

Invisible Fish

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I'm going to describe an ongoing artistic project with the title "Invisible Fish." This project began in 2018 as a collaboration with South African writer and director Lindiwe Matshikiza. Before I begin to describe how Invisible Fish¹ came about, I want to set the scene by reflecting on a photograph of my daughter several years ago in an aquarium, looking at a diver cleaning the tank. I've had this photograph on the wall of my studio ever since I took it and, in many ways, I can trace the start of the thinking for this Invisible Fish project back to this moment.

In this photograph, you can see a two-year-old girl looking at a diver floating in a tall cylindrical tank. The diver is cleaning the tank and fish are swimming around their body. For me, there was something important here about trying to see this moment through my daughters' eyes; the imaginative power and freedom of a two-year-old watching a situation unfold in front of them, not recognising the dynamics, associations, and hierarchies that I might have seen at first glance. After looking at the aquarium, I took my daughter to the café and she sat on my knee, outside of the body in which she had grown. We looked out over open water and watched rain run down the windows. When I think back to the aquarium, I am able to reset my imagination to a place of watery interconnection, alternative sensing, and porous boundary.

1 List of Invisible Fish exhibitions:

'I'm In The Bath On All Fours' Well Projects (2019)

As part of group exhibition, Sonia Boyce's 'In The Castle of My Skin' Eastside Projects (2020)

As part of group exhibition, Sonia Boyce's 'In The Castle of My Skin' MIMA (2021)

Figure 1

Two-year-old girl looking at a diver floating in a tall cylindrical tank



This way of thinking informed the work for the Invisible Fish project, inspired by a new species of cave fish discovered in the Danube Aach River in Germany in 2016. The first sighting of the Cave Loach was by the experienced cave diver Joachim Kreislermaier and evolutionary biologist Jasminca Behrmann-Godel confirmed the uniqueness of the fish (Behrmann-Godel et al., 2017). A few of the fish were filmed in the cave and subsequently captured by Kreislermaier. A small colony of the Cave Loaches are now in the laboratories of the Limnology Department at the University of Konstanz in Germany. At the time I visited, Behrmann-Godel believed that there are schools of fish living in the sections of the networks that are not accessible to humans. The fish have no vision and very little

pigmentation, and have evolved over 20,000 years from surface species. The moment of encounter between the diver and fish is set within the perimeter of the cave; the walls are solid rock and the water within them heavy with sediment and harsh currents. The diver has a thick, spongy skin of neoprene covering almost every inch of flesh and the fish has a thin transparent skin through which its internal structure can be seen. But in the depths of the cave of course, nothing can be seen. I think what our project has begun to think through is the beauty and opportunity that this regressive evolution might offer our surface thinking: thinner skin, lengthening of form, other ways of navigating, other ways of understanding and responding.

I'm going to speak about the Invisible Fish project with speculative feminist practice in mind, particularly the essay *The Second Body* (Hildyard, 2017). The book describes the notion that "every living thing has two bodies" (Hildyard, 2017) and that "to be an animal is to be in possession of a physical body, a body which can eat, drink and sleep; it is also to be embedded in a worldwide network of ecosystems." Hildyard (2017) speaks about an encounter with a pigeon, which becomes a touchstone for the essay. The pigeon represents the tangible and proximate more than human in Hildyard's consciousness—her first body and perhaps her second body is reaching and floating over parts of the world facing climate catastrophe that feels abstract and distant. For me, this central animal encounter is with a tiny, almost invisible fish.

The Cave Loach that has become the site for the second body of the Invisible Fish project requires a much less extreme imagination of depth, and of consciousness—but to me, it is an unreachable depth, nonetheless. And this the unreachable depth. It is where the Invisible Fish project keeps one imaginary toe, while on the surface, other thoughts and associations come together.

My second body and the second body of the online conversations that I have with Lindiwe in Johannesburg are often to be found in the Aach Spring cave network in Konstanz Germany, which I have visited only once by climbing down a long ladder to the edge of the underground water system. I am unlikely to visit there again. The richness of the imaginary encounters in that water are something that my imagination can't seem to leave behind. Lindiwe wrote a number of vignettes for the project and we sent images and words back and forth to develop the show. In one piece of writing, Lindiwe describes the experience of some kind of imagined regression back to a muddy prehistoric creature that takes place in bath tub, seeing fingers becoming webbed. She invites audience members to imagine 5 meter hairs growing all over their body and stretching out to the walls around them, feeling and tasting the surfaces they meet.

We are now working on the fourth iteration of Invisible Fish. This growing and changing project is important and is the nature of the long distance, digital collaboration with Lindiwe Matshikiza. These have been long, slow, and distant ways of thinking that adapt to new surroundings that underpin the project. When I try to explore these ideas through materials in the studio, I imagine them as intensities—most easily described as sound. Not exactly musical sounds or notes, but more as densities of noise. These densities then lead me to think about different types of materials, their combinations with one another, and which forces and directions should be at play in their manipulation and display. Where things come

from. How they occupy space. How they relate to the other things around them. Where are the bleeds and the boundaries. I believe there to be a lot of care and consideration of the more than human consciousness, inherently present in sculptural practice. Meyer (2016) describes outdoor silence as absences that are performed and materialized through process and material objects. The current conversation between Lindiwe and I, has evolved into a story about a young person adjusting to life in a new city, told through a series of school swimming lessons and the strangeness of a new environment as an uneasy backdrop.

I imagine new Cave Loaches have been born in the lab, never having encountered the deep waters of the Aach Spring and instead only know the smooth still waters of a tank. I find myself wondering how their experience of space might differ from the cave loaches in their natural habitat. What would happen if this new generation were released into the cave, only having sensed glass lines and corners? Thinking back to the aquarium makes me wonder whether the fish in the tanks are able to think and feel beyond the tank; extending, connecting into the layers of materials outside of the first glassy wall.

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Conflicts of Interest

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About the Author

Flora Parrott is a practice-based researcher working primarily in sculpture and textiles. The work looks at notions of the subterranean, experiences of darkness and the restructuring of the senses. Based in the Geography Department at Royal Holloway since 2016, initially as Leverhulme artist in Residence and then as a Techne PhD student, the artistic practice is informed by contemporary thinking in geography and the geohumanities. Parrott trained in Printmaking at Glasgow School of art and the Royal College of Art, the practice is still rooted in the techniques and approaches of printmaking workshops; using materials and processes as a way-in to making.