

LEST I FALL OFF THE EDGE OF THE WORLD INTO NOTHINGNESS

by Kendra Paitz

HOW CAN WE ENSURE that voices are not lost in a void, but instead continue to shout, echo, and resonate? And how can we preserve and amplify the critical perspectives of women writers across generations? Although it would be impossible to tackle this topic in its entirety, *Strange Oscillations and Vibrations of Sympathy*, which features works by women artists that acknowledge or reference women writers, offers one option among myriad possibilities. The exhibition's title was derived from a sentence Sylvia Plath underlined in her copy of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, and that Stephanie Brooks later appropriated for a text-based artwork. These layers of influence and mediation are integral to the thirty-four works in the exhibition, made by twenty-one artists inspired by the writers Octavia Butler, A. S. Byatt, María Elena Cruz Varela, Emily Dickinson, Zora Neale Hurston, Clarice Lispector, Gabriela Mistral, Toni Morrison, Alejandra Pizarnik, Sylvia Plath, Mary Shelley, Rebecca Solnit, Gertrude Stein, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Virginia Woolf. As a tribute to Woolf's foundational essay "A Room of One's Own," which argues that women need their own political and physical space to produce creative works, all the artists selected for the exhibition are women, allowing for a focus on the interpretation of literature through the lenses of subsequent generations of artists. The works in the exhibition demonstrate the political and creative progress of feminism, examine writers' intellectual pursuits, navigate their status as literary icons, and interpret their legacies. They also engender an intimate and sustained contemplation of texts—a cerebral, analytical pursuit whose future is threatened by a culture that favors sound bites, hashtags, and 140-character tweets.¹

Strange Oscillations and Vibrations of Sympathy is, perhaps, a rather unwieldy exhibition title, but it serves as a poetic and open-ended entry point. The phrase also beautifully speaks

to the idea of reverberations, of influences and impacts that resonate beyond an initial gesture. As previously mentioned, it was derived from **Stephanie Brooks'** *Sylvia Plath's Underlinings in Virginia Woolf's "The Waves"* (2009), which merges the voices of two writers and an artist: Woolf, Plath, Brooks. While researching American author Sylvia Plath's (1932–1963) archives at Smith College, Brooks discovered that Plath had underlined passages in her personal copies of Woolf's *The Waves*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and *The Years*. The importance of Woolf's writing to Plath cannot be underestimated; she wrote about Woolf in her diaries numerous times, even documenting a day that she purchased several of her books. On July 20, 1957: "Virginia Woolf helps. Her novels make mine possible..."² And on March 1, 1958, while describing her struggles with writing a particular chapter, Plath asks, "How does Woolf do it? ... I cannot & must not copy either. God knows what tone I shall strike. Close to a prose-poem of balanced, cadenced words and meanings..."³

Reading English author and feminist Woolf (1882–1941) through Plath's eyes prompted Brooks—whose clever and often humorous work has addressed poetic and literary forms via abstraction—to create her minimal text-based sculptures, which echo the spread of an open book and feature the words that Plath underlined against otherwise blank "pages."⁴ In Woolf's experimental 1931 novel, *The Waves*, Plath underlined:

Am I not, as I walk, trembling with strange oscillations and vibrations of sympathy, which unmoored as I am from a private being, bid me embrace these engrossed flocks; these stargazers and trippers; these errand-boys and furtive and fugitive girls, who ignoring their doom, look in at shop-windows. But I am aware of our ephemeral passage.⁵

Woolf published these words in 1931; Plath, who was born the following year, underlined them sometime before her death in 1963; and Brooks selected them and brought them to a different degree of visibility in 2009. Many have read Woolf's and Plath's published works, as well as their diaries and correspondence, but Brooks offers a new kind of engagement with the two icons. We wonder about Plath's motivations for selecting certain passages; ponder the slippages between excerpts; and, perhaps, consider Woolf's fragments as new mini-texts, or moments of found poetry, by Plath.

Dawn Roe also culled Woolf's language from *The Waves* for her HD video, *The Sunshine Bore | The Daylights* (2016), in which passages such as, "There is agitation and trouble here. There is gloom. The light is fitful," appear in a white font against a black screen. These texts are interspersed with still and moving images, sometimes split-screen, of leafless trees, right-side-up and upside-down, against blue and gray skies. All the while, the soundtrack alternates between silence and a woman's voice repeatedly singing fragments of the phrase "The sunshine bores the daylights out of me" (which sounds like something Woolf may have written, but is not) as she builds phrases into the entire sentence. Her unaccompanied mellow and melodic voice slowly starts and stops, sometimes in off-register layers, in stark contrast to the Rolling Stones' high-energy sexually-driven performances of their 1972 song, "Rocks Off," from which the lyric is quoted. Roe's mashup of a Modernist's written text, a classic rock group's refrain, and her own artistic imagery peacefully washes in and recedes, much like a wave. She says the initial impetus was to make something that continued her earlier project, *The Tree Alone*, which "looked to ... *The Waves* as a poetic structuring device that allowed for a certain relationship to time/temporality."⁶ The artist sees this video "functioning as part elegy and part perceptual study."⁷ Her decisions to partially obscure some views with a scrim and to show the camera's alignment grid or focusing circles not only add a geometric element but make evident the strategies of the work's construction.

Lisa Tan's HD video, *Waves* (2014–2015), also evinces how it was created and references Woolf's book. *Waves* is one of three videos by the artist that acknowledge women writers: Woolf, Susan Sontag, and Clarice Lispector. Tan has, in her own words, been "working with female subjectivities ... experimenting with how to speak not about these writers or their respective works, but with and through them. It's a different movement that runs counter to a patriarchal order, where things/topics/subjects are 'mastered,' and that speak over any given thing."⁸ *Waves* begins with a view of the

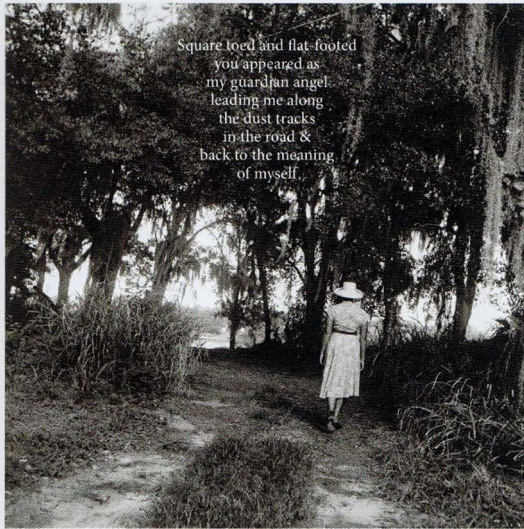
artist's MacBook Pro, tethered to another monitor displaying a view from a Frankfurt museum, upon which we see her hands typing edits into the very text she is reading aloud:

Virginia Woolf said that she wanted her novel *The Waves* to be made 'of some continuous stream, not solely of human thought, but of the ship, the night, all flowing together.' With waves on my mind, I want to hold hands with what she says.

In the 19-minute work, Tan "holds hands" with that notion of a "continuous stream" as she surprisingly meshes current digital innovations that allow unprecedented access to images and text (Skype, Google Cultural Institute, Wikipedia) with more traditional analog sources of information (oil paintings from the 1800s, diary entries from the 1920s, and a novel written in the 1970s). Among other things, she includes: footage filmed in her own studio in Stockholm, on a flight from London to Los Angeles, and at the Städel Museum in Frankfurt; recordings of her mother's television on standby, a Skype conversation, and Gustave Courbet's 1869 painting *The Wave* as viewed on Google Cultural Institute; and text from critical essays by Gilles Deleuze, a Wikipedia entry on pink noise, and a diary of Virginia Woolf. Tan points out that each reference is connected to the idea of waves, whether Courbet's dramatic rendering of a fierce ocean or Google's underwater cables that are cooled by the sea. Of Tan's trio of videos, Lauren O'Neill-Butler writes, they "explore precarity described as freedom, a pedestrian reality birthed by the marriage of digital technology and capitalism. Moreover, she examines how this union opens up new affective relationships and novel forms of nostalgia: when a real landscape meets a cosmos screensaver."⁹

artist has said that reading Hurston's 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* changed her and gave her confidence "in her own possibilities as a visual artist."⁶⁰ For her small, slightly sepia-toned photograph, *Untitled (Square Toed and Flat Footed)* (2003), Weems explored Hurston's town while assuming the author's character. Amidst intricate lacy foliage on a still day, we see Weems from behind as she walks along well-worn dirt tracks toward the lake. She is in mid-stride, with the sole of one shoe facing the viewer. She strolls effortlessly down the path—modest dress, sun hat, no bag, arms casually at her sides—seeming to know exactly where she is going. There are no other people in the distance. Sirmans has thoughtfully analyzed this body of work, writing, "Weems ... provokes a consideration of women, art and society beyond the confines of the framed pictures. The images also speak to a space in which the black body is the only body. It is not a body in question, but a figure in the landscape, defining itself while defining others. And at this juncture, it is in the spirit of imagining and creating a critical fiction that the work so succeeds."⁶¹ Importantly, over the center of the image are eight lines of center-aligned white text reading: "Square toed and flat-footed you appeared as my guardian angel leading me along the dust tracks in the road & back to the meaning of myself." The text acknowledges Hurston's influence on Weems, and the specific language references the author's celebrated 1942 autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*. In the catalogue for *Embracing Eatonville*, Weems writes, "I am indebted to Zora who literally saved my life through the power of her words and courage of her convictions."⁶²

As previously mentioned, **Carrie Mae Weems** was also a founder of A Social Studies Collective and traveled to Eatonville to make work about Zora Neale Hurston. The



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Weems' quote says it all. An enduring force who has paved the path for countless other artists, Weems attributes her own success—her awareness that she could exist in her body as an artist with a powerful voice—to reading the words of a writer who had an unmarked grave for the first thirteen years after her death. These women (and so many others) did not simply formalize thoughts into written forms; they shared bold ideas, defied power structures, and demonstrated that other ways of thinking, or even being, were possible. The artists in this exhibition are resolutely doing that as well, whether quoting a writer's text, dissecting her language, exploring her personal life, alluding to themes in her work, or investigating the mythologies surrounding her legacy. Their creations acknowledge: the first Black female whose science fiction writing was widely published; an activist who wrote about women's rights as early as the 1790s; a poet who was imprisoned for her political writing; a poet and educator who has been somewhat disappeared from her country's cultural history; a Modernist who rebelled against societal gender norms; a folklorist and

Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Square Toed and Flat Footed)*, 2003. Pigmented inkjet print. 18 x 18 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

anthropologist who brought awareness to her town's vital social history; a historian who is a leading voice in her country's political resistance; and many others. The artists in this exhibition are staking claims for the writers and for themselves, as Dawn Roe quotes Woolf in *The Sunshine Bores | The Daylights*, "lest I fall off the edge of the world into nothingness." They are actively preserving and amplifying these voices so they will continue to resonate. The "strange oscillations and vibrations of sympathy" the writers' lives and texts have prompted—the thoughtful, wild and unpredictable outcomes resulting from their influences—ensure that they will not be allowed to "fall off the edge of the world into nothingness."

—Kendra Paitz is Senior Curator at University Galleries of Illinois State University. Selected curatorial projects include *Strange Oscillations and Vibrations of Sympathy* (2016); *Terry Adkins: Soldier Shepherd Prophet Martyr: Videos from 1998–2013* (2016); *Carrie Schneider: Nine Trips Around the Sun: Selected Works from 2006–2015* (2015); *Juan Angel Chávez: Winded Rainbow* (2015); *The House of the Seven Gables* (2013); *Melanie Schiff: The stars are not wanted now* (2012); *Oliver Herring: TASK+ selected work* (co-curated with Barry Blinderman, 2010); and *Stephanie Brooks: Distance Intimacy* (2009). She has also organized solo exhibitions featuring Laura Letinsky, Jason Lazarus (co-curated with Blinderman), Stanya Kahn, Lori Waxman, Kendell Carter, Deb Sokolow, Edra Soto, Irena (Knezevic) Haiduk, Adam Farcus, and Shinique Smith, among others. This publication is the tenth exhibition catalogue that Paitz has produced at University Galleries. Her essays and interviews have also been published by Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago; Golden Parachutes, Berlin; and Daylight Books.

1 The first paragraph forms the crux of my curatorial statement and was used in my press release and exhibition texts.

2 Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950–1962*, ed. Karen V. Kukil (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 289.

3 Plath, *Unabridged Journals*, 343.

4 In 2009, Brooks made several text-based works entitled *Sylvia Plath's Underlinings in Virginia Woolf's "The Waves," Sylvia Plath's Underlinings in Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway," and Sylvia Plath's Underlinings in Virginia Woolf's "The Years,"* five of which were included in this exhibition.

5 Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, (New York: Harcourt, 1931).

6 Dawn Roe, "The Sunshine Bores | The Daylights," April 15,

2016, *The Finch*. <http://thefinch.net/2016/04/15/dawn-roe-the-sunshine-bores/>

7 Roe, *The Finch*.

8 Lisa Tan, email to the author, October 15, 2015.

9 Lauren O'Neill-Butler, "Time is a Dictator," in *Sunsets, Notes from Underground, Waves*, ed. Joshua Shaddock. (Berlin: Archive Books, 2015), 28-29.

10 Dianna Frid, studio visit with the author, Chicago, July 7, 2016.

11 Dianna Frid, email to the author, June 2, 2017.

12 Jen Bervin's work has not only yielded *The Dickinson Composites* but also *The Gorgeous Nothings: Emily Dickinson's Envelope-Poems*, a full-color book that includes facsimiles of the poet's writings on portions of unfolded envelopes.

13 An explanation of Dickinson's fascicles can be found at <http://www.edickinson.org/faq>: "Fascicle" is the name that Emily Dickinson's early editor, Mabel Loomis Todd, gave to the homemade manuscript books into which Dickinson copied hundreds of poems, probably beginning in the late 1850s and continuing through the late 1860s. Dickinson constructed the fascicles by writing poems onto sheets of standard stationery already folded in two to create two leaves (four pages). She then stacked several such sheets on top of each other, stabbed two holes in the left margin through the stack, and threaded string through the holes and tied the sheets together. Occasionally she varied this basic pattern by binding half-sheets (cut along the fold) into the stack of folded sheets. 'Set' is a term first used by editor R. W. Franklin to describe groups of unbound sheets of similar paper and size that were never bound by the poet. There are 40 fascicles, and 15 sets."

14 Jen Bervin, "The Dickinson Composites Series," accessed on July 11, 2017, <http://jenbervin.com/projects/the-dickinson-composites-series#2>.

15 Bervin, "The Dickinson Composites Series."

16 Jen Bervin, remarks after lecture at University Galleries of Illinois State University, November 9, 2016.

17 Bethany Collins, (lecture presented at University Galleries of Illinois State University, October 26, 2016).

18 In *Positive Obsession* (1989), Octavia Butler points out that Samuel R. Delany Jr. was the only other Black science fiction writer "working successfully" at the time her first novel was published. She goes on to identify him, Steven Barnes, Charles R. Saunders, and herself as the only Black science fiction writers at the time that she was writing this essay.

19 Normal, Illinois, where the exhibition took place, is surrounded by corn fields.

20 Mistral was a pseudonym for Lucila Godoy Alcagaya.

21 Ana Roncero-Bellido and Juliet Lynd, "Art, Poetry, and Testimonio in Cecilia Vicuña's *Saborami* (1973)" (paper presented at Oscillations of Gender at Genre, University Galleries of Illinois State University, November 10, 2016).

22 In fact, I didn't think I would be able to exhibit it because I assumed it would be in an international museum, but it was languishing—cherished but unseen—in Vicuña's New York apartment.

23 Cecilia Vicuña, conversation with the author, November 10, 2016.

24 For more information, see "1994: María Elena Cruz Varela," accessed July 11, 2017, <http://www.pen-international.org/campaign/past-campaigns/because-writers-speak-their-mind/because-writers-speak-their-minds-50-years-50-cases/1994-maria-elena-cruz-varela/#>.

25 Coco Fusco, "Description: La Botella al mar de María Elena," accessed October 15, 2016, <http://cocofusco.com/>.

26 It was particularly timely to watch this video in the context of this exhibition, during which former Cuban president Fidel Castro passed away on November 25, 2016.

27 We've certainly seen suppression of protestors, and even military action, at Standing Rock.

28 Harriett C. Babbitt, "Poet's Voice Provokes the Lider Maximo: Cuba: A young woman, now in prison, represents ideas and aspirations Castro refuses to acknowledge as legitimate." *Los Angeles Times*, January 01, 1992, accessed June 2, 2017, http://articles.latimes.com/1992-01-01/local/me-1020_1_fidel-castro.

29 Benjamin Moser, "The True Glamour of Clarice Lispector," *The New Yorker*, July 10, 2015, accessed June 6, 2017, <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-true-glamour-of-clarice-lispector>.

30 Delbecq's performance at Musée de l'Orangerie took place on January 8, 2016, and was organized in conjunction with the exhibition, "Who's Afraid of Women Photographers? 1839-1919."

31 Email to the author, November 25, 2015.

32 Marcelline Delbecq's website, accessed May 15, 2017, <http://www.marcellinedelbecq.net/?p=2768>.

33 Delbecq's website, 2017.

34 A search of this album indicates that it contains the deceased writer reading "The Ghost's Leavetaking," "November Graveyards," and "The Disquieting Muses," among several other poems. The recordings were made at the Poetry Room at Harvard College Library from 1958-1959 and BBC Records from 1960-1962, and poet Stratis Haviaris, then Curator in the Poetry Room at Harvard Library, wrote a brief introduction for the record.

35 Brian Sholis, "Photographic: Anne Collier and Melanie Schiff," (Salina, KS: Salina Art Center, 2010), 2.

36 Fans of Collier's work will recognize the format and setup from her 2009 *Studio Floor #2 (Marilyn and Norman Mailer)* and her 2012 *Clouds*, among others.

37 The album's cover art is attributed to Three Lions, Inc., which was described in a *New York Times* obituary as "a prestigious international photographic agency."

38 Schneider is in the process of realizing a new series, *The Readers*. She is asking each living author featured in *Reading Women* to sit for her own photographic and filmic portrait as she reads a book by a woman writer of her choice.

39 Carrie Schneider, "In Conversation: Carrie Schneider and Kendra Paitz," in *Carrie Schneider: Nine Trips Around the Sun*, (Normal, IL: University Galleries of Illinois State University, 2016), 25.

40 Schneider made an artist's book with these images but she had not printed and exhibited them before *Strange Oscillations and Vibrations of Sympathy*.

41 Catherine Wagner, "Trans/Literate," accessed June 2, 2016, <http://www.catherinewagner.org/transliterate/>.

42 Jesse Hamlin, "Catherine Wagner—works of braille in 2-D," *SFGate*, January 7, 2013, accessed September 15, 2016, <http://www.sfgate.com/art/article/Catherine-Wagner-works-of-braille-in-2-D-4172755.php#photo-3985743>.

43 Michael Slenske, "L.A. Women: Eve Fowler," *Cultured*, October 2016, accessed March 10, 2017, <http://www.culturedmag.com/eve-fowler/>.

44 Krzysztof Ziarek, "The Poetics Event: Stein, the Avant-Garde, and the Aesthetic Turn of Philosophy," *SAGETRIEB* 12.3, Winter 1993.

45 Sabina Ott, "Sabina Ott: Q & A." Interview by Kristen Daignault and Michael Soto. *Inside the Artist's Kitchen*. September 29, 2014. <http://insidetheartistskitchen.com/blog/sabina-ott-qa/>.

46 Ott, "Sabina Ott: Q & A."

47 Ott, "Sabina Ott: Q & A."

48 Stephen Cope, "Ekphrasis, Ekstasis, and the Transgeneric Hybridity of Gertrude Stein's Aesthetics" (paper presented at Oscillations of Gender and Genre, University Galleries of Illinois State University, November 10, 2016).

49 See the second page of Kay Rosen's, "A Constructed Conversation Between Kay Rosen and Virginia Woolf," in the text section.

50 Xavier Simmons first developed the format for her 2009 sculpture, *Breedlove (Mason)*, which featured a single row of jars on each shelf.

51 Email to the author, June 3, 2016.

52 Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (New York: Viking, 2005; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 29.

53 Wojnarowicz—a hero to many for his fearless 1980s and early 1990s artwork, poetry, and performances—has a connection to University Galleries' institutional history as well. His first large survey exhibition was organized here in 1990 by Director Barry Blinderman, and the influential *Tongues of Flame* book was published in conjunction.

54 Email to the author, February 4, 2016.

55 Email to the author, February 5, 2016.

56 Email to the author, February 4, 2016.

57 Email to the author, October 14, 2016.

58 Email to the author, October 14, 2016.

59 Franklin Sirmans, *Contact Sheet 124: Embracing Eatonville* (Syracuse, New York: Light Work, 2003), 16.

60 Kathryn E. Delmez, "Real Facts, By Real People": Folklore in the Early Work of Carrie Mae Weems," in *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video* (Nashville, TN: Frist Center for the Visual Arts, 2012), 13.

61 Sirmans, *Eatonville*, 16-17.

62 Carrie Mae Weems, *Contact Sheet 124: Embracing Eatonville* (Syracuse, New York: Light Work, 2003), 47.