

Invisible mending: recent Australian regional feminist activism

Julie Montgarrett and
Sarah McEwan

SLIDE 2 – TITLE - JULIE

Between 2015 – 2017 we devised a series of three exhibitions and an arts project to test our understanding of feminist strategies for social change and on reflection this was a form of INVISIBLE MENDING.

This is a report about rural women - working in partnerships and enterprises across regional Australia. Many are passionately engaged in challenging the inequalities that beset all women but they don't name themselves Feminists. It is also a report about various forms of limited opportunity and censorship of women's lives through the overt and subtle ways in which sexist commonplace social commentaries work to undermine women's individual agency, ambition, and confidence and which attempts to enforce compliance to ensure obedience to stereotypical cultural norms.



RE//CREATING 2017 Artists

Image: Angela Coombs Matthews

SLIDE 3 – head shots JULIE

NSW Regional women are diverse. To quote Sonia Muir, the Director of Education and Regional Services at the Department of Primary Industries, “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.

In the wider field of feminist debates, there is a relative invisibility of regional Australian women’s presence, agency, labour and lived experience. Our projects are not new or innovative, rather they are continuing a feminist strategy of consciousness-raising through art making, and the eternal, vigilant quest of many women before us ensuring a diversity of voices can be acknowledged, heard and valued.



Vic and Sarah McEwan

Image: Barbara Bartos and Vic McEwan

SLIDE 4 – CAD – SARAH

As artists and feminists', we have both transplanted our lives to regional Australia after years of creative practice in Sydney and Melbourne respectively.

My partner Vic and I run a small arts organisation called the Cad Factory. We live 30km from Narrandera in an old school house that was built in 1886 to service the local children who lived on properties out of town.

The Cad Factory is an artist led organisation creating an international program of new, immersive and experimental work guided by authentic exchange, ethical principles, people and place.



The Cad Factory 2018
Birrego, NSW

Image: Ross Waldron

SLIDE 5 – OLD CAD – SARAH

Before moving to Birrego, we lived in this warehouse space in the inner west of Sydney. From 2004 – 2010 the Cad Factory operated in two different Marrickville warehouses that were considered 'illegal' due to the fact we held gigs and exhibitions without any planning permissions from council. We were motivated to do this because we were part of a community of people who were dedicated to underground culture.



The Cad Factory 2018
Birrego, NSW

Image: Ross Waldron

SLIDE 6 – CURRENT CAD – SARAH

However, in our naive search for adventure and challenges, we decided to move from one industrial site to another. After five years of building, and years of no running water, we created our third Cad Factory space, a beautiful world class recording studio, along with accommodation for visiting artists and a house for Vic, our daughter Holly and myself.

This regional move and our development into an incorporated association with DGR status is significant for Vic and I who started the Cad as an antidote to what we didn't like about the (art) world – so there could be a safe space for people to go and be themselves as artists or audience, with no other goal than supporting people to develop and present the work they were making amongst a kind community.

To date, over our 13 years the Cad has worked with over 1000 artists, given over 200 workshops, worked with countless young people and community members to an international audience of over 70,000 people.



Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, December 1983. 70,00 protesters surrounded the Base in protest of Nuclear Weapons at RAF Greenham Common, Berkshire, UK

Image: Julie Montgarrett

SLIDE 7 – UK PROTEST – JULIE

For more than 3 decades I've been interested in the ways that feminist theory and activism has sought to counter the gendered constraints that generate social, psychological and cultural disadvantage and inequality arising from the entrenched institutionalisation of power and privilege. From working in remote Secondary Schools; community learning exchanges; University teaching; with theatre companies in Australia and the UK; Artist-in-residencies across the world; to Greenham Common; and during the first years of the AIDS NAMES Quilt project in Melbourne and many other opportunities I have learnt of the subtle and overt ways that feminism adds value to women's lives and to the World



Victorian Trades' Hall Council Arts Workshop Union banner, 1988, Melbourne, Vic

Image: ©The Age Newspaper

SLIDE 8 – TRADE UNION – JULIE

As one of 3 artists-in-residence at the Vic trades Hall with Megan Evans and Mary Leunig we tested some of the ways that adaptable accessible contingent practices like drawing and textile can be activated, subverted or extended in many contrasting ideological directions to investigate and even unravel the high/low gendered cultural divides. Feminist principles if not rigorous theory, can be readily employed to generate complex, uncertain visual narratives that endure as vital contemporary languages for individuals and communities and have done so in every culture and society.



Temporary Alignments: Fraught Fictions and Fragile Facts
Detail of installation with moving shadows, Wagga Wagga Art Gallery 2016

Image: Julie Montgarrett

SLIDE 9 – TEMP ALIGNMENTS – JULIE

My practice is also personal – this recent installation addressed the unresolved facts of the genocide, dispossession and enslavement of the First nations of this country. The fraught histories and false Narratives of heroic colonial settlers that continue infect our inherited identity since the British invasion.

Here too I've used the longstanding habits of drawing and stitch – both most suitable for stories used often by many. Perhaps this is most simply explained as the 'old' feminist adage that the personal is political - this folds back and forth across all that I do.



Buckingbong to Birrego: Walking Into Country, 2014
 Sandigo, NSW
 The Cad Factory

Image: Jacob Rapauch

SLIDE 10 – MAMBA – JULIE CANOLA FIELDS

As regional artists', Sarah and I are both familiar with the widely held, often ignorant assumptions made about Regional Arts as commonly 'beige'- as a zone of perpetual cultural drought; that we are somehow pathetically stranded in a space of MAMBA (Miles and Miles of bugger all) an 'other' place of contradictory cultural meanings –

A long mythologised legacy of the 19th C European Enlightenment Colonialization projects and the alleged source of the Nation's true identity and spirit of resilience - it is equally perceived as a place of romance and utter disdain - a problematic dualism contrarily and uncomfortably held in the mind's eye of most Australians.

As Feminist philosopher Nancy Hartsock argues the rationalist Colonial assumptions of the rights of a superior elite to power and privilege are closely aligned with racism, sexism and the ideological capitalist exploitation of the natural world ...(and) that each prejudice supports and excludes the majority 'other' to confirm the legitimacy of the power of the elite who consequently creates their own reality. What's notable in Hartsock's 1990 analysis is the absence of an acknowledgement of people with disability within this hegemonic paradigm.



Shadow Places, 2017
Narrandera Travelling Stock Reserve, NSW
The Cad Factory

Image: Vic McEwan

SLIDE 11 – SHADOW PLACES – SARAH

As such, we live in Val Plumwood's concept of 'Shadow Places'- where land is perceived as an economic resource.

As one of the founding figures of the environmental humanities in Australia, Plumwood's ideas of hyper-separation, where there is a sharp ontological break or radical discontinuity between the groups identified as the privileged 'centre' and those subordinated elsewhere as other. Given this historical legacy, or baggage, from regional Australian landscapes, we are reminded of 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."

This past we live with on Wiradjuri country makes us both acutely aware of distributions of power and a need of sharing lived experience, however uncomfortable it might make people feel who have a more privileged position, as a way to generate understandings of the complex and nuanced world we live in.



Fuck Art Lets Wash Dishes, 2013
Casey Ankers, Uranquinty, NSW
RE//ASSEMBLING, 2015

Image: Sarah McEwan

SLIDE 12 – CASEY – SARAH

After attending the Feminism and Contemporary Art Conference at Sydney College of the Arts in 2014, we devised a plan that would see our organisations, the Cad Factory and Charles Sturt University, commit to presenting a yearly exhibition, over three years, of the work of female Riverina artists in the HR Gallop Gallery at CSU to commence with the 40th Anniversary of International Women's Day. This was our first act of invisible mending.



I don't want to tell her, 2013-15
 Sarah McEwan, Birrego, NSW
 RE//ASSEMBLING, 2015

Image: Sarah McEwan

The title of the exhibitions over the three years, RE//ASSEMBLING (2015), RE//CONSTRUCTING (2016) and RE//CREATING (2017) suggested a conceptual arc to focus our attention upon significant thinking about how we can revise, reconsider, rearrange, rebuild and revalue how we think and practice, in order to act in a way, that promotes a platform for a multitude of different voices to be heard.



Guys Like You, 2016
Sarah Mifsud, Wagga Wagga, NSW
RE//CONSTRUCTING, 2016

These exhibitions and artworks are reminders that feminist voices take many forms beyond the academic conjectures of 'serious' Feminist intellectuals or the opinions of young women often demeaned as lacking genuine feminist credentials bec of the way they dress act, or speak via twitter feed. We aim to report the circumstances of many women across our rural communities through collective dialogue and social networking as generative tools of creative practice long associated with feminist achievement. They don't claim to be on the cutting edge of innovation in contemporary practice yet they remain quietly significant.



Yabunyalang narbanggalangga, (detail) 2015
 Gail Manderson, Wagga Wagga, NSW
 RE//CONSTRUCTING, 2016

Image: Sarah McEwan

SLIDE 15 – AUNTY GAIL - JULIE

They are testament to the vitality of regional women's arts practice and reflect the labour and agency of these artists. All 3 of the Wiradjuri Elders we work with (of 5 indigenous artists in all) are represented in National collections and are making significant new works but it is these particular weavings by Aunty Gail Manderson which I believe best sum up their collective contributions to the process of local Wiradjuri cultural renewal by incorporating language into and onto the body of these basket forms. Language IS the heart of culture – it is essential to an understanding of culture, lore and country. This is the Wiradjuri concept of Yindjamarra Winghangada – of learning to live respectfully on country in a world worth living in.



RE//CONSTRUCTING, 2016

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

Image: Sarah Mifsud

SLIDE 16 – GROUP CRIT – JULIE

In 2016, we invited Jacqueline Millner from the Contemporary Art and Feminism Network to give a lecture and conduct a group critique session with the artists. We thought that it was essential to connect the artists with someone who instigated the conference that helped germinate our exhibitions. More importantly she brought a new voice to gently, generously and thoughtfully challenge us to re-see and question our practice - a valuable extension of the collective workshops and critiques of the previous year.



RE//CONSTRUCTING, 2016
 HR Gallop Gallery, CSU
 Wagga Wagga

Image: Sarah McEwan

SLIDE 17 – RE//CON ROOM – JULIE

Twice a year we held arts labs at CSU where the women who live 100s of km apart, were challenged to discuss and question their practice. Their works began to reflect the particular quality of time they spent in sharing, mutually acknowledging and incubating an understanding of the value of practice as on-going – and to strengthen the confidence gained to claim this time despite the obligations and routines of lives under pressure indebted intimately to others.



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

Image: James T Farley

SLIDE 18 – Elvis LECTURE – JULIE

The final year, 2017, included Elvis Richardson to give a lecture and have individual critique sessions with artists. Again, we wanted to connect the artists to someone who had inspired our action to address the invisibility of regional women's arts practice. Equally importantly we wanted Elvis to remind the women of the remarkable works being made over that horizon and how strong their works are as part of women's arts practice across Australia



An Earthmoving Performance, 2017
Ashleigh McDonald, Wagga Wagga, NSW
RE//CREATING, 2017

SLIDE 19 – ASH - SARAH

We feel this project was hugely successful in its aim of invisible mending, consciousness raising, professional development, sustained creative opportunities and community building. Wiradjuri artist Melinda Schiller commented that, “I cannot speak highly enough in regards to Sarah and Julie in their mentoring of me. Being part of the three exhibitions has led me to head in a different direction in my art practice. To challenge myself, think deeply and continue to be accepting of non-perfection. 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.”

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



After Nightfall, 2017

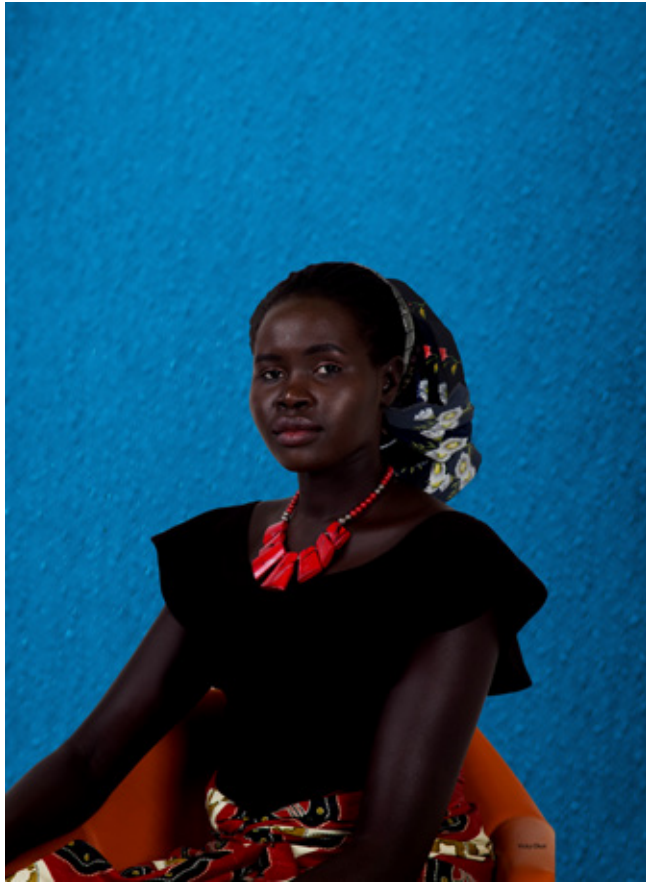
Angela Coombs Matthews and Julie Briggs, Temora and Narrandera, NSW

RE//CREATING, 2017



Pussy, 2017
Adele Packer and Kate Allman, Wagga Wagga, NSW
RE//CREATING, 2017

Image: Tim Crutchett



Melaninated, 2017
Vicky Okot, Wagga Wagga, NSW
RE//CREATING, 2017



RE//CREATING, 2017
HR Gallop Gallery, CSU
Wagga Wagga

Image: Tim Crutchett



RE//CREATING, 2017
Narrandera Arts Centre

Image: Sarah McEwan



Wild Brush Dreaming, 2016-2017
Kath Withers, Wagga Wagga, NSW
RE//CREATING, 2017

Image: Sarah McEwan



RE//CREATING, 2017
Narrandera Arts Centre

Image: Sarah McEwan



The Daily Diminish
Work in progress, CSU Studio's
Wagga Wagga, NSW

Image: Tim Crutchett

SLIDE 27 – US TESTING – JULIE

In early 2016, mid-way through the annual RE// exhibitions Our 2nd project, The Daily Diminish began, also devised with feminist philosophies of art for social change to highlight the ubiquitous forms of sexist language that ALL Australian women experience daily. Multiple black calico panels that refer a feminist ethos of making do as domestic scale textiles such as quilts and pillows, each panel carries a single quotation hand-written in bleach and embroidered in red text, to record each woman's feelings when encountering the words. Displayed, on public fences and walls, the work aimed to highlight the overt and subtle ways in which sexist social commentaries and reprimands work to subtly enforce compliance to stereotypical conservative cultural norms while working to undermine capacity for self-determination by reinforcing subliminal self-objectification.



The Daily Diminish
Work in progress, CSU Studio's
Wagga Wagga, NSW

Image: Sarah McEwan

SLIDE 28 – STUDIO – JULIE

We sought the collective help of many professional women associates, arts organisations and community networks via a simple strategy of open conversations and anecdote, adopted in lieu of articulating complex feminist ideologies and principles in order to create a full and broad range of voices. WE were energized by 168 enthusiastic responses of multi-generational women from varied communities and backgrounds across regional and metropolitan Australia, eager to share their stories. And clearly indebted to feminist Jenny Holzer's 'making-do' poster strategy from her 1977-79 *Truisms* series amongst others.



The Daily Diminish
Western Plains Cultural Centre
Dubbo, NSW

Image: Julie Montgarrett

SLIDE 29 – WPCC FENCE – SARAH

We presented the Daily Diminish as part of future/public curated by Alex Wisser at Artlands Dubbo in 2016, the bi - annual national regional arts conference.



The Daily Diminish
Western Plains Cultural Centre
Dubbo, NSW

Image: James T Farley

SLIDE 30 – WPCC SWEARING – SARAH

Placing these voices of Daily Diminishing comments on fences in a conservative regional community such as Dubbo, was perceived as subversive and disturbing the status quo which unintentionally but significantly provoked interesting forms of censorship. Prior to Artlands, Dubbo City Council demanded pre-approval to determine 'suitably uncontroversial' quotations. Western Plains Cultural Centre kindly offered their inner courtyard for more 'offensive' comments in order for the artworks to be seen.



The Daily Diminish
BOOM Dubbo Fence
Macquarie St, Dubbo, NSW

Image: James T Farley

SLIDE 32 – BOOM DUBBO FENCE – SARAH

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

And she also reflects– “In the past decade, artists have shown a strong interest in returning to hybrid modes of creativity that were developed in the 1960s and 1970s, but with a consciousness of the critical thinking and political emphases of conceptually driven works from the 1980s and 1990s. [...] Foregrounding the process of making, and drawing on the legacy of performative, hybrid, “intermedial” concept- and process-driven practices [...].



The Daily Diminish
BOOM Dubbo Fence
Macquarie St, Dubbo, NSW

Image: James T Farley

SLIDE 33 - BOOM DUBBO FENCE – JULIE

Council's threat to enforce removal of the panels was defused by the Cultural Centre Manager who pointed out that this would most likely create a national media event that would reflect badly on the City Fathers and Council. The panels stayed put.

A second collection of smaller 'guerrilla panel' quotes intended for leaving in Dubbo's back streets and laneways, where verbal and physical violence is most frequently encountered by women, were also censored before the Conference but this time by Festival managers fearful of causing further difficulties with the Council and funding bodies.

In doing so, the voices of women were AGAIN silenced, by the very Arts organisations responsible for and invested in acting as creative agents for positive change in the dominant social order.



The Daily Diminish
BOOM Dubbo Fence
Macquarie St, Dubbo, NSW

Image: James T Farley

SLIDE 34 – RIPPED - JULIE

The Daily Diminish Panels were damaged and stolen at both sites in Dubbo. Some panels were torn down and left on the ground only to be reattached by people passing by. Some were partly damaged and a few were carefully cut away indicating perhaps an intention to souvenir rather than willfully damage the works. The damage raises issues around the perception of and relationship between casual verbal sexism and actualised physical violence against women. What is also notable is that the vandalism was caused by both males and females as both genders were witnessed reacting verbally and physically, both positively and negatively to the works – tearing them down and returning damaged works to the fence.



The Daily Diminish
BOOM Dubbo Fence
Macquarie St, Dubbo, NSW

Image: James T Farley

SLIDE 35 – RIPPED – JULIE

The tampering with the work begs consideration of notions of defacement, best addressed in light of anthropologist Michael Taussig's (Taussig, 1999) theories of collective ways of knowing what are public secrets he describes as a form of "knowing what not to know". They are characterised as kinds of public secrets that are known but hidden by collective, unspoken agreements. As Taussig asserts, "If secrecy is fascinating, still more so is the public secret into which all secrets secret." (Taussig, 1999, 4)



The Daily Diminish
BOOM Dubbo Fence
Macquarie St, Dubbo, NS

Image: James T Farley

SLIDE 36 – RIPPED - JULIE

The distorted raw-edged applique, the rough, uneven character of the embroidered letters, and the irregular bleached text confuses and refuses to the narrowly defined standards of perfect textile as commodities for elite patrons allied to the discipline, training, normalization, grooming and strict governance that oppresses thousands of anonymous women expected to demonstrate their expertise simultaneously disenfranchised and impoverished nonetheless. The embroidery of The Daily Diminish is the intentionally unruly, resistant non-compliant hand of modern women. These are disobedient objects as V+A Curators Flood and Grindon would have it. Moreover, finely crafted Objects are themselves mostly failures in the task of making change.



Apartheid demonstration, Embroidery detail.
University of Johannesburg.

Image: Julie Montgarrett

SLIDE 37 – J-BURG - JULIE

In December 2016, the Daily Diminish project was included in the INTERTEXTUAL Textiles Conference at Univ of Johannesburg and presented at the University of The Free State, Bloemfontaine. As a result several versions of the project have been adopted and adapted by 2 post-grad art students from UNISA Pretoria. and in both Jo'burg and Bloem local women are developing the idea of making women's voices tangible with textile but with distinctly S. African style. These projects alone underline the value of regional arts that engages with international audiences Challenging the city-based blind-spots that rarely imagine the existence of nationally and internationally engaged debates and creative works being made in rural communities.



The Daily Diminish
Correspondence of Imaginary Places, Cemeta 17
New York City

Image: Lauran Smith

SLIDE 38 – DD NY – SARA H

From the success of generating a spectrum of comments from Artlands, curator Alex Wisser invited us to be part of a collaboration for Cementa 17, *Correspondence of Imaginary Places*, involving artists from America and Australia to translate written instructions for each other's work for exhibition in our respective countries.



The Daily Diminish
Correspondence of Imaginary Places, Cemeta 17
New York City

Image: Lauran Smith

SLIDE 39 – DD NY – SARAH

We were paired with New York artist Lauren Smith, who invited ten of her friends to be part of the project and to translate the idea to fit their own neighbourhoods. Lauren wrote to us -

Unexpectedly, as the ten women wrote and photographed their textile pieces discussions sparked among the people surrounding us. Whether it was a by-standing roommate, a passing car full of young men, coworkers, or local folks standing near us at the bar, different members of the community listened to our experiences, shared their own stories and showed their support. Publicly acknowledging this oppressive rhetoric created a pathway for conversation and support; letting women know that they are not alone in these experiences and there are many people within their community who actively want to change how women are viewed and spoken to.



The Daily Diminish
Correspondence of Imaginary Places, Cemeta 17
New York City

Image: Lauran Smith

SLIDE 40 – DD NY – SARAH

Lauren reflected to us that:

Although it was disheartening to acknowledge the plethora of consistently delivered sexist comments I have learned to live with, I found solace and camaraderie through the creation of this artwork and sharing these common experiences...



The Daily Diminish
Correspondence of Imaginary Places, Cemeta 17
 Cuchifritos Gallery, New York City

Image: Lauran Smith

SLIDE 41 – DD GALLERY - SARAH

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 Mended, 2017
 Eastern Riverina Arts Window Gallery
 Wagga Wagga, NSW

Image: Julie Montgarrett

SLIDE 42 – MENDED - JULIE

Our current iteration of the Daily Diminish involves visible mending to consider the capacity for textile to record violence, where repair occurs despite the invisible and imposing force of coercive language, enabling mending and patching with hand embroidery in such a way that the damage remains visible and the repairs become evidence of resilience and resistance. Time prevents me from addressing this further suffice to say it has an intriguing potential with connections of textile both old and new.

We welcome any other artists who may wish to adopt and adapt the idea of the Daily Diminish to other settings and communities to bring new voices to mend Plumwood's hyper-separation and identify new directions in regional narratives.

We would like to leave Donna Haraway with the last word – “we are no longer able to sustain the fictions of being either subjects or objects, all the partners in the potent conversations that constitute nature must find a new ground for making meaning together.”

Mandaang Guu wu – thank-you



The Daily Diminish Mended, 2017

Image: Julie Montgarrett

...I want to engage in a carrier-bag practice of storytelling, in which the stories do not reveal secrets acquired by heroes pursuing luminous objects across and through the plot matrix of the world. Bag-lady storytelling would instead proceed by putting unexpected partners and irreducible details into a frayed, porous carrier bag. Encouraging halting conversations, the encounter transmutes and reconstitutes all the partners and the details. The stories do not have beginnings or ends; they have continuations, interruptions and reformulations – just the kind of survivable stories we could use these days.

Donna J Harraway

"Otherworldly Conversations, Terran Topics, Local Terms" *Material Feminisms*,
Ed Stacy Alaimo and Susan Heckman, Indiana University Press, 2008, p160