

Catherine Bédard; “The Call Girl Effect”,

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Nadine Norman  
Call Girl

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## **The Call Girl Effect**

Catherine Bédard

Initially an artistic undertaking, Call Girl 01 44 43 21 65 has attained, at the end of its 10-week life span, the dimension of a social and media revelation. Everything started, it's true, with a communication strategy which played on the selling schemes of both businesses and cultural events: visiting cards created by the artist distributed in various public places around Paris, publicity in the form of advertising inserts identical to the cards (no picture nor indication of location... sufficiently enigmatic, but still a few unusual references like "a project by Nadine Norman"), and, parallel to this strategy, direct publicity through invitations, press releases and inserts of a more institutional nature announcing that the artist's project would take place in an exhibition space. These crossed signals acted more by infiltration than by bombardment (the nuance is crucial; it's a matter of light artillery here), and should have aroused some suspicion as to the nature of this mysterious enterprise. The media (national and international, newspapers, radio and television) responded one after the other – the news spread like wildfire –, demand exceeding available supply.

From then on, the ambiguity reached critical mass and numerous questions popped up concerning the terms of the project, its goal and its wager: was it an excellent lure or a proposition whose pertinence and efficaciousness were linked to the accuracy of the gaze it directed towards the contemporary world and to its capacity to confront that world with its own expectations? Needless to

say, these two hypotheses are equally legitimate; to dissociate them in a manichean fashion would amount to avoiding a reflection which is obviously taking place, except for those who believe there is only disinterested art. Necessarily "impure," though not necessarily cynical, Norman's project shined an extraordinary spotlight on what interests the media (and, through them, "the public") and equally on what attracts individuals (for if the media became interested, it's because the proposition, as conceptual as it was in the beginning, "hit home," attracting each person within the framework of a strategy whose particularity was to not address itself to the crowd, but rather to individuals, who, ever more numerous, dared come satisfy their curiosity, one by one).

To claim that the project's sexual catch phrase assured its success from the start does not lead us far in the sense that the message was clear ("100% dialogue" and "free encounters by appointments"): there was nothing to buy. This lead-in, to the contrary, could have made it a preemptive flop. What appears more pertinent is to look at the nature of a more complex desire, consisting of the principle of a mutual exhibition, that of a visitor, whose status is undefined (invited to embody the role of participant in an undertaking whose aim he is ignorant of, above and beyond the satisfaction and dissatisfaction of his own experience), and an actress in the role of a call girl. Norman's unclassifiable proposition had the strange power to arouse, through an untouchable yet desirable image, an indeterminable and interminable urge to talk, and this on a game board whose rules were as clearly defined for the artist as undefined for the others.

The nerve center of the installation, which was run by the call girls only three days a week, the telephone, that now archaic instrument, rang frantically on

the average of up to 300 times a day – imagine it, that lonely object sitting there waiting to be picked up – most often echoing in the silent gallery, which had been transformed by a somewhat theatrical decor, until finally the tantalizing voice of a call girl deigned to respond, either directly, or, after the work hours of these ladies, through the triggering of an automatic voice messaging system. Hundreds, then thousands of men and women of all ages, and all backgrounds, as well as couples, enjoyed the experience, and it was necessary to establish a waiting list in order to hold out hope for the unlucky ones in case there was a last minute cancellation on the calendar.

This non-commercial enterprise, though entirely founded on the notion of a specific type of commerce (sex), furnished a free service: offering men and women who desired it a meeting with a call girl and the benefit of a 30 minute tête-à-tête with her. Two major limitations defined the nature of the proposed exchange, one founded on the nature of the service (respecting the “100% dialogue” format), the other on the context of the encounter (the official, public space of the Canadian Cultural Centre, located on the sumptuous Esplanade des Invalides in a mansion belonging to the Canadian Embassy). The dialogue’s physical distance was automatically imposed (with the visitor internalizing the constraints all on his or her own and quite admirably) by the effect of distance created by the context – one that the artist took pains to amplify by using a system of mirroring surveillance cameras which projected onto a wall screen in the entrance hall what was happening during the meeting, and, on a screen installed in the waiting room, the arrival of visitors filmed without their knowledge as they entered the Canadian Cultural Centre. Despite the intimacy promised by the warmth of the first phone contact, the visitor had to merit his or her hostess by passing through this strange

antechamber which is also a public hall. They had to exhibit a common voyeurism, confronted as each was, along with the other persons circulating around there, by a huge yet silent image divided into nine screens which showed the hostess conversing with the preceding client.

One would have thought that this device would make the public flee. The contrary occurred. Obviously the image also had an extreme power of seduction just perfect for sharpening the desire to know more about what was happening up there in that elegant pink salon where apparently very pleasant things were being heard. Without any doubt, once they had entered the image, the clients completely forgot they were now the one being filmed and seen by others, carried away as each was in the reality of the experience, as if, through the magic between the two participants open to risk, this lay beyond representation. Glancing through the notes made regularly by the actresses after each encounter, the human dimension of the project revealed itself in all its complexity. Page after page one can read how the artifice of the game was constantly put at stake through the desire for a real and sincere exchange (the most tender to the most violent). These pages are the archive of a work framed by the artist, yet realized entirely in her absence. They speak of a thousand and one things, and in particular about what a woman is for a man or a woman, the difficulties and pleasures of a relationship, an encounter, a passing affair, of satisfaction and frustration, and finally, especially, of the extraordinary force of what can travel between two people during 30 minutes, and of their mutual willingness to give a palpable depth (if not a meaning) to a moment presented as a emptiness to fill with a simple conversation. If Nadine Norman seeks to confront the visitor with the expectations he or she has in relation to a woman, to the female as object of

sexual fantasy, to an unusual situation where the representation reverses the roles by placing the visitor in the position of examinee, she seeks just as much, perhaps even more profoundly, to confront him or her with an experience of time. The only thing to be consumed here is the duration of the encounter: it's for the visitor to choose how to profit from this moment, to fill it or to leave it empty, to let him or herself be carried by the conversation or to control its every turn. There is certainly an object to contemplate, but this object poses demands; each one seeks to seduce his or her call girl, hoping in this way to gain time with her.

To these intimate archives are added a visual souvenir, a Polaroid generally taken by the call girl presenting a portrait of the consenting client/visitor, who apparently wanted to mark his or her passage. This gallery of portraits lets one think that the snapshot offered each one a way to make a perfect ending. It points to an ambivalent desire to leave an image of oneself, a semi-public, semi-intimate image which everyone knows will pop up somewhere later, though not exactly where (in another installation obviously and therefore in the public sphere), just as one didn't quite know where each encounter would lead. One thing certain, however, is that Nadine Norman's project had a considerable reach and resonance, to which this publication hopes to respond by placing the work in its artistic context and recalling, in the silence of words and images, the many stages of a process that was minutely elaborated and recorded, and that caused quite a ruckus.

Translated by Lucy McNoir