

Dear Rosa

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Dear US Homeland Security Agent #94142587 Rosa Gomez,

I am writing to you today after having returned to my homeland, New Zealand, from a trip to the United States of America on 2 May 2013. I was processed through the Los Angeles International Airport in Terminal 5. You are the officer who inspected my bags.

During that inspection, you came upon a small matchbox, and as it was deemed to constitute a flammable substance, it was confiscated. Understandably so, as a list of prohibited items is clearly posted throughout the airport and on the Homeland Security website.

At the time, our interaction was necessarily brief because a queue of grumpy passengers from a 14-hour bumpy plane ride was forming. Perhaps you remember me? I have had time to reflect on this incident and think it important to share with you the nature of that matchbox and the power it holds.

I carry this small, seemingly innocuous toolbox with me at all times. Or at least I did. Fitting in the palm of my hand, it travels light. Though it is susceptible to being crushed or drowned, its interior is exponentially expansive due to the matter(s) it houses.

The outer surface of the toolbox discloses its original use to store matches. If there were matches inside the box they would not be just any matches, but safety matches, matches that are effectively impotent until struck across a surface specially coated with red phosphorous. The timber sticks have been soaked in paraffin and their heads dipped in a solution of potassium chlorate, sulphur, starch, a neutraliser, siliceous filler, diatomite and glue.¹ This is a preventative measure that subdues their combustibility by the initial spark. So, the potential danger denoted by the red-coloured packaging is mitigated by separating the two active ingredients; the chance of two heads rubbing together to produce friction, and hence fire, is almost entirely eliminated.

The creation of fire is an important story in New Zealand's indigenous culture. According to Māori legend, Mahuika, a goddess of the underworld, restored the gift of fire to the people after Maui, a demi-god associated with the sea, tricked her out of all but one of her fiery fingernails. Acting



in anger, she threw the fingernail into the forest to set it alight. Later, after the rain god Tawhiri squelched the flames, the fire took refuge in the branches of the totara, mahoe and pukatea trees.² So it was a small sliver of keratin, a tough protective protein, that brought fire into the world; a small sample of a female body capable of destroying the world but equally so, keeping it warm, and casting light into the darkness.

These facets to the matchbox are volatile, literally and figuratively. They are political as well; it is no accident that the name Beehive Matches and the New Zealand House of Parliament share the same name.³ It is here that robust and often contentious debate is flung between ministers defending their ground, their constituents, and their principles in a building inspired by the social construct of honey bees, often interpreted as a monarchy but actually modelling a true egalitarian democracy.⁴ This coincidence of brand and building draws attention to the fact that the matchbox has two ends, by virtue of a tray sliding within an overall wrapper.⁵ Such open-endedness is pivotal to most heated discussions and key to my interest in keeping things in circulation without resorting to binary modes of thinking, acting, living and making. There is always more than one way in and out of an argument, a country, a space...

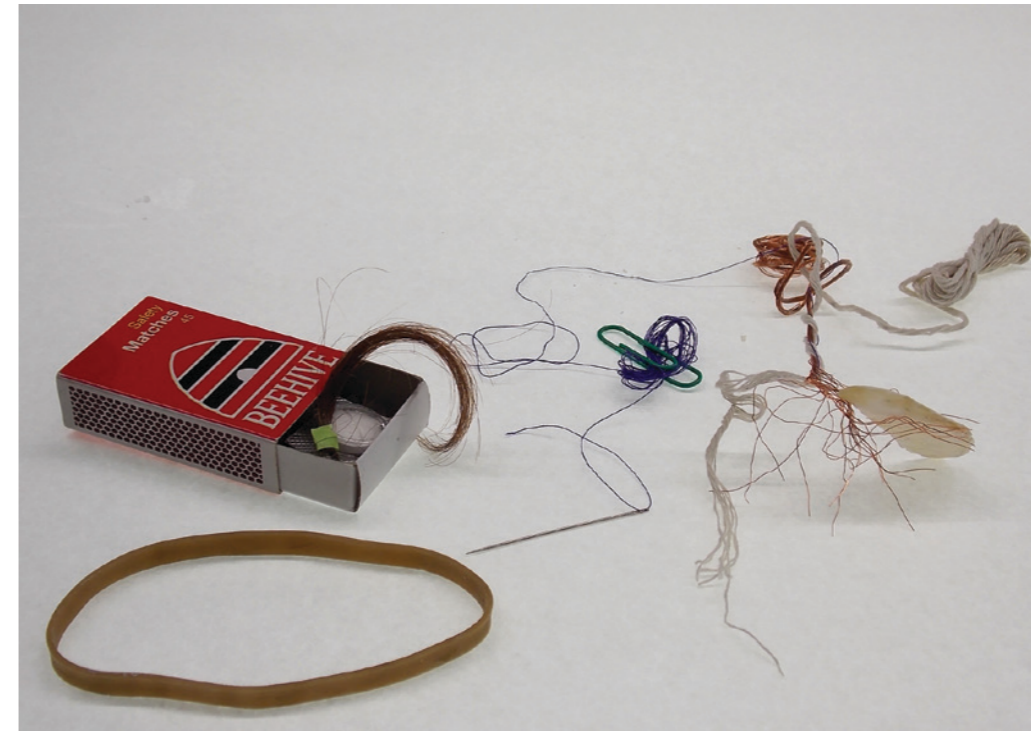
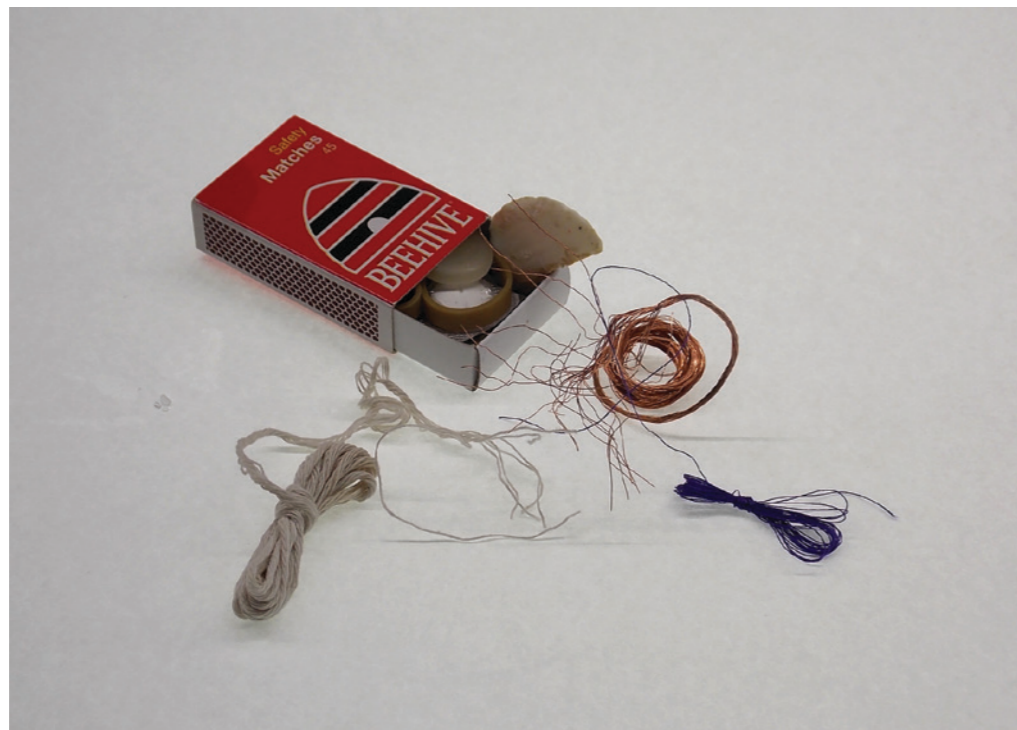
Imagine the matchbox on the table in front of you. If you slide it open it quickly reveals more than expected. You will not find (as the outside of the box promises) 45 neatly stacked red-tipped sticks, 'lucifers' as they used to be called, lying side by side like tiny soldiers ready to take action in defence of freedom.⁶ (At this point the anticipation of the smell of ignited sulphur may fill your nostrils.) Instead you will find a collection of materials eager to escape the close quarters of the spatial confines of a Pandora's (tinder/tender) box, eager to unfurl and proliferate in the exuberance of

fertile stuff. Beware! It is this liveliness of matter that may prove more threatening than the matches themselves! For in this mere 27 square-centimetre interior you will find a set of survival tools, everyday tools to live by, everyday feminist survival tools to lead life by.

Take care! Things coming out of the box onto the table in front of you will start to get messy, untasteful and disorderly. These bits of matter will want to comingle, copulate, assemble and conjugate. They will beg you to handle them and thus you are complicit in an out-of-the-box performative event.

Rosa, can I call you Rosa? I feel that in the process of writing to you about this box we have become more familiar, more intimate, and hence it seems more fitting to call you out as a person, with a face, rather than just a border-guarding uniform with a badge and gun bestowed with the agency to let me and my luggage in and out of the USA. As you looked at my passport and travel itineraries, did it mention that I am a feminist, a spatial artist, an academic, an alien and a believer that all things are vibrant and capable of acting on their own accord, especially when they form alliances with other mutually associating matter? I am a defender against assumptions around material inertness. My art works listen to materials, even the most banal or synthetic. For me they are swaggering, pulsating, pungent, bundles of energy, eco-political forces composed with animism. My body, like yours, is a bundle always reassembling itself in response to its environment. This would explain my sweating that day – simply salt leaching from my pores as the system tried to reach a state of equilibrium.

Though it is my ploy to stir up controversy and contest political, religious and social convictions, I hope that by admitting this belief I do not offend or upset you. Perhaps not, as I suspect it is part



of your job to remain impartial, neutral, and objective unless the matter impacts upon the safe state of the nation. Those traits come with the uniform, I suppose. But as a woman working at the border, monitoring the crossing of territorial boundaries, are you not curious about how these small fragments of material stuff could help you survive? What challenges are you faced with as a twenty-first century woman?

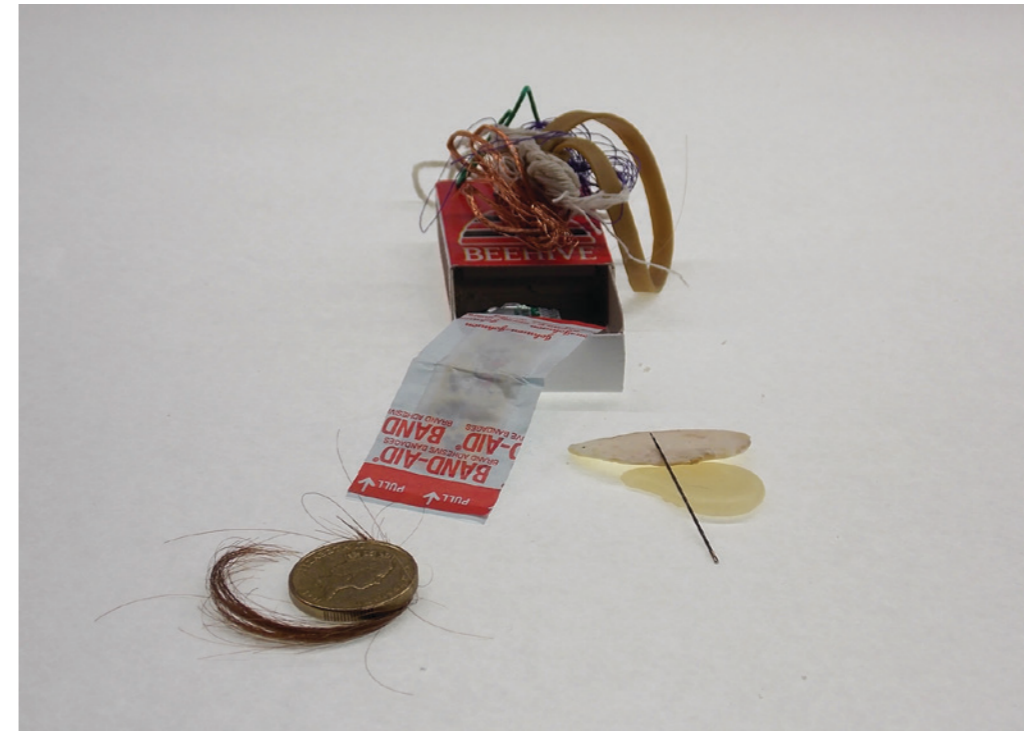
Two bits of stuff leap out of the matchbox. One is coiled, sharp and shiny. It is a transducer to distribute heat, an energy broker for motors of all kinds, including the human body, which relies on the element of copper to maintain hair colour, heal wounds and balance hormones, amongst other things.⁷ With this small pliable piece of copper I can jerry rig a car, mend a fence, short an electrical panel or fix a pair of heels. The other, a wad of cotton fibres, is prone to suturing, sewing, repairing and maybe even in a pinch, fishing. Despite its tendency to tangle, the thread has an amorous alliance with knots, which reveals a simultaneously tensile and compressive attribute in the course of one continuous filament. (I adore these kinds of paradoxes!)

Rummage around in the matchbox and you will find a needle to make mending life easier. Needles are one of my iconic tools not because I am a talented seamstress but because of *Flatland*, Edwin Abbott's tale of Victorian social hierarchy.⁸ In this novel, geometry merges with fantasy fiction to expose the dark side of social evolution. While the males take the form of various kinds of polygons, the females of the community are straight lines with one sharp end. They are required by law to waddle back and forth so they can be seen and to avoid skewering any one with their pointed end. I secretly revel in this invisible risk as I sit very still taking very shallow breaths. So, I can understand in profound ways why a needle might constitute a weapon of mass destruction.

The unpacking continues. A half-moon of soap may become tangled in the copper wire. Its primary purpose is to promote good hygiene but in an emergency, its body of slippery fat and oil can be rubbed on a surface to reduce friction, to increase ease of motion through decreasing physical contact. Literally on the other hand, soap, with a tad of water, as you know, expends itself in a lively, gendered and joyful eruption of bubbles.⁹ Harnessing the sexual tension implied by this substance is all that the copper wire can bear. And yet not far away or far behind, a tassel of human hair springs from the box as if to induce more laughter to combat or compound the hysteria of being a woman. Far from abject, this lock from my daughter's very first haircut draws goose bumps and deep laughter at the slightest stroke. If you have a daughter you will know how precious this memento is.

Rosa, do you recognise the small globule of soft yellow substance? It is wax from our beehives located a short distance up the mountain. Its distinctive musky aroma fills my house. (Ah, this information may raise alarms because of the bio-security threat that beeswax highlights!) As an apiary excrement and building compound, beeswax softens in your grasp after a few minutes. It is a material that remembers; it already knows your skin surface through all the cosmetics and hair products you use. Like soap it is especially effective in reducing friction. With a wick, it can burn into the midnight hours, illuminating a good book, a sexual encounter or even a power outage.

Were you ever a girl scout, a girl guide, or have you ever received first aid training? If so, then you would know how important it is to be prepared. In the four years since assembling this box, I have never had to use this lone bandage. Perhaps as an actual and symbolic shield of protection it warded off injury. I am not sure. It always reminds me of the complications of being female, of menstruating, another messy matter. And it signifies my penchant to help, give aid, to rescue,



sacrifice myself. I have for a long time wondered why the packaging is not part of the bandage. Would that not mean less waste and more wounded people could be helped?

Deep in the shadows of the matchbox hides a blood thinner, a remedy for migraines. This aspirin replaces the one I gave to an elderly man on the streets of Auckland who appeared to be having a heart attack. The coin, now missing, was spent to call an ambulance. The aspirin tastes as metallic as the coin. (I often stress and get headaches over money so they travel together.) The elastic





band reminds me to be gracious, respectful, and supple as I reach out to other people, other things. It also demonstrates my (sometimes misguided) sense of community as a collaborative engagement, a deep sense of civic mindedness. It bestows a sharp sting; the closest thing I have to a whip. It is good for bunching things together and to snap when things get out of hand. My other tool of choice would be the wedge/shim. It is no longer in the matchbox; I shoved it between two plastic panels above me in the plane to keep them from rattling on the long journey. A wedge has special powers to pry things apart whereas a shim can help make things level. Level-headedness is sometimes a great virtue. It certainly mattered when I surrendered the matchbox to you.

I am not claiming this unassuming box and its contents will help me, or you, leap tall buildings, establish world peace or solve poverty. It is unlikely to stimulate the kind of leadership that draws accolades, political position or vast wealth. While there is no guarantee that it offers protection from prejudice, hatred or misfortune, there is evidence to suggest it can prompt kindness, thriftiness and generosity. The combinations of practical and philosophical dimensions it affords are numerous.

I thought that when you took the matchbox away from me that smog-laden morning, I would grieve its loss. When I started writing this letter, my intent was to ask if you still had it and if you would be willing to post it back to me. I was ready to contest that indeed it was not harmful. As I prepare to conclude this letter, my thinking has changed. I hope you neglected to send this matchbox to the fate of most illegal goods in customs – the fiery bin full of contraband. Or maybe you will see fit to rescue it from some mountain of impounded items and make it your own? If so, it is yours. I can make another:

From one freedom fighter to another, though of very different sorts,
Julieanna

AFTERWORD

Dear Rosa dwells on the power of everyday things to serve as tools to survive with, and more so, tools with which to lead life. The text takes the form of a personal letter that operates across several levels of familiarity as a persuasive form of communication. It is driven by a series of visual images that unpack the contents of a small interior space, a matchbox filled with sundry items, essential accessories to an activism aligned with feminism.

Dear Rosa expands upon a sculptural work titled *This is my feminist survival kit* that previously featured as part of a group exhibition, *13.3%.*, (WUHO Gallery, Pasadena, California USA, 2010). According to curators Jayna Zweiman and Christian Stayner, the exhibition '*13.3%.*' borrowed from the conceptual structure of curator Lucy Lippard's landmark 1973 exhibition of conceptual art, *c. 7,500*, in which each work on display fit into a standard manila envelope. Lippard's exhibition contested the belief that there were no women making conceptual art at the time – and she did so by mailing evidence of this work directly to the gallery for display. Nearly forty years later, *13.3%.* provides a space and form in which to consider the contributions and visibility of today's practising female architects.¹⁰ As a creative work in its own right, *Dear Rosa* expands upon *13.3%.*'s conceptual and strategic use of the ubiquitous manila envelope; it concentrates on a common matchbox as a literal and conceptual catalyst of change incited by personal, material, political, cultural and historical inflections.

Dear Rosa affects multiple readings that both reveal and conceal a litany of associations to historic and contemporary feminist activism. For example, the name Rosa draws reference to Rosa Luxemburg (an early twentieth century German journalist, socialist theorist and self-proclaimed citizen of the proletariat),¹¹ Rosa Parks (an African-American who, in 1955 refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white passenger),¹² Rosie The Riveter (an American cultural icon symbolising the economic power of women that emerged during WWII when women replaced men in the factories)¹³ and Rose Schneiderman (a Polish Jewish immigrant who worked to improve wages, hours, and safety standards for American working women from 1904-1949).¹⁴ Rosalba Carriera (a prominent Venetian portrait artist of the Italian Rococo)¹⁵ is the alias of a member of the Guerrilla Girls, a group of activists that describe themselves as 'feminist masked avengers in the tradition of anonymous do-gooders like Robin Hood, Wonder Woman and Batman.' They ask, 'How do we expose sexism, racism and corruption in politics, art, film and pop culture? With facts, humour and outrageous visuals. We reveal the understory, the subtext, the overlooked, and the downright unfair.'¹⁶ This survey would not be complete without mention of the feminist group subRosa, a collection of interdisciplinary feminist artists committed to combining art, social activism and politics to explore and critique the intersections of information and biotechnologies on women's bodies, lives and work.¹⁷

The survival kit revealed in *Dear Rosa* draws reference to a wide range of contemporary 'purse' survival kits available online. Each kit gathers small quantities of notions and potions in handy

pocket-like pouches to assist in bodily maintenance and day-to-day living when travelling away from home.¹⁸ In sharp contrast, a collection of survival kits such as *Positive Women's Survival Kit*, New Zealand's *Grab 'n' Carry Emergency Survival Pack*, rape kits and evidence collection procedures, and *dvSurvival Kit* underscores a more serious sense of survival.¹⁹ In these examples and more, survival is defined as living in spite of despair, trauma or against the odds, which shifts the emphasis from products that pamper to those that sustain life in the face of strife or inequity. *Dear Rosa* introduces a survival kit situated between these two types, one that is filled with unassuming items gleaned from the everyday and yet, items that enable one to grapple with life challenges and at the same time, leap into the future prepared to support one's self, demonstrate thriftiness, respect and generosity, and come to the aid of others in need.

Using the conventions and sentiment associated with personal letter writing, *Dear Rosa* is an exercise in ficto-criticism, a hybrid mode of writing that transgresses the boundaries between creative and critical visual and textual expression. Considered as 'a highly political strategy of literary invention' with the capacity to 'interrogate the violence of representation', ficto-critical practice pries open a space to unlearn the authority of scholarly academic writing and privilege a process that develops an ethical relationship with the other.²⁰ In this case, it is not important that *Dear Rosa* deviates from or fabricates truth, but instead, that it generates tensions between fact and fiction, 'proper' discourse and experimental prose, and textual exposition and imagery driven by analogy. This begs a practice of reading between the lines, ultimately suspending practices that provide uncontested evidence; *Dear Rosa* leaves conjecture and interpretation up to the reader.

Dear Rosa invokes a polemical tone adapted from artist and academic Laura Kipnis as a means of stirring up controversy: 'A polemic is designed to be the prose equivalent of a small explosive device placed under your E-Z-Boy lounge: It won't injure you (well not severely); it's just supposed to shake things up and rattle a few convictions. Be advised: polemics aren't measured; they don't tell "both sides of the story". They overstate the case. They toss out provocations and occasionally mockery, usually because they are arguing against something so entrenched it's the only way to even make a dent in the usual story.'²¹ Where most polemical writing uses hostile language to shape a dispute or debate, *Dear Rosa* stirs its argument via a softer and more persuasive rhetoric most notably recognised in personal letter writing, a mode of writing that establishes familiarity, breeds increased levels of intimacy and urges the reader to take some form of action. In like manner, a box of matches harbours the potential for violent destruction as well as the promise of warmth. A mere glimpse of the matchbox's interior contents begs questions about the viability of matches – what they can do, if they are dry, who might use them and if matches inhabit the box at all. The matchbox is shown to be inhabited by a clump of string, a length of thread, a ball of beeswax, a needle, a BAND-AID, a coil of wire, an elastic band, a piece of soap, a paper clip, a few coarse granules of salt, a lock of hair plus a coin and a shim, now missing. Hence, speculation is raised on what such ordinary materials can do – what danger or risk they can activate and what situations they can ameliorate.

NOTES

1. M. F. Crass Jr, "A History of the Match Industry," *Journal of Chemical Education* 18, no. 2 (1941): 428-431.
2. John Trasker, "New Zealand Matches and Matchboxes," *Ohinemuri Journal*, accessed February 27, 2014, <http://www.ohinemuri.org.nz/journal/n.37.htm>
3. In the 1960s, British architect Sir Basil Spence sketched out his startling Beehive for housing the executive and Bellamy's. The name came from a box of Beehive brand matches he had been given, and despite official misgivings, it stuck. Bryant and May, the makers of the matches, later made special Beehive matchboxes for sale to MPs. Accessed February 27, 2014, <http://www.eventfinder.co.nz/venue/parliament-buildings-wellington>
4. "The Politics of Honey Bees," *JOURNYS: Journals of Youths in Science*, Sun, 2013-03-31 00:00, accessed February 27, 2014, <http://www.jourmys.org/articles/politics-honey-bees>
5. 'Honey bees enlist a caste system to accomplish the tasks that ensure survival of the colony. Each member of the community fulfils a need that serves the group. Tens of thousands of worker bees, all females, assume responsibility for feeding, cleaning, nursing, and defending the group. Male drones live only to mate with the queen, who is the only fertile female in the colony. The queen need not lift a wing, as workers tend to her every need.' "Ants, Bees, & Wasps (Order Hymenoptera)," accessed February 27, 2014, <http://insects.about.com/od/antsbeeswasps/p/honeybeesociety.htm>
6. California Digital Newspaper Collection, "How the Lucifer Match was Invented," Pacific Rural Press, Vol 45, Number 1, January 7, 1893, accessed July 20, 2014, <http://cdnc.ucr.edu/cgi-bin/cdnc?a=d&d=PRP18930107.2.27.1>
7. Copper Development Association, "Copper and Society," accessed February 28, 2014, <http://www.copperalliance.org.uk/copper-and-society/health>
8. Edwin A. Abbott, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (New York: Dover Publications, 1992).
9. See Jane Dunlop, trans., *Francis Ponge: Soap (Le Savon)* (California: Stanford University Press, 1998).
10. "13.3...", accessed July 15, 2014, <http://architecture.woodbury.edu/wuho/?p=91>
11. "Rosa Luxemburg Foundation," accessed July 21, 2014, <http://www.rosalux.de/english/foundation/rosa-luxemburg.html>
12. "BIO: Rosa Parks," accessed July 21, 2014, <http://www.biography.com/people/rosa-parks-9433715>
13. "History: Rosie The Riveter," accessed July 21, 2014, <http://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/rosie-the-riveter>
14. "Jewish Women's Archive," accessed July 21, 2014, <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/schneiderman-rose>
15. "Windows on Art," accessed July 21, 2014, <http://www.finestresullarte.info>
16. "Guerrilla Girls," accessed August 3, 2014, www.guerrillagirls.com
17. "SUBROSA," accessed August 2, 2014, <http://cyberfeminism.net/>
18. For example: https://www.google.co.nz/search?q=%E2%80%98Purse+Survival+Kit%E2%80%99&espv=2&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=FxTUU8T3GIXz8QX_04LYCw&ved=0CCYQsAQ&biw=1297&bih=488
19. Positive Women's Survival Kit: http://www.icw.org/Survival_Kit, After Shake: <http://www.aftershake.co.nz/categories/grab-n-carry-emergency-survival-pack>, Pandora's project: <http://www.pandys.org/articles/rapekit.html>, *dvSurvival Kit*: <http://www.dvguide.com/content.html>
20. Helen Flavall, *Writing Between Two: Australian and Canadian Ficto-criticism* (Perth, Australia: Murdoch University, 2004), 1-3.
21. Laura Kipnis, "Against Love," in *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers*, ed. David Bartholomae (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martins, 2011), 390.

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