

C O N T E N T S

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Page 1 image:
Otago Bay hot-house Tasmania – Elizabeth Day working on a cast for
View from the Sixty Third Floor, exhibited at CAST, Hobart, in 2001.
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RADIALS AND RADICLES: THE RHIZOMATIC PRACTICE OF ELIZABETH DAY

Everything around us was cold, damp, dark and gloomy. Hideous fungi, of all varieties of shape and colour, clustered beneath the wet, half-charred logs, or inside the hollow trees, as if they knew themselves to be unfit to meet the light of day, or even the twilight of the forest, so disgusting were they, in their livid, bloated, venomous-looking swarms.

So wrote colonial diarist Louisa Meredith, describing the fungi she came upon during a trip in the Deloraine area not far from Longford in the northern midlands of Tasmania some time in the 1840s. The ambivalence produced by Meredith's wonderful description in which the beauty of her writing brings to vivid life the fungal forms that fill her with horror, recalls the intense sensation produced by Elizabeth Day's Risdon Cove fungi, a grouping of dark mushrooms whose knitted woollen flesh is mottled with dry grass the colour of straw and flecks of livid red like eruptions of bruising or outbreaks of eczema. Day's fungi are horribly beautiful, contradictory and complex, like the place for which they are named: Risdon Cove, near Hobart, was the site of an 1804 massacre of a group of Aboriginal people by British soldiers who seem to have fired on them thinking – wrongly – that the new British settlement there was under attack. Day's school bus route took her past this scenic but unsettling and unquiet spot every day of her adolescence in Tasmania. In it past and present collide and compact. One can't be separated from the other. As novelist Chloe Hooper writes through one of her characters in succinct summation:

Left: *Small Cosmos*, 2008 (detail)

Here, just 150 years ago, you could be sentenced to death for stealing a sheep... It was hard to believe that my grandparents' grandparents were in the crowd watching [the execution]. My grandparents' generation certainly didn't speak of it: they were still touched by the stain. My parents' generation didn't speak of it because they had not been told. And at school my classmates and I didn't find this history the slightest bit related to us; even if it was, we didn't really care. Some of my friends at university got paid to welcome international visitors to the airport wearing convict costumes. We thought the joke was on the tourists (85).

Day's *Risdon Cove Mushrooms* knit together in impossible thickets two materials. Wool, of which there could be no greater symbol of colonisation of Trouwunna (one of the Aboriginal names for what the British then called Van Diemen's Land) is one. Grasses from around the area of Risdon Cove, recalling the kinds of grasses that indigenous women wove into an astonishing array of baskets and other artefacts are the other. The art of grass weaving is now being reclaimed, revived and turned to powerful expressions of culture in the (very different) work of contemporary indigenous artists like Vicky West or Julie Gough. Day's work references and implicitly acknowledges theirs, and seems to want to open a dialogue with it, an intercultural exchange between women. For in England as in Trouwunna, the making of textiles, knitting and weaving, were traditionally women's arts, even as the industrial revolution in England placed them under the control of the (male) capitalists who owned and ran the mills which employed women at pitiful rates and in appalling conditions. While dialogue between Tasmanian Aboriginal and anglo women in the present is inevitably difficult, given the history of violent colonisation and the complete dispossession of the Palawa (Aboriginal people), the mycelial networks of communication and distribution that support the fruiting of mushrooms are known to be capable of absorbing toxins from the environment. This is the gesture the work proffers as it turns – not just towards a generalised Aboriginal other – but to call to and recognise the work particular women, survivors of the colonial wars which continue, albeit by other means, to this day, and whose works renew their claim to country.

The contemporary Western art world still tends – despite numerous feminist reclamations of knitting and other handicrafts as political interventions into the (still) male-dominated art system – to operate a de facto distinction between art and craft in which craft is treated as art's non-conceptual and constitutive other. Like the work of so many contemporary Aboriginal artists, Day's work doesn't so much challenge this distinction as simply moves beyond it. Her mushrooms spring up in various locations as the visible fruitings of a rhizomatic practice in which networks of association and practices of various kinds of weaving connect her sculptural installations, her two-dimensional works, her feminist community engagements and her fictocritical writing. Mushrooms are only the visible manifestations of the work of mycelia, for although the fruiting bodies of fungi come in multifarious forms and a vast array of colours, it seems their formation isn't strictly necessary for the spreading of the fungal spores. These spores take to the air to travel huge distances according to the unpredictable itineraries determined by local conditions. When they eventually land in new territory they can hide out, lying dormant for long periods of time

until conditions are right for their eruption into new manifestations. Like the mushroom, whose external structure 'is not determined by its internal anatomy' (Komárek 2002:121), Day's works too are 'free-style creations' springing up unpredictably wherever conditions are right, taking different forms according to the demands generated by the situation and site of the work.

In *Myco Logic* (produced for the *Cementa15* arts festival at Kandos NSW) Day instigated and co-ordinated highly skilled local communities of knitters and crafters to make numerous mushrooms in a variety of sizes, shapes and colours of their own design. Other artists also contributed mushrooms made of *papier maché*, wild plastic frills, or in the form of ready made parts of rusted machinery, lamps, or whatever came to hand. Day then installed all these so that they seemed to spring out of the huge mass of mycelium she created from long knotted strips of tape and string. This thick mycelial entanglement (which could never be repeated elsewhere in exactly the same arrangement) seems to suggest the complex processes of communication and cultural translation – as between the local residents remaining in the small town after the closure of the cement works that had been its *raison d'être* and the artists from outside – which are always local and particular and from which community, however temporary, must be produced as a living network.

The process of mycelial germination might sometimes be symbiotic, or it could equally be parasitic. Day's practice makes use of both modes. *The Boronia Garden* (2005) which grew out of her work with women prisoners – mostly migrant and Aboriginal – involved in the art classes she ran in Dillwynia Women's Correctional Centre, was developed over an 18 month-long period. As it evolved, the garden came to act as a host for land rights of a sort, as the women took it over and made it their own. The Islander garden is designed on the pattern of a frangipani and consists of a series of pathways that follow animal tracks to a place the makers described as their 'sacred site' (Day 2013), while a herb garden references the domestic activities of colonial women, often convicts. While more attention is usually paid to the role of imperial botanical gardens in this respect, convict gardens, like the slave gardens of the United States to which Donna Haraway (2015) refers, provided food for communities and also served to preserve biodiversity as they provided habitat for plants, animals, and fungi alike.

In their symbiotic mode, many of Day's works recall the way mycorrhizal fungi attach to the roots of trees, forming what mycologist Paul Stamets calls a 'natural Internet' like a vast neurological network between them. This self-renewing network functions not only as a communication system able to warn of insect attack but also as a distribution system delivering 'carbon, nitrogen and water to trees in need' (Pollan 2013). Day's installation *View from the Sixty Third Floor* (Artspace 2000), in which a hydroponic system which actually formed a rhizome with the city's own circulatory system through which water, power flow, references the experience of her own family's transplantation from Liverpool in the UK to the strange new environment of Tasmania, where they became the island's first hydroponic farmers. On the face of things this is an image of survival and success, of human ingenuity and invention in the face of odds stacked against you. Yet there often seems, in Day's work, to be an ambivalence, a sense of things turned inside out, an

underlying violence in the way the nutrients of the earth can be contained and conscripted to ends not their own. The labour-intensive creation of an artificial environment for the sustenance of life in a gallery space at once cavernous and strangely claustrophobic calls to mind both the particular kind of hyper-alertness required by migration to a strange place in which even the smallest of everyday gestures and routines must be relearned, and the carceral history of Tasmania itself. This history is everywhere present even today, in the material manifestations of the remnants of sites of convict imprisonment like Port Arthur or the Ross Female Factory, as well as more recent ruins like those of the Royal Derwent Hospital, an asylum where mental patients suffering depression or schizophrenia, geriatric patients with dementia and the criminally insane were all warehoused together, and which wasn't closed until 2001. It is also present in the archaeology of family feelings of shame, where particular patterns of feeling persist even when knowledge of the past has been deliberately disappeared or perhaps simply forgotten. The half-life of shame is a long one, while its inception might lie in any number of causes: in what, for example, was until very recently still called 'the convict stain', but also in the shame of alcoholism, illiteracy and poverty, single parenthood, illegitimacy or madness.

In Day's work the image of the life-giving mycelial network lifework inevitably recalls its dark verso: the image of the infernal machine that was the system of colonial expansion of empire, fed by the forced transportation of slaves and convicts around the world to labour in the colonies. This was a machinery in constant motion, whose unstoppable gears continue to grind even as the machine itself updates its components and takes on the increasingly abstract form characteristic of contemporary capitalism. From the Industrial Revolution which saw the movement of people in England from the countryside into the cities, to the European exploration and merciless exploitation of the 'new world', and beyond to the massive migrations of people displaced first by World War II and now again by wars in the Balkans, Rwanda, Sudan, South Sudan, Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, populations now flow from place to place around the world. Movement itself has come to characterise the contemporary world, and whether chosen or forced, it has become a way of life. Against these flows, yet also part of the turbulence producing them, 'settling' as a form of occupation of land and colonisation of worlds implies the need on the part of newcomers to put down their roots deep into the sometimes unforgiving soil of places not one's own.

Such transplanted roots always retain a memory of place. *Of the Earth* (2005-08), a work composed of 15 separate segments or panels, each framed with rusted steel, casts in earth the names of places from which various migrant groups in Australia originally came, including Wigan in the north of England, which Day's family left in 1963 when she was 10 years old. These place names, signs and sites of memory, often comprised unexpected points of departure. Appearing two by two in odd couplings (Amman and Sao Paulo, for example), they suggest both the turbulence of the flow that have thrown them together and the possibility that new proximities will generate new relations and new connections. If symbiogenesis is sometimes imaged as a series of 'forbidden couplings' (Margulis and Sagan), and as is always the case with such couplings, it's not clear which partner has domesticated the other. And in any case, since the works are bifurcated by a cut in the earth

between the names, there can be no question of total takeover of one by the other. That cut seems to separate the places, holding the memories of the lives they once contained apart, even as the heavy frame binds the frozen names together in an unnatural union in the present. Looked at this way, the letters composing the names seem to have the block solidity of tombstones, memorialising a past to which there is no longer any access.

Meanwhile the compacted mass of very fine roots appears like a filigree of interconnected laceworks through soil which has become dry and sandy, compounding any too simple or too familiar conceptual opposition between roots and rhizomes. If the need for roots, for attaching physically and emotionally to the earth is a deeply felt and powerful urge, the need for the rhizomatic support system connecting body to body in a sociality binding human beings with plants and other animals is equally real. Day's own family were transplanted rather than transported to Tasmania, but her work seems to set up an emotional resonance that echoes between these otherwise very different kinds of deracination. In one of the many uncanny coincidences that have come to spark and drive her work, Day discovered that among her ancestors was a judge who may well have sentenced others to transportation to Australia, while in one of those twists in inter-generational transmission, she herself has worked for many years as an artist in the penal systems of Tasmania and New South Wales.

'The law is not always just' reads one of Day's grass works, grown in reverse so that when it is peeled back from its casting tray, it reveals the text in the exposed tangle of roots, soil and seeds – itself suggesting both the complexity of the history of contemporary Australia and the inextricable connectedness of land and belonging. This complexity and connectedness is the underside of lawn, a powerful symbol of English colonisation covering – smothering – the backyards of so many Australian homes, the exterior analogue of the carpet covering the floors inside, and almost as rootless.

In this work too, the text takes the sculptural form of a kind of frozen life in which the vitality that once flowed through these roots systems is stilled or brought to a dead end, evoking the material weight of a life sentence, and with it a kind of death – the end of life in this particular place – a living death, elsewhere. Generating an excess beyond its semantic meaning, the text turns the viewer not simply into a reader, but into a witness to the traumatic affect to which it obliquely refers. Here witnessing means that the materiality of the text directly enters and seizes our bodies: our hands know the feeling of sifting through soil to prize apart roots for planting, our feet know what it is to walk on earth, whether over dirt or grass, feeling the different textures of each between our toes. This is a kind of corporeal knowing of a completely different order from the bureaucratic abstractions of counting and quantifying that formed the logistical support for the English penal system and underlay the mania for paperwork of Governor Arthur's micro-managing colonial administration of Van Diemen's Land with its insistence on the letter of the law – and especially on applying that letter like a brand to the bodies of Aboriginal people, of convicts, and of delinquent women.

Day's work with roots and radicles takes on new dimensions in its mycelial dissemination over distance by way of her creation of a series of 'magic' carpets. These carpets all transplant grasses, seeds and soil from one place to another. From the garden of a worker's

cottage at Port Arthur, Tasmania, to the garden of the stately colonial mansion Werribee Park in Victoria (located next to an Aboriginal corroboree site); from Mark's Park (proximate to Aboriginal rock carvings) at Bondi Beach to Artspace in Woolloomooloo Sydney (an early disembarkation site for the new colony), the carpets seem to have arrived from elsewhere, alighting wherever they can to deliver news of the past, of events and lives that have been actively denied, unconsciously disavowed, or perhaps even simply forgotten. These works made from living components all make manifest the ways in which the present contains and is animated by the past, which continues to live on it.

In one of the works in this series, titled *Liverpool / Liverpool*: the skin of translation, carpets were 'exchanged' (by means of concurrent exhibitions) between Liverpool in the UK (Day's ancestral home and also once a holding dock for slaves en route from Africa to America) and the Casula Powerhouse at Liverpool in New South Wales (on the lands of the Darug, Gandangara and Tharawal peoples and which and is inscribed by their Law, by their care of the land and their culture in it over tens of thousands of years. Liverpool now also hosts a very diverse migrant population). Here Day creates a dialogue between two vastly different places which share a name, and a history in the workings of British colonialism which sent forth soldiers and convicts into a land they wanted to imagine as empty and unowned, a *terra nullius*, on which no human history was inscribed. The 'translation' referred to in the title highlights the uncanny, somehow discordant echoing of the sameness of names in the face of the manifest differences between the places they designate despite their historical connection. The names are both a skin over place (or rather a scar over a wound), and point to the skin in translation, the attempt to familiarise the unfamiliar by transplanting the feeling of home to somewhere which is all too palpably not.

Working in the present in which we are all responsible for what happens from here on in, a present in which all non-indigenous Australians are in some sense boat people, whether we have been here for generations as economic refugees or arrived seeking asylum yesterday, Day solicited words of migrant stories from four of these more recent boat people. She chose her sister, poet Sarah Day, Ouyang Yu (also a poet) and writers Nasrin Mahoutchi, and Catherine Rey as collaborators in a work that writes back to Liverpool, and

by extension to Britain, from the Australian Liverpool place, and by extension, from Australia. The work then is a *fort/da*, a kind of boomerang sent out from one Liverpool to which it returns, having crossed paths with the one sent in the other direction, from the other Liverpool. Both the process by which the work was made, and the resulting work itself, are important here. Addressing ideas of roots, and of belonging to land, and belonging to place, Day cast the words of the writers in plaster. Over this she placed the turf in which the grass was grown so that the text was impressed into it. Imagining the moment when the skin of turf was peeled back by the artist we might feel something of

her desire to repeal the law of the colonisers, the legal and judicial system that wrought such violence on Aboriginal peoples and continues to wreak it on them and on those arriving by boat to seek asylum here. The revealed text is a rewriting of the law, a writing legible in the impacted, entangled mass of roots and growth appearing on the surface of the earth, like the marks on skin that bear witness to belonging — with all the responsibility entailed by that. Day is suggesting, I think, what indigenous people have been saying all along, that the land is a living being, that our roots are in it, and that it is the land's porous skin that breathes us in and out and that, with our roots in so many different pasts, we are all nevertheless now entangled together in the shared present of this place, which must preserve through our making and remaking of it together.

Day's own writing about the work places poverty-stricken Liverpool at the heart of the grass roots politics of the union movement that comprised the class struggle of her father's time (2013). Formed to fight against the general exploitation of workers by the owners of mills, mines and factories, the union movement was successful in the abolition of child labour in the mines, even if it did not fundamentally change the bigger picture of exploitation. The population of Liverpool in New South Wales faces its own forms of disenfranchisement by virtue of its marginal situation as an outpost of Sydney's metropolis, relatively under-resourced and largely unappreciated as the rich cultural repository of different knowledges and traditions it actually is.

This cultural diversity, the result of generations of migration, is an aspect of Australian life in the present that some of Day's earlier works seem to address. Where some of these, like the *Mesh* series of 2007-08, emphasised the multifarious means of keeping the unknown at bay through the use of gridded hi-vis orange plastic that signifies a hazard as it surrounds and barricades the potential pitfalls of construction sites, they also pointed through the interweaving of fabric, fibres, wire, wool, brocades to the complexity of the composition of contemporary Australia, suggesting coherence, something that at least has the potential to pull together into a bigger picture. In *The Unravelling of Form* (2007), unravelled clothing suggests the way everyday life can come apart at the seams for those transplanted into unfamiliar territory: the clothing that was meant to protect the vulnerable body can no longer do so; what might once have been fashionable no longer holds the same meaning: nothing can be taken for granted at the most basic level of living. There is no prospect of the secure sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care — this coming undone is not reversible, familiar shapes are gone and new ones will have to be invented. And yet there is something compelling and seductive about these unravelled threads: their colours call out to the eye and their different textures solicit the touch of the hand. Strangely beautiful as they are in their dishevelment, they nevertheless seem to ask to be reshaped and reused.

Reshaping and remaking are central to the concerns of at least one of Day's ongoing collaborative projects in the present. *The Longford Project* could in many ways be said to be about the making of kin. Pointing to the long history of work feminists have done, often in collaboration with their so-called objects of ethnographic study, in 'unravelling' the supposed natural necessity of ties between sex and gender, race and sex, race and nation, class and race, gender and morphology, sex and reproduction, and reproduction

Of the Earth, 2007 (detail)



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and composing persons', Donna Haraway calls for more of such feminist leadership in 'imagination, theory, and action to unravel the ties of both genealogy and kin, and kin and species' and, borrowing a term from Bruno Latour, to work in compositional mode and in collaboration with the 'earth-bound' to produce what she calls 'multispecies ecojustice' (Haraway 2015). This means moving beyond ancestry and genealogy as forming the horizons of family and care, as of course the LGBTIQ movement has long known. And in Haraway's worlding, it also means a kind of 'kinnovation' (2015) which forms kin even beyond the human.

An ongoing and open-ended collaboration between artists Elizabeth Day, Julie Gough and Noelene Lucas and writer Anna Gibbs, *The Longford Project* grew out of the peculiar coincidence of a number of Day's (mainly) Sydney-based friends having some family connection with the tiny town of Longford, Tasmania (population about 4,500). This coincidence gave Day a striking sense of the possible significance of this tiny place on a tiny island at the southern end of the world, seeming to her to send out a shower of sparks in the form of an extraordinary diaspora to various other points on earth. Coincidence is a source of surprise and delight, and a small source of wonder. It's like the striking of a match that sends out tiny sparks in all directions. Too often dismissed as trivial, coincidence shows its strength in the fact that it can't be undone. But if coincidence can't be reverse engineered, it can be re-engineered into other forms, and by that process, pressed into new meaning. In this respect perhaps to notice it in the way Day does is to make it function as a form of divination of potential worlds to come.

To make this real, the project must first work back through ideas and ideologies of family. Family life is the crucible — or its own little blast site — for our sense of who we are, individually and communally. It is one of the key ways that 'history...works through people and things to produce a force of knowing that makes itself at home in specific skin' (Schlunke 2008). It's this proximity to skin, a point of tangible affect, which is the contact zone of an experimental history that takes the form of a 'poetics of doing' (Noske 2015) both in its work of making (art) and the more directly interventionist work of engaging community. Yet this is emphatically not a 'roots project' in the sense of finding individual identity through a discovery of ancestry. Rather, it is a way of forging a temporary collectivity in the present to make works which are activated by lateral connections between us. It is not so much about the identities of the four collaborators, as about what the larger collectivity of those of Tasmanian ancestry both Aboriginal and European might become, even in the face of a patchy, incomplete, often surmised knowledge of a past which is difficult to reconstruct in any degree of detail from remaining historical records. For although Governor Arthur seems to have been a demon for paperwork and his administration used documentation as a form of control, Longford, situated in the northern Midlands, was in many ways beyond the reach of officialdom.

Research into the history of place cannot replace the daily practice of maintaining memory through living in it, but when research is shared as art-making, it can become conversation, allowing acknowledgement of a shared past, albeit one producing very different situations in the present for different groups of people. Yet it's also the case that the extent of familial interconnection between some of these groups is greater than is

often acknowledged, so this project might provide an occasion for the exploration of connection and what might be required to sustain it. There's something about mushrooms that tends to resist identification, as John Cage well knew. 'The more you know them—about telling, for example a *Spathyema foetide* from a *Collybia platyphylla* — the less sure you feel about identifying them,' he wrote (*For the Birds*). The wager of the project is that in opening up a bigger picture of extended family in the past and in working to turn coincidence into connection in the present, we might make a small affective, empathic, corporeal and imaginative shift towards new ways of collective knowing and being.

The whole of Day's rhizomatic body of work focuses on the potentiality of mycelium, that is, its power to create an open-ended futurity, beyond any specific imaginings. When psychologist Roland Fischer investigated the effects of the mushroom hallucinogen psilocybin he concluded first that it increased the amount of 'primary process' content in work by writers, and eventually that the transformations it induced in the perception of visual space could be 'regarded as an optimisation of information'. If this is in some sense the case in Day's work, the intensity of affect it generates can be understood as form of memory, a work of memorialisation and an opening to new becomings. As Brian Massumi writes, 'A thing felt is fringed by an expanding thought-pool of potential that shades off in all directions' (2011: 61). There is no knowing what it might become and where following it might take us.

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Professor Anna Gibbs

writes across the fields of textual, media and cultural studies focussing on feminism, fictocriticism and affect theory. She often collaborates with visual artists, and is currently working with Elizabeth Day, Julie Gough and Noelene Lucas as a member of The Longford Project, which works with the colonial history of Longford in northern Tasmania to turn coincidences of common ancestry into connection and reconciliation in the present through a collaborative practice in contemporary art.