

C O N T E N T S

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Page 1 image:
Otago Bay hot-house Tasmania – Elizabeth Day working on a cast for
View from the Sixty Third Floor, exhibited at CAST, Hobart, in 2001.
Image: Gordon Harrison Williams

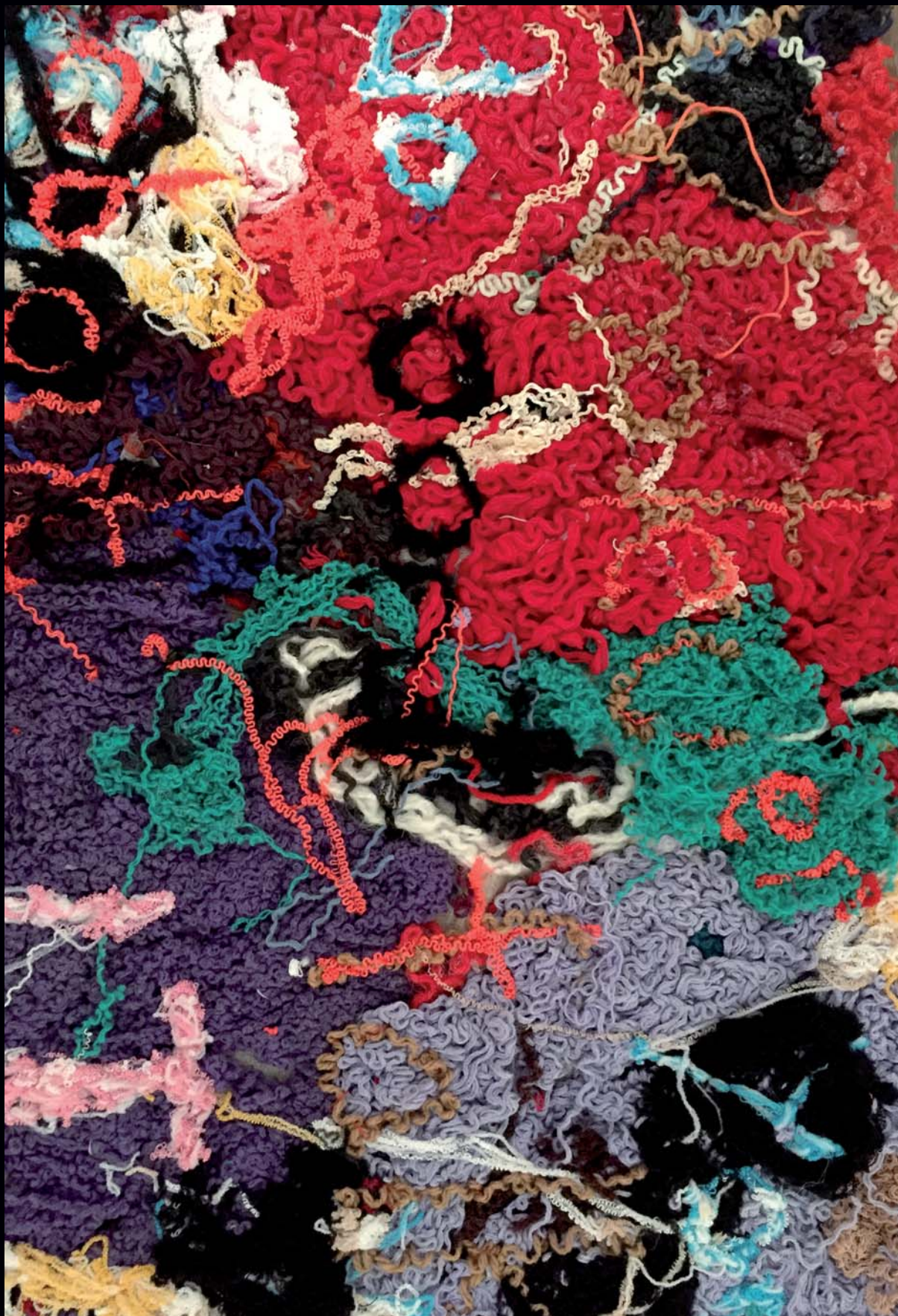
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JACQUELINE MILLNER

ELIZABETH DAY'S FEMINIST PRACTICE

¹
Suzanne Lacy, 'Affinities:
thoughts on an incomplete history'
in Norma Broude and
Mary Garrard, *The Power of
Feminist Art*, Harry N Abrams,
1996, p 269

²
Griselda Pollock, keynote address
to The Subversive Stitch
Revisited: the politics of cloth
conference: <http://www.gold.ac.uk/subversivestitchrevisited/>

Elizabeth Day's practice and politics are inextricably entwined, and feminism is fundamental to both. Feminism here means many things: principles and insights drawn from personal experience as much as from the affirmations and epiphanies inspired by the theory and practice of others. But at its heart, feminism is a critique of conceptual frameworks of domination. Feminism is anti-hierarchical and inclusive, rather than oppositional and mutually exclusive. It questions how power privileges some to the disadvantage of others, and challenges the logic of domination that justifies the status quo. Feminism calls to account conceptions of knowledge that are represented as objective, impartial, detached, and gender-neutral. It demands more complex ways of knowing by encouraging us to always situate ourselves within specific historical, cultural, and economic contexts, and hence to generate knowledge from situated, gendered, concrete, daily experiences.

Feminist art embraces art as an agent of social transformation. From its beginnings in the 1970s, feminist art focused on the relationship of art practice to public life. Its critique was 'tied to an activist project of shifting power relationships in daily life rather than a theoretical exercise in a rarefied language addressed to an art world viewership', seeking a shift from symbolic to actual action. Citing Allan Kaprow and Judy Chicago, American artist and activist Suzanne Lacy argues that 'it was feminism that most clearly posited political and cultural activism as part of 70s conceptual and performance art'.¹ As British art historian Griselda Pollock observes, a feminist political gesture links process, practice, making, history, and subjectivity.²

Left: *Whatever you do don't talk about it*, 2017 (detail)

Day's methodology and process, her concerns and ethics, as well as the rigour and integrity of her work, all reflect feminist insights and a feminist drive for transformation at social and individual levels. Day's art has engaged with personal histories and their relationship to broader questions, such as the legacies of her grandmother's thoroughly gendered experience of mental illness and incarceration. She has experimented with the language of traditional 'feminine' domestic crafts such as knitting and sewing, and facilitated collaborative projects with various communities. Her conceptual framework has the body at its core – 'nothing but body' – while she has explored the specificity of female embodiment and theories of abjection. And her overall practice can be seen as the cultivation of an alternative ecology founded on the ethics of care and generosity, an ethics that aspires to honour the equivalence of all things, be they human or non-human, organic or non-organic.

The personal is political

Day began painting in the 1970s while living in Tasmania, but her thinking around art was transformed when she saw a lecture by Lucy Lippard: what previously she had intuited about the gender politics of the art world was suddenly given careful and compelling articulation. With these feminist insights fully embodied, Day spent much of the 1980s in London, the Thatcher years that spurred an astoundingly creative and astute activist backlash. Artists of all kinds, from musicians to printmakers, collaboratively crafted languages and practices of resistance, often carnivalesque, always witty. This was the time of Greenham Commons, the feminist protest against the UK's nuclear facility, which saw a whole community emerge galvanised by the threat of nuclear destruction, informed by the ethics of feminism. Such activism profoundly shaped Day's politics and art. On returning to Australia, she undertook post-graduate study at Sydney College of the Arts, working with Mike Parr and Bonita Ely, whose practices put the body (their body, specifically) on the line in their pursuit of activist artistic strategies.

At this time – the late 1980s and early 1990s – Day also immersed herself in the feminist philosophy of the body being developed by philosopher Elizabeth Grosz who was then teaching at Sydney University. Grosz's interpretation of Michel Foucault's notion of bio-power via Freudian psychoanalysis and lucid readings of Irigaray and Kristeva influenced a whole generation of artists and art theorists. It was a particularly empowering interpretation, one that manoeuvred beyond the structuralist *cul de sac* that viewed social inequality as the product of deep underlying systems with little potential for change, and the left-wing credo that only an overwhelming revolution – economic and political – could ever achieve social alternatives. This empowering reading emphasised the role that representation plays in constructing social realities, and offered a model of social analysis whereby many different views of the world vie with each other, with each, depending on circumstances, having a chance to gain traction. In such an understanding of the process of social change, the agency of those who imagine and represent alternate realities – among them, artists – becomes key.

This sense of the potential impact of artistic practice on broader social realities was for Day, then, suffused in the political project of feminism. Feminism accordingly offered Day the tools to explore her own narrative within the wider context of the historical repression of women's experience.

Day was born in the UK but migrated to Australia as a child (the family left UpHolland near Wigan for Hobart, in 1963, when Day was ten years old). That experience of dislocation – common to all migrants irrespective of cultural heritage, language and reasons for departure – was formative for Day both as an artist and as embodied subject. She speaks of migration, and related notions of uprooting, transplanting, transmutation, cultivation and hybridisation, as underpinning much of her art. In migration, there is a viscerally present sense of rupture: something, someone is always left behind, while all the points of orientation one had previously used to negotiate identity and belonging suddenly disappear. Migration necessarily entails trauma, and often, its positive corollary, the migrant's extraordinary psychic and social efforts to adapt and survive. The migrant must re-construct their life, learn everything anew, continuously suffer estrangement and often indignity among the values and practices of the adopted society, while at the same time looking to the future and investing in the potential for change.

No wonder so many feminist theorists, most notably Julia Kristeva, have seen the parallels between migration, exile and femininity. A woman does not recognise herself in patriarchal society, seeing instead only a distorted image created in an alien language. She is de-territorialised; assaulted and bereft, she must fight and invent to locate herself. But in that estrangement is also the possibility for something new, another world. That feminine proximity to how things could be different was another appealing implication of 1990s feminism wrought through productive amalgams of psychoanalytic theory, Foucauldian readings of power and philosophies of deconstruction.

The trauma of migration often involves inter-generational separation, as it did in Day's case. But there were particularly tragic circumstances surrounding her matrilineal grandmother, who was incarcerated in a mental institution in England on account of being deemed an unfit wife and mother. Piecing together the story, Day understands this now as an untreated case of post-partum depression. Silences persisted around Alice's real fate, in keeping with the prevailing mores of the day.

So Alice suffered abandonment and betrayal at the hands of her husband. Its revelation to Day when she was well into adulthood inflicted yet another form of inter-generational trauma, but also helped to make sense of certain aspects of her life. Day has for many years worked in prisons as an arts educator, drawn to institutional settings as sites of trauma, driven by a desire to make reparation. It is an impulse that she has come to understand as tied up to her keen sense of being a British migrant in a British colonial nation. Discovering her grandmother's story placed Day and her art practice in a very particular context and honed one of the questions underpinning her artistic explorations: how does one speak of trauma, and of the trauma of silence, without repeating the injury?

The language of domestic craft

Day has been knitting since she was four years old. Knitting, wool and thread have had a recurring presence in her work, necessarily connected to her childhood and to the domestic sphere. There is an inherent creativity within such a practice and materials, one with strong feminine associations that include the inter-generational transmission of knowledge, tending to family, and knitting as a form of connecting with other women and building community. Yet given the pain of separation, abandonment and shame that imbued Day's domestic sphere, knitting evokes both survival and trauma.

Despite her lifelong knitting, a key moment in Day's practice was the first time she created a work by in effect 'un-knitting', that is unravelling a found object: *The Unravelling of Form* (1995). Unravelling has a double meaning, destructive and constructive. *The Unravelling of Form* is a particularly witty title, implying the deconstruction of a thing in order to understand it (as in 'unravelling a problem'), while also alluding to psychological breakdown. Day's original raw material is less the wool than the jumpers and cardigans she collects from op shops; the collection process depends on a network of friends who also collaborate in the 'unravelling salon' as Day calls it. Of course, when one works with found clothing, particularly that donated to (or more accurately, offloaded on) a charity store, one is necessarily dealing with the intimacies of the everyday lives of others. Just as Mike Kelly worked with found stuffed toys for their disturbing ambivalence of childhood innocence and abuse, so Day's found jumpers and cardigans – some homespun, some cheap and thread-bare, many stained and fraying – evoke the memories of both domestic care and neglect.

Day thinks that she might have worked in a carceral institution to address and engage this inter-generational memory. This is brought achingly to bear on specific aspects work such as *Work for those who fell into the Chasm of Fear in History's Black* (2006). Naming the darkness continues in the recent unravelled text works, *Invisible Words / Invisible Worlds* (2017).

The relationship between traditional women's handcraft, strategies of survival and remembrance has a long history in feminist art. Back in 1984, Rozsika Parker's *The Subversive Stitch* first mapped the status of embroidery through the ages according to gender politics, from a professional and high form practiced by men and women in the Middle Ages, to a domestic and low form in the 19th century associated almost exclusively with women.³ But Parker also documented how women used embroidery as a weapon to negotiate the limitations of femininity, including its use by socially disadvantaged and marginalised women. (We know that sewing was one of the few skills taught to institutionalised women and girls). This impulse has been revitalised in recent years with the emergence of 'craftivism' and many forms of activist, politically driven work underpinned by sewing, knitting and embroidery.⁴

A particularly potent contemporary strategy is the exploration of the links between textile and text, of the process of literally crafting words, and taking that labour – that so explicitly integrates material, body and thought – into the public sphere. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, who began meeting in Buenos Aires' main square in the mid 1980s to demand the return of their disappeared children, embroidered their names on white cloth nappies

which they wore as head scarves. *The Knitted Petition* convenes knitters engaging in mindful protest, rallied by causes such as the need for safe drinking water or the poor health care for pregnant women. Bordamos Por la Paz is a global collective where people embroider the names and imaginary conversations of the missing and murdered women of Ciudad Juarez in Mexico on handkerchiefs and clothing. Stitching, handkerchiefs and garments all have strong associations of home and childhood; the intimate experience of sewing or knitting is an act of care



Mesh 4, 2011 (detail)

that is also meditative, a way to challenge anger with haptic engagement. Bringing such experiences together in a public space is potentially transformative, and has a strong affiliation with feminine resistance to the violence of patriarchal forces.

Such 'domestic' forms, of course, are always more broadly contextualised when in the hands of artists who not only deal with the public sphere but also with the discourses of art and art histories. Unravelling as a process for example also situates Day's feminist investigation within modernist strivings to understand the inherent structures of painting and sculpture (recall Umberto Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913), where the sculpture 'unravels' its own components but retains coherence). The transformation of a coherent, functional object into its constituent parts, namely threads of colour that are now free to be rearranged in whatever fashion, also recalls the breaking down of figurative painting to abstraction, and the cutting loose of colour and line from the burden of meaning. In this way, Day's use of wool evokes the creativity and resilience of traditionally feminine work and equates its value with that of formalist experiment. Once unravelled, these objects are metaphorically freed from their cossetting effects to create alternate worlds.

Collaboration and the public sphere

Day's 'unravelling salons' are but one instance of her collaborative practices that go beyond the studio into the public sphere. As Lucy Lippard claimed over 40 years ago, feminist art replaced the modernist 'egotistical monologue' with a dialogue – between art and society, between artist and audience – with collaboration as a creative mode. Feminist art deliberately pitched to a public and social context characterised by 'an element of outreach, a need for connections beyond process or product, an element of inclusiveness' that 'transcended the individual'.⁵ From the 1970s on, the entire field of public art projects was shaped by feminist artists, such as Suzanne Lacy, Mierle Lader Ukeles and Betsy Damon, artists who 'exemplified a rapport with their site and their material rather than a victory over them'.⁶ They pioneered site-responsive, collaborative approaches, working with, listening to, and negotiating with communities in ways that anticipated today's social practice, and provided clear alternatives to artist-imposed work in public spaces of which Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* (1981) is the iconic example. As feminist art historians Norma Broude and Mary Garrard write,

*Women introduced new attitudes and iconographies to public art projects, in which they sought to express the self not simply as the personal 'I' but worked instead to blend the personal with the public, pointing a way to the traditional concerns of the artist with those of the community.*⁷

Through considering non-artists as equal collaborators in the construction of artworks, and drawing on practices not conventionally defined as art, 'artists were in effect redefining the tools, skills, audiences, makers and imagery of art', and feminists led the way. Artist and activist Suzanne Lacy argues that it was feminist art that 'gave public life and political meaning' to Allan Kaprow's prophesy in 1958 that artists 'will disclose entirely unheard of happenings and events, found in garbage cans, police files, hotel lobbies, store windows'. Without feminism, such gestures had remained largely in the art world without crossing over into the public sphere and everyday lives.⁸

Perhaps Day's most significant collaborative, social practice works have been responses to institutional violence. The Dillwynia Garden Project, her engagement with Parramatta *Female Factory Memory Project* and most recently *Myco Logic* at the Cumberland Hospital in the same precinct of early colonial institutions. The former began when in the course of her work as an arts educator in Long Bay Gaol, teaching Aboriginal youths, Day was struck by the disconnect between the gaol's alienating colonial architecture and the Aboriginal history and significance of its location, La Perouse. As Day explains, 'I felt that it was incongruous that I was teaching art to Aboriginal inmates in a building that looked like a relic of the British feudal system. I didn't think that the site of the prison or its context was being taken into consideration, and therefore tried to organise a site-specific project responding to advice that myself, and the Aboriginal culture teacher, Betty Champion could get from the women at La Perouse who we visited in order to begin to recover the Aboriginal history there.'

The Long Bay project was not pursued for various reasons, but the idea was transposed to another correctional facility, Dillwynia Women's Centre near Windsor where around 600 women are incarcerated. *The Boronia Garden* as it was eventually called entailed integrating the idea of creating a garden for the indigenous detainees to connect to land with a horticultural course run as part of prison education. Day worked with between two and 15 women, three times a week over the course of a year to bring the garden into being. While the process was very difficult – motivating the women to participate proved an ongoing challenge – eventually the garden was established. The women planted local indigenous grasses to provide materials for basket weaving, decorated the garden with their own artwork, and effectively took it over so that it is still operating today.

Day's work in Dillwynia Women's Centre came to the attention of social curator Lily Hibberd, who had recently begun developing a plan for artistic interpretation of the Parramatta Female Factory site in Sydney. Hibberd approached Day, and Day came to work closely with Bonny Djuric, the head of a group of survivors of abuse in the Female Factory during the 1970s and 80s. With her usual research-intensive approach, Day spent many months visiting the site, reading old maps, wandering around and contemplating the site's many social and physical processes that might be 'folded in' to her work, which focuses on indigenous and colonial herbs as well as healing plants from other cultures. The work remains a proposal. *Myco Logic* is another plant related project at the Justice Precinct 2017.

Gardening, knitting and community came together in Day's most recent social project for *Cementa15*, an arts festival held in rural NSW. Day held workshops and coordinated the community to produce a field of knitted mushrooms. Day is captivated by the biology of fungi that has challenged scientific conventions with its complexity: apparently fungi behave in ways that are more like animals than plants, and have consequently been recently recognised as a third genus. And, they epitomise efficiency and resilience, living as they do off decaying matter.

5

Lucy Lippard, cited in Broude and Garrard, *The Power of Feminist Art*, p 22

6

Cited in Judith Stein and April Kingsley, 'Collaboration', in Broude and Garrard, *The Power of Feminist Art*, 243. Damon's work includes *A Memory of Clean Water* (1988), a 250 foot paper casting of a dry river bed; Ukeles's work includes *Touch Sanitation* (1979-80) where the artist shook hands with every garbage collector in New York City; Lacy's work includes *Crystal Quilt* (1985-87), a two year project on women's aging comprised of community engagement, classes and workshops culminating in a collaborative performance in a shopping mall with more than 400 local women over 60.

7

Broude and Garrard, *The Power of Feminist Art*, 23

8

Lacy, 'Affinities: thoughts on an incomplete history', p 264

Environmental ethics

The links between gardening, the feminine, cultivating and caring, figures strongly in Day's practice. Day grew up on a hydroponic farm, an apt metaphor for the radical adaptation necessary by her migrant parents to render a parcel of Australian land their own. But gardening was not just a means of economic survival for her family; it was also a way of remembering 'the mother country'. Day calls her mother's English garden in Tasmania a 'time based sculptural installation' to reflect the complex intersection of conceptual, emotional and aesthetic factors that went into its tending. For Day, gardening has similarly played a role of remembrance and healing, an activity that connects her to past generations of women, not only in her own family but also those who suffered the violence of colonial Australia: women incarcerated in female factories, prisons, asylums, as well as in everyday patriarchal domination.

Lawn grass, for example, has been a significant material in some of Day's work. A plant that is banal and ubiquitous but nonetheless exotic to Australia and ill suited to its dry climate, lawn is indeed quintessentially English. Day's 'cast lawn' works are among her most distinctive, developed after finding a grass segment on prison grounds that spelled out a fragment of the word 'electricity': the grass had grown moulded by the letters cast in cement into a disused manhole cover. The discovery led to Day simulating these conditions using her parents' hydroponic glass house. The artist planted turf over plaster casts of text and when the grass was sufficiently thick, removed it from its mould, effectively creating a 'printing reversal method'. In *Of the Earth* (2005-10), Day cast several texts with poignant references to migration, landscape and family relations, including lines from the poem *Émigré* written by her sister Sarah: 'a grave or scattering of ashes incontestable proof that you left, that you did not stay; the first headstone inscribes with your own name like a gauntlet thrown down, a single stone in a dry paddock, a word or two by one who knew you well or didn't'.

The original auto-generated cast grass work (*'ELECT...'*) keys into Day's interest in the intelligence of plants, an interest newly topical among 'new materialist' philosophers but a notion with a much longer history. Day's research uncovered that Charles Darwin in *The Power of Movement of Plants* (1880) compared the tip of a plant's roots to the brain of an animal, given its power to respond to sense impressions and to direct the movements of adjoining parts. The analogy stayed with Day, whose work is informed by feminist ethics that emphasise the wholeness of a non-hierarchical continuum between nature and culture.

In *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), American scientist Aldo Leopold set out the four fundamental tenets of 'land ethic'. This ethic held that the moral community should include soils, waters, plants, and animals, and that the role of humans should be changed from conqueror to plain member of the land community. Further, Leopold

9

See Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Routledge, 1993 and Chris Cuomo, *Ethics and the Ecofeminist Self*, 2005

10

See Karen J Warren (2014), 'Feminist environmental philosophy', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-environmental/>

argued that we can be moral only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, respect, admire, or otherwise have faith in, and that 'a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community; it is wrong when it tends otherwise'. Many feminist environmental philosophers have adopted key aspects of Leopold's land ethic, conceiving of the self as a relational, ecological being who is a member of the larger biotic community, and agreeing that 'moral emotions', such as empathy and care, are important to environmental ethics.

According to Australian eco-feminist Val Plumwood, humans are *both* continuous with and distinct from nature, both individual selves (who are different from nature) and ecological selves (who are a part of nature). Such an approach allows for relationships between selves and others, community and individuals, that are not based on positing human identity in terms of individual interests, autonomy, and separation from nature. Caring for self, then, goes beyond individual rights and liberties to also involve protection of the ecological well being of others (including nature) with whom we have a relationship.⁹ Caring – unlike justice – is not reducible to individual rights or duties. If the ability to care is necessary for ethics, then the failure to care for others, including nature, is a moral wrong.¹⁰

These ethics underpin the idea of an 'ecological democracy', where notions of the public sphere, democracy, citizenship, and free speech are reconceived based on an understanding of the unjustified dominations of women, animals and nature. Ecological democracy recognises that we live in cultural and ecological communities founded on relationships, and that being a good citizen means to nurture the health of 'the land' – all soils, waters, plants and animals – as understood by Leopold.

Day's practice brings to material life many of the principles of an ecological democracy.

Her work cultivates an alternative ecology founded on the ethics of care and generosity, an ethics that aspires to honour the equivalence of all things, and through that non-hierarchical acceptance, attempts to make amends for injuries both personal and historical.

JACQUELINE MILLNER

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completed studies in law, political science, and visual arts, before consolidating a career as an arts writer and academic specialising in the history and theory of contemporary art. She has published widely on contemporary Australian and international art in key anthologies, journals, and catalogues of flagship national institutions such as the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, the Queensland Art Gallery and the Art Gallery of NSW (AGNSW). Her book on Australian contemporary art, *Conceptual Beauty*, was published in 2010. She was visual arts editor for the national arts broadsheet *RealTime*, as well as guest editor of supplements and special issues of leading arts journals.

Invisible Words / Invisible Worlds, 2015, image used on the cover of a research document. Produced by the Department of NSW Corrections 2013. In this image the unravelling of wool is compared to carbon nanotubes under an SEM microscope. The analogy was used as a central image for work in the series *Invisible Words / Invisible Worlds*.

