

Lisa Tan

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Archive Books

# Document of its Own Method

by Lisa Tan

## *Sunsets* (2012)

Landscapes appear throughout *Sunsets*. But I'm not interested in nature as such, just in its affects. Take note of the video's images, how most of them are tightly framed, reflecting an addled me, trying to grasp the concept of winter and summer in Sweden—where the extreme light conditions play with my mood, work schedule, social life, and creative abilities. The video documents its own methods, so the viewer follows my research of a 1977 interview with Clarice Lispector—the Brazilian writer whose work I've been socializing with for several years now. During this same period of reading and reading about Lispector, I was setting my phone's alarm for three o'clock in the morning, at the height of summer, getting out of bed to film.

At this latitude, a day's illumination can fade in a glorious, seemingly endless manner or in one that's disconcertingly fleeting. Either configuration offers an experience of radical alienation, felt mostly outside of any social order, and it's both wondrous and destabilizing. I surveyed the quality of light and thought about the activities that occur—or don't occur—at this time. And when summer ended, I waited for the winter solstice, which would signal my next call-time: three o'clock in the afternoon. Inside that dimly lit season, I was also spending parts of every week with a friend. She agreed to translate Lispector's interview for me, over Skype, connecting her apartment in Brooklyn—or her studio in the city—with mine in Stockholm. I recorded our sessions, not knowing that they'd end up being the life force of the video, its driving poetics.

Sunset is a time that elicits a more unstable experience of the world. At the threshold of light and its absence, feelings of displacement, loneliness, fatigue, and anxiety can seep in, as the end of the day ushers in the unknown of night. Will we wake to see another day? Anthropologist and writer Michael Taussig talks about it as a time for rituals—such as happy hour, when we imbibe half-price cocktails, easing our trepidation

of any day's end. In tipsiness, we can forget about how our individual consciousness will soon abandon us in our sleep. Yet we're also attracted to the end of the day, not just wary of it. Taussig cites the way people gravitate to sunsets, particularly in places where the horizon line is visible, better able to witness the orb perform its descent to the underworld.<sup>1</sup> In that instant, some see the flash of the green ray, as the last bit of light meets the retina.

Tacita Dean, who documented the process on 16mm film, relates the social and relational pull of sunsets.<sup>2</sup> "The evening I filmed the green ray, I was not alone. On the beach beside me were two others with a video camera pointed at the sun, infected by my enthusiasm for this elusive phenomenon."<sup>3</sup> But in fact, Dean's naked eye didn't catch the ray. It was revealed to her only later that while her body could not register the phenomenon, her camera's film could. According to art historian Kaja Silverman, this is precisely what the photographic (filmic) apparatus does: it reveals the world to us. It is not a matter of indexicality or representation, both of which are tied to a view of the world centered on human thought and action.<sup>4</sup> It also goes to show how threshold experiences can elude us if we remain our fully conscious selves. According to Taussig, thresholds solicit the experience "when consciousness pulls the switch on itself," momentarily giving us access to all manner of things and relations that we don't usually recognize.<sup>5</sup> We cease to be moths, fatally lured to the bright lights of thought, and are fleetingly more open to "appreciate a type of journey from animal awareness to crossing centuries of civilization in a second."<sup>6</sup> Past works of mine have used background performative methods to cultivate the pulling of the switch.<sup>7</sup> *Sunsets*, and its method of directly engaging spatiotemporal threshold experiences, accelerates that search, for which transformation is reward.

I started filming after waking in the middle of the night to pee and noticing my laptop in screen saver mode. It had never been more interesting to me than in that singular moment when I realized it was doing nothing, just lazily rotating through images of the cosmos. Jupiter fading to Saturn, Saturn fading to Earth's moon, and so on. In this liminal state, I registered the thing's thingness, its materiality anew. I continued this nocturnal schedule. Flipping the times for productivity is an ever-so-slight social transgression in this part of the world, where norms around work and recreation schedules are rigid. Misbehaving

was pleasurable. Questions quickly arose. What state of consciousness is needed for creativity, and when does it occur?

In Lispector's interview, she takes on questions about when she works and what happens between writing books. She philosophizes about death, how it occurs during her creative process. And when speaking about the end of a period of writing, she ponders aloud, "Let's see if I'll be reborn again."<sup>8</sup> Her speculative resurrection talk is self-aggrandizing for certain; nevertheless, she could reach the most radical of transformations, and somehow, metaphysically still be able to write about it!

But the winter's light affects similar life and death questions. Will I survive to experience spring, summer, ever again? Did my friend know that the activity of our translation sessions, our loving chitchats, were not only helping my flailing research, but also mediating my loneliness and displacement in my new, darkened surroundings? Consistent with the piece's vulnerable, casual beginnings, the translation in *Sunsets* is in no way "professional." Even though Portuguese is her mother tongue, my friend is from Portugal and Lispector was from Brazil, so there's a dissonance there, compounded by Lispector's strange manner of pronunciation.<sup>9</sup> As I mentioned before, I didn't anticipate that the recording would end up being the soundtrack for this work—nor did my friend. This explains why she sounds so very free in her task, why there's hardly a trace of self-consciousness. Her uncertainty, hesitation, searching, is generative, closer to the essence of what translation is.

I edited the recording and images to create transient moments of alignment. The first is when we see the screen savers of my workstation's dual monitors in my studio. The following image is the same setting—only now the camera is closer to the monitors, closer to Lispector's interview as it streams on YouTube. "It doesn't alter anything. It doesn't alter anything. It doesn't alter anything."—Lispector responds this way when she's asked whether or not her work induces political change, in reference to an article she had written on murderous police brutality, inflicted upon a notorious criminal in 1960s Rio de Janeiro named José Miranda Rosa, alias "Mineirinho."<sup>10</sup> I'll excerpt her article here because it's stunning.

That is the law. But while something makes me hear the first and second shots with the relief of security, it puts me on alert at the

third, unsettles me at the fourth, at the fifth and the sixth covers me with shame; the seventh and eighth I hear with my heart beating in horror; at the ninth and tenth my mouth is quivering, at the eleventh I say God's name in fright, at the twelfth I call for my brother. The thirteenth shot kills me—because I am the other. Because I want to be the other.<sup>11</sup>

Lispector repeats that her article doesn't alter anything. The translator then says it to me, again and again. An immensely valued colleague of mine, the poet and novelist Mara Lee, wrote about this passage in *Sunsets* in terms of the movement that language and voice induce. "But when a single meaning has travelled between two languages six times, then something is altered. The displacement of the repetition and the translation enacts a minimal linguistic defiance, a resistance against the finality of Lispector's words."<sup>12</sup> She continues, "The translation introduces otherness, but also movement, uncertainty that constitutes a counter language against the vestiges of death in the language of Lispector."<sup>13</sup> Words shift into activism, and the politics of Lispector are re-enlivened and *enlivening*.

It's within this passage that the translation momentarily aligns with the on-screen interview, just as Lispector lights a cigarette. The igniting match not only lights the writer's tobacco, but also sets aflame the origin of the voice. There's something that happens within these alignments that may be a primary vehicle for the video's poetics. But this is elusive, just as it is closer to the source of the work, but I suspect it's what makes the video an experience of translation itself. Translation creates new language in its liminal ontology. Walter Benjamin tells us, "The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue... For to some degree all great texts contain their potential translation between the lines."<sup>14</sup>

Film's capability to reveal some truth—in the way a good translation does—is completely dependent on editing. The sensibility required is new to me on a practice level; *Sunsets* was the first video I edited myself. But it's not new to me on a lived, embodied level. Real life deprives just as much as it gives, and unfolds within a logic where every image threatens to disappear. Filmic images cut, fade, and bleed into other images, but

they always end. It is a contingency known only through experiences of becoming, when forms are not fixed. The task of the editor is to make this becoming ring true.

I end with the beginning. The video's first scene introduces the source of Lispector's interview, the scratchy internet call commences, typing, transcribing, the translator assumes her role. Journalist Júlio Lerner poses the question, "Rilke, in his letters to the young poet, asks 'if you couldn't write, would you die?' I transfer this question to you." Lispector answers, "I think that when I write I am dead."<sup>15</sup> *Sunsets* is titled in the plural because there are several sunsets in the piece—winter's and summer's—but also Lispector's own death, which would happen the same year. In the interview she says she is tired, and seems irritated and uncomfortable, engulfed by an enormous brown leather armchair, as each drag on a chain of cigarettes seems to fuel her hazy, enigmatic responses.

#### *Notes From Underground* (2013)

In *Notes From Underground*, Susan Sontag's voice is translated into a grainy, undulating soundwave. I was doing research at the library, listening to an interview with Sontag that was broadcast on Swedish radio on the occasion of the publication of her book of short fiction, *I, etcetera* (1978), when a small window appeared on the database's screen, framing a soundwave moving along to the ebb and flow of her voice.<sup>16</sup> It's how the database is programmed—though I still don't know what purpose it serves, other than giving the ghostly feeling of seeing Sontag *move*.

I decided to film the jagged soundwave because it also reminds me of the silhouette of a mountain range, or the outline of stalactites, or a cardiograph, or an elevation drawing of the path of a subway traveling above and below ground. The movement seems to correspond with multiple velocities, temporalities, frequencies. It diagrams the negotiation of a border against an imaginary median line that we're conditioned to see, even if it might not exist.

Borders likely attract me because I grew up on one. *Notes From Underground* (abbreviated here as *Notes*), contains distinct horizontal and vertical movements that narrate an unlikely connection between the Stockholm underground and Susan Sontag's sojourn in Sweden, with a

cavern system 5,000 miles away, roughly a three-hour drive from where I was raised in Texas, on the borders of Mexico and New Mexico.

Carlsbad Caverns National Park was one of a handful of places in the region that served as a destination for sightseeing day-trips when my family hosted an out-of-town guest. Other options included a quaint adobe town called Old Mesilla, where Billy the Kid stood trial for murder, and where a restaurant called La Posta used to thrill with its collection of caged parrots, macaws, and toucans. Another destination was White Sands National Monument, impressive for its vast undulating gypsum sand dunes. It's where Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster made her dystopian film *Atomic Park* (2004), aware of its proximity to the first nuclear test site.<sup>17</sup> But it's the caverns that resonate most with the place I live today.

Sontag lived in Stockholm on two separate occasions, for a total of over two years, during an important time in relation to her personal politics, having arrived to the Swedish capital directly after successive trips to Hanoi and Paris in the spring of 1968.<sup>18</sup> She indulged in the generous practical, financial support allotted to her creative work—and made two films, *Duet for Cannibals* (1969) and *Brother Carl* (1971). She was the same age I was when I moved to Stockholm in 2010. Of course, I find myself here at a very different time, but for similar work-related reasons.

A scene from Sontag's *Duet for Cannibals* recurs in my *Notes*. A man and woman walk through a subway station in the city center. The protagonist, a young political activist, reflects admiringly on how the art in the station—a whitish concrete frieze by Siri Derkert—makes him believe in the progress of humanity.<sup>19</sup> But seconds later, his idealism totally collapses, when his lover takes out a gun and proposes he kill her husband, an exiled German Marxist intellectual, for whom he works. Today, the scene reads humorously. It truly looks ridiculous, but still it struck me for the bleak outlook Sontag seems to convey in writing and directing it, as if to say: humans are irredeemable, no matter their politics. A very similar message is found in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novella *Notes from Underground* (1864).<sup>20</sup> Like Dostoyevsky, Sontag seems to convey that no amount of utopian social advancement can release us of our insufficiency. In her diary from this time, she jots down some notes after returning from Stockholm.

Dialectic of the relation between conscious and consciousness:

—function of language (language promotes consciousness / an increase of consciousness is not only philosophically debilitating (cf. Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*, Nietzsche), but, more importantly, morally debilitating)<sup>21</sup>

Sontag, whose life revolved around all things literary, is keenly aware of the notion that language facilitates our own blindness. We are “able to relate only to things which turn us away from other things” (Blanchot).<sup>22</sup> But there's more to say on this. In an interview that appears in the first half of the video, Sontag states how she thinks we're capable of inflicting “unimaginable cruelty and wickedness” on each other, and that recognizing this is the start of one's “moral adulthood.” She excavates deeper, telling the interviewer how it drives her “nuts” when people are “surprised by atrocities—saying how can this happen? How could people do this to each other?”<sup>23</sup> She wants us to understand that life is nothing if not total contingency, and so it shouldn't surprise any of us when violence befalls the most innocent, the most desperate among us. This is an example of how I use Sontag as a conveyer of moral questions—questions posed by her answers that I found in a web-archived interview from the American news channel C-SPAN, conducted on the cusp of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, not long before her death in 2004.<sup>24</sup> She's really angry—about all of it.

For anyone who's come across Sontag's essay, “Letter From Sweden,” it's abundantly clear that she experienced a strong sense of disappointment and confusion despite, or probably as a result of, her high expectations for it being an advanced social welfare state.<sup>25</sup> She's pretty down when she returns home. Her diary from this time reveals her contemplating loneliness—how it affects her creative ability to form new ideas.<sup>26</sup> For obvious reasons, I was reading about Sontag's time in Stockholm with particular personal interest.

I thought about her experiences and concerns and then felt my own. The time in which *Notes* was made stands between the Swedish general elections of 2010 and 2014, when the far right anti-immigration party garnered enough votes to reach parliamentary representation for the

first time since the party's founding. It was such a letdown. It resonates in my everyday encounters with varying intensity, but is always felt in relation to the affective experience of my displacement, which is shared with others and other things. And I can't help but recode the scene from *Duet for Cannibals*—of the foreign woman and her murderous demand on her white, Sweden-born lover—through this moment's own iteration of insidious violence and racism.

The scene is filmed on Stockholm's red line. But the *blue line* plummets even deeper. Literally. To reach its subway platforms, commuters must descend what seems like an excessive depth for a single escalator. Along with Carlsbad Caverns, South African gold mines flash through my imagination. The line starts in the city center at a stop named Kungsträdgården, meaning "King's garden," and extends northwest to the largely immigrant-populated outskirts. Waiting commuters can hear a sharp, rhythmic snapping sound. It's an orienting signal for the visually impaired, informing them which track will receive the next incoming train. The sound is appealing in the way a metronome is—or a lover's heartbeat. I pair it with the sound of dripping water in a cave, and as one transforms into the other, blindness and the passage of geological time momentarily share the same frequency.

For several months, I repeatedly traveled the city's complete transit network to its terminal stations, but kept returning to the blue line. It heads in a westward direction, and so I kept heading even further west, onward to the desert, until I arrived at the caves in New Mexico. For if one wants to court an experience of liminality and untether subjectivity in order to re-enter it and the world more knowingly, then Deleuze and Guattari have a formula: "This is how it should be done: Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out continuums of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times."<sup>27</sup> They go on to say how such meticulousness is what's necessary in reaching beyond the strata that precedes deeper assemblages.<sup>28</sup>

Halfway through *Notes*, the sharp slicing click of my camera shutter abruptly shifts one image to the next. The first image is of a moiré-pat-

terned screen, displaying an image from inside a cave looking up at the light. The next image is of the same site and framing, but without the moiré-pattern. Within the instant between the images, we inhabit the act of looking itself. Thought is absent in that moment, and we cross centuries in a second.<sup>29</sup> Marguerite Duras enacts a similar crossing in her film *Les mains négatives* (1978). She captures Paris in the early morning hours as a voice-over narrates the film through a love letter of sorts. It's for someone who lived 30,000 years ago, whose pigment images—the film's titular *negative hands*—were painted in the Magdalenian caves, next to the Atlantic Ocean. Duras's film is a meditation on the expanse of time through the collapse of time.

The association of prehistoric underground spaces is sealed in Freud's structural model as the strata of consciousness that forms before the ego and superego. The pre-linguistic, unmediated part of the self that's responsible for instinct: the *id*. But if we take leave of psychoanalysis for neurobiology, we find that the brain's frontal lobe is supposed to deteriorate with aging, making way for uncensored thoughts to be exposed, unmediated by good sense. When Sontag was given the terminal results in her final battle with cancer, she is said to have yelled out a long and loud blood curdling *no!*<sup>30</sup> When Clarice Lispector, hospitalized in her final days, was prevented from leaving her room, she screamed at the nurse, "You killed my character!"<sup>31</sup> Life resists capture for anyone who wants to be closest to it. Loss ensues. But to be sure, I consult Lispector in her last book, *The Hour of the Star*. "What I write to you is a dank haze. The words are sounds transfused with shadows that intersect unevenly, stalactites, woven lace, transposed organ music. I can scarcely invoke the words to describe this pattern, vibrant and rich, morbid and obscure, its counterpoint the deep bass of sorrow."<sup>32</sup> I held this strangeness close to my gut while making *Notes From Underground*, and ended up with something so aggregated that it totally refuses excerpts. It can't be easily summarized.

But in this way, it's like Maurice Blanchot's writing, it needs to be experienced as a whole. Lydia Davis has written on her experience of translating and understanding Blanchot, saying it was *physically* demanding: "It was in the nature of Blanchot's argument to resist summary. The experience of reading had to take place moment by moment; one's understanding proceeded like a guide's flashlight, illuminating one by one

the animals painted on the wall of an ancient cave.”<sup>33</sup> Davis is attuned to Blanchot’s notion of *primordial obscurity* as something that exists beyond the realm of thought.<sup>34</sup> It’s in this darkness we feel the desert as an ancient sea that has distanced itself from its former boundaries.

#### *Waves* (2014–15)

*Waves* engages Virginia Woolf and her seemingly intuited novel *The Waves* (1931). I narrate her influence on me, as I find my own way of depicting consciousness in relation to society and its technologies. Much of the work is filmed in between, or at the meeting of land and sea. Such locations are a way to relate the piece’s structuring liminal relationship, while multiple hydro-relations are set into play. Yes, this includes waves and the distances they traverse, but other things are considered as well: jellyfish, professional big wave surfing, Woolf’s persona explored in the literary criticism of Gilles Deleuze, Courbet’s paintings of the sea, transoceanic cabling, homesickness—and how the Atlantic Ocean is both image and material to measure the distance between where I’m from and where I live today.

The logic at play in the video stems from my attachment to a single thought sighted in Woolf’s diary: “I am writing *The Waves* to a rhythm not to a plot.”<sup>35</sup> Stream of consciousness may instantly come to mind. But notice how scholar Kate Flint reassigns the writing style away from the linear flow of a stream to that of waves. She explains, “the images of waves, with their incessant, recurrent dips and crests, provides a far more helpful means of understanding Woolf’s representation of consciousness as something which is certainly fluid, but cyclical and repetitive, rather than linear.”<sup>36</sup> Why it is that a narrative mode of circularity over linearity hasn’t been more widely considered seems strange. But the video at hand takes leave of categorizations and asks what happens when metaphor swapping ceases altogether.

In an interview conducted about *Waves*, I’m posed the question: “Culture commonly uses natural metaphors to discuss contemporary technology, and frequently I hear terms like ‘oceans of data,’ or ‘sea of information’ used to describe the internet. If we could extend those metaphors, what do you see are the waves within those oceans and seas?”<sup>37</sup>

The seas, as well as global networking, are already obscured in this use of language, and so the desire to extend the metaphor seems problematic. A song I like pops into my head, “Wave of Mutilation” by the Pixies—and I start to answer the question by talking about it, “...that song isn’t a metaphor for the proliferation of internet technology... But actually, maybe it’s still relevant—and much more interesting.”<sup>38</sup> The tune is about a spate of murder-suicides in Japan in the late ‘80s. Husbands were driving off of piers into the ocean with their wife and kids in the car. I describe this and then say that’s “... such a profound image of the ocean’s fatal force and powers of attraction. But those metaphors are actually something I’m trying to open up as material realities. There are ‘oceans of data’—as in—the oceans do consist of data—in the way of an ever-increasing number of undersea fiber-optic cables. And there is a ‘sea of information’—certainly seas that are affected by information.”<sup>39</sup>

In *Waves*, I speculate on how the activity of looking at Gustave Courbet’s painting *The Wave* (1869) in the Städel Museum in Frankfurt on the internet today connects me to Google’s data center, housed in what was once the Summa Mill, a seaside pulp factory in a town called Hamina, in Finland.<sup>40</sup><sup>41</sup> Its thousands of servers generate a great deal of heat, and Google has taken pains to exhibit how effectively it channels the nearby frigid seawater as a cooling source. Thus the material connection between Courbet’s painting and the Baltic Sea is nothing less than spectacular. Gaining “access” to the painting online, we come into contact with the sea itself—which is connected to the very thing that Courbet painted on the Norman shores of Étretat. And “I am heating up that same sea by looking at it online.”<sup>41</sup>

I convey meetings like this—those that take place over vast spatiotemporal distances, absurd displacements, and multiple durations—by using Google’s *own* aesthetics. Its ‘Cultural Institute’ employs similar capturing technology as ‘Street View,’ which we’ve become rapidly familiar with to such an extent that the program’s awkward regulated zooms and jagged panning movements are just a part of the way we experience place. To mimic this phenomenon, I film using unorthodox camera movements. I look odd doing it, and people in the vicinity stop and stare, but when this Street View movement is applied directly to the physical space where the painting hangs in the museum is when I really see this way of seeing.<sup>43</sup>

Courbet made several wave paintings. There is one that really moves me. It hangs in a corner next to a window in the Alte Nationalgalerie in Berlin. It's rough, puffy, and very physical. One can sense the ocean's force while standing in front of it. At the same time, the image is approaching abstraction, and it doesn't really look like an actual wave. Art historian Linda Nochlin points this out too, thinking about Courbet's waves against the iconic Katsushika Hokusai woodblock print *Fuji at Sea*.<sup>44</sup> She sets both next to Gustave Le Gray's well-known photograph taken from the beach, and compares them with her own experience of looking out at waves from the shore.<sup>45</sup> She brings along an image of one of Courbet's waves to beaches on Long Island and Normandy, holding it out to compare against actual waves. Nochlin decides that the painting still does not look how waves look, writing that, "Courbet's wave is more forceful, scarier, in short, more 'wavelike'—akin to the wave fixed in our imagination—than any actually viewed wave."<sup>46</sup>

The wave painting in the Alte Nationalgalerie reminds me of a Rothko. It has distinct yet blurred rectangular forms, which constitute the sky, sea, and shore. It might be obvious, but it's worth noting that Courbet is a relevant artist here, not only for his wave proclivities, but also for the histories his oeuvre engages, namely that of art as witness to the society in which one is living, making this life visible as a matter of personal liberty from any institution.<sup>47 48</sup> *The Wave* was the cover image *Artforum* selected for its issue on the fortieth anniversary of May of '68!<sup>49</sup> But along these lines, Nochlin shares one "brilliant and politically hopeful" historical reading of Courbet's wave paintings and then swiftly shoots it down. She quotes art historian Klaus Herding, who writes how the wave paintings, "...attempt, through exact observation of nature, to collect experience which could be fed back as imagery into society, in conformance with Courbet's desire to work through art for individual freedom and finally for democracy."<sup>50</sup> If there is such a thing as a respectful guffaw, Nochlin seems to issue it here, as she turns away from Herding's ambitions for Courbet and narrows in on the artist's pull towards the thingness of the thing itself, offering that "what we might call the 'primordial form' of the natural object, whether it be tree, wave or grotto, an image, however naturalistic in some respects, which is at the same time true to the felt reality of the motif in question."<sup>51</sup>

Thus, the connection goes far deeper than tasking art with the service

of politics or sociality. This potently resonates with me. Courbet's painting contains within it so much sensation that it edges towards *non-sense*. It exists as an experience of the unknowable natural phenomena that is simultaneously an experience of being-in-the-world. And within the painting's ability to describe this unknowable thing, it reveals the material force and ontology of the very thing it depicts.<sup>52</sup> The video, *Waves*, aspires to lend this experience, too. Or, likewise to do what Lispector's writing does, in how she uses language to disassemble language, and in doing so, speaks closer to the truth.

Again, Virginia Woolf's statement: "... I am writing *The Waves* to a rhythm not to a plot."<sup>53</sup> It's in her diary (also in a letter to a friend), and it's part of a passage that seems to indicate Woolf feeling productively cast off from subjectivity. "I am not a writer: I am nothing: but I am quite content."<sup>54</sup> I follow her lead. Loosening my grip, allowing questions to emerge from the subject of inquiry itself, not the other way around. A leveling out occurs, a democratization of ontologies. It's not only Woolf's novel *The Waves* that informs the video, because there is no real origin, merely intersections, shadows—such as an indiscriminate, albeit undoubtedly algorithm-determined, selection of surfing videos I lazily watched over an entire summer, burned out after finishing *Notes From Underground*. The binge proved just as consequential to my process as any active research activity up to that point. *Inordinate* amounts of my time went to gazing at *Teahupo'o*, a surf break whose namesake belongs to the village in Tahiti it rushes toward. The wave's shape is tied to the dramatic configuration of the reef below it.<sup>55</sup> Sending off a deep barrel with a crest bearing a lip so thick and weighty it's like no other in the world. I continue to look at this wave every now and then, in pursuit not of *the perfect wave*, but rather of conditions equally intangible. Moving-images of *Teahupo'o* not presented in slow motion and/or not distorted by a too wide-angle lens are elusive. *I just want to see the wave as a wave*, but I only get subjectivity.

Late-summer idleness between one work and another, things were shapeless, mutable. Deleuze is interested in the in-between for this reason. He says that as opposed to what modern philosophy ascribes to, this space doesn't limit movement in reaction to origins. He explains this through sports. Sports of the modern era extended from the human



body as the source of movement, specifically as it reacts to something else—basically, think of any track and field sport. But what he calls *new sports* (in 1985)—surfing, windsurfing and hang-gliding—are different.<sup>56</sup> They possess no real start or finish. They take form in an already existing movement. Waves. He explains, “There’s no longer an origin as starting point, but a sort of putting-into-orbit. The key thing is how to get taken up in the motion of a big wave, a column of rising air, to ‘get into something’ instead of being the origin of an effort.”<sup>57</sup> Deleuze’s claim is for unrestricted movement in philosophy, out of a drive to create things, not merely reflect on them.<sup>58</sup> This resonates acutely with what I’ve designated in this text as Woolf’s dictum, *rhythm over plot*, and it’s the driver for all of the videos of this trilogy. But her *rhythm over plot* is far riskier than most any other alternative. And I have a hunch that unending risk belongs to the realm of the *impossible*, Blanchot’s (and Bataille’s) idea of an unattainable limit where contact with the divine resides.<sup>59</sup>

Woolf makes her own incisive invocation of the impossible when asked the question of what literature is. Her answer is outright resistance to fixity: “To whom are you speaking of writing? The writer does not speak about it, but is concerned with something else.”<sup>60</sup> Woolf’s *something else* is the liminal, pre-linguistic space of affect, involved in processes of becoming, and not unlike Lispector’s *it*, or her *whatever is lurking behind thought*. It exists beside a longing for what is far afield from intellect. *The Waves* is a novel as countermovement to finalism. “... life itself is an utter contingency: it need never have emerged, and there is no particular explanation for why it developed in the forms it presently takes on earth,” explains philosopher and feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz, writing on Henri Bergson.<sup>61</sup> Woolf’s Bergsonian plot-free alternative approaches a more materially felt understanding of the way duration makes every thing and every experience differentiated from the previous and the next. Producing another kind of knowledge that Bergson regards as intuition, not intellect. Or as he writes, “... our intellect [is] solely preoccupied in welding the same to the same, intellect turns away from the vision of time. It dislikes what is fluid, and solidifies everything it touches. We do not *think* real time. But we *live* it, because life transcends intellect.”<sup>62</sup> Grosz instructs that Bergson does not dismiss intellect, but rather that it, in combination with intuition and/or other forms of knowledge, is best when harnessed *together*.

Departing from the preceding videos—where I use the voices of Lispector to structure *Sunsets*, and Sontag for *Notes From Underground*—for *Waves* I use my own voice and writing out of necessity.<sup>63</sup> I write, re-write, and read aloud portions of a self-authored script of sorts that began to take shape over the Atlantic Ocean. Suspended between the continent of my birth and the one I live on today, between zones of assimilation, conscientiousness effectively slackens. Since the video is a document of its own making, viewers see and hear the always-provisional work forming. I decide on word tenses, stumble around my limited vocabulary, my own lame metaphors. It’s embarrassing. But in the process, I hear something other than writing or thought—*through* writing and thought (and towards the production of images). Perhaps it’s like putting a nautilus to one’s ear to hear not the inside of a shell, but rather the sound of the sea. Thus, video-making becomes an alternative measuring tool used to grasp distances between relations. Searching for intimacy.

What’s more, my sense of homesickness comes to exist as such, in the process of researching the sea, filming waves in different locations over a year, trying to figure this work out. Reading books and articles about invisible jellyfish, the laying of the first trans-Pacific internet cables, wave mechanics, species extinction, cruise ships, philosophical concepts tied to the sea, watching films on the global shipping industry, morbid documentaries about sea-related natural disasters, people who jump from the Golden Gate Bridge, re-watching a swath of French New Wave films—so many of them ending with a solitary man overlooking the ocean.<sup>64</sup> I read *Memoirs of Hadrian* by the formidable novelist Marguerite Yourcenar because she is the first translator of *The Waves* into French. Could she connect to something? With a Blanchotian sensibility, her heroic protagonist loved sleep because, like death, he thought of it as the great equalizer of men. I read the novel at a point when I was flailing about, really suffering for lack of a structuring principle for the video, and grasping for some connection between my displacement and that of Yourcenar’s, from her native Belgium to a place in Maine called Mount Desert Island. What a name—each topographical word of it merges towards solitude! It all goes to say that the most daunting task of working with the sea is to find a representational register that can stand up to its countless imaginings (it is also exceedingly difficult to film a scene of waves that is not clichéd).

To enter into any project about waves—or sunsets, or the underground—is to face a formidable, protracted lineage of thought. Yet assigning the sea as a symbol for consciousness is hard to knock down for a reason. Primordial reasons. *Oceanic feeling* was an idea introduced to Sigmund Freud by Romain Rolland, a writer, musicologist and mystic—and his most-revered pen pal. Freud initially rejects oceanic feeling on the basis of rationality. But he eventually succumbs, acknowledging that there must indeed be *some* “physiological source” for a “primordial connectedness to other creatures and things,” and he “knew this feeling to be the only possible basis for social cohesion.”<sup>65</sup> This is explained to me by art historian and theorist Kaja Silverman. She continues that oceanic feeling, “is ‘imposed’ upon us as a ‘fact,’ and it is a ‘sensation’ instead of a thought—the sensation of the ‘contact’ between ourselves and other beings.”<sup>66</sup> What is boundless is not us, but the totality that we are merely a part of.

Woolf ends her experiment, *The Waves*, with a single italicized sentence: “*The waves broke on the shore.*”<sup>67</sup> It marks the death of a character named Bernard, and with it an image of a breaking wave is applied onto individual finitude. But like any wave, the writer knows that it’s a double movement—and then some. Other waves will break, fulfilling their own unwritten paths, and life does not cease without us. The writer tracks a continuum that will go on, as I say in *Waves*, with or without us.<sup>68</sup> The *us* is not any given individual, but the human species itself.

*This text is excerpted from Lisa Tan’s doctoral thesis.*

## Notes

### Mara Lee

1. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, trans., Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, 1982, 96.
2. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Translation as culture," *Parallax*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2000, 13.
3. Anne Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, Princeton University Press, 1999, 29.
4. See for instance Lynne Huffer, "Blanchot's mother," *Yale French Studies*, no. 93, 1998; Frederic-Yves Jeannot, Hélène Cixous, Thomas Dutoit, "The Book That You Will not Write: An Interview with Hélène Cixous," *New Literary History*, Vol 37, no. 1, Winter 2006.
5. Anders Olsson, *Skillnadens konst. Sex kapitel om moderna fragment*, Albert Bonniers, 2006, 343. My translation.
6. Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, Routledge, 2009 [2000], 45.
7. *Stockholm news, Online News in English*, May 19, 2011. For further reading, see the report: OECD. *International Migration Outlook 2014. Special focus: Mobilising Migrants' Skills for Economic Success*, 2014.
8. Sylvia Plath, "Nick and the Candlestick," *The Collected Poems*, Ed. Ted Hughes, Harper & Row Publishers, New York 1981, 240.
9. Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans., Thomas Dutoit, Stanford University Press, 1993, 34.
10. *Ibid.*, 33.

### Lisa Tan

1. Michael Taussig, "When the Sun Goes Down: A Copernican Turn of Remembrance," Lecture, Monash University, Victoria, March 10, 2010, <http://www.digitalpodcast.com/items/7696283>. Thank you to Natascha Sadr Haghghian for letting me know about Taussig's lecture.
2. Tacita Dean, *The Green Ray from the Sun Quartet*, 2001.
3. Fondazione Nicola Trussardi, "Fondazione Nicola Trussardi Presents Still Life the First Major Solo Exhibition in Italy by Tacita Dean," Press Release, May 12, 2009, <http://www.fondazionenicolatrussardi.com>. This quote is pulled from one of several texts that Dean wrote on her individual films, all included in materials accompanying her 2009 exhibition in Milan.
4. Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy, Or, The History of Photography* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 11. Silverman reconceptualizes photography away from indexicality and representation and instead towards analogy. "When I say 'analogy,' I do not mean sameness, symbolic equivalence, logical adequation, or even a rhetorical relationship—like a metaphor or a simile—in which one term functions as the provisional placeholder for another. I am talking about the authorless and untranscendable similarities that structure Being, or what I will be calling 'the world,' and that give everything the same ontological weight."
5. Taussig, "When the Sun Goes Down."
6. *Ibid.*

7. See the works: *One Night Stand (Paris)*, 2006, and *Moving a Mountain*, 2008, <http://lisatan.net/archive.html>.
8. Lisa Tan, *Sunsets*, 2012, 00:21:00.
9. Benjamin Moser, *Why This World: A Biography of Clarice Lispector* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7.
10. Yudith Rosenbaum, "Ethics in Literature: Reading Clarice Lispector's 'Mineirinho'," *Estudos Avançados Estud. Av.* 24, no. 69 (2010): 174, <http://www.scielo.br>.
11. Moser, *Why This World*, 277.
12. Mara Lee, "The Shadow Is Just as Tangible as the Origin," in *Sunsets, Notes From Underground, Waves*, by Lisa Tan (Berlin: Archive Books, 2015), 15.
13. *Ibid.*, 15.
14. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 81-82.
15. Tan, *Sunsets*, 00:00:35.
16. "Lars-Göran Bergquist Intervjuar Amerikanska Författare. Susan Sontag," interview: Lars-Göran Bergquist, *Sveriges Radio*, 198-, <http://smdb.kb.se/catalog/id/000111576>.
17. Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, *Atomic Park*, 2004, [http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x8bey8\\_atomic-park\\_shortfilms](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x8bey8_atomic-park_shortfilms). The end credits of Gonzalez-Foerster's film read (in French and English): "The White Sands desert is located near Trinity Site. It was here, in July 1945, that the very first atomic bomb was tested. The voice of Marilyn Monroe, in John Houston's film 'The Misfits', can be heard in the distance. Arthur Miller wrote the script."
18. Susan Sontag, *As Consciousness Is Harnessed to Flesh: Journals and Notebooks, 1964-1980*, ed. David Rieff (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 239-321.
19. Siri Derkert's public artwork is in the Östermalmstorg metro station in central Stockholm. It was made between 1961-1965.
20. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993).
21. Sontag, *As Consciousness Is Harnessed to Flesh*, 271.
22. Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1982), 134.
23. Lisa Tan, *Notes From Underground*, 2013, 00:06:38.
24. "In Depth with Susan Sontag," *C-SPAN*, March 2, 2003, <http://www.c-span.org/video/?172991-1/depth-susan-sontag>.
25. Susan Sontag, "A Letter from Sweden," *Ramparts*, July 1969. I received this essay from an expatriate artist living in Stockholm. The version he gave me was transcribed from the *Ramparts* article as a Word document. I suspect that at the time, it was not easily available online as it is today.
26. Sontag, *As Consciousness Is Harnessed to Flesh*.
27. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 161.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Taussig, "When the Sun Goes Down."
30. "Regarding Susan Sontag" Dir, Nancy D. Kates, *HBO Documentaries*, 2014.
31. Moser, *Why This World*, 383.
32. Clarice Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, trans. Giovanni Pontiero (New York: New Directions Books, 1977), 16.
33. Lydia Davis, *Proust, Blanchot and a Woman in Red*, The Cahiers Series (London: Center for Writers & Translators, The Arts Arena, Sylph Editions, 2012), 31.
34. Maurice Blanchot, *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction & Literary Essays*, ed. George Quasha, trans. Lydia Davis, Paul Auster, and Robert Lamberton (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill/Barrytown, 1999), 385.
35. Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 3 1925-30*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew MacNeillie (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 316. Full sentence: "This rhythm (I say I am writing *The Waves* to a rhythm not to a plot) is in harmony with the painters." Woolf's sentence in parenthesis is from a letter dated 28 August 1930 to Ethel Smyth.
36. Virginia Woolf, "Introduction," in *The Waves*, ed. Kate Flint (London: Penguin, 2000), xi.
37. Nicholas O'Brien, "Lisa Tan: On Literary References, 'Wave of Mutilation' and Oceans of Data," *WAX Magazine*, 2015, 8.
38. *Ibid.*, 8.
39. *Ibid.*, 8.
40. Gustave Courbet, *The Wave*, 1869. Oil on canvas, 63 x 91.5 cm.
41. Pertti Jokivuori, "Workers React to Threat of Closure of Paper Pulp Mills", *EurWORK*, March 3, 2008, <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu>. This article reports the closures of the paper manufacturer Stora Enso in 2007 with 1,100 job losses. How fitting that Google's data center is housed one of these former paper mills, reducing the number of employees to a fraction of what was once required in the building. Google itself describes another interesting aspect of the building's history: part of the facility is housed in a former machine hall designed by Alvar Aalto.
42. O'Brien, *WAX magazine*, 11.
43. At the time of my visit, Courbet's *The Wave* was being restored in advance of a loan for an exhibition elsewhere in Germany. I knew this before my trip to Frankfurt, having contacted the museum to gain permission to film. I refer to the painting's absence in the video, "... but on a sunny day in Frankfurt, *The Wave* wasn't hanging in its handsome blue fridge."
44. Katsushika Hokusai, *Fuji at Sea*. Woodcut, *One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji*, vol. 2, 1835.
45. Gustave Le Gray, *The Great Wave, Sète*, 1857. Albumen silver print from two collodion-on-glass negatives, 33.7 x 41.4 cm, 13 ¼ x 16 ⅝ in.
46. Linda Nochlin, *Courbet* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007), 203.
47. T. J. Clark, "Introduction," in *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1973). The introduction alone provides important insight into Courbet's art in terms of its implications on society and politics at the time.
48. "Wie Die Nazis Den Maler Hans Thoma Vereinnahmten," *Die Welt*, July 5, 2013, <http://www.welt.de/kultur/kunst-und-architektur/article117753925/Wie-die-Nazis-den-Maler-Hans-Thoma-vereinnahmten.html>. In place of Courbet's *The*

*Wave* at the Städel was a stiff-looking self-portrait by 19th century German artist Hans Thoma. Looking at that painting, I wouldn't have guessed that Thoma and Courbet had met, in Paris. Courbet's effect was so great on Thoma that he went on to paint subjects that reflected the people and things around him, feeling liberated from the Academy. For more, refer to the Städel's Hans Thoma exhibition from 2013.

49. Paul Galvez, "Inner States," *Artforum*, May 2008, 346. This issue of *Artforum* includes a text on Courbet by art historian Paul Galvez. He writes about the paintings in a way that seems to me to resonate with Nochlin's reading of a "felt reality" and "primordial form" in the wave paintings. Galvez: "Courbet worked the paint so that to perceive a mark is to understand the object anew." He continues, "This successive unfolding has an erotic component as well. Objects release their inner states of being in a kind of convulsive birth of form."

50. Nochlin, *Courbet*, 203–4.

51. *Ibid.*, 204. T.J. Clark might agree. "I do not want the social history of art to depend on intuitive analogies between form an ideological content—on saying, for example, that the lack of firm compositional focus in Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* is an expression of the painter's egalitarianism..."

T.J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*, 10–11.

52. Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy, Or, The History of Photography*.

53. Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 3 1925–30*, 316.

54. *Ibid.*, 316.

55. "Teahupo'o," Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teahupo'o>.

56. Gilles Deleuze, "Conversation with Antoine Dulaure and Claire Parnet L'Autre Journal 8 (October 1985)," in *Negotiations, 1972–1990* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 122.

57. *Ibid.*, 122.

58. Karl Palmås, "Bodies without Bodhis," *Eurozine*, November 13, 2009, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2009-11-13-palmas-en.html>. Thanks to Göran Dahlberg for pointing me to this text on the movie *Point Break* and Deleuze.

59. Lisa Tan, *For Every Word Has Its Own Shadow: Sunsets, Notes From Underground, Waves*, (Gothenburg: ArtMonitor, 2015). See: section on "Liminality, Threshold and an Ethics of Becoming."

60. Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 6. Please note: Deleuze does not cite from which source Woolf's statement is from in his text.

61. Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 215.

62. Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (Lanham: University Press of America, 1983), 46.

63. "Rare Recording of Virginia Woolf," *BBC News*, July 9, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-28231055>. I wanted to use only surviving recording of Woolf in some way for the video, but I just couldn't make it work.

64. Casey Dunn, "A Marine Magician's Vanishing Act," *The New York Times*, May 28, 2014. Neal Stephenson, "Mother Earth Mother Board," *Wired*, December 1, 1996. Fredric Raichlen, *Waves* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013). Elizabeth Kol-

bert, "Annals of Extinction, Part 1 and 2," *The New Yorker*, December 13 and 16, 2013. David Foster Wallace, "Shipping Out: On the Comforts of a Luxury Cruise.," *Harper's Magazine*, January 1, 1996. Kaja Silverman, "The Oceanic Feeling," in *Flesh of My Flesh* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009). *The Forgotten Space*, dir. Allan Sekula and Noël Burch (2010). *The Bridge*, dir. Eric Steel (2006). *Contempt*, dir. Jean-Luc Godard (1963). *Pierrot le fou*, dir. Jean-Luc Godard (1965). *The 400 Blows*, dir. François Truffaut (1959). *Point Break*, dir. Kathryn Bigelow (1991). *By Brakhage*, dir. Stan Brakhage (1955–2003). Listed in chronological order of the listing in my sentence that this note belongs to.

65. Kaja Silverman, "The Oceanic Feeling," in *Flesh of My Flesh* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 34.

66. Silverman, *Flesh of My Flesh*, 29.

67. Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1931), 297.

68. Rosi Braidotti, "The Ethics of Becoming-Imperceptible," *Deleuze International*, February 28, 2008, 29, <http://deleuze.tausendplateaus.de/wp-content/uploads/2008/01/trent-final.pdf>. I owe this thought to Braidotti who writes of *becoming-imperceptible*. Hers is an affirmative take on death, "Life will go on, but it is *Zoe*, not the rational conscious, sovereign individual. It will go on in the superior generative powers of a Life that is relentlessly not human in its power to endure, in its obscene capacity to fulfill the vitality that animates it."

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Cover: Lisa Tan, *Notes From Underground*, 2013 (still)

Installation images by Jean-Baptiste Beranger

*For every word has its own shadow* at Galleri Riis, Stockholm, 2015.

Three 190 x 106.8 cm single-channel projections in 16:9 HD video with speakers and headphones, carpet, paint, and wooden pedestals.

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