

## ***Autonomous aesthetic practice in the Anthropocene***

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### **Biography**

Elizabeth Bevan-Parrella completed a PhD by Research Major Studio Project (MPHD) at the University of South Australia in 2015. Elizabeth's background is in interior architecture and painting with an honours degree in visual art theory. She has tutored in art, architecture and design theory at the University of South Australia and is currently tutoring first year architecture and design theory. Her art practice of installation and painting continues to reflect and extend the thesis of her previous research with a view to discovering further forums for exhibition. Gift exchange as analogous to arts function is a current site of interest.

### **Abstract**

The concept of the Anthropocene brings with it an impression of present day reality that has been described by French philosopher Felix Guattari as 'the great ecological fear'. Responding to this interpretation I ask: is art practice, per se, relevant to this age of the Anthropocene? If so, in what ways is an autonomous aesthetic practice relevant and justified amidst an era of complexity and uncertainty?

This presentation is a culmination of a recently completed practice-led, doctoral research project entitled 'Follow any Path from A until B : "Useless" gardens, gifted ecologies'. The aim of this research was to show what my visual art practice could do to expand the relationship between art and an ecological sensibility. Reflecting on my thesis as informed by the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Rancière, I look at Lewis Hyde's, *The Gift* as complementary to Guattari's unequivocal concept of the Anthropocene.

The corresponding art works of installation and assemblage will be presented as a nomadic narrative of images that reference painting, drawing, sculpture and photography. Otherwise described as 'attention intensifiers' these art works and are made from often dispersed and overlooked fragments, detritions transformed and reappearing as patterns of dialogue that take on an unbecoming character synonymous with the event of disintegration. This research follows an ethoecological strategy that detaches art from its status as

commodifiable object to proffer a fresh way to recast our thinking in relation to the Anthropocene.

**Keywords:** the Anthropocene, the gift, agency, ecologies, art practice utility

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### ***Autonomous aesthetic practice in the Anthropocene***

How do we change mentalities, how do we reinvent social practices that would give back to humanity - if it ever had it - a sense of responsibility...

– Félix Guattari (2000, 82).

This paper is a script in defence of a virtual space of artistic practice with a view to extending the normal coordinates of perception and exchange relations. I am concerned with how art is made (and how it functions in a field of relations) to show what my art practice can do to cultivate and expand the connection between art and an ecological sensibility. I would describe my studio process as a seamless interplay and continuum of making and thinking that encapsulates the will to go beyond typical and habitual modes of thought.



Fig. 1: soap box from (*earth drawers*) series, 2012, outstallation, recycled timber and washing soap, dimensions variable, Palmer Sculpture Scape, SA

It is through the process of art making that I consider how concepts such as ‘agency’ and ‘the gift’ hold the key to adaptive responses in the Anthropocene. My art practice of

assembled objects and installations are vehicles that intimate knowledge in a manner that brings an array of possibilities and multiple potential meanings to my topic (Scrivener 2001, para 22) whilst embracing active experimentation as a fundamental, philosophical and political gesture. This whole project is reflective of my own anxiety about the futility and wastefulness of conventional art production, a preoccupation synonymous with early conceptualism, feminist theory and eco-feminism (Plumwood 1993, 60).



Fig. 2: *mirror, mirror*, 2015, Installation, picture frame, mirror, lichen, brick, steel and timber boxes, dimensions variable, Liverpool Street Gallery, UniSA

In the 1960s a significantly more sustainable approach to the creative process emerged and art became detached from its status as commodifiable object. Practices born out of this space belong to a particular way of thinking that prioritises the primacy of aesthetic function by 'conservative' means. This attitude signifies a bridge between aesthetics and an ecological sensibility bringing to the fore the relatedness of all things amidst bounded states of inconsistency (Genosko 2010, 107).

My pedagogical method and speculative framework of relational, ecological aesthetics considers the interrelationship between ecosystems as significant sites of communication and information that belong not solely to material and energetic systems, but to mental

systems of the mind (Bateson 1972, 464). Accordingly, I have adopted a process in which 'consciousness and intelligence open up the material world to the play of virtuality' (Grosz 2004, 230), and where the virtual may be accessed through praxis. This strategy does not insist on the certain knowledge of scientific method nor does it privilege the faculty of thought instead it demonstrates that 'learning is, after all, an infinite task'(Deleuze 2004,166).



Fig. 3: *of cabbages and Kings*, 2015, digital photograph of leaves and rubber bands photocopied onto aged paper with dismantled photograph mat, approx. 20 x 28 cm, Liverpool Street Gallery, UniSA

## Thinking through the Anthropocene

In this era filled with collective anxiety there is an urgent need for critical dialogue to address our failure to adapt to the troubling conditions of the Anthropocene. Overwhelmed by the fallout from the effect that is climate change we retreat to accepted practices or customs that offer separation and security, and that divide our present day realm '...into a number of exclusive domains' (Guattari 2000, 28).

I question where art fits into this Age of the Anthropocene (a turning point in the human relationship with the earth) and what it might precipitate when set within a network of social

relations (Carter 2004, 12). I wonder what kinds of things, adaptive behaviours and habits of thinking can emerge from this research to define positive evolutions within this era of complexity and uncertainty. I refuse to accept with 'a fatalistic passivity' the 'catastrophic and negative developments' (Guattari 2000, 28) that characterise the global ecological crisis. It is within this context that our experiential disappearance has become a covert kind of extinction. The key to a veritable understanding of the experience of the Anthropocene, I suggest, is to dispense with habitual attitudes that promote a human and nature dualism (Plumwood 1993, 60).

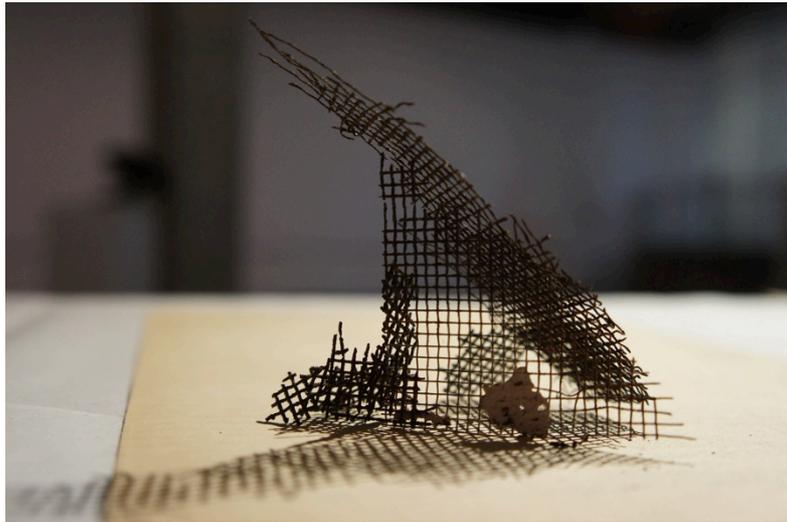


Fig. 4: *small ruin*, 2013, from *Tavola dei contenuti*, rusted fly wire, paper, dimensions variable, SASA Gallery UniSA

By corollary, my art practice and adaptive strategy demonstrates how to understand the ecology as extensive and diverse where 'affects' emerge in surprising ways, making visible the invisible to define worlds within worlds. This is what philosopher Isabelle Stengers has speculatively defined as 'ecologies of practice'(2005, 183-196). The idea that non-human agency is productive in a vital materialist sense is to acknowledge the uncanny ability of inanimate things to animate. What is imperative within this philosophical context as also guided by Michel Foucault is the ability to pay attention and be aware of all manner of things (1972). More specifically, to notice the propensities animating things bringing forth noticeable and subtle affects (Bennett 2012, 42-43).

The following established ideas are integral to my methodological approach to art practice. These are; Stengers' 'notion of agency', Félix Guattari's 'ethico-aesthetic paradigm' and Lewis Hyde's extension of Marcel Mauss's analysis of 'gift exchange in archaic societies'. To follow Guattari and Hyde's emphasis, if we consider that Art's primary function is associative

and located within a social interstice (rather than primarily answering to the laws of fiscal currency and bilateral return) it can also be said that this expansive and associative capability is the proper terrain of philosophy. This capacity can be traced to the readymades of conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp and is central to Stengers' notion of agency, Guattari's concept of the Anthropocene and Hyde's commerce of the creative spirit. These philosophical and theoretical positions are imbedded in my making process in order to situate my art practice within the field of ecological politics and place me, as an artist, in a position of accountability.



Fig. 5: *blanket/ directed field*, 2011, digital photograph of sewn leaves, approx. 40 X 60cm, Liverpool Street Gallery floor, UniSA, Adelaide

More specifically, Hyde provides a model for my artistic method as informed by Mauss's seminal work *The Gift*. Mauss's attention to the importance of gift exchange in archaic societies reflects the centrality in societies of 'the gift' and the practice of art, as synonymous with life and interdependency where one's attitude to art, equates with one's attitude to life (Krauss 2011). This model denotes a process that has become like 'second nature' (Bennett 2010, 9).

To explain, my art practice of recycling represents a position of particular relevance to a subsistent and 'conservative' practice. My position can also be described in Foucauldian terms as a 'practice of abstinence' (Foucault 1988, 37) that draws from ecologically inflected and accountable creative practices. Of central concern to my creative practice is being mindful of and looking out for what art can do. My method consists of artefacts made from 'useless' items and materials gleaned from my local environment. My palette is reduced to

the extent that the materials I use and the manner in which they are applied are chosen with a conventional approach to ecological sustainability in mind and according to the terms of a subsistent practice. The way I select out things that are generally relegated to the scrapheap situates my practice within a contemporary setting where the imperative relevance of art can be found by coming to terms with a cultural inheritance. It is in this manner and through this process that my art works retain an unbecoming quality of things chosen for their state of repair and inflections of time.



Fig. 6: *un-becoming*, house paintbrush, 2013, 1950s plastic and frame,  
10 x12 cm, Seedling Art Space Belair, SA

This approach extends into the present Rosalind Krauss's earlier work in the expanded field together with the dynamic conversations of Suzanne Lacy, Joseph Beuys, Richard Serra, Agnes Denes and others in the field of ecologically inflected art. This capacity for autonomy and conceptual expression goes hand in hand with the unique capacity for the arts to operate as an 'avant-garde without authority' (Jagodzinski 2015, 127). Since the 1960s, artists have developed a plethora of experiential and affective encounters within a broad field of social relations. Such practices deregulate and decode where art is situated in relation to the Anthropocene accentuating difference in a precise way but not at the expense of delineation and domination (Kwon 2004, 109-110).



Fig. 7: *plexus*, 2012, digital reproductions of preserving jar, pollen, cup and hair net, dimensions variable, Liverpool Street Gallery, University of South Australia

I deal mostly with quite small objects, commonplace things often considered to be of little importance or value, yet my contemplation of these is conducted at a deep level. Such trifles lack uprightness and the prestige of the virtuous and ideal human subject (Smith 2011). What I am doing is attending to things that have otherwise been disregarded and 'overlooked'. I consider them as a form of commentary defining a particular locality that has been observed intensely.

It is through praxis that I approach a boundary of my own philosophical experience and where making in all its permutations becomes an opportunity for matter, thought and experience to coalesce at a meeting place. I think about this as a conjoining of my 'authorial singular position' where the sequence and rhythm of folding takes embryonic ideas to an atomic fruition. These ideas sit somewhere along the boundary between anomalies and classical symmetries, between abstraction and formalism.



Fig. 8: *earth drawers*, 2012, outstallation, recycled timber, picture frame, door handle, dimensions variable, Palmer Sculpture Scape, SA

The things that constitute my art works have a peculiar material quality, as does the space they occupy. They demonstrate how even weather-beaten material salvaged from a shady edge of the driest continent on earth are intensities, investments in time and provisions to share, open to the possibility that worth can be celebrated through symbolic play (Bryson 1990, 23). In combination they can be described as descriptive of the field in fluid definition as analogous to Bernard Cache's phrase and artefact title (fig.15) 'from city to teaspoon' (Cache 1995, 70). The artefacts then become part of a scene, enabled to appear as not more than they are, but precisely as they are. My role is to magnify and intensify their presence, or 'collective agency' simply through placement (Bennett 2010, 98). Their loose moorings re-affirm my pivotal role as artist and player within a network of things rather than a maker of site-specific or ephemeral art (Kwon 2014, 157).



Fig. 9: *I AM*, installation, music stand circa 1940, photocopy on reclaimed music paper and folder rims, Liverpool Street Gallery, UniSA



Fig. 10: *Tavola dei contenuti*, 2015, installation, trestles, planks, can, twine and oddments, dimensions variable, Liverpool Street Gallery, UniSA

This brings me back to the central idea that emerges from the overlappings and resonances between Stengers' notion of agency, Guattari's 'common principle' and Hyde's attention to the natural, spiritual and social aspects of the gift (Hyde 2009, 194). The practice of gift exchange, like art, occupies a transitory realm and can be described as a conscious practice

that restores to experience the associative dynamism of things. As Hyde writes, ‘...the reception of objects reveals that the gifted self is a thing that breathes’ (Hyde 2009, 284). To attend to the idea that lively forces are immanent to all ‘things’ is, ‘to encourage more intelligent and sustainable engagement with vibrant matter’ (Bennett 2010, viii). It is to bear witness to the base materiality of the world by consideration of the weight and intrinsic worth of all things. It is not about bounded symmetry - a bespoke frame, but framing as the binding thread of material relations.



Fig. 11: *cosmograms on the commons*, 2015, installation, fuse wire, frying pan, seed pods, egg white, flour, steel frame and galvanized pipe, dimensions variable, Liverpool Street audio visual room, University of South Australia

Along with adopting a concept that acknowledges the agency of things, I have located the practice of art as operating from a fundamental register as proposed by Mauss and Hyde. My art practice can be delineated as presenting an extension to ecosophical concepts by directing attention towards the critical relations fundamental to civility. This approach ties in with Guattari’s concept of the ‘common principle’. To enable this reading, I have considered how both the art object and the gift are embedded in cultural institutions, rather than tethered solely in the realm of ‘economics’. In other words, my art practice engenders in theory what Mauss calls ‘reciprocal generosity’ (Mauss 1970, 81).



Fig. 12: *gifted*, 2011, brown paper, string, house paintbrush, 18 x 28 cm + photograph and card, Liverpool Street Gallery, University of South Australia

To explain, my art practice is an offering that sits somewhere between rational thought and unconscious imagination. As Hyde writes,

...the imagination is not subject to the will of the artist. To accept the fruits of [the creative process] as gifts is to acknowledge that we are not their owners or masters, that we are, if anything their servants, their ministers (Hyde 2009, 191).

Hyde proposes that, '...the true commerce of art is a gift exchange...' (Hyde 2009, 205) and gift exchange operates in

...three related ways: as a natural fact (when gifts are actually alive); as a spiritual fact (when gifts are agents of a spirit that survives the consumption of its individual embodiments) and as a social fact (when a circulation of gifts creates community) (Hyde 2009,194).

It is through these interchangeable lenses and 'a process of give and take that Art re-creates [...] our sense of ourselves and our notion of the world.' (O'Sullivan 2001,128)



Fig.13: *song of myself*, 2015, installation, rusty farm wire, dimensions variable, Liverpool Street Gallery, UniSA.

The idea that aesthetics plays an integral role in art's visibility ties in with Guattari's particular emphasis on the quality of subjectivity, where the interface between both private and public realms and the pathway between the artist and viewer become paramount. Aesthetics activates a range of sensoria through intensive, productive and discretionary modes of exchange. Without aesthetics art has no meaning and without exchange art has no affect. What is important for Guattari is establishing through observation what binds these worlds together. This is what he terms the 'common principle' (Genosko 2010,104).

Guattari's thinking, lays out a theoretical and philosophical framework that extends the idea of a bridge between theory and practice. This brings into play my own artistic strategy whilst acknowledging that 'both materialism and science promoted - indeed made possible - ecological ways of thinking' (Foster 2000,17). Concurrently in *The Three Ecologies* Guattari suggests that Continental philosophy might have something different to offer by reinventing ways to deal with negative developments or 'evolutions' (Guattari 2000, 41). He insists that we "'kick the habit" of sedative discourse' in order to be able to apprehend the world through the interchangeable lenses or points of view of the three ecologies (Guattari 2000, 41-42).

Guattari offers an alternative reading of climate change within the context of the Anthropocene as a creative transformation or breaking out of what he calls 'existential Territories' (Guattari, 2000, 75-76). His emphasis is shared between the categories of social relations, human subjectivity and environmental imperatives.

Furthermore, Hyde writes, 'a work of art itself however is not necessarily a gift but instead it is what we make of it' (Hyde 2009,xvii). It is through 'a sympathetic perception of objects [that I am able to enact] a remembrance of the wholeness of things' (Hyde 2009, 227) by emphasising the value of 'value-less-ness'. This ties in with Guattari's philosophy where he emphasises the value of subjectivity. It is here that the experience of observation brings the material world and 'real' world together in conversation with the imagined world (Ikas&Wagner 2009, 50-51) and where the gap between an object and our experience of it becomes known to us. The relationship between these two forces is the distance between things, reminiscent of what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as intensive space and 'unjointed time' (Rajchman 2000, 136-137). These positions point towards the existence of a delicately intricate world that sits behind the present.



Fig.14: *blackbird*, 2016, installation in baptismal font, water, music stand, charcoal, flour, flowers and branches, dimensions variable, Prospect Gallery, Adelaide.

Despite the age-old tension between gift exchange and the market, I insist that art practice plays a vital role, as a participant along the continuum of what Mauss calls ‘total human behaviour’ (Mauss 1970, 81). My art practice is woven into a complex web of activities that he (Mauss 1970, 81) describes as ‘the aesthetic, moral, religious and economic, and the material and demographic factors whose sum is the basis of society and constitutes the common life’. It is then I suggest, through the space between still life, object and subject and the act of attending to everyday ‘useless’ things, that alternative currencies might be gaged and circulated. This requires a meditative contemplation of things and a certain detachment from them - without desire.

I remain deeply curious about the aesthetic function of art and its role within this network of relations. My art works are deviations, ‘patternations’ and ‘monuments of duration’ that are not I would assert, representations but resonances, interrogations and points of resistance. In this manner they are not intended as mappings but as an itinerary, ‘a fragmentary sequence of events and actions *through* spaces, that is, a nomadic narrative whose path is articulated by the passage of the artist’, (Kwon 2004, 95) and where art and aesthetics take up a place of intrinsic value as meters of survival.



Fig.15: *from city to teaspoon*, 2013, installation, salt, spoon, nasturtium leaf and water droplet, 22 x 200 cm, SASA Gallery window, UniSA

My approach offers an alternative scenario to that of ecological decline. What I have identified here as informed by Stengers, Guattari, Hyde and others is the importance of perceptual literacy as a means by which perception can be evaluated. Guattari (Guattari 2000, 24 & 20) supports ways of operating that are ‘...more like those of an artist’ and ‘...that embrace culture, creation, development, the reinvention of the environment and the

enrichment of modes of life and sensibility'. This attitude is also central to Hyde's concept of reciprocity.

Concurrently, if contemporary art practice is to maintain relevance within this age of the Anthropocene, it must perform a deep and complex role. It is then that we may correctly speak of Art as constitutive rather than merely illustrative (Stafford 2007, 7) an agent of transformation and a gift (Hyde 2009, 58). In the words of Lewis Hyde, '[the] gift will continue to discharge its energy so long as we attend to it in return.' (Hyde 2009, 62-63)

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## Notes

### p.1

For further explication of the term anthropocene see Jill Bennett, *Living in the Anthropocene* [pamphlet] Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, 2012.

Here Bennett describes the term as derived from geology and circumscribing an era that began with industrialization. For a more detailed account refer to: 'The Anthropocene Project'- Berlin. Here, scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty in his Keynote Address 'Climate Change and the Scales of Environment', defines the Anthropocene as an event distinguishable from other great extinctions - five in total. His enquiry into the history of life leads him to situate climate change as an 'ecological overshoot'. He suggests our lack of empathy and understanding towards the moral life of other species is detrimental to a living planet.

### p.2

My exegesis entitled 'Follow any Path from A until B: "Useless" gardens, gifted ecologies' includes a more detailed account of my ecoecological strategy. This practice-led research project situates visual art within the unknowable limits of climate change and is substantively informed by; Gilles Deleuze's speculative philosophy and Jacques Rancière's thinking between disciplines.

Eco-feminism was a transitional period, initiated within the context of the second wave of feminism of the 1960s and signified a radical shift in thinking amidst a developing crisis in art in which counter cultures emerged that seriously questioned the 'officially sanctioned high art styles' (Burn 1984, 8).

In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* Val Plumwood presents a critique of reason from an eco-feminist viewpoint, highlighting problems posed by habitual attitudes that promote a human and nature dualism. She also critiques Plato's environmental philosophy as found in *The Timaeus* describing his theory as representing an extraordinary inversion of intuitive thinking (p.60).

### **p.3**

Visual anthropologist, social scientist, linguist, semiotician and cyberneticist Gregory Bateson's concept of mental systems is acknowledged in Félix Guattari's *The Three Ecologies* and Lewis Hyde's *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*. Bateson's *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* is a seminal text in the field of ecological aesthetics where he proposes 'an ecology of ideas' as a new way of thinking (1972, vii). He contends that artists and poets are specifically concerned with the bridges between one sort of thought and another.

My enquiry into adaptive behaviours and habits of thinking is entirely consistent with Gilles Deleuze's concept of differentiation between virtuality and possibility as elucidated in Willatt and Lee (2009, 38).

My speculative framework of relational, ecological aesthetics is informed by an interrogation of ecological ways of thinking as established by 19<sup>th</sup> century materialists Charles Darwin and Karl Marx. These thinkers paid particular attention to notions of materialism as positioned in equal measure with both philosophy and science. The concept of the ecology is emergent from a materialist sensibility as instigated in scientific thought and the enlightenment. This is integral to Darwin's work.

I also note that the endosymbiotic theory of biologist and evolutionist Lynn Margulis is a substantive and alternative approach to Darwin's evolutionary theory. In *The Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* (1998) she identifies complex cell formation as the key to the origin and idiosyncratic behaviour of the species.

I gain further phenomenological insight from thinkers such as Merleau-Ponty, Friedrich Nietzsche, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin and Elizabeth Grosz.

### **p.4**

Otherwise described as 'attention intensifiers' these art works and are made from often dispersed and overlooked fragments, detritions transformed and reappearing as patterns of dialogue that take on an unbecoming character synonymous with the event of disintegration.

The new century brings the potential for an unprecedented level of disappearance - climate change. Fallout is echoed by an acute awareness of past extinctions and a grave fear of inevitable consequences of exponential growth as predicted in Patrick White's *The Tree of Man* and *Voss*, first published 1955 and 1957 respectively.

#### **p.6**

My aesthetic framework is substantively informed by the positive aspects of gift exchange rather than its obligatory, problematic tendencies such as; manipulation, oppression and humiliation. The essays of Millard Schumaker and Garrett Hardin cover the limits of altruism and are cited in (Hyde 2009, xxiii). To acknowledge this alternative focus these references are included in my bibliography.

In *Vibrant Matter: A political ecology of things*, Jane Bennett suggests that the term 'second nature' is a better way to describe human relations than the conventional term 'nature'. The latter infers a separation and a distinction between entities or 'actants', whereas the term 'second nature' offers a way to perceive 'the natural' in a way that is closer to what Bruno Latour refers to as 'comingling' whereby each actant inflects the other (Bennett 2010, 9).

The word 'conservative' is used here in its original sense, to imply a meaning synonymous with conservation.

In *Technologies of the Self* Michel Foucault situates the term abstinence within its historical context as a form of ritual purification.

By 'cultural inheritance' I refer to environmental factors that have shaped my attitude to both art and life. This attitude sits within a more general context of emergent art practices of the new millennia that have a reflexive relationship with modernism and where materials are to be found in the accumulating detritus of everyday life.

#### **p.7**

Networks of artists include the Italian Arte Provera of the late 1960s and Fluxus. Along these similar lines a more recent event titled, *Arte Magra: From the opaque* (2013) was staged at

the Australian Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, supporting fourteen artists and curated by Domenico de Clario & Mary Knights. 'Arte magra' shares its lineage with Arte Provera and roughly translates as 'lean' or 'meagre' art.

**p.8**

An enlivening philosophy of the inanimate fascinates, because it re-replaces authoritarian expertise with idiosyncratic expressions, peculiarities and differences, the delicate and the intricate and insists that there is no privileged viewpoint.

**p.11**

In *The Gift: Forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies*, Marcel Mauss states that reciprocal generosity and mutual respect can be gained through education.

**p.13**

The title *song of myself* (fig. 13) is borrowed from Walt Whitman's poem of the same name circa 1855 as cited in Hyde's *The Gift: Creativity and the artist in the modern world* (2009, 208 & 213).

**p.14**

Félix Guattari refers to 'existential territories' as constrained within finite personal worlds, mapped by limits and coordinates and describes 'incorporeal Universes' as a realm beyond' where all extrinsic references and coordinates disappear [...] The former are singular, idiosyncratic, sensible and finite, the latter are non-dimensioned, non-coordinated, transensible and infinite'(Guattari 2000,85).

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