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Forced Entertainment's Adaptation of Sophie Calle's *Exquisite Pain*

The dramatic form of *Exquisite Pain* (2005), a recent production by the leading British performance group Forced Entertainment, can be regarded as non-standard in several respects. First of all, the performances of Forced Entertainment are so different from 'conventional' plays that they have been championed as an example of post-dramatic theatre. Since theatre and drama have at all times tested the limits of dramatic rules and conventions, this label is more suited to emphasise that post-dramatic theatre goes beyond an Aristotelian model of action-centred, plot-driven drama than to suggest a categorical break with drama in general. As earlier shows of Forced Entertainment, *Exquisite Pain* once again does not rely on a plot-driven structure; instead, as I attempt to show in the following, it can be described as a story-driven performance. Drawing on trauma theory, this essay will explore the gradual transition from 'unstory' to story in *Exquisite Pain*. The performance exhibits a second unusual feature: In contrast to all previous works of Forced Entertainment, it was not devised from scratch by the company's artistic director Tim Etchells and the company members, but adapts an already existing text in a surprisingly cautious manner. This text is part of a multi-media installation by the French conceptual artist Sophie Calle, entitled *Doleur exquise (Exquisite Pain)*. Therefore, Forced Entertainment's *Exquisite Pain* is remarkable in yet another respect, since it transforms a museum exhibit into a theatrical event – in times of abounding novel and film adaptations in the theatre, this is still an uncommon form

of theatrical adaptation. Paying particular attention to questions of media transfer, I will in the following paragraphs first analyse the installation before taking a closer look at its adaptation by Forced Entertainment.

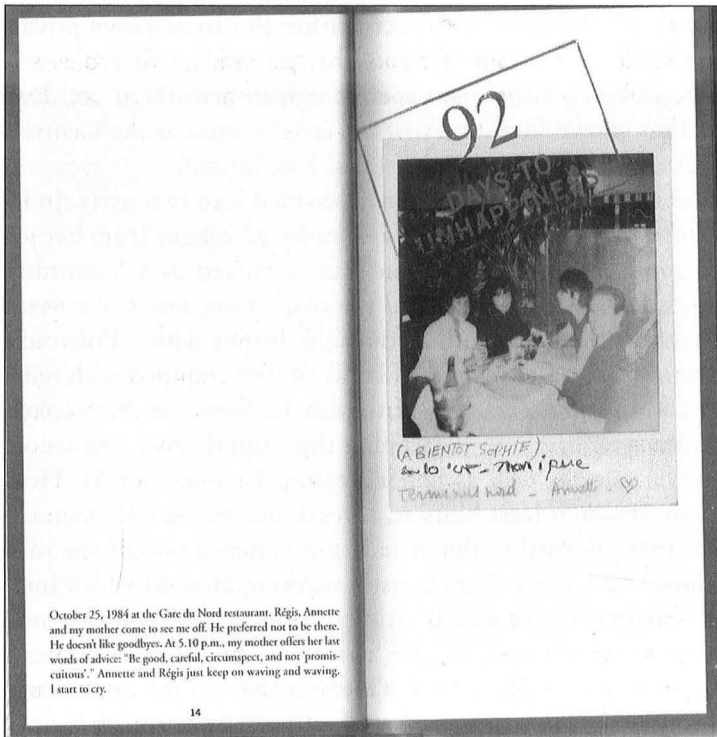
Sophie Calle has become famous for her innovative projects which blur the boundary between fact and fiction, sometimes in collaboration with writers such as Paul Auster in the project *Doubles-jeux* (*Double Game*). Using real-life experiences and their ‘bodies of evidence’ – for example, photographs, diary entries or interviews – not only as inspiration, but also as material for her art, Calle elicits the artful from everyday life or, vice versa, regulates her experiences according to her artistic principles.¹ For example, in her famous project *La filature* (*The Shadow*) she asked her mother to hire a private detective who followed Calle, unaware of the fact that she knew of his presence. Eventually, she displayed the detective’s photographs and his report together with notes she took during the surveillance. With this project and throughout her career, she has developed a specific “genre which is neither ‘auto-fiction’ nor photo novel, but rather [offers] innovative criss-crossings of factual narratives with fictional overtones, accompanied by photographic images” (Macel 21; cf. also Franzen, Gratton). Calle herself prefers the label ‘narrative artist’ (cf. Gratton 157, Heinrich 17) and, given the importance of writing and storytelling for her projects, this seems an appropriate term.² Not only do oral narration and written documents play an eminent role in her works of art, but many of her projects are also turned into books that come closer to illustrated novels than to exhibition catalogues.³ Accordingly, Forced Entertainment became first inter-

¹ Cf. Calle’s comment that obedience plays an important role in her projects, since she has to follow the rules which she determined in advance (qtd. in Stech 212).

² Stech notes that Calle preferred teaching literature to arts at the Ecole des Beaux Arts (211).

³ The importance of words and writing was maybe most striking in Calle’s project *Fantômes* (*Ghosts*), in which descriptions by the museum staff replaced the paintings that had been displayed. In an interview Calle claims to be searching for a writer who can offer her a scenario she can enact – Paul Auster had denied Calle’s invitation to do so: “Eines Tages würde ich gern einem Buch gehorchen, das eine

ested in *Doleur exquise (Exquisite Pain)* when reading Calle's book rather than seeing the installation.

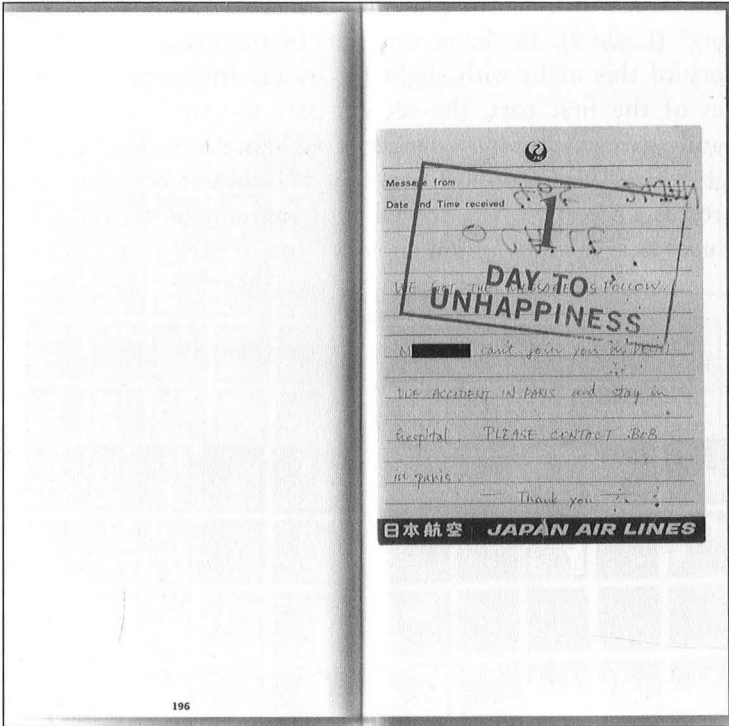


In *Exquisite Pain*, Calle deals with a particularly painful experience of her early thirties. At that time she was living with M., her father's friend, whom she, if we can trust her memories, had been in love with since she was a small girl. When she was granted a scholarship to travel through Japan for three months, her lover warned her that he would not remain faithful for such a long time span. Calle nevertheless entered on her

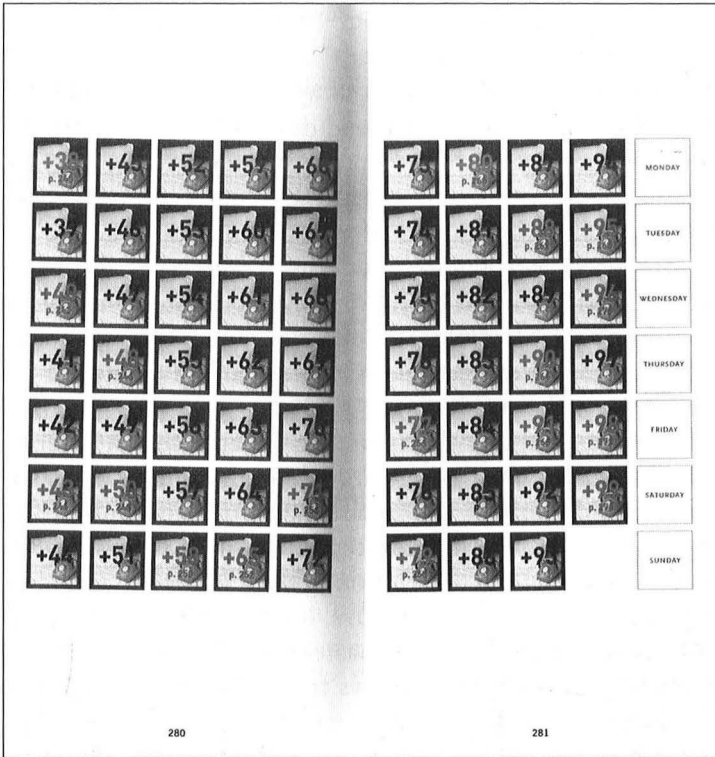
Vorlage für mein Leben bildet, aber diesmal würde ich absoluten Gehorsam üben. Ich würde Teil der Heldin des Buches" [One day, I would like to obey a book which offers a model for my life, but this time I would be absolutely devoted. I would become a part of the heroine of this book] (qtd. in Stech 218).

artistic project, while looking forward to their reunion, planned for January 1985 in New Delhi. When she finally arrived, however, she had to learn that M. had abandoned her for another woman. Unusual for Calle's work which tends to protect neither the artist's own privacy nor that of friends and strangers, it took her more than fifteen years until she finally dared to turn this experience into a work of art. *Exquisite Pain* was first shown in a survey of the artist's work at the Centre Pompidou in 2003, entitled *M'as-tu vue (Did You See Me)*.

The installation of *Exquisite Pain* is divided into two parts. In its first part, "Before Unhappiness," Calle assembles 92 tokens from her journey to Japan and her work there, which are arranged as a 'countdown to unhappiness.' The series of framed photos, letters that Calle wrote and received, train tickets, and other souvenirs begins with a Polaroid taken during her last evening in Paris, which is rubber-stamped with red ink as "92 days to unhappiness" (cf. illustration 1). Some of these tokens are accompanied by a brief text explaining their significance and recounting Calle's travel tales as well as her increasing yearning for M. However, she also reports, or at least hints at, several love affairs with men she met on her journey. Formally, the installation is hence one of the more recent examples of Calle's characteristic working method which interconnects real-life experience and artistic creation as well as image and text. Through this interconnection, the 'narrative artist' invites audiences to identify the 'narrator' or persona as it emerges from the installation with Calle as its creator; this congruence of author and narrator (or of artist and persona) is, however, unsettled by various devices. When I speak of 'Calle' in the context of this installation and its theatrical adaptation, I am referring to the artist's persona as it is evoked in *Exquisite Pain*.



The final picture of the installation's first part and of the book that accompanied it, stamped "1 day to unhappiness," displays the telegram Calle received on her arrival at New Delhi airport. The telegram says: "M. can't join you in Delhi due accident in Paris and stay in hospital. Please contact Bob in Paris. Thank you" (cf. illustration 2). In the installation's second part, entitled "After Unhappiness," Calle attempts to come to terms with this experience of having been abandoned. She does so by telling and retelling the story of her arrival in New Delhi and the lonely night she spent at the hotel room, anxious that M. had had a serious accident. When she finally reached him via phone, she learnt that he had only been in hospital because of an infected finger and that the actual reason for the cancellation of his flight was that he had met another woman. It is this experience which causes Calle's eponymous exquisite pain, which both the installation and the publication that accompanied



Much in the same vein as the first part of the installation, Calle places the versions of her story beneath these images; this time, however, they are not written on paper but stitched on linen. In this respect, the German title of the installation, *Stechender Schmerz*, is even more appropriate.⁴ Calle explains that the incessant retelling of the story helped her to overcome her pain:

[W]henver people asked me about the trip, I chose to skip the Far East bit and tell them about my suffering instead. In return I started asking both friends and chance encounters: – “When did you suffer most?” I decided to continue such exchanges until I had got over my pain by comparing it with other people’s, or had worn out my own story through sheer repetition. The method proved radi-

⁴ The exhibition was shown in Berlin’s Martin-Gropius-Bau in winter 2004.

cally effective. In three months I had cured myself. [...] [T]he exorcism had worked [...]. (202f)

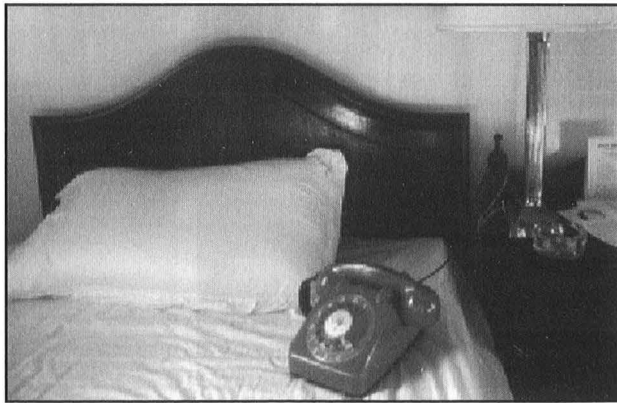
Here she describes a similar pattern of appropriation via repetition and narration to that which Sigmund Freud developed in his theory of traumatisation.⁵ Freud argues that traumatic repetition compulsion, which makes the subject reproduce aspects of the trauma, generally entails two different but intersecting modes of repetition, namely acting out and working through. According to Freud, the acting out of the traumatisation enables the traumatised subject to develop belatedly the affect that was not aroused by the traumatic experience, because a trauma is so overwhelming that it does not allow intellectual and emotional processing at the time (cf. “Remembering,” “Erinnern”).

While re-enactments of the traumatic experience can offer its ‘experiencing’ in the sense of ‘going through it emotionally,’ they can also be unconscious attempts to master the traumatic experience, to work it through. In contrast to the mimetic reproduction of the trauma which is characteristic of acting out, its working through implies a modification of the reproduction. In a creative move, it turns ‘pathology’ into a semi-conscious act which attempts the mastery of the traumatisation. Thus, paradoxically, working through allows for a gradual liberation from the repetition compulsion through the very mechanism of repeating, albeit repeating in a slightly different manner. According to Freud and Breuer’s theory, the entire process of working through requires both repeating and remembering in a verbal form (Laplanche and Pontalis 488f), and, of course, their idea of a talking cure is based on this healing potential of speech and narration. Freud and Breuer assume that the affective recollection and acknowledgement through verbalisation can relieve the trauma’s symptoms by deactivating its harmful impact: “the psychotherapeutic procedure which we have described [...] brings to an end the operative force of the idea which was not abreacted in the first instance, by allowing its strangulated affect to find a way out through speech”

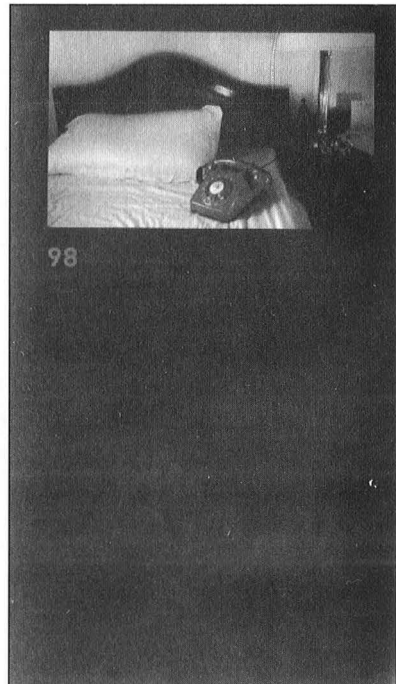
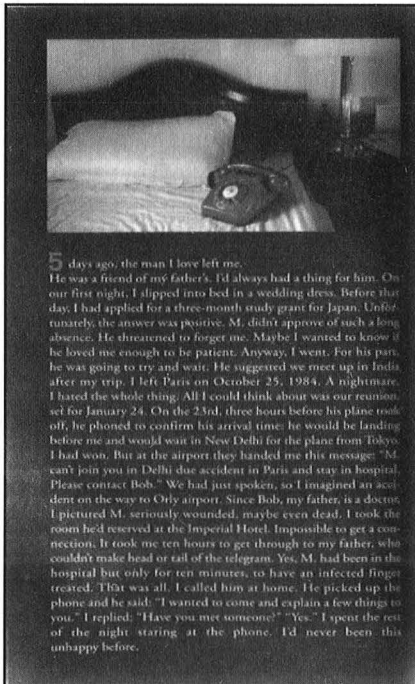
⁵ Calle mentions this link to Freud’s therapy in an interview: “Das ist wie auf Freuds Diwan, sprechen, sprechen, um es auszuscheiden” [It is like on Freud’s couch: talking, talking in order to eliminate it] (qtd. in Stech 220).

(*Studies* 17; cf. *Studien* 97). They specify that in order to secure the success of their cathartic method, “the patient [should] describe [...] that event in the greatest possible detail and [...] put the affect into words” (*Studies* 6; cf. *Studien* 85).

Calle’s installation (and its adaptation by Forced Entertainment) displays both features of traumatic repetition compulsion. Acting out her trauma, Calle excessively repeats the traumatic moment of having been abandoned. In that regard, the red telephone seems to serve as a trigger signal, which arouses the sensual reality of the night in the hotel room and allows for the reliving of the night as if in a flashback. Accordingly, the installation’s turning point, the passage from Part I to Part II, offers a detailed re-creation of the hotel room, not merely as an image but as a life-size reconstruction. Thus, spectators can participate in the mimesis of the trauma, in the re-creation of the traumatic moment in greatest detail possible. As a part of this mimetic re-creation, Calle’s stories initially quote and paraphrase the telegram text as well as the telephone communication without interpreting them: “But at the airport they handed me this message: ‘M. can’t join you [...].’ [...] He picked up the phone and said: ‘I wanted to come and explain a few things to you.’ I replied: ‘Have you met someone?’ ‘Yes-’ I spent the night staring at the phone. I’d never been this unhappy before” (204). One day later, she repeats almost verbatim: “As I was boarding they handed me this message: ‘M. can’t join you [...].’ [...]. As soon as he picked up the phone I knew it was over: ‘I wanted to come and explain a few things to you.’ ‘Have you met another woman?’ ‘Yes.’ [...] I sat on my bed for hours, staring at the phone” (206). In the same manner, the subsequent entries repeat parts of the telegram and phone call and dwell on Calle’s paralysed fascination with the telephone.



The fact that Calle begins to talk about her experience only five days after this incident and that she stares at the phone, seemingly unable to come to terms with the phone call, indicates that the experience, typical of a trauma, is so overwhelming that it cannot be grasped emotionally and intellectually at the time of occurrence. Instead, it becomes – in Freud’s and Breuer’s words – a ‘strangled affect’ and resists being accounted for in a coherent way after the event. The traumatic event is not possessed knowledge which could be narrated; on the contrary, it itself possesses the subject (cf. Caruth 5). Calle’s obsession with the event is highlighted by the 35 images of the red tele-phone set up in a row. The table of contents (reproduced above) makes this fixation even more obvious, as it contrasts Calle’s diversified travel pictures and tokens with the monotonous, obsessive repetition of the same moment (cf. illustration 5). This visual fixation is reflected by the formulaic beginning of all entries ‘after unhappiness’: “X days ago, the man I love left me.” Likewise, their ending always mentions the red telephone.



Complementarily to these features of acting out, the installation also displays aspects of working through. It demonstrates the diminution of the pain in the course of its narration and renarration, since the thread that Calle uses, initially white on black linen, becomes greyer and greyer until it is eventually black, and thus barely visible on the black surface. Her story has worn out its impact; it has become less and less significant (cf. illustrations 6 and 7).

In addition, the narration becomes increasingly dense. The first image is accompanied by a full-page report of pain, which includes many details of Calle's arrival and the night in the hotel room. Moreover, it provides background information such as when and where Calle saw M. for the first time ("He was a friend of my father's. I'd always had a thing for him"; 204). The second report likewise offers a brief version of their love story from its very beginning ("I used to dream about him as a little girl. He was so handsome. At thirty I managed to seduce him. For our first night I wore a wedding dress"; 206) and recounts the events of the night in Delhi, but the text is already one line shorter than the first story. Fifteen days after the night in the hotel room, Calle becomes aware of the cathartic aim of her project of repetition: "I hated that accursed journey. But I don't want to talk about it. He's the one I want to talk about. Until I'm up to here with him. Disgusted. He's the one I have to get rid of" (218). Further on she acknowledges that narration and plot did not only play a decisive role in her dealing with the aftermath of the separation, but had also shaped her anticipation of the reunion and thus might have contributed to the causation of her exquisite pain: "I had wanted this love story, he let it happen. I could have spared myself this pain" (232). She asks herself, "Would it have hurt so bad if I hadn't spent three months building up the romantic scenario of our reunion, if there hadn't been this expectation, this excitement of the prospect of seeing him again?" (244). Thus, Calle indicates that the countdown to the reunion, the installation's first part, might not only have been the time before her unhappiness, but also a reason for it; the two parts of the installation are not only connected temporally, but also causally.

It takes her eleven stories until she can begin to liberate herself from her past. Although her present is still dominated by her fixation on the

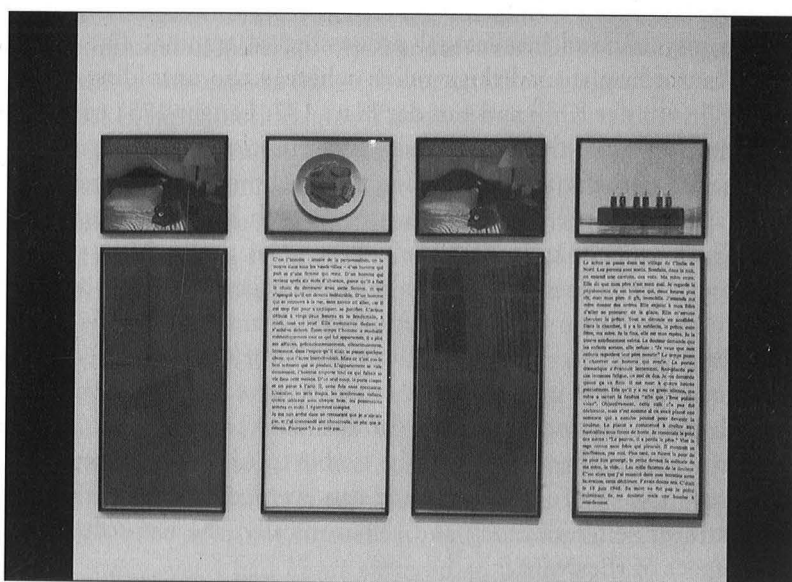
trauma, a future without M. eventually becomes possible. In her entry after 22 days, she claims that life with M. “never really suited me. Sooner or later I would have let it go. But he was quicker. He didn’t give me time to leave him first” (224). Nine days later, her story ends with, “Next time, I’ll take one who loves me” (232). Four days and one story later, she can perceive the comic potential of her incessant repetition of the events in hotel room 261 at the Imperial Hotel, New Delhi, when she acknowledges that M.’s excuse for cancelling the flight, an infected finger, is “almost comical” (234). The fact that the medical term for M.’s infection that was caused by a splinter is called “felon,” a synonym for villain, makes his affliction appear as an almost hysterical symptom that converts a psychic ailment into a physical one. Another three days later, she repeats that the infected finger was “funny,” but makes clear that this is only her impression in retrospect. Back then, “I wasn’t amused, not yet. Heartbroken, stunned, I spent the rest of the night in that room 261 of the Imperial hotel with my eyes on the red telephone” (240). Five days later, Calle begins to see that her incessant recantation is “absurd” (244) and seven days later, she is able to objectify her experience: “A banal love affair with a pathetic ending. Nothing more” (248). But also nothing less, one is tempted to add, since it takes Calle 49 more days and thirteen more stories to eventually overcome this loss. Her insight that her own story is only a variation of the ever-repeated human story of abandonment does not forestall its hurtful emotional impact: “It’s an ordinary story, yet I had never suffered so badly before” (250). She repeats this acknowledgement nineteen days later, still unable to overcome her pain (cf. 256). It is only after 91 days that she laconically concludes, “That was all. Not a lot. I’ll get over it” (266). The next entry is the first to break with the ritualistic pattern of repetition, since it does not open with the “fetish-sentence” (Bois 39) of all other beginnings: “X days ago, the man I love left me.” Instead, it abandons the confessional mode for simple summary: “It’s the same story, except that it happened 95 days ago” (267). After 98 days, Calle repeats her formulaic confession in the past tense, now speaking of “the man I *loved*” (my emphasis); she finishes her short entry with “*Enough*” (272, emphasis in the original), and, finally, the entry for the 99th day is empty, except for the photograph of the telephone and the number “99” (274).

The series of Calle's narrations displays the gradual transition from the unfolding plot to the unfolding story. The complementary aspects of the trauma's actualisation, acting out and working through, have alternatively been conceptualised in terms of 'unstory'/plot versus story.⁶ The difference between the unfolding plot, or the 'unstory,' which repeats the pain, and the unfolding story that provides relief can, as Ruth Leys suggests, alternatively be grasped through the terms mimesis and diegesis (2000). The working through/diegesis of trauma belongs to the conscious, psychic and intellectual processing of trauma. The formula that the "unfolding story brings relief, whereas the unfolding plot induces pain" (van der Kolk and van der Hart 177; Langer 175) epitomises the assumption that the intellectual and emotional processing of a trauma via its verbalisation is an effective technique of re-membering and de-fragmenting the subject's life story which has been shattered by trauma. The transformation of Calle's account of the night in the hotel room shows that it develops from a mimetic account, an unstory with direct quotes and many insignificant details, to a story. It is part of Calle's healing process that she realises the 'story-ness' of her experience, its conventional pattern of an unhappy love story: "A banal love affair with a pathetic ending" (248), "an ordinary story" (250). As she is able to objectify her experience, as she is able to transform it into a causally and temporally ordered story and can even comment on this story and its narrator self-reflexively and self-ironically, she has softened the painful impact of the event.

As part of this healing process, of the increasing ability to distil a story and to objectify it, Calle compares her own experience of utmost pain to the tales of other people. The second part of the installation not only reproduces Calle's reports but also assembles accounts by friends and strangers who shared their moments of exquisite pain with her. These stories, placed in between Calle's, are likewise accompanied by an image. Since the images often display or stand in for that which is lost (such as the lover reduced to a voice on the phone in Calle's case), they

⁶ According to Showalter (225), the term 'unstory' was first used by Lawrence Langer in *Holocaust Testimonies* (39).

often serve as fetishes of mourning (cf. Marcus 16).⁷ As Nancy Princenthal observes, the arrangement of the stories in the exhibition also forms such an image of loss: Their positioning as diptychs resembles repeated pairs of twin beds, with the two images as pillows and the texts as blankets. This impression is reinforced by the fact that the stories are stitched on sheets: a black one for Calle's story, a white one for the stories of her acquaintances (cf. illustration 8).



Although degrees of suffering may be hard to compare, the juxtaposition of these bedfellows decisively weakens the impact of Calle's own accounts. It does so for two reasons. First, the structure of the installation invites the spectators to compare each of Calle's repetitions to a new story by someone else. Due to this pattern, the fresh stories have more impact than the only slightly varied report of Calle. Second, many of the experiences are more devastating than Calle's unhappy love story, since they entail tales of suicide, severe illness and death. In this respect,

⁷ Princenthal notes that most of these photographs were taken by Calle years later, while some were contributions of the respective story's narrator.

the second meaning of the term 'exquisite pain' becomes more important; Calle's incessant repetition of her love story increasingly appears as an egocentric, narcissistic and exhibitionist mode of self-fashioning. As Willie White puts it, Calle's persona seems to "luxuriate in unhappiness" (4). This impression is reinforced towards the end of the exhibition, when one contributor refuses to make his painful memories public:

Even if I had some fresh flesh of unhappiness, I wouldn't give it to you. A few things happened in the past but decency forbids that I tell you. It would be overdoing it to turn them into a story. Some people have a gift for unhappiness. I don't. Is that because I have this system of indifference, an ironic disposition? I would have liked to have been more unhappy, then the world would have been more real to me, I'd have felt my existence more intensely. But I've never been in a state of total unhappiness. I hope one day to really suffer. To go deeper. My story hasn't happened to me yet. (233)

This account, accompanied by a pictureless frame, emphasises not only the relentless exhibitionism and arousal of voyeurism ('fresh flesh') involved in Calle's autobiographical art, but also points out that suffering results from the interaction of the severity of the event with the reaction towards it. Calle seems to have, as she highlights by the insertion of this story, an extraordinary 'gift for unhappiness' which she exploits to gain fame and to entertain her spectators.⁸ Both the artist and the audience seem to be fascinated by displays of pain because they intensify the experience and make 'the world more real.'

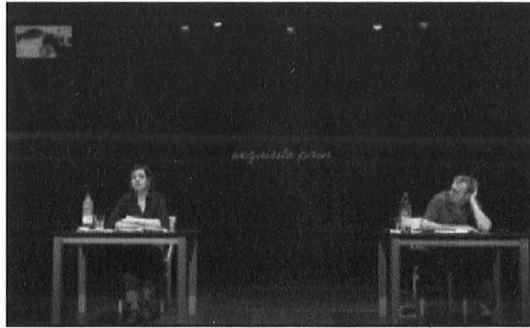
Through the comparison of her story with those of others, Calle has to concede after 90 days, "As suffering goes, nothing special. Nothing worth harping on about" (264). She thus doubly exploits the stories of others; not only does she make them public, include them into her work of art, but she also uses them to overcome her pain. As Princenthal points out: "The disequilibrium is meant to be part of her cure; in the rather ruthless economy of 'Exquisite Pain,' the suffering of many becomes balm for one." In addition to the comparison of the stories' con-

⁸ Cf. Calle's comment, "Wenn ich im Leben unglücklich bin, bildet das mein Ausgangsmaterial für die Kunst. Bin ich glücklich, behalte ich es für mich" [Being unhappy provides the material for my artistic projects. When I am happy, I keep it private] (qtd. in Stech 215).

tent, their formal differences are significant, too. In contrast to Calle's initially mimetic 'unstories,' her accounts which actualise the past situation and the pain connected to it, the other events are told in the past tense; their narrators have already succeeded in fully transforming them into stories.

The awareness of spectators that Calle stylises her experience as an 'exquisite' form of suffering also pertains to the comparison of the two parts of the installation. Having witnessed the wealth of her travel impressions in the first part, one wonders how Calle could have neglected all these memories and only told her friends (and audiences) of the one night in Delhi once she was back in France. As part of the audience, one feels slightly deprived of many interesting stories, especially since they seem to contain acts of unfaithfulness on Calle's part which are totally neglected in her reaction to M.'s confession of infidelity. In the theatrical adaptation of Calle's *Exquisite Pain*, Forced Entertainment takes Calle's above-quoted decision to "skip the Far East bit" seriously and presents only the second part of her installation.

Exquisite Pain seems to offer particularly suitable material for Forced Entertainment, because the installation contains many of the stylistic and thematic concerns which have become characteristic for the work of the collective, such as storytelling and the exchange of stories, a fascination with the confessional and the device of repetition. Furthermore, the mood of Calle's text agrees with the melancholic atmosphere of Forced Entertainment performances which is characterised by a "language of loss" (cf. Malzacher and Helmer 18). Stylistically, *Exquisite Pain* nonetheless departs from previous performances of the group, as the show is not characterised by spectacular imagery, simultaneous action, direct audience addresses and involvement, an unusual treatment of the theatre space or the like, but reduces theatre to an absolute minimum. A female and a male performer alternately read out Calle's stories and those of the other contributors. They do so in minimalist scenery, consisting only of a blue neon writing "exquisite pain," two tables with chairs and two monitors behind them, which display the images that accompany the stories. The performers (in the version I saw, Claire Marshall and Robin Arthur) wear everyday clothes, and there are no lighting or sound effects (cf. illustration 9).



In contrast to visiting the installation, the audience of Forced Entertainment's performance cannot browse Calle's stories and skip the repetitive parts; the show "does not allow short cuts" (Rieger 2). Whereas the *Raumkunst* of Calle's exhibition allows busy spectators to transform the visual experience into mere information (cf. Lehmann, *Postdramatisches Theater* 341), the aspect of *Zeitkunst* in the theatrical performance forces audiences to listen carefully to each story. Audiences have to witness the full circle of Calle's talking cure – rather than being able to pick up only the thrilling or entertaining details from the tablets in the installation, they have to experience the length and slow development of each narration. This increases the awareness for both the 'sheer repetition' envisioned by Calle and the slight differences between the stories, which are gradually transformed from a mimetic plot to a diegetic story. Accordingly, White's portrayal of the reception of the audience in the theatre resembles a job description of a psychoanalyst:

As an audience member you become involved and strangely complicit in the woman's storytelling. Again and again you run through the script from the last version in your head, comparing it to the words you are hearing spoken, looking for the detail that will make sense of her unhappiness and how it came about. (4)

Thus, the oral narration of the stories can, on the one hand, heighten the hermeneutic pleasure involved in finding the psychological 'key' that will help explain and possibly cure Calle's suffering. On the other hand, the utmost concentration on the spoken word and the incessant repetition of Calle's story for more than two and a half hours can also transgress the border of the audience's interest; in the performance I saw, there was already laughter during the third entry and clapping when the

actress read the entry after forty days faster and with bored distance. These reactions indicate how ambivalent the theatrical device of repetition is. While it initially raises the audience's awareness and concentration and can have a comic effect, it can also, when continued, become an act of challenge or even aggression towards the audience. By denying entertainment through the stimuli of variety, diversion and change, repetitions on stage require an effort from audiences and make them aware of the (slow) passing of time; they effect, as Hans-Thies Lehmann puts it, "a crystallization of time" (*Postdramatic Theatre* 156).⁹

Given the minimalist and concentrated staging of Calle's text, the few onstage actions gain immense importance. This concerns, for example, the relationship of Calle's stories and those of others. The auditory, subsequent reception of the stories in real time reinforce the contrast between Calle's obsessive love story and the often more drastic other stories, especially since the performers listen to each other and in a few moments comment non-verbally on each other's stories: Every gaze and every guarded smile indicate how their stories affect each other or fail to do so. Thus, the performance re-creates the alleged origin of the installation (Calle talking to others) in a more experiential manner than the tablets in the exhibition; it does so, however, in a rather unemotional and detached manner.

A second example regards the issues of authenticity and fictionality of Calle's allegedly biographical art. When the actress reading Calle's texts at one point (reading the entry 28 days after the break-up) turns to the monitor behind her and looks at the photo of the red telephone, one wonders whether she has become aware of the artistic potential of her suffering or whether she is checking on the performance of suffering that she is reproducing for artistic means. This doubt of reliability,

⁹ Karen Jürs-Munby's translation offers a shortened version of Lehmann's *Postdramatisches Theater*. My argument draws on the following observations of the German original: "Abgewiesen wird in der aggressiven Repetition das Bedürfnis nach oberflächlicher Unterhaltung durch passiven Konsum von Reizen. Statt Abwechslung, die die Zeit totschießt, Anstrengung des Sehens, die Zeit fühlbar macht. [...] Bei der Repetition findet [...] eine Zeit-Kristallisierung statt, eine mehr oder weniger subtile Verdichtung und Verneinung des Zeitlaufs selbst" (335f).

which already concerns Calle's persona as it comes to the fore in the installation, is thus transferred to the stage performance. It also affects the perception of the other stories: Looking at the photographs (again, audiences are forced to contemplate the accompanying images that are shown on monitors for a longer time than they probably would do when walking through the installation) and hearing the stories, the significance of the motifs only gradually becomes clear. For example, the story after Calle's fifteenth entry relates the death of a grandfather, accompanied by an image of two screws, one with a broken head. Towards the end of the story, the narrator informs us that the heads of the screws that closed the coffin had to be broken off "so that no one could ever open it again. A quick, decisive act. Like saying: I accept. Worse than the last look" (219). In the meantime, one searches for the connection of word and image and wonders whether the image authenticates the story as body of evidence or whether it is the other way around, as the narrator, or possibly even Calle herself, may have invented a story to accompany the photograph.¹⁰

Regarding the unreliable and playful pose of the artist's persona, the teasing title of Calle's exhibition *Did you see me?* is also a question raised by Forced Entertainment. After having seen the performance, we do not know Calle any better. Neither has the company included text passages that would explain, justify, or ridicule Calle's behaviour and thus create a round character, nor does the acting fill the gaps or soothe the contradictions of Calle's persona as emerging from the installation. Instead, almost with the detachment of a newsreader, the actress presents the stories without creating a psychological character.¹¹

¹⁰ This blurring has also been typical of the devised performances that the company staged before *Exquisite Pain*; as Etchells stresses in various interviews, "the borders between the real and the unreal are constantly being eroded" ("Dirty Work" 45) in contemporary society, and therefore the differentiation between "the real and the playful" (*Fragments* 60) cannot be stable in their performances either.

¹¹ Again, this technique agrees with the company's earlier work, which understood the self as "no more (and no less) than the meeting-point of the language that flows into and flows out of me [i.e., the self]" (Etchells, *Fragments* 102).

The decision to explore traumatisaion beyond the context of a coherent plot and psychological character analysis differentiates *Exquisite Pain* from the majority of contemporary plays and performances dealing with traumatisaion.¹² Forced Entertainment is interested in the principal mechanisms of traumatisaion and the idea of a talking cure rather than in their potential individual impacts on a character's psyche and biography. Both thematically and stylistically, the performance is preoccupied with discerning an essence, with laying bare a core, to the point of abstraction. Accordingly, Tim Etchells describes *Exquisite Pain* as a methodical scrutiny, as the distillation of a "mathematical and psychological essence" ("A Note on *Exquisite Pain*" 1). He perceives the attempt at utmost reduction as a continual development rather than a break with earlier shows of Forced Entertainment, since their more recent projects such as *The Voices* (2003) abandoned the earlier "mega-mix method" of 1990s productions like *Marina & Lee*, *Emanuelle Enchanted* and *Club of No Regrets* in favour of "a more focused approach; taking one thing, one language, one element, and then pursuing it to its ultimate end logic" (qtd. in Heathfield 78).

The performance comments on this stylistic and thematic concentration on 'one thing,' namely on story-making in the context of trauma. The installation's self-reflexive mode of narration discussed above, which increasingly acknowledges the significance of storytelling and narrative clichés for the trauma's occurrence and its cure, is accompanied on stage by moments of theatrical self-awareness. Through these metatheatrical comments, the performance reflects on its potential for a progressing action with almost melodramatic moments of emotional climax and, at the same time, on its refusal to stage such conventions. Thus, Calle begins to imagine her night in the hotel room as a highly emotional "scene:" "88 days ago, the man I love left me. The scene was played out on January 25, 1985" (262). Eight days later, she transforms her experience into a combination of an author's note to a play and a brief review, which comments on the lack of dramatic quality:

¹² For an analysis of plot-driven, psychologically realist plays dealing with issues of traumatisaion, see my reflections on 'Trauma Drama' in Wald 2006 and 2007.

96 days ago, the man I love left me.

Time: January 25, 1985, at two in the morning.

Place: room 261 of the Imperial Hotel in New Delhi.

Action: break-up over the phone.

Distinguishing mark: the hero's infected finger.

Title of the work: The Felon.

The rule of the three unities was observed, but the lines were poor, the ending borched and the plot banal. (270)

The subsequent story of an anonymous contributor employs likewise a theatrical metaphor to describe his sense of alienation and of loneliness, which resembles the atmosphere and plot of a farce:

It's the story – no need for names here, it's the staple fodder of farce – of a man who leaves and a woman who is left behind. [...] The action begins at ten in the morning and is all over by noon the next day. It starts indoors and ends outdoors. In between, the man has methodically packed everything that belongs to him, [...] hoping that something will happen, that she will say something. But the scenario doesn't pan out as desired. [...] Suddenly, the door slams and we are in Act II. This time, there's no audience. [...] I am totally lost. (271)

While these straightforward remarks envision a (deficient) form of plot-driven drama, be it melodramatically serious or farcical, other parts of the stories adopt a metatheatrical meaning only in performance. These instances seem to comment on the challenges inherent in a theatre which abandons progressive action as well as psychologically realistic characterisation and acting. Thus, one wonders whether one of the stories, the account of a suicidal youth who waits in vain for his lover, does not apply to the performance as well; whether the incessant repetition of Calle's stories are not also "a ritual of nothingness," "absolute prostration, total inactivity, a black hole" (235). When the final story describes how the "dramatic intensity slowly wanes, replaced by fatigue and a stiff back" and has its narrator "wonder when it will end" (273), the performance ironically comments on its hardly bearable pattern of repetition and lack of action.

Through its adaptation of Calle's installation, Forced Entertainment thus offers a new, reduced version of its non-standard theatre. Rather than creating theatrical equivalents of the aspects of *Raumkunst* in Calle's installation (such as the audience's chance to move freely, the detailed re-creation of the hotel room, the presentations of material

forms of memory), the performance focuses on the aspect of narration, of *Zeitkunst*, and even these narrations are rendered in a restrained, low-key manner. Etchells sees this minimalist staging as a form of faithfulness to the original:

[W]e now felt compelled, for the first time, to 'do' a text. And it was clear too that most of what we would need to 'do' would consist of exercising restraint. There is something so perfect about the declension of the *Exquisite Pain* text that our strongest desire was, and remains, to let it be there as simply as possible; unfolding, taking both its time and its toll in what may be the least theatrical but most effective way we can muster.

Given this regard for the 'perfect' original text, even at the cost of theatrical vitality, *Exquisite Pain*, notwithstanding its post-dramatic quality, shares a concern of script-based theatre in its most conservative form. It might be this unusual amalgamation of unconventional and traditional qualities that has resulted in the ambivalent reviews of *Exquisite Pain*, ranging from Lyn Gardner's immense praise for this "heaven-sent" production in *The Guardian* ("It is so pure there is something quite magnificent and quite unendurable about it") to Dorothea Marcus's much less enthusiastic review in the *taz*, who did not see more than a tiring reading in the show.¹³

While I am writing this essay, Calle's latest work, *Prenez soin de vous (Take Care of Yourself)*, is displayed at the Venezia Biennale as the official French contribution. Once again, Calle deals with the experience of being abandoned. Rather than working through the experience of splitting up via e-mail by repeating the story herself, this time Calle offers the raw material of her pain to others. She has invited more than one hundred women, among them artists and celebrities such as Jeanne Moreau, Laurie Anderson and Leslie Feist, but also experts such as a UN official in charge of women's rights, a fortune-teller and a psychoanalyst to read and analyse the e-mail. This project, which once again connects repetition and difference, unstory and storytelling, the private and the public, will possibly offer new inspiration for Forced Entertain-

¹³ "Auf der Bühne geht das Schillern verloren: Es ist eine bald ermüdende Lesung vom Unglück anderer Menschen, das uns, obwohl wir direkt dabeisitzen, schon nichts mehr angeht" (Marcus 16).

ment. Or maybe it will attract other performance groups or playwrights to explore alternative forms of adapting visual art – thus, staging conceptual art may gradually become a more diversified and a less unusual strategy of contemporary theatre.

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