# Wandering Gazes: Drifting, Observation and Archiving in the Work of Agnès Varda and Sophie Calle

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**Abstract:** The text proposes a cross-cutting reading of the artistic practices of Agnès Varda and Sophie Calle based on their shared methodologies. It presents observation as a common method and as a way of producing knowledge in contemporary art. Rather than analyzing specific works, the focus is placed on actions such as looking, moving, following, waiting, collecting, and archiving, understood as forms of research.
In both artists' practices, observation unfolds through drifting and prolonged duration, which allow for a sustained relationship with the surrounding environment. Observation is not treated as a neutral act, but as an engaged practice shaped by subjectivity, the body, and lived experience. In this way, everyday life becomes a field of experimentation in which the minimal or marginal acquires political and poetic significance.
Both artists also share an archival logic based on attention and contemplation. Their practices blur the boundaries between art, research, fiction, and ordinary life, proposing the gaze itself as a method for generating knowledge.

**Keywords:** gaze; contemporary art; drifting; archive.

## Introduction

This research proposes a transversal reading of the practices of Agnès Varda and Sophie Calle through their shared artistic methodologies, understanding observation as a common method and a central axis for the production of knowledge in contemporary art. Rather than analyzing specific works, the focus lies on the procedures both artists develop: looking, moving, following, waiting, collecting and archiving as forms of research.

## Point of departure

This research focuses on the practices of Agnès Varda (1928–2019) and Sophie Calle (b. 1953), two key figures in contemporary European art whose work revolves around drifting, observation, and the archive.

Agnès Varda—film director, photographer, and visual artist—was one of the most influential figures in modern cinema and a member of the founding circle of the French Nouvelle Vague. Throughout a filmmaking career

spanning more than sixty years, she developed a distinctive visual language that challenged conventional modes of representation and proposed new ways of seeing through film and image. Her work raises not only cinematic but also theoretical questions concerning the relationship between image, experience, and time. By moving fluidly between fiction, documentary, and contemporary art, Varda created a body of work marked by personal and experimental narratives, while using cinema as a social and political tool.

Sophie Calle, by contrast, is a conceptual artist whose practice combines photography, text, and installation in hybrid forms that explore everyday life and the boundaries between public and private space, identity, and storytelling. Observation functions in her work as a method of inquiry. A significant aspect of her practice is its autobiographical dimension: many of her projects originate in real situations that she herself initiates. These works often consist of documenting actions, encounters, or personal investigations. Because her work operates within such a deeply autobiographical—and in many ways ephemeral—terrain, shaped by the circumstances in which events unfold, chance inevitably becomes an active element within her creative process.

In both artists' practices, the act of looking operates as a central methodology, unfolding through drifting, displacement, and sustained attention to the everyday. Walking, observing, waiting, and recording become artistic research strategies that challenge and blur the boundaries between art and research, fiction and reality.

## Observation as methodology

Within the framework of this research, observation is not understood as a merely perceptual or contemplative act, but as an active practice of knowledge production. To observe implies a sustained form of attention that engages the body, time, and lived experience, situating the subject in direct relation to the world. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes in *El ojo y el espíritu* (2013, 21): seeing is inseparable from the way we inhabit and translate what appears before us: we only truly see what we look at.

The act that enables observation is *the act of looking*, and looking allows images to circulate—from advertising billboards to painting—each emerging from particular points of view. As Peter Szendy argues in *Le supermarché du visible* (2017, 25): the ways in which we feel, perceive, see, and hear are shaped by underlying social and economic relations. Likewise, John Berger's central premise in *Modos de ver* (1972, 12) is *that looking is never neutral.* Questions such as *What do I see? Whom do I see? From where does my gaze emerge?* become crucial, particularly in recent decades, when attention itself has become one of the most contested resources of contemporary culture. The city perhaps offers the clearest stage for this dynamic: advertising screens, luminous notifications, and an uninterrupted flow of images colonize urban space, transforming how we look, observe, contemplate, and relate to our surroundings. To immerse oneself in the city with full bodily and mental

presence has become an unusual, almost anachronistic gesture. Jean Baudrillard, in *Cultura y simulacro* (1978, 34), describes this condition by suggesting that we live within a regime of signs that refer to nothing beyond themselves—a spectacle that replaces reality with its own endless reproduction.

For this reason, the act of looking—and therefore observation—constitutes an active practice of knowledge production, shaped by the position of the observer. As Chantal Maillard writes in *La baba de caracol* (2014, 38), attention is a practice that transforms both the observer and what is observed, implying an ethical disposition toward the real. The creative process, and with it the emergence of an artwork, demands a radical presence: a way of perceiving the environment as pure event. It requires an attentive and vulnerable openness—a readiness of the eye that sees, the ear that listens, and the body that senses without projecting what is already known. As Maillard further suggests (2014, 92), this involves becoming aware of what occurs in the instant before interpretation takes place, and later inviting the viewer to share that initial impression. Perceiving a drop of water falling is not the same as thinking about how it falls. Symbolic thought, often driven by the ego, pushes us to decode and produce complex interpretations that make us feel more intelligent and less vulnerable. Yet in doing so we risk losing what is essential: the event itself, the falling drop. If we believe that what we see conceals a mystery beyond its simple occurrence, we will discover nothing new; we will mistake the event for a projection of our expectations. The mystery does not lie beyond the instant but within it—the drop falling, simply, in its irreducible happening. This is the place where creation emerges and where the possibility of contemplation may reopen.

From this perspective, a different kind of gaze becomes possible: another way of inhabiting the present, opening new landscapes and horizons. For Merleau-Ponty, perception is fundamentally a mode of *being-in-the-world,* where knowledge arises from embodied experience rather than from a distant or supposedly objective viewpoint.

In this sense, observation cannot be understood as a passive activity or as a simple recording of what is visible, but as a situated practice that generates knowledge through the relationship between subject and environment. Observation entails a form of attention that resists the dispersive logic of contemporary image regimes and reactivates a sensory experience of the world. In looking, the subject does not merely recognize what stands before them; they establish relations, select, interpret, and generate meaning. Observation thus becomes a gesture that articulates perception, experience, and thought, where knowledge emerges not from objective distance but from direct engagement with what unfolds.

Within this research, observation is therefore approached as an artistic methodology capable of activating situated, sensitive, and open forms of knowledge, where looking also means inhabiting, attending to, and thinking the world through lived experience. In this regard, Andrea Soto Calderón writes in *Imaginación material* (2022, 45) that “it is urgent to cultivate images capable of fissuring the belief—constructed through the systematic erasure

carried out by dominant cultures—that there are no other valid ways of doing, no other modes of critical existence, no other forms of life. They do exist, but they have been suffocated almost to the point of disappearance; the challenge lies in how to organize these latent possibilities so that they may activate their movement." In a similar vein, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue in *¿Qué es la filosofía?* (1993, 108) that "thinking is not recognizing, but producing". This perspective allows observation to be understood not as a passive act of recognition but as an ongoing process in which meaning emerges through experience itself. Observation thus becomes an artistic practice that does not simply aim to represent reality, but rather to establish relations, generate thought, and activate sensitive forms of knowledge—situating the act of looking as a space from which other ways of perceiving, thinking, and inhabiting the world may emerge.

## The wandering gaze

The *act of looking* involves multiple dimensions, among them the presence of the other's gaze. Both Agnès Varda and Sophie Calle construct narratives in their work through encounters with others, where observation becomes a way of approaching and understanding the world. The gaze they propose is not unilateral but reciprocal: on the one hand, they observe those who cross their paths; on the other, those same individuals return the gaze, addressing and challenging the observer. In this sense, Georges Didi-Huberman argues in *Lo que vemos, lo que nos mira* (2014, 15) that "the gaze is only possible as a double operation," suggesting that every visual experience also involves being affected by what we look at. From this perspective, observation can no longer be understood as a distant or neutral gesture, but rather as a relationship. In both Varda's and Calle's work, looking entails entering into contact with others and accepting the possibility of being affected by their presence, their gestures, or the ways in which they respond to that gaze. However, while Varda often builds relationships of proximity and attentive listening with the people she films, Calle's observation moves into a more ambiguous territory, where curiosity, surveillance, and distance generate different tensions in her relationship with the other. In both cases, observation goes beyond the mere recording of the visible and opens a space of encounter in which the gaze becomes relational and transformative. This raises further questions: how does observation change when it becomes an encounter? What happens when the person being observed responds to the gaze? At that moment, observation ceases to be a unilateral gesture and becomes a relationship that transforms both the observer and the observed. The gaze no longer simply records what is visible; it opens itself to being affected by what appears. In this sense, attention also implies a form of availability toward the other. As Chantal Maillard suggests, to attend is to suspend one's own certainties, allowing what is observed to manifest itself and potentially shift the observer's perception. Observation thus becomes an experience in which the subject does not fully control what occurs but instead exposes themselves to a relationship capable of altering how they see.

In *Daguerréotypes* (1976), Agnès Varda constructs a portrait of everyday life on Rue Daguerre through direct encounters with her neighbors. The camera does not simply describe their activities; it creates a space for storytelling in which each person returns the gaze through memory, speech, and presence. Through conversations and small everyday gestures, the film establishes a mode of observation grounded in proximity and attentive listening, where the camera functions less as an instrument of recording than as a device that enables encounter. In this way, the gaze becomes a shared space in which individual stories emerge and intertwine, forming a collective memory of the place.

This dynamic is also connected to the extent to which the artist allows themselves to be affected during the creative process. As Chantal Maillard writes in *La baba de caracol* (2014, 77), the process involves becoming aware—through a rupture with ordinary discourse—of the nature of one's own mind: its emptiness and instability. From this perspective, observation implies an openness that allows what appears to transform the observer. In Varda's films, the image is built precisely through a convergence of gazes: encounters between the filmmaker and those she films, but also between the spectator and what appears on screen. Varda gives a privileged place to those she looks at and to those who return her gaze, positioning at the center of the image subjects who are not merely observed but actively participate in the construction of the narrative. Through these encounters, her cinema proposes a form of knowledge that arises from relationships with others, where the gaze becomes both a position and a way of grasping the world, while the filmmaker simultaneously recognizes herself in relation to those she films. In this process, a dimension of intimacy and subjectivity emerges, as the director allows herself to be affected by what unfolds. If we are able to see and hear, it is because there are stories, gestures, and presences that deserve attention. In this way, Varda does not merely show; she questions and values certain experiences through inquiries that often continue beyond the film itself. It is within the spectator's mind that these questions persist, creating a kind of montage between the visual and the sonic layers where the meanings proposed by the director continue to unfold.

By contrast, in *L'Hôtel* (1981), Sophie Calle observes from absence: the bodies are not present, only their objects, traces, and belongings remain. Through the archive of these remnants and the texts that accompany them, the artist constructs a form of knowledge based on intimacy without direct dialogue. Observation no longer emerges from encounter, as it does in Varda's cinema, but from a silent proximity to what remains when the other is no longer there. The hotel rooms become spaces where human presence appears only through minimal traces—forgotten clothes, suitcases, letters, or the arrangement of objects—that allow the viewer to imagine the lives of those who once occupied them.

Within this context, observation takes on an almost detective-like dimension: the artist gathers fragments, interprets signs, and constructs possible narratives from scattered clues. Yet this gaze does not attempt to reveal a definitive truth about those who inhabited the rooms; rather, it highlights how intimacy can be reconstructed through what persists in someone's absence.

In this way, Calle moves observation into an ambiguous territory between curiosity, investigation, and fiction, where looking also means confronting the boundaries between public and private. The absence of a direct interlocutor transforms observation into an act of interpretation, where knowledge emerges from the relationship between material traces and the imagination of the observer.

Being affected takes on a particular form here. Although the connection to observation remains, the intimacy that Sophie Calle seeks is constructed differently. In several of her works, the artist shifts her own position as a subject in order to approach the lives of others, temporarily suspending her everyday routines, decisions, and even her own objectives in relation to the strangers she observes or follows, her decisions and even her own aims are momentarily displaced into the figure of the stranger she observes or follows. This gesture entails a suspension of her own identity, allowing her to position herself at the threshold between the public and the private, exploring the tensions that emerge within this intermediate space. Calle does not fully reveal the intimacy of the other; rather, she reconstructs it through fragments, silences, and traces. As Byung-Chul Han notes in *La sociedad de la transparencia* (2013, 34), contemporary culture tends to dissolve the distance between the public and the private in favor of an increasing exposure of intimate life. In contrast to this logic of total visibility, Calle's practice preserves the distance necessary to reconstruct intimacy without subjecting it to complete disclosure.

Unlike the cinema of Agnès Varda, where observation unfolds through encounter and dialogue, Calle's practice introduces a more unsettling and ambiguous dimension. Her gaze does not merely seek to understand the other, but rather to inhabit their trace momentarily, creating situations in which curiosity, proximity, and intrusion call into question the very limits of observation. While in Varda knowledge emerges from encounter, in Calle it arises from distance and absence. Yet in both cases observation functions as a relational methodology that produces meaning not through definitive answers, but through the experience of the encounter itself—or its absence—transforming the creative act into a space where, rather than formulating questions, possible responses begin to take shape.

In this sense, the practice of Sophie Calle suggests that intimacy is not a territory that can simply be revealed, but rather a space that must be constructed and reconstructed through attention, distance, and sensitivity toward the other. Her work demonstrates how observation can operate both as an act of presence and as one of withdrawal—an exercise that maintains the tension between the visible and the hidden, inviting us to reconsider the boundaries between private and public life, between curiosity and intrusion, and ultimately between knowing and inhabiting another person's life. Taken together, the practices of Agnès Varda and Sophie Calle reveal that artistic observation cannot be reduced to the immediate documentation or comprehension of the other. While Varda constructs intimacy through encounter and dialogue, establishing a direct relationship with her subjects, Calle approaches it from a distance, inhabiting fragments and traces that reveal only partial glimpses of other lives. Despite these differences, both practices share the same relational logic: meaning emerges from the

experience of observing, participating, or even withdrawing, rather than from definitive conclusions. In this way, the work of Varda and Calle reminds us that observation—whether close or distant, dialogical or silent—transforms curiosity into a tool for understanding, and the encounter with the other into a space for reflecting on the limits of intimacy and public life. In both practices, to observe is not to look from the outside, but to establish a relationship that transforms both the observer and what is observed. As Andrea Soto Calderón paraphrases Gilles Deleuze in *Imaginación material* (2022, 11): the creator, says Deleuze, bends language, makes it vibrate, embraces it and fractures it in order to wrest perception from perceptions, affect from affections, sensation from opinion—creating for a people that does not yet exist.

## Discussion

The practices of Agnès Varda and Sophie Calle position observation as a profoundly political act, revealing that every gaze entails taking a stance. In their work, observing is not merely about recording what is visible; it involves engaging in a relationship with the world that is shaped through encounter, attention, and experience. Both artists explore less conventional paths, where chance, wandering, intuition, boredom, or idleness acquire methodological significance within the creative process. In this sense, drifting—aimless walking and openness to the unexpected—becomes a way of approaching the environment that allows attention to what usually remains at the margins of visibility.

At the same time, their practices challenge the regimes of visibility that determine which bodies, voices, and experiences are deemed worthy of being seen, narrated, or preserved. Through encounters, traces, and fragments of everyday life, both Varda and Calle construct ways of seeing that do not aim to transparently represent reality but to intervene in it, disrupting the hierarchies that govern who may speak, who is heard, and who remains silent. Observation thus becomes a process that links experience, memory, and the collection of traces, where gathering fragments and organizing materials gives rise to archival forms that do not seek to fix meaning once and for all, but to keep open the relationships between images, narratives, and experiences.

In a context marked by image saturation and the acceleration of visual consumption, these practices assert attention as a form of resistance to dominant rhythms of production and consumption. To look entails pausing, lingering, and allowing oneself to be affected by what appears. From this perspective, observation ceases to be a passive gesture and becomes a critical tool capable of activating other forms of sensitive, situated knowledge, compelling us to ask not only what we see but also who is looking, from where, and with what consequences.

## Conclusions

This research argues that artistic observation should be understood as a relational and critical methodology rather than as a neutral act of visual registration. First, the works of Agnès Varda demonstrate that observation can generate knowledge through proximity, encounter, and dialogue, where attentive engagement with everyday life allows overlooked voices and experiences to emerge. Second, the practice of Sophie Calle reveals an alternative mode of observation based on distance and absence, in which intimacy is reconstructed through fragments, traces, and material remains rather than direct interaction. Third, both artistic approaches show that observation operates through processes such as wandering, attention, and the collection of materials, transforming lived experience into narrative structures and archival forms. Taken together, these practices suggest that observation in contemporary art is not simply a means of representing reality, but a methodological tool that produces meaning through relationships, positionality, and the organization of experience.

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## Author Contribution

Author: Conceptualization, investigation, writing, original draft.

## Tools of Artificial Intelligence

The author used AI-powered tools to translate certain passages into English, as Spanish is his native language. These tools (ChatGPT and DeepL) were also used to conduct preliminary searches of the academic literature, although all cited sources were subsequently checked and verified directly.

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