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The Black Prince, the Trinity, and the Art of Commemoration

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Death and the Found Object: Virginia Woolf, Lucy Skaer, and Becky Beasley

Article by **Margaret Iversen**
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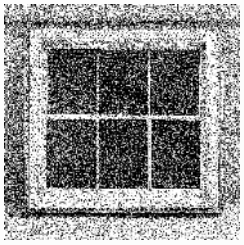

Abstract
Virginia Woolf's short story "Solid Objects" (1920) offers a thought-provoking starting point for reflection on the continuing preoccupation of many artists with the found object. The story implies that the disconcerting and fascinating effect of certain found objects is bound up with their relation to death. With reference to Woolf and to the philosopher Maurice Blanchot, this article argues that the work produced by two contemporary British artists, Becky Beasley and Lucy Skaer, occupies a liminal space on the threshold between life and death, like the objects in Woolf's story.

Introduction

Virginia Woolf once described Daniel Defoe and other realist writers as "truth-tellers". In their work, she wrote, "emphasis is laid upon the very facts that most reassure us of the stability in real life, upon money, furniture, food, until one seems wedged among solid objects in a solid universe". Such novels encourage one to believe in "this positive world existing so palpably and completely outside us".[1] Of course, her own fiction does just the opposite, unsettling any sense of a stable, independently existing world. In her novels and short stories, thoughts, feelings, and fleeting sensations impinge upon descriptions of things and sometimes things impinge on thoughts. Woolf is particularly noted for her exploration of subjective interiority, yet she was also attentive to the sensory character of things. In some of her stories, objects have a disconcerting, life-altering impact. This happens in her remarkable short story "Solid Objects" (1920), which explores the effect that three found objects have on the protagonist. The objects in the story are presented neither as mental phantoms nor as solid objects, but rather as occupying a liminal space. The critic Peter Schwenger identified three types of liminality at work in the story. The objects, suspended in "half-conscious" reverie, are liminal with respect to consciousness; they are found in liminal spaces such as the seaside and urban wasteland; and they are on the margin of the economic system as possessions that don't count as commodities.[2] I would add to this list a further and crucially important type of liminality: the objects in the story occupy a space on the threshold between life and death. Of course, Woolf's prose style more generally can also be considered liminal since it resists determinate, solid signification.

"Solid Objects" offers not a theory but a cluster of associated ideas and images in the medium of fiction, which I hope will serve to illuminate the art of Lucy Skaer and Becky Beasley, two contemporary British artists both born in 1975, whose works engage with the conjunction of the found object, liminality, and death. Skaer makes direct reference to Woolf, and both artists are influenced by the French critic, theorist, and novelist Maurice Blanchot (1907–2003), for whom death and its relation to art and literature were major preoccupations. Elaborating his conception of the image, Blanchot cited André Breton's account of the found object as a useless, obsolescent bit of flotsam washed up in a flea market: "we might recall that a tool, when damaged, becomes its *image* (and sometimes an aesthetic object like those 'outmoded objects, fragmented, unusable, almost incomprehensible, perverse,' which Breton loved.) In this case the tool, no longer disappearing into its use, *appears*". That which *appears* in this strange way is "the object's double".[3] This fascinating phantom-double, which no longer refers to anything beyond itself, grips the imagination. Similarly, the stuff of art and poetry can only appear when released from its communicative or referential functions. In short, according to Blanchot, a thing only appears when it is dead, obsolescent, or useless.

John Stezaker, an artist who makes collages out of old film stills, publicity portraits of forgotten stars, and vintage postcards, and for whose practice Blanchot's theory of image fascination is important, explains that, for Blanchot, "a kind of death of the image, in obsolescence or dysfunction, is often required for it to come alive as an image. The image is most alive to the imagination when touched by death".[4] I want to argue that Woolf, Skaer, and Beasley share this idea of the image. Yet there is a certain awkwardness in my position as a critic charged with elucidating in discursive prose artworks touched by death when silence might be a more appropriate response. It becomes necessary in these circumstances for the critic to draw out the work's sensuous imagery, ambiguity, and metaphor, and attempt to convey a sense of the

encounter with a work that eludes our conceptual grasp. In this article, I find continuities and resonances between Woolf's fiction, Blanchot's opaque but evocative prose, and the works of visual art under discussion.[5] Yet "Solid Objects" does more than provide a critical framework; it is, in my view, exemplary of an artistic engagement with the found object that ties it closely to death. Accordingly, it sits alongside and has the same status as the works of visual art.[6] Given that Beasley and Skaer draw inspiration from fiction, it seems especially important to make use of the resources that literature and literary criticism offer the art historian. A brief introduction to the two artists, highlighting some of their shared concerns, is followed by sections devoted to "Solid Objects", Skaer, and Beasley.[7]

Liminality

Lucy Skaer's imagination is fed by her reading of Woolf and Blanchot, and also touched by Surrealism. This latter aspect of her work was evident in her fugitive public intervention of placing a scorpion and diamond side by side on an Amsterdam sidewalk. The work, which exists now as a photograph, *Scorpion/Diamond* (2001/3), is a reversal of the surrealist practice of finding significant objects; instead, she disseminates them for others to find. The pairing of the two, one lucky to find, the other potentially lethal, is a reminder of the extent to which our daily lives are subject to the whim of chance. She also secretly hid butterfly and moth pupae in the main criminal courthouse in London, the Old Bailey. Ambiguity haunts these disseminated objects. While butterflies represent regeneration, transformation, and metamorphosis, moths are known for their deadly attraction to flames and are associated with the biblical warning that "moth and rust doth corrupt" earthly things. In the Old Bailey, one imagines the moths attracted to the judges' absurdly antiquated wigs. When Skaer works with found objects she usually alters them in some way. *Further Consumption/Blue Window* (2017), for instance, consists of an old sash window and frame removed from her childhood bedroom and displayed either propped against the gallery wall or lying flat on the floor (fig. 1). Its six glass panes are replaced by an intricate veneer of lapis lazuli. Skaer's lapis windowpanes, flecked with pyrite, invite one to gaze through the window into the deep celestial blue of the night sky. Yet this infinite distance is immediately barred, flattened, by the thin veneer of precious stone. The sublime, unfathomable darkness is blocked by an opaque, impenetrable barrier. Or, as one critic noted, "the lapis veneer promises representation beyond the window and withdraws it at the same time".[8] The piece occupies a shallow liminal space between inner and outer worlds, between representation and refusal.

Figure 1

Lucy Skaer, *Consumption/Blue Window*, 2017, window frame with lapis lazuli Digital image courtesy of Lucy Skaer / Photograph Ausgustin Garza (all rights reserved)

Although Becky Beasley's practice draws upon works of fiction from Herman Melville to Franz Kafka to Thomas Bernhard, she does not make direct reference to Woolf. However, since both she and Skaer find inspiration in Blanchot's writing, many of their concerns overlap. For instance, the motif of the blocked window occurs in both artists' work, although in Beasley's case the medium is photographic. *Curtains (I), (II), (III)* (2009) consists of three silver gelatin prints of curtains glazed with green acrylic (fig. 2).[9] The imaginary space of the photographs is blocked by the repetition of a simple curtain motif made up of two vertical marginal strips spliced together. It is as if a middle section, perhaps a view through a window, had been excised. As with Skaer's window, the viewer is left to focus a kind of non-verbal, non-narrative attention on the curtains themselves. This accords with Beasley's intention: "I am after a mute thing that works as a form of refusal and is resistant to simplification by language".[10] Or, as she put it elsewhere, "I'm interested in retaining an essential opacity".[11] Silence, opacity, and ambiguity are, for her, means that art has for avoiding cliché and resisting power. The extended subtitles of *Curtains* only obliquely refer to the motif. They consist of excerpts from an interview with pianist Glenn Gould about his habit of spending three hours in the recording studio in a state of uncertainty, experimenting with a composition until he finds a rendition suitable for recording.[12] Gould was famous for being a brilliant recording artist who adamantly refused to perform live concerts—a fact that must be relevant to Beasley's sense of photography as a medium. Although it is not "live", photography bears a strange relationship to the real, and so, as she said, it "pulsates with the potential to destroy order, habit and jargon".[13] The photograph, as she so pithily put it, is "dead, yet vital".[14] In *Curtains*, this ambiguity is manifested by the contrast between the blocked view and reticent treatment of the curtain motif, on the one hand, and the luminous blue-green glazing, on the other. In these artworks by Skaer and Beasley, the function of the windows is negated, forcing an encounter with the mute object itself. They embody the essential ambiguity and liminality of art.[15]

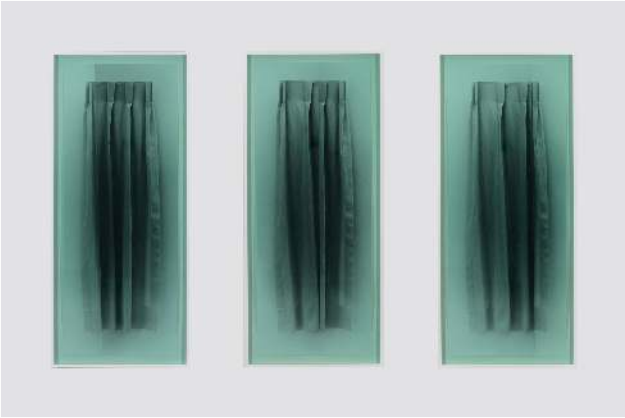

Figure 2

Becky Beasley, *Curtains (I), (II), (III)*, 2009, three photographs, gelatin silver prints on paper, archival tape, green acrylic glazing, each 181 × 70.5 cm. Collection of Tate (P82486) Digital image courtesy of Becky Beasley / Photograph Galeria Plan B (all rights reserved)

Solid Objects

Before continuing with my enquiry into the work of Skaer and Beasley, I want to demonstrate the case I have been making about the connotations that attach to the found object by attending in some detail to Woolf's short story, drawing out its images, ideas, and implications. "Solid Objects" opens with two men arguing as they move along a misty beach. They flop down to rest beside "the ribs and spine of a stranded pilchard boat".[16] One man, Charles, starts skimming flat stones over the water, while the other, John, digs his hand "down, down" into the wet sand, where he discovers a lump of green-tinted glass "so thick as to be almost opaque; the smoothing of the sea had completely worn off any edge or shape". He pockets the piece of glass and later places it on his mantelpiece.[17] The incident on the beach proves to be a threshold in John's life. Prior to this event, John has been, like Charles, on the brink of a career as a Member of Parliament (MP); afterwards, he devotes himself to scouring marginal and derelict areas of London for similar treasures. "He took, also, to keeping his eyes upon the ground, especially in the neighbourhood of waste land where the household refuse is thrown". John eventually spots another object—a fragment of china resembling a starfish. Since it is out of reach behind a fence, he is obliged to return home to construct a stick with a wire ring attached—a device Woolf surely intended to contrast with the thrusting pointed stick wielded by Charles on the beach. Although John manages to retrieve the object, he misses his train and a constituency meeting, neglects his duties, and consequently is not elected as an MP.

As in myths and fairy tales where things generally happen in threes, John eventually finds a third exceptional object—a remarkable piece of iron, "massy and globular, but so cold and heavy, so black and metallic, that it was evidently alien to the earth and had its origin in one of the dead stars or was itself the cinder of a moon. It weighed his pocket down; it weighed the mantelpiece down; it radiated cold". In "The Theme of the Three Caskets" (1913), Freud argued that the third object in a series of choices made by a fictional protagonist of a tale signifies death.[18] And, indeed, Woolf leaves us in no doubt about the deathly significance of the lump of iron. John

becomes a solitary, dishevelled man and, from the point of view of others, quite mad. While John becomes intensely preoccupied with his fascinating objects, Charles is blind to everything except the prospect of his glittering career. It is as though the two friends have become contrasting types. In a diary entry for 3 July 1924, Woolf described a friend in terms that recall the men's contrasting characters: Lady Colefax, she wrote, lived "on a burnished plate of facts … not at all able to sink into the depths; but a superb skimmer on the surface".[19]

Sinking into the depths might be interpreted as a descent into the domain of the unconscious. Woolf did not read Freud until late in life, but his work formed part of the Bloomsbury intellectual milieu, and his collected papers were (and still are) published in English by the Hogarth Press, founded by Virginia and her husband, Leonard Woolf. Freud was dubious about avant-garde art, yet, as John Forrester has pointed out, his writing gave prominence to "the readymade, the found object, the bit of detritus". He invented "a new theory of objects", for "displacement and condensation"—the tropes of dreamwork—"transform such everyday objects into veritable philosopher's stones; they become infinitely displaceable, perpetually unstable".[20] Freud himself noted psychoanalysts' tendency "to divine secret and concealed things from unconsidered and unnoticed details, from the rubbish heap, as it were, of our observations".[21] Surrealist artists and writers were attracted to this same rubbish heap. Because the surrealist found object is marked by love, loss, and anxiety (Eros and the death drive), it should be clearly differentiated from Marcel Duchamp's readymade, which is mass-produced and governed by an aesthetic of indifference.[22]

Although Woolf's objects are open to multiple symbolic interpretations, they can also be considered in terms of their "object relations". This possibility is suggested by John's contemplation of the green glass globule: "Looked at again and again half consciously by a mind thinking of something else, any object mixes itself so profoundly with the stuff of thought that it loses its actual form and recomposes itself a little differently in an ideal shape which haunts the brain when we least expect it". John's relation to his objects involves a quasi-dissolution of the boundary between the self and the external world, and so his objects might well be understood as "transitional objects"—that is, as objects which, for the analyst Donald Winnicott, are both found and self-created. A child's play with transitional objects, such as a favourite blanket or teddy bear, affords "intermediary experiences" between fantasy and reality. Winnicott thought that in later life these intermediary or liminal experiences enable us to exercise our innate capacity to become "unintegrated, depersonalized, and to feel that the world is unreal".[23] This temporary dissolution and withdrawal into the liminal space of play suffuses the world with emotional colour and makes creativity possible. It is as though a temporary "death" of the subject makes possible a renewed sense of vitality and connection. In the story, John's capacity for transitional states is contrasted with Charles's impervious ego—the subjective equivalent of a solid object. John becomes an artist who has come to see the world differently through the lens of his green-tinted glass.

Objects placed on a mantelpiece are normally thought to consolidate the collector's identity. In her 1927 essay "Street Haunting", Woolf acknowledged this function of objects displayed in the home: "for there we sit surrounded by objects which perpetually express the oddity of our own temperaments and enforce the memories of our own experience".[24] Although John's collection certainly does express the oddity of his temperament, it does nothing to enforce his memory of the past or affirm his sense of personal identity. On the contrary, as Douglas Mao pointed out, John does not possess his objects; rather, we should speak of his "profound possession *by* things".[25] John's treasures are alien things that exercise a kind of fatal fascination but also offer

the possibility of transformation or renewal. The arrangement of the objects on John's mantelpiece is like a small, intensely private display consisting of three enigmatic objects—a wordless haiku. Each one has a distinctive mood or temperament: the glass is "mute and contemplative", the ceramic is "vivid and alert", the iron "alien" and "cold". Aligned in a row, they describe a vast temporal arc beginning with primordial watery origins, followed by a period of life on earth and finally death and extinction. The first and the third objects are similarly formless.[26]

None of the commentaries I have seen remark on the mention in the opening paragraph of a single and prominent object on the beach where the two men pause to rest. Yet it seems to me probable that the "ribs and spine of the stranded pilchard boat" is to be understood as a whale-sized, skeletal *memento mori*. This, together with John's action of digging "down, down into the sand" and retrieving an object from the depths, indicates at the outset that death is at work in the story. This suspicion is confirmed by the third found object, the piece of iron resembling a "dead star" that "radiated cold". These details suggest a reading of the story along the lines proposed by Jacqueline Rose in her essay "Virginia Woolf and the Death of Modernism". Rose argued that critics should take account of Woolf's bouts of depression and her tragic suicide because she wrote out of a proximity to death, both private and public. Between the ages of thirteen and twenty-two, she lost her mother, half-sister, father, and brother. Also relevant is the fact that Woolf began writing "Solid Objects" in 1918, at the close of the Great War and during the deadly Spanish flu pandemic. The rubble-strewn "waste land" of London where John hunts for treasures recalls the war-damaged city and the unimaginable twenty million war dead.[27] Rose argued that Woolf's proximity to death was the very source of her artistic vision. She refers to Michael Levenson's *The Genealogy of Modernism*, which includes a discussion of the well-known opening stanza of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), the first section of which is entitled "The Burial of the Dead" and begins:

> *April is the cruellest month, breeding*
> *Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing*
> *Memory and desire, stirring*
> *Dull roots with spring rain.*
> *Winter kept us warm, covering*
> *Earth in forgetful snow, feeding*
> *A little life with dried tubers.*

Levenson observes that these lines issue from a point of view underground, more specifically from the point of view of a corpse—but a corpse that breeds and sprouts. Rose concludes that the catastrophes experienced by both Eliot and Woolf drove their imaginations underground.[28] The same relation to death orients John's imagination. His objects, retrieved from the ground or underground, exert a force akin to gravity pulling him away from the high ground of received social convention, careerism, and timekeeping. As Hermione Lee pointed out, in Woolf's fiction, "silence, darkness, death pull against social convention".[29] One might regard John's downward trajectory as an Orphic descent into the underworld, especially in view of Blanchot's interpretation of the mythic story of Orpheus and Eurydice. For him, Orpheus's descent into the underworld to retrieve his dead wife Eurydice is an allegory of the source of artistic inspiration. He argued that it was necessary for Orpheus to forget the gods' prohibition, to glance back at Eurydice on the threshold and so to lose her again. For it is her disappearance and Orpheus's encounter with the void, with the nocturnal source of art, that are necessary for the

accomplishment of the work. The necessity of his mistake, his failure, suggests the extent to which the work of art must exceed the artist's conscious intention and technical mastery.[30]

Lucy Skaer

Skaer's work is both full of meaningful resonances and resistant to them, so it is not surprising to learn that she is attracted to Woolf's more experimental fiction. In 2016, she produced an installation, *One Remove* (fig. 3), that was inspired by Woolf's novel *The Waves* (1931).[31] Asked about this work, Skaer responded: "*The Waves* is a big influence, particularly the first chapter, where the world seems to start before language and then the utterances are spoken as if for the first time. There is an ambivalence towards language in my work, I think, which links perhaps to prehistory, time without narrative".[32] Also important for her are the italicised impersonal interludes in *The Waves* which, together, describe the sea and sky, from dawn to dusk, as seen from a house with a garden overlooking the sea. The room Skaer created is filled with domestic furniture configured in three bands as if to suggest the advancing and merging of waves upon the shore. Closest to the viewer is a long, specially made Moroccan-style carpet in sandy colours with a pattern of criss-crossing lines. The pattern recalls the way *The Waves* is composed of intertwined interior monologues of six friends as their lives merge and separate over the course of decades, from childhood to middle age. As one character observes, "meeting and parting, we assemble different forms, make different patterns".[33] The next rung is a row of five oval modernist tables joined together to form a continuous undulating shape. The furthest rung is made of spliced old mahogany dining tables. The scene is completed with pale ceramic pendant lamps and dark ceramic pots with bases rounded so that they seem to rock unsteadily as do buoys. The contrasting period styles of the tables perhaps suggest the changes brought about by successive waves of time and history. Tables, rugs, lamps, and pots normally fill a comfortable domestic space; in *One Remove* they are rendered unfamiliar through rhythmical repetition and the apparent liquefaction of solid things. In the second interlude of *The Waves*, Woolf describes how the sun's morning rays transform the interior of the house: "*Everything became softly amorphous, as if the china of the plate flowed and the steel of the knife were liquid*".[34] *One Remove* is an installation that aims to embody in the form of modified found objects something of the liquid, liminal world created by Woolf.

Figure 3

Lucy Skaer, One Remove, 2017, installation view
Digital image courtesy of Lucy Skaer / Photograph Ausgustin Garza (all rights reserved)

Skaer's lapis-encrusted window, *Further Consumption/Blue Window*, is part of a series of enigmatic pieces made from reconfigured and embellished wooden floorboards and doors taken from her childhood home. This group of works was first exhibited in a one-person show called *Una Casa Más Pequena (A Smaller House)*, at the Museo Tamayo in Mexico City in 2017. In the catalogue, Skaer described it as "an exhibition made from my childhood home, devouring parts of the building".[35] This kind of cannibalisation is at work in *Eccentric Boxes* (2016–2019). It consists of a series of wooden crates made with old floorboards lifted from the house and encrusted with strips of lapis, slices of ceramic bowls, casts of an unusual stick collection, and a deconstructed small mahogany chest of the sort that might hold a collection of small treasures (fig. 4). The pieces were accompanied by photographs that documented the process and allowed one to see the extent to which Skaer had "devoured" the house, revealing the bare bones of the floor joists in the sitting room. In an interview, Skaer acknowledged that her formation as an artist owed a great deal to her father's sensibility and habit of collecting and arranging things in the house, including pottery and unusual twigs—a habit which was in turn inspired by his time spent as a student with Jim Ede at Kettle's Yard.[36] Mourning the imminent loss of her family home, she preserved a smaller version of it as an installation. *Eccentric Boxes* speaks of childhood attachments and losses in the mute, affecting language of the found object. Although the objects and materials featured are not "found" in the usual sense, they are retrieved from her former home and so both recall a lost childhood and anticipate the future loss of the house and, by extension, the loss of her father who at the time still lived there. The installation externalises the shadowy space of memory.

Figure 4

Lucy Skaer, *Eccentric Boxes*, 2016–2019, wooden box
Digital image courtesy of Lucy Skaer / Photograph Ausgustin Garza (all rights reserved)

As these two installations demonstrate, Skaer's objects oscillate between the quotidian and the symbolic. Before her exhibition at the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh, in 2008, she stated that the show would be "about the boundary between the realm of the image and our actual realm; between symbolism and actuality". Referring specifically to her plaster sculptures inspired by the famous fifteenth-century *Dance of Death* frescos in Basel, she said: "That's why death plays a part in the piece, as it has done in others I've made, because death crosses between these two realms. It's the symbolism of death which interests me, rather than the actual event".[37]
The symbolism of death dominated Skaer's Turner Prize exhibition at Tate Britain in 2009, for which she exhibited two whale skeletons—large-scale *memento mori*. *Leviathan Edge* (2009), consisted of the mysterious skeleton of a sperm whale, borrowed from a natural history museum. The skeleton was obscured by a specially constructed partition with slits that allow only partial views. Seen as a series of optical fragments, it had to be synthesised by the viewer. The other whale exhibited was a 1:1 scaled drawing of the skeleton of a pygmy right whale. This drawing, called *(Death)* (2006), forms part of a series of so-called "Black Drawings" (fig. 5). At first sight, the huge drawing, installed so that it curves around a corner of the gallery space, appears to be a complex patchwork of squares and an intricate pattern of spirals in dark graphite and black marker pen on paper. The marks baffle vision rather than delineate a figure. Yet, viewed from a distance, the whale skeleton seems to surface. As one critic aptly put it, the image keeps "decomposing and recomposing".[38] The critic Isla Leaver-Yap stressed the effect of the black drawings' "moment of encounter". When one is looking at *(Death)*, the dark solidity of the surface pattern "occasionally gives way to an image seemingly embedded within the surface of the drawing", but only briefly, as "the whale manages to evade definitive presence".[39] The experience of Skaer's drawing recalls Blanchot's account of the disturbing but fascinating elusiveness of the image. As philosopher Simon Critchley put it, image fascination "describes the experience when we are caught by something that we can neither grasp fully nor relinquish", such as the vanishing face of Eurydice.[40] Skaer memorably remarked that she aimed at "a re-creation of the feeling of the whale moving beneath you".[41]

Figure 5

Lucy Skaer, *(Death)*, 2006, permanent marker pen and pencil on paper Digital image courtesy of Lucy Skaer (all rights reserved)

As we have seen, Skaer's work is concerned with the liminality of the object and its association with death. Yet if the theme of death is tied to the ambiguous presence/absence of the image, it also implies a certain relation to temporality. In a conversation about her 2013 show at Tramway, Glasgow, Skaer discussed the theme of time in her work: "The focus is on ideas of time itself, such as those that preoccupied the British modernists". She mentions Woolf, "whose novels convey a sense of time outside the narrative—where tumbleweeds flourish and characters die mutely in parentheses, but nothing really happens save time going by".[42] This is an allusion to the middle non-narrative section of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, "Time Passes", in which the deaths of three characters are briefly noted in brackets in the course of an extended description of the corrosive effects of time, wind, and rain on a seaside house abandoned during the Great War. Skaer's allusion to "Time Passes" might explain the parentheses around the title of her drawing, *(Death)*.

Becky Beasley

Although both Skaer and Beasley work in a variety of media, I think it fair to say that Skaer's sensibility is mainly sculptural, while Beasley's is primarily photographic. For example, Beasley's treatment of the found object, especially in her early work, is photographic. Early in her career, she noticed something problematic about her use of found objects: "At college I was photographing found objects—odd things I found in the streets and charity shops, domestic pot plants—but eventually I decided they were holding me back. There was a nostalgia about my choices I couldn't avoid if I was working with found objects".[43] She managed to circumvent this stumbling block by photographing what might be termed fabricated found objects—"found" in the sense that they relate to objects that she has encountered in fiction or old photographs that have affected her. Her photographs, usually large, monochrome, shadowy, handmade prints, give the impression of the image looming into view or hovering on the threshold of visibility. One such photograph, *Gloss II* (2007), is a large matt silver gelatin print of a bookshelf-like structure that the artist had constructed and painted in matt and gloss black paint (fig. 6). The structure is a two-thirds scale model based on the proportions of an upright piano, but one emptied of its guts. *Gloss* was inspired by the artist's reading of Thomas Bernhard's novel *The Loser* (1983), which

is the tragic story of two talented pianists whose careers are ruined by the presence of a third student, the exceptionally gifted Glenn Gould. The narrator-pianist gives away his piano, while the loser, destroyed by Gould's perfect rendition of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, commits suicide.[44] The loser was unable to conceive of an intermediary position between success and failure. Beasley's hollowed-out piano is a carcass that carries a deathly connotation, like the wreck on the beach in "Solid Objects" and Skaer's whale skeletons. Its emptiness is doubled by the absence that haunts photography as a medium. The piece is exemplary of the undertow of melancholia and a consciousness of mortality that pervade Beasley's work.

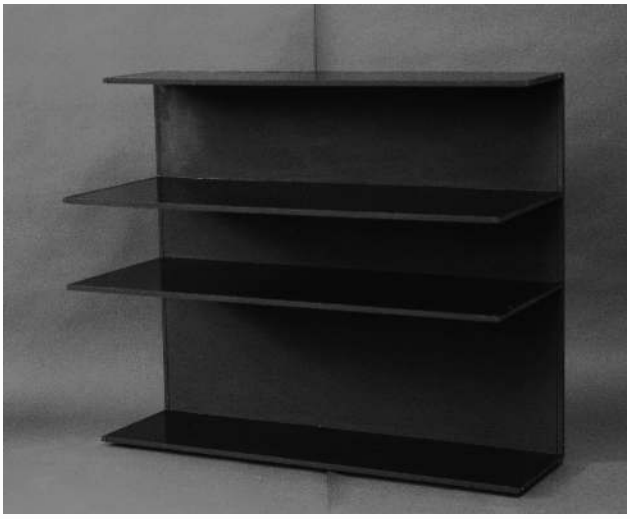

Figure 6

Becky Beasley, *Gloss II*, 2017, black and white matt fibre-based photography, archival linen tape, eyelets, 172 × 210 cm Digital image courtesy of Becky Beasley / Photograph Galeria Plan B (all rights reserved)

As the example of *Gloss* indicates, Beasley finds in fiction a source of inspiration. Her hybrid photograph/sculpture *Literary Green* (2009) was inspired by Herman Melville's novella *Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*, published in 1853 (fig. 7). The story turns on the scrivener's polite response, "I would prefer not to", when set a task by his employer. Resisting both outright refusal and compliance, he is a disconcerting presence who eludes available frames of reference. As Beasley observed in her essay about the story, "The Man without References", Bartleby "is hinged somewhere between architectural fitting, object and image". His immobility, his "unchanging fixedness", became a disturbance in the office, and this had to do with the ambiguity of his constant presence, like a "leaden weight", and his "formlessly haunting" absence through non-participation.[45] Beasley's interest in Bartleby was no doubt partly inspired by Blanchot's commentary on the ambiguous stance of Melville's strange character. In his book *The Writing of the Disaster*, he described an attitude to reading, and, by extension, the reception of art, that emulates Bartleby's position. In reading, he argued, one can either actively participate in the creation of meaning or one can passively respect the autonomy of a text. Blanchot, however, commends a third way, a "nocturnal vigil", involving a loss or dispersion of the self, when one no longer knows what reading is.[46] Similarly, Beasley is an artist who attempts to find a third position between explicit political opposition and submission. *Bartleby* and Blanchot helped her to understand ambiguity as a politically resistant and ethical position which can be more effective, and certainly more disconcerting, than outright opposition couched in the

unequivocal rhetoric of persuasion. Beasley commented: "I have tended to gravitate towards certain works or figures who lean towards this kind of spiritual passivity. In various ways they are silent rather than silenced subjects, as a form of resistance to power structures. In his work on the Orpheus myth, Blanchot argues that Orpheus wants to gaze at Eurydice in the night. It's a dark gaze, pre-linguistic, an attempt to experience things as things … This is to do with not killing things with words, with naming and language".[47] Literature, for Blanchot, is a special use of language that seeks the silence of things before the imposition of naming: "The language of literature is the search for this moment that precedes literature".[48]

Figure 7

Becky Beasley, *Literary Green*, 2009, black and white matt gelatin silver print, green acrylic glass, steel, 218 × 154 × 45 cm Digital image courtesy of Becky Beasley / Photograph Galeria Plan B (all rights reserved)

Literary Green consists of a seamless montage of two photographs, one the inverse of the other, which together produce what looks like a folded partition recalling the "high green folding screen" behind which Bartleby's employer hides him from view. The monochrome photographs are mounted behind green glazing, and a green acrylic tabletop standing on slender steel legs is placed in front of the image. The colour and shape of the tabletop lock it into the virtual space of the image. *Literary Green* is hinged somewhere between an architectural fitting, an object, and an image. This arrangement invites the viewer to imagine standing in Bartleby's position at a high clerk's desk behind the screen, effectively transforming his and our space into an enclosure, a box or corner, for solitary, immobile reverie.[49] A way of inhabiting space and resisting authority is elided in the work. Beasley cites Blanchot's writing on cadavers (objects) and corners (spaces) and notes that these are forms with which she has long been "compelled and obsessed" and, further, that they "would be the way I would, with hindsight, orient my journey most specifically".[50] *Literary Green* combines these images. Although Bartleby in his corner is not a corpse, Melville calls him "cadaverous". For Beasley, he embodies the cadaver's strange ambiguity of being an "uncanny presence and hollowed out absence"—a condition which

Blanchot thought characteristic of both the cadaver and the image and which Roland Barthes declared is the essential nature of photography.[51]

Spring Rain is the title Beasley gave to a 2013 solo exhibition of her work at Spike Island, Bristol. It announced a change in her attitude. In an interview given in 2016, Beasley remarked on a shift in her understanding of photography as a medium: "My relation to photography as a deathbound medium was initially spatial, taking the form of dens or tombs. Over the last ten years this relation has changed with my life. Still deathbound, it became concerned with the future, the work finding its place as the point between the time of the image (its 'now') and my future absence. So, life".[52] One reviewer of the *Spring Rain* exhibition noted this change, commenting that "her early sculptures and photographs were brooding, mute and darkly glowering, communicating the inability or refusal to speak". More recently, however, the work has softened or lightened.[53]

The title of the exhibition refers to a short story by the American-Jewish writer Bernard Malamud, which is reprinted in the show's catalogue. The story "Spring Rain" is about a man who is emotionally inhibited, unable to communicate his feelings or to connect with others, including his own family. However, he is deeply affected when he witnesses the dying moments of a young man accidentally struck by a car. At the scene, he wants to express his fellow-feeling, but "the words never formed themselves on his thin lips". Instead, he "went home, choked with unspoken words".[54] Later, he takes an evening walk in a light spring rainfall which seems to excite and soften him. The darkness and cold mist allow him, briefly, to feel his own emotions, to talk, and to cry. It is very likely that the title and theme of Malamud's story allude to Eliot's description of how spring rain breeds lilacs, mixes memory and desire, and stirs dull roots. The exhibition included *Family Cucurbitaceae I–IV* (2013), a series of four hand-tinted silver prints of a family of oddly shaped, home-grown gherkins posed against a stark white ground. There were also strings of small brass-cast gherkins arranged as a motorised mobile suspended from the ceiling, *Spring Rain (Family)* (2013). Although the size and shape of the gherkins invite a tactile grip, they are prickly—perhaps suggesting the inevitable ambivalence of family relations.[55] Beasley wrote: "For this reader, it is a story about love and how hard love is to communicate, and how the effort to do so can be extremely tender".[56] Another exhibit in *Spring Rain*, *Eclipse (I) (Pearwoods Nos. I & III)* (2013), is a small abstracted wooden couple painted black and standing on a table. Each personage rotates on its own axis, making their gendered peg and hole intermittently align—perhaps hinting at the possibility of connection. Beasley also displayed a series of photographs of this odd couple (fig. 8). These and other works in the show hint at the poignancy and difficulty of love and family relations. Because they are both abstract and intimate, our reception of them is likewise twofold.[57] They recall Blanchot's idea of that fascination as involving both separation and contact: "although at a distance it seems to touch you with a gripping contact".[58]

Figure 8

Becky Beasley, Extensions (Elaboration No.1), 2012, gelatin silver print, 164.5 × 123 cm Digital image courtesy of Becky Beasley / Photograph Galeria Plan B (all rights reserved)

Woolf's fiction and the work of the two artists I have discussed manifest a particular interest in the found object. In all three cases, the object occupies a liminal space on the threshold between life and death. Blanchot's sense of the intimate connection between the work of art and death meant that he particularly admired those artists whose work evoked in him death's uncanny proximity, including Virginia Woolf, whose fiction he knew well. He wrote a review of *The Waves* in which he stated that her work "seems like one of the rare creations of our time".[59] In a later review article, on the French translation of Woolf's diaries, he insisted upon the necessity of her moments of despair: "She must encounter the void … in order, starting from this void, to begin to see, even if it be the humblest things, and to grasp what she calls *reality*". [60] This *reality*, in italics, emerges from an encounter with the "void", and this, wrote Blanchot, was the risk Woolf took at every step of her writing practice. "Down there, in *The Waves*, roars the risk of a work in which one has to disappear".[61] Her work eludes our grasp, linked as it is "to dispersion, to intermittency, to the fragmented brilliance of images, to the shimmering fascination of the instant".[62] Bearing this in mind, one is driven to conclude that the title Woolf gave to "Solid Objects", conveying as it does a reassuring sense of the stability of things, must be ironic. She understood that writing, or at least her kind of writing, necessarily involves a moment of sinking into the depths rather than skimming over the surface of things. I propose that we should understand the work of Becky Beasley and Lucy Skaer as similarly drawn from the depths. Paradoxically, it is the undertow of death that animates their work, and which has necessitated an oblique approach to criticism. While the discussion of "Solid Objects" is a useful introduction to the linked themes of death and the found object, the deeper reason for its inclusion here is as a means of drawing criticism closer to the liminal space of the imagination.

Acknowledgements

This article began life as notes for a symposium presentation in conjunction with the exhibition *Transparent Things*. The show, which included work by fourteen artists, was installed at Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art, London. It opened in late February 2020 and closed prematurely owing to the COVID-19 lockdown, and the symposium was cancelled. Curated by Natasha Hoare, the exhibition proposed that Nabokov's fictional evocation of the perception of objects in *Transparent Things* offers a novel way of thinking about contemporary art, particularly sculpture. At the same time, it proposed that a work of fiction might serve as a point of departure for creating a work of art, for curating a group show or, more generally, for thinking about art. I would like to thank Natasha Hoare, Becky Beasley, and Lucy Skaer for their generous responses to my queries, and for catalogues and articles required for the initial research and drafting of this article during the time of COVID-19 lockdowns.

About the author

Margaret Iversen is professor emerita at the University of Essex, England. Her books include *Photography, Trace and Trauma *(2017); *Beyond Pleasure: Freud, Lacan, Barthes *(2007); and *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory (1993). She is co-editor with Diarmuid Costello of special issues for Art History, "Photography after Conceptual Art", (2010) and for Critical Inquiry, "Agency and Automatism: Photography and Art since the Sixties" (2012)*. She is co-author with Stephen Melville of *Writing Art History* (2010). She also edited the *Documents of Contemporary Art* volume on *Chance* (2010). Her current work continues to explore the overlapping fields of contemporary art, photography, psychoanalysis, and literature.

Footnotes

1. Virginia Woolf, "Phases of Fiction", Part 1, *The Bookman* (April 1929): 124, 125. Reprinted in Woolf, *Granite and Rainbow: Essays by Virginia Woolf*, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1958), 95.
2. Peter Schwenger, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 82–83.
3. Maurice Blanchot, "The Two Versions of the Imaginary", in *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 258. The Breton quotation is from *Nadja* (1928), trans. Richard Howard (London: Penguin Books 1999), 52.
4. John Stezaker, "An Interview with John Stezaker and Andrew Warstat", *Parallax* 16, no. 2 (April 2010): 75. Stezaker taught Beasley when she was a student at art school.
5. I wrote an article that made similar critical use of Woolf and the literary critic Ann Banfield: "The World without a Self: Edward Hopper and Chantal Akerman", *Art History* 41, no. 4 (September 2018): 742–60. One art historian who makes good use of the resources of literature for art criticism is Briony Fer. See, for example, her use of Proust to frame a discussion of installation: "The Somnambulist's Story: Installation and Tableau", *Oxford Art Journal* 24, no. 2 (January 2001): 75–92.

6. In her introductory chapter to the special issue of *Art History* "Creative Writing and Art History", Catherine Grant explains that the volume addresses the relationship between creative writing and art-historical writing. This article, in contrast, is mainly concerned with artists' creative engagement with literary texts. See Catherine Grant and Patricia Rubin, eds., *Creative Writing and Art History (Art History Special Issues): 8* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).
7. Other artists one could productively discuss in these terms include Felix Gonzalez-Torres, David Hammons, and Zoe Leonard. Beasley's practice includes writing, as does the practice of an increasing number of artists. I am thinking particularly of Moyra Davey and Susan Morris, about whom I have written: Margaret Iversen, "The Diaristic Mode in Contemporary Art after Barthes", *Art History* 44, no. 4 (September 2021), 798–822.
8. Isla Leaver-Yap, "Lucy Skaer's 'Black Drawings': Encounter and Aftermath", in Fiona Bradley, ed., *Lucy Skaer* (Edinburgh: Fruitmarket Gallery, 2008), exhibition catalogue, 94.
9. Beasley's triptych is in the Tate collection. The tinted glazing would seem to allude to the practice common in silent movies of tinting monochrome film various colours to evoke different moods or times of day.
10. Beasley, "Based on Paper: A Conversation (with John Slyce)", *American Letter* (London: Laura Bartlett Gallery, 2007), 43. Published to accompany the exhibition *Becky Beasley: Three Notable American Novellas*, Laura Bartlett Gallery, London.
11. Beasley, *Becky Beasley in Conversation with Claire Scanlon*, ed. Adam Gibbons and Eva Wilson (Hastings: Nero Books, 2019), 41.
12. The long subtitles are as follows: *Curtains (I)* (There have been many occasions when I have recorded something and I have come into the studio at 10 o'clock on a Monday morning and really been in sixteen, not just two different minds, but sixteen different minds as to how it should go.…); *Curtains (II)* (.… and this sense of option is really quite a marvellous luxury. It's a luxury that you cannot permit yourself in the concert hall, you simply cannot, you would be dead if you walked on stage not being quite certain.); *Curtains (III)* (.… But in fact what happens is that by one o'clock in the afternoon having given it three hours of work I may not have come to any definitive conclusions, but I will finally have selected one of these options and made it my priority, and out of this created a viable performance.) (Glenn Gould), 2009.
13. Beasley, "The Man without References", in *American Letter*, 33.
14. Beasley, "Based on Paper: A Conversation", 43.
15. Another contemporary artist who has made the blocked window a repeated motif is Anna Barriball.
16. Virginia Woolf, "Solid Objects", in *Selected Short Stories* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 61–67. Since the story is so short, detailed page references are unnecessary.
17. In her diary for 1919, Woolf reported that her chemist gave her a long-coveted green glass jar. She remarked that "glass is the best of all decorations, holding the light and changing it". Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 1, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 170.
18. Sigmund Freud, "The Theme of the Three Caskets" (1913), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 12, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1958), 289–302.
19. Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf,* vol. 2, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 305.

20. John Forrester, "Collector, Naturalist, Surrealist", in *Dispatches from the Freud Wars: Psychoanalysis and Its Passions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 125.
21. Sigmund Freud, "The Moses of Michelangelo" (1914), in *Standard Edition*, vol. 13, 265.
22. See Margaret Iversen, "Readymade, Found Object, Photograph", *Art Journal* 63, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 44–57. See also Iversen, *Photography, Trace, and Trauma* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).
23. D.W. Winnicott, "Primitive Emotional Development", in *The Collected Papers of D.W. Winnicott*, vol. 2, 1939–1945, ed. Lesley Caldwell and Helen Taylor Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 362. See also Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena" (1951), *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1990), 1–34.
24. Woolf, "Street Haunting: A London Adventure", in *Street Haunting and Other Essays*, ed. Stuart N. Clarke (London: Vintage Books, 2014), 226.
25. Douglas Mao, *Solid Objects, Modernism and the Test of Production* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 27.
26. For an alternative reading, see Bill Brown, "The Secret Life of Things (Virginia Woolf and the Matter of Modernism)", *Modernism and Modernity* 6, no. 2 (April 1999): 4–5, 12. Brown's article is primarily concerned with post-war scarcity and the role that particular materials, including glass, china, and iron, played in the political economy of the period and in Woolf's imagination. See also Brown, "Things", *Critical Inquiry* 28, no.1 (Autumn, 2001): 1–22.
27. See David Bradshaw, "Mrs. Dalloway and the First World War", British Library, 25 May 2016, https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/mrs-dalloway-and-the-first-world-war.
28. Jacqueline Rose, "Virginia Woolf and the Death of Modernism", in *On Not Being Able to Sleep: Psychoanalysis and the Modern World* (London: Vintage, 2004), 85. Rose examines Woolf's early novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915). See also Michael H. Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine, 1908–1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
29. Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage, 1997), 375.
30. See Blanchot, "The Gaze of Orpheus", in *The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Literary Essays*, trans. Lydia Davis (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1981), 99–104.
31. *One Remove*, curated by Natasha Hoare, was held at the Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, 2016. It was one of a series of shows called *Para/Fictions* that involved five artists making new work that responded to a work of fiction. See https://lucyskaer.com/exhibitions/one-remove.
32. Skaer, email correspondence with the author, June 2020.
33. Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Leonard and Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth Press, 1933), 184.
34. Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Leonard and Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth Press, 1933), 29–30.
35. The catalogue is available online: https://lucyskaer.com/exhibitions/una-casa-m-s-pequena. See also Gallery guide for Lucy Skaer, *Sentiment*, at Peter Freeman, Inc., New York, 2018, https://www.galleriesnow.net/shows/lucy-skaer-sentiment.
36. Skaer, "Leaving the House", conversation with Anna Reid, *British Art Talks*, podcast audio, 28 October 2022. Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, London, https://audioboom.com/posts/7715859-lucy-skaer-leaving-the-house. Curiously, Beasley also made a piece out of twigs collected by her father. She made brass casts of twigs and fixed them together to form a long arm suspended from a device on the ceiling that made it revolve

at one rpm. The piece is called *Bearings*, but the revolving pointer, like the spinning needle of a compass, suggests a loss of bearings.

37. Cited in David Pollock, "Renaissance Woman: Lucy Skaer", *The List*, no. 603 (22 May 2008), https://list.co.uk/news/35043/lucy-skaer.
38. Chris Sharp, "Lucy Skaer at Kunsthalle Basel", *Art in America* 97, no. 8 (September 2009): 159. The drawing was first exhibited as part of the show *Leonora*, at the Elisabeth Kaufmann Gallery, Zurich, 2006.
39. Leaver-Yap, "Lucy Skaer's 'Black Drawings'", in *Lucy Skaer*, ed. Fiona Bradley (Edinburgh: Fruitmarket Gallery, 2008, 94, exhibition catalogue.
40. Simon Critchley, *Very Little … Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy and Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), 44.
41. Skaer, cited in Melissa Gronlund, "Mining for Gold", *Frieze* 111 (November–December 2007): 128, https://www.frieze.com/article/mining-gold-0.
42. Jac Mantle, "Lucy Skaer: A Brief History of Time", *The Skinny* (September 2013), https://www.theskinny.co.uk/art/interviews/lucy-skaer-a-brief-history-of-time.
43. Beasley, "Being Silence, in Conversation with Becky Beasley", *IIIIXIII* (*Four by Three Magazine*), Silence Issue (July 2016): n.p., https://christine-jakobson.squarespace.com/issue/silence/becky-beasley-interview.
44. Thomas Bernhard, *The Loser*, trans. Jack Dawson (London: Faber and Faber, 2019).
45. Beasley, "The Man without References", 31, 33.
46. Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 17, 101.
47. Beasley, *Becky Beasley in Conversation with Claire Scanlon*.
48. Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death", in *The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Literary Essays*, trans. Lydia Davis (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1981), 46.
49. See also Gaston Bachelard, "Corners", in *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1969), 136–47.
50. Beasley, "Being Silence". The discussion of the cadaver and mention of the corner can be found in Blanchot, "The Two Versions of the Imaginary", 254–63.
51. Beasley, "Based on Paper: A Conversation", 46.
52. Beasley, "Being Silence". In this text, Beasley alludes to the personal significance of this change in her view of photography as a medium: "As a depressive, this turn has also had a profound effect on my life and how I make choices". Beasley has described depression as a component of her practice. In the last couple of years, however, she discovered that peri-menopausal hormonal imbalances and undiagnosed autism have been important factors in her condition.
53. Laura McLean-Ferris, "Becky Beasley: Spring Rain", *Art Monthly* 364 (March 2013): 30–31.
54. Bernard Malamud, "Spring Rain" (1942), in Becky Beasley, *Spring Rain* (Bristol: Spike Island, 2012), 7, exhibition catalogue.
55. The cast gherkins also have a comic-erotic charge. They relate to Duchamp's moulds of female genitalia and to the missing lead weights in a sash window that resulted in young Tristram Shandy being accidentally circumcised.
56. Beasley, "Three-Part Invention", in Beasley, *Spring Rain*, 3. The exhibition had two other sources of inspiration: Duchamp's *Étant donnés* and Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.
57. The overt references in *Spring Rain* to Duchamp's *Étant donnés* prompt speculation that Beasley is positioning herself as working in his wake and yet, as a feminist woman with

strong familial ties, also separating herself from him. The plan of the footprint of Duchamp's peep show, rendered in black lino in the opening room, suggests a template for modification. As Parveen Adams observed, instead of presenting a female nude with legs spread, Beasley has hung a homespun checked tablecloth with a hole in the centre to accommodate a parasol. See Parveen Adams, "what would happen … if one were to stop copying?" in Beasley, *Spring Rain*, 19–25.

58. Blanchot, "The Essential Solitude", in *The Space of Literature,* 32.
59. For this review, written in 1937, see "Time and the Novel", in Blanchot, *Faux Pas*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 248. See also Mary Ann Caws and Nicola Luckhurst, eds., *The Reception of Virginia Woolf in Europe* (London: Continuum, 2002).
60. Blanchot, "The Failure of the Demon: The Vocation", in *The Book to Come* [1959], trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 113.
61. Blanchot, "Diary and Story", in *The Book to Come*, 185.
62. Blanchot, "The Failure of the Demon", in *The Book to Come*, 101.

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