Long Paddock

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Liverpool Liverpool: The Skin of Translation

(see also Elizabeth Day's essay 'Liverpool/Liverpool (After the Black)' in the hardcopy section of *Southerly* 71.1)

Two exhibitions titled 'Liverpool/ Liverpool: The Skin of Translation' by Elizabeth Day were shown almost simultaneously in September 2010 at St George's Hall in Liverpool UK and in Liverpool, Australia. This fortuitous synchronicity of Liverpool/Liverpool (the shows overlapped for a month) consolidates the circuit of sending and return that characterises the colonial relation. Indeed, the journey Day and her family made from Lancashire to Hobart when she was 10 years old is the very same trajectory she retraced for her show at St George's Hall.

Further, this doubling or twinning of the name, Liverpool, recalls the tendency for the wholesale transplantation of England's Englishness to its colonies, nomenclature included. From Liverpool to Liverpool, from a great port city of Empire, to an obscure satellite village of the relatively newly established city of Sydney, Australia, and then back again, is, in distance, akin to a journey around the world. Australia, the antipodes, was the farthest flung place in the Empire's imaginary, and yet, more than a hundred years on from Federation, so many of Australia's institutions and traditions are forever England.

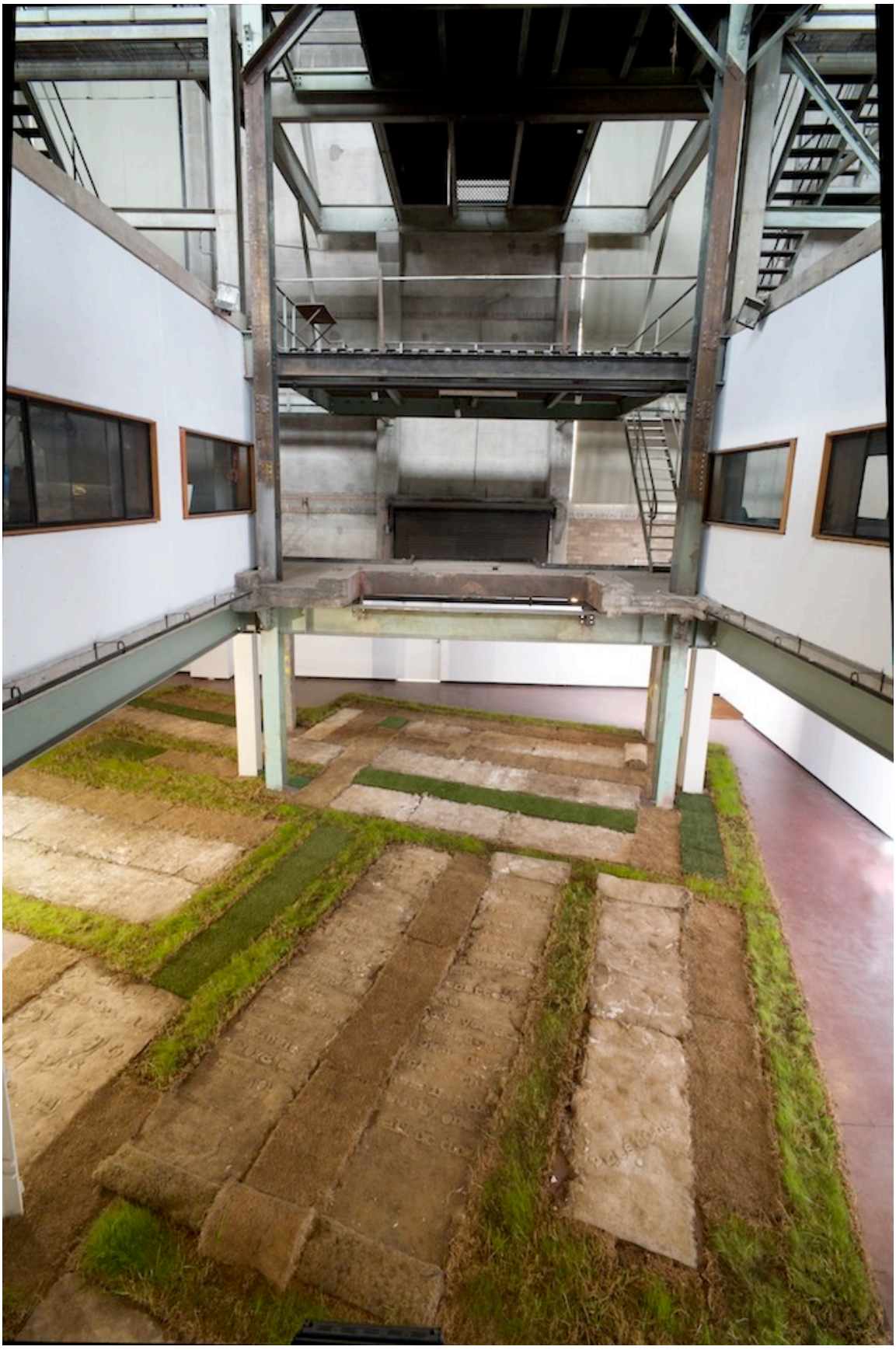
Day has worked extensively with various cultural transplantings, such as the Victorian medievalist revival evident in the neogothic sandstone architecture of many of Australia's public buildings, and the more invisible 'infrastructure' of its laws and institutions of

learning, but the tradition which continues to most mark the cultural connection with Empire is the exportation of the English lawn. Forget the hedgerows which never quite took in a land of vast brown sheep stations in times of drought, and the now feral pests of the rabbit and the fox. The tie to England is sealed in the Australian love of lawn. Synonymous with the idea of Australia as the Lucky Country are suburbs composed of quarter acre blocks and quarter acre lawns.

All over the country botanical gardens, usually Royal Botanical Gardens, are characterised by lavish expanses of green: our colonial heritage, reflective of the motherland, continues to recall England as 'that green and pleasant land'. For a generation of older Australians who established perfectly flat and regularly rolled lawn bowling clubs in every hamlet large enough to field teams for competition, Sir Frances Drake, calmly finishing his game of lawn bowls, before trouncing the Spanish Armada, lives on in the folklore. If the French parks fence off lawn and fiercely police any strayings from the inevitably gravel path (many are not possessed by any lawn at all), Australians, like the British, champion their right to lull in the sun, to stretch out and enjoy the public good of a well-trimmed lawn in state-funded public gardens. Indeed, for Day the Englishness of lawn has become a multiple-valenced symbol in a practice invested in post-colonialism and migration. Lawn and grass are fields apart (excuse the pun). In Australia we might have fields of wheat, but never grass. Grass belongs in a paddock and is often the native stuff fenced in. Lawn signifies differently; often composed of imported seed, it signals cultivated society, and, in period films, an unmistakable Englishness. *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, the film that launched the Australian film industry abroad with accolades at Cannes in 1973, drew a stark contrast between the safe civility of the lawns of an English garden and its English house (complete with swans and geese) and the eerie terrors of the Australian bush. Recently, *The Proposition* bizarrely set civilisation in an English garden in the midst of a shimmering desertscape.

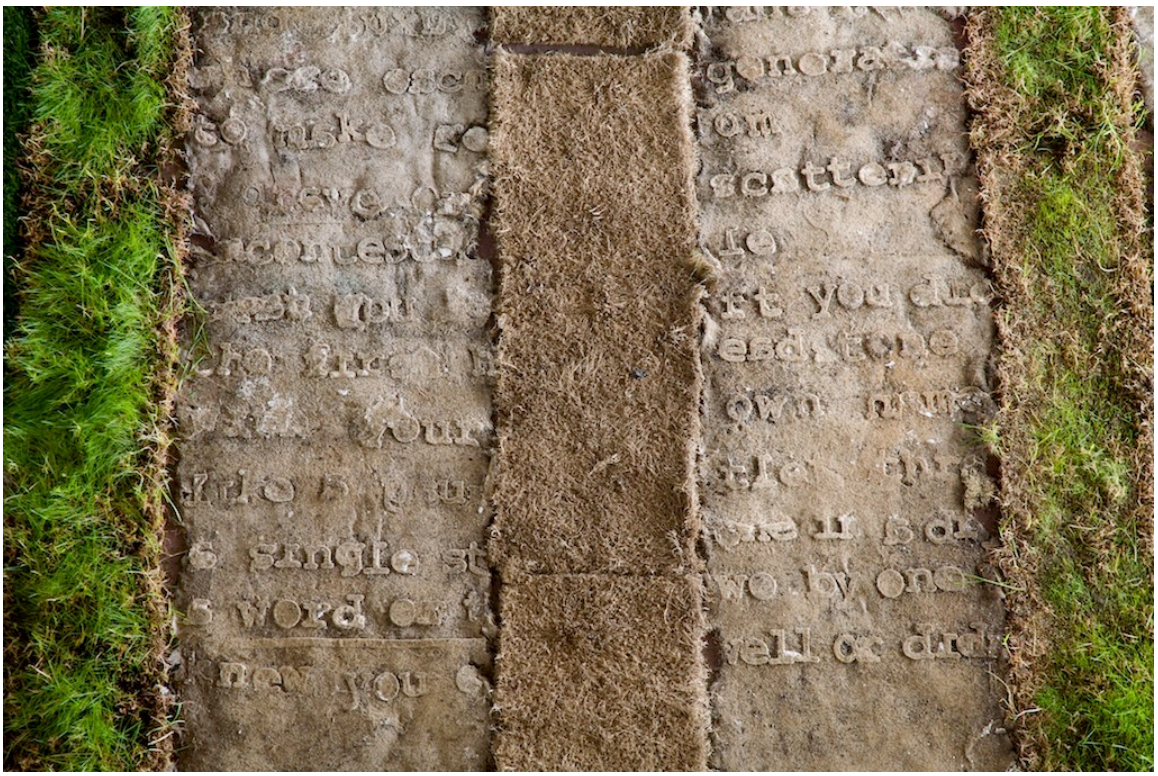
For more than a decade Day has been installing neat grids of manicured lawn in Australia's premier cultural institutions. This inevitably registers a certain Surrealist jolt, or in poststructuralist terms, a Derridean invasion of the inside by the outside,

metaphorically of the invasion of normative consciousness by a repressed 'exterior' or unconscious. Lawn, as doubly coded, as signifying both 'civilised grass' and unconscious 'Nature', invades in its role of Nature, of what belongs outside, exterior to architecture's artifice. The shock of lawn staged in the interior provokes a double analysis of its belonging. No longer ordinary, the everyday stuff that is taken for granted and forgotten (in the analogy with unconscious), 'lawn' extracted, reified, exhibited in the interior of built space, rather than complementing architecture's exterior, starts to signify the very civilising of Nature itself. This is more so in Australia, where this staged invasion of the gallery space bears the imprint of British colonisation. 'Lawn' signifies a certain rootedness, literally of taking root, anchoring the edifices of colonial architecture and colonial rule. Indeed, more so that the colonial public buildings which now sit, somewhat awkwardly, as historical remainder in modernist glass and steel Australia, a remnant of the colonial past, the humble garden lawn spreads its anti-hierarchical, rhizomatic roots throughout the culture, stubbornly, resistantly English. It has never signalled Empire like the monuments to Queen Victoria which still proudly grace the capitals, but is symbolic rather of Australia's unconscious relationship to Englishness, part of a set of habits or of protocols, much like Said's notion of Orientalism.



Until we see it exhibited, *unheimlich*, made strange or uncanny on art gallery floor, Australians don't even register its foreignness. Lawn is just lawn, pervasive, everywhere a habit, unconsciously part of our image of ourselves. At the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympics we proudly choreographed rows of gardeners pushing the iconic Australian invention of the Victor lawn mower. No-one had to roll out the lawn: it was already there, a benign presence, so deep in our national unconscious, as cricket as cricket, that we fail register it, much less its Englishness - unless reminded, as in the practice of Elizabeth Day.

Here, for the Casula show, Day has invited four migrant writers of various origins– Sarah Day (her sister), Nasrin Mathouchi, Catherine Rey and Ouyang Yu – to subvert and further overwrite this Englishness in the very fabric of garden lawn. Using a system of plaster casts, Day has grown turf over the plaster letters of their texts in a process which is literally a form of underground typesetting.



When the time is ripe, she carefully cuts the turf in a 'peel' and unfolds the text inscribed into the tight texture of the impacted roots on the plaster casts on the underside. What emerges is a kind of underground mirror writing of roots, analogous to Freud's description of the unconscious as a kind of trace left in the wax tablet after the top sheet has been removed on his 'mystic writing pad'. On the surface the lawn signifies a certain conscious regularity, an average everydayness of 'idle talk' (to borrow Heidegger's terms), of community, of pleasant associations. The lawn is gregarious, part of the street, on display, a zone of contact, of daily greetings and the Aussie barbeque, whereas the underside is what occults, hidden from view, like unconscious thoughts, in this instance the multiple voices of multiculturalism that are now woven through the very roots of the fabric of Australian society.

Day's text casts encourage us to envision a babble of migrant tongues overwriting the mononculture of English lawn with cultural difference . However, this is only to a depth some centimetres deep - of relative shallowness - given that the 200 years or so of European colonisation amount to little in geological terms or the mythic time of indigenous Dreaming. Installed in the gallery, the lawn castings sit adjacent to the Aboriginal floor, a floor spatially and pictorially symbolic of the traditional owners in Casula Powerhouse, Australia. With the signs of occidental ancient history elsewhere, overseas, Day asks how do we relate to the ancient history 40,000 years old beneath our feet? In a geological timeframe the lawn dwellers increasingly come across as interlopers, their neat grids of subdivisions and town planning a poor substitute for the majesty of 'country' and singing the landscape in songlines.

European Lack: *Desire for Ancient History*

Indeed, Day registers this European lack of connection to the land and a longing for lost ancient ties of the occidental past, which one, as a migrant can not have in Australia. In 2004 Day produced a work called *Desire for Ancient History* which reflected on the genealogy of colonial prisons in medieval and ancient architecture. Her focus on the prison condensed the inherent brutality in colonial architecture, standing in as synecdoche for the total colonial system. Our 19th century British heritage was not only brutal but

profoundly at odds with indigenous life. As a prison educator Day well knows that the damage is perpetuated.

Day's Liverpool UK work concurrently on exhibition at St Georges Hall, Liverpool UK is titled *The Law is Not Always Just* continues the contemplation of the transposing of British law onto Australia. St Georges Hall, formerly a law court and prison from where convicts were sent to Australia, is a large public building, now a museum and function centre.

In her DVD performance, the maxim, 'the law is not always just' was grown into plaster casts on the underside of the strip of lawn, in the very 'roots' of Australian-grown English lawn. In the video we witness the 'peel' as the lawn, symbolic of Englishness for Australia, is pulled back to reveal a text reflexive of the questionable justice of transportation for trivial crimes. Coincidentally Day has a forebear, a judge at St Georges known for his severe punishments. 'Justice' as a term to be interrogated goes back and forth and is symbolically 'returned' to the homeland in DVD form. Further, the text - 'the law is not always just' -- is, in its direct connection with the soil, emblematic of the grave, recalling the many deaths that resulted from deportation to Australia.

The lawn-grown texts in circulation between Liverpool and Liverpool, between the UK and Australia, connect England with the antipodes, the most far-flung reaches of the former empire. In our contemporary times it is only just that England's just injustices be symbolically returned to England. Reflective of shifts in values in contemporary Australia, the Australian texts celebrate cultural difference as the flipside of former monocultural allegiance. Further, for Day, migration is intimately caught up in not only transplanting but translating, in writing - as translation rather than replication - through which we translate ourselves from one thing into another, into multivalent cultural identities.