

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

The spaces in-between: the emotional geographies of art therapy and place

Sheridan Linnell and Anita Lever

You must put yourself elsewhere.

- Homi Bhabha (in Mitchell 1995)



Figure 1. Photograph of Goldsmiths College sourced and altered (Linnell, 2016)

When we found out that the theme of the 2016 Goldsmiths Art Therapy conference was about place and space, we (Anita and Sheridan) submitted a proposal for a collaborative art installation that would consist of projecting images onto the canvas walls of a large tent. We proposed to ask conference delegates to send us images prior to the conference of culturally and emotionally resonant artworks or photographs that documented remembered and imaginary places and spaces that somehow connected with art therapy, including from delegates' childhoods.

We wanted to invite other art therapists to join us in exploring inner and outer spaces and in creating a place in-between – a 'third space'/ 'thirdspace' (Bhabha 2004, Soja 1996) – where these memories and imaginings would be responded to through art making. We were initially thrown off balance, and then delighted, when our British colleagues Jill Westwood and Lesley Morris from the Goldsmiths conference collective emailed us to say that they were proposing to build an entire tent city with art therapy students on the College Field. On the basis of the unexpected similarity between Westwood and Morris's proposal and ours, they generously invited us to join them in conceptualising and assembling the major conference art installation.

The need to respond to the ethical call of 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 British colleagues. Given our opposition to Australia's policy of indefinite offshore detention for asylum seekers arriving by boat, we could attune to what had been happening on a much larger scale in Europe.

Having found ourselves in the grip of similar ideas to those of our Goldsmiths colleagues, though coming from opposite sides of the globe, we moved away from our original idea. We decided to play upon the notion of being the upside-down half of this *unintentional* and *serendipitous* quartet of collaborating artists – the negative space to their positive, an 'other' to the main event.

At first we wondered how we might articulate the contours of the negative corridors between the tents, inspired by the modernist sculptures of Eduardo Chillida, who considered that '[b]oundaries are actually the main factor in space, just as the present, another boundary, is the main factor in time'. (O'Connor 2016). Later we began to imagine an installation of builders' plumb bobs, pulleys and string, as an exploration of negative spaces, boundaries, border crossings and the weight of memories.

Displacement, difference, transience and distance continued to emerge as guiding themes of our work – not surprising in the light of our personal histories of migration. Sheridan's ten-pound Pom (slang for English working-class migrant) adolescence on the Mornington Peninsula east of Melbourne (a relatively easy experience given the preferential treatment of British migrants) intersected with Anita's Slovenian heritage and birth in London on route from the Eastern Europe of the mid 1960s to Australia. We came from different histories of migration but with overlapping memories of childhood holidays camping on the fringes of oceans and lakes, clinging to the edges of a vast continent in which we were at once becoming and displaced.

Anita's father had been a builder and Sheridan's was a stonemason. When Anita showed Sheridan the first plumb bob, our memories, feelings, ideas and associations multiplied, and our course was set for London.

Sheridan's story

My English father, who was apprenticed to his father just as my father's son was apprenticed to him, tells a story that slides effortlessly into the Australian mythology of big things. This abrasive yet self-ironic tendency, mostly limited to agricultural produce, seems to have begun in the 1960s at Coff's Harbour on the far north coast of New South Wales, where you can walk into the hollow interior of a giant piece of fruit called The Big Banana.

I like to think that The Big Plumb Bob has more gravity than its garish yellow cousin. A sizeable chunk of granite, it was used to drop a builder's line

through the centre of the interior of what was then one of the tallest buildings in Central London. You will want to know what and where the building is, and when this happened. But in my memory all the detail has dropped away, leaving only a line running plumb through the centre of my father's life, from his birth within sound of Bow Bells to the small white house near the southernmost reaches of mainland Australia, where some days he ails and labours for every breath. A dusty job, masonry, and then there are the cigarette breaks.

As I wait for my plane to London at Sydney airport, my parents text me. "Have a good trip with Plumb Bobs! Love you XX." We say that now, as time narrows to a point of intensity, hovering barely above the ground.

Anita

As a second generation daughter from migrant refugees who escaped from former Yugoslavia to England post WWII, the balance of staying or leaving constantly sways like a pendulum to one side then the other – across time and space. My father's plumb bob and builders' string sat within a well-used toolbox that eventually travelled to Australia. Time created a home here, time left family and friends in a far away place. Space between the two becomes wider, emotional space becomes closer.

In transit at Shanghai airport, en route from Sydney to Goldsmiths College in London, I was called aside by airport security and questioned about my present-day cargo of fifteen vintage brass builder's plumb bobs, barrels of string and metal pulleys placed carefully at the base of my luggage. I did not think that saying they were for a contemporary art installation would get me very far. "Oh" I improvised, ever my father's daughter. "Those are just tools for building".



Figure 2. Vintage metal plumb bobs, string, wooden case. Photo (Lever, 2016)

Experiments in in/determinacy

‘Stepping into the void, opening to possibilities, Straying, going out of bounds, off the beaten path – diverging and touching down again, swerving and returning, not as consecutive moves but as experiments in in/determinacy.’ Karen Barad (2012, p 208)

By the time we installed the fragile tent frame (found second-hand in London by the resourceful Westwood, from a line drawing by Lever), string, pulleys

and plumb bobs, in the Whitehead Building Gallery Space next to College Field at Goldsmiths, our purpose had intensified and our focus had refined, with the density and sharpness of a plumb bob. The path there, though, was by no means linear or predetermined.

We wandered local markets, bid at auctions in the city and mountains, seeking out the objects of our desire – lead, steel and brass, shining or worn, marked with the patina of a long history of finding a true point of balance. Laden with this extraordinary weight of memory and imagination, we worked individually with ink, string, paper, drawings and words. Together, we took these to Cockatoo Island, a site in the middle of Sydney Harbour where the shipbuilding industry, penal and military establishments, living Aboriginal histories, and the Biennale of Sydney overlap and intersect across time. That day the island was saturated with rain and complexities, enabling us to inhabit/imagine a space where momentarily:

‘Everything comes together... subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable...the mind and body... everyday life and unending history.’
(Soja 1996, p 57)

We recorded Sheridan’s haiku series on the shore, huddled under a thin awning in the persistent rain, and suspended Anita’s plumb bobs in the underground passage that convicts and workers had once used to traverse the island. Anita photo-documented and edited it all, creating a presentation of moving images, theory, poetry, drawing, installation and sound that we played at the conference to an audience of our peers, as one entry point into the emergence of the Goldsmiths collaborative installation.

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



Figure 3. Plumb bobs come to Cockatoo Island, NSW, Australia 21 March 2016 Photo montage (Lever, 2016)



Figure 4. Pre-conference collaborative visual documentation (Lever & Linnell 2016)

Our contribution to the conference art installation was, in fact, collaborative long before it left the shores of Sydney. We 'intra-acted' – Karen Barad's (2007) term for interactions that transform the actors themselves, human and non-human – with each other, forming a friendship and aesthetic partnership that has become enduring. Led by objects and materials, as well as by our sorrows and pleasures, our intentions and dreams, this project was at once meandering, purposive, driven, playful and relational.

Theories too were part of this intra-action. Postcolonial theory and theories of place assisted us to locate our project in relation to current and historical politics. This emerged materially, not just in the positive and negative spaces of the tent city, but in minutiae of our preparation. For instance, we painstakingly dyed the builders' string in black tea, a commodity stained with the power of empire (Fig 4). (Strangely, without prior consultation, we found that each of us in our separate studios had used, for this purpose, exactly the same, fairly uncommon brand of 'English' tea from fair trade plantations in Kenya.) Poststructural theory and the new materialism challenged us to question the stability of taken for granted ideas about the human-centred enterprise of art/therapy. The writings of other art therapists, in particular panel speaker Patricia Fenner (2012), contributed significantly to a sense that as art therapists we could focus more widely and more narrowly, in order to change what enters our fields of vision and play.

Rosi Braidotti (2006) reminds us that the affective, affirmative turn in contemporary theory is not served by the random proliferation of loosely rhizomatic methods: we need a qualitative shift into difference, rather than a quantitative multiplication of the same. This is a highly disciplined project, in which:

'A sustainable ethics for a non-unitary subject proposes an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or 'earth' others, by removing the obstacle of self-centred individualism.' (Braidotti 2006, para. 36)

Of course, via its partial antecedents in psychoanalysis, art psychotherapy has long decentred the sovereign, autonomous, conscious subject of individualism, albeit through an appeal to the psychodynamics of lack and loss (Linnell 2010). Our encounter with the new materialism (Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2012) might leave us with a longing for the nuanced depths of the psychoanalytically-inflected, poststructural version of self and other - for Derridean hospitality (Derrida & Defourmantelle 2000) and Butlerian performativity (Butler 1997) – were it not that the radical otherness and generative possibilities of the non-human exert an equally compelling call. ‘Ethicality entails hospitality to the stranger threaded through oneself and though all being and non-being’ (Barad 2012, p 216). A new materialist ethics for art therapy might thereby embrace alterity beyond our selves as human. It is not only the unconscious, but also the non-human within (and without) us, that might enable us to touch otherness and the void.

According to Karen Barad, every *thing* can be alive, and everything that is alive does theory.¹

‘Spinning off in any direction is neither theorizing nor viable; it loses the thread, the touch of entangled beings (be)coming together/apart. All life forms (including inanimate forms of liveliness) do theory. The idea is to do collaborative research, to be in touch, in ways that enable response-ability’ (Barad, 2012, p 208).

We might add that everything that is lively does ‘art’. When Sheridan first recorded her poems on GarageBand, the visual patterning of the sound levels mirrored the shapes of plumb lines and bobs (Fig 4). When Anita dipped the tips of suspended plumb bobs in ink and swung them over paper, they became her collaborating artists, and they drew (Fig 5).

¹ Patricia Fenner’s panel presentation reminds us that every *thing* is some *where*



Figure 5. Plumb lines. Ink on paper, (Anita Lever & plumb bob. 2016)

We (Anita and Sheridan) held these multidirectional threads of responsibility as the shadow of a recent loss fell across our days of making, emerging in the movement of the plumb bobs and in-between our lines of poetry and drawing, becoming 'together/apart' as our memories illuminated the void.

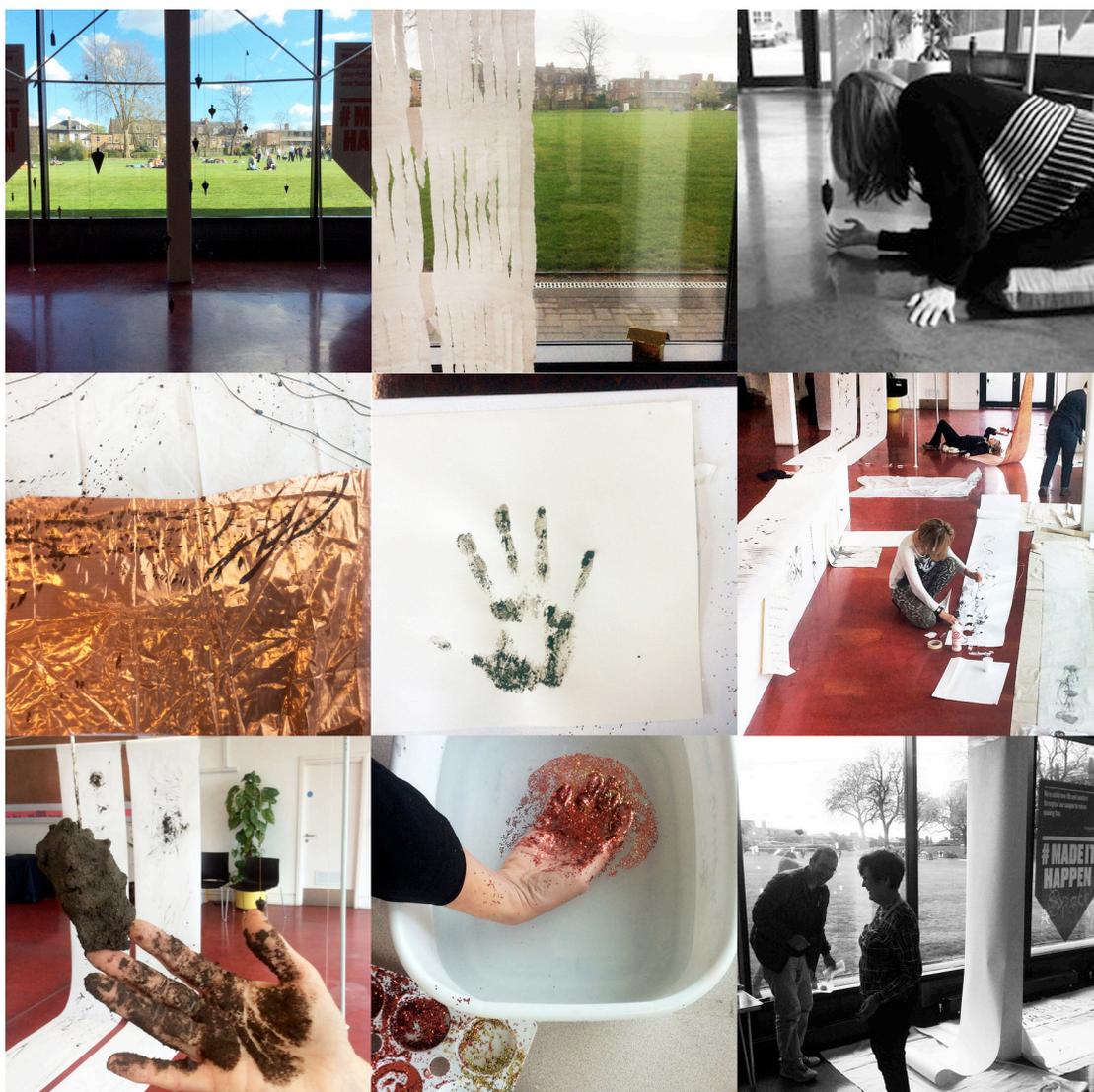


Figure 6. Selection of images taken over the three days of the Art Workshops. Photography (Lever, 2016)

At Goldsmiths

Exchanges of metal, paper, earth and water created an alchemy of elements that both contracted and expanded a sense of place. Space was occupied by memory. A body map traced through the present moment tenderly captured a private journey of pain recalled by the pointy chiseled end of the cold metal plumb bobs.

Nature weaved its way into the sealed off constructed space of the building through the invitation to come in from the cold and wet of the encampment. Earth/mud plumb bobs dangled down from the metal frame, together formed

organically through the tightening of the hands of the maker, leaving contour lines reminiscent of palmistry readings, held in suspension with internal geographies yet unknown. Shavings of protected trees gazed back to the mother tree alongside ghostly handprints remembering past connections through touch and release.

Punctuating the space were offerings of suspended red glitter, a lunch still in its wrapper, copper folds of fabric together with ink soiled beads suggesting possibilities of a bohemian shelter, a foil for concealment and privacy away from the gaze through the transparent glass wall that stood between the encampment and the quietude of the suspended moments within. Black ink dripped uncontrollably through the piercing of a suspended menstrual cup, excess bod(il)y fluid spilling over the edges of thick sheets of paper onto the red floor of the gallery. Threatening to stain. (We mopped up, the strange space becoming momentarily domestic.) On the final day of the art workshops, Dr Robin Tipple (convenor of the conference) gifted the space with a drawing of that legendary creature the Hippogryph, winged and earthed, known as a symbol of transformation and love.

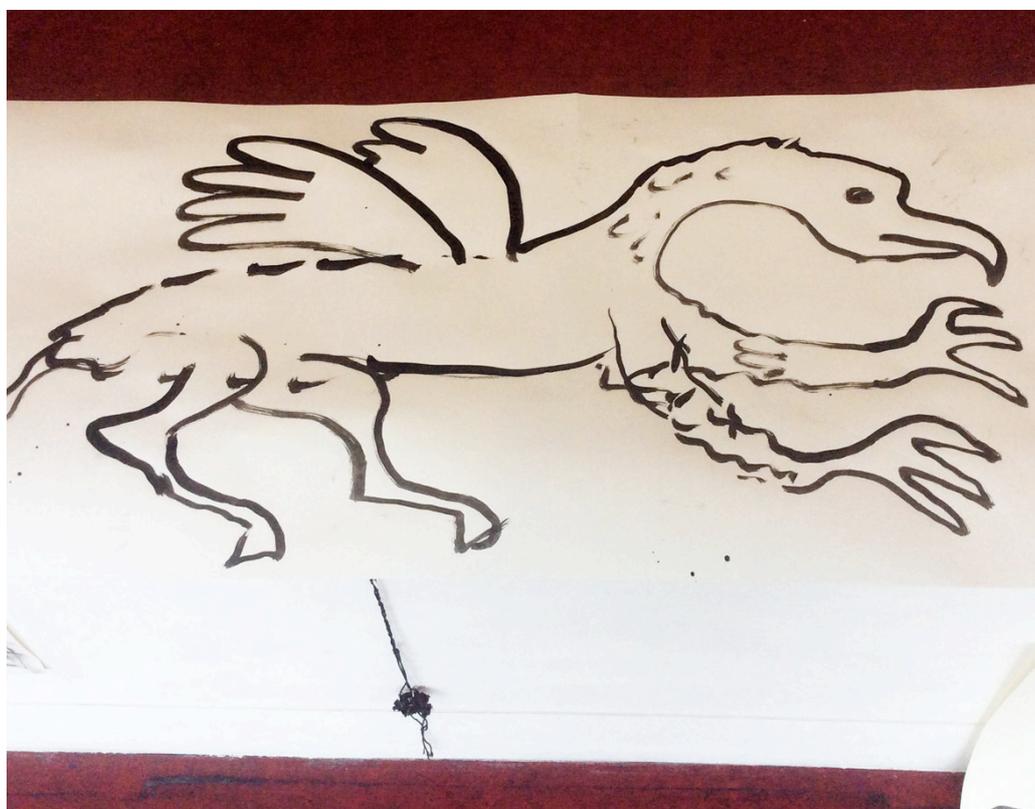


Fig 7 The Hippogryph. Ink on paper (Tipple, 2016)

Further collaborations/observations from the Art Workshops

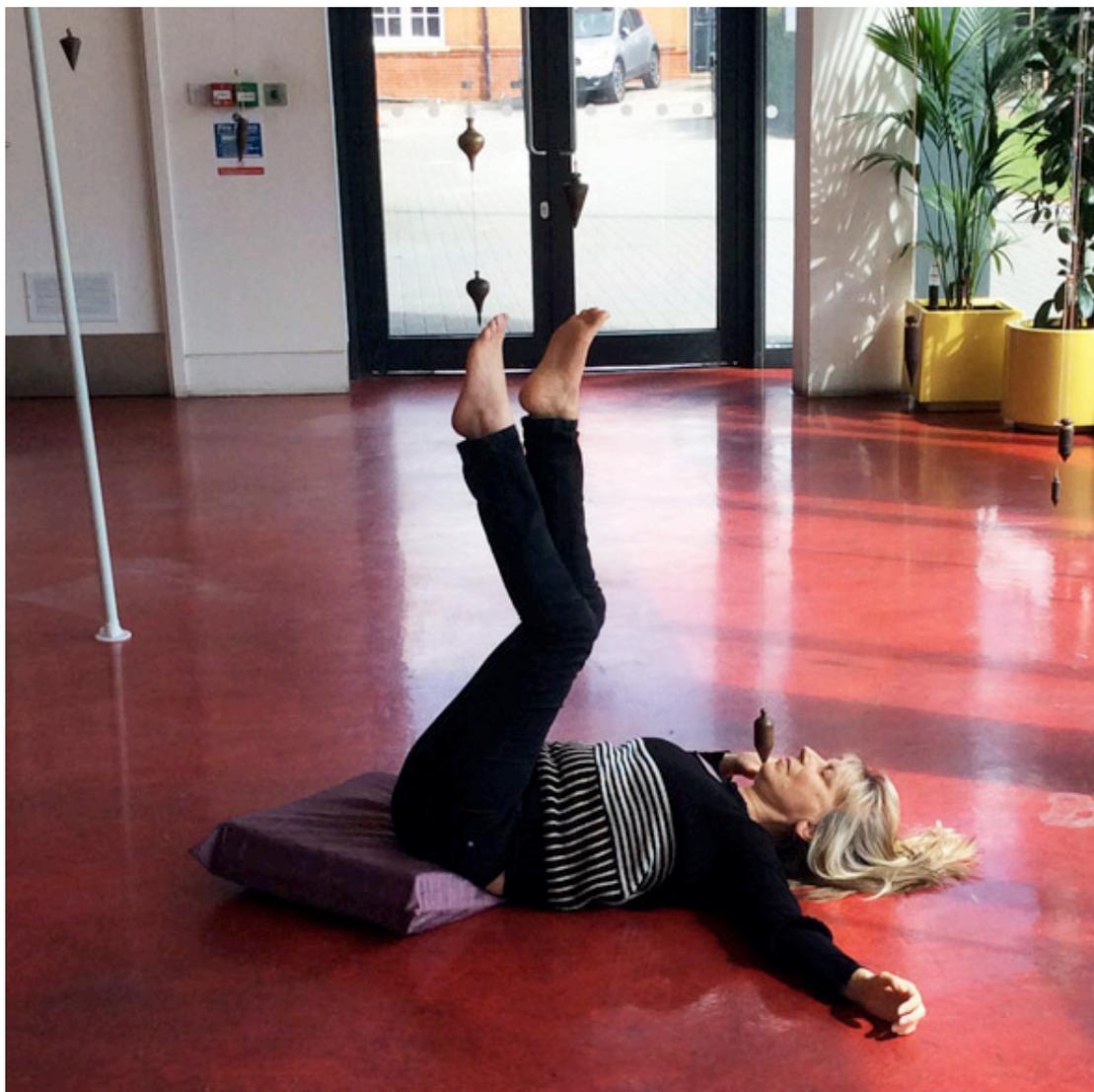


Figure 8. Day 1, Participatory art installation, Sue Curtis, Whitehead Building, plumb bob installation and dance. (Lever, 2016)

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 miniscule 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

Sue Curtis, Movement Dance Psychotherapist.²



Figure 9. Diane Hall-Bruce, paper, plumb bob, string, Photo (Lever, 2016)

The plumb bobs reminded me of my father who used this tool in his work as a painter and decorator. As a child, I was fascinated with this simple object. The rolled wallpaper that he hung paralleled the endless elegant white cartridge made available to us within this workshop. Each offered potential to my imagination.

² Sue Curtis's account of her participation appears in full in Lever, Linnell and Curtis 2016

Poised, I held the string, taught from the weight of the plumb. I dipped the tear shaped lead into the blue-black ink and watched the fluid flow across the paper surface. Without the burden of plan or design, the gravitational swing captured the serenity and tranquility of time. Space became free and far-reaching.

Diane Hall-Bruce, Art Psychotherapist.

Coda

If as Michel Certeau suggests, 'space is a practiced place' (1985:117) then we, Westwood, Morris and all the other collaborating artists at the Goldsmiths conference were engaged in the work of making a third space for art therapy – through focused, serious and playful practices of making, reflecting, thinking, talking and being with ourselves and each other. We did our part by providing a temporary frame for an experiment in space and place, the shape of which we hope to have traced again and extended a little in the lines of this paper.

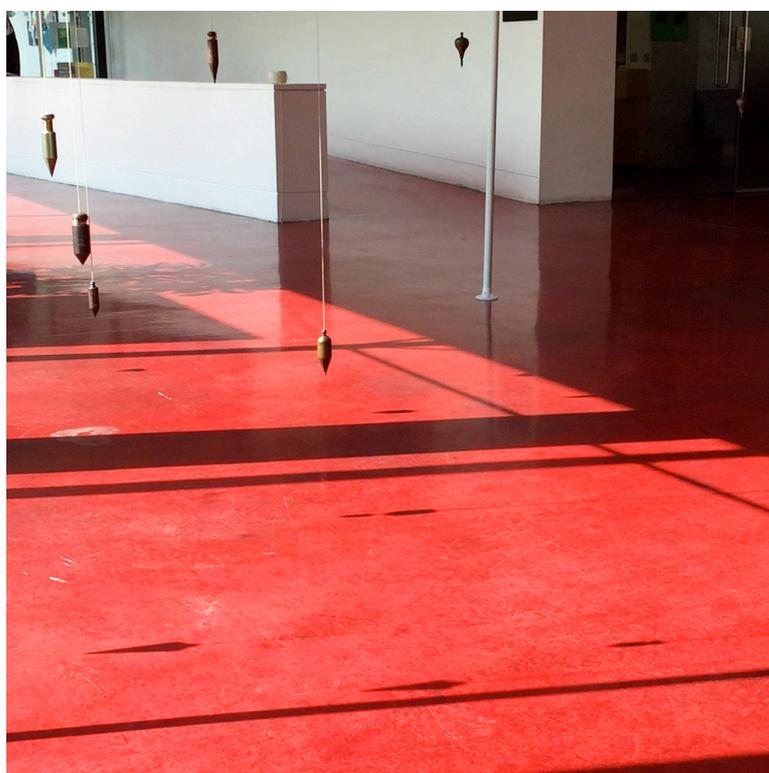


Figure 10. Plumb bobs waiting, Photo (Lever, 2016).

Acknowledgements

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Biographies

Sheridan Linnell, PhD, Western Sydney University, Australia

Sheridan is Associate Professor of Art Therapy at Western Sydney University, where she has a teaching, coordination, and research role. She is currently engaged in research partnerships exploring arts-based mental health recovery with a group of artists with lived experience of mental health issues, and conducting an arts based, narrative enquiry (with Lever) into how difference and diversity shapes arts therapies in the Asia Pacific region. Sheridan is passionate about socially just art therapy for a postcolonial, diverse world.

Anita Lever, MAT, Sydney, Australia

Anita facilitates art therapy groups within mental health (mood disorders and eating disorders) programs. Her own experimental, mixed media work is occasionally exhibited around Sydney. Anita has developed 'Material Matters', a methodology that she has practised in participatory art installations with Anna Moraova and adapted for arts-based research workshops. Anita is also a casual tutor within the Master of Art Therapy degree at Western Sydney University.

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