

<https://blog.sculpture.org/2017/06/14/sophie-calle-bury-your-secrets-at-green-wood-cemetery/>

Sophie Calle: Bury your Secrets at Green-Wood Cemetery!

[June 14, 2017](#) By Jan Garden Castro



Photo by Leandro Justen, Courtesy of Creative Time.

Today's blog is about a personal secret and a super-cathartic art event that will continue for 25 years. Sophie Calle is a major writer, photographer, and performance artist; her stunning photographs and finely-printed books are currently at 192 Books, New York. Her book *True Stories* reveals all kinds of intimate encounters, including shipping her bed to a stranger recovering from heartbreak and her last week with a lover with whom she was breaking up.

The horrible secret that the decamping boyfriend revealed to her has led to today's sequel: Sophie is both witnessing and inviting people to write their inmost secrets. These are being inserted into a slot in a marble obelisk engraved *Here lie the secrets of the visitors of Green-Wood Cemetery*. Green-Wood, a National Historic Landmark founded in 1838, is the resting place of luminaries including Leonard Bernstein, Louis Comfort Tiffany, and Jean-Michel Basquiat, along with many others, including the unidentified remains of some of the 278 people who died in the Brooklyn Theater fire of 1876. Green-Wood is now a new art destination, yet art has always been present on –and *inside*— these death-filled hallowed hills!



Photo by Leandro Justen, Courtesy of Creative Time.

I'm late for the Cemetery! After a night of lightning storms during which I pictured myself dripping wet, running to meet with Sophie, I still haven't decided which secret to share. This *is* personal. Calle's art digs into *and* under people's psyches. Under the engraved obelisk is a 55-gallon container. Periodically, over a 25-year period, the secrets will be exhumed and cremated. None will be read or revealed. The catch: there are three lines to reach Sophie and share, eye to eye, my deepest secret (which I'm still deciding upon). By the time I'm in the last line, there is still a 45-minute wait.



Photo by Guillaume Ziccarelli, Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery & Perrotin.

This is fortuitous because it's a glorious, picture-perfect spring day, and I'm starting to have unplanned conversations with people who are also enjoying the scene and the hilltop view. Nato Thompson, Artistic Director of Creative Time, the sponsor of this and other enlightening events, tells me, "Public art is an ethos, a spirit. We are given a wide band width in terms of tone. Everyone is welcome. We're blessed on this one – it's a weather-sensitive project."

Even though there is a picnic mood at this event, we are at a cemetery. What does that mean? Nato Thompson has thought deeply about the social practice Creative Time does so well. His 2017 book *Culture as Weapon: the Art of Influence in Everyday Life* (Melville House Books) looks at "the way the manipulation of culture has been embedded in different forms of power," including the Apple store, Ikea, the military, advertising during political campaigns, and social networks. "It looks at the ways arts from the twentieth century are part of every other part of life," Thompson tells me. "I get into the culture wars – rather than thinking of it as a war on culture, you can think of Jessie Helms, the silent majority, and Trump as being very aware of how to manipulate and use culture."[\[1\]](#)

Nato confides that he's undecided about telling Sophie a secret because he knows her and will see her again. This somehow spurs me to tell Nato a secret! He's a bit shocked, but this leads to further conversation and some reunions with people I know at this hugely popular event.



Photos by Leandro Justen, Courtesy of Creative Time.

As the long line to talk to Sophie winds around a nearby hill, I'm still figuring out what to tell Sophie. She wears a black and white dress and is seated in a chair with her dark hair and back to the line. Secret-sharers climb the hill, speak to her for about three minutes, and leave. I'm now three people away. Some of us discuss secrets and defining a secret. One says, "My secret is I long to be an actress." Her friends chime in, "a diva singer," "a painter." They define a secret as "information you would want withheld," "something you want to hide." One says, "Like a crime is a crime – there are no levels to a secret. The general characteristic is that it's withheld." Then Chloe Bass, a social practice artist who is wearing big golden beads and gold shoes, says, "We use the language of secrets to give permission for things that are deeply questionable...the maintenance allows it to flourish."^[2]

It's my turn. I ascend the hill, take a seat, and look at Sophie. She seems totally focused on our moment. I tell her something deep I've never told anyone. She writes it on a piece of paper, gives the paper to me, and tells me to put it into the tomb. I comply. I feel cleansed. Purged. I told my secret, yet no one will know. This frees me beyond what I imagined.

However, there is a catch-22 I did not anticipate. My big reveal, I realize hours later, was part of a *bigger secret about the secret* that I now need to address. Thanks, Sophie! Thanks, Chloe! Thanks, Nato! My epiphany is: it's better to not have a single secret! To visit Green-Wood, see: <http://creativetime.org/projects/here-lie-secrets/>

Please post a reply telling me how you manage your secrets – or how the secrets of others affect you — or rush to Green-Wood Cemetery!

[Jan Garden Castro](#)

^[1] All Nato Thompson quotes from our conversation on 4.29.17. See also <https://www.mhpbooks.com/books/culture-as-weapon> of the secret /

^[2] See <http://chloebass.com/> and <https://www.facebook.com/callesophie/> and <https://www.google.com/search?q=sophie+calle+books&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8>

Other links to Creative Time's Doomocracy: see <https://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/ride-through-trumped-up-politics/3535>