

IN CONVERSATION II

Rebecca Geldard and Austin Houldsworth

31 May 2010, The Orchard, Tatton Park

Jordan Kaplan: This is Austin's work, *Two Million & 1AD*. Austin came to the Biennial with a proposal for our competition requiring an artist either based in or originally from Cheshire who had completed formal education within the past five years. Danielle and I received many proposals – we had not met Austin, knew nothing about him, but we were delighted – he presented an idea for a machine that could make fossils. The idea was, according to Austin, that, if time were really not a problem, what he'd most like to be doing was fossilising a human, because there are no humans in the fossil record. But, because we only had five months, he didn't think that would be possible...so he would try and work with something else. Of course, this caught our imagination!

Rebecca, I think it would be really interesting to hear some of your questions, about why he would want to make a piece like this and how it's possible, and then also looking at this idea about the Biennial being about experimentation and exchange of ideas and how we document all of this...

Rebecca Geldard: Well, one of the things that came up earlier was that we don't really understand exactly how it works. Do you think it would be possible to look at the mechanics of it – so then we can start to talk about it a bit more as an object?

Austin Houldsworth: Shall I give a demonstration? Okay, so the process is emulating a process in nature called petrification (or it's attempting to anyway). Petrification occurs when a very high concentration of minerals are in water and, basically, in order to get the minerals very high in the water, there's limestone in this bottom right container and, because calcium carbonate isn't very water soluble, I've added some sulphuric acid which, changes calcium carbonate to calcium sulphate, which is gypsum, which is what you make plaster of Paris out of. So that has a very high concentration in the water. The public can subsequently come along and pump from the bottom of these two tanks to the top to the header tank and that liquid slowly trickles through these two chambers here, one housing a partridge and the other a pineapple. As it flows over the partridge, it will start to calcify the feathers and all the other very porous parts and then in the other chamber I've got a very different set up: the pineapple's actually in sand to test out whether I can actually get a caste almost of the pineapple as it decays. So the process just keeps going round and round as the water flows from the top down to the bottom very, very slowly. It takes about a day and a half to empty that tank and the public have got to be pumping about half an hour a day to fill the tank. If they don't, it remains empty, so the public are a very important part of the process! If they don't pump, absolutely nothing will happen.

Audience: What's that stuff in the bottom?

AH: That's the limestone. Because these tanks only have very small openings in the top, to pour limestone in there would be a nightmare, so I've made up many bags of limestone and dropped them in there and that's why it looks a bit 'carpety' in places.

Audience: Will we see the partridge?

AH: Eventually. Well, when I take it out it will be unveiled. And then we'll know how successful it's been – or not.

JK: We'll certainly get some pictures on the website!

AH: It's a constant thing to maintain though because the concentrations so far aren't high enough in the water. I've got a solids meter which, with conductivity, measures the parts per million of solids dissolved in the water. I've taken a reference point of Knaresborough – I don't know if you've heard of Knaresborough – there's a petrifying well called 'Mother Shipton's Cave'. I took some of that water and measured how many parts per million of minerals are in it in order to create this kind of process and it's about 2,000 parts per million. I've only got about a thousand so far so I need to get the balance right with adding more sulphuric acid in order to create that very water soluble mineral calcium sulphate. So it's a work in progress.

RG: Why? Why this process? How did this develop? Because you made a machine before you did this commission...

AH: Well, I made a concept for this beforehand and it was originally a human that I wanted to fossilise because for me it's fascinating when you think about the time scales involved with fossils – everything we know. There's the ammonite – it's kind of a marine animal that existed for 350 million years – it's a fantastic amount of time that that creature was alive on earth and you think of the human race and modern humans probably came about, I believe, about 200,000 years ago, which is absolutely negligible in comparison. We're sort of like this blip, a peak. And as we control absolutely everything in our environments, we control our burials and the casket is the perfect environment for decay so it's likely that it's no remains of humans will survive. When you think of the amount of life that's been on earth, the amount of fossils we have, relatively speaking, are negligible. So the requirements to create a fossil are very specific. I thought about how I could guarantee the creation of a fossil – a human fossil – to be contemplated 250 million years into the future by a completely different race that could have evolved in that kind of time period. Because in those kind of time periods, it's guaranteed that we're not going to exist as we do now certainly, or there could be a completely different race that evolves here on earth within that time that could have consciousness and could contemplate our existence.

RG: So, taking on board this commission, what made you pick a partridge and a pineapple?

AH: Um...I wanted to go for an apple originally, but I think the pineapple works well because the chap who owned this property, Lord Maurice Egerton, was very into science and innovation and was – someone told me the other day he funded the Wright Brothers in their attempts to fly – I don't know how true it is – it was from John the gardener...and one of the reasons they allowed me to build this machine in their nice lovely formal garden was because they believed Lord Egerton might have been interested in it himself. He might, essentially, have commissioned one himself. I thought in the same mindset, what would they want to petrify or want to keep in that period of time? And pineapples were extremely rare and hard to come by and to grow one here takes hard work and money and innovation, so I thought maybe if they were going to conserve anything maybe it would be a pineapple. So that's why I've done a pineapple.

RG: It's a great symbol of new world exploration, isn't it?

AH: Yeah.

RG: And for me, the partridge, obviously the main game bird, is a symbol of wealth and fortune.

AH: Yeah, yeah. I wanted, also, in a practical way, to try two different things because the partridge should be easier to fossilise because the feathers won't decay anywhere nearly as quickly as the pineapple. So, if anything, the pineapple will probably be a nice wine, and the partridge may have a hope!

RG: For me, what's interesting about this piece, looking at some of the things you've made before, is that they are very much about destroying things. You did a series of works, for instance, about home-made explosives. And this brings together a sense of destruction and sustainability. You're taking things that are dead and systematically destroying them as well as creating something that's going to be preserved for hopefully a long period of time.

AH: Well, when it started out, I was also looking into cryonics: this idea of freeze drying – freezing people and then waking them up 200 million years later when the technology's got to the stage when it can resurrect people – and I thought a much more pragmatic way would be to...for a start, people don't want to wake dead people up who probably haven't got much to offer society at that point – and why would they?! It's just a great money making exercise. I thought a more pragmatic way would be to allow people to live on in a different person's imagination. I think that's one thing humans are quite good at because we strive to understand our existence. So any race with any consciousness would probably do the same. Yeah, it is about decay and also creation but I don't know if I think too heavily about that kind of relationship. I suppose I just take each piece as it comes.

RG: There is a great resonance with things like climate change and you've dealt with the issue before. For me, I was thinking about understanding what we've got before it's gone.

AH: Yeah, because it also raises the question: what would we keep? People have had problems with me saying 'a human being' because that's not really our identity as such – it's everything that's surrounds us that belongs to our society as well. But then, when you get into that kind of depth it gets really fuzzy in what you would want to keep, but that's probably good because it creates some sort of large existential thought about our existence in the grand scheme of things.

RG: I like the idea of its endeavour – that it's totally in keeping with the spirit of the Biennial itself. But this is a very Heath Robinson English contraption. You couldn't say that it was formally beautiful, but there is a formality to it that's almost like a sculpture and yet makes you think of product design, makes you think of the workings of your own house – it takes you into the realm of making, which I think is quite interesting given your own background in design as opposed to fine art. It makes me wonder how much of this structure is consciously aesthetic and how much of it is purely utilitarian and functional.

AH: I would say predominantly it is set out to be utilitarian in the sense that it performs a function and I think the function is far more interesting than the object itself. And the process is obviously the central part of it. But it could look like anything because I suppose there are no other machines like it so I could have made any sort of arrangement possible. But due to a few things (money!) and also the time that I have, there are some slight compromises behind the aesthetic of the piece but also when you're dealing with things on this scale, to get an IBC container, or a container which will hold 1,000 litres, with the right connections, and the things that will all fit together, is a challenge in itself and you've got to let go a little bit of the overall aesthetic of it. So it's also an evolution, I'd say rather than an absolute design in the pure sense. I quite like its honesty.

RG: Yes, but also its accidental beauty, it's quite charming. Especially with its proximity to the fruit trees. I keep thinking of it as a giant still. And secretly you're telling us you're creating these fossils when really you're making the world's best gin.

AH: Don't tell everyone that!

RG: Well it does rely to some extent on our belief. You tell us how it works in such detail we can't doubt that it's real. Why can't we see what's in the tanks? Why is it secret? You could be fossilising anything (or nothing). And also the handle: there isn't a big sign saying 'pump me' and yet kids are immediately drawn to it and know what to do. And also, the reliance on the public – you could have set this up at home and made it self-reliant. Why do the public have to engage with it in order for it to succeed? Or do they?

AH: Well, no, I think that's the important part. About the sign and the pumping, I'm working on that. I think a sign is important and probably a bit of an explanation about the device because it's such a strange thing in itself...

Audience: I think that would be a real shame.

AH: Do you think? But the information behind it isn't accessible to people which I think is also important.

RG: Perhaps that's the charm of the piece – that you have to allow people to take the chance to engage with it rather than force them into it. So, will there be images published? Will you be candid about whether it has or hasn't worked?

AH: Yes. It's an ongoing process – it's not that I don't think it can't work, it's just getting the mixture right and the different elements perfected.

RG: Well that's the interesting thing about it sitting very much between a design object, a scientific experiment and an artwork. And how you choose to deal with it in the future and where you're going to take the idea next.

AH: Well, depending on this one...I've basically got to see. I suppose if it is successful I would continue to try and perfect this kind of system, using ultimately a human volunteer – if I can find one.

Audience: The thing is, fossilisation in the first place took place without any human interaction whatsoever. Have you thought about the prospect of it being wind-driven or solar powered so that it's purely the elements and if it's wind-driven by some sort of turbine, that kinetic element would immediately draw people in so when people are saying "Why can't we see what's taking place?" that visual aspect of it would be some indication of the process.

AH: Yeah. My experience of exhibitions is that people engage with things that they can get their hands on. That's why I gave the hand pump a go, because although you can automate all these processes, I like the idea that people can also be a part of the process themselves.

RG: It's very specifically designed, isn't it? It could have been much more rudimentary than that.

AH: I think you're right. If I were going to petrify a human being, then it would be completely using the elements and would be, literally, plumbed into a river or a different source, which is constant because with a human it would take tens of years rather than a few months to actually completely petrify.

RG: I like the idea that you have taken control of it. When we spoke earlier, it was described as an almost egotistical thing to do: to apply science to something that has never been bound.

AH: It was probably a bit of a trip on my ego initially when I thought of the project. But I think that's gone on the sidelines a bit. It's more interesting to me the idea of the time scale – I'm not bothered about whether I'm the one that's going to be petrified. I think it's just a great thought project as well.

RG: And how do you think it fits in the context of Tatton? You're actually a local person.

AH: Um yeah. I think this year – probably Danielle's better placed to tell you about this – but there was a very kind of experimental theme to a lot of the works –

Danielle Arnaud: Yes. This is one of the premises of the Biennial: to give you some sort of freedom because you have a lot of constraints and restrictions here. I was going to mention something, which was that when you presented the project first, the different designs you made – and one of them you made in your back garden and I was thinking, "Oh my God, that's really ugly, how are we going to have that in the garden!" But, you know –

AH: - That was with the scaffolding –

DA: - Yes, with the scaffolding and I was saying, "I don't really want scaffolding in the Gardens!" Anyway, to go back to what it looks like, I think it is actually quite pleasing – it works within the setting really, really well.

AH: I think it goes back to Lord Egerton again. Was that one of the reasons for the experimental theme?

DA: Well, partly, but it's much more Jordan and I as curators trying to give you a bit more freedom. And also what is quite essential is that you have a lot of biennials around – millions of them now – and this one has to have a different identity and the one thing we could do as curators was to develop an agreement with the staff and management at Tatton and they are really quite open and it's quite extraordinary because what we are doing is risky. I mean, you are very young, we are not the international curators you would expect at such a big event, so there is a lot of trust thrown around and, well, I think it's working.

RG: I think that's what allows things to happen. And there is a sense of limitation in every real sense from every angle and what I was wondering is how you feel the limits of place have impacted on the idea coming to fruition?

AH: I think it's the opposite – I don't think it's limited it at all. Because not having it would have been far more limiting in my book. Because it would still be just a concept left on a page. Maybe I'd have made a little model or tried to do a few tests, but, as you said, there's no context to talk to anyone about it or get people's opinion on it. It's the opposite – it was an opportunity for me.

RG: You were quite open and flexible about how it could be done. I remember being here with Danielle and Jordan and talking about finding an area that could actually hold the weight because it obviously weighs a ton –

AH: Three tons I think.

RG: Three. So finding somewhere, the constant negotiation to find the right place to make the work, to bring materials in through the gardens without disturbing anything else...your project, I would imagine, is the most experimental here because it was simply an idea that had to be done.

AH: I can't remember it being that much of a headache though! It's been very enjoyable for me. Even constructing something like this is great for your head.

DA: Yes, but you have to mention that you built one in your back garden and you did try out a lot of different configurations and you worked very hard. Here it looks relatively simple but to get where we are, there were quite a few months not only on paper but also physically trying things out.

AH: And then at the last minute, we found out we needed these concrete footings that needed to be pumped in to listed grounds. I suppose it's easy to look back with rose tinted glasses. For me, I like the art and science and design intersection. Art and design have an ability to look across the sciences and think of something that combines them and this, because it's not a specific area – I've worked with a chap from Imperial College who's given me some advice on the geo-chemical specifics to it, but then the decay is a biologist's field. And then there's a structural engineer who has helped me to make sure the thing doesn't fall over. So there are all these different areas amalgamated into one.

RG: From the purely artistic perspective, I can imagine this being quite a nice thing, because you have to renegotiate every single bit of material as you discover this new knowledge. So you have almost no idea what you will wind up with although you have a fairly clear idea in your head when you start. It's still a work in progress until it's finished.

AH: Yeah. It evolved – it's not like I had a supreme idea I'd sketched out on the page and that's it there. It doesn't work like that.

RG: Earlier, we were speaking about – it's a very nice idea – about wanting to create an artwork that wasn't necessarily about science but that did something. That provided some kind of service or an operation rather than something that simply had to be negotiated as an object.

AH: I suppose in my work I try to think of solutions to problems that are probably neglected a bit by industry or the things that aren't necessarily money making ideas, and I think that this is one of them in the sense that it makes people think in a more philosophical way than just the capitalist-driven agenda of 'we want to fossilise people to make lots of money', leaving thousands of fossils everywhere – I certainly don't want that! Previous projects that I've done, there's one, *Surviving with Englishness*, where I imagined the Doomsday scenarios that are around us today and in the age I've grown up in and – not only are we learning at GCSE about the Greenhouse Effect, but also about the creation of petroleum from crude oil through distillation and you think, "That combination, that can't be good!" So this project imagines a future scenario where nuclear Armageddon is on the horizon and a chap called Peter Richards, who's a retired BNFL nuclear engineer, 64, he decides that instead of building a placebo bunker (because he knows the chances of survival), he wants to have a final

cup of tea during his last moments on earth. So he creates in his workshop different equipment that will guarantee a fast cup of tea before he dies. There's one object called a thermite kettle – thermite burns at 2,500 degrees Celsius (it's the hottest stuff I could find) – he places that in these tubes in the kettle and lights it so it boils the water in a few seconds. And then he pours that water with a teapot syringe, which is the quickest transfer, but because it's too hot, he has to cool it down to the right drinking temperature, so he makes a heat sink tea cooler, where he pours it down these heat sinks and it slowly cools the tea so he can drink it while he enjoys the (probably quite beautiful) explosion that very quickly comes toward him. Hopefully people can appreciate it on several levels, from engineering and the technicalities, to questioning what's important in life. And then the philosophical levels about what it might make of society as a whole and how we regard the planet now and the disaster scenario – what's important and whether we enjoy life now or we try and struggle by and...we make so many assumptions...and these are generated through media and politicians – it's infinitely complex – hopefully I touch on those subjects as well.

RG: I like the concept. I'm curious about what you describe as a particularly Northern Englishness and how this might translate to Tatton now – I suppose there might be a lot of tea involved?

AH: Well, I suppose, you might say, Tatton is the Northern English now, and even then, it's a different time period. I can't say how people then, working the grounds as the proletariat, might have viewed Lord Egerton, but it may not be too dissimilar. And that's where, I suppose, the Biennial comes in – where you can build something like this that can bring people in and they'll think 'maybe'.