House*Guests*

Artist-in-Residence exhibition series

MEG MITCHELL: *Threaded in a Voice*

EVERGREEN
MUSEUM & LIBRARY,
JOHNS HOPKINS
UNIVERSITY

MEG MITCHELL:
Threaded in a Voice

ESSAY BY JILL H. CASID

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COVER AND ADJACENT PAGE:
Meg Mitchell. Caption to come, details.
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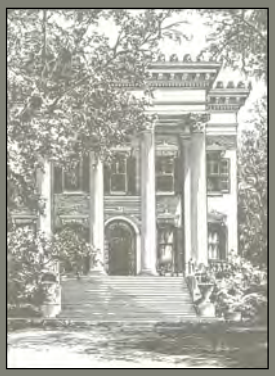

EVERGREEN
MUSEUM & LIBRARY
THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

Housed in a former Gilded Age mansion surrounded by Italian-style gardens, Evergreen Museum & Library is at once an intimate collection of fine and decorative art, rare books, and manuscripts assembled by two generations of Baltimore's philanthropic Garrett family, and a vibrant, inspirational venue for contemporary art. As a teaching museum of Johns Hopkins University, Evergreen contributes to the advancement of scholarship and museum practice by helping to train future art historians, historic preservationists, and museum professionals.

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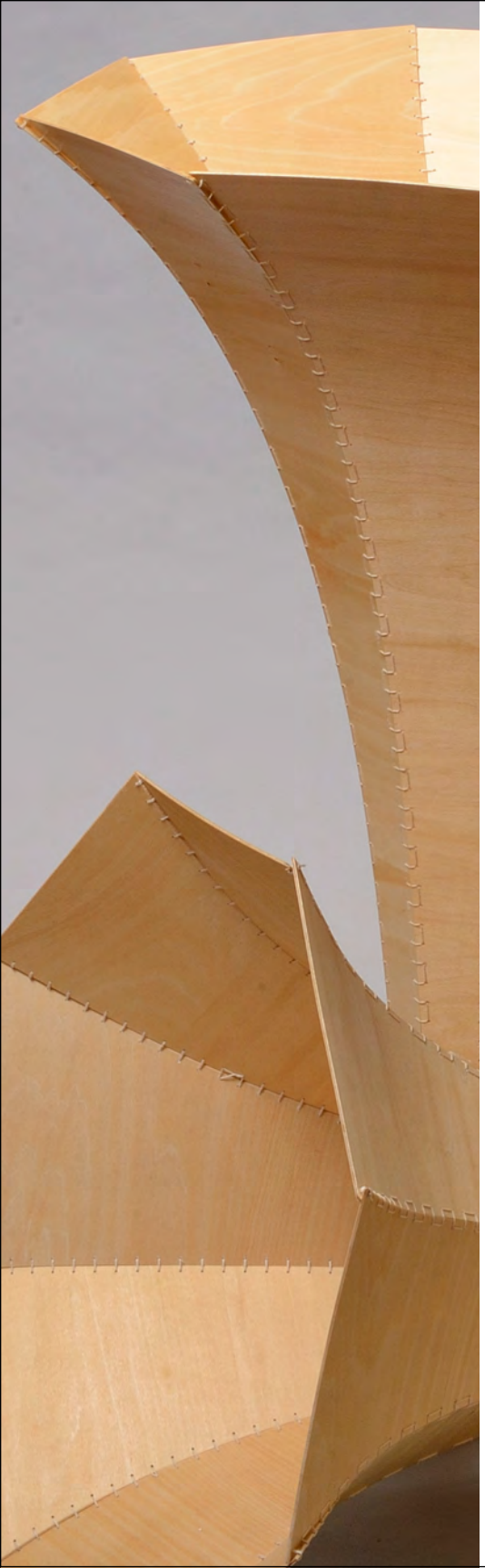


FROM THE DIRECTOR

The exhibitions represented in this publication fulfill the ambitions envisioned for Evergreen by its last residents, Ambassador John Work and Alice Warder Garrett. By bringing together the study of art and the making of art, both exhibitions embody the museum's mission—now twenty-five years strong—to preserve and interpret not just the permanent collections but also to nurture, support, and inspire contemporary artists.

Meg Mitchell's thought-provoking exhibition, *Threaded in a Voice*, is the culmination of a year-long study of Evergreen through the *House Guests* Artist-in-Residence program, which continues the legacy of inspired support demonstrated by the Garretts who invited artists of all kinds to live and work at Evergreen. Meg is grateful for the assistance of James Gerken; Mary and Joseph Gigliotti; Helen Hawley (vocal recitations and production assistance); Jeffery Carter Mason; Timothy O'Neill; and Victoria Reed.

For their exhibition *Point, Counterpoint*, mother/daughter artists Charlotte Cook-Fuller and Lynette Cook wish to thank Donald and Nancy Felton of Almac Camera; J. T. Morrow; Michele Pred; and George Rivera, former executive director and senior curator at the Triton Museum of Art. Lynette also thanks her mother: "I remember that when I went to college there were some fellow art students whose parents felt they should choose a different career path.… I am grateful that my mother always believed that art was an appropriate choice for me."

On behalf of the museum, I express appreciation for the generosity of James R. Garrett and the Evergreen House Foundation; Karen Winicki and the Evergreen Museum & Library Advisory Council; and the Maryland State Arts Council. Further gratitude goes to Dean Winston Tabb and the staff of the Sheridan Libraries and University Museums, and the staff and volunteers of Evergreen Museum & Library. Lastly, I extend heartfelt thanks to our exhibiting artists for sharing their time and talents.

JAMES ARCHER ABBOTT
Director and Curator, Evergreen Museum & Library

ART OF HORNING

JILL H. CASID
Professor of Visual Studies,
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Visiting Evergreen Museum & Library during interdisciplinary artist Meg Mitchell's installation *Threaded in a Voice* is to be led by vocal sound, which conducts while altering our encounter in this Gilded Age house-museum turned contemporary art exhibition space. To appreciate the shaping power of voice—and especially the technology of "female voice"—to make and unmake the home, call to mind the house riven by its sound in the short story "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1831), published by Baltimore writer Edgar Allan Poe just decades before the Italianate great house of Evergreen was built in 1858.[1] (The estate was purchased in 1878 by the investment banking firm of Robert Garrett & Sons, and passed to T. Harrison Garrett (1848–88) upon the death of his father, John Work Garrett (1820–84), president of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad.) It is no

accident that Virginia Woolf returns to the voice-haunted house as scene of the crime of women's domestic confinement in her speech "Professions for Women" (1931), delivered nearly two decades before Evergreen was left to The Johns Hopkins University. In her revoicing of a politicized Gothic, it is the phantom whisper of the "Angel in the House" and the demoralizing rustle of her skirts that the woman writer must kill as her profession.[2]

"ALL PROGRESS MUST BE EXTRAVAGANT AND WASTEFUL; AN ADVANCE COMES AFTER ENDLESS FUTILE EXPERIMENTS."

~ ALICE WARDER GARRETT

ABOVE: Meg Mitchell caption to come, detail. (2015-07-20-Meg_Mitchell-28.tif).
Photography by Jim Escalante

Now here at Evergreen in the twenty-first century, the ushering reverberations of women's unquiet voices may not rend the great house as a carceral, even tomb-like space of confinement in an acoustic revelation of its undead ghosts. But the Gothic's attunement to the house as an instrument for not just the orchestration of comforts but also the derangement of sense can help us to appreciate what a certain mediumship of vocal sound can conduce. If not exactly an uncanny echo of the direct-voice mediumship of the nineteenth-century séance, the voices that thread through the house—and through us—trade in the disquieting material conceit of making the absent and the dead present. Such vocal mediumship stages the kind of cross-talk between generations of women whose actual sharing of space-time, much less their potential influence on one another, are, as cultural historian Rebecca Solnit describes in her essay "Grandmother Spider," so often disappeared by the erasing reduction of the threaded network or web of what she calls the "grandmothers" down to the paternal line.[3]

As performed by Mitchell and artist Helen Hawley, the voices of suffragist and philanthropist Mary Elizabeth Garrett (1854–1915), who never lived at Evergreen, and her nephew's wife, patron of the arts Alice Warder Garrett (1877–1951), who was its very last resident, summon us into

BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT: Mary Elizabeth Garrett, courtesy Bryn Mawr College Special Collection. Alice Warder Garrett. Captions to come.

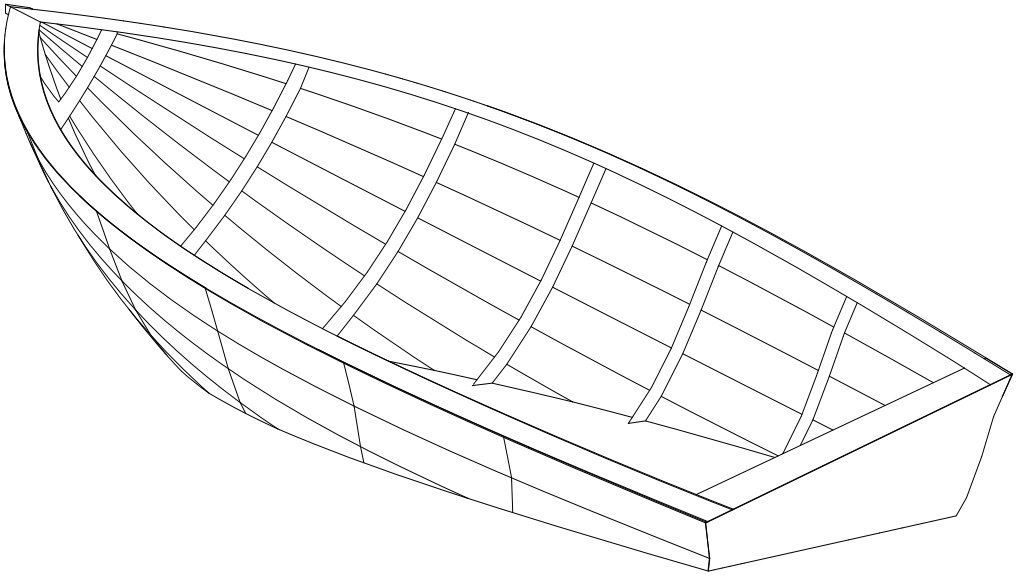
ADJACENT PAGE: Meg Mitchell caption to come. (2015-07-20_Meg_Mitchell-13.tif)
Photography by Jim Escalante

"THE ATTITUDE OF THOSE MEN SIMPLY MAKES MY BLOOD BOIL HOW MUCH MORE HAS TO BE DONE BEFORE WOMEN'S POSITION IS WHAT IT SHOULD BE!"~ MARY ELIZABETH GARRETT

the imaginative projection of what we might call the impossible conversation—and, in this case, among the "grandmothers" especially vulnerable to erasure. Neither had "children" according to the traditional definition and, though Mary Elizabeth Garrett was one of the wealthiest and largest landowners among women of her generation, she left no traditional "bricks-and-mortar" legacy as none of the houses she owned remains.[4] Although Alice's husband John Work Garrett (1872–1942) did not inherit Evergreen until after his aunt's death, Alice married into the family seven years before Mary's death. Given the years of overlap one might infer some contact at Evergreen or elsewhere, but there is not even a mention of Alice Warder Garrett in Kathleen Sander's major biography.[5] A cue might be taken instead from the way in which Mitchell's installation makes us listen to the unspoken of the house and its decoration and collections. Among the contemporary American artists whom Alice Warder Garrett befriended and commissioned is the Mexican-born artist Miguel Covarrubias (1904–57) who produced murals for Evergreen. Covarrubias became known for his caricature illustrations for *Vanity Fair* magazine that included a witty series of "impossible interviews," which staged unlikely encounters between icons of seemingly opposed charges, such as the naughty one in which Mae West cozies up on the couch with Queen Marie of Romania, nudging her with her toe. By contrast, Mitchell's *Threaded in a Voice* leaves the sofa unoccupied, thereby drawing us into encounters that animate and reshape the house as the voices take us through the threshold of the Reception Room into the Great Library and the Den; from these public rooms to the Garden Room; from this space for the ritual of dressing a lady to the occulted labors within the servants' quarters on which all these rooms depend; and finally into the showpiece of the Bakst Theatre.

Meg Mitchell at work
(JHU5214 shown or JHU5324?)

The marvelous trick of the installation is that those of us schooled by the market and an object-focused art criticism, to take the sculptural object or image-object as the work of art, find crafted material things on which to focus our attention. The voices and ambient sounds come to us as if channeled and amplified by a series of hand-stitched audio horns propped on various pieces of furniture, as well as suspended from the ceiling and



ABOVE: Meg Mitchell caption to come
(boat wreck sketch pdf)

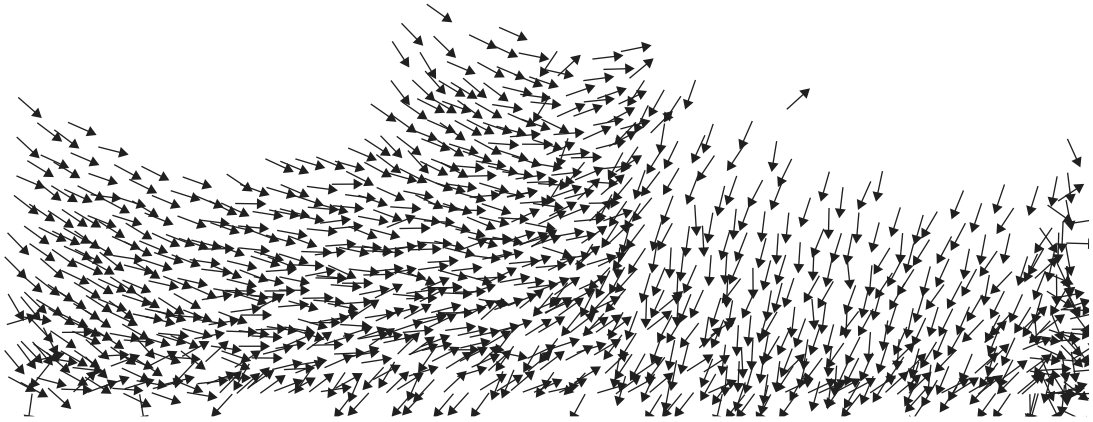
a large boat in the middle of the theatre. These sculptural objects are visually and materially related by their mode of production—the horns and the boat have been fabricated using the same mix of high- and low-tech techniques of hand-sewing delicate laser-cut sheets of lightweight plywood—and by the empty vessel forms of their curving concavity. But, importantly, the audio horn and boat are also related historically as devices of transport, moving cargo and sound from over there to right here. From the shipping industry (including that of the slave trade) that built the city of Baltimore and delivered the immigrant Garretts from Ireland to the United States, to the B&O Railroad which formed the major base of their family fortune, Evergreen is a product of devices of transport. The audio horns also call out as they call on us to consider the house itself as a dilated instrument of aspiration in both the sound and class sense and, in its resounding function as the call of mastery, not unlike the gramophone horn in the famous RCA Victor Company's logo of a faithful dog held rapt by "His Master's Voice" issuing from the large horn.[6]

But this is no longer an age in which the major icons of transport take the form of either the horn or the boat. And, indeed, the digitally-recorded and mechanically-amplified voices that you hear in Mitchell's installation are only secondarily boosted by the horns. The horn here is not just a vestigial form that has outlived its function or that, like the iPod gramophones sold by companies such as Restoration Hardware, replays hollowed function as style in the service of a certain refined Steampunk retro-chic. To understand the work that these horns do and, by extension, what Mitchell's installation performs, we need to take hold of the

horns not merely as historically referential skeuomorphs that echo in striking sculptural ornament what was once vital to function. Rather, what most interestingly unites the horns and the boat is not how they appear but what they do in taking us to the other side of horn, its operation not just as a noun or a visual and sculptural thing, but as a verb or, in other words, horns that horn.

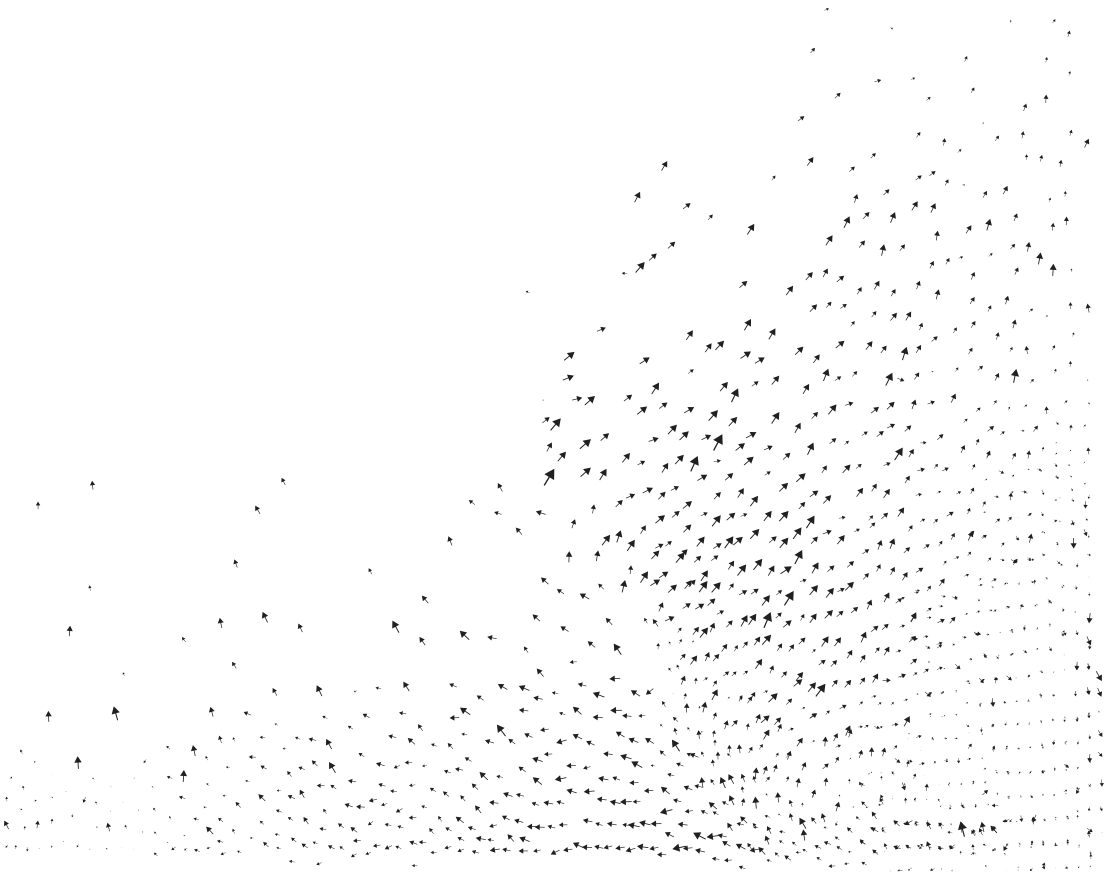
We might best understand the work of Mitchell's installation as an activation of what I would like to call the *art of horning*. In taking up the primary sense of horning or to furnish with horns, Mitchell's installation might seem to re-perform the decorous role of the artists brought in to decorate Evergreen. But we might also think of horning as an exercise of a sort of priapic Trojan Horse that, in the guise of the gift, makes the audacious move of insinuating the extent to which the horn is transferable property, a prosthetic put-on with performative powers potentially irrespective of location. To furnish with horns is also to call up the long but often forgotten history of the role that women with their own inheritances, or horns of plenty, have played in building the major public institutions of art and education. And here we might relate the way Mitchell horns the house to usher to the fore the unfinished legacies of Mary Elizabeth Garrett and Alice Warder Garrett to the re-animation of the words of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney in Andrea Geyer's performance *Time Tenderness* (2015) for the recent opening of the new Whitney Museum. Geyer tactically insinuates the revoicing of the woman benefactress to open up the unsettled and unsettling questions of not just access, but whom and what the art museum and other such institutions of culture are *for*. It is all to the prodding point that the phrase "to horn in" was first introduced not as proper English but rather as colloquial American slang right around the turn of the twentieth century when Evergreen was a private residence of publicized magnificence, a domestic machine that hinged on inclusions and exclusions. In an evocation of this history of invited guests and artists, Evergreen Museum & Library calls its artist-in-residence exhibition series, of which Mitchell's installation forms a part, "House Guests." To be a house guest during the heyday of Evergreen was to be subject to an implied rule book of obligations made explicit in such guides as Mrs. Burton Kingsland's *The Book of Good Manners: Etiquette for All Occasions* (1904) with its chapter devoted to "the duties of a guest," a key dictum of which is the restatement of the proverb: "Never mention a rope in the family of a man who was hanged." In a performative exercise of the kind of polite restraint in which it instructs us, we are admonished: "The application is obvious."[7] But take the game-changing example of the redeployment of the tactics of curation, such as the "talking paintings" that use the device of giving voice to the otherwise overlooked representations of black children to ask such impertinent questions as "Who calms me when I'm afraid?" in Fred Wilson's 1993 *Mining the Museum* installation at the Maryland Historical Society. These voices that refuse to make us comfortable in asking for comfort still challenge in their proposition that the trespassing breach of a dominant culture's codes of decorum may be precisely what it takes to make those for whom lynching is not just a familial but also a national trauma necessary to acknowledge and mourn feel at home or that the museum might also be "mine."

Mitchell's horns do not aggressively butt their way in, but, between their spatial protrusions and the way in which the sound intrudes on our attention without our bidding, we may be no less reminded



Meg Mitchell caption to come
(arrows 5 pdf).

that the complex interdependencies and potential conflicts of the positions of art, artist, patron, and visitor are in a necessary bristle that no etiquette should easily resolve. In demanding that we listen to the technology of the "female voice," Mitchell's impertinent horns push the sense of horning as a synonym for cuckolding to make us palpably aware of the ways horns and their taking also mark the gendered and sexed boundaries of social conduct. But the sense here is precisely not just visual. As the classicist Anne Carson elaborates in her article *The Gender of Sound* (1995), one of our brutal inheritances from the Greeks is the way in which we associate high-pitched vocal sound with women and feminized men and, from there, with lack of control and moral fiber.[8] Horning has many double and razored edges; not least the way in which to "put to the horn" is the speech act for casting someone out as a rebel, outlaw, or undesirable. The urgent poignancy of the ways in which Mitchell and Hawley do not just act as mediums for the voices of others but also ventriloquize words and texts that might not be understood to be theirs at all was brought home to me as I listened to Mx Justin Vivian Bond perform *Swallow My Pride* at Joe's Pub in New York City on the night of this year's Dyke March. In defiance of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival's refusal to include trans-women, Bond surprised with a set of three "outlawed songs," classics of "womyn's music" by Ferron, Jill Sobule, and the Indigo Girls. By its trespassing appropriation, such horning issues a vocal invitation to imagine a freedom based on the sort of radical hospitality that philosopher Jacques Derrida articulates movingly as the seemingly impossible of "let us say yes to who or what turns up…before any identification."[9] But the radical law of hospitality that would command that the new arrival be offered an unconditional welcome may



Meg Mitchell caption to come
(arrows 2 pdf).

seem impossible to serve. And, yet, Mitchell's audio horns, in making good on the sense of horning as not just signaling *with* a horn but also proclaiming loudly as if *by* one, repeat the gesture of the clarion call of democracy, echoing the human megaphones of the Occupy movement and the train whistle signals of the great railroad strike of 1877, the biggest labor dispute up to that point in American history and one put down by the strategic intervention of John Work Garrett, then president of the B&O Railroad. It seems especially fitting that recent work by media artist Sharon Hayes, also in residence at Johns Hopkins University in 2014–2015, should still be on view at the Baltimore Museum of Art at the time of Mitchell's installation. While the exhibition features Hayes' film *Ricerche: three* (2013)—consisting of interviews with students who attend the all-women's Mount Holyoke College, which we might consider in relation to Mary Elizabeth Garrett's role in the shaping of Bryn Mawr College—it is Hayes' well-known performance project *In the Near Future*, in which she held up old protest signs such as "Ratify ERA Now," that resonates powerfully with Mitchell's art of horning in calling out how the seemingly past or dead is not yet over while calling in the promise of the as yet.

NOTES

1. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" was first published in *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* in September, 1839. Poe wrote the short story while living in Baltimore at the house on 203 N. Amity Street, which was reopened in 2013 as the Edgar Allan Poe House and Museum.

2. "Professions for Women" is an abbreviated version of the speech Virginia Woolf delivered before a branch of the National Society for Women's Service on January 21, 1931. It was published posthumously in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1942).

3. Rebecca Solnit, "Grandmother Spider," in *Men Explain Things to Me* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), 63–75.

4. I develop the possibilities of imaginative projection through the contemporary use of old technologies in my recent book. See Jill H. Casid, *Scenes of Projection: Recasting the Enlightenment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015) and especially the conclusion, "Queer Projection: Theses on the 'Future of an Illusion,'" 225–44.

5. Kathleen Waters Sander, *Mary Elizabeth Garrett: Society and Philanthropy in the Gilded Age* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

6. One of the few remaining statue versions is now on display atop the roof of the Maryland Historical Society.

7. Mrs. Burton Kingsland, *The Book of Good Manners: Etiquette for All Occasions* (New York: Doubleday, 1904), 300.

8. Anne Carson, "The Gender of Sound," in *Glass, Irony & God* (New York: New Directions, 1995), 119–42.

9. Jacques Derrida, "Step of Hospitality/No Hospitality," in *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 77.

MEG MITCHELL: Threaded in a Voice

Photographs by Will Kirk/
HomewoodPhoto.jhu.edu
unless otherwise indicated

MEG MITCHELL,
American, b. 1979

RECEPTION ROOM	*This is where we wait* 2-channel interactive audio installation
GREAT LIBRARY	*Over there is where* 4-channel interactive audio installation
DEN	*Matters of State* 2 channel interactive audio installation
GARDEN ROOM	*On Appearances* 2-channel interactive audio installation
SERVANTS' QUARTERS	*Place and position* 2-channel interactive audio installation
BAKST THEATRE	*Remainders and reminders* 4-channel interactive audio installation