

C O N T E N T S

Discontinued Narratives: Elizabeth Day
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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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ANNE FINEGAN

R H I Z O M A T I C S A N D M I C R O C I R C U I T S O F P O W E R

In an unmistakably philosophical way, multiple strands of contemporary thinking inform Day's practice. Deconstruction, psychoanalysis, feminism, cross-culturalism and postcolonialism resonate deeply within the work in ways which are never overt but rather expressed through process – deceptively simple craft processes like knitting, for example, or horticulture in the growing of grasses. As in much feminist practice, nature is never far in Day's work. Her actions of stitching or weaving resonate with the way that nature is also a cognate stitcher or weaver, but Day engages in these processes through a rigorous philosophical inflection.

Anti-hegemony

Two major philosophemes could be said to inform Day's practice: an intuitive rhizomatic impulse that overruns or undermines the dominant hegemonic circuits of power (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*), and Foucault's critique of the power structures inherent in architectures of governance. Without dominating or over-determining her processes, these robust philosophical framings inform her engagements with history, with community, with place, and an ongoing discussion with diaspora and colonialism. As such her historical forays into the local are embedded within a philosophical nexus, rather than history *per se*. This is not to suggest that her engagements transpose philosophy, but rather that she works in such a way as to encourage reflection in ways that are philosophical. For those familiar with the writings of these thinkers, there's a resonance with their work as philosophers of systems examining the powerful philosophemes operating as invisible undercurrents within notions of nature, power and governance.

Left: *Myco Logic*, 2016 (detail)

An early work of systems analysis within the general order of being takes the simple activity of knitting. *The Fragility of Goodness* (Conny Dietzschold Sydney, 2004) consisted of an open-ended structure of fine white angora wool knitted into a form of delicate, free form dimensions. Emblematic of chance and randomness, the work paradoxically evolved as the product of the strict repetition of knitting-as-process [knit one, purl two], reminiscent of biological or genetic programming, without, however, evidencing a pattern or blueprint of what it was going to become. Chaos and order struggled within the unfinished form, which, while exhibiting a certain vulnerability, gathered atmospheres and associations, suggestive of the fragility of life itself, the near nothing of a tentative yet sustained beginning, pitted [knitted] against the void.

It would be tempting to interpret this work in Heideggerian terms of becoming, a thing on the verge of thinghood, as it teasingly refuses to reveal its final form. Yet within the context of an overview of Day's practice the work is less about the ontologies of being, gendered or not, than on an underlying experience of systems and growth, on 'knit one purl two' as a system or force within a universe patterned through systems and forces. In this respect *The Fragility of Goodness* resonates with the rhizomatic growth of grasses in Day's work, nature's wild genealogies in conjunction with human engendered processes of order and disorder. Cognate systems operate in the human and natural worlds, as described in the theory of assemblages in Deleuze and Guattari (*A Thousand Plateaus*), less concerned with Heidegger's manifestation of beings, occulted or not, and more with 'what a body can do', how components, living and non-living, active and inert, engage, attract, collude, collide, overrun, overcode. The force inherent in Day's product reflects the output of the knitter-wool assemblage that overruns the gallery walls, the literal growth of knit one purl two, analogous to the way nature and natural growth proceeds until checked.

The title, *The Fragility of Goodness*, teases out ethical presuppositions. The work reminds that we presume so much about goodness and good endeavours. However, what does it mean when the work seems to overrun purpose, to run wild and unchecked, 'goodness' overrun for want of a limit or form? How 'good' is goodness when its incarnation turns rampant? How many 'good things' in the natural world, when transplanted with the best intentions [think agents of biological control], have had disastrous effects? Or 'good' inventions produced unwanted side effects? Day's innocuous, even innocent form, lightly gossamer in baby fine wool, is, in many respects, a reference to the cultural and ethical epitome of unsullied goodness – in the way that newborns are free of moral taint. And yet, even the most innocent of processes can run amok as here on the gallery walls, the product of an unfettered assemblage. The work suggests that goodness, indeed, is fragile, and is senseless when produced, as here, in the abstract, without concern for meaningful engagement in the world's assemblages. By way of a surfeit of production, a surfeit of this product of 'goodness', Day recalls us to the interconnectedness of beings and processes, eliding, by suggestion, the moral universe of human conduct and responsibility for the products of human making.

This deceptively innocent work – all lightness and surface – is ever so delicately a reminder of human production gone mad. As such, in an oblique and modest way, it parallels and gives cause for reflection on capitalism's obsession with growth.

notes from the castle

notes from the castle [Tin Sheds Gallery, 2004] was grander in scale and darker in theme. There are still basic building

blocks of process (literally those of physical architectures), but her target is systems of another order: bureaucracy, power, institutions and incarceration. The delicacy of the knitting yields to the monumental stacking of plain brown cardboard boxes and piles of paper documentation. Cardboard building blocks, standing in as ersatz stone, stack up with blocks of paper files to mimic the architecture of the sandstone institutions of governance, learning and incarceration. Less fragile than the knitting, the emphasis is as equally on process as system. Day is less concerned with replicating the actual physical forms of Australia's sandstone institutions than with exposing their 'castle-like' forms as a bizarre importation that has been grafted onto the Australian landscape.

Australia's 19th century sandstone institutions manifest medieval architectures of power. Constructed in the late 1800s, c1860-80, in Victorian medievalist revival style, they masquerade as Romanticism and charm, whilst simultaneously transplanting five or six hundred years of fortifications and rule to the relatively new colony of Australia. Collectively, the institutions of Pentridge Gaol, National Art School, Sydney University, Long Bay Gaol, and Port Arthur Gaol not only express colonial power and rule, but do so through what Deleuze and Guattari terms a 'politics of segmentarity' (*A Thousand Plateaus*). The castle's massive molar form enforces blocks of symbolic power and formations of striation and separation, rule of law by force of authority from above, centralised, hierarchised and dominating. Further, the medieval segmentarity of molar massing is grafted onto Napoleonic bureaucratic segmentarity. The title, *notes from the castle*, directly references Kafka's nightmarish novel, *The Castle*, in which the protagonist is summoned to the castle dominating the town, to answer to a matter that is never revealed. As he is channelled through the unending striations of the bureaucracy, power is manifested in architectural form. In homage to Kafka, Day is drawing out the links between citizen obedience and the heritage of British colonial relationships of architecture, bureaucracy and power.

A detail from Day's video footage of Port Arthur shows the literal lines of segmentation, manifested as built structure, in the barriers which prevent the prisoners looking sideways at each other in the prison chapel. Blinkered by wooden shutters, their point of view is restricted to regarding the priest and, behind him, the rose window of salvation.

The dominating focus of the installation is the cardboard panopticon, a set of 'rooms' radiating around a central tower stack of boxes. This is Day's most literal reference to the writings of Foucault, who demonstrated how the architecture of Bentham's panopticon is internalised at all levels of bureaucracy and governmentality. A new form of 18th century prison design, the panopticon placed the cells and yards of prisoner in a configuration which faced a central tower such that the prisoner would be under surveillance at all times. The tower itself had shutters such that the prisoner would be unable to detect

whether there was in fact anyone in the tower. The point was that the mere presence of the tower would induce the prisoner to behave as if being watched at all times, even if the tower was empty. As a result the prisoner would internalise the physical relationship of his being to the structure of the architecture and modify his/her behaviour, as if under constant surveillance. Foucault then analysed how this model functioned in the family, in school, in all functions of the state; its citizens act as if under surveillance.

On the walls facing the cardboard and paper stack panopticon, slideshow and video elements documented the various 'castles' of Australian bureaucracy, education and incarceration. On the floor, a patchwork segment of her trademark bleached and unbleached living lawn reproduced the trace or imprint of the castle's molar form. Even so, the wildness of this rhizomatic lawn, or the parts of it throwing out long shoots [grown under hydroponic lights at night], was symptomatic of the elements of resistance from within. In part, Day's video of the Port Arthur excavation reveals European lawn to be an artificial graft, imposed on the indigenous soil (an alien practice to be questioned), but the wildness of the grass, green and living, simultaneously has the countering effect of protesting against the dominant order.

In another corner of this complex and multilayered installation, Day had a cinema-screen sized video of a bonfire blazing emblematically by a lake, as if the elemental processes of nature, fire, water and earth (grass), resist the dominant order's violence against the spirit. Other details included a gob-wall of masticated gum, material remainders or traces of the human element processed by the prison walls. [This relates to Day's earlier series of 'paintings', 'The Spat-Out Ones', and themes of dereliction and abjection.]

Inside the overall topology of the installation, the panopticon 'castle stack' literally embodied the politics of incarceration from within within the broader politics of history, colonisation, and social engineering, with a key component extending to indigenous rights and dispossession. This consisted of documentation of an unrealised project for the aboriginal inmates of Long Bay Gaol: a garden designating the dreaming of the site before it was overlaid by the imposition of the European prison. Ironically, in post-invasion times, prior to the construction of the goal, indigenous Australians had used the site for healing. Caves inside the prison grounds still bear the traces of their use as refuges for those dying and ill from European diseases. This project, like the knitting, returns to the fragility of systems in tension with hegemonic force.

Subversiveness of Grass

Grass is the prosaic stuff of the everyday, in Australia a common denominator of ordinary backyards and tamed suburban dreams. But grass can also be a wanderer, spreader, and stubborn disseminator that resists neat fences and boundary lines, refusing to be quarantined. Elizabeth Day has made use of grass within multiple paradigms as a carrier of codes. In numerous works, humble grass is cannily deployed in the tradition of Derridean deconstruction's 'undedicability', simultaneously evoking, on one hand, the wild card, ready to over-run, and, on the other, the good-mannered imposition of the 'Britishness' of a well-trimmed lawn on Australian colony (lawn, the unnoticed and near-ubiquitous emblem of British colonisation, is much more invidious than bronze statuary and brass plaques).

Day has also devised a technique for working with the wilder underside of grass's rhizomatic roots. To borrow an analogy from Freudian psychoanalysis, consciousness, like the blandness and everydayness of grass, is apparent and evident, taken for granted. However, the flipside the unconscious, is the hidden underside of consciousness that occasionally breaks through. Freud describes the unconscious as a buried repository of knowledge and experience that only reveals itself when the repressive and rational forces of consciousness are caught napping – in dreams, in slips of the tongue and jokes. In his 'Note Upon The Mystic Writing Pad', Freud likens the relationship of the unconscious to the conscious mind in the example of a child's wax writing-pad over which a sheet of cellophane is laid. You write on the cellophane and the imprint of the letters manifests through contact with the dark wax underneath. Peel off the plastic layer and the text disappears; lay the plastic back over the wax and the page is clear for writing to begin afresh. In Freud's analogy the wax underneath holds the overwritten traces of all the words which have been written on the pad, in an analogy to the way the unconscious stores knowledge which we have repressed or forgotten.

Day's technique involves the cultivation of a kind of underground or unconscious writing in the underside of grass – the roots, which like the unconscious are usually hidden or repressed. Growing turf from seeds, the grass is sown into soil into which she has embedded blocks of letters [in mirror writing in the manner of typesetters]. When she peels back the turf, the words appear 'written' right side up in the roots, which she then exhibits. [The works have a strange parchment like texture, with a quasi resemblance to stone-carving, whilst very much retaining the recognisable materiality of roots of grass.]

The material of signification is therefore the roots themselves, with the text the result of Day's occult collusion between nature and the gardener. The matter of the message is the message of the matter. Grass, the irrepressible figure of dissemination in Deleuze and Guattari's fiercely nomadic text, *Rhizome*, has become a partner in propagating messages from the underside.

Not unlike knitting, the grass weaves a substrate which is also a text. Ironically, Day has described how she stumbled upon the technique when she saw turf peeled back from an embossed metal plate in the lawn of Long Bay Gaol. It was as if from this site of incarceration and repression the underside – like Freud's repressed unconscious – had found a way to speak.

Of the Earth

Place names and poetry written in the roots of her seeded grasses form the core of these installations in the series *Of the Earth*. Again, on the model of Deleuze and Guattari's irrepressible rhizome, the grass roots are bearers of repressed or occulted messages – in these specific works addressing diaspora and cultural mapping.

For 'Lucky Country' (Hazelhurst, 2006), Day has produced a series of place names written in relief in underground roots that only make sense when the grass is ripped up, torn out of the earth and exposed, inverse side up. Dispersed across the root web, now right way around, the place names reference the displacements of Sutherland Shire locals across the surface of the earth: Sudan; Somalia; Vietnam; Afghanistan; Serbia; Liverpool; Manchester; Bogotá; Gaza; Amman; El Obeid; Guayquil; Saigon. A roll call for wars, famine, poverty, and the time-tested hopes of plain old good expectations, they signal intermeshed cultural threads – nodes of identity and difference within the local community.

Day is effectively over-coding the regional place/grass/location of Hazelhurst with reminders of the places from which its inhabitants originate. Grass, of the earth, acts as a carrier, recalling connections in a common matrix, in a fusing of the symbolic and material realms in which the population now dwells. Closeness is implicated in this bonding with the earth and a compounding of the signifier in embedded matter. The earth is thus charged with a kind of repository responsibility, bearing the material imprint – the palimpsest – of what remains in memory, of the places left behind.

This acknowledges the tension between migration and rootedness, and the psychic patterning that remains of 'putting down roots' long after one's roots are torn up.

Furthermore, grass is a fitting material through which to negotiate the 'Our Lucky Country' project brief in the context of the history and philosophy behind the Broadhurst bequest. Originally from Manchester (the name appears in palimpsest), the Broadhursts were philanthropists and spiritualists who followed many of Rudolf Steiner's principles. In the business of textiles (another rhizomatic link), they gifted the means of production to their workers, who were often invited to enjoy the gardens of Hazelhurst, where the Broadhursts were keen organic gardeners, and early advocates of the benefits of composting and recycling. In line with their wholistic philosophy, the bequest mandated that the gardens be preserved and complemented by either "a place of culture" or a community facility'.

Adhering to Steiner's belief that 'everything is related to the soil', the garden was crucial to the Broadhurst vision. Hence, Day's project of imbricating the immaterial signifier of the letter in the organic matter of grass, as cultural transmitter, intimately reflects the Broadhurst philosophy of the unity of all spheres of life, specifically as grounded in the relationship with the earth, and as such, pays homage to their passionate spirit of community. One senses they would have approved of Day's cultural mapping in the medium of grass, being that the laying down of the letter(s) underground is analogous to Freud's description of the psyche as laid down in 'the underground' of the unconscious. As President of the Sydney Centre for Psychic Research in the 1950s, Ben Broadhurst certainly knew a thing or two about the unconscious.

An unrealised aspect of Day's 'Lucky Country' project could be described as a symbolically rhizomatic extension of her interest in museology. Local women, representative of the cultural diversity of Hazelhurst, were to bring along a small object of personal importance for museum display. Day explains that, given the museum's historical use of vitrines as institutional sites of cultural validation, the aim was to consolidate the pluralist threads of local identity. Working from the grass roots up, such a practice encourages patterns of emergence – akin to Foucault's autonomous 'self-seeded' microcircuits of power. Therefore, the display of these personal objects interrogates institutional function in relation to community, inverting the top down hegemonic relations of power, and replacing the museum's usual classificatory tree with wild, rhizomatic anti-genealogy of these women's personal possessions.

Liverpool / Liverpool

Returning to themes of incarceration, colonialism and the export of regimes of institutionalised power, this work connects two Liverpools – one in the UK, the other in Sydney, Australia – across the time of centuries, from the Victorian era to the present. As in her earlier work, Day is interested in the personal and the local, as a means of talking back to the hegemony (in this regard, De Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* has much in common with Foucault's ideas of microcircuits of power), and this work engages Day's own family history within the broader matrix of the indigenous and multicultural community of Liverpool, Australia.

The UK Liverpool site was once a place of judgement presided over by Day's great grandfather, the infamously severe Judge Day, who sentenced many to transportation to Australia. Video of *Boronia Garden* (2000 and ongoing), near Liverpool, Australia, gives testament to British hegemony and the export of British penal regimes still in place today in a local Australian women's prison, with indigenous overrepresentation. The garden, implemented by Day in her role as arts co-ordinator and teacher, is a restorative project directed at healing this micro-community. In nearby Casula Powerhouse, also in Liverpool, a large installation of text grown on the underside of her wild, anti-hegemonic grasses displays local poetry and stories written in the roots and sourced from Liverpool's diverse community. In a sense this largely self-organising community has come together in its own local microcircuit of power to give expression to notions of healing and restorative justice. Collectively, Day and her community effectively challenged her ancestor across time and place, reversing the roles and judging the judge in his own court in Liverpool, UK.



Sir John Charles Frederick Siegsimund Day, National Portrait Gallery, London

The Aerial View

Grass and the garden, in their associations with colonialism, have often stood in as metaphors for conquest and cultural imperialism in Day's work, as well as materially signifying a re-planting of the natural environment. Earlier works such as *View from the Sixty Third Floor* (1998) featured a patchwork of bleached and hand-seeded imported grass, astro turf, carpet squares and native grasses. The view, as imaged from on high, reinforced De Certeau's notion of the hegemonic occupation of high places (in 20th century architecture from its sky scrapers) as divorced from community and the local. The mixture of the artificial, the imported/ imposed and the local literally mapped lines of power and occupation onto these aerial landscapes, whilst paradoxically reminding that lives are lived locally on the ground directly underfoot. Hence these works also mapped the microcircuits within the domination of the macro, in a Foucauldian double gesture of simultaneously representing resistance and domination.

Conclusion – from rhizome to mycelia

The rhizomatic is wild, expressive, grasped best at the local, and anti-hierarchical. It operates in assemblages through connections and process, and as such interconnects the abstract and the concrete, the material and immaterial, the real and the idea/I. A constant in her work, often deployed subversively in the cause of institutional and cultural critique, or more positively as a model for microcircuits of local power and resistance, the rhizome is more than a figure, trope or model: it is also a living entity of the earth in alignment with a feminist perspective on nature (thinking feminist 'anti-genealogy' genealogy in the example of earth-body artist Ana Mendieta and feminist philosophers like Irigaray, Clement and Cixous).

While certainly her practice is very open to interpretations along the philosophical lines evoked in this essay my intention wasn't to reduce the work to philosophical premises, but is rather an attempt to articulate the resonances with key ideas and figurations of the zeitgeist. If I have chosen to highlight a certain affinity with core ideas in Foucault, in particular *Discipline and Punishment* and *The Order of Things*, and an even stronger resonance with anti-genealogy in Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, it is because these thinkers engage directly with Day's core themes of power, politics, nature, institutions and systems.

That said, many of these themes play out within colonialism, or post colonialism in the way of coming to terms with the heritage of colonialism's collective damages and impositions; this does so from within a philosophical frame, as could be said of Foucault as a philosopher's historian. However, the feminist side of her practice, deeply connected to body and earth, not only critiques and analyses, but also incorporates the rhizome within a deep connectedness. *Myco Logic* (*Cementa15*, Kandos) engaged a broad collective of community and artists to create a large interconnected work of fungi (knitted, carved, fired, woven) and most importantly, their interconnecting mycelia.

Based on the idea that fungi are a third kingdom, sharing characteristics of flora and fauna, this collaborative mushroom field of all manner of shapes, sizes and interpretations, nestled in an immense matrix of interconnecting threads – an uber-rhizome or assemblage

representative of communication and social cohesion. The third kingdom of fungi not only functioned as a rhizome emblematic of the connection between living beings, mediating between the plant and animal kingdoms, but also paid respectful homage to the power of fungi as a natural detoxifier of the environment, restorative of planetary health. If a new wave of philosophers, the object-orientated ontologists, new materialists and feminist new materialists, are rethinking the materialist and earth-centred philosophies of Deleuze and Co. all the way back through Nietzsche to Spinoza, Day is also a like practitioner of sorts, transitioning from rhizomatics to a thinking with and thinking through the restorative programatics of mycelium.

ANN FINEGAN

Reference

'Mycelia are the neural network of the terrestrial biosphere.'
Luz Grace Terranova on mycology-centred-eco restoration and the mycological research of Paul Stamets (http://realitiesandwich.com/88714/intelligence_mushrooms_environmental_restoration/)

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Liverpool / Liverpool, 2011

