

C O N T E N T S

Discontinued Narratives: Elizabeth Day
Edited by: Nicholas Tsoutus

ISBN 978-0-646-97702-7

First published in Australia in 2017

Published by:
Conny Dietzschold Gallery | Sydney | Cologne | Hong Kong
99 Crown Street, East Sydney, NSW
www.connydietzscholdgallery.com

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Otago Bay hot-house Tasmania – Elizabeth Day working on a cast for
View from the Sixty Third Floor, exhibited at CAST, Hobart, in 2001.
Image: Gordon Harrison Williams

Design: Lynda Warner
Production Assistant: Tracey Diggins
Printer: Bambra Press

Supported by:



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For Alice Hodge

FOREWORD

Elizabeth Day's career spans more than 30 years, but also the more than 17,000 kilometers and over 200 years between Liverpool in the UK and Liverpool, NSW, and between the colonial period of transportation and Australia's contemporary almost-postcolonial present.

Nick Tsoutas opens his interview with Elizabeth by framing her work in relation to migration, the subject of her doctoral thesis, *Discontinued Narratives of Migration*. As Day herself puts this issue, migration locates people as strangers, wherever they are.

From the day I left the United Kingdom at the age of nine, I had a sense of unreality and dreamed I was in a movie, one in which I played the role of the stranger. As many writers have described, a stranger can make no assumptions, and they must continually reinvent themselves. And that edge, that edginess, that necessity, becomes one's life, one where there is no turning back.

This role of stranger defines for me the migrant, living in the in between, between what one has left and where one is, between past and present. This tension is, I believe, the reason for the creativity of many migrants. It comes out of incessant discomfort with what and where one is, with at once unrelenting displacement and irresolvable in betweenness—in a word, homelessness.

Creatively, her work has been at the forefront of developments in feminist art practice, as it has engaged with issues of transportation, colonisation, migration, exile, and adaptation through practices of creating networks and histories: tracing traumas and sketching survivals.

Anna Gibbs contextualises Day's work in a broader context of art practices:

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.

Constructions of mushrooms, fungal fruit, grasses or rhizomes, earthly impressions, these are the quizzical media through which Day interrogates histories and networks of meanings.

For Ann Finegan, Day's work is a form of thinking.

In an unmistakably philosophical way, multiple strands of contemporary thinking inform Day's practice. Deconstruction, psychoanalysis, feminism, cross-culturalism and post-colonialism 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.

Day's 'rigorous philosophical inflection' shifts meanings and histories through the questions she poses, and through the media she explores in pursuing these questions. Fundamentally, Day understands how personal these issues are, through her explorations of her own histories as the entrée into political histories often thought of as broader in scale, as Jacqueline Milner outlines.

Discovering her grandmother's story placed Day and her art practice in a very particular context and honed one of the questions underpinning her artistic explorations: how does one speak of trauma, and of the trauma of silence, without repeating the injury?

In migration, there is a viscerally present sense of rupture: something, someone is always left behind, while all the points of orientation one had previously used to negotiate identity and belonging suddenly disappear. Migration necessarily entails trauma, and often, its positive corollary, the migrant's extraordinary psychic and social efforts to adapt and survive. The migrant must re-construct their life, learn everything anew, continuously suffer estrangement and often indignity among the values and practices of the adopted society, while at the same time looking to the future and investing in the potential for change.

Her work cultivates an alternative ecology founded on the ethics of care and generosity, an ethics that aspires to honour the equivalence of all things, and through that non-hierarchical acceptance, attempts to make amends for injuries both personal and historical.

Elizabeth Day's extraordinary career well merits the attention afforded it here. Read, enjoy, accept a provocation to think and look otherwise.

PETER HUTCHINGS

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Liverpool / Liverpool 2010