



# Conversations and Actions Whitechapel Gallery

**Sophie Calle:  
Talking to  
Strangers**

**16 October 2009  
–  
3 January 2010**

**Whitechapel Gallery**  
77–82 Whitechapel  
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[whitechapelgallery.org](http://whitechapelgallery.org)

## How to use Conversations and Actions

This booklet has been written to help you explore the Whitechapel Gallery exhibition *Sophie Calle: Talking to Strangers*.

It begins with a *conversation* between two artists, **Rebecca Greathhead** and **Daniel Wallis**. Their conversation outlines key ideas about **Sophie Calle** and her work. This will support your exploration of the exhibition, and give you information to pass onto others whether you are visiting with children, young adults or any other group. Their conversation continues throughout the booklet, introducing you to each work in the exhibition. There is a map of the exhibition at the back.

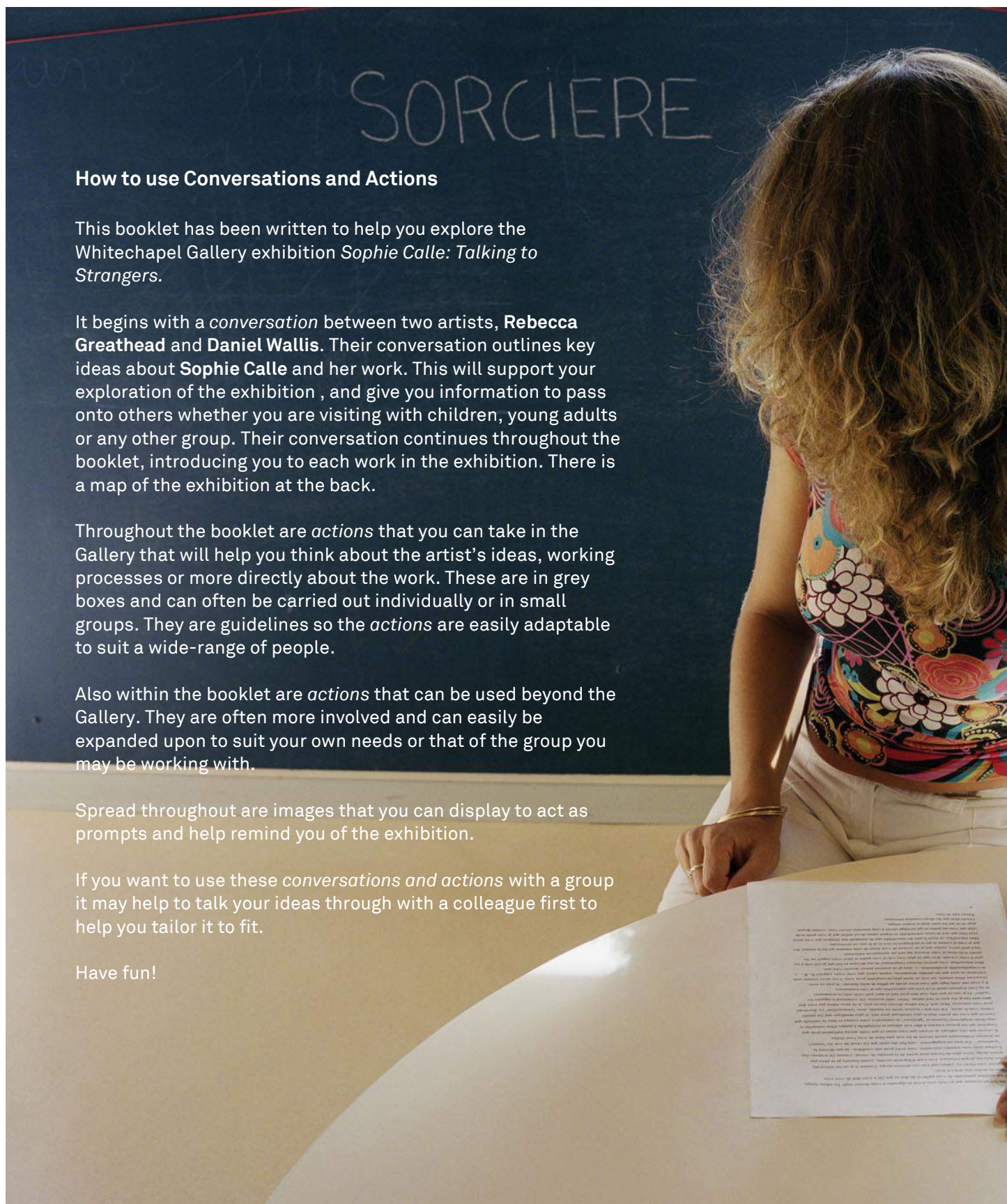
Throughout the booklet are *actions* that you can take in the Gallery that will help you think about the artist's ideas, working processes or more directly about the work. These are in grey boxes and can often be carried out individually or in small groups. They are guidelines so the *actions* are easily adaptable to suit a wide-range of people.

Also within the booklet are *actions* that can be used beyond the Gallery. They are often more involved and can easily be expanded upon to suit your own needs or that of the group you may be working with.

Spread throughout are images that you can display to act as prompts and help remind you of the exhibition.

If you want to use these *conversations and actions* with a group it may help to talk your ideas through with a colleague first to help you tailor it to fit.

Have fun!





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<b>Daniel</b>	Sophie Calle uses a lot of writing in her work, but she's French isn't she. So, why's it all in English?
<b>Rebecca</b>	Some works have been translated. The piece shown in the downstairs gallery was first shown at the Venice Biennale where it was presented in French and Italian.
<b>Daniel</b>	She's been making work for the last thirty years. Does she always make work about people?
<b>Rebecca</b>	Sophie often uses other people in her work, sometimes people she hasn't met. At times it seems she manipulates others for her own creative ends, but she also offers opportunities and space for the creative input of others.
<b>Daniel</b>	How does she manage to get people to do all sorts of things for her?
<b>Rebecca</b>	She often does something in return. She asked Damien Hirst to write her a love letter as she claimed never to have received one before. He did so and it led to a series of exchanges between the two of them.
<b>Daniel</b>	Sophie doesn't just ask artists to collaborate with her though, she seems able to get all sorts of ordinary people to take on bizarre tasks.
<b>Rebecca</b>	Maybe she captures people's imagination or gives them license to do something they would not otherwise do.
<b>Daniel</b>	Where her work involves people do you think it is about them or about Sophie herself?
<b>Rebecca</b>	That's something to think about when looking at each work.
<b>Daniel</b>	The texts that Sophie use take her a long time to compose. I think she definitely has a sense of humor, some of it is very funny.
<b>Rebecca</b>	So are some of the images.
<b>Daniel</b>	The works are loaded with stories about the artist, about other people and about stories the artist has imagined about other people.
<b>Rebecca</b>	She also invites other people to invent stories about her.
<b>Daniel</b>	Early in her career she was taking photographs around the Eiffel tower in Paris. She saw some gardeners laying turf and asked the head gardener if he would mind contacting her if they returned as she wanted to take photographs. Six months later she received a phone call informing her of further work. She began to wonder what was written in the diary next to her phone number to remind a near stranger who she was, and when to call her.

**Rebecca** I guess we all wonder sometimes how we might be described by others.

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## Gallery 1: Take Care of Yourself

- Daniel** What do all these women have in common? I've spotted that they have all sorts of different jobs – it lists them on the walls. There is a Chess Player, a Clairvoyant, a DJ and a rifle shooter...
- Rebecca** Sophie gave them all a copy of an email from her lover breaking off their relationship and asked them to interpret the message in whatever way they felt was appropriate to their profession, there are 107 responses.
- Daniel** Using email isn't a very personal way to end a relationship. Is there a copy of it anywhere? I'd like to see how he wrote it.
- Rebecca** There are a few full copies of it on display. I like the Rifle Shooter's response – you can see the whole email printed out, but she has shot through the word love. Go and have a look...

Look at some of the responses closely before finding out from the text near the ceiling what is the **profession** of the person who made it has.

Can you guess what they do?

Once you know their profession, what **elements** of their response **match** their job?

Could you make a visual response that reflects your profession, hobby or personal interests?

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Choose a job from amongst those listed around the gallery.

Play charades and **act** out that profession for the others to guess

Why did you pick that job?

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Have a longer look at the responses in the gallery that are people **performing** readings of the email.

Are the various women simply reading it out, **imagining** they are Sophie, or **taking on the role** of the man who wrote it?

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Think of different ways to **act out** the content of the email.

You may need to **simplify** its message first:

e.g. *I still love you but I no longer want to have a relationship* could become *I don't love you anymore*

A good **starting point** is to look at how the **9 year old girl** at the far end of the gallery (labeled above as *Schoolgirl*) has made her summary.

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Do you think the man who wrote the email has been **cruel** to Sophie?

Is Sophie presenting a **balanced view**?

Do you think she **felt better** after having made the artwork?

Do you think all these women felt **sympathy** for her?

How do you think the **author** of the email would feel walking around the gallery?

**Select a text** to begin with – it could be real or made-up, a poem, an email, a phone text, a story or a phrase.

**In groups** each make a different interpretation – a dance, a collage, a song, a play, a diagram etc.

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## Gallery 9: Couldn't Capture Death

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- Daniel** In this first work upstairs Sophie attempted to record her mother's last acts before she died. The film was intended to capture her last moments of life and the first of death. In the end it was impossible to determine the point at which one became the other.
- Rebecca** It's very sad. Your last moments could equally be chance, or planned as with Sophie's mother, Monique, selecting the things she wanted to do for the last time. There's a list on the wall.
- Rebecca** It's just like Sophie's artwork. There may be a firm plan, rules or instructions- in this case, to record her mother's passing - but there is still much chance and fortuity. The works in the next room have the guiding rule written high up above them.

## Gallery 8: The Bronx

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- Daniel** Sophie refers to the next three pieces as 'Journeys'. According to this instruction she asked passers-by in this notorious no go district of New York to take her to a place that was meaningful to them.
- Rebecca** The text in the frames explains where they took her and the things they told her. One man took her to a bank as it was his ambition to have a bank account. Another homeless person took her to the house he had grown up in.
- Daniel** They made really meaningful choices. I wonder where I would take her in my hometown that means something to me. Why is there writing all over the work?
- Rebecca** Someone broke into the gallery where it was first shown and covered the work and walls in graffiti. Sophie decided to leave it as she thought it made the work better. Others may call that person a vandal, but she describes them as an unexpected collaborator.

Which **special place** would you take a **stranger** to? Why?

**Describe** it to someone else.

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Lots of people seem **willing to take part** in the requests Sophie makes.

**Would you** take a stranger somewhere if they asked you to?

What would you **get out of** doing this?

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**Would you** want to go somewhere with a stranger?

Do you think this was a **safe** thing for Sophie to do?

What do you think she was trying **to achieve** through this?

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How would you feel if someone **wrote over** your artwork?

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Take someone to a **place** within your local or immediate environment and **describe why** you selected it.

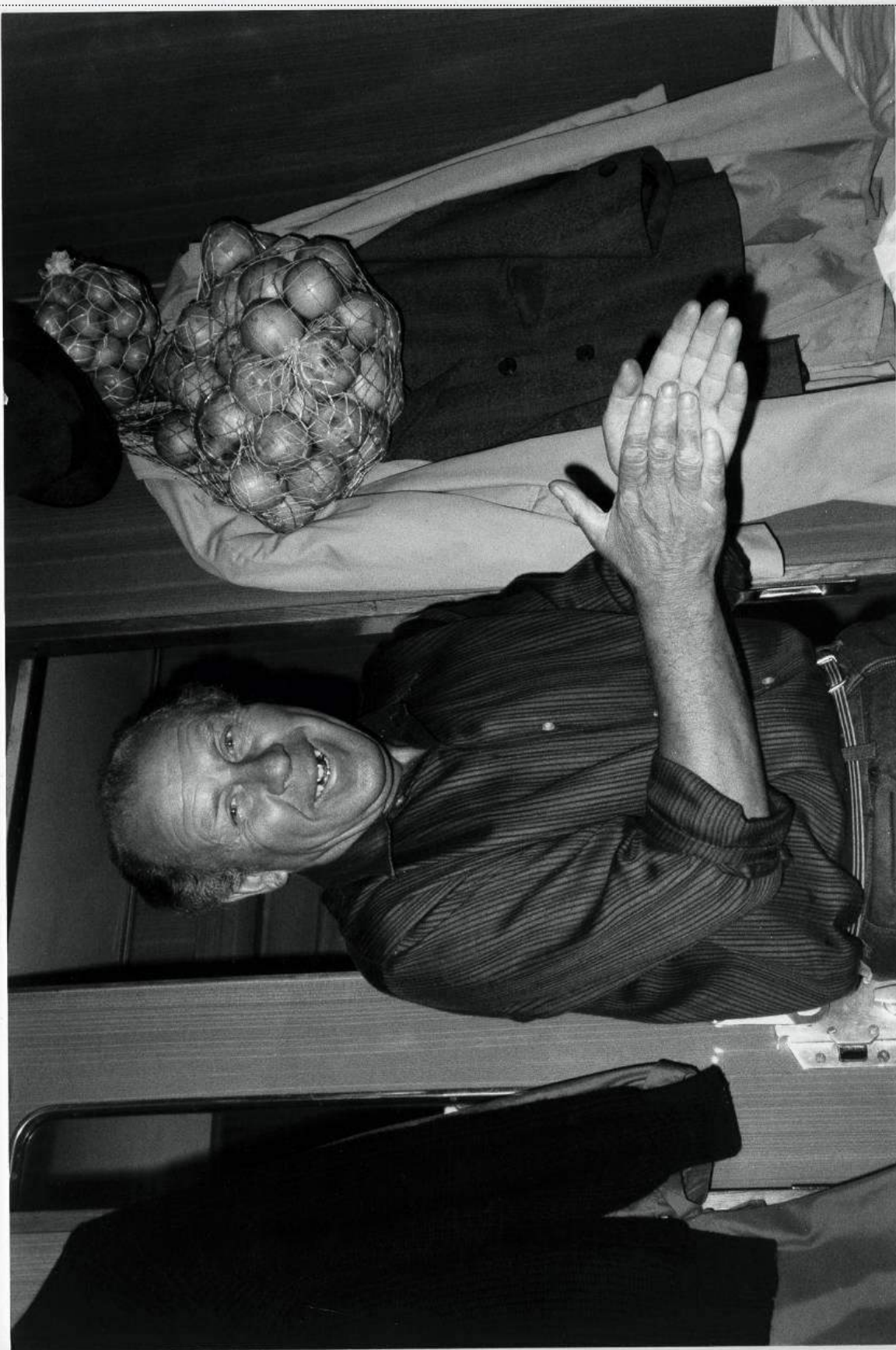
**Ask** other people to **take you** to nearby places and **record** the reasons for their choices.

Had you **noticed** any of these places before?

Do they seem **different** to you now?

Does doing this **reveal to you** anything about yourself?

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Photograph from *Anatoli*, 1984, 19 x 24cm

## Gallery 8: Anatoli

Rebecca

These photos are of a man called Anatoli that Sophie spent a long train journey with. They were in a cabin that only slept two for a number of days.

Daniel

I'm trying to guess, by looking through the photos, what they had in common and what they talked about.

Rebecca

Actually they spoke different languages so they couldn't really 'talk' to each other, but they still managed to communicate. One of the first things Anatoli said to Sophie was 'Kasparov?', the name of a famous chess player. He wanted to know if Sophie played and when he found she didn't he tried to change cabin.

Daniel

It easy to make first impressions and judgments on people without getting to know them. I wonder if Sophie was really herself in front of this stranger or if she tried deliberately to be someone else.

Tell someone what your **biggest love** or **hobby** is using just **gestures** and **no words**.  
Now try the **same** using **drawing** or **mark making**.

Are there people in your group who speak **different languages**?  
See if they can make themselves **understood** to other **non-speakers** by telling them a simple song, phrase or anecdote.

Sophie and Anatoli had a **shared vocabulary** of around **ten words**.  
Make a list of **ten words** and try to **communicate** in pairs using **just these**.  
Your ten words should include words such as:

A **greeting** (like hello or alright!)

The **name** of a famous person (perhaps an artist or musician)

A named **place** (London, the East-End, Whitechapel)

**Somewhere to go** (a supermarket, an art gallery, the swimming pool)

**Food types** (Anatoli had brought along food including tangerines and hard-boiled eggs)

**Watch** each pair **trying to communicate**. Is it easier to **understand** when you are **involved** or **observing** it?

If you could take on a **new personality** to define yourself to a stranger **what** would it be?  
How could you **convince** them that that is truly **who you are**?

## Gallery 8: Berck

Daniel

Some of the chance and accident in Sophie's work seems to come by asking other people to instruct her. Here she has asked a clairvoyant to make a card prediction everyday in order to guide what she should do, resulting in a trip to a seaside town and an amazing coincidence...

Use a set of **playing cards** or **dice** to determine a **journey** you might go on.

You will have to make up the **rules** i.e which **places** or **actions** relate to which numbers or suits. Start with places within or nearby where you are based.

**Choose** carefully as you must be prepared to **follow** where **chance** may lead.

**Document** your journey using **text**, **photographs** or both.

Perhaps use a roadmap, train map or atlas and **relate places to numbers** on the dice or cards in the pack to plan a **journey** you **can't actually go on**.





From *Gotham Handbook*, 1990, colour photo mounted on aluminium, 180 x 120 cm



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## Gallery 8: The Detachment

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**Rebecca** These books contain conversations Sophie had with people about their memories of monuments that were removed after the Berlin wall came down.

**Daniel** I only have vague memory of that happening.

**Rebecca** In 1989 the people of Berlin tore down the wall that had divided it for nearly 30 years. It formed part of the border set up by the communist East German government to divide it from West Germany. The books also have an image of the actual monument. You need to peer round the pages to see as the books mark easily and should not be touched.

**Daniel** It's interesting how the missing monuments are replaced with the described memories of people who were there, but they can't quite remember what the monuments actually looked liked.

**Rebecca** But they do remember what they stood for?

Can you tell from the photographs that something has been removed?  
How?  
Describe a monument you would like to see there instead.

Play the 'memory game' – get your group to look for a few minutes at a number of objects placed together and try to remember what is there. While no-one can see, take one of the objects away. Do people know which one has gone?  
Can they describe it?

## Gallery 8: Gotham Handbook

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**Rebecca** Here Sophie has asked the Writer Paul Auster to give her a set of instructions to follow. Amongst other things he asked her to look after a chosen place, and to smile at strangers.

**Daniel** She has chosen a phone booth as her 'place', look there is a big photograph of how it looked when she tried to make it better. There are books and tissues, welcome banners and even a banana! It is quite funny how she describes having to practice smiling at people before she could do it convincingly.

**Rebecca** It is an attempt to improve people's lives.

Set each other three simple rules to follow when moving around the gallery:  
This might involve other visitors to the gallery, smiling at people or taking the same route as another around the artworks.  
It might be about how to view the artwork: through one eye, for exactly five minutes or on one leg.

**Cultivate a spot** in your local or immediate environment  
Take **responsibility** for it, clean it, make it more pleasant  
Spend time **watching** and **recording** what happens there, see if you **learn** anything

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## Gallery 8: The Sleepers

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**Rebecca** This was made 30 years ago, before Sophie called herself an artist. She asked people to sleep in her bed for shifts – one in as one gets out.

**Daniel** I like the documentary style. She writes that she offered clean sheets to people but some weren't worried about this and others wanted to know who had previously been in the bed before deciding.

**Rebecca** There was no reward offered to people to do this but she still found enough to fill the bed for a week, including people she had never met before. There is a lot of trust in inviting people you don't know to sleep in your bed, but also trust from them for falling asleep in a stranger's bed knowing you will be photographed.

A bed can be a place of **safety** or of **sickness**. How is your bed important to you?

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Look at the way Sophie **describes** the **actions** of the people in her bed. Can you mirror her **style**?

**Watch** or **follow** a visitor for a few minutes as they move around the gallery and **record their actions**. This could be by writing, drawing or just in your memory.

What are the **important**, **boring**, and **interesting** things to describe?

What can you **leave out**? What **must** you **put in**?

**Why** did you pick that person?

How would **you feel** if you discovered someone was **following you** and describing your actions?

**Occupy a new space**. A chair you never sit in, under a table, in a cupboard. **How does it feel?**

**Watch** someone occupy a different space. **How do they look different?**

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Find a **place to occupy** for a short time that you might **not normally be allowed**, the teachers desk, someone's study, in the loft. You will need to **ask permission**, you may need to **offer something in return**, use of your own private space, a favour.

**Imagine** that **someone else** is **following you** and **recording your actions**. Try to **describe** what they might notice

Get a **friend** to **follow you** and **take photographs**. Use these to **describe** your actions.

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## Gallery 8: Journey to California

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**Rebecca** A man wrote to Sophie after his long-term relationship ended asking if he could spend the rest of his time grieving the relationship in her bed.

**Daniel** Sounds like just the sort of thing she'd be interested in.

**Rebecca** Actually, she thought it was a bit of a tricky request to deal with. You can see why in the letters. But she did send him her bed so his request was fulfilled.

Having looked at a number of Sophie's works now you must have formed an opinion of **what she is interested in** and what **sort of person** she is.

What would **you ask** her to do **for you**?

What would **you ask** to do **for her**?

**How** would you ask her? By email, phone, text, letter or another way?

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## Gallery 8: The Address Book

- Daniel** I've heard about this artwork before, it is one of Sophie's earliest and most famous artworks.
- Rebecca** I wouldn't have the nerve to take a stranger's address book, call their friends and then publish those conversations about the stranger in a national newspaper.
- Daniel** He had been on holiday and was very angry when he returned and found out.
- Rebecca** I am not surprised, I would be too!
- Daniel** Sophie felt she had gone too far and crossed a line with this work. From then on she resolved to try and use herself more as the object of her artwork rather than risk exploiting others.
- Rebecca** Perhaps it is her most infamous work!

The images in the newspaper relate to something that Sophie felt **emerged** during her **conversations**. **Find a conversation to eavesdrop.** Draw and doodle whilst listening. Try **not to** focus on illustrating the narrative, just **pull out images** from what is being said.

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If you are in a large group divide into **groups of five**.

Pick **one person** in each group to be your '**stranger**'.

**Everyone** in the group should **write one word/draw one image** that **describes** the 'stranger' or the 'stranger's' personality or interests. The 'stranger' should do this too.

**Reveal** your descriptions to the **other groups** – can they work out **who** your 'stranger' is.

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What **aspects/elements of** a person can **you choose** to describe them?

Think about the many ways that your descriptions could be **wrongly interpreted**?

## Gallery 8: Cash Machine/Unfinished

- Daniel** What about this piece around the corner then showing images of people using a cash machine. They don't look to me as though they are aware of being caught on camera.
- Rebecca** A bank commissioned this piece and gave her the images to use. She tried finding a way to add text to the images for many years including seeing a hypnotist but was not happy with anything she tried. In the end she decided it could stand as it was - a monument to failure.
- Daniel** You could say that these images are stolen. Having them in the gallery like this raises a lot of questions about personal privacy and ideas of a surveillance state.

What do you think some of these people are **thinking about** whilst they are using the cash machine?

Do you think **all** of them were able to **withdraw money**?

**Why** does the bank have security cameras at its cash-points?

**Would you feel comfortable** with images such as these of you being shown in a **gallery**?

**How do you feel** about security cameras?

**What is it** about Sophie's work that **prompted the bank** to choose her to **commission**?

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From *Take Care of Yourself*, 2007

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**Daniel** It seems that Sophie is always looking for someone to tell her what to do. But how does she choose? There must be people suggesting things to her all the time now she's so well known.

**Rebecca** She won't do just anything, it has to fit in with the ideas she wants to pursue.

**Daniel** Do you think she invites suggestions so as to have more ideas to choose from?

**Rebecca** I went to an exhibition she had in 1999 and there was a suggestion box from Sophie requesting ideas for an activity she might undertake. I asked her to DJ at my wedding.

**Daniel** Did she?

**Rebecca** No!

**Daniel** Some of her more recent work has involved enacting errors that journalists have made about her.

**Rebecca** What do you mean?

**Daniel** Well, for example if someone has mistakenly written that she works with deaf people then she goes and works with deaf people.

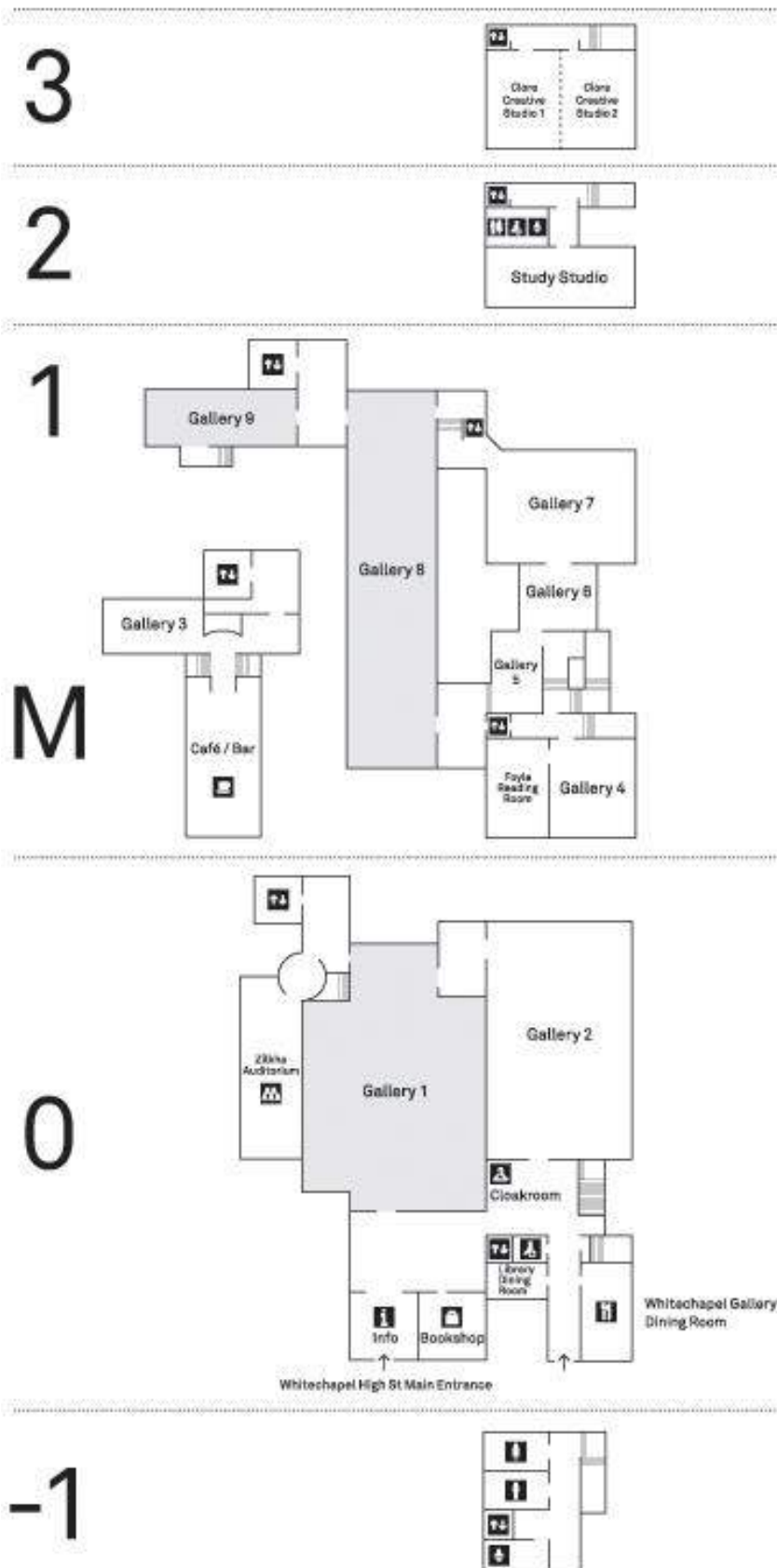
**Rebecca** Oh, so instead of getting annoyed she looks for mistakes and turns them into a game.

**Daniel** I hope we haven't made any mistakes?

**Rebecca** I hope we have!

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## Whitechapel Gallery Floorplan



To book your group visit and use of our Education Space (Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday during term time) contact: [education@whitechapelgallery.org](mailto:education@whitechapelgallery.org)