

# ***SHARING ROOTS: ON PLUMB POLTERGEIST BY AARON ANGELL AND IAN LAW***

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Some exhibitions can feel perfectly spaced and capable of conjoining sparseness with plenitude. In entering Art Exchange to see *Plumb Poltergeist*, the viewer observes a number of works belonging to discrete groups. On the low rectangular plinth close to the door, are three inflatable stools dating from the 1950s with artificial flowers placed in them. When the eye moves to the left it spots a single sheet of painted glass. After that—if we follow around the room—a taller rectangular plinth upon which four ceramic works have been placed. At the back of the exhibition space is a large, fairly minimal painting. And lastly, affixed to the wall that faces the painted glass are four square-framed black-and-white photographs. We have, then, obvious groups determined by particular mediums and themes: a group of photographs; a group of ceramic work; a group of assisted readymades or found objects. While there are two paintings, by dint of curation and approach, these do not form a pair and so remain deeply singular. Once the exhibition has become a bit more familiar to us, it becomes evident that the groups function not as self-contained units, but are ultimately interwoven in a complex manner. The four photographs, for instance, are linked with the large painting close to them. But moreover, they are linked with the inflatable furniture, the ceramics, and the other painting.

Despite whatever the variety of approaches on display might suggest, *Plumb Poltergeist* brings together just two artists: Aaron Angell and Ian Law. It would be misleading to state that this amounts to a group show, as that would imply we have disparate bodies of work brought together under a particular theme (though saying that would not be quite incorrect either). At the level of curatorial description, it might be called a collaborative exhibition—although, doing so would come with certain provisos having to be made. Some of works are clearly made by Law, and others are made by Angell, so it makes sense to claim that the works are individual but the

exhibiting of those works are collaborative. However, other works are also made by the two of them working together. Perhaps one way of clarifying the issue is that collaborative quality of this exhibition partly derives from an admixture of working *together* and working *alongside* one another. It is a dialogical process in which each speaker maintains their own position but discovers a shared ground between them.

In the long run, I want to argue that the shared ground as betokening connection between distinct entities is essential to grasping the exhibition as a whole. But in order to render such a thought as perspicuous as possible, I shall consider aspects of both Angell and Law individually before seeking to highlight key aspects of *Plumb Poltergeist*. Indeed, part of my argument here is that, despite obvious differences between their practices, something resembling “determinate negation” as a system of interrelations—or elective affinities—plays a role in their thinking. Because of this, the collaboration between them succeeds and structures the exhibition’s content.

The issue of determinate negation manifests itself in Angell’s engagement with ceramics. In interviews, a certain degree of ambivalence becomes apparent when discussing the ceramic basis of his works and the Troy Town Pottery. For instance, whilst conversing with Sam Thorne, Angell makes the remark that he is trying “to look at ceramics as almost not ceramics” and that he wishes those seeing the work in a gallery do not immediately exclaim “Oh, it’s ceramics” but rather “it’s sculpture.” Also during the same interview, he mentions Anthea Hamilton producing work at the Pottery and, in relation to an exhibition in New York in which some of the work was shown, he comments it “was really nice, she didn’t even list it as ceramics in this exhibition in New York. It was just stuff that was there; almost a designer’s approach to the material.” How, then, might one explain this ambivalence and evaluate its significance? To ask such a question should not be a preliminary to locating a point at which contradictions are resolved; on the contrary, there is arguably something productive about allowing the terms to remain in a state of disjunction. But how can we make sense of this state of disjunction and justify its presence?

One way into this question would be through something that could be named “anti-ceramics”—or, at least, that is the name I would like to propose here. I borrow the idea in significant part from an interesting essay by Nancy Foote titled *The Anti-Photographers* that was published in *Artforum* in 1976. Discussing the photographic work of artists such as Ed Ruscha, Eleanor Antin, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Jan Dibbets amongst others, she coined the term “anti-photography” in order to capture their staunch resistance against standard conventions of rightness in photography (for example, correct depth of field, sharp focus, composition, proper relation

to subject, etc.) rather than any hatred for the medium as such. As she writes: “Despite its dependence on photography, conceptual art exhibits little *photographic* self-consciousness, setting itself apart from so-called serious photography by a snapshot-like amateurism and nonchalance that would raise the hackles of any earnest professional.”

It is plausible, arguably, to perceive a similar interest in amateurization and deskilling within the loose congregation of works that may fall under the anti-ceramics banner. Of late there seems to have been a virtual resurgence in ceramics within the artworld and one of its apparent characteristics is a certain refusal of, or deconstructive attitudes towards, the various standards attached to the dominant craft tradition. Whilst I would not desire to contend that there is anything like a movement, there does nonetheless appear to be almost a tendency. For instance, one could point to artists like Emma Hart (who exhibited quite naïve ceramic work at the Folkestone Triennial and here in Art Exchange) and Claire Twomey. Or one could think further back and proffer something like Fischili and Weiss’ brilliant and hilarious *Suddenly This Overview*, with its playfully amateur handling of materials and selection of off-kilter subject matter, as an important precursor. In any case, the last decade or so has witnessed a renewed interest in clay that virtually separates ceramics as medium from ceramics as material. As medium, ceramics is both elevated and burdened by its history, especially by that history of craft traditions and studio work that emerges after, and often against, the Industrial Revolution. The focus upon its materiality offers a resistance against the craft tradition that animates its medium status, but notably it requires the existence of that tradition in order to make its resistance pertinent. As both Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger contended, there is a deep etymological history chaining “tradition” to “betrayal,” so that the handing down of tradition is also its ongoing betrayal.

Law’s practice evinces a similar respect for and dependency upon interrelationality, though the logic of determinate negation is less overt or even important here. Put differently, it is less a case of “not this, but that” than of “that and that and that.” We could apprehend this veritable spider’s web of connections by taking Law’s *On Simone Weil Avenue . . .* as an example (the ellipsis are part of the series’ title; I shall remark upon them later). The work consists of a series of photographs mounted onto a replica of a Barbie Dream House floor that has been shifted from a horizontal to vertical orientation. Simone Weil (1909-1943) was a French philosopher and theological thinker who, uprooted by the invasion of France by Nazi forces, was exiled for a short time to Ashford in England, where she died. In the months leading to her death, Weil worked on a report examining how French society can renew itself both politically and spiritually through rediscovery and reassertion of its “roots” once the Nazi regime had been driven back.

This report was published posthumously in 1949 as the book *The Need for Roots*. Subsequently, a non-residential road called Simone Weil Avenue was made in her honour and is the home for a retail park and hotel. Initially, Law was intrigued by the potential disjunction between Weil's social philosophy and the consumerist hive that has appeared under her name.

Using the hotel as his base, Law worked with a local actor and photographer to produce the photographs for *On Simone Weil Avenue . . . .* We see the actor working or perhaps playing with items—a cereal box, candles, netting, eggs—bought from the retail park. Whether this is a form of work or play, there appears to be an overcoming of the alienation between worker and commodity fostered by capitalism. The resultant photographs are affixed upon industrially reproduced copies of Barbie Dream Houses and displayed on the wall. Another set of oppositions therefore come to the fore: what one might assume is the ultimate antithesis of Barbie and Weil (though one might comment that Weil and Barbie share the same dream in some odd sense) as well as the classical horizontal/vertical binary. Once again, these oppositional terms function as a means for thinking interrelation, for thinking the determinate connections between apparently discrete categories. The large painting on the wall depicts, in a loose fashion, a toothbrush and toothpaste tube bought at the retail part and used as one of the props by the actor (and drawn on the egg). It reproduces on large scale the actor's original egg decoration; the brown paint used matches the brown packaging that the Barbie Dream House was mailed from the USA in.

Besides Weil's book, the reference to roots may also bring to mind the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and their theorization of the "rhizome"—especially inasmuch as their thinking in this area has a considerable influence in art over the last two decades. Such a thought, intended by them as a means for capturing a certain lateral interrelationality amid concepts, is not inappropriate in this context of *Plumb Poltergeist* but needs to be revised or reconfigured before it possesses any interpretative force.

Here we might start from the tree—the tree, with its roots, as a metaphor; the picture of tree that was in many respects the light-bulb moment, or seed, that initiated the exhibition; and finally the various trees, both depicted and semi-visible, within the works of the exhibition itself. In order to be clear, it is helpful to begin with the second tree but proceeding onto the first and third in this listing. Looking for a preliminary starting point for the exhibition, Angell wandered around campus and stepped into the *Something Fierce* exhibition in the Hexagon that celebrates the 50th anniversary of the University of Essex. Within that exhibition, on the upper floor, was a recreation of a student bedroom with the kind of paraphernalia such places might have had in

the 1960s. His eye was caught by a poster reproducing Richard Doyle's *The Enchanted Tree*, a somewhat kitschy painting depicting fairies playing around the gnarled base of a tree. In telling Law about the poster, it turned out that Law had been reading Weil's *The Need for Roots* and considering a project relate to her death in Ashford. And so a way into the exhibition was found

This happy coincidence, however, is arguably made all the more concrete by the tree serving as a felicitous metaphor (the first item on my list above). While many plants are indeed rooted, it is worthwhile tracking the possible metaphorical value of the tree here rather than settling simply for the rhizome. For example, we can work up from the network of roots below the soil and follow up the trunk, eventually reaching another network of branches that touch the sky around them. "Branching out" is a nice turn of phrase to have in mind, suggesting the divergent paths that stem from a seemingly single source. The networks formed by such an action moreover are not static, but are simultaneously integrated with and responsive to their ever-changing environs (the branches engage the air and the roots the soil) and in a on-going process of transformation (the tree grows, reconfiguring its form as it does). Perhaps finally, we can mentally picture the acorns that grow and fall from the tree, impregnated with the potential of generating new networks, new trees. Responsiveness, interrelationality, transformation, process, fecundity—all these qualities are to be found in the tree and can characterize the works in this exhibition insofar as they are "rooted" in the campus but branch outwards without leaving the idea of the campus behind. Indeed, the exhibition situates the campus in specific geographic relation to Ashford, the Isle of Wight, and San Gimignano; it constantly displaces itself from one location to another, refusing to find a home to abide permanently in.

So we have the depiction of the tree as seed of the exhibition and the metaphor of the tree. What, then, about the presence of the trees in the exhibition? Probably the most obvious example would be *Hinterglasmalerei* in which Doyle's original picture is loosely recreated. The funerary urns are another example, though the way function as so it more implicit. Their glaze is partly made from the ashes of a Victoria Plum Tree that originally lived in the garden of Law's grandparents. In fact, there is a striking inversion here that should be marked: funerary urns are intended to contain the ashes of somebody that has died; the urns, or *Cineraia*, built by Angell and Law do not preserve anyone's ashes, however. Embracing the homology between corporeal ashes and ash glazes, it is as if the absence of ashes in the urn's interior has necessitated the manifestation of "ashes" on or *as* its exterior. This switching between interior and exterior (which it is tempting to say has intriguing resonances with core themes in Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*, especially his discussion of sculpture as defined by an exteriority or form utterly continuous with its inte-

riority or content) mirrors the *Hinterglasmalerei*'s switching of recto and verso and suggests the independency of these oppositions (interior/exterior, recto/verso). Finally—but given the way that the exhibition is essentially restless, can we actually say or mean “finally”?—would it be senseless to track the linguistic homology further and highlight the correspondence between the various ashes just mentioned and the references to *Ashford*, the town where Weil died. Maybe there is no “finally” insofar as the recognition that linguistic homologies also has a part to play leads one to the further recognition that the exhibition title *Plumb Poltergeist* puns on the Victoria *Plum* Tree.

These connections are essentially contingent, which further testifies to the equivocation that underwrites the exhibition's status as collaborative, or joint, or parallel. Law's *On Simone Weil Avenue . . .* photographs were recently shown at Rodeo and acted in dialogue with the overlooked American artist Robert Overby. It is easy, and natural, to imagine those photographs being presented by themselves, say, within their own exhibition, having no more linkages than those already existent between each other as a series, or to Weil's life, or just simply to Law's practice as a whole. By the same token, the three stools shown by Angell can be exhibited in an entirely different context or just returned to being domestic items once again. There is a certain constitutive instability to the relationships between the works combined with the possibility of those relationships being sundered as soon as *Plumb Poltergeist* closes. Nonetheless, if they are nullified by subsequent circumstances, it is conceivable they remain knowable afterwards, lingering as traces of displaced, semi-forgotten and therefore semi-recalled meanings.

Like the poltergeist wantonly throwing objects around, *Plumb Poltergeist* is a deeply restless exhibition in which new configurations are generated between elements. Such new configurations are far from static; indeed, mobility and self-displacement continue to be features of the generated configuration, meaning that the elements will further circulate without cessation and hence produce yet more possible configurations in their fundamental contingency. We can end, in that case, by emphasizing the ellipsis that makes up part of the title of Law's *On Simone Weil Avenue . . .*. The presence of those three dots indicate an opening of possibilities correlated with the ambiguity of the “On” in the title. Law's usage of the ellipsis here less marks an excision of specific words than serves as an invitation for the viewer to continue making additional connections. That invitation bespeaks the exhibition's innermost character, namely the interplay of roots in which unexpected conjunctions are discovered by Angell, Law, and us, the audience.

<https://www.artexchange.org.uk/sharing-roots-on-plumb-poltergeist-by-aaron-angell-and-ian-law/>