Conversations in Caves

FLORA PARROTT AND HARRIET HAWKINS

In 2015, Harriet Hawkins and Flora Parrott met through the Royal Geographical Society. Parrott—an artist working across a broad range of materials [1]—was working on a research and development project funded by Arts Council England. She was searching the archives at the Royal Geographical Society for material relating to caves and caving, drawing a parallel between the labyrinthine passages of a cave network and the experience of lostness in the process of research. Parrott and Hawkins’s meeting came at a time when Hawkins had been thinking about the underground, both as a cultural geographer and as an art historian interested in twentieth-century artworks that explored the underground in terms of embodied experiences of its materialities, volumes and the challenges these posed to human sense-making and representation. Her research had also evolved to incorporate collaborations with a range of artists and writers.

The meeting resulted in a Leverhulme Artist-in-Residence Grant application for Parrott to work in the geography department at Royal Holloway University, London (RHUL). Over the last six years, their collaboration has evolved. Funded by the Leverhulme Trust Artist in Residence, an AHRC grant, an AHRC-funded PhD and an Arts Council–funded exhibition, they have undertaken a series of field visits to caves in the United Kingdom and the European continent, as well as collaborating on producing writing and workshops together.

HH: How did you become interested in caves?

FP: During a trip to a tourist cave with friends, I was struck by the effect of the profound darkness of the underground. To me, the experience of the cave reinforced so many of the ideas that I had been trying to articulate in the studio during my Masters; it was a tangible example of the complex themes around geologic time, intuition, tacit knowledge, lostness, the ineffable.

HH: I was interested that much of our early work together became about what in geography we would call “fieldwork.” Gully Cave in Ebbor Gorge in the Mendips offers an important early site. The cave is key for the RHUL geography department and especially for Danielle Schreve, a geographer and quaternary scientist who has been working there since its discovery in 2006 after a storm dislodged rocks. The cave offers a fascinating flora and fauna record that enables the study of biological responses to climate change at the end of the last Ice Age. I am interested in what it was like for you to come and develop a body of artwork in a geography department and, of course, in the cave.

FP: I definitely had a sense of nervous anticipation, of being out of my depth, at first. I think that, as an artist, I feel nervous about how the work will be perceived by researchers and academics from other disciplines. These feelings quickly dissipated. Geography at RHUL has a legacy of artists-in-residence, and Danielle could not have been more generous with her time and knowledge. When I look back on it, I think how extraordinary her open-mindedness was—trusting an artist she has just met with her research. And to have you...
there as a translator was fundamental to its success—you were able to contextualize in a way that I could not at that stage. What was it like for you to have an artist come and work in a geography department?

HH: It was a really important point in my work, both on the underground and more broadly, to have you come and work with us. Working collaboratively with you marked, I think, a step change in my thinking around what the relationship between geography and art could be. It forced an invaluable confrontation about what it meant for geography as a discipline to take art seriously as a research practice. I also really valued how I had to try to imagine what it must be like to come into our discipline and how, in doing so, I got to revisit all the elements of our research process—from fieldwork to our often very formulaic paper and presentation forms. I am interested in what it felt like for you to come and work in a really established project, which included both geographic fieldwork and lab work.

FP: I always feel concerned that I will come in and harvest visual material and make something that might look interesting to an arts audience but has little value to the discipline with which I am collaborating. This type of activity can further compound that alienation often associated with contemporary arts. I was anxious to try and make this project an exchange, to contribute to the research in the same spirit with which I was invited in. My first task was to think about how to navigate all the material—the specimens from the cave as well as the history of the dig—from fieldwork to our often very formulaic paper and presentation forms. I am interested in what it felt like for you to come and work in a really established project, which included both geographic fieldwork and lab work.

FIG. 1. Preparatory drawings by Flora Parrott. Studies of specimens from Gully Cave, used in the development of These Pits and Abysses, 2016. (© Flora Parrott)

HH: I was drawn to geography for its diversity and its possibilities for thinking across natural science, social science and arts and humanities. So in a sense this was an ideal project rather than a risk. Further, as someone who often works in interdisciplinary contexts, I really value how feeling out of place or out of my depth can shift how I work. I am always concerned though about how to balance not becoming superficially a scientist or an artist without being too much of an outsider, a voyeur. I was interested to watch how you encountered Gully Cave as a space, as it is quite different to other cave spaces that we have worked in since.

FP: Gully Cave, in its very architecture, offered a range of spaces through which to think and develop work. The configurations presented by the archive section (a preserved section of the dig, initially requested to be left for future archaeologists, then released for exploration in 2018) (Fig. 2), for example, or by the description of a horse hip so solidly embedded in the wall of the cave that it needed to be drilled out. These act as frameworks for hanging thought from and hopefully offer a new perspective on the cave for those that have been working there. Working in this way leaves me free to generate studio work in parallel with but not directly and logically in response to the cave. The specimens stored in the lab were incredibly exciting—the diversity and quality of the bones—but most striking too were the time spans that were being discussed. Numbers so large and abstract that they dizzy the mind and suggest a shifting landscape entirely different from the one I consider to be permanent and stable. Alongside these time spans were the dynamics, stories and evolutions of the period of study—12 years at the time of the Leverhulme project. Was the outcome of the residency what you had expected it to be?

HH: One of the things that I really loved about the residency’s evolution was its movement beyond you and me to include a huge range of people from across the department and beyond. I think the specimen-drawing workshops you ran were really inspired; they enabled a range of different geographers to come together in a way we don’t do as much as we should. So there were those cultural geographers like me, for whom art and creative practices are part of what we do, and those on the more scientific side of the discipline. The latter group hooked into specimen drawing as an important
disciplinary skill that, while perhaps in decline, is still of real value. Clearly there are all kinds of ideas to unpack there around the kinds of drawing being practiced and so on, but I think this experience of the cave as a space for drawing a range of knowledge together was common to the residency. It was really present in the event These Pits and Abysses that you organized (Color Plate D).

These Pits and Abysses (hereafter TPA) was a thematic event in the CLF (Chronic Love Foundation) Arts Café in Peckham in December 2016 to mark the end of a Leverhulme Artist in Residence program in the geography department at RHUL by Flora Parrott. The evening used the excavation of Gully Cave as a point of departure and included a broad range of material investigating experiences of the subterranean. The program combined talks by geographers Hawkins, Schreve and Rachael Squire with a film by Gordon Matta-Clark, artwork by Daniel Clark, music by EDEN and a film by Lily Grimes about Gully Cave expert Pierre Schreve. Parrott designed and coordinated the event [2].

FP: TPA was such a fantastic experience and really ambitious. I think the content was varied but cohesive, and it was wonderful to represent all the geography department research groups alongside visual arts, film and music pieces. On reflection, I think the framing, which is the part I was responsible for, was too ambitious and, as a result, not focused enough. I tried to represent too many things in a single space—I know the endeavor was good—to explain all these different approaches, but I think in reality that the set didn’t have the presence. I learned so much, though; it has really made me think about audience, duration and communication. It has opened so many doors into new experimentation with the spaces between exhibition and conference.

Another fundamentally important result of the project was the relationships formed—with you, primarily, but also with Danielle Schreve, Pierre Schreve (a lab technician), and Rachael Squire (a geopolitical scholar). Rachael had just completed her PhD and was brought into the TPA project at a relatively late stage. She was incredibly open and enthusiastic, and her presence really widened the project’s scope. With Rachael’s presentation, the event encompassed all the department’s research groups. Since the event, Rachael has worked with some of my colleagues in the arts and contributed to some really incredible projects outside of geography. Do you think the breadth of geography at RHUL means that the academic staff are more accepting of practice-based research methods? I wonder if I would have had similar support and freedom in another department.

HH: I think geography in general is a discipline that tries to encourage us to sit with the problems at hand and to mobilize whatever resources might be needed to engage them. In that way it can be a brave but challenging discipline, giving us huge, if sometimes disconcerting, freedom to ask and answer questions. We were all excited by how your presence brought human and physical geographers into new kinds of convergences. It was, I think, challenging for everybody—not in a combative way, as it felt really natural to congregate around caves—but because we had not previously had or made the space to come together in these ways.

There was something, I think, reassuring about it being a challenging space for everyone. Oftentimes you might be having a great exchange with one of your colleagues—a geomorphologist, say—but it can sometimes feel like you are taking turns to explain, and one or other of you has to take the leap to not know, to become vulnerable. I think when you brought us all together to draw, or to be in the cave, or to present in the space you created at CLF, we were all in a slightly uncomfortable space together. This fostered a kind of closeness and a greater appreciation of commonalities and differences.

FP: When we first met, you described Danielle’s work at Gully Cave to me, and it seemed like an incredible opportunity and, importantly, a really good way to make the Leverhulme project relevant to the department at Royal Holloway. I quickly realized how broad geography is as a discipline, and so it made sense to use a specific location that was already very much embedded in the psyche of the department. You acted as the translator and the negotiator (assisting with meetings, suggesting texts and explaining the process and
relevance of my work to staff and students) working on my behalf—for an artist out of my specialism, this was invaluable. It feels like trust played quite an important role there.

HH: It is interesting to think about the relationship between research and trust. Maybe a whole set of conditions led you and me to leap and see where we ended up. Maybe it was a combination of institutional context, through the Royal Geographical Society and our various universities and the shared interest in caves, and I think (hope!) also that we just liked each other. RHUL’s history with artists in residence helped with the wider departmental relations.

We often talk about trust in fieldwork research in geography, not only in how those participating have to rely on each other but also in that, historically, there is a “trust” built up around reporting back from the field. Being with you in the field created a sometimes slightly surreal coming-together of geographical practices. For so long, geography’s engagement with art has been a rather desk- or archive-bound affair; despite the role of visual practices historically in exploration, it has taken a while for creative practices to become part of fieldwork again. Going into the field with you opened me to new ways of thinking about art as a field practice. Perhaps ironically, I distinctly remember thinking that on some of our trips I felt more like a “proper” geographer than I normally do: a combination maybe of the open-ended exploration and the “kit” we used, caving kit and ice axes, crampons and ropes. I was channeling my inner “rugged geographer.” There has been a lot written about the different tropes of “research,” unsettling distinctions between the desk-bound scholar and the explorer whose fieldwork is often figured as more scientific, as well as, of course, more colonial.

FP: The fieldwork has been very interesting for me; I think I was mimicking a scientific approach to collecting data, which felt more authentic at the time, but actually the results were disastrous artistically: forced and didactic. On reflection, the fieldwork was in being in the place and observing how an expert or guide navigates and understands that environment. Just the observation requires concentration and everything else I was doing in the landscape felt like a distraction.

HH: Your observations on observation are fascinating. I am used to going into the “field” in quite a structured manner, with a plan for “data” collection. I need to collect this or that piece of “data”; where once it might have been stream-flow or rock samples, now it is more often about collecting/making images. I always feel uncomfortable saying that to artists, because it sounds like I am trying to take over or take on a set of practices I am utterly untutored in. Working with you in the field has taught me a lot about how geographers might need to think again about the relationship of creative practices and fieldwork. Oftentimes “creative” practices of drawing, photography or sound recording in the field are understood by geographers as a “becoming attentive” and as a key expression of so-called creative geographies. Yet being-in-the-field with you taught me about the limitations of such narrow and bounded conceptions of creative practice in the field. We need, I think, as a discipline to think a lot more carefully about what we make of the intersection of creative practices and field research.

FP: Another important part of the fieldwork was staying together and having conversations in the evening that related to other projects—just time for chat really, but all these ideas become enmeshed and end up being important in a round-about way.

HH: I very much agree. I think the sustained nature of the day-in, day-out conversation helped build up an accumulated mass. It feels like important thoughts germinated during walking, looking, staying, cooking and driving around together. This felt as much about the caves we visited as about the more general thinking we did together. I still draw confidence from our discussions to explore the challenges and possibilities of geography and art. I think these tested ideas and built trust for our experiments with pushing the boundaries of geography conferences and exhibitions. Our past experiences, together and apart, had brought us both to the point where I think we were aware of the limits of trying to bring our work to standard conferences and were keen to experiment with creating interdisciplinary spaces that were welcoming but also a little challenging for artists and geographers, without being “owned” as it were by either.

FP: As an extension of these working philosophies, I think that the event Expand and Contract (Fig. 3) was an evolution from TPA. It was a totally different type of gathering and setting, so it’s difficult to compare, but I feel strongly that Expand and Contract could not have happened without TPA two years before. To me, the event demonstrated our synchronicity and the shorthand we developed over the last three years of communication. I have a new confidence in the value of joint endeavor, and I think that is reflected in the more understated and elongated nature of the event.

Expand and Contract, organized by the authors, was an experimental conference at Chisenhale Dance Space in July 2018. The focus was experiences of the cave and darkness. The day included drumming, a live-action role-playing workshop, a talk about subterranean engineering, archaeology and an audio essay. Contributing were William Rowlandson (University of Kent), Una Hamilton Helle (Open School East associate), Shell Like (artist duo Amy Pettifer and Jennifer Boyd), Clive Gamble (University of Southampton) and Loretta Van Der Tann (Think Deep UK).

HH: I am really struck by that observation. It recalls ideas around slow scholarship I have been exploring recently. In the midst of lots of different expressions of these ideas, I tend to gravitate toward a sense of “taking time” as a kind of daily (if privileged) practice of resistance to an academy that likes us to speed up. Different kinds of work, like collaborative...
work, can accumulate slowly and, I think, require the investment of different kinds of time. For me it was tough to think openly without goals, to invest without already fixing an outcome—this paper, that book chapter. Instead, I had to trust that out of the midst of all the things we were doing might come, or not come, outputs whose form we also had to be open to. This required cultivating a certain kind of attitude toward “making time” that was not only different from that I had had before but also was a different sense of both outputs and research process—something that I think is crucial for the conditions of working and collaborating in the contemporary academy.

Acknowledgments

Funding to enable this research and its writing has been provided by an AHRC Techne PhD studentship and grants funded by the AHRC AH/N004132/1, the Leverhulme Trust PLP-2016-186 and the ERC, 863944, THINK DEEP.

References and Notes

1 Over the past ten years Flora Parrott has worked on interdisciplinary projects looking at embodied experience of landscape. In 2016 she worked with the Earth Science Department at the University of São Paulo, resulting in an exhibition in the Mineral Museum within the department.

2 More details on the These Pits and Abysses event can be found at: http://www.floraparrott.com/these-pits-abysses.

Manuscript received 30 December 2018.

FLORA PARROTT is an artist and researcher currently undertaking a TECHNE-funded PhD in the Geography Department at Royal Holloway University London. Parrott works in sculpture and textiles; she trained in Printmaking at the Glasgow School of Art and The Royal College of Art. A key focus of the practice is interdisciplinary collaboration; working with experts from other disciplines to create rich and experimental programs to accompany visual arts exhibitions. I’m in the Bath on All Fours, a project made in collaboration with South African writer Lindiwe Matshikiza, has recently been shown at Eastside Projects in Birmingham as part of Sonia Boyce’s In the Castle of My Skin, going on to MIMA Middleborough in 2021.

HARRIET HAWKINS’s research focuses on the intersections of geography and art and related concepts including creativity, aesthetics and the imagination. Working in collaboration with artists and creative organizations and institutions around the world, she explores the geographies of art works and art worlds, including exploring the place of practice-led research within the discipline of geography. She is currently leading a five-year research project, THINK DEEP, exploring creative approaches to the subsurface.
COLOR PLATE D: CONVERSATIONS IN CAVES

Harriet Hawkins presenting at These Pits and Abysses, 2016. Sculptural work: Flora Parrott. © Flora Parrott (See the article in this issue by Flora Parrott and Harriet Hawkins.)