

**Virginia(s) Woolf reclining in a deck
chair, undated.**

by Ruth Skinner

very very very

Ioana Dragomir

March 21 - May 14, 2026

Ioana Dragomir
Artist's Statement

Virginia Woolf was a writer, Vita Sackville-West was too, and Vanessa Bell was an artist. You can find their letters and diaries on the internet. You can peer into their homes! Virginia and Vita wrote novels but they also wrote to each other. They called each other “dearest creature” and “pig” and “you angel” and Virginia really liked Vita’s legs. Vanessa painted canvases but also the tiles around her fireplace and the backs of chairs and Virginia’s face again and again and again.

I have been hungrily consuming this content. In *very very very*, I question the lack of privacy afforded to these artistic figures and the way I, too (I, especially), have been a voyeur and invaded it. The exhibition includes drawings of photos from Virginia’s albums where her face denies the camera by being over-exposed or in shadow or turned away. A text collaged from letters between Virginia and Vita scrolls along the gallery’s baseboards. Their letters, rubbed clean of page numbers and unbound from their order, rest on a stack of quilts inspired by Charleston House, where Vanessa lived.

Two privacy screens (one for kissing, one for lying down), provide cursory cover for *you*. They are studded with pockets full of things you can’t quite see. Everything has a back-side and a front-side. The front is public-facing and prepared and the backside is soft and vulnerable like a turtle’s belly. Think of someone wearing a shirt inside-out, seams exposed. Think of a postcard with its generic front and I-miss-you-back.



Ioana Dragomir. Installation view. *very very very*. Forest City Gallery. 2026. Photo by Anahí Gonzalez.

Virginia(s) Woolf reclining in a deck chair,
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It would make sense, in an exhibition addressing Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, and Vita Sackville-West, that Vita, Vanessa, and Virginia would be imaged in a few places. After all, Ioana Dragomir is very forthcoming about her voyeuristic fascination with their lives and is very interested in what it means to have such ready access to a person. She is familiar with their writings, their paintings, their books, their correspondences, their clothing, their furniture, their flowers, and their teacups. What also results from this investigation is a very great deal of intimacy—intimacy in forms of withholding, screening, and hiding. So, I'll write about photography and hiding. But I'm also thinking of Ioana and Virginia and Vanessa and Vita.

Ioana has considered Virginia in previous bodies of work. She discloses that her initial attention was “a sort of erotics of relation”: “I read her for the first time six years ago because of a woman who I, in a complicated way, sort of wanted to be.”¹ *very very very*

1 Ioana Dragomir, *this cloud, this crust, this doubt, this dust*, MFA Thesis exhibition text, Concordia University, 3 December 2024. <https://spectrum.library.concordia.ca/id/eprint/994997/>

extends this relation to relations: to family, friends, lovers. While corresponding, Ioana shared a link to scanned family photo albums belonging to Virginia.² Many of the photographs are striking in their familial familiarity. They are deeply beautiful. Even the banal snapshots of Brittany landscapes feel charged by their proximity to photos of Virginia and Leonard Woolf and their circles, lawn-bowling, or lounging. There are photographic observations of the cats in repose, stalking, or caught as blurs-in-motion. In one image, a family dog is so close to the camera that all we receive is a nearly amorphous ball of shape and love. The garden is everywhere.

I imagine some of these photos and postcards arriving by mail, tucked into skirt pockets to be carried across terraces and gardens—enjoyed privately before being stored for posterity. Thanks to high resolution scans and the leveling effect of the screen, the albums that hold Virginia’s photos are equally visible. They are hand-bound, hand-dated, and thoroughly handled. Newspaper and magazine clippings from across the decades are taped to album pages or tucked into endpapers.³ We can see, recto-verso, the reverse corners of family photos slipped into their permanent pockets: hand-cut slits in pages and cardboard. Their

2 Virginia Woolf Monk’s House photograph album (MH-4), 1890-1947 (inclusive). Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. [https://iif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:17948758\\$1i](https://iif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:17948758$1i)

3 It was very thorough of the Harvard archivist to scan every page of the 1965 magazine feature, “Leonard Woolf at Home,” which someone tucked into the back cover of the 1939 album. Be warned when viewing that the three-decade time-jump may cause whiplash.

imaged front-sides are hidden, their back-sides appear partially with scribbled notations just out of view.

“I am very aware that when I interact with Virginia, I am meeting her in two dimensions instead of three,” Ioana writes.⁴ In one of the undated family photographs, four corners hidden in card-stock pockets, Virginia reclines out in the sun on a deck chair. We actually see two Virginias because the photograph is a double exposure. One image is a nearly full view of Virginia in profile, staring out into the distance from the terrace. The sun is high, and her hand is lifted to her hat. It looks like she’s pulling the brim back to give the sun full access to her face. Overlaying/underlaying this image is another Virginia, closer with face full to the camera. Her elbows are in her lap and she is cupping her cheeks in her hands. She seems to be mid-word. Virginia’s collar in the other view overlaps with her eyes in this one, so it’s hard to know if her eyes are opened or closed.

Both views of Virginia are too bright, overexposed. This is a danger when opening the shutter twice on the same piece of film. There’s no way of knowing which exposure came first. Did the photographer opt for an establishing shot on the terrace before creeping in low and close? Or did the encounter begin tête-à-tête, with Virginia’s companion then drawing back to take in the full view?

Here then are two dimensions of Virginia Woolf. V and V. Who took the photograph? It might have been

4 Dragomir, *this cloud, this crust, this doubt, this dust*.



Ioana Dragomir. *Untitled (like a plant newly stood in the air)* (installation view). Graphite and pencil crayon on paper, found images, stickers, CMYK photo lithograph. very very very. Forest City Gallery. 2026. Photo by Anahí Gonzalez.

Virginia's sister, Vanessa Bell. V and V by V. The sisters look remarkably similar. There's a playful world where they've had fun with this familial resemblance, swapping places and clothing to appear on camera together. Unlikely, but what a mad dash if true! V and V by V and V. What if Vita Sackville-West was visiting Virginia and took the image? V and V by V. What if Vita was visiting both sisters? V and V by V. Do these imaginative substitutions get us closer to three dimensions of Virginia?

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes explores our relationships with photographs by exploring his own relationship with photographs. At a cultural level, he notes that the arrival of photography coincided with modernity's "explosion of the private into the public."⁵ The domestic space of home was given new social value through our ability to present it: exposure and its corresponding response, consumption. What results is a world of spectators (us), operators (photographers, sometimes us), and targets (subjects, sometimes also us).

Barthes is bothered by the possessive reading of the photograph, even as he acknowledges the habituated tendency to shift himself when he sees a camera. He knows that he does this in order to present himself just so. "I transform myself in advance into an image," he muses.⁶ But doubly frustrating is a very contradictory

5 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), 98.

6 Barthes, 10.

experience induced by being in front of the camera. On the one hand, he is incapable of presenting himself truly, so that he can be photographed accurately. In his words, “‘Myself’ never coincides with my image.” On the other hand, he experiences a competing desire for distance: “I want to utter interiority without yielding intimacy.”⁷ He isn’t complaining. Barthes finds this entire encounter fascinating.

And photography isn’t all about capturing subjects *just so*, in order to be able to possess them. For Barthes, certain photographs express both “evidential and exclamative” qualities. When these photographs make contact with something both interior *and* intimate, they collapse being and time into a singular meeting. Photography “accomplishes the unheard-of identification of reality (‘that-has-been’) with truth (‘there-she-is!’).”⁸ From Barthes’ perspective, this effect can be so powerful that we fall in love with a photograph. Observing how threatened we can feel by such an unmooring encounter of past with present, he identifies a correspondingly modern pathology: domesticating the photograph through ubiquity. We drown ourselves in images, and this has the reverse effect of love; “it completely de-realizes the human world of conflicts and desires, under cover of illustrating it.”⁹ Barthes begins to sound a little bit protective of certain photographs.

Similarly, Ioana is both fascinated and protective. She is very aware of how much access we have to

7 Barthes, 12, 98.

8 Barthes, 113.

9 Barthes, 118.

famous literary figures like Virginia because *she* has experienced a lot of access to Virginia. Like Barthes, she is interested in the interplay of closeness and distance. She is drawn to intimate family photographs that provide only partial views—photos where Virginia is turned away from or generally unavailable to the camera, or photos which are over- or underexposed. At one point in time, these images would have also been singularly private and far away from the authorial portraits of Virginia freely given to the public. But now, following Barthes, we really could drown in their digital likenesses if we so desired. These partial personal angles are too readily available to us, too endlessly replicable for our possession. Maybe we've lost the intimacy.

Who is the 'she' in Barthes' '*there-she-is!*'? No photo can access the subject (or viewer) completely. The ones that most closely approach intimacy have a wounding power that, for Barthes, require protection and even protraction. In the wake of his mother's death, he describes searching through family photos in a vain attempt to find her—to find an image "straining toward the essence of her identity."¹⁰ Photo after photo fails: "I was struggling among images partially true, and therefore totally false. To say, confronted with a certain photograph, 'That's almost the way she was!' was more distressing than to say, confronted with another, 'That's not the way she was at all.'"¹¹ When Barthes eventually discovers this wounding photograph—the photograph that lets him see his mother again—he refuses to share it with

10 Barthes, 66.

11 Barthes, 66.

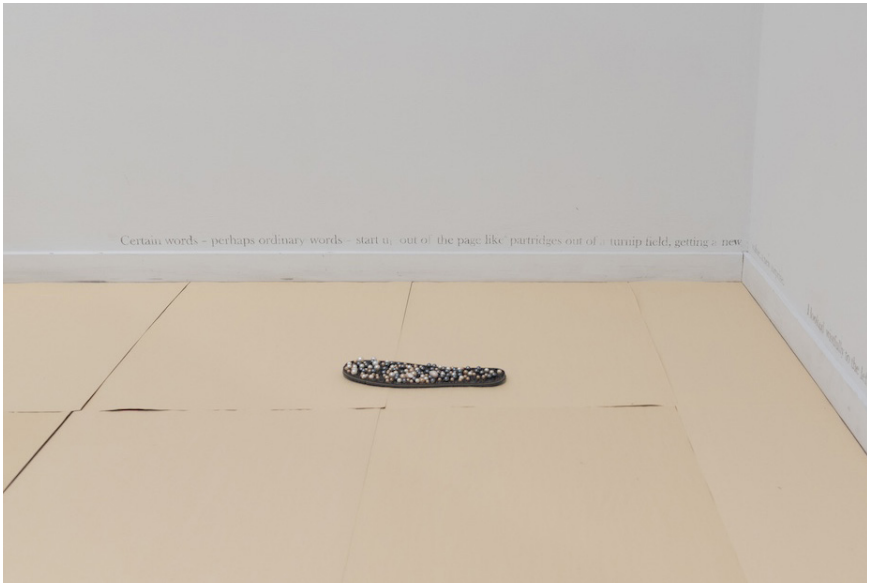
us. He gives us many other illustrative photographs in *Camera Lucida*, but not this one. “It exists only for me,” he writes. The welcomed wound of this photograph would not translate to us, the readers, as anything more than “an indifferent picture.”¹²

Barthes’ quest for his mother illustrates how photographs can reveal the genetic threads of our lives—sometimes obliquely, sometimes too closely—through capturing familial features and gestures.¹³ In seeing our own features reconfigured across time, we become all the more aware of our own lives and inevitable deaths. Hence that unmooring feeling and the corresponding pathological, combative flood of images. Maybe we don’t need so many photographs.

Virginia and Vanessa looked remarkably similar. Virginia and Vanessa’s mother, Julia Stephen, looked a lot like her daughters. Julia was a favourite model of her maternal aunt and godmother, the renowned photographer Julia Margaret Cameron. Julia imaged Julia throughout her life—through youth, motherhood and widowhood, and through her second marriage to Vanessa and Virginia’s father, Leslie Stephen. Thanks to Julia, we see Julia change over time. Her hair lightens with decades. Vanessa kept a photograph of her mother on her writing table. Julia is gazing out a bright hotel room window in Switzerland in

12 Barthes, 73.

13 “The Photograph gives a little truth, on condition that it parcels out the body. But the truth is not that of the individual, who remains irreducible; it is the truth of lineage.” Barthes, 103.



Ioana Dragomir. *a coil of hair, a hook* (installation view). Graphite on wall, pressed flowers. very very very. Forest City Gallery. 2026. Photo by Anahí Gonzalez.

1889.¹⁴ She wears the chignon hairstyle that Virginia will adopt. Julia's profile, so like her daughters', is overwhelmed in daylight and difficult to fully see. Did Vanessa look at this photograph and also see Virginia? Vanessa's daughter, Angelica, kept this same image on her writing table, after Vanessa. Did Angelica look at this photograph and also see Vanessa? Also see Virginia?

In the hotel photograph, taken by Gabriel Loppé (not Julia), Julia has arrived to care for her husband after he's suffered a mental breakdown. Throughout their short time with their mother, much of Julia's attention was focused on their father. Even the Wikipedia entry for Julia Stephen includes: "Leslie Stephen describes how his constant self-deprecation, was intended to elicit Julia's sympathy and attention."¹⁵ In this hotel photograph, Vanessa would be ten and Virginia seven. Julia would die only six years later.

Julia appears in myriad forms throughout Virginia's writing as a saintly and beloved, albeit remote, figure. Her constant caregiving for Leslie Stephen is often attributed as the reason for this maternal distance. Numerous scholars have sought to explain the lives and behaviours of Virginia and Vanessa through

14 Gabriel Loppé, Julia Stephen at the Bear, Grindelwald, Switzerland, 1889. Mortimer Rare Book Collection: Leslie Stephen's photograph album, Smith College, Northampton, Mass. <https://www.smith.edu/libraries/libs/rarebook/exhibitions/stephen/39c.htm>

15 "Julia Stephen," Wikimedia Foundation, last modified 29 December 2025. The Wiki quotes Desmond MacCarthy, *Leslie Stephen: The Leslie Stephen Lecture*, delivered before the University of Cambridge on 27 May 1937.

Julia's refracted image. As Ioana writes, many of us fall prey to the "clinical lure of analysis" when engaging with figures like Virginia.¹⁶ Virginia did not appreciate such reads. When Virginia and Vanessa's younger brother, Adrian Stephen, took up the practice of psychoanalysis with his wife Karin, Virginia wrote through her wariness of the methodology in her diary.¹⁷ Adrian and Karin would be among the first British psychoanalysts; many of their Bloomsbury Group friends appreciated the method, particularly for its easy integration with culture and political activism. Virginia remained circumspect.

Another family photo: "Adrian Stephen and two unidentified women playing a game of cards, undated."¹⁸ This photograph is also over-exposed, and the corners are also gently tucked into cardstock pockets. The sun is high again and we are back on the terrace, but this photograph feels further along than when we saw Virginia(s) reclining on the deck chair. An older-looking Adrian is seated at a small, circular table between two entirely unidentifiable women. Both women are wearing lighter dresses. The woman seated on Adrian's right has rested a walking stick in her lap. Above her collar, most of her neck and head are absorbed into the shadow space of the

16 Dragomir, this cloud, this crust, this doubt, this dust.

17 See Janet Sayers and Helen Tyson, "Karin Stephen: Bloomsbury's Rebel Psychoanalyst," *Psychoanalysis and History*, Vol 26 No. 1, 11 April 2024.

18 Adrian Stephen and two unidentified women playing a game of cards, undated. Virginia Woolf Monk's House photograph album, MH-2, MS Thr 559, Box 1. Houghton Library, Harvard College Library. <https://id.lib.harvard.edu/ead/c/hou02069c00024/catalog>

hedge behind them. The woman sitting on Adrian's left is wearing a brimmed hat. Her face is entirely obscured in shadow. Adrian is releasing an artful puff of smoke from his pipe. They are absorbed in their card game. Is this Adrian and his sisters, Vanessa and Virginia? Virginia and Vita remained friends right up to her death in 1941. Could that be Vita behind the camera? Is she observing, in the light of day, "My, how like Virginia Vanessa looks!"

Adrian completed his analysis with Ella Freeman Sharpe—underrecognized, compared with her male colleagues. Sharpe was interested in Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*. She expanded on psychoanalytical dream research through illustrating defence mechanisms like displacement: redirecting a negative emotion from one source to another, less threatening source. Ella provides a rich illustration of displacement in her 1937 work, *Dream Analysis*, describing an "interesting psychical experience" from a female patient:

She woke up from this dream quite suddenly. "*I was standing in a street looking up at a window which was open. A woman was standing there. I was only able to see the woman's head and shoulders and the upper part of her body which was fully clothed.*" The patient, already acquainted with the theory of dreams, was interested in the sudden awakening and thought, "What can there be in a dream like this to make me wake?" She fell asleep and again woke suddenly. This time she had further dreamt that she was inside the room where the woman was whom she had seen in the previous dream at the windows from the street. The dreamer, now a child, was on the floor, and she looked up and saw not the woman's head and shoulders and face from the front, but her back,



Ioana Dragomir. *fakes and knock-offs* (detail shot). Found chair, cotton, upholstery nails, secondhand books, wasps, wax. very very very. Forest City Gallery. 2026. Photo by Anahí Gonzalez.

and the body was naked; a repressed memory of a bedroom scene in early childhood.¹⁹

Ioana draws flowers as they appear in windows from street level, behind frosted glass. The ghost images of these flowers press against the glass, “necessarily seeking the light.”²⁰ Instead of including photographs from Virginia’s family albums, Ioana opts to instead draw portions of the image, hoping for a different kind of access. Following Walter Benjamin and Hito Steyerl, she observes: “there is something of the aura in the authentic article that the replica cannot hold but if I make another thing altogether, not a poor copy but something that is its own object with its own essence, maybe that’s a way of getting around the frustrating singularity and farness of her.”²¹ Earnest and loving displacement.

Similarly, Barthes believes the photograph can indeed provide an erotic encounter, but reproducibility alone does not bring Virginia, or anyone, closer to us. Like Ioana, his eroticism is also based in an act of projection, when the photograph “takes the spectator outside of the frame” and beyond the merely visible: “it is there that I animate the photograph,” Barthes explains, “and it animates me.”²² Imagine Virginia

19 Ella Freeman Sharpe, *Dream Analysis: A Practical Handbook for Psycho-Analysts* (London: Maresfield Library, 1988), 48.

20 In conversation with Ioana, 20 February 2026.

21 Dragomir, *this cloud, this crust, this doubt, this dust*. See also Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Mechanical Age of Reproduction*, translated by J.A. Underwood (London: Penguin Books, 2008) and Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg; e-flux, 2012).

22 Barthes, 59.

being animated by such a photograph from Vita. Imagine Virginia sliding this photograph into her pocket as she walks across the terrace—the stones felt underfoot—to be enjoyed by herself alone.

In Ioana's exhibition, photographs and postcards and other items are tucked into stitched pockets—a last respite of feminine privacy from our too-easily photographed modern life.²³ The images are hidden, and the screens they reside in hide your image in turn: “Two privacy screens (one for kissing, one for lying down), provide cursory cover for *you*.”²⁴ I know it's nice to think of your children finding you in images years on, but isn't it also nice to have a place where you can't be photographed? Ioana's screens celebrate closeness differently, and just for you (and for Virginia and Vita and Vanessa). She has outfitted these screens with other protective shields: floral flourishes that refuse further disclosure, the piercing backs of things like earrings, and the privacy patterns of envelopes—those remarkable/unremarkable designs that keep unwelcomed audiences from peeping into our business.

Ioana has also smocked her screens, and this act pays quiet homage to V and V and V. Smocking is a technique of gathering material into pleats and stitching them together to create decorative forms and the elastic elements for cuffs, necklines, and bodices. **VVV** is a basic zigzag stitch, versatile for

23 Ioana points me to Barbara Burman and Ariane Fennetaux, *The Pocket: A Hidden History of Women's Lives, 1660-1900* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020).

24 Ioana Dragomir, *very very very*, March 21 – May 14, 2026, Forest City Gallery.

finishing hems and raw edges, attaching trim, or to keep fabric from puckering. The decorative shell tuck stitch -V-V-V- provides a bit of a vintage touch with scallop or picot hems.

The chevron stitch VVV is a staple of smocking. When smocking, temporary threads are knotted securely into one side of a piece of fabric. These threads are used for gathering stitches (also called running stitches), which are sewn through the material in parallel lines resembling dashes of morse code: secret and temporary messages that will gather together and run away from view. When the loose ends of these threads are gently pulled, the fabric is accorded into three-dimensions. Three dimensions of VVV. Decorative motifs of interlocking patterns, dips, and braids can be formed from stitches that pass up and out of the valley of each pleat. Cable stitch is the basic element of wave(s) stitch; honeycomb stitch deftly knots the faults of pleats together into diamond and honeycomb designs. Ioana and V and V and V give us so many places to hide.



Ioana Dragomir. *privacy screen for kissing, for Virginia, again* (detail shot). Muslin, thread, postcards, spindles, iron, fake pearls, tucked away things, batting, lining, silk. very very very. Forest City Gallery. 2026. Photo by Anahí Gonzalez.

Bios & Acknowledgements

Ioana Dragomir

Ioana Dragomir is an interdisciplinary artist and writer currently based in Montreal, Canada. She has an MA in Art History and Curatorial Studies from Western University and an MFA in Print Media from Concordia University. She has shown her work with Support, Centre Clark, the plumb, and Robert McLaughlin Gallery, among others.

Her artistic practice combines her interest in writing, literary analysis, and curation with drawing, textiles, and installation. In particular, poetic methodologies of juxtaposition, metaphor, and slippage are important to her practice. She loves Sappho, Anne Carson, and Virginia Woolf.

Ruth Skinner

Ruth Skinner is an arts administrator and educator in London, Ontario. Her research interests include experimental publishing practices, artists' books, forensics and clairvoyance. She has worked in the nonprofit arts sector with artist-run centres, collectives and independent projects, and she currently operates the very occasional Edna Press.



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