

# anzjat

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## Plumb bob lines

Anita Lever *Wesley Private Hospital, Sydney*

Sheridan Linnell *Western Sydney University, Sydney*

Sue Curtis *Goldsmiths College, University of London*

### Plumb bobs in flight

I (Anita) was in transit at Shanghai airport, en route from Sydney to Goldsmiths College in London, when I was called aside by airport security and questioned about my cargo of 15 vintage brass builders' plumb bobs, barrels of string, and metal pulleys, all placed carefully at the base of my luggage. These shapes appeared on the x-ray security as dense, suspicious-looking objects. In an age of terror, heightened anxiety, and distrust of all things different, my steely response went down a practical line: "Oh, they are just tools for building".

To declare that they were, in fact, a pivotal component of an art installation at the International Art Therapy Conference 'Finding spaces, making places'<sup>1</sup> felt, in that moment, too complicated and somewhat less convincing.

With too much at stake to risk provoking increased tension and even confiscation, I felt that a purely utilitarian response, devoid of political or artistic inferences, would provide a clear passage. (After all, these objects are builders' tools, even if my pragmatic response faintly echoed a stereotype about the literal and metaphorical construction of modern China.)

Months earlier in Sydney, in response to an invitation to Sheridan Linnell and me from our Goldsmiths colleagues, Leslie Morris and Jill Westwood, to join them in constructing the major conference art exhibition, I had begun to imagine an installation of builders' plumb bobs and string: an exploration of negative spaces, boundaries, border crossings, and the weight of memories. The need to respond to the ethical call of difference, transience, and displacement – in light of the unprecedented numbers of people crossing land, sea, and borders in

search of refuge and safety – had resonated as strongly with us in Australia as it had with our European colleagues. My father had been a builder, and Sheridan's a stone mason. When I showed Sheridan the first plumb bob, our memories, feelings, ideas, and associations multiplied and our course was set for London.

In that moment in Shanghai it appeared that the plumb bobs' attempt at border crossing was being contested. Then an arbitrary wave of the customs officer's hand offered these objects safe passage to their next destination.

Anita Lever

### plumb lines

*autumn infusion*

*in my tent-shaped studio*

*dripping pearls of tea*

*in an art brochure*

*'tent city' sounds romantic.*

*wake up. smell the shit.*

*dangling from false strings*

*hope has insecure borders*

*fear hits the marked ones*

*the angel merkel*

*at the gate won't keep them out*

*just to get back in*

*asylum seeker*

*on the island that chokes dreams –*

*a plumb bob, hanging*

*cockatoos shriek out*

*on our isle of conviction*

*boat docks and wharf groans*

*you draw something good*

*from hoardings of memory*

*brass, wood, ink and string*

*these lines on a page –  
another way to draw blood  
from an old lead weight*

Sheridan Linnell

## Intersections

Initially we (Anita and Sheridan) joined Jill and Lesley in making the conference art installation because, on opposite sides of the globe, we had all conceptualised, without previous discussion, something very similar. During the months of preparation, we found ourselves responding differently to the initial invitation, focusing on what we might make within a particular frame. Our installation, constructed within the glass foyer of the Richard Hoggart Building, became the counterpoint to the tent city assembled by Jill and Lesley across the college field.

We became intimate with intersecting lines of poetry, ink, and builders' string, sometimes flowing and sometimes pulled taut. We were preoccupied with supporting the large, fragile, yet resilient tent frame (sourced by the wonderful Jill, based on a sketch by Anita), from which we suspended the plumb bobs and all the weight of our personal and cultural histories. We worked physically, aesthetically, emotionally, and philosophically, such that the distinctions between these domains began to blur. 'In-between' and at times unseen voids became the ground that situated the dense objects punctuating the space with their weights, histories, and possibilities.

Both the tent city and the plumb bob installation offered an experiential and aesthetic way to step into the political, social, and personal spaces opened up by the conference, in dedicated workshops and between conference sessions. Within the Richard Hoggett Building, our installation offered a quiet and contained space to delegates for contemplation, movement and artistic responses. Delegates became our collaborating artists. The installation and the various responses to and experiences with it were realised and captured, including the following experience recalled by dance movement psychotherapist Sue Curtis. In a highly personal and poetic account of the interactive 'spaces in

between', Sue eloquently speaks back to the installation and the themes of the conference through her body, her memory, and her embodied knowing.

Anita Lever and Sheridan Linnell

## Dancing in the spaces in between

I stare at the plumb bobs hanging there in their simplicity, unadorned and exposed, dangling from a fragile frame. The sounds around make silence difficult to find... papers unravelling and the scratching of pens – footsteps, conversations, and chatter – they all bombard my senses. Sitting curled up at the side, and small by comparison, I feel suddenly inadequate with materials, to know how to participate in the task of responding through artwork.

But the plumb bobs call to me, sending out a quiet invitation to rest there with them, to feel their touch and to experience the spaces in between. I ask Sheridan if it is alright to respond in movement, and she seems delighted that I will 'dance' with them! A moment of panic seizes me that I might have set up an expectation of whirling movement and dance echoing their verticality and I am suddenly aware of my disability and the splints that encase my lower legs. But my skin wants to know their touch, and so I take off my splints, lie down on my back and quietly slide underneath. At first I wonder if I am intruding in the space and if I should even be there – it will change the space and plumb bobs might swing!

I close my eyes and slowly extend my arm, searching with one finger to touch the tantalising end point of the lowest plumb bob. A minuscule vibration echoes through me with almost imperceptible movement and I find myself smiling at how vast it feels in its smallness and how aware I am of the pumping force of my blood within. That first touch – with its finest, tiniest point – is like Braille, not to be read but to be informed. It imprints my finger and I am changed. It rests on my skin, gently turning and swirling around its axis, balancing precariously and defining a moment's encounter. I sense the rest of my body yield beneath it as my muscles relax and the sounds around fade into the distance.

I am encapsulated in the stillness, cocooned in the space, and humbled by such a simple connection. My skin surrenders to its point and as I stroke its edges I want to cry, remembering years of treatment for cancer that involved being stuck by pointy needles. But this point delicately nestles upon my finger without piercing or invading, as if listening for my cells to initiate. I am filled with warmth and want to find other plumb bobs, so reach with my feet and other arm to search out others to explore. I play with their weight, their texture and coolness, and to listen to their vibratory songs. I am smiling again at the aliveness

of the connections, across my limbs, through my centre – skin to metal – sensing and re-membling the different parts of myself in a sublimely serene and timeless moment.

Plumb bobs! The encounter is deeply embedded and imprinted within my body's memory and I am grateful for the unfolding mystery that continues to reveal itself.

Sue Curtis

## Endnote

1. *Finding spaces, making places: Exploring social and cultural space in contemporary art therapy practice*. Goldsmiths College, University London, 13-16 April 2016.



Clockwise from top left: Figure 1. *Plumb bobs in transit*. Vintage metal plumb bobs, builder's string, wooden box. Figure 2. *Plumb bob in shadow* (diptych), Location – Tunnel, Cockatoo Island, Sydney NSW, during the 2016 Biennale of Sydney. Figure 3. Dance therapist Sue Curtis, Plumb bob installation (diptych). 'Finding spaces, making places', Art Therapy Conference, Richard Hoggart Building Goldsmiths, University of London. All photography by Anita Lever.