An Unrehearsed Adventure
Emiliano Battista in Conversation with Scott Samuelson

Emiliano: The first thing that struck me about Sophie is that she has been a relatively quiet artist. I couldn't find an interview or conversation with her in print. A search on YouTube turned up none of the ubiquitous two-minute clips in which we see an artist speaking about a new show or piece. There are no artist's talks on Vimeo. She did give me some texts written for one or another exhibition – their presence is a reality that even the most reticent of artists has had to accept – but nothing in which I could hear her voice discussing her work. This is unusual given that the art world has been for quite some time an enormous machine for the production of discourse. The days when artists, such as Andy Warhol, would answer interviewers' questions with amused monosyllables ('Yes'/'No') are long gone; so too is Plato's idea that if you want to understand what poets do and how poetry works, you should not waste your time asking poets, for they will not know.

Now artists are expected to talk, for the simple reason that they're always already *also* editors, theoreticians, researchers, political activists, social workers, journalists, educators, collectors, curators, chefs, historians, lecturers, etc. Not as sidelines to their work, but as their work. Small wonder, then, that what we might think of as academic, political or journalistic forms of expression and knowledge sharing have become forms of artistic practice, resulting in a proliferation of books, conferences, talks and the like.

Scott: What you're calling an 'enormous machine for the production of discourse' is hardly limited to the art world. Jacques Derrida once declared that there is nothing *hors-texte*, and ever since then it's felt like nothing but text, textuality, texting – much of it blah-blah-blah.

Emiliano: Right, and what struck me about Sophie is that she has not framed her work in a web of theories, stated commitments or historical references that weave themselves into the fabric of the work and orient its reception. What is more, her multidisciplinary work is mostly silent as well. She works with video, but she doesn't make documentaries, film-essays or features about current or historical events. Her videos can be ranged into two types. There are those in which she stages a scene, such as *Shadow Boxing*, *Excess of Yang* or *Over the Sea*. And there are those in which she positions the camera and observes a scene that has for one reason or another captured her eye: people crossing an overpass (*Passerelle*); a man standing on the helm of a boat, the wind flapping his wide trousers (*Homme debout*); a vendor in some sort of ticket booth, his face framed by the metal grille (*Homme en cage*); recording the sunlight as it filters into her studio through the windows (*Recording the Light*), or as it shimmers in dots on the sea's surface (*Bling Bling*).

Scott: I think Sophie's quietness makes space for intimacy. All the artist statements and theoretical interpretations in the world, even when they're illuminating (they're usually the opposite), don't add up to intimacy. It's not simply about feeling close, although that's part of it. It's certainly not about coming to an understanding, although connecting can also be part of intimacy. Intimacy has something to do with revealing vulnerability, but it also has something to do with the strangeness of that revelation. I'm shocked at how little I know about other people, even people I've known for years, even my own

children. What are they thinking? How does music sound to them? Where are their borders of comfort and anxiety? I'm also shocked by how little I know about myself. What am I really thinking and feeling? Where are my borders? That confusion is the moment of vulnerability where – with a touch of art – intimacy happens.

Sophie's videos are often funny, not necessarily in the laugh-out-loud sense, but in the sense that they embody the structure of humour. Think of the rueful humour of *Conversation Piece I*, where the tension between her and the cook is released in his throwing food at her mouth. The usually simple act of eating becomes a menacing process of feeding: a low-tech but equally inefficient version of the feeding machine in Chaplin's *Modern Times*. The structure of humour reveals something (so this is how her mind works) and conceals it too (I have no idea what she's thinking). This reversal makes her work feel intimate, maybe because that's how we encounter ourselves. I, for one, have been known to laugh in moments of intimacy.

Emiliano: Maybe the video that most clearly embodies the structure of humour is *Excess of Yang*, where we discover at the end that the Formula One car the artist had supposedly been driving at amazing speed has in fact been parked the whole time, its wheels spinning in the air. Chaplin and Keaton would have approved; think of Keaton on the handlebars of a motorcycle whose driver, he discovers after a while, is long gone.

Quietness and the structure of humour meet in *La dormeuse*, a tongue-in-cheek work in which we see the artist dozing off at an outside café, her head – in a distant echo of a couple of Modigliani portraits – propped horizontally on an obliging hand while people talk all around her. Sophie's work is an exploration of the paradoxical force of this slumbering and silent body, and the image of her dozing unperturbed by the surrounding chatter can be seen as a metaphor for her attitude and aesthetic practice more broadly.

Scott: Another aspect of Sophie's intimacy, similar to humour, involves seeing and being-seen. The early work *Diptyque Autoportrait* is a split screen where we can see what she's seeing and see her at the same time. In *Random Fight*, she appears as two video-game avatars of herself, each attacking the other, as if operated by players who have yet to learn how the controls work. She's attacking herself: now there's a symbol I have no problem connecting with! In *Desk Peace*, she looks straight into the camera as she delivers a series of punches: she's attacking us. Even *Over the Sea*, which is tightly focused on her lower legs and the back of her feet as she's walking in high heels, makes me feel both voyeuristic (I'm staring relentlessly at her legs) and sympathetic (I'm aware of her awkwardness in navigating the terrain in heels). It's not that I feel how she sees or see how she feels, but I feel close to such feeling and seeing.

In the *Letter to Edgar King*, Hugo von Hofmannsthal says, 'Most people do not live in life, but in a simulacrum, in a sort of algebra in which nothing exists and in which everything only signifies. I would like to profoundly experience the being of each thing.' He also says, 'One can never express a thing quite as it is.' Both remarks are suggestive of Sophie's work.

Emiliano: Those passages from Hofmannsthal crystallise my sense that Sophie's videos are not epic poems but visual haikus. Whether staged or not, the videos are fully consumed in a singular observation, in the laser beam focus on a situation or moment, which she never allows to dissolve into investigations of the

conditions of possibility of what is observed, or into what those conditions tell us about perception, the world or the economy. Take the famous haiku by Ezra Pound: 'The apparition of these faces in the crowd:/Petals on a wet, black bough.' We don't know anything about these faces: to whom do they belong? where are they going? where did they come from? We know that they are. We know also that, like the petals, the full meaning of their existence is contained in their apparition. The same holds for the people crossing the overpass, for the man in the ticket booth, for the birds perching on the electricity line at dusk, for the light shimmering on the sea's surface. To ask if Pound's faces and Sophie's birds mean anything beyond their existence is to miss the point, and yet our instinct is to do just that: for the most part, we paper over the mute presence of things with the 'algebra' of meaning. Actually, we expect art to be one of the highest forms of that algebra, and we're often at a loss when it foils our expectations. It's important to mention here that we cannot understand Sophie's quietness as a negative, an absence, a mere refusal to speak. It's easy to say nothing, and even easier to act as if the refusal to speak were the manifestation of a deeper wisdom. That doesn't undo meaning, it just refuses to play the game. It's harder, though, to subvert the algebra from inside, to push the tendency to signify inherent to every representation to the point where it starts to come undone and the mute presence of things appear. Sophie plays the game: she positions her camera in front of birds, the sea, her own self; she traces lines on paper and drills holes into wood panels to let the light shine through; she shapes matter into form. She takes the risk of addressing her self and things, of sounding them out, and she does not shy away from their silence.

Scott: What you're describing as the haiku element in Sophie's work is perhaps another kind of intimacy, when we're able to see or be without worrying about what we're seeing or being: an intimacy with life. You've just referred to the work of Sophie's I come back to most, especially when I'm feeling out of balance myself. In *Life Balance*, a string of birds perched on a wire is agitated, and they swoop up into the air before settling back down, bird by bird, in a not-quite-perfect row along the wire. Cars go by, many probably heading home, as the sky over the mountains is purple. On a flagpole the American flag and a POW/MIA ('You are not forgotten') flag flap in the breeze. The finale of the video involves the few last birds flying around until they find their spaces. The whole thing is incredibly mundane, and yet when the last bird finds its spot on the crowded wire, I feel an enormous sense of peace and triumph.

The haiku in her work connects to another element: what I'll call, for lack of a better term, 'spiritual discipline', where she stages an encounter with her own life in an effort to find intimacy with it. The video that most clearly shows this element is *Shadow Boxing*, where a martial artist delivers blow after blow an inch away from her, and she takes it without flinching. This is the work of the self on the self that I could imagine in the repertoire of ancient Stoic discipline.

In the original ink drawings of the series *Self-Portrait as a Volcano*, she finds a technique – depicting things with wavy sets of horizontal or vertical lines – and uses it to draw an imagined volcano. The drawing makes no bones about its being a drawing, something made by her hand, but it also clearly registers as a volcano. Then she draws the volcano again: what would it look like under different circumstances? Then again. It takes on a personality, a self. Because she is making it with her own technique, it is *her* self. It is changing. She is changing. What is it doing to her to draw it? What we as the viewers see – and this applies more broadly to her work – is twofold: first, a set of ink-on-paper

volcano drawings (with iterations in other media); second, the record of what I'm calling a spiritual discipline, the work of the self on the self, which is rooted in the most confusing, most astonishing intimacy of all: being a self.

Emiliano: I see the drawings as explorations of textures and contrasts (holes, rips, tears, layering), and of the interplay between figuration and abstraction (two recent series, *Cotton Candy Landscapes* and *Plaster Landscapes*, offer good examples). Her sculptures, for their part, are concerned with creating textured spaces or environments and shaping light; her interventions in public space and her *in situ* drawings seem above all to attest to a fascination – natural, perhaps, for someone who uses light as matter – for shadows and shimmers. A recent piece consisted of attached pieces of bamboo that formed a zigzagging line across a pond. It's a work that existed at the very margins of the visible: it almost merged entirely into its environment. But it produced a stunning effect: the surface of the water was ruffled by the wind on one side of the bamboo and smooth as a mirror on the other. It was like drawing on water using an extreme economy of means: one crooked line traced across a pond. Sophie is attentive to these effects. Indeed, the title of the piece, *Des ronds dans l'eau*, actually describes the ripple effect produced when a stone is thrown into a body of water, and not the shape of the bamboo itself.

Scott: I find myself asking the question '*Where* is Sophie's art?' In one sense, this question applies broadly in an age when a video installation in Madrid is just as likely to be seen online by someone in Iowa City as by someone in Madrid. But the question applies more specifically to Sophie's work. When it's intimately situated in a place, it puts the place and the art in a new relationship. The lighting isn't just a way of showing the work but part of it. In the video *Ligne*, she draws a chalk line – crookedly – down the centre of a road and then continues to draw it off road. Other artists do similar things to blur the distinction between art and reality, but that doesn't seem to be what Sophie's up to. Her art is comfortable with dwelling in several places at once – in the line, on the road, off the road, in the video, in this book, in the ongoing process of finding her way.

Emiliano: The line is a persistent and fundamental motif in Sophie's work. In *Ligne*, the chalk line at first doubles the line created by the road, until it breaks off on its own, as if it had missed a turn and kept on going. The video *Road Stretch* is a double projection: on one side, the blue line created by the crash barrier cuts the landscape horizontally, while on the other the structure of a bridge cuts the landscape vertically. *Contre-basse* is a different articulation of the same juxtaposition: for two minutes, we see a bow slowly gliding across the strings of a cello – the whole work is in the interplay between the vertical strings and the horizontal bow. The face of the man in *Homme en cage* is both framed and cut by the vertical bars. In *Passerelle*, the procession of figures walking across the overpass is framed, at the bottom, by the sides of the structure. In *Maniaco-depressif Tam Tam*, the cityscape in the distance is cut by the vertical line traced by a human figure (the artist herself) jumping up and down in slow motion. *Scène d'attente* is set in a church and in a theatre, and what seems to catch Sophie's eye is the orderly rows of chairs gradually being filled up by human presences; at one point, the image freezes just as one person in the theatre turns his head to look behind him, breaking for a second the symmetrical order of the whole. *Pong 1972* is not only another video-game reference, but a sort of companion piece to *Life Balance*, except that in *Pong 1972* the line cutting the horizon is that of a funicular

(the planes flying by in the background – accelerated and staccato presences reminiscent of early video-game technology – draw yet another line). A recent work, entitled *Frieze*, consisted of a long strip of pink paper, evenly creased so that it seemed at once contractible and expandable, cascading from the ceiling and arranged in a large coil on the floor. There is *Endless Landscape*, *Montagne au mètre*, *Recording the Light*, the *in situ* drawing *Tancat per obres*… the list can go on and on. And, were we to be thorough and exhaustive, we would have to consider the fact that walking is a way of tracing a line and is itself, like the line, a recurring and insistent motif. Without a line, the horizon would not be the horizon, but an undifferentiated continuum receding into the distance. Similarly, without holes to channel the sunlight, light would have no tangible form, but would be nothing more than a diffused luminosity.

Regarding your question, '*Where* is Sophie's art?', I'll limit myself to mentioning this, which I think needs to be considered: in *Shadow Boxing*, the pugilist's blows never touch Sophie's immobile and unflinching figure, but they do come close enough for her hair to billow in the wind generated by his speed and for her frame to be obscured by the shadow of his punches. Wind, shadow, light. None of this is accompanied by pronouncements about the politics of light and shadow, or of the line, or of walking; or about the perils of climate change, the state of feminism, violence; or the equal capacity for tenderness and cruelty inherent to the closest family bonds (a theme Sophie explores in *Transmission*). That is not to say, of course, that these issues are absent from the work.

Scott: Thank God Sophie doesn't use her art to preach at me about the horrors of neo-liberalism!

Imagine this scenario. With a few patrons at a bar you strike up a conversation about the news on TV. If you find that you're all like-minded, isn't it likely that you'll celebrate your wisdom and rectitude and belittle your political opponents for their ignorance and bad motives? But let's imagine that you're not all like-minded. If the group at the bar persists in this mode of engagement, you're likely to get defensive and even be offensive. What if, in the midst of the argument, you relieve the collective pressure by sharing a story, one that opens up about the suffering at the root of your political positions? Isn't this last form of communication the one with the most possibility for making a positive difference – not only in the immediate social environment but in the surrounding political environment?

Art engagé, for better and usually worse, is continuous with the mode of celebration and scorn. Art like Sophie's is continuous with the intimate aside, but it finds a voice up to a bigger task than sharing a personal story. For democracy not to degrade into its worst forms, it's necessary that its voices are unique, real and diverse. It's also important that its voices connect. We can't really have a public life without an intimate life. Insofar as the relentlessly 'social' and mediated quality of our world is eating away at both public and private life, we all need to find – or re-find – our voices. Sophie's is a woman's voice, a cosmopolitan voice, a voice in search of itself. She doesn't preach or whine. She is serious. She can make fun of herself. Her voice enhances the quality of our suffering – often by revealing its absurdity. Her art doesn't speak for us; it whispers to us – in a way that can startle us into a different way of relating. I'd take that over a blistering indictment of neo-liberalism any day!

Emiliano: In many ways, everything that Jacques Rancière has to say about the politics of art is an extrapolation of the dynamics and implications at play in a

joiner who, while working for a wealthy client, pauses to admire the landscape and delight in its beauty. It's a moment that may help us talk about politics in relation to Sophie's work, one that offers the added benefit of being about landscape, a genre Sophie loves. Come to think of it, a lot of her work, across all the media she works in, is in that genre. She has even conceived her upcoming show at CENTRALE in Brussels as an environment-cum-landscape: stars, icebergs, the forest.

It's difficult to discuss politics in relation to Sophie's work because we tend to associate the politics of art with the politics of its subject matter. Art about social and political issues – war, famine, misery, institutional violence and corruption, the ravages of colonialism and so on – is 'political', as if the mere fact of addressing such themes amounted to politics. By the same token, art that doesn't deal with those issues is not. This almost knee-jerk reaction reflects the long shadow cast by Marx's theories of alienation and false consciousness, the idea that the fog produced by capital and bourgeois ideology alienates us from ourselves and makes us incapable of seeing the reality of our condition. Art's political task is thus to fight against this blindness and alienation by piercing through the fog to reveal the mechanisms of oppression. Political art denounces the horrors it renders visible, and denounces as well the horror – psychological and economic – occasioned by our blindness to them. This double denunciation constitutes the moment of 'awareness' that supposedly overcomes alienation and makes us whole: awareness replaces false consciousness and, as un-alienated beings, we can organise to fight against the forces that conspire to oppress us. Some version of this story, which essentially restages Plato's Allegory of the Cave as the story of the masses seeing the light and storming the heavens, continues to guide our thinking today.

If that story makes it impossible to discuss the politics of Sophie's work or of the joiner's experience, the problem is not so much with Sophie and the joiner as with the narrow and ultimately reactionary scope of the story itself. That, at any rate, is Rancière's point. For him, the politics of art has nothing to do with the politics of its subject matter: a film that denounces the way the Belgian government tried to hide its involvement in Patrice Lumumba's assassination is not necessarily more political than Sophie's *Cotton Candy Landscapes*. And that is because politics is not an intrinsic feature of a particular theme or work, but something that exists – as a possibility – in the relationship between the viewer and the work. Differently put, the politics of art is the politics of the aesthetic experience, and that experience is aesthetic to the extent that it is *free* – that is to say, to the extent that it is not identified with a cause or a denunciation, and to the extent that it does not identify the viewer with a body or a people (the worker, the working class, the proletariat, etc.). What the joiner experiences as he looks out at the landscape is not an awareness of his condition as a worker and a newfound identification with the causes of the working class, but rather the very opposite of that: he experiences a liberation from that condition through the freedom to occupy a space or position other than the one he is expected to occupy as a worker. Looking out of the window, he occupies the space of the aesthete who delights disinterestedly in the beauty of the landscape. Alienation and awareness outline a politics of identity, in which the worker is at last able to identify fully with what he or she is supposed to be. Rancière's story is about dis-identifying from my condition and inhabiting – temporarily, precariously – a position other than my own. The politics of art is the politics of this possibility, this freedom. Ultimately, the story of awareness is grounded on the supposed ignorance of the worker who, mired in the fog of ideology, cannot think, see or speak. Rancière's

rejoinder is that the problem is not that workers can't think, see or speak, but that philosophers can't listen. Be that as it may, Rancière happens to think, for a number of reasons, that 'engaged' art doesn't offer the space for this freedom, because it tends to anticipate, and format, the viewer's reaction: identity, outrage, indignation, etc. I hope these schematic remarks suggest a lens through which it makes sense to speak about the politics of pink and yellow and white landscapes, of volcanoes as self-portraits, of bamboos attached to one another and placed on a pond, of the play of light and shadow.

Scott: Most artists can be understood through how they register and use light. Sophie's use of light and shadow is often connected to violence. In *Shadow Boxing* there's a close-up of her arm where we see the flickering shadow of the martial artist's repeated blows. The shot, which looks almost like an abstract work, is a quiet drama of light – made by violence. Another good example is *Drilling for Light*, where the dots of light are made by puncturing the art itself. I'm reminded of Lucio Fontana's canvases in this regard.

I would also connect her use of light to intimacy. Light isn't about a particular meaning. It's about the act of meaning itself: illumination – and the shadows cast by illumination. She seems irresistibly drawn to how and where light works. Sometimes whole works are devoted to this subject. Other times the fascination with light is a break from trying to parse what's going on. Here is where her work is the most *beautiful*, for light is lovely – the 'bling bling' of existence.

Recording the Light, where she keeps taping around squares of sunshine as they shift, acts out our perennial wonderment at light not staying put. At the beginning of the 12th century Al-Ghazali says, 'The strongest of the senses is the sense of sight. Now this looks at a shadow and sees it standing still and motionless and judges that motion must be denied. Then, due to experience and observation, an hour later it knows that the shadow is moving, and that it did not move in a sudden spurt.' The problem isn't exactly the sense of sight, for, as *Recording the Light* shows, with the drawing of a line we *see* just how fast patches of sunlight or shadows travel. The problem is some deep difficulty in accepting change. Sophie's labour of taping around squares of sunlight again and again – and, by extension, her entire fascination with depicting the movement of light – doesn't evoke despair over our inability to seize time. If anything, it reconciles us with our absurd and sometimes beautiful relationship to change, which is intimately related to our relationship to light. Al-Ghazali gets closer to the issue when he says, 'One should be most diligent in seeking the truth until he finally comes to seeking the unseekable.'

Emiliano: I once asked Sophie about her influences, about the art that she converses with and talks to through her work, and I must admit I was a little puzzled by what she said. Mostly, she mentioned painters – Joachim Patinir, Piero della Francesca, Rembrandt, Giotto and Bosch – pointing out that, although she does not paint, she sees herself as a painter. Patinir made some sense given Sophie's fascination with landscape, the genre he is best known for. His landscapes, moreover, include strange cloud formations and jutting hills that bear a kinship to Sophie's work. When you look at them through her work, you realise just how odd the clouds and mountains are: strange abstractions with rough textures that almost seem disconnected from the whole and attract your attention rather than disappearing into the scenery. Focusing on them gives you the eerie feeling that they were waiting – and it would take a few hundred years – until the

moment when people decided that they were good enough on their own. Rembrandt no doubt has something to do with the play of light and shadow. Bosch was a stretch: his universe is governed by a sense of ultimate punishment and reward that seems entirely alien to Sophie's. That said, and this brings us back to the question of humour, Bosch is also kind of funny, and it's impossible not to imagine him smiling mischievously at some of the horrors he depicted. Besides painters – and maybe you'll know what to do with the ones I haven't discussed – she mentioned classical music, particularly pieces for piano and cello, which she puts on repeat while working. Maybe there's an important point here – namely that influence is not only about finding evident traces of Patinir and Bach in this or that piece, but about gaining a glimpse into the inner conversation that goes on during the creative process. What Sophie gets from music is not something in particular, but a certain idea of rigour and a structure that depends on the repetition of motifs: drilling holes into thin sheets of wood, or methodically piercing or tearing paper both seem like they could be linked to fingers running over keys, or bows gliding across strings, knowing that the tiniest change will produce entirely different results. This opens up another possible reading of *Contre-basse*: not just a piece about the interplay of horizontal and vertical lines, but about Sophie's creative process. She also mentioned Ingmar Bergman, and that's an easier line to follow: *Transmission* revisits a theme – the relationship between mother and daughter, into which Sophie introduces the granddaughter as well – that Bergman, at least in film, made his own. The only contemporary figure she mentioned is Etel Adnan, and that I see immediately: the *Cotton Candy Landscapes* series strikes me as a tribute to that artist.

Scott: I remember reading lectures by Frank Stella where he looks to Caravaggio as a model for how to advance abstraction. The idea is that Caravaggio, coming after the artistic explosion of the 16th century, explores tactility, light and space in dramatic ways that are suggestive to artists, like Stella, striving to do something new and arresting after the heyday of abstract art. When I think of Sophie's work, I think almost the reverse of Stella's position. She seems to take inspiration less from those who master or renew a tradition and more from those who work at the margins of shifting traditions – more early Renaissance than Baroque. In figures such as Giotto or Piero, we feel like light and shape are being seen afresh, and techniques are being improvised rather than reinvented. Stella's question – how can I make something interesting in the wake of geniuses like Pollock? – seems far from Sophie's mind. Her art seems to have two interrelated concerns: the work of self-knowledge and the play of light. Had she been an artist five or six hundred years ago, she would have been wondering how best to paint a column's shadow in ways that glorify the geometry of sunlight and activate the salvation of her soul. Just as the early Renaissance masters were finding ways out of a tradition where art was freighted with meaning, Sophie is moving beyond a similar inheritance, where modernism strove to mean everything and postmodernism dwelt anxiously with the inability to mean anything. Patinir likes clouds. Sophie likes cotton candy. Clouds and cotton candy are good enough: they don't have to mean anything.

Obviously, Sophie's mention of Rembrandt and Bergman goes beyond my point, as they *are* perfections of their traditions, but I would guess that their appeal lies in the intense investigation of psychology by means of light and shadow.

Emiliano: The first time I visited Sophie's studio was on a sunny spring morning, and I was reminded of Joan Didion, who says that, as a child, Georgia O'Keeffe painted 'watercolours with cloudy skies because sunlight was too hard to paint'. One of the windows of the studio was covered with two large wooden sheets, dark and perforated, so that the sunlight filtered into the studio not as an undifferentiated luminosity, but as shafts of light that fell in irregularly spaced dots on the studio floor, like glitter, or like the dots of light in *Bling Bling*. It was hard to know what to look at – in other words, it was hard to know what was the work: the dots of light on the floor, or the perforated sheets covering the window. Had the latter been placed on a wall instead, they would have produced a different effect and been an entirely different work. We could say, circling back to the question of where the work is, that this ambiguity or indeterminacy is just another instance of a well-known trope of postmodern thought: the dissolution of the artwork into a pure and ephemeral affectivity. There may be truth to that, but it may also be the case that the ambiguity here is rooted in the paradoxical attempt of inventing ways to turn light itself, that most immaterial matter, into work.

Something similar is at play in the *Cotton Candy Landscapes*, a series of drawings done using cut-outs of pink and yellow paper. We see what the title invites us to imagine as mountain ranges or valleys, although these have been reduced to colour swathes that eliminate everything that makes a landscape distinctive, giving us only ragged outlines in which the alternation between bright pink and soft yellow recreate the gradations of light. Looking at these works is a bit like looking at a landscape in the dying light of day, when everything in front of us starts to lose its specificity and to be visible only as more or less darkened shapes disappearing gradually into the barely illumined horizon. Or like the images in a geography textbook, where a landscape or terrain is rendered as a series of lines on a graph. But more than that distant memory from the classroom, Sophie's *Cotton Candy Landscapes* conjure up the – far more thrilling – memory of the fair, where most of us experienced for the first time the strange alchemy of sugar, of the colour you pleased, being spun into candy on a wooden stick. Come to think of it now, the encounter with cotton candy may be our first metaphysical moment, the first moment when sensory perception seems truly inadequate to the experience: the conjuring of something out of nothing, the massive but weightless bulk, the liquefaction of matter in our mouth.

Scott: Just the idea of cotton candy makes me smile at a childhood fantasy, eating a pink cloud, and a deep-seated memory of a summer dusk at a grubby small-town carnival, a fantasy and a memory that speak to something weird and tender at my core – and, given how you're waxing on about metaphysical moments, probably not uncommon. I understand that Sophie served cotton candy at the opening of the exhibition where the *Cotton Candy Landscapes* were first shown. Imagine all the physical and metaphysical thoughts that were triggered!

Emiliano: Eating and body themes run throughout Sophie's work: *Conversation Piece 1*; the *Cotton Candy Landscapes* series; the working title for the contemporaneous series, *Plaster Landscapes*, had been *Crème fraîche*, because the folding and undulating landscapes look like whipped cream; Sophie constantly refers to the icebergs she's making for the upcoming show at CENTRALE as 'marshmallows'; one of the iterations of *Self-Portrait as a Volcano* is done on gold foil paper plates, as if the work were the food or dish. And there is of course *Conversation Piece 2*, the only other video, along with *Transmission*, in which we

hear a voice. What connects *Conversation Piece 1* to its companion is food: in *Conversation Piece 2*, a woman talks out loud to herself about her vexed relationship to food as she walks in what seems to be a park. The wind is hissing furiously, and the ground is uneven, to judge by the jerkiness of the subjective camerawork, which perfectly matches the woman's disjointed monologue. We see what she sees without ever seeing her, and we hear her speaking, in breathless *non sequiturs*, about the 'monster' within her that binges on food, and about her disordered attempt to master it.

Scott: One of the deep problems we face is the problem of desire. The most common thing for someone holding a menu to say is: 'I don't know what I want.' We stuff ourselves with everything. We also want to be purified of desire, to be in total control of what and how we want. There's always some excess we don't quite know what to do with. Most of us live out minor tragedies of coping with these crossed desires. Those with eating disorders live – and sometimes die – at the most intimate intersection of chaos and control.

When I was invited to be part of this conversation, my teenage daughter was being admitted to an in-patient treatment centre for anorexia nervosa and substance abuse. The synchronicity of Sophie's work and my daughter's own rocky story makes me especially responsive to it.

I know nothing of Sophie's personal story with food and hunger. I assume *Conversation Piece 2* isn't a total invention, although I could be wrong. Either way, her art opens up realities for myself and my daughter: realities of seeing and being-seen, desiring life and desiring death, transmitting and failing to transmit who we are, seeking intimacy with oneself and others, and inhabiting reality, especially as a woman. Her work contains the hunger-artist's alluring No, but I'm grateful that it also contains an irrepressible Yes – the Yes of humour, the Yes of sparkling light, the Yes of cotton candy, the Yes of trying to catch those morsels of food being thrown her way.

Emiliano: I want to switch gears and talk about the composition and organisation of this book. The first time I met Sophie to discuss it, she told me that the only thing she was committed to was the inclusion in the book of a conversation between herself and another artist, preferably a woman. There was nothing particularly remarkable or unusual about this. On the contrary, a good many of the books produced inside the world of contemporary art feature a conversation, sometimes even more than one – between the artist and a fellow artist, or the artist and a curator, or the curator and a scholar of some kind: philosopher, political theorist, botanist… the possibilities are as varied as the fields that contemporary art is in dialogue with.

But there was something unusual and challenging about the whole enterprise. Given the quietness that in many ways defines Sophie's practice, it will come as no surprise that the book, understood as an ideal medium for the confluence of work and discourse, has been essentially absent from her oeuvre. In her studio, I've seen innumerable notebooks, which she uses to plan out her interventions and works; I've also seen beautiful sketchbooks of varying sizes that are clearly not studies but works: each a unique, although never exhibited, artist's book. Unusual for an artist who has been making and showing work for over a decade, we can count Sophie's own publications on two fingers, and neither is burdened by the overtones of self-promotion that are sometimes the underside of contemporary art publications. The first dates from 1998, when Sophie was among the winners of the Prix de la Jeune Peinture Belge. The second,

Conversation Piece/Shadow Boxing, dates from 2006 and consists of two sturdy booklets – flipbooks, almost – velcroed together: one is white, like the glaring luminosity of *Conversation Piece* (at the time, the number '1' had not been added to the title, since *Conversation Piece 2* had not been made); the other black, like the mood of *Shadow Boxing*. Besides dovetailing with each work, the colour choice was also an interesting, if perhaps unintentional, play on the two colours most commonly associated with books. Each booklet contains a text – printed black on white and white on black – although, curiously enough, Sophie's name does not appear on the copyright page, as if the whole thing had been someone else's idea. I mention all this because otherwise we cannot appreciate the novelty involved in this twin venture into the realm of discourse and the space of the book.

Scott: I think Sophie's intuition fits with the spirit of her artwork, which doesn't speak for others, but for her and for itself. The value of a conversation is that it engages the work without speaking on its behalf. Sophie's art makes me laugh, charms me, moves me. That can be enough. But it also has such a unique presence that I naturally want to respond to it – not to speak for it, but to engage in a conversation with it and about it.

Emiliano: That's how I came to think of it. Over time, it occurred to me that Sophie's desire to have a conversation in the book opened up the possibility for a more wide-ranging exploration of the aesthetic and plastic possibilities of a genre of discourse that, like the bamboo drawn across the pond, exists just on the edge of silence and is, again like the bamboo, provisional. A conversation is something different from a commentary, something other than a discourse of justification whose 'algebra', all too often, results in rendering its object meaningful by rendering it invisible. Or, to put the point using terms specific to bookmaking: by turning the work into an illustration of the author's theses. It was important to avoid this dynamic and to create a space in which the quietness of Sophie's practice and the discursivity of the book could meet on an equal footing. This meant giving graphic form to the idea that a conversation is more intimately connected to its object – which does not mean that it knows its object better, or that it offers a path to greater insights. It only means that conversation relates to its object differently, approaching it more like a fellow traveller or companion than an observer.

It will be said that conversation is the heart of every project, and certainly of every publication such as this one, which is ultimately the fruit of the conversations between artist, editor, graphic designers, authors, etc. Every such book asks to be received as the instantiation of the many conversations at its source, which find their embodiment in the way this piece has been made to speak to that piece, and this text to dialogue with that work or this text. That is all true. But what is also true is that, more often than not, those conversations will all have been divided into discrete units – texts here, images there – that converse only in the expanded sense that one is the object discussed by the other, and both are bound together in the same space. Nothing is more commensurate with this object than that conversation should graft itself onto it as an idea and horizon, but there is a difference between conversation in this expanded sense and conversation as an organising principle, as a presence running through the length of the book and merging with these images. This confluence was a way to capture the intimacy with which conversation relates to its object, as well as a way to stage a more subtle dialectic, what Rancière calls the *chassé-croisé* of words and

images, in which words make us see (which, here, is not synonymous with understanding) and images make us hear.

Scott: I have no official authority to be part of this conversation about Sophie. I'm not an artist, art critic or art historian. I haven't published on contemporary art. I don't know her. I wonder if being part of a conversation with and about her work doesn't give me a leg-up. I have no axe to grind or part to play. She liked a few paragraphs I wrote about food, and I like looking at her work. Michael Oakeshott calls conversation 'an unrehearsed intellectual adventure'. Sophie's work, in its intimacy, makes me wonder if she doesn't prefer an unrehearsed response to it. Nobody really likes a formal rejoinder to an expression of intimacy.

Paul Tillich once remarked that 'faith' is one of those words that need mending before we can use it again. Certainly, that is the case with 'conversation', which has been trashed by corporations forcing 'conversations' on employees so they can have 'a voice', by the media's 24/7 'conversations', and by society's relentless calls for 'conversations' about the injustices we blithely inflict.

The conversations I like best involve intimacy. Here are the situations where I've had the best conversations: with a close friend over drinks, generally late into the night; with a lover, either after sex or after a fight; with students, generally when discovering a new idea that lights up a vista; with my children, usually after one or both of us has been hurt or humiliated. In these moments of intimacy, something real is exchanged – something unrehearsed that surprises both parties.

Emiliano: Oakeshott's is a beautiful definition, and 'unrehearsed' is the word I had been searching for and not finding. The choice for structuring the book around conversation was, indeed, motivated just as much by the attempt to convey something of that quality as by the desire to push Sophie's first instinct to its limit, to see where it would lead us.

As I was considering the unusual arrangement I proposed for this book, I was flooded with ideas. As I mentioned already, contemporary artists often see themselves not just as makers – of sculptures, videos, paintings, drawings, of ephemeral and punctual situations, interventions, environments, and so forth – but also as generators of discourse. I don't mean that in the age-old sense that their work is and has always been an object of discussion among art historians, writers, philosophers, amateurs and, of course, among artists themselves. I mean it, rather, in a more complex sense: for quite some time already, artists have been blurring the lines between the work and the discourse about it by assimilating the latter into the work itself. That audiences have almost come to expect artists to be at the frontlines of the discussion about their work is a symptom that points towards a deeper redefinition of artist and art, and one element of this redefinition is the idea that discourse is not just the surrounding matter that may or may not accompany the work, but a continuation of its possibilities, another one of its manifestations. In this sense, at least, the rise of the lecture performance can be read as an outgrowth of a phenomenon that has dug deep and extensive roots in the world of contemporary art, and whose instantiations are not limited to that genre alone.

The book – and herein lies one of the causes for its ubiquity in that world – provides the ideal medium for embodying this intertwining of lines. And yet, if we put aside the particular case of artists' books, what we notice is that the radicality of artistic propositions, interventions and practices seems to become afflicted by what we could call the 'anxiety of academia' once it encounters the

book: suddenly, a strange commitment to making sure that each thing is in its proper place, a quiet capitulation to the idea that the images on the page are representations, 'citations', of a body of work whose fullness exists elsewhere. This may be one reason why the book in the art world has remained an object that, although omnipresent, has generated virtually no critical discussion. This silence is, at the very least, odd. We came of age at a time when it was assumed as a matter of course that every discourse or practice (theoretical, historical, artistic, etc.) is a meta-reflection, i.e. that it carries within itself the traces of its investigation of and confrontation with its own conditions of possibility. If postmodernism taught us anything at all, it is that no system of representation can lay a legitimate claim to neutrality. Texts produced in and by the art world toe that line: rarely do they fail to remind us that the supposed whiteness of the white cube is pure ideology, that the work exists always, and only, through its negotiation of the forces – political, economic, colonial, gendered, institutional, clinical, etc. – at play in the far from innocent regimes of representation through which it appears. That the book, as a system of representation ubiquitous in the art world, has escaped the long and unforgiving reach of this hermeneutics of suspicion, of the idea that there is no *hors-texte*, is an amazing fact unto itself. But, much as we may look, what we find is that, while white walls aren't innocent, white pages seem to be. The idea for this book was, in part, to complicate this picture by giving graphic form to the conviction that there is no blank space for writing – which means, of course, that there is no blank space for images either.

Scott: I have two personal reasons for liking the idea of having a conversation for this book – and a third reason that pertains directly to Sophie's art.

First, I generally find conversations more interesting than formal criticism – even sometimes more interesting than art itself. I've attended more than one academic presentation where the conversation over wine and cheese was more insightful and less boring than the paper. I've also been at readings where the poet's stories about the poems were more beautiful than the poetry. Thankfully, Sophie's work stands on its own, which is why she can get away with what you're calling her 'quietness': she doesn't need to puff it up with anecdotes or certify it with theoretical maxims.

Second, I suspect that thinking itself is conversation. If you or I had written an essay about Sophie, it would have been the result of conversation – with each other, with others, maybe with Sophie, with the voices in our head. To make the conversation explicit, I hope, keeps our thinking vibrant and avoids the danger of getting too preoccupied with our own voices.

Third, as I've said, I think that conversation suits Sophie's art. Miraculously, her work manages to avoid the frightening question, 'What does this mean?', that stands between so many viewers and so much art. But that's not because her work is simple or even clear. Her work provokes conversation.

Emiliano: In a famous essay, Walter Benjamin argues that we should reconsider the dominant trend to see translation always from the perspective of what has been lost in relation to the original. Perhaps we would do better to focus, not on the way in which a translation falls short, but on the ways in which it prolongs the imaginative life of the text, on how translations introduce new inflections, turns of phrase and expressions into our linguistic consciousness. Benjamin is not disparaging the original, nor is he trying to perform a sleight of hand that would catapult the translation to the status of the original. He is simply suggesting that the original is not the only lens through which translation can be seen – indeed, it

may not even be the most interesting or productive lens. A book of and about an artist's work is itself a translation of a body of work – in Sophie's case: video, drawing, sculpture, *in situ* installations and interventions – into a 'foreign' medium, for the work itself exists elsewhere than on these pages. I would say that part of the value of using conversation as an organising principle is that it has the potential to displace the elsewhere and train our sights, not on the absent fullness that images cannot capture, but on the fullness with which conversation can conjure up works as fragments.

Scott: Or, rather than see them as fragments, which still suggests the possibility of a whole, it might be better to approach them as they are – then talk about them, let them lead us where they will, even off the path, as in *Ligne*. This is why I've been harping on the intimacy of Sophie's art. You don't respond to an intimate act with a question like 'What do you mean by that?' Much less with a statement like 'I see, I see, you're deconstructing the whole notion of meaning.' The gesture itself is meaningful. It's also provocative and strange – in the wondrous rather than the puzzling sense of those words.

Emiliano: When I think about the paradox of Sophie's quiet and conversable qualities, and how her work takes us on an unrehearsed surprising journey, I think about *Over the Sea*, which you have already mentioned as a work of seeing and being-seen. In it, we see the artist herself in high heels, black tights and a green silk skirt walking from Santiago de Compostela to the coast, in what is essentially a pilgrimage away from the holy site. In the course of its nine minutes, the camera frames these feet walking, in fair weather and foul, on cobblestones, asphalt, dirt roads, gravel roads, country roads, hiking paths strewn with rocks, meadows. When she reaches the coast, the camera, finally managing to catch up, positions itself between her legs, and we see, as if emanating from her womb, the sea stretching far out to the horizon, a liberation for eyes that the video had until then confined to feet, lower legs and tiny stretches of varying terrain, a field of vision that reduced the world to an oversized square of hopscotch. I imagine the conversation as these feet, walking the length of the book and tracing a line through the images as they make their way across the varied terrain of Sophie's work, in the hope of reaching, in the end, a vista as eloquent and quiet as the sea stretching out to the horizon.

Scott: Yes, Sophie's art points to itself and then beyond itself, somewhat like the camera going from and through her legs in *Over the Sea*. It can point to the spiritual discipline that brings her closer to herself, to the light that makes art possible, even to what makes existence possible at all.

A haunting work in this last regard is *Transmission*, which shuffles various close-up videos of herself, her mum and her daughter. You don't need any backstory to know that this is a work about three biologically-related generations: the faces are startlingly continuous. The look of the thing, shot in black and white, is mesmerising. Each face is covered with glitter, and lights and shadows pulsate in rhythm on them. (Sophie's imagination is a place where things sparkle.) There's a spooky moment when we see a split screen of their three pairs of eyes glaring out like they're laying a curse on us. Suddenly it's not an individual person who for whatever reason has it in for us; it's like there's a damning power flipping on and off in people like light switches – or, more to the point, like genes on towers of DNA. Over these shuffling images of generations there's the occasional voice-over (Sophie's mother) about the anguish, selfishness and

dreams that course through families. What is passed down, and how? How much of it is transmitted through nature, how much through nurture – or the absence of nurture? How much do we even want to know about ourselves?

Transmission is a self-portrait, one that understands that the self can't be limited to one face. We're back to the influence of Rembrandt. When Sophie's mum talks about being selfish, her face is tripled, and the effect – by mathematical magic – is one of a diminishment of personality. Several times, Sophie's daughter appears alone (once when her grandmother says the past can't be changed), and her presence is enlarged. Because the facial similarities are so strong, and the three generations are posed, dressed and lit almost identically, the differences stand out.

Speaking as a parent myself, I can't help but feel awful. I would like to see myself as Aeneas heading out of the tragic past into an auspicious future, carrying my father on my back and holding my child by the hand. I would like to be known for wisdom, like 'Learn courage from me, and true toil; from others the meaning of fortune.' But I feel like I've dropped Anchises on his bad hip and let Ascanius run off God knows where. Mirroring what I once dreamed of overcoming, I worry that I'm teaching the meaning of fortune rather than courage and true toil.

Sophie's art doesn't have a message that it's trying to transmit. It takes us to the act of transmission itself – family, sunlight, intimacy. Maybe this is why it makes for good conversation, for conversation isn't preaching or lecturing but a form of transmission, where themes emerge, ideas are dropped and taken up again, possibilities are played with, and the goal – if there even is a goal – is the continuation of the conversation, at least until it's time for bed. In one of Emily Dickinson's great poems, the one where she's overwhelmed by 'a certain Slant of light', she says: 'Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –/We can find no scar,/But internal difference –/Where the Meanings, are –'. Sophie's art is generous with heavenly hurt – and, for that matter, slants of light.