New Anonymity: on Sophie Calle and Edward Snowden

The government's decision to remove telephone booths from the public sphere in Israel has led Hagai Ulrich to think about new possibilities for freedom offered by Sophie Calle in the wake of Edward Snowden’s revelations.

Essay / Hagai Ulrich June 7, 2022

> “*Imagine, if you can, that you could wake up every morning and pick a new name and a new face by which to be known to the world (…) [and] choose a new voice and new words to speak in it, as if [there was] a reset button for your life*.”
> (Edward Snowden)1

On November 9, 2021, the Israeli Minister of Communications signed new regulations ordering the removal of the telephone booths from the public sphere in Israel. Starting on January 1, 2022, the installment of new public telephones ceased and the dismantling of some booths began. Proponents of the decision on the Knesset’s Economic Affairs Committee have portrayed these new regulations using a narrative of “progress,” and a representative of the committee has declared that the move will promote the removal of environmental hazards around the country.

The association between public telephone booths and an environmental hazard reminded me of Sophie Calle's takeover of a telephone booth on the corner of Greenwich and Harrison streets in New York, in September of 1994. Calle equipped the booth with various objects, such as chairs, cigarette packs, an ashtray, some snacks, paper towels, a comb, a mirror, several fashion magazines, a bucket of red roses, and a sign reading *Have a nice day!*2 For a week, she cleaned the booth every day, watched what was happening in its surrounding, eavesdropped on conversations of its users, conversed with some of them, and documented everything in photography and writing. The documentation revealed various reactions to the takeover: alongside the indifference of some passers-by, there had been puzzlement by others, as well as accusations of vandalism by some, which had led to the dismantling of the outpost by the telephone company, AT&T.

1200px-Javits_Ctr_West_Side_02.jpg

[1]A phone booth on 12th Avenue in Hell's Kitchen/Hudson Yards, Manhattan, 2017 (illustration)

Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International [2]

The motivation for Calle’s work, which she eventually turned into an artist book, the *Gotham Handbook* [3], began with *Instructions for Embellishing Life in New York*, a set of operating instructions orchestrated by writer Paul Auster, as part of an ongoing creative dialogue between the two, that dwelt on concepts like reality, imagination, narrative, and biography. Following the instructions, Calle had to choose a place in the city and think of it as her own and under her personal responsibility. She was also asked to see what she could learn about social interactions, people, and herself.

copyright claim2.jpg **[4]**

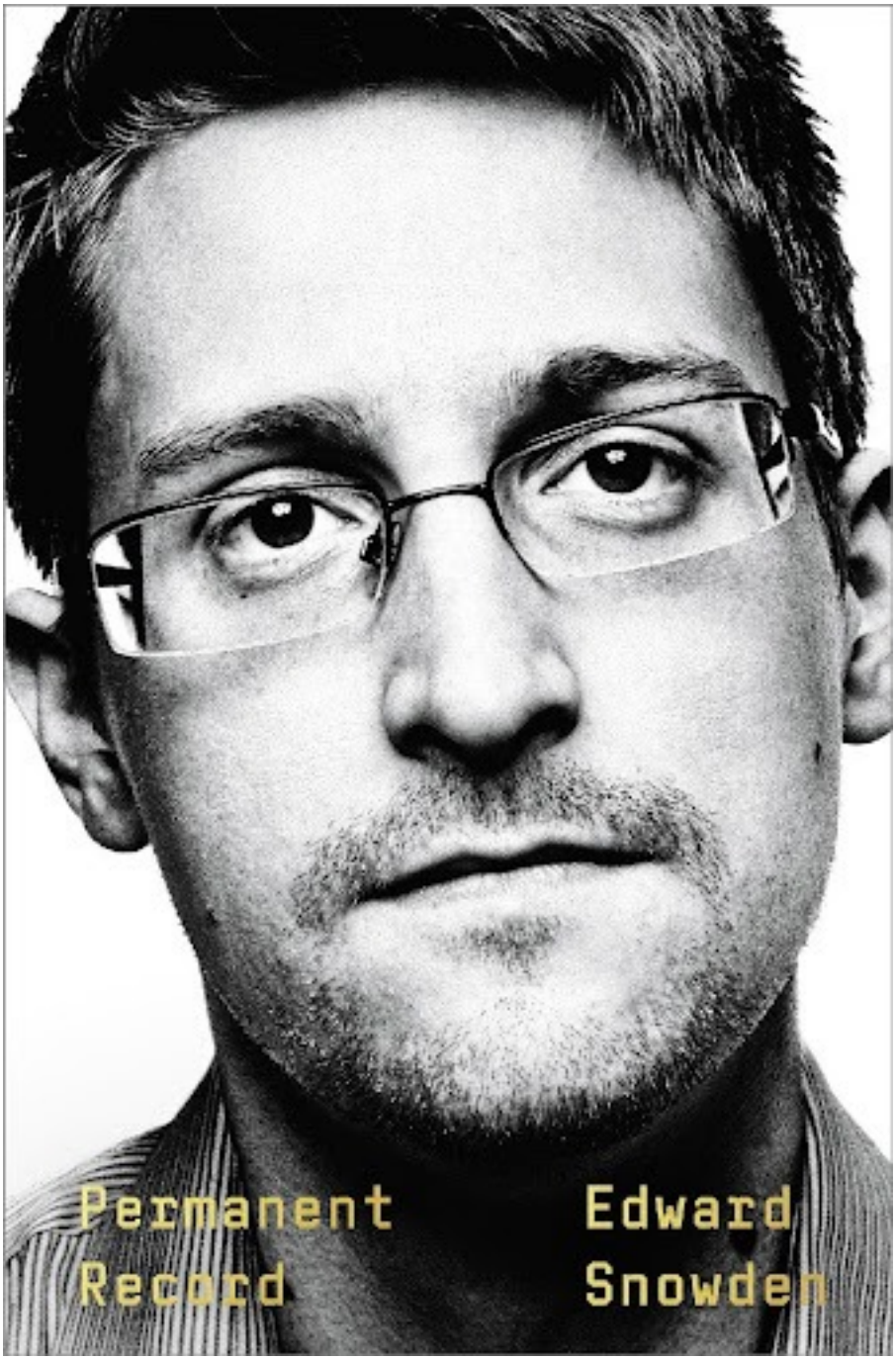
[5]
Screenshot of a scan of pages 282-283 from Sophie Calle and Paul Auster's Double Game, 1999, Violette Publishing

In her artistic practice, Calle adopts methods of surveillance and intelligence: acting anonymously, inventing fictitious characters, doing detective work, eavesdropping, bringing photographic evidence, and taking notes. Calle invasively intervenes in the private lives of others or herself, while using the public sphere as a stage. In her work *The Shadow* (1981), for example, she asked her mother to hire a detective to follow her around and document everything Calle had done. Calle has engaged someone to follow the detective as well, and documented his every move. In the work *Address Book* (1983), she had contacted all the people whose phone numbers were listed in a personal notebook she claimed to have found on the street and then published the information she had gathered about the notebook's owner in a newspaper column.[3]

In that same year, 1994, Edward Snowden - now a refugee, but formerly a CIA and NSA contractor, who revealed in June 2013 that the US and several of its allies had built a system of eavesdropping, surveillance, and espionage aimed at their own citizens - was 11 years old. Around this age, he started teaching himself how to use computers, the internet, and programming - technologies that were becoming commonplace in every American household.

Snowden describes the Internet of the 1990s as an open playground that allowed equal opportunities. Anyone who wanted, could reinvent oneself and express himself or herself freely and without the fear of implications. Back then, we could make "mistakes" online (like uploading embarrassing images, being involved in disagreements, as well as hacking), without the folly being linked to our legal identity and thus registered against us.4 For Snowden, this had been, and should still be today, a healthy and good way for children to develop and grow. His argument is that the dissociation between legal identity and a persona or avatar, allows children (as well as adults) to develop a sense of self-criticism, and learn to challenge their acquired opinions without suffering exposure and shame. Anonymity was a platform that allowed the exercising of opinions, and a psychological development that was not over-personal or over-judgemental. It allows the contemplated shifting of one's positions, instead of just apologetically nurturing them to keep one’s good name – as exposure tends to do, in many cases.5

unnamed.jpg **[6]**



[7]Cover of Permanent Record, the autobiography of Edward Snowden, 2019, Macmillan Publishing

Snowden and Calle were acting in distinctly different ways and with utterly different motivations, but to a large extent, their actions had similar effects – the destabilization of accepted values, norms, and rules that we're accustomed to taking for granted, or as obvious. In his whistleblowing about illegal spying, Snowden resorted to digital practices of surveillance and spying but was acting in the name of freedom of speech, transparency, curiosity, play, and learning. Likewise, in a contemporaneous look at the analog spying and surveillance practices used by Sophie Calle, one can find similarities with Snowden's, especially in regard to the implications that their work had incurred. When a telephone booth changes and transforms into a living room, a space for conversation, or an instrument that spies on its users, the norms and the distinct ways in which relationships form, as well as the manner in which identities persist in appearing the same, are suspended. This suspension of the persona may be similar to what happens when one plays a game, is engulfed in research, or

uses an avatar on the internet. The anonymity, the taking of a new face, and the dissociation of identity from behavior can expose aspects of freedom of speech that are missing from the traditional roles – be they of gender, status, legal status, nationality, or society.

A telephone booth is supposed to remain a telephone booth. It is supposed to persist in its identity and usage - otherwise, it is estranged, queered, or regarded as an environmental hazard. This changing of roles that occurs in Calle's sites (as happened also in *Address Book* and in *The Shadow*), and the suggestion to allow within them expressions that allegedly are not typical of their normative use (a mother spying on her own daughter, a regular citizen spying on a detective, a woman disclosing in the information of a private person in a public newspaper, the telephone booth as a physical meeting place), and allowing within them the engendering of relationships that are not formed through identified, accepted, and traditional public roles, expose the power that is affecting us without our knowledge when we're identified. Without anonymity, in most cases, we'd probably act in accordance with our public roles, the law, tradition, out of concern of sanctions, or the need to keep walking the line. In these ways, Calle's work uncovers an intrinsic inequality in society – inequality that is adjacent to the ways in which our legal identities influence our behavior, and the personas we wear. It is an inequality engendered by the lack of liberty.

The controlled linking of fictitious personae of users when they're online and their legal identities offline is what Snowden has described as the worst inequality in the history of the digital sphere.[6] With the beginning of the new millennium, says Snowden, states and corporations had started using the internet with the intent to impose loyalty through memory, to perpetuate consistency of identity, as well as ideological conformity. This change was created, he says, in several stages: at the end of the 1990s, after the collapse of the e-commerce bubble, corporations, and private firms started monetizing the ways in which people interact online, and from the sheer fact that people like to share their private lives with others.

To profit from this sharing of information, the need to link legal identities and credit cards to the online persona had emerged, as well as to fight pirate websites and file-sharing applications, and other anonymous sharing platforms. For Snowden, this is how *Surveillance Capitalism* has begun. It flowed through different channels and in different ways into a centralization shared by private firms, corporations, and intelligence agencies.[7] Without any public discourse or wide social consent, they have developed a total and universal surveillance architecture that accumulates intelligence about citizens. This architecture had been constructed in a manner that intentionally and deceptively concealed its existence from the public (including lawmakers, legal experts, and most politicians).[8]

in June 2013, with the help of Glenn Greenwald and Laura Poitras, Snowden revealed in a series of articles published in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* that the US and its allies: the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (termed the "Five Eyes alliance"),[9] are conducting massive spying on their citizens, as well as those of other countries, and foreign officials (such as then Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel). Snowden leaked that the NSA (the National Security Agency), despite the organization's denials, had the capabilities to eavesdrop on Americans and gain any kind of information from internet servers, satellites, underwater fibers, local and foreign telephone systems, and personal computers. As late as 2013, The NSA had the ability to monitor the billions of telephone calls and emails that had passed through the internet each day,[10] and to intercept specific conversations. Snowden also proved that the organization had received personal data (as well as private communications) directly from the major internet companies (Google, Microsoft, Facebook, Apple, YouTube, and others),[11] and can know the habits of internet users, collecting all the metadata (who conversed with whom, when, from where, for how long they communicated and in what frequency). All this information is recorded, stored, and available for use at any given moment.

CITIZENFOUR - Official Trailer **[8]**

Video of CITIZENFOUR - Official Trailer
Trailer for Citizenfour, Laura Poitras's documentary about Snowden, 2014, Madman Films

Joe Rogan Experience #1368 - Edward Snowden **[9]**

Video of Joe Rogan Experience #1368 - Edward Snowden
Edward Snowden interviewed on the Joe Rogan Podcast, The Joe Rogan Experience #1368 , October 2019

The existence of the universal spying architecture and Surveillance Capitalism has gained another disturbing piece of evidence with the 2017 *Wikileaks* publication of *Vault 7*. An unprecedented number of documents, even larger than those Snowden had released, were leaked by anonymous whistleblowers. *Vault 7* has proved, among other things, that the CIA (the Central Intelligence Agency) has unlimited capabilities to hack into any smart technology device: any computer, smartphone, or smart television can be turned into a recording device, in sound and video.12

Inside the Green Line in Israel, from where I'm writing, evidence of the surveillance architecture and spying on citizens is plentiful. Recent examples include *Shin Beit*'s phone pinpointing capabilities, used as part of the emergency regulations the government imposed in 2020, allegedly to counter the spread of COVID-19. Also, as has recently been published in *Calclaist* [10], Sigint (short for Signal Intelligence), the cyber intelligence technology department of the Israeli Police, is allegedly hacking into smartphones of citizens without a warrant, using Pegasos, spyware developed by the Israeli company NSO.

In this state of affairs, and with the narrative of "progress", it seems like anonymity, like the public telephone booth, is reaching its end. However, to philosopher Geoffroy de Lagasnerie, the anonymity under which Snowden was acting, his refusal to accept state rules (a state that uses strategies of extra-legal emergencies to violate its own laws), and his choice of taking refuge, are all expressions that constitute the emergence of a new subject. De Lagasnerie finds this new subject also in other persons and collectives that act in similar ways to Snowden's, albeit from different motives.

De Lagasnerie mentions journalist, publisher, and founder of *Wikileaks*, Julian Assange, now in prison in the UK, awaiting legal process concerning his extradition to the US. He is accused of violating the 1917 Espionage Act of the US (although he's not a US citizen). De Lagasnerie also mentions Chelsea Manning, a former US soldier sent to prison between 2010 and 2017, after leaking several classified military documents to *Wikileaks*. Among the documents was the video titled *Collateral Damage*, showing an intentional killing of Iraqi citizens and two *Reuters* journalists from an Apache helicopter, in 2007. He also mentioned *Anonymous*, an anarchistic hacker collective, with no formal definition, unity, or identity.

Assange_speech_at_Ecuador_embassy 2223.jpg **[11]**

[12]
On the right: Julian Assange speaking on the balcony of the Ecuadorian Embassy in London, August 2016. On the left: Chelsea Manning at a demonstration, January 2018
Assange Photo: Wl dreamer. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0
Manning Photo: Manolo Luna. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0

In his book, *The Art of Revolt: Snowden, Assange, Manning* (2017), de Lagasnerie gives the example of the painter Manet and the Impressionist revolution, which, to sociologist Piere Bourdieu had constituted the new subject of the time - a subject that had confronted the French establishment of the 19th century – the subject of the life of the artist. For de Lagasnerie, in our time, the constitution of oneself as an anonymous subject means to demand the potentiality to act without the imperative of identification and the responsibility for actions and rules that one is unwilling to take, legally as well as morally. In other words, it means to flee from the ways in which power ties us to what we do.13 Anonymity – the dissociation between the imaginary persona, the avatar, and the legal persona – symbolizes possibilities for freedom but also the rethinking of oppressional mechanisms we had inherited. Anonymity invites us to imagine new relations with the law, the state, and citizenship.14

re:publica 2016 – Geoffroy de Lagasnerie: The art of revolt. Snowden, Assange, Manning **[13]**

Video of re:publica 2016 – Geoffroy de Lagasnerie: The art of revolt. Snowden, Assange, Manning
Geoffroy de Lagasnerie lecturing about The Art of Revolt: Snowden, Assange, Manning at re:publica conference in Berlin, May 3, 2016

Looking back at Sophie Calle's work of the 1980s and 1990s, it seems that the artist was acting in a similar fashion. In her transformation of a telephone booth or an address book, Calle raises questions about various patterns of power relations and about how relationships tied to a narrative of normativity are formed. In the telephone booth work, she was acting no differently than a hacker breaking into a particular system to expose its vulnerability and the illegality at its core. The performativity of these systems is then seen by all and with it the perseverance of a behavior that is needed for it to convince us of its role and identity. In *Address Book*, Calle "leaked" personal details about a stranger and exposed the fragility intrinsic to the patriarchal surveillance technology of her time.

For Snowden, the problem is not the technology, but the technological despotism and the proliferated inequality made possible by the ignorance (the lack of information and naivety) of anyone who uses it daily without the understanding and knowledge about who it really serves, and in what authoritarian ways it intermingles with a singular narrative that denies others the liberty to speak their mind freely. The refusal to educate oneself concerning the basic maintenance of the equipment one relies upon is in effect the passive acceptance of this despotism and receiving its terms, Snowden says.15 In this frame of reference, the removal of public telephone booths - accessible to anyone at any time and place - is another expression of the transition toward a centralized and completely controlled, regulative communication system, one that we do not fully understand. It is a system that does not take into account any alternative communication at hand, such as dialing anonymously with a telecard or a coin. The question emerges: does this announce the end of anonymity, alongside the end of freedom of speech as we knew it?

640px--rpTEN_-_Tag_2_(26184155224).jpg **[14]**

[15]Geoffroy de Lagasnerie, from re:publica conference in Berlin, May 3, 2016
Photo: re:publica / Gregor Fischer. CC BY 2.0

Anonymity is highly important in a free society. It motivates more people to action and allows those who do not define themselves as political to appear and demonstrate - to act politically at a given moment. In her fictitious dissociations, Calle succeeded in fleeing from the non-possibility of speaking freely. For de Lagasnerie, anonymity and these kinds of fictitious characteristics allow the proliferation and the spread of demonstration sites and rebellions, much in the same way as *Anonymous*, or *Wikileaks* for that matter can gather individuals together for a particular cause, anonymously.

The new anonymous subject knows how to raise its voice and then disappear or run away.16 It is not dissimilar to Calle's and Auster's motivation, united as individuals with the intention of embellishing life in New York, forming new relationships, but then going their own ways. Calle could have done her telephone booth work only when acting anonymously, without her being tied to the law, identity, social conformism, and normativity. The telephone company, of course, saw this motivation as vandalism and as an environmental hazard.

For de Lagasnerie, thanks to Snowden, Assange, Manning, *Wikileaks*, and *Anonymous*, we are witnessing the birth of a new political category - that of individuals who are not defined through their relationship to a state, a nation, or a territory, but rather through a community they have chosen for themselves.17

- 1. 1. Edward Snowden, *Permanent Record*. London: Macmillan, 2019, p.47.
- 2. Sophie Calle and Paul Auster, *Double Game*. London: Violette, 1999, p.246
- 3. Nicole Miller, "Following Sophie Calle", *Hyperallergic*, June 18, 2016.

https://hyperallergic.com/305869/following-sophie-calle/ [16]

- 4. Supre note 1, Snowden, ibid., pp. 47-48.
- 5. op. cit.
- 6. Ibid., pp. 46-47.
- 7. Ibid., pp. 4-5.
- 8. Ibid, p. 7.
- 9. Glenn Greenwald, *No Place to Hide: Edward Snowden, the NSA, and the U.S. Surveillance State*. London: Penguin, 2015 p. 30. Snowden revealed that the cooperation between the United States and Israel is almost as close, if not closer. Based on Snowden's findings, the United States regularly transmits intelligence about American citizens to Israel, without using "minimizing" information processes required by US laws. Greenwald, ibid., p. 102.
- 10. Ibid, pp. 88-89.
- 11. Laura Poitras and Barton Gellman, “U.S., British intelligence mining data from nine U.S. Internet companies in broad secret program ”, The Washington Post, June 7, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/us-intelligence-mining-data-from-nine-us-internet-companies-in-broad-secret-program/2013/06/06/3a0c0da8-cebf-11e2-8845-d970ccb04497_story.html# [17]
- 12. .”Vault 7: CIA Hacking Tools Revealed”, *WikiLeaks*, March 7, 2017, https://wikileaks.org/ciav7p1/ [18]
- 13. Geoffroy de Lagasnerie, *The Art of Revolt: Snowden, Assange, Manning*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017, p.82.
- 14. Ibid., p. 10.
- 15. Supra note 1, Snowden, ibid., p. 28.
- 16. Supra note 13, de Lagasnerie, ibid., pp. 56-58.
- 17. Ibid., p. 71.

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