

# The Boston Globe

ART REVIEW

## Getting up close and personal at MIT



SOPHIE CALLE, PAULA COOPER GALLERY, NEW YORK; PHOTO BY STEVEN PROBERT

**Sophie Calle's "Secrets"**

**By Cate McQuaid** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT | MAY 31, 2017

I went to see “An Inventory of Shimmers: Objects of Intimacy in Contemporary Art” at the MIT List Visual Arts Center with what felt like illicit anticipation.

The word “intimacy” triggered it. What would I encounter? Would I find myself in the middle of someone else’s relationship? Would I step over the boundaries of privacy? Would I be made to feel like a voyeur?

Yes to all three, it turns out.

The conceptual art in “An Inventory of Shimmers” plugs into perceptions of love, trust, and care. We form models for these in our earliest years. Our projections and intuitions about them are prelingual, beyond reason. That’s where this show points.

The work here is not particularly beautiful or spectacular. Understated but high voltage, it makes insinuations in whispers and secrets. It provokes discomfort and wonder in equal parts, but shies away from sentimentality.

I can't imagine an overly sentimental show at the List, a museum that can lose itself in thickets of theory. This exhibit, organized by curator Henriette Huldish, springs from an "art with affect" movement stirring over the last 20 years that arose as artists focused less on objects and more on experiences, and has theoretical underpinnings as far back as 17th-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza, who argued against the Cartesian body/mind split.

Intellectual apparatus sometimes does get in the way, here. Lisa Tan's "Waves" video weaves Virginia Woolf, Gustave Courbet, geological history, and perceptions of virtual distance in a failed attempt to get, as Woolf puts it, beyond thought.

The show stumbles, too, with items associated with personal use presented as art. We project all kinds of juju onto some objects. In hotels, I'm wary of bedspreads. Jason Dodge touches on that fear with "Anyone," piles of institutional bed sheets throughout the galleries, changed out regularly by a linen service.

The problem with this — and with Park McArthur's assemblages of medical supplies — is that objects turned into art in museums take on yet another valence. "Oh, this is conceptual art — what might it mean?" effectively sanitizes what we might otherwise shrink from.

But much of the art gets under the skin as pointedly as a hypodermic needle. Sophie Calle, who for years has used her own identity and social relationships as fodder, is the show's presiding matriarch.

For "Secrets," she solicits a couple to share with her secrets they keep from each other. Calle records them and places them in safes in the couple's home. Only the artist knows the combination. A contract is signed; if Calle discovers that a safe is broken into or a secret told, she disavows the art.

What a hornet's nest! Calle gives form to what is only tacit in a relationship and brings it home to roost. It could be the premise of a play by Edward Albee or Yasmina Reza. And, of course, it brings the viewer's own secrets right to the surface.

Jill Magid's unnerving art practice involves mining institutional and bureaucratic relationships for intimacy.

For years, Magid has been seeking access to the professional archive of Mexican modern architect Luis Barragán, who died in 1988. The Swiss furniture company Vitra acquired the collection in 1995 and set up the Barragán Foundation. Architecture scholar Federica Zanco, who oversees the archive, has rebuffed the artist's petitions.



JILL MAGID; PHOTO BY STEVE PROBERT

### **Jill Magid's "Dearest Federica"**

But the architect's personal archive in Mexico is open, and for "Dearest Federica" Magid plucks from that collection a slide show of women posing, pouting, and flirting. Put on headphones, and as you contemplate Barragán's gaze, Magid murmurs a love letter in your ears. Barragan wrote some of it; the rest is the artist's own incantatory litany.

It's like listening to a lovers' spat through a hotel wall — you know you shouldn't, but you can't walk away. The knowledge that Zanco isn't the artist's lover — they appear to have, at best, a chilly professional relationship — does nothing to invalidate the urgent need that underlies Magid's plea, made naked by her language and tone.

Antonia Hirsch's "Object T" video installation similarly provokes the twitchy sense that you're witnessing something you shouldn't, although in this case it's intimacy with an object, not another person. Sit on a bench welcomingly warmed to body temperature. The video depicts two women fondling black cubes that look like small versions of your bench.

They rub it against their skin. They murmur and whisper. They are having private, sensuous experiences — and you're watching. Hirsch bases her work on YouTube videos about Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response, which occurs when certain soft noises spark tingles, reflecting on how the internet has legitimized and commercialized voyeurism.

Intimacy doesn't always mean too close for comfort, and not everything in "An Inventory of Shimmers" has that frisson. Andrea Büttner asked a community of cloistered Carmelite nuns to videotape each other as they made baskets, crucifixes, and the like to be sold at a bazaar. In the resulting video, "Little Works," their humility and joy shine through the choppy filming and hushed tones.

Faith is so rarely seen in contemporary art, yet don't both dive beneath reason? Most art aims for affect, but this show makes sensing the sublime seem lightweight. It's a Pandora's box of the felt responses that most closely define us — faith, shame, grief, longing. The art may bring you comfort or stir intrigue. It will certainly make your skin crawl.



LISA TAN, GALLERI RIIS, OSLO, STOCKHOLM

A still from Lisa Tan's "Waves"

## ART REVIEW

### AN INVENTORY OF SHIMMERS: OBJECTS OF INTIMACY IN CONTEMPORARY ART

At MIT List Visual Arts Center, 20 Ames St., Cambridge, through July 16. 617-253-4680,  
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