rachel, Monique* as a frame of reference, the first step of our analysis involves a description and inventory of the material of the exhibition, the surroundings and the respective works of which the exhibition consists. The second step, building upon the first, establishes some of the thematic and more abstract structures shortly mentioned above. The third step brings our findings in the mediality analysis into a discussion of *Rachel, Monique* as a Bakhtinian aesthetic object.

We are fully aware that it is impossible to draw clear and undisputed lines between experience, description of experience, description of material (inventory), and interpretation of a work of art, as if a work of art and the experience of it were things that could be efficiently dissected:

The aesthetic object is also the threshold where the author/artist as the origin of the external work and the reader/spectator as a co-creative contemplator meet. In this sense the aesthetic object is the threshold of an existential meeting between two subjects. This is why, as Bakhtin says in "Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences," the activity of the researcher in human sciences needs to be "the activity of one who acknowledges another subject, that is, the *dialogic* activity of the acknowledger."<sup>4</sup>

Bakhtin, with his idea of the aesthetic object and indications for a methodology for analyzing it, thus forefronts the necessity to strive for grasping the event-like aesthetic object as a whole, even if he well understands the utopian character of "succeeding" in such a quest.<sup>5</sup> And we do, of course, assume the hermeneutical

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<sup>4</sup> Thune, *Mikhail Bakhtin's Aesthetic Object*, 327 quoting Bakhtin in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, eds. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 161. In one of his very last texts, "Toward a Methodology of the Human Sciences," Bakhtin argues that the objects of the so-called exact sciences are things and may be treated like things, while the human sciences' objects represent subjects, therefore cognition of the objects of human sciences must always be dialogic. See Mikhail Bakhtin, Vern W. McGee, Michael Holquist, and Caryl Emerson, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986). See also Thune, *Mikhail Bakhtin's Aesthetic Object*, 68.

<sup>5</sup> That is, if "succeeding" means attaining one "true" answer or conclusion.

circle and both individual and more general a priori prejudices in the form of situated positions as fundamental for understanding any approach to art analysis.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Rachel, Monique* as Part of Sophie Calle's Oeuvre**

Sophie Calle is a French writer, photographer, installation artist, and conceptual artist. She started working as an artist in the late 1970s, and her early photographs were of tombstones, marked simply—and in this context interestingly—“mother” or “father.” One of the photographs of the exhibition *Rachel, Monique* is a black-and-white photograph of a tombstone with “Mother” engraved (1990), another black and white photo is of a white cross in a cemetery and says “Maman” (2013). The exhibition also includes a black-and-white digital print showing Monique Sindler's tombstone, with a picture of herself making a face and the inscription and title “I'm getting bored already!” (2010).<sup>7</sup>

Generally, Calle's work orchestrates numerous aesthetic processes into myriad, rhizomatic exhibitions, where a network of medialities challenge any assumption of the existence of pure art forms or media. All through her artistic career, Sophie Calle mixes medialities, real life, fiction, public, and private in a narrating way that provokes engagement, affect, and emotion in the public, and she explicitly uses her own and other peoples' personal lives in her praxis. As also in *Rachel, Monique*, she often delves into questions and problematizations of identity, intimacy, and vulnerability.

Calle was chosen as the official representative of France at the 2007 Venice Biennale where her main presentation was the monumental exhibition *Prenez soin de vous* (*Take care* [of yourself]),

<sup>6</sup> See Thune, *Mikhail Bakhtin's Aesthetic Object*, 51–54 on the development of a reception aesthetic frame for the aesthetic object.

<sup>7</sup> The inscription is in French: “Je m'ennuie déjà!” This was part of Monique Sindler's own preparation for her funeral, as explains this quotation from what we shall refer to as the Pulpit Text—the text displayed at the pulpit upon entering the chapel: “She organized the funeral ceremony: her last party. Final preparations: she chose her funeral dress—navy blue with a white pattern—; a photograph showing her making a face for the tombstone, and her epitaph: I'm getting bored already!”

which deserves a brief presentation here. It has strong affinities with *Rachel, Monique* because of its equally systematic, mixed mediality representation of a personal experience that blends humor and pathos. *Prenez soin de vous* is named after the last words of a break-up e-mail Calle received from a lover at some point in the early 2000s. Devastated and incapable of making sense of the e-mail and the accompanying sensation of shock and loss, she decided to ask 107 women, all outstanding in their respective, very different, professional occupations, skills and experience, to read, analyze, and interpret the letter for her as a way to do what her ex-lover had encouraged her to do—*take care of herself*. The result was gathered and documented in what has become a central feminist artwork, which after the Venice Biennale has been shown in amongst other England, Denmark, USA, Finland, Norway, and Mexico. *Prenez soin de vous* is at the same time a massive and refined demonstration of Calle's experimentation with how different medialities affect meaning production. The analyses, interpretations and representations of Sophie Calle's break-up letter may be seen as a variety of "adaptations" (in the broad sense of the term<sup>8</sup>) of the e-mail, along with certain responses. The adapted medialities including various musical genres, loud readings, short stories, advertisements, dances, theatrical performances, and so on—a lot of them produced as short films, also available on DVD in the artist's book *Take Care of Yourself* (2007).<sup>9</sup>

## Experiencing *Rachel, Monique*

As mentioned above, *Rachel, Monique* offers a rich and complex network of interrelated individual works. As a first step toward an interpretation and understanding of the exhibition, we propose a relatively systematic description of what meets the visitor, or

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<sup>8</sup> On this understanding of adaptation, see Linda Hutcheon with Siobhan O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2013); for a short overview of the field of adaptation studies, see Jørgen Bruhn, Anne Gjelsvik, and Eirik Frisvold Hanssen, eds., *Adaptation Studies: New Challenges, New Directions* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Sophie Calle, *Take Care of Yourself*, trans. Charles Penwarden (LeMéjan: Actes Sud, 2007).

rather the participant of the exhibition, when entering the space. This will enable us to afterwards establish an initial register of the represented medialities. We have chosen to describe the experience of walking through *Rachel, Monique* in present tense in order to furnish an idea of the exhibition as a living perceptual experience. Whether described in past or present tense, it is impossible either way for the reader to go back and visit the exhibition that ended June 25, 2014.<sup>10</sup>

In order to enter the exhibition, the visitor is led through the main entrance of the Episcopal Church of the Heavenly Rest on Fifth Avenue facing the east side of Central Park on Manhattan. Once inside the church, one turns right before making a left into one of the rather large side chapels which lie parallel to the main church nave. Entering the large rectangular space of about 8 meters' breadth and 20 meters' length, one can take in a view of the entire chapel and (almost) the entire exhibition.

The light in the exhibition is turned somewhat down without being dark, and instead of the murmur of other churchgoers in a conventional religious space, the visitors of the exhibition can hear the sound of a female voice reading aloud from the far end of the room. The exhibition consists of 14 named and numbered individual works of different sizes, textures, and medialities (listed in a printed folder). The works all weigh differently in the medial economy of the exhibition.

Entering from the west end of the chapel (Figure 2), one immediately sees a pulpit with what we shall refer to as the Pulpit Text, describing all Monique Sindler's "lasts" taking place between January 31 and March 15, 2006, when she died (text on paper, not listed in the folder). One's attention is attracted to what we consider the three major works of the exhibition. The first of these is the audio recording of Kim Cattrall reading Sophie Calle's selections of Monique Sindler's diaries out loud to the right of the altar close to the south-eastern corner of the chapel. Letting

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<sup>10</sup> For an artist's book/exhibition catalogue, where several of the objects are reproduced, see Sophie Calle and Xavier Barral, *Elle s'est appelée successivement Rachel, Monique, Szyndler, Calle, Pagliero, GonThier, Sindler: Ma mère aimait qu'on parle d'elle* (Paris: Xavier Barral, 2012).



**Figure 2.** Overview of the exhibition from the entrance at the Western wall. Sophie Calle, 2014. Photo: Henriette Thune, University of Stavanger. License: CC-BY-NC-ND. Rights holder has not responded after repeated requests about copyright claims. Copyright claims are welcomed.

one's eyes be swept towards the altar and the sounds, make them pass by the video installation, an 11-minute loop, projected on the south wall—"Couldn't capture death." The installation represents Monique Sindler's last minutes alive. Being drawn towards the front of the chapel, one discovers a life-size photograph of Monique Sindler's open coffin on the left of the nave (Figure 3). The rather sinister but also peaceful aspect of the deceased woman is softened by the numerous objects included with her in the coffin—and by the fact that all these objects are also listed and framed on the wall over the coffin. Monique Sindler's open coffin is what we consider to be the last of the three major works of the exhibition as the overall main work.

Around the three capital works are situated the less-dominant works. On the eastern wall, occupying a central place, immediately visible when entering the chapel, is the altar table with the "Souci" centerpiece in front (sandblasted paper). The visitor



**Figure 3.** Photograph of the open coffin of Monique Sindler. Sophie Calle, 2014. Photo: Henriette Thune, University of Stavanger. License: CC-BY-NC-ND. Rights holder has not responded after repeated requests about copyright claims. Copyright claims are welcomed.

can see photos and digital prints of numerous tombstones, particularly along the southern wall, including a photo of Monique Sindler's tombstone (sculpturesque with text "Je m'ennuis déjà!" ["I'm bored already"] and a photo of a smiling Monique), as well as a number of individual photos and digital prints symbolically relating to aspects of motherhood, either in writing or sculpture.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> "Les Mains" (photo), "Maman" (photo on marble epitaph), "Mother" (black and white photo), "Daddy Mother" (digital print), "Mama" (digital print), "Maman" (digital print), and "Souci"—stitched butterfly poem.

The word “souci” appears on the same wall, close to the entrance, and only up close it becomes clear that the word is put together of dried, pinned butterflies forming the five letters.

Near the altar on the northern wall, the work “Gênes,” three kneelers, are situated, facing three different enlargements of the same photo of a girl lifting a cover to peek in under it, seemingly at the head end of a bed or table where a body lies.

Finally, turning around and looking towards the western wall of the entrance appear lace curtains hung above the entrance door. The curtains are visible only from well inside the room as one turns around and looks back, and embroidered in the lace we once again see the word “souci.”

Even a quick trajectory through the exhibition reveals a thematic core message, which is what we will refer to as the content of the work concerning a number of related existential or affective notions such as grief, loss, death, subordinated under the broader idea of *souci* (worries, sorrow, and care).

## Inventory of Medialities

Before we go closer into such a thematic investigation, however, we shall go through the exhibition in line with our proposed method in this article by way of listing an inventory of the different medialities at play. This is because it seems obvious to us that Sophie Calle has chosen to convey a relatively clear-cut thematic message in an unusually differentiated medial constellation.

We begin with the 18-minute audio recording of selections of Monique Sindler’s diaries, which is—medially speaking—complex. Initially, Calle has selected parts of her mother’s diaries. The diaries, conventionally being a semi-literary and private genre, have been read aloud and recorded, not by Calle or her mother, but by actress Kim Cattrall. The private diaries are not only made public as such—they are also “contaminated” with the exhibition participants’ knowledge of *Sex and the City*-celebrity Cattrall’s character in the NYC-based TVshow for which she is known.

“Couldn’t capture death,”<sup>12</sup> the 11-minute video installation projected on the south wall representing Monique Sindler’s last minutes in life, is also a complex mediality product. Calle placed a camera beside Monique Sindler’s deathbed in order to record the first extremely weak and later absent movements of her dying mother. Sophie Calle said about this project and her mother:

My mother liked to be the object of discussion. Her life did not appear in my work, and that annoyed her. When I set up my camera at the foot of the bed in which she lay dying—I wanted to be present to hear her last words, and was afraid that she would pass away in my absence—she exclaimed: “Finally!”<sup>13</sup>

The sound is diegetic; what we hear is whispering and a few everyday noises. Extradiegetic sound is added only in the last minute or two when Monique Sindler is dead, and the music is a Mozart sonata, that she had demanded be played upon her death.<sup>14</sup>

Beside the life-size photography of Monique Sindler’s open coffin a written list is hung on the wall just above it, specifying the many objects put in the coffin along with the body. We here quote the entire list:

Before the lid of her coffin was closed, the following objects were laid on her body:

Her white polka-dot dress and her red and black shoes, because that is what she chose to wear for her death.

Handfuls of sour candies, because she gorged on them.

Stuffed cows and rubber cows, because she collected cows.

Volume I of *À la recherche du temps perdu* by Marcel Proust, in the Pléiade edition, because she knew the first page by heart and recited it whenever she got the chance.

A postcard of Marilyn Monroe with Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, because Marilyn was her idol.

<sup>12</sup> The video installation was screened for the first time at the French pavilion of the 2007 Venice Biennale, one year after Monique Sindler’s death in 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted from the gallery’s web material, now deleted.

<sup>14</sup> See Sadie Stein, “Worry,” accessed January 16, 2016, <https://www.the-parisreview.org/blog/2014/05/14/worry/>.

A postcard of Ava Gardner, because when people met her for the first time, that is who she claimed to be.

A Christian Lacroix silk scarf, because she was a coquette.

A book from the “Que sais-je?” collection on Spinoza and Spinozism, because she began studying the subject a month before she died.

Mozart’s sonatas for violin and piano K. 376, K. 377, K. 357 and K. 360, because at the end, Mozart was all she listened to.

A photograph of a sailboat on the Atlantic, because she loved the ocean.

Marlboro cigarettes and matches, because she smoked a lot.

Vodka, rum and whisky, because she loved to drink.

Paper, a pencil, and an eraser, because she dreamed of writing.

A MoMA membership card, because of New York.

Photographs of the love of her life, her friends, her children, her brother, and a few lovers, because she loved them.

Photographs in which she felt she looked young and beautiful.

A photograph of a parasol pine, because it was planted at Courtonne-le-Deux-Églises the day after her death, and it bears her name.

A few flowers—*souci* (marigolds), because *souci* (worry) was her last word.

This list—enumerating what can also be seen on the photograph—is on the one hand an emotional tribute to the mother, but on the other hand also an almost systematic list of different medialities related to different sense perceptions, different aesthetic conventions, and different technical media being present in the coffin. We have objects relating to fashion, to literature, to music, to philosophy, to the technical ability of writing, to museum activities, and more.

The remaining photos and digital prints represent either words or tombstones: the “Gênes” refer to the religious design and architectural space of churches with three kneelers, an appropriation of the architectural trend continued in the implementation of the word “souci” on the centrally placed altar table. The word “souci” made from dried butterflies on the southern wall, close to the entrance, is mixing the iconic images (or shapes) of the butterflies with the symbolic signs of the five letters.

Making a rather coarse but perhaps necessary distinction between qualified artistic medialities in themselves as opposed to remediated forms enables us to produce two lists.<sup>15</sup> On the one hand *Rachel, Monique* consists of the qualified artistic medialities of photography, digital prints, stitched butterflies, a video recording, an audio recording, texts, and a lace embroidery. On the other hand, these medialities mediate and represent a range of other medialities: several tombstones (sculpture), a diary (in Catrall's reading), the photograph of the contents of the coffin (specified also in a verbal list exhibited on the wall resembling an epitaph) is representing by way of synecdoche *literature* (the Proust volume), *music* (the Mozart CD in the coffin), *philosophy* (the Leibniz volume in the coffin), and *fashion* (the scarf and the dress and shoes).

The medialities could also be further ordered into groups according to different criteria and following different theoretical interests and positions, for instance by means of a relatively simple and conventional division into predominantly visual media or audio-visual media or media focused on verbal text. This, however, is not necessary for our argument, since the purpose of naming and listing all the medialities of the exhibition is of course not to produce the list in itself, but to acknowledge and truly perceive the widespread presence of medialities in the show. The many medialities of the exhibition demonstrate, consciously or unconsciously, that Calle's thematic requires the widest possible array of medialities.

In other words: what interests us is neither the list in itself nor the multiple presence of medialities. It is, instead, the *function* as well as the artistic and existential *meaning* produced by this conspicuous presence of different medialities. As mentioned from the outset: the core of the exhibition establishes a dichotomy between two strongly related but nevertheless distinctly different systems related to two thematic dimensions. We have the conventional

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<sup>15</sup> "Qualified media" in Lars Elleström's terminology roughly equates conventional art forms. See Elleström, ed., *Media Borders*. "Remediation" is here simply referring to medialities being mediated once again; thus the term does not refer to Bolter and Grusin's influential concept of remediation in Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).

thematic, or content, established early on as the question of *souci* (loss, sorrow, absence—death), but we also find that there is a “formal” thematic in the exhibition, that seems to consist of multiplicity, perspectivism, irony, and heterogeneous medialities. We will argue that *Rachel, Monique* exhibits a systematic “testing” and opposing and questioning of how the different medialities opposed to each other create a “formal content” of its own. The goal of the following discussion will consequently be to establish the relations between the explicit conventional content and the implicit “formal” content.

### Formal Content in *Rachel, Monique*

The internally conflictual presence of medialities in *Rachel, Monique* produces two closely related impressions, we believe. The mere presence tends, on the one hand, to dominate the message of the exhibition—and on the other hand the medialities seem to exhibit a certain kind of systematization. In other words, the medialities dominate the visitors’ experience of the show, but they dominate in an almost systematic, structured way.

Conventionally, the meaning and the function of such medial plurality is located in one of three different positions: either it is located in the position of the exhibition or it is seen from the viewpoint of the visitor or that of Sophie Calle. That is, from the receiver or sender or the work in the basic communicative model, so to speak. We want to avoid this pragmatic but also limiting and rather destructive division of the meaning production taking place through the artwork to either *sender* or *work* or *receiver* by employing the aesthetic model sketched by the early Bakhtin, namely, what we have already introduced as the aesthetic object.

Thune develops this model in her thesis about Bakhtin’s aesthetic object, where she defines both:

contemplating subjects [as being] engaged from their respective ethical-epistemological situated positions. From these situated positions the artist and the contemplator co-produce meaning related to contemplation of the external work, that is, they co-produce the

content of the aesthetic object. [...] the artist creates a form-bound, external work where meaning and ideas are represented almost statically through compositional forms. The meaning and ideas represented develop through the co-creation of architectonic forms.<sup>16</sup>

While conventional communication models tend to focus on analyzing *either* semiotic content *or* formed material *from* sender *to* receiver—and often with the idea of communication as a finalizable process where a more or less static content is communicated—the model sketched by Bakhtin<sup>17</sup> enables us to systematically approach the elements of form and content and complex ethical-epistemological situated positions of the sender, the receiver, and the work of art, and simultaneously look upon these as a complex constellation where meaning is dynamically and dialogically produced.

Following this model we interpret the myriad presence of media in *Rachel, Monique* not as a *pêle-mêle* of diverse medialities for the sake of difference and plurality itself, but rather as a necessary strategy following from the fact that the work aims to represent something that is in essence more or less unrepresentable. What may look like an uncommitted artistic experimentation with forms and medialities, should in our opinion be interpreted as a necessarily non-consummated attempt to track the incomprehensible, the absent presence, the fact of death and the resulting feelings of absence, loss, and grief.

These remarks are necessarily very general, almost abstract, but by way of Bakhtin's idea of the aesthetic object it becomes possible to narrow down slightly the thematics of the work.

### ***Rachel, Monique* as a Bakhtinian Aesthetic Object**

In Thune's model of Bakhtin's aesthetic object, the concept of situated positions is central and we need this terminology in order to be able to approach the question of the meaning of the exhibition. This necessitates a few terminological clarifications. The artist creator, following this model, occupies a given situated position at the moment of creation of the external work. The

<sup>16</sup> Thune, *Mikhail Bakhtin's Aesthetic Object*, 41.

<sup>17</sup> Thune, *Mikhail Bakhtin's Aesthetic Object*, 27–68.

visitor, on the other side, occupies another situated position at the moment s/he relates to the external work and makes sense of it. Finally, the external work (which in this case amounts to all the works adding up to the exhibition) occupies a third given complex situated position when the artist and the visitor create and relate to it.

Within the external work—in our case the exhibition—the different works of art represent different situated positions that internally stand in dynamic relations to one another. For our purposes here, the interesting situated positions of *Rachel, Monique* are the different medialities and how they are situated in relation to one another within each and every work, and within the exhibition as a whole. Meaning production in the aesthetic object takes place as the visitor, from her/his situated position, relates to and intellectually and bodily-emotionally interprets the situated positions of the external work—in our case *Rachel, Monique* or any of the works constituting it. The dynamic meaning production taking place between the artist creator and the visitor in contemplation of any of these external works is the aesthetic object. One may thus approach Sophie Calle's exhibition *Rachel, Monique* and the three major and the other less dominant works of which it is constituted, as aesthetic objects on a number of levels.

Corresponding to the main external work, the main aesthetic object is *Rachel, Monique*, the exhibition, as a whole. In this case the artist creator is of course Sophie Calle but also the visitors experience the exhibition from their respective situated positions. The external work *Rachel, Monique* may be described as an attempt to capture Monique Sindler's life and death in a greater perspective of living and dying, and the aesthetic object—that is; the meaning we produce in contemplating this external object—may be summarized as *Monique Sindler remembered*.

When it comes to the movie, "Couldn't capture death," one of the three major works of the exhibition, the artist creator is still Sophie Calle and the visitor whoever sees this death bed film, making sense of it from their situated positions at any given time. The external work is an attempt to capture Monique Sindler's death in the moment it occurs, and its aesthetic object may thus be summarized as *Monique Sindler dying*.

In case of the audio of Monique Sindler's diaries read out loud by Kim Cattrall, the artist creator may still be seen as Sophie Calle, but also as Kim Cattrall (producing the reading from Monique Sindler's diaries) or even as Monique Sindler herself having produced the read text. One therefore questions the situated position(s) of the artist creator, as it involves boundaries between several situated positions at different times; Kim Cattrall and Sophie Calle's roles here are as mediating instances to purvey Monique Sindler's written utterances. Sophie Calle offers her dead mother, Monique Sindler, the position of a living situated position and an active utterer, so that the external work is an attempt to re-present Monique Sindler's life and living after her death. The visitor is whoever listens to the audio recordings from their, at any given time, situated positions. In this context, the aesthetic object of the reading aloud of the diaries may be summarized as *Monique Sindler living*.

Regarding the photo of Monique Sindler's coffin, the artist creator is Sophie Calle and the perceiver (in this specific analysis we call this the visitor) is whoever contemplates the coffin text and/or the photograph of the coffin from their, at any given time, situated positions. The external work "the coffin," is an attempt of through a pile of qualified medialities capturing Monique Sindler's life, or—alternatively—Sophie Calle's story of Monique Sindler's life, after her death, and its aesthetic object may in the following be summarized as *Monique Sindler's life*.

In the remaining works of the exhibition, the artist creator remains Sophie Calle and the visitor, whoever contemplates any single of these subworks from their, at any given time, situated positions. The external subworks themselves represent several independent medially situated positions that in different constellations represent other more complex medially situated positions. It is our opinion that the composition and mixture of these medialities and the boundaries between them are fundamental to what we see as Sophie Calle's attempt to capture the process of dying as the ungraspable but nevertheless indisputable boundary between life and death. The aesthetic object of these less dominant external works may be summarized as exactly different variations of *the process of dying marking ungraspable boundaries between life and death*.

## Conclusion

The immediate impetus for writing this text was our slightly confusing experience of Sophie Calle's *Rachel, Monique*: the feeling of calm solemnity of the church space that was met with the complex medial mixture of the show. Another, slightly confusing—not to say disturbing—feeling was created in the exhibitions' confrontation of deeply private material that was represented. We decided to approach the exhibition by way of two theoretical frameworks: the aesthetic philosophy of Bakhtin combined with a more general media theoretical approach, and it is this combination that we wish to lift forth as a fruitful means of sharpening the tools that intermediality can provide for researchers in meetings with aesthetic objects. Bakhtin's theory helped us establish a fundamental understanding of the basic nature of the objects of the art exhibition, while the mediality approach gave us the analytical tools to describe and distinguish between the different aspects of the rich exhibition.

Beginning with the role of the artist in this composite work, our description and analysis shows that through *Rachel, Monique*—as was also the case with *Prenez soin de vous*—Sophie Calle aesthetically processes and thus transforms highly personal and private material, giving it general relevance by turning it into art. Sophie Calle starts off by setting up severe dichotomies, for instance between the private and the public, then only to permit the excessively public experience of this exhibition to become inherently private.

Characteristic in this exhibition, and this is typical for Calle's entire work (and of course of much of what is going on in contemporary art), is that it does away with the conventional, often romantic, idea of the artist as an autonomous creative instance behind the work of art. The exhibited works here are rather “found” or recorded, and often consists of conventionally non-aesthetic objects, most of which in another setting would primarily have pragmatic or to some extent symbolic functions: The coffin's list (or *Wunderkammer*-like form), the stable camera (ref. Warhol's experiment with putting a camera in front of the Empire State building), not to forget the reading of Monique Sindler's diaries, that in their written form were not created by Sophie Calle, but

simply found, selected, and adapted. Calle's creative input is to gather and put on display rather than creating *ex nihilo*, and she hides herself behind her findings while at the same time relating every single detail to a specific, personally related life situation. As mentioned already, Monique Sindler was upset that her daughter didn't let her be part of any of her earlier artworks. "Finally"—as it turns out—when Sophie's mother is on her deathbed, Sophie Calle starts a long process where the mother becomes the center of several projects through many years.

Why did this happen just then? Why didn't Sophie try to grasp the relation to her mother while she was alive? Were they too close—or too distant, too different—or too much alike? These psychological questions are of course out of reach of our analysis, but it seems to be the case that only when her mother is vanishing, can Sophie get close to her. Only at the threshold between life and death are the borders between mother and daughter, a parental intimacy and distance, being explicitly worked into Calle's personal artistic production. Only in her death, as an object, can Sophie's mother become a subject for Sophie's art.

Unsurprisingly, we found that the content thematized in *Rachel*, *Monique* is grief and loss and the absent presence of death. Without ever stating directly that Sophie Calle is in grief or that she misses her mother, the meticulousness and detailed care, her *souci*, by which the exhibition gives us an impression of her mother, nevertheless demonstrates the magnitude of the loss. We have suggested that this overarching theme of grief and loss branch into differentiated emotional subthemes: On the level of the exhibition, the emotional content is Monique Sindler *remembered*; the main theme of the death-bed movie is Monique Sindler dying, whereas the reading aloud of her diaries deals with Monique Sindler *living*, which is also the case of all the "gifts" Sophie Calle's gives to her mother's coffin. Several of the other works rather take positions in life or in death, and negotiates the borders between them by representing death, dead people, or symbols of love and resurrection (the butterflies forming the word "*souci*"), *life*.

One could have expected an exhibition about life and death and a dying mother to be terrifying or uncomfortable. Depending upon the visitor's experienced life and situated position, it would

not be surprising if some visitors experienced such feelings or were quite simply reminded about their anxieties related to their own deaths. For the two authors of this article, from our situated positions, the dominating sensations became more about humbleness for being invited to witness a very private, caring, loving event, motivated by a wish on behalf of Sophie Calle to share, to keep alive, and to understand. We ask ourselves whether *sharing* and *reworking* existentially devastating experiences such as a parent's or another close person's death makes it possible to grasp a little more of what is ungraspable in our living, ongoing lives, always on the threshold of the unknown.

The formal setting is at least as engaging and demanding as the thematics, and by employing a relatively broad concept of mediality we have endeavored to describe a formal system underlying the exhibition. From a formal point of view, our initial observation was the quite overwhelming presence of different medialities of the show. However, our main argument concerning this medial multiplicity has been centered around our conviction that the variety of different medialities is not a mere coincidence, nor should it be understood as a superficial multiplicity of forms. Instead, it is our belief that the abundance of medialities mimics the thematic content of the exhibition.

The ungraspable nature of death, or to be more precise: the indefinability of the threshold dividing life from death (and despite the fact that at least the outer borders of this very moment is "caught" on film), seems to have forced Sophie Calle to orchestrate a number of found or recorded materials in several different medialities. The number of medialities reflects the impossibility of representing death, or perhaps the exact moment of death (if such a moment exists), and thus the thematic content of the exhibition is beautifully, and necessarily, represented by way of the formal complexity of the show.

Sophie Calle, in a manner typical for most of her work, builds dichotomies, only to make them collapse, and consequently the meaning inherent in *Rachel*, *Monique* as polyphonic, ungraspable, and dynamic. In a way, this relation between structure and collapse of structure corresponds to a tension in our own methodology in this investigation: from a rather narrow point of departure, with

an indeed very structural approach to trying to grasp a meeting with a work of art as a living aesthetic experience. As we were well aware of before we began thinking about this work, the aesthetic object exceeds the limits inherent in any structured analytical framework. But nevertheless we find this Bakhtinian intermedial framework apt to include the subjective experience of art as the core of aesthetic meaning production, as well as permitting us to understand some of the formal intermedial aspects at play in the work.

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