

How is regional feminism different and why does this matter?

Julie Montgarrett and
Sarah McEwan

SLIDE 1

Hello everyone. Thank you for coming to this session. We are meeting today on Dja Dja Wurrung land and I wanted to pay my respects to elders past, present and future. I also wanted to thank the elders for welcoming us and having us here during Artlands.

My name is Sarah. My partner Vic and I run a small arts organisation called the Cad Factory that's an artist led organisation creating an international program of new, immersive and experimental work guided by authentic exchange, ethical principles, people and place.

Julie Montgarrett, who should be standing beside me, who is an artist, curator and lecturer at Charles Sturt University, sends her deepest apologies for her absence.



Image: Jacob Rapauch

SLIDE 2

In 2015 Julie and I came together to start exploring feminism where we live – which is on Wiradjuri country, along the bila Marrambidya, the Murrumbidgee River in Wagga Wagga and Sandigo - 100km apart from each other.

We live surrounded by broad-acre industrialized agriculture in all directions – halfway between Sydney and Melbourne.

As Katherine McKittrick would say, living here is “how we come to know and where we know from.” So, it is from here – surrounded by this landscape - that we ask the question, what is regional feminism, how is it different, and does this even matter?

Coming to some kind of understanding of ‘regional feminisms’ has been a slow, uncertain and unfolding process for us. Today I’m going to briefly share the projects Julie and I have been doing and then I’ll open up the session, so we can have a kind of round table discussion to share experiences, maybe dissect the topic a little more – or, totally reconceive it! Julie and I see today very much as a site for testing and questioning and we are looking forward to knowing what you are thinking!

Because it is a site for testing, we are audio recording this session, so we can capture these conversations to refer back to them. By participating in this discussion you should be aware that Julie and I will be using this in our ongoing research.



Fuck Art Lets Wash Dishes, Casey Ankers, 2013
RE//ASSEMBLING 2015, HR Gallop Gallery, NSW
The Cad Factory and Charles Sturt University

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Julie and I see the work that we have been curating and making as nothing new or innovative, but rather continuing the work of people who have come before us, and who work alongside us in the never-ending vigilant quest to ensure that a variety of lived experiences can be acknowledged, heard and valued.

People have always been in resistance to our patriarchal Western society and there is a long historical web of action that we can draw upon to understand this. Whether it's Periclea in 400BCE writing about the double standards between women and men in Ancient Greece, or Christine de Pizan in 1405 calling out men by name for their barrage of unjust comments about women, or Francois Poullain de la Barre in 1673 who wrote and taught that a lack of education is why women were being held back in Renaissance society, or Olympe de Gouge who was beheaded in 1794 after a history of radical activism, most notably re-writing the key French Revolution document The Declaration of the Rights of Man to be inclusive of citizen rights for women; when women had no rights and came under the jurisdiction of a male relative.



Guys Like You, Sarah Mifsud, 2016
RE//CONSTRUCTING 2016, HR Gallop Gallery, NSW
The Cad Factory and Charles Sturt University

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It seems impossible to conceive of a time when I would have been the property of my husband, or father or brother. However, for the majority of Western history this has been the lived experience of women. Across the world, most women achieved citizenship rights sometime in the last 130 years. For example, in Australia, white women won the vote in 1902, but it took another 74 years before First Nations women and men became citizens. Indigenous activist Pearl Gibbs, as far back as 1938 was calling for the same citizenship rights as white women through her fierce advocacy.



Pussy, Adele Packer and Kate Allman, 2017
RE//CREATING 2017, HR Gallop Gallery, NSW
The Cad Factory, Charles Sturt University and Western Riverina Arts

Image: Tim Crutchett

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Given this historical legacy, we are reminded of the words from Karen Barad when she says, "The past is never finished. It cannot be wrapped up like a package, or a scrapbook, or an acknowledgement; we never leave it and it never leaves us behind."



RE//CREATING 2017 Artists

Image: Angela Coombs Matthews

SLIDE 6

After attending the Feminism and Contemporary Art Conference at Sydney College of the Arts in 2014, Julie and I felt inspired to devise a plan that would see our organisations, the Cad Factory and Charles Sturt University, commit to presenting a series of exhibitions, arts labs, critique sessions, lectures and artists talks held in Wagga Wagga and Narrandera called RE//ASSEMBLING in 2015, RE//CONSTRUCTING in 2016 and RE//CREATING in 2017.



RE//CONSTRUCTING, 2016

Group critique with Jacqueline Millner from the Contemporary Art and Feminism Network

Image: Sarah Mifsud

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Over the three years, we worked with 23 women artists, in varying stages of their careers, to offer sustained professional exhibition and curatorial support aimed at strengthening regional arts practice, and to address the statistics released by Elvis Richardson through her CoUNTess blog that demonstrates the exhibition gap that exists between women and men as artists by counting exhibition records in city locations. To my knowledge, no kind of regional gallery counting has taken place in regards to gender representation, although I would love to know what that kind of counting produced!



An Earthmoving Performance, Ashleigh McDonald, 2017
RE//CREATING 2017, HR Gallop Gallery, NSW
The Cad Factory, Charles Sturt University and Western Riverina Arts

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On reflection, we have come to think of the RE// series of exhibitions as a form of invisible mending and remaking by trying to add regional women's presence, agency, labour and lived experiences into the wider field of feminist art practice. Participating Wiradjuri artist Melinda Schiller commented that, "I've noticed that everybody has grown in their art practices. It was good to be involved in something where everybody was encouraging and empowering each other in their own styles."

The support and connection that everybody gave each other over the years was one of its successes. Another success was bringing together artists from across a 200km radius to have critical conversations about the development of new work. This coming together and sharing was mutually beneficial for everyone.

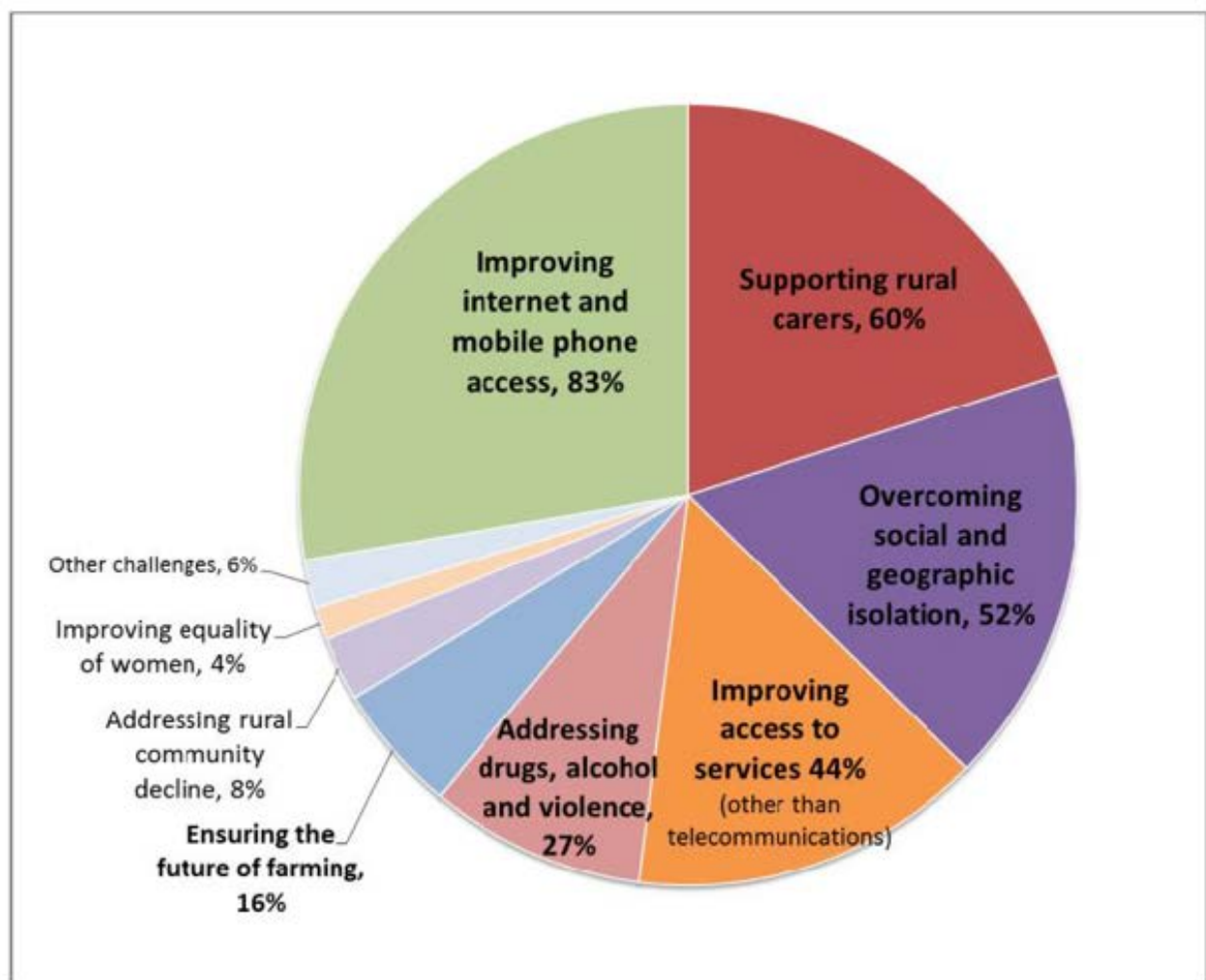


Figure 1 Priority challenges identified at the 2016 Rural Women's Gathering
% shows proportion of participants who identified this as one of their top three issues/actions

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In speaking at a regional conference I'm sure you're all well aware of the pressures rural living can have. We can see in this graph from the 2016 NSW Rural Women's Gathering some of the key issues that the 300 delegates tabled as being their key concerns for rural living.

To quote Sonia Muir, Director of Education and Regional Services at the NSW Department of Primary Industries, she says, "the issues for rural women are not that different to urban women, they are just exacerbated by distance and lack of technology and infrastructure urban women take for granted. The further you move away, the harder it is to access services and choices become less. You have to be proactive and often travel great distances that can have a financial and psychological impact on you." End quote.

What I find interesting in this graph is the figure of 4% of conference delegates whose top concerns were improving equality of gender. Within current feminist conversations, a key theme is to be 'performing feminisms' – which translates to 'doing' feminist actions. In my lived experience, I see rural women 'doing feminisms' constantly; in the way they care for each other; for their families and their communities. Even though they are not using critical theory and feminism as their frame of reference, their actions speak much louder. To quote bell hooks, "the possession of a term does not bring a process or practice into being; concurrently one may practice theorizing without ever knowing/possessing the term just as we can live and act in feminist resistance without ever using the word "feminism.""

Five most often mentioned challenges.



Improving internet & mobile phone access (83%)

Poor access is a key challenge with many women reporting unreliable, slow speed internet with limited data – and high cost. This has social and economic impacts, affecting women's ability to socialise with friends and family, participate in their community, access services and information, and run successful rural businesses.



Supporting rural carers (60%)

Caring for someone who is frail, ill or has a disability is rewarding but also challenging. Rural carers face additional challenges of living long distances from respite care and health services, and often have limited access to support networks.



Overcoming isolation (52%)

Difficulty attending social events, seeing friends and family and accessing services, together with long travel distances that increase risk of road accidents, are all challenges associated with isolation. There is concern that rural issues are not understood in the city.



Accessing services (44%)

Small populations and big distances means many rural people have to drive a long way, and pay for overnight accommodation, to access services, including health, childcare, education, and professional services.



Drugs, alcohol & violence (27%)

Improving support for women experiencing violence, drug or alcohol addiction, and providing support networks for women who are caring for partners or children who have addiction problems, were identified as important for improving the wellbeing of NSW women.

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The Country Women's Association, established in 1922, the National Rural Women's Alliance, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance and various State and Territory groups like the NSW Rural Women's Gathering, are key examples of how rural women have been championing change through organised movements – with little or no use of the word feminism!

I wonder then, what does the word feminism mean to rural people? Is feminism a 'city word'? Does feminism scare inherently conservative regional communities? Is it best to operate by stealth and not name the resistance you're working under? Or are the material realities of life so present in rural locations, that there's just not time for naming feminism, as there are more practical things to overcome, like the examples that are up here?



RE//CREATING 2017, HR Gallop Gallery, NSW
The Cad Factory, Charles Sturt University and Western Riverina Arts

Image: Tim Crutchett

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The Country Women's Association is a fascinating example of rural women's activism. It began in 1922 to advocate for services and has gone on to lobby for bush nurses, maternity wards, baby health care centres, hospitals and schools. The CWA also brought women together to fight isolation and encourage social connection. Under the guise of making scones, these women have actually effected significant progressive change by getting services into rural locations.

It alights this fractured carapace
warms each scarified landing
and draws its absences for us
showing what might be saved.



After Nightfall, Angela Coombs Matthews and Julie Briggs, 2017
RE//CREATING 2017, HR Gallop Gallery, NSW
The Cad Factory, Charles Sturt University and Western Riverina Arts

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Given the organisations almost 100 year history and that largely conservative white squatter women established the CWA, you would not expect its members to negotiate cross cultural relationships with First Nations women. However, for a brief time in the 50s and 60s, six CWA chapters in NSW – Griffith, near where Julie and I live, Bogabilla, Kempsey, Taree, Grafton and Nowra worked with women on stations and reserves to establish their own culturally appropriate chapters of the CWA where together women worked on advocacy and education issues for Aboriginal women. As a reminder of Australia's deeply racist and contradictory segregated past, in Griffith, the CWA women worked with Indigenous women, however, the newly immigrated Italian women were not allowed to partake in any of their activities.



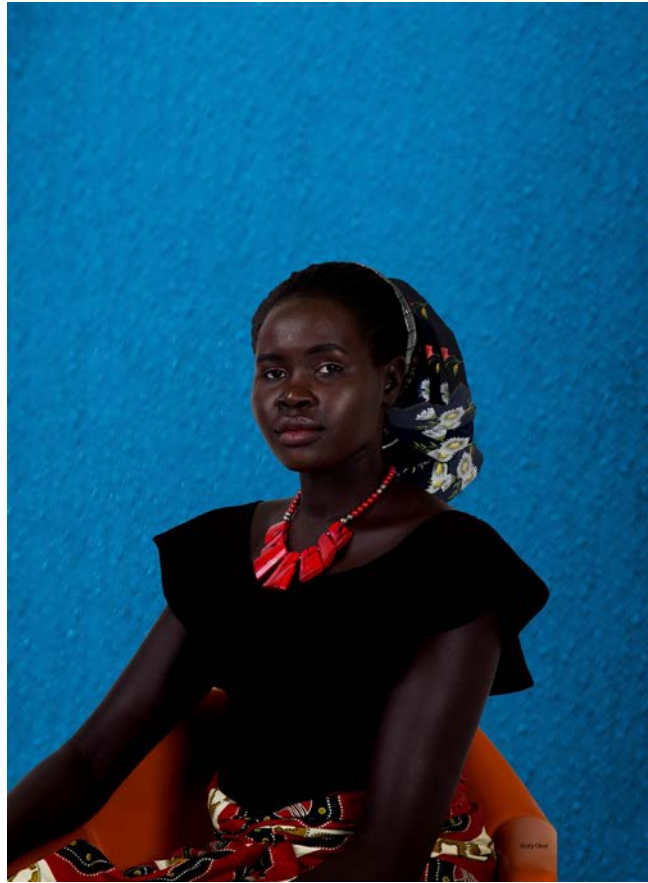
Elvis Richardson Lecture
 CSU Wagga Wagga Campus
 RE//CREATING, 2017

Image: James T Farley

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Museum Victoria are in the process of completing their Invisible Farmer project, the largest ever study of Australian women on the land. I encourage everyone to look up the website and connect in some way, to add to this important study in changing the dominant heroic male colonial 'settler' narrative. This project has the potential to become a landmark document that creates a foundation that will enable regional women's lives to become visible within a national record.

The expression goes, "you can't be what you can't see," but in this case, the sheer scope, significance and diversity of regional women's contributions can't be known and evidenced until it is mapped and documented, and through this project, Museum Victoria is trying to create this map and effect change in the national narrative.



Melaninated, Vicky Okot, 2017
RE//CREATING 2017, HR Gallop Gallery, NSW
The Cad Factory, Charles Sturt University and Western Riverina Arts

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Women being recognised as part of the farming community has been a slow process. It wouldn't be until 1994 that women could put their occupation as farmer on the census.

In 1992, when the third Women on the Land conference convened in Manurkah Victoria, their keynote speaker Lynne Johstone said, "The archaic convention of the male progenitor is long overdue for a change. This very English tradition which exists to ensure that the family name stays with the land and therefore only the sons can inherit is an obscenity, an offence against all women."

Rural womens' activist Marg Carroll attended this 1992 event and went on to start the NSW Rural Women's Gathering in collaboration with Ronnie Hazelton. Marg has spoken about the importance of these annual events as, "a collective search for surviving and thriving."

With 51% of Australia's land being used for farming practices, and women being central to this sector, it highlights how collective forms of women coming together enable conversations and connections to be had to offer mutual aid and care in navigating what is occurring around them.



Wild Brush Dreaming, Kath Withers, 2016-17
RE//CREATING 2017, Narrandera Arts Centre, NSW
The Cad Factory, Charles Sturt University and Western Riverina Arts

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At the Cad Factory, something that we reflect on as an organisation and find relevant to our practice, as it occurs around us, is a concept that was coined by Val Plumwood called Shadow places. Plumwood spoke about how primary industry was one of the many locations that are not seen, acknowledged and honoured as sites that people are tied to in order to maintain their survival. She talks about Shadow Places as being overlooked and seen as a resource to extract from. It is here, as a shadow place, where regional locations often sit within urban imaginations.



RE//CREATING 2017, Narrandera Arts Centre, NSW
The Cad Factory, Charles Sturt University and Western Riverina Arts

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This kind of thinking about rural place of course motivates Vic and I at the Cad Factory to make work that honours rural locations and people and to bring regional thinking into national and international conversations through the work that we make.



The Daily Diminish, Julie Montgarrett and Sarah McEwan, 2016
BOOM Dubbo Fence, Macquarie St Dubbo, NSW
Part of Future/Public curated by Alex Wisser for Artlands Dubbo

Image: James T Farley

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I want to conclude, with another regional feminist adventure Julie and I undertook in 2016 and 2017 called the Daily Diminish. We collected 168 comments from women in both rural and urban locations to create a list of everyday sexist comments and social reprimands women have experienced and how these words made them feel. This artwork was made for Artlands Dubbo and became another testing ground for us to think about regional feminisms.



The Daily Diminish, Julie Montgarrett and Sarah McEwan, 2016
BOOM Dubbo Fence, Macquarie St Dubbo, NSW
Part of Future/Public curated by Alex Wisser for Artlands Dubbo

Image: James T Farley

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Julie and I used toilet bleach to burn the comments onto black calico and stitched or painted in red the feelings. We purposefully displayed the work on public fences to reinforce how boundaries – both physical and psychological, enforce compliance to cultural norms and undermine capacities for self-determination.



The Daily Diminish, Julie Montgarrett and Sarah McEwan, 2016
 Western Plains Culutral Centre, Dubbo, NSW
 Part of Future/Public curated by Alex Wisser for Artlands Dubb

Image: James T Farley

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The artworks were split between two locations, Macquarie St and the courtyard of Western Plains Cultural Centre as these comments were deemed to offensive for Macquarie St. Funnily these comments were given to us by the eldest participant who was 75!



The Daily Diminish, Julie Montgarrett and Sarah McEwan, 2016
 After three days of being installed along Macquarie St, Dubbo NSW
 Part of Future/Public curated by Alex Wisser for Artlands Dubbo

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Within hours of the work being up on the first day of the Conference, Dubbo City Council told us we had to remove the works from the main-street following complaints from the public asserting that the works “were offensive” and “not legitimate art works”. The reason for this was “because they were hand-written”; because they were “words”; because they were “not neat” and because “they were on a fence”.

Amelia Jones notes that artworks where the hand of the maker is apparent and in dialogue with the cultural turn towards new materialism – “... show the evidence ...of (the art work) having been made... in stressing making, these practices point to political issues in relation to the valuing (or devaluing) of artistic labor...”

The distorted edges, irregular bleached text and uneven character of the embroidered and painted letters, confuses and refuses the narrowly defined standards of perfect textiles – where anonymous women for thousands of years have had strict training, grooming and discipline towards creating beautiful objects. The Daily Diminish is the intentionally unruly, resistant, non-compliant hand of many contemporary women.



The Daily Diminish, Julie Montgarrett and Sarah McEwan, 2016
After three days of being installed along Macquarie St, Dubbo NSW
Part of Future/Public curated by Alex Wisser for Artlands Dubbo

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Thanks to the bureaucratic know how of Andrew Glassop, the manager of Western Plains Cultural Centre, a council run facility no less, and advocate for the project, disaster was obverted, and the works stayed put, even if they did get ripped, stolen and caused heated words to be exchanged.



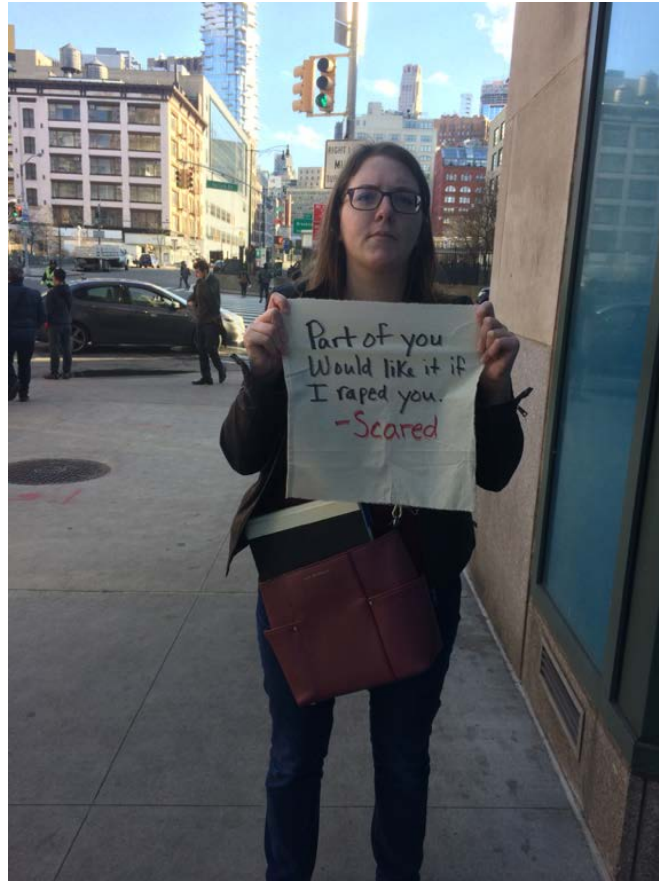
The Daily Diminish, Julie Montgarrett, Sarah McEwan, Lauren Smith, 2017
New York City
Correspondence of Imaginary Places, CEMENTA 17

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This work went on to be enacted in New York in collaboration with artist Lauren Smith and a group of her friends, as part of CEMENTA 17.

On March 8 2017, on International Women's Day, Lauren brought 10 of her friends together who took to the streets recording themselves with their comments. In reflecting on the project Lauren wrote:

As we continue to defend our rights on a legislative level, it was refreshing to find compassion and encouragement in and through this grassroots textile artwork. The Daily Diminish offered an opportunity to connect fellow New Yorkers of various backgrounds and identities to combat the long-fought battle of sexism. On International Women's Day 2017, I am more grateful than ever to have found this support.



The Daily Diminish, Julie Montgarrett, Sarah McEwan, Lauren Smith, 2017
New York City
Correspondence of Imaginary Places, CEMENTA 17

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A phrase that always stays with me is the words of trans activist Dean Spade, who passionately speaks about “building the world we want and need.” It seems very clear to me that women across the world have been enacting this phrase for thousands of years - even if it’s in their own small way, because of the restrictions of patriarchal control that have only begun to lift in Western countries over the last 130 years. Regional women, of course, have demonstrated time and time again how they are an integral part of building this world we want and need through their work.

Please share your thoughts and experiences with us



Feminism has fought no wars... killed no opponents... set up no concentration camps... starved no enemies... practiced no cruelty. Its battles have been for education, for the vote, for better working conditions, for safety in the streets... for reforms in the law.

— Dale Spender —

AZ QUOTES

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I'd like to open up the conversation to you all now – while Australian feminist from Newcastle Dale Spender watches over us. I would love to know what you think of the proposition of regional feminism – is there a case? Does it matter? We welcome your constructive feedback!

I should also mention that the next project we are working towards in 2020 is bringing together artists from regional locations, Sydney and LA to discuss the overlaps and divergences of various feminisms, and so this afternoon will also directly feed into our thinking of this project.