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LAND DIALOGUES: Interdisciplinary research in dialogue with land

*Topologies of Practice: reconsidering the legacy of Western Australian textile artist Elsje Van Kepple*¹

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This paper aims to re-contextualise the work and legacy of Elsje Van Kepple (1947 – 2001), Dutch-born Australian Textile artist, in light of the problematic perspectives that framed Studio-textiles of the 1990s which inherited the unresolved tedious sophistry of the art-craft debates of the previous decades. These arguments were further complicated by the ascendancy of a postmodern emphasis on structuralist debates dominated by linguistics, semiotics and signification. Both philosophical positions argued for interpretation and the locating of all creative practice through the domains of language and representation alone. The aspects of the works which centred upon their textile materiality in both their conception, creation and reception were relegated to consideration mainly of their craft-based technicalities or alternatively confused by discussions of functionality.

Occasionally, the debates surrounding Second Wave Feminism further problematized Van Kepple’s choice of textile as her medium by situating the patterns...
and construction of particular works in relation to narrowly domestic references. I wish to contend however, that all these perspectives overlooked other more vital and equally legitimate concerns of artists such as Van Kepple, who intuitively made the most significant works of the period against the dominant ideologies recognising that, as Donna Haraway reminds us,

*It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.*

Elsje Van Kepple’s textile works were informed and generated by an innovative, rigorous and uncertain conceptual intent that emerged through an intimate and highly experimental engagement with particular aspects of textile’s materiality. She sought outcomes as traces of actions both delicate and harsh upon cloth using materials found on country repeatedly often over many years manipulating the surfaces over extended periods of time at specific locations. The textile forms were subjected to the same energies that weather the landscape and the human body on country – extremes of heat, saturation, erosion, wind and sun. The cloth, later re-constructed through ‘the essence of ancient textile traditions’ was stitched and re-stitched, over printed, re-dyed and mended. Van Kepple however was well ‘aware that in the Australian context they would have different resonances.’

Feminist theorist Karen Barad identifies a significant aspect of Van Kepple’s creative practice concerns and the era in which she worked, when she argues,

*Language had been granted too much power. The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretive turn, the cultural turn: it seems at every turn lately every ‘thing’ even materiality is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation. The ubiquitous puns on matter do not alas, mark a rethinking of the key concepts (materiality and signification) and the relationship between them.*
These twin and problematic perspectives - language and representation, left the most innovative works of the 1990s such as Van Kepple’s which challenged the histories and boundaries of medium, form and performativity, in a kind of suffocating critical domain of language and culture in the no-man’s land between art and craft or if you will, art and design. Design, as an ascendant new category of crafts practice further muddied the waters of identity politics of makers and innovative creative practice from the 1980s well into the early years of the new millennium. These were the decades in which Van Kepple made her major works and evolved a distinctive methodology that continues to shape and guide a great deal of contemporary studio textile practice by way of major artists and teachers such as Judy Watson, Nalda Searles, Cedar Prest, Kay Lawrence, Ruth Hadlow, John Parkes, Valerie Kirk and Liz Williamson for example who were colleagues or students of Van Kepple and arguably through their teachers and mentors, the subsequent generation of textile artists such as Ilka White, Jemima Proos-Saunders and Julie Ryder amongst others.\(^{vi}\).

figure 2: Elsje Van Keppel Animal Vegetable 1994 Photographer unknown
The consequence of Van Kepple’s focus on seeking a different understanding of textile beyond the debates of language and culture ensured that an appropriate critical analysis and acknowledgement of the innovative significance of her works beyond the applied arts and crafts was largely disregarded because the dominant debates of the era focussed upon different concerns. Her works remained unrecognized as a particular original, innovative and emergent new field of visual arts practice fundamentally driven and shaped by a different conception of materiality.\textsuperscript{vii} Craft versus art versus design remains a problematic suite of categorisations even today, almost two decades later as evidenced by numerous Museum collections and arts organisations at pains to demarcate the boundaries between craft and design by opting for the choice of both terms in their titles and badging. For example, Australia’s own \textit{object: Australian design centre} was once the \textit{Crafts Council of NSW} and New York’s \textit{Museum of Art and Design} established originally in 1956 as the \textit{Museum of Contemporary Crafts}, later became the \textit{American Craft Museum} prior to its 2008 re-branding as MAD (\textit{Museum of Art and Design}). Its stated aim is that it,

\begin{quote}
\textit{celebrates materials and processes that are embraced by practitioners in the fields of craft, art and design, as well as architecture, fashion, interior design, technology, performing arts, and art and design-driven industries.}\textsuperscript{viii}
\end{quote}

Of course in the case of textile works such as Van Kepple’s, the additional influence of Feminist debates must also be recognised because the earlier Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1970s which shaped Second Wave Feminism, informed many of the textile works of the following two decades. Most frequently these works, through the choice of techniques and materials, emphatically demonstrated the traditions of domestic labour as a means of overtly challenging women’s sequestered devalued place and roles. By adopting, exploiting and amplifying the tropes and forms of domestic textile constructions, many female makers aimed to test the boundaries of pattern languages and decoration in a form of quotation of early Modernist abstraction. Emphasising traditional textile processes of embroidery, weaving, felting, knitting, knotting and related techniques many artists subverted the
contexts and meanings of their otherwise mundane domestic materials and forms often by distortions or exaggerations of scale though the processes of making and construction. This also resulted in the subsequent adoption of many textile techniques, materials and forms by other artists, in following decades, who identified the power of materiality of cloth and textile structures as a fresh and challenging new medium when re-contextualised to readily subvert expectations and perceptions of meaning of their audiences. However, with no understanding of the history, complex skills or traditions of textile many of these artists produced works which, while attending to postmodernist methodologies and propositions of sign and signification, resulted in textile works which were fundamentally shallow and glib manipulations of materials. Uninformed by the depth and the place of textile across centuries as an intimate companion and mnemonic recorder of and counterpart to lived human experience anchored within the narratives of ritual, ceremony and daily life, these postmodern textile works lost a fundamental vitality and resonance in the hands of makers unaware of tradition and far deeper potential of textile as a medium. The difficulty then in respect of the materiality and processes of working with and through textile in contrast to each of these dominant debates and discourses – language, semiotics, representation, art, craft, design and feminism in the last two decades of the twentieth century was that works with other motivations which did not fit comfortably within the parameters of these critical domains were overlooked and largely misrepresented as being part of the post-war craft movement allegedly masquerading as art.
I don’t mean to suggest, however that Elsje Van Kepple’s works were not shaped by her Feminist understanding of her life and experience. One of the few times I heard her react fiercely was to a thoughtless assumption about her role as a new parent when the question unequivocally implied she no longer had a practice and identity as an artist because she had become an invisible capital ‘M’ Mother - a role in which she it was assumed she would have no time for her textile practice. However motherhood was one of many experiences along with marriage and her role as a full-time Lecturer in Textile at Edith Cowan University, Perth which made her realise just how relentlessly determined she needed to be to realise her vision for textile through her work – her practice and her teaching. Feminism most certainly did significantly inform her identity and lived experience as a wife, artist and academic – but not in the usually expected and predictable ways as framed by Second Wave feminism. I wish only to say that her works were not readily recognised as being Feminist in nature or intent because they didn’t adopt the expected style of Feminist works of the
era (and in many respects still don’t.) As colleague Phillipa O’Brien noted in respect of Van Kepple’s work, *Dust to Dust*,

[ … ] it is created from the time honoured log-cabin patchwork pattern – the imagery rebounding between old urban walls, the ancient domestic hand-crafts of patchwork and batik, hearth and home, the home without walls in the bush, the earth as home, dust returning to dust.\textsuperscript{iX}

As such, I believe Elsje Van Kepple’s works are examples of what Grayson Perry, recently said of the importance of the innovative works that emerged in spite of the heated debates and emphatic categorisations of media and materials of this era, that the makers of this period, ‘sailed out on the dangerous sea of fine art with crafted forms’.\textsuperscript{x}

One of many reasons that Van Kepple’s intentions were largely not well understood and her works were misrepresented was that they were problematically unrecognisable to an audience who expected textile works to be craft as predictably familiar referring to everyday objects. The same audiences understood art to be
otherwise – cool and cleverly self-conscious as part of the legacy of Greenberg’s Modernist - Kantian notion of reified refined art operating via narrowly categorised, autonomous and fundamental mediums. Moreover, in this Neo-platonic tradition, only certain material substances of the world, such as paint, were approved and strictly prescribed as suitably almost intangible ‘matter’. Consequently this limited range of superior appropriate materials as potential tools toward abstractions of Platonic ideals relegated many other media such as textile to insignificance in the decorative arts as illegitimate materials for the making of art-works. The Greenbergian critical position assumed that the proper ambition for an artist was to aim for materially authentic works that lay far beyond any reference to the commonplace material world to achieve pure form and transcendence. Textile of course being fundamentally associated with the feminine and domestic realms was emphatically not a suitable vehicle for Greenbergian Modernist - Kantian ambitions. Van Kepple whose practice required a complicity with textile in particular – working and acting as an agent with her materials, adopted a different methodology. However, this was an approach which was not a wilfully nor consciously direct critique nor refusal of this form of logocentrism and the dominance of written language as the privileged tool for creating and communicating meaning. It was perhaps more of an intuitive move within the discourse of her undergraduate education of Modernist abstraction towards a language of textile because the medium offered her qualities of fragility and transience not apparent in other media she encountered in her studio-based Art School education of the 1970s. As Anthropologist Tim Ingold has pointed out, an actual primary concern with materials such as Van Kepple’s, has until recently, remained surprisingly rare universally even beyond the visual art Studio-focussed debates and technique focussed disciplines of the traditional Crafts. Ingold argues, even in the elaborate Academic discourses such as Anthropology and Archaeology which address the human-made material culture, attitudes to materialities were similarly overlooked in this era. He states,

*The greater part of archaeology is dedicated precisely to the study of materials and the ways they have been used in processes of production. Even in anthropology there is some ethnographic work on the subject. My point is simply that this work*
does not seem to impinge significantly on the literature on materiality and material culture. xi

In contrast, the intentions and works of this era by Elsje Van Kepple, manifested a vital understanding of materiality that can now be better expressed via a post-humanist performative approach articulated in the writings of Feminist theorists such as Karen Barad. I believe that Van Kepple’s works need to be located in terms of Barad’s understanding of materiality and performativity to be adequately understood.

I recall the difficulty many critics and crafts’ reviewers had with Van Kepple’s works in the 1990s who struggled to describe her works via problematic terms such as ‘deconstructed landscapes’, ‘numinous’ or ‘spiritual’—each of which mislead us into assuming that this was Van Kepple’s actual objective. There were however some who recognised aspects of Van Kepple’s work more clearly. Garth Morse, a fellow Western Australian noted in 1989 reviewing Van Kepple’s work that,

[ … ] there is no attempt to merely decorate or to invoke traditions of making which may relate to pleasing or superficial subjects. Elsje King presents us with a world of fragments, glimpsed evocations of a tenuous reality, forms in a constant transition between being and nothing. It is this perception, this life energy, which endows her work with its particular mystery. Her capacities with materials are quite simply, superb. xii

It is the rare observations such as Morse’s which relate Van Kepple’s work and her engagement with cloth to Karen Barad’s notions of intra-actions where Barad argues in her 2007 paper Meeting the Universe Half-way that,

A performative understanding of discursive practices challenges the representationalist belief in the power of words to represent pre-existing things. Unlike representationalism which positions us above or outside the world we allegedly merely reflect on, a performative account insists on understanding thinking,
observing, and theorising as practices of engagement with, and as part of, the world in which we have our being.\textsuperscript{xiii}

Or in Elsje Van Kepple’s own words,

*The processes I use are often metaphors for nature’s processes, ones which naturally weather and create a surface. This object is not specifically about the landscape, or about a desert, or about Niagara. But it was stimulated by the experience of being in a particular place at a particular time. It is about an almost indescribable feeling of fragility and even vulnerability.*\textsuperscript{xiv}

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\textbf{figure 5: Elsje Van Keppel} In the Making 1994 Photographer unknown

At the risk of allowing language to dominate and misrepresent yet again, I wish to argue that Van Kepple’s works are certainly about a particular form of land dialogue
but this is better expressed as an ontological ambition or intention to record through repeated, steeped bush dye colour and threading through cloth the investing of a human presence at a certain place and time. This process became over time a kind of onto-poetic mending or repair of cloth as intimate collaborator of skin and soul to be found on and in tandem with the diurnal rhythms of the bush-camps and the continuity of returning through varied seasons to country. Phillipa O’Brien states that, ‘it was in the unifying experience of Australian nature that she could experience the sense of oneness, and the continuity and connectedness that she craved’ and which was encountered through the bush camps and with indigenous cultures through her collaborations with Nalda Searles. Her ambition I believe was to test her own relationship to country phenomenologically towards a new and uncertain process of understanding of being in place through the honesty of her material language. This might have been because of her migrant heritage in the sense of someone who as a foreigner might bring a different and uncertain, open perspective to their reading of or making meanings about place. Academic Alison Ravenscroft proposes this as an event of,

[ … ] reading as an act that marks and makes. When we read, we produce a scene of our own imagining. We produce a scene, there is no scene waiting to be seen. There is no scene before us, as it were. This subjective and subject-making practice has its limits: all readings have their aporias [ … ] Another way of putting this is: how might a settler not read? What are the critical and aesthetic implications of allowing the aporias to remain? How not to fill in the gaps or slide over them in our haste at interpretation? 

If this reading of place and of country occurred without the conflicts of issues of sovereignty that non-indigenous Australian born readers of texts negotiate in relationship to country, I can only guess respectfully. Since Elsje Van Kepple is no longer here to answer our questions I suspect it was a major factor in her respect for and repeated return to country as place essential to inform, shape and saturate her practice. I do recall one of our last conversations when she recommended I read Val Plumwood’s 1994 text – Feminism and the Mastery of Nature – because for her it
resonated by articulating aspects of her deep emotional attachment to place and confirmed her understanding of responsibility to country. It entranced her thinking because it was a means to validate and better articulate her emotional and physical relationship to place and provided a vital language necessary to express her understanding of things she knew subliminally and intuitively. Crucially it was also a means to better negotiate (and work against) the academic discourses within which she was obliged to operate to justify her creative practice.

In Van Kepple’s engagement with cloth and stitch I recognise Barad’s ‘primary semantic units’, that are,

[ … ] not words but material-discursive practices through which (ontic and semantic) boundaries are constituted. This dynamism is agency. Agency is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfigurings of the world. The universe’, as Barad defines it and I believe Van Kepple engaged with it, was, ‘agential intra-activity in its becoming, [ … ]
Elsje Van Kepple’s works arose from and inherited a vital mix of abstraction that was indebted to her art-school education in Modernist abstractionist discourses and forms that eschewed decoration and instructed ‘a truth to materials’ through which meaning is inherent. Adolf Loos’ dictum that ornament was moreover a crime was never overtly asserted but nonetheless ever present. Van Kepple’s early works are either dark or light fields of subtle felted layered cloth of simple rectilinear formal order and precision played out against a neutral fragile delicate ground. Whether these early large scale works were a reflection of her early education in Bauhaus Modernism via woven and felted form through her typical 1970s Australian undergraduate creative arts education is debateable. This early training whatever its long-term influence, was later reinforced by two years post-graduate study in the winter dark seasons at Goldsmith’s Textile Department in the University of London. This period was also the start of a tentative re-engagement with her European heritage. Each of these stages of the maturation of her practice are evidence the signature qualities of fragility and lace-like constructions and patterns of density/absence that was to become a fundamental part of her last works.

However it was through these early works and experiences that she recognised the value and significance of textile as a vital and resonant medium for expression of time and place. In 1978 as she began the process of envisaging a textile course at Edith Cowan University devising the course structure, the word that focussed her thoughts was Location. Phillippa O’Brien, a colleague of Van Kepple’s and a contemporary Western Australian artist and writer has said that the concept and importance of location,

[ … ] seemed to be the central enlivening concept that would give veracity to a course that taught the skills of the great textile traditions but also sought to be a preparation for the life of an artist.xx

Over more than two decades Van Kepple demonstrated a relentless determined commitment as both an educator and artist to the search for a resonant, legitimate
means to create an art of her own time and place which formed the substance of what she passed on to her students and peers. Late in her first decade at Edith Cowan, she returned from a disappointing second trip to Europe, specifically to her homeland of the Netherlands, where she had sought but not found a validation of both the great European textile traditions and a sense of place and identity. She did however unexpectedly discover what she was seeking in the spectacular Ethel River Gorge in the Ashburton Ranges – an intense transforming experience that she had sought in European culture. Though an encounter with the light, colour and space in a canyon in country at Ethel River in Western Australia she began understand that it was in the unifying experience of the Australian natural world that she could experience as sense of continuity and connectedness to place that she craved. In the Western Australian landscapes were experiences of materialities that were ancient, weathered, complex, and as resonant as the qualities she perceived in the timeless human traditions of making through weaving, felting, dyeing and stitching she had hoped to find in Europe.

figure 7: Ruth Hadlow An Inner Garden: embroidering on Air 1993 Photographer unknown
She also recognised the unique skills and importance of joining forces with fellow artist Nalda Searles, who brought great knowledge and capacity as both teacher and artist to Van Kepple’s vision for an innovative and relevant textile program for the Western Australian arts community. In the following decades Searles went on to build significant creative partnerships with indigenous communities across the Western Australian, the Northern Territory and South Australia. She was the perfect Academic and artist ally with whom Van Kepple could build a new philosophy and approach to teaching textile in what has become an internationally identifiable Australian studio-textile practice that emerged from the teaching program complemented by a bush camp site-specific experience for students and artists alike.

Together their complementary vision began to shape Van Kepple’s ambition, establishing the bush camp experience initially for students who were required to commit up to two weeks immersed in isolated bush-camp based creative practice at various locations across the Western Australian goldfields first at Niagara and later Ethel River. Van Kepple and Searles blended a unique aesthetic of place that combined the best of Australian domestic Between the Wars make-do and mend practicality.

Working in the bush had many implications. It gave everything a natural authenticity that could be achieved no other way. It necessarily reduced process to the basics. Take the basics, do the basics. Sleep on the ground. Notice everything you do. Take time – be present. Experience the place fully. The tradition of the annual bush camps was that they were meditative activities.
By working with re-cycled natural fibres, fabrics and natural dye techniques on location in bush camps the artists tested and built a repertoire of bush-dye knowledge during the first decades of the new course through Edith Cowan University. This knowledge was further complemented by Searles’ knowledge of Nyungar and other indigenous basket-making traditions which were later further enhanced via Van Keppe’s on-going additional dialogue with Indonesian Batik artists Agus Ismoyo and Nia Fliam through the Brahma Titra Sari’s Studio in Jogjakarta, Indonesia. The close relationship Van Keppe established and treasured with the Indonesian artists and their studio was another result of her search for a sense of place which led again, by way of her Dutch heritage, to Indonesia as an ex-colony of the Netherlands. This engagement with contemporary Indonesian textile culture and encounters with the Japanese traditions of Shibori through relationships with other colleagues, were adapted, as Van Keppe said, into a particularly Australian version of the textile process that has acquired its own distinctive language of resist dye forms in tandem with bush-dye process.
Artists who have joined the bush-camps over the decade or more have included Judy Watson, Rebecca Paterson, Ruth Hadlow, the Ernabella Community of artists, John Corbett, John Parkes, Kay Lawrence, Valerie Kirk, Liz Williamson, Sue Wood (whose works were one of seven satellite exhibitions as part of Land Dialogues) and many, many more, the author included. All of whom have extended and shared the philosophy of the bush-camp recognition of place and practice. Charles Sturt University through the School of Communication and Creative Industries was also part of this emergent Australian studio-textile practice through the teaching programs on-campus and with the Wiradjuri Elders’ re-emergent practice of weaving.
In my own case Van Kepple’s ideas and legacy were fundamental to the recent process of devising, testing and problem solving involved with the construction and creation for the CAD Factory and National Museum of Australia’s *On Common Ground* event. Commissioned to create a seventy metre long, ten metre high textile installation entitled *Vanishing Point: Swan Hopper Legacy* I was indebted to both an understanding of the significance of site and location I learnt from Van Kepple but equally an appreciation of the importance of working with the cloth and the elements
– the currents of weather and water, fragility, light reflections, shadow and the shapes and tensions of textile and wind to engage the fundamental character of all the elements in concert. To allow each a place and role as intra-active participants in the emergence of the concept and the form. The work was situated on country over the Murrumbidgee River at Narrandera last October and here at Wagga Beach in a different configuration for Land Dialogues. It will later this year (2016) be re-created again as a series of cave-like spaces for the National Regional Arts Festival and conference artlands in Dubbo to again address through textile the fragility and tentative resilience of the survival of the creatures of our river systems across south-eastern Australia. The first and subsequent versions of the textile installation were,

[ … ] constructed from cloth discarded as part of the relentless cycle of fashion and chance, (which) came from the domestic realm. Its industrially designed patterns were a stylised homage to the beauty of the natural world yet their manufacture was central to the destruction of the same exquisite order in the fragile landscapes that sustain us. The cloth carried the colours and histories of the black swans and other birds that once filled similar spaces above the rivers across south-east Australia in their millions before the determined destruction by Swan Hoppers and the relentless demands of industrial scale development. This textile points to many things most especially to the unseen energies and sounds of this place. The fragments and geometry refer to the building blocks and logic of complex fluid ecologies. It is imprinted with the rhythms and traces of water, of creatures, shadows, sediments and energies of life. This textile is as tenuous and fragile as the river’s own survival – the resilience of both is strained to breaking point.\textsuperscript{xxiii}
In the almost two decades since the death of Elsje Van Kepple, Nalda Searles has continued to share their philosophies of process with communities across Australia most notably as a key motivator for the Tjanpi Weavers from Central Australia who created the remarkable woven full-scale Toyota which won the Telstra Art Awards in 2005 and the Narrogin Doll makers project that has successfully addressed the need for healing in the face of on-going grief and trauma as a result of the cultural disruptions and conflicts in the small indigenous community in Western Australia. All of these artists have identified the immense value and significance of the immersive experience of working on country and in locating and intensifying their individually authentic intra-actions of materiality through site-specific practice. Understanding the importance of this sustained focus on making is vital as part of teaching programs within undergraduate, post-graduate contexts, in community-based practice and in master-class workshop challenges. The aesthetic, psychological, physiological and performative intra-active material practice that the
bush-camps have engendered have begun a new understanding of the languages that emanate from human dialogue with and from materials when subjected to the forces of energy transference; the elements of gravity and tension of threads under pressure through human agency over time. These interactions emerge from and also require an acknowledgement of the importance of place in anchoring and informing practice. These are the elements of a creative practice that is more than the phenomenology of experience mediated by human senses and temporal perceptions – it is a blend of the phenomenon of the intra-agency of materiality. As Petra Lange-Berndt, a leading researcher in the field of material studies in art history, argues in *How to be Complicit with Materials*,

*Materials here become traces that are entangled in the web-of-life. Nature is more than the raw material of culture in the logic of capitalist colonialism.*

The influence of Van Keppel and the bush camps’ philosophy of materiality has shaped and now widely characterizes the non-indigenous fibre and textile art of Australia having steadily developed for more than three decades. The original materially based research process envisaged by Elsje Van Kepple has folded across time, and demonstrates a form of synchronicity with unrecognised undercurrents of life. The particular materiality it engages is neither a passive surface awaiting the mark of culture nor the end product of cultural performances as Barad would have it.
The legacy of Elsje Van Kepple’s work I believe is evidenced as the reimagined links and connections to land and location, to country, created through the intersections of the potentials of fundamental traditional textile methodologies. As forms of visual and material phenomena intra-acting and re-inscribing into textile’s discourses in webs of relationships to tangible networks of connection and hand-work on, through and across country. New approaches have been questioned and engaged by these makers to create contemporary meanings and to problematize post-humanist performative theoretical constructs which question dominant histories and assumptions about the significance of materiality in ways that art and critical theorists previously refused to acknowledge.
In conclusion, I think it fitting to let Barad have the last word –

In an agential-realistic account, performativity is understood not as iterative citationality but as iterative-intra-activity. Intra-actions are agentive and changes in
the apparatuses of bodily production matter for ontological as well as epistemological and ethical reasons: different material-discursive practices produce different material configurings of the world. Different difference/diffraction patterns; they do not merely produce different descriptions. Objectivity and agency are bound up with issues of responsibility and accountability. Accountability must be thought of in terms of what matters and what is excluded from mattering. xxvii

figure 14: Julie Montgarrett, Vic Mc Ewan - CAD Factory, Clytie Smith Vanishing Point : On Common Ground  Photographer Julie Montgarrett

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i Topologies in this instance is intended to suggest both the character and expansive scale of the landscape as country experienced at certain locations or from particular points of view as well as the use of the term to describe the networks and interrelationships as used in relation to computer systems designed as a mapping of interconnected electronic pathways and points on a field of intersecting and
interacting elements. It aims to point toward the notion of complex webs of meaning as materialities and intra-actions that trace and communicate what ‘matters’ in relation to lived experience as new forms, patterns and relationships.


iii Phillipa O’Brien, Notes toward a lecture on Elsje Van Kepple’s works presented at the 1998 SHIFT Textile Conference, at the Canberra School of Art 1998 and given to the author in the same year.

iv Kay Lawrence, Elsje King’s Fragile Objects, object magazine; issue #27 1998, p. 17


vi For example, publications such as British author, Matthew Koumis’ Textiles of the World series twice focussed on Australian contemporary Studio textiles, and included Van Kepple in its first Volume identifying her as a significant leading Australian textile artist voice and in the second Volume which focussed on thirteen of the next generation of makers included 8 of Van Kepple’s and Nalda Searles colleagues and artists connected as ex-students of others who have adopted aspects of Van Kepple’s ethos in their teaching and textile practice. Art Textiles of the World: Australia, Matthew Koumis (Ed.), Telos Publishing, U.K. 1998 and Art Textiles of the World: Australia vol. 2, Matthew Koumis (Ed.), Telos Publishing, U.K. 2007

vii Van Kepple was recognised with a major exhibition in the Powerhouse Museum Sydney in 1997 however this was specifically within the context of the leading NSW Museum for the Applied Arts and Sciences. The exhibition catalogue entitled, Fragile Objects included essays by Grace Cochrane, Senior Curator of Decorative Arts and Design, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney and author of Crafts: A History of the Crafts Movement in Australia, Craftsman House Pub. 1992.


ix Phillipa O’Brien. ib id. 1998

x Grayson Perry is also an artist of complex sculptural forms and installations, who describes himself as ‘once a potter’ and like Van Kepple an artists whose works are intimately informed by the great traditions of ceramics as vessels with ritual,symbolic, narrative functions. Perry, 2013. Reith Lecturers – Tate Modern http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03969vt


xii Garth Morse, Hovea, Western Australia.1989. Written for Elsje King Textiles Meat Market Craft Centre exhibition flyer. November 1990. Taken from a Commentary on the work of Elsje King (nee Van Kepple) provided to the author by the Artist.

xiii Karen Barad, op.cit. 2007. p. 216

xiv Conversation between the author and Elsje Van Kepple, 1995, Canberra during the Junichi Arai Masterclass, Canberra School of Art.
Reading in this context includes visual practices as the interpretations and perception of visual and material works of art as well as text-based work.

Elsje Van Kepple also referred me to a much earlier paper in the Australasian Journal of Philosophy - Val Plumwood, *Ecofeminism: An Overview and Discussion of Positions and Arguments*, in the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 64, supplement 1, 1986, pp. 120–138. Both texts addressed aspects of ecofeminism that were of concern to both of us in respect of textile, feminism and our own arts practice and identities as artists within the field of feminist debates of the previous decade. This thoughtful sharing of ideas is typical of Elsje Van Kepple’s generosity as noted by Grace Cochrane in the opening speech of *Fragile Objects* at the Powerhouse Museum in 1997.

Karen Barad, op.cit. p.215

Phillippa O’Brien, op.cit. 1998

The bush-camps were originally part of the BA Fine Art degree programs in the former School of Visual and Performing arts, Wagga Wagga from 1998 to 2002. Annual Summer Masterclasses were subsequently led by Ruth Hadlow from 2005 – 2010 and coordinated by the author for the textile community for Wagga with national and international participants.


Karen Barad, op.cit. 2007. p. 216