



Sun 11 Dec  
12:45 - 2pm

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Laura Emsley  
in conversation with  
Maria Angélica Madero  
Live transcript

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#### SPEAKERS

Laura Emsley, Canan Batur, María Angélica Madero

Canan Batur 00:03

Welcome back to the Caves, Dwellings and Vibration second day. For those who have been with us yesterday, welcome back, and I hope you enjoy yesterday's sessions. My name is Canan Batur and I'm the curator of Live Programmes here at Nottingham Contemporary, and it's fantastic to be able to kick off this sensorial exchange, deepening and complexifying our relationship with caves, especially in a city that sits upon a secret city of over 800 caves lying metres, being the UK is largest network of caves. Yesterday we kicked off with thick we kick things off with two walkthroughs the first one being led by our colleagues at Nottingham Contemporary thank you to Rosa and Niall. And then the second walkthrough was led by Norma Gregory, the director and founder of Black Miners Museum, highlighting black miners heritage in Nottingham in dialogue with our exhibition. We had incredible presentations by Flora Parrott, Frank Pearson, Kathryn Yusoff approaching questions of geological form from the vantage point of deep time ecology and contemporary artistic practice. We had a workshop led by dear Frances Morgan, who will lead a sonic meditation inspired by Pauline Oliveros, who's anthologies also present

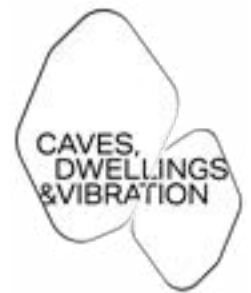
in our exhibition, through which we thought about the archaeoacoustics and sonic epistemologies. With those who were quick to book in for our listening sessions in the city of caves, we took a deep dive into the case for to soul expanding performances by Maxwell Sterling, and Evan Ifekoya who reflected on restorative forms of listening and divine resonances through sonic affinities of vibration, my heartfelt gratitude to all the artists, thinkers and conspirators for their generous and vibrant field thinking it was a blessing to feel think and sense with them. Before launching into today's first segment, it's worth dwelling briefly on Caves, Dwellings and Vibration again, in today's programme Caves, Dwellings and Vibration aspires to look closely into the poetic and artistic knowledge and wisdom caves carry. To think about the notion of geologic and deep time archaeoacoustics and the uses of cases spaces of dwellings, but also spaces of upheaval. As you know, quite often we reach for geological and architectural terms to make sense of caves. This programme tries to reach for an alternative vocabulary, a possibility that blurs the lines in between the geological and architectural the body and the intellect to provide a haptic space for the felt seen and heard as an extension of our current research trend, Emergency and Emergence which investigates transdisciplinary sensorial and speculative practices of radical sense making. This programme aims to think about vibration as a meandering a potential course of funding dominant knowledges and modes of being. Today we continue to be touched by and being in touch with more contributors. And I'm extremely delighted to introduce our programme, where you're going to partake in the offerings incantations and invocations from Laura Emsley, Maria Angelica Madero, Emma McCormick-Goodhart, Jessika Kenny, Ella Finer, Louis Henderson, Zeynep Bulut and Ignota Books during the day and in the evening, we're going to descend into the caves that our gallery sits above to experience further offerings from Lucy Railton and Paul Purgas. Some very brief housekeeping notes before I introduce our next guest. Although we will keep an informal atmosphere throughout the evening, our talks performances and screenings seek to create challenging environments where open mindedness and respect for each other's approaches can foster growth. So please be mindful and respectful of each other's opinions and views. In the unlikely case of emergency, a member of staff will guide you to the nearest fire exit, you will see that our toilets are located right next to the exits, feel free to come as and go as you please of course as quiet as possible so that our events are not disrupted. I would like to use this opportunity to extend our thanks to our funders, the University of Nottingham and Nottingham

Trent University generously and graciously supporting today's events as well as my colleagues Philippa Douglas for hard work leading up to this event, Shannon Charlesworth for her generosity and being back with us again. Catherine Masters for her meticulous organisation, Sam Harrison for his detailed insights in our tech team, Jim Brouwer, Craig Parr, Tom Harris, Tom Chamberlain to Paul Buddle, and our Confetti students, Holly and Laura, thank you for making this event possible. Lastly, yeah, so without further delay, I'm ready for the scene to introduce our speakers are exhibiting artists Laura Emsley, who's going to be presenting for 45 minutes, which will be followed by an in conversation with Maria Angelica Madero, with whom Laura has been collaborating, collaborating for almost a decade. Born in Cape Town South Africa Laura Emsley is a London based artist. She works across a range of media including papier mache, painting, sculptural objects and video often realises large scale immersive installations. In her work she takes on the role of explorer paleoanthropologist with a mixture of irony and authenticity. Her projects have been facilitated by residences and site specific exhibitions. Maria Angelica is an artist, curator and researcher at the London Interdisciplinary School. She's the Associate Professor and lead on Prep Culture and Content Creation. She is also honorary professor at El Bosque University in Colombia, where she was Head of Art from 2015 to 2020. She cares about contemporary visual culture, technology and radical education. Once the conversation is over, we want to have some time to hear from you. So please wait for one of our gallery assistants to kind of bring over a microphone. This is for the recording purposes so that we can record your voice and record your question. After this segment, if you haven't had the chance to look at our programme, we're going to have a lunch break. And once that is over, we'll meet here again at 3pm. For Emma McCormick Goodhart and Jessika Kenney's performance. Please be mindful of the fact that when you enter the space, it will be pitch dark, just wait for one of the gallery assistants to guide you to your seats. Due to the nature of the event, I won't be able to introduce our brilliant guests, which I have to say is a shame, as I will always be humbled by their brilliance, sincere care and deep commitment, which I want to acknowledge wholeheartedly. Without further ado, over to you dear Laura.

Laura Emsley 06:41

So the question for this talk, which arose early on was how did I end up with an art practice based around caves. So I've never really tried to explain this fully before. And so I'm going to follow some advice from

Wonderland because the original book after all was called Alice Underground. Begin at the beginning, the king said gravely, and go on till you come to the end. I was born in Cape Town, South Africa. In the 60s, my father ran a family business from the house, making souvenirs for tourist destinations, including the Cango Caves. My job was to brush on the psychedelic highlights. So trance and caves are forever united in my psyche. And really, I've been making cave paintings all my life, I would take the trip with my dad to deliver the order to the venue. And for me this was the chance of a great adventure descending into the earth. So being small, I was able easily to squirm my way through the devils chute and the postbox and emerge into enormous hollow cavern's. And here I discovered the hole in existence. And this was much more exciting than going into space where everything just goes on forever. But here, everything stopped. Here I could feel the weight of the entire earth, compressing in until it collapsed, opening up this mysterious portal right there in front of me, not to somewhere beyond, but rather to somewhere both within the cave. And within my head. It was a kind of frightening, but amazing discovery to find this passageway where these two merged, and through which I could feel the great underlying primordial force that connects them. And I knew then, in fact, especially then, that this can never really be understood, but it can only be experienced. So moving into adulthood, in the 80s, my husband and I left South Africa to avoid him being sent to prison for refusing to fight for the White Nationalist government under the apartheid system. And as my parents had been Scottish, we came to the UK. And I guess it was some kind of return. But really, it felt more like Alice in reverse, falling through the earth and coming out in the northern antipodes. So Alice's fall had never really made much sense to me anyway, reading it from the south because it was completely the wrong way round. And in any case, why was I in the south? How'd I got there? But what did make complete sense to me was the nonsense of wonderland, the surreal and the absurdity. The violence and the underlying presence of something dark and sinister felt like an accurate description of reality. And this impression was really only further enhanced by the later revelations about the darker side of Lewis Carroll. Wonderland is truly full of wonder. But it never was, nor is innocent. So now I was in the north and trying to work out why I was there and where I was. And I was feeling thoroughly disorientated. And this fragmentation of my personal life coincided with the fracturing art historical moment of the postmodern. And I was in freefall, and I urgently needed solid ground. So how to begin and the most prime necessity that I could think of for both life and for art is a



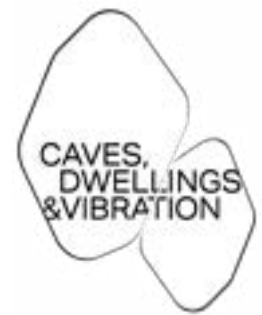
surface. And so taking books and magazines, from around me, I pulped and remade them into blank sheets. And this selection reflected my immediate prison surroundings, but it also revealed to me older cultural strata. And these became a kind of cartographic template from which I began to navigate through the past and the present in the hope of trying to reshape the terrain, and to find new routes. The one on the left is Sega Megadrive. And the one on the right is the young Turner. So the next evolutionary step from the surface was to make form. So again, pulping books and printed material and moulded them into various primordial shapes, and they sort of came out looking like a reef, like coral reefs. So it's Emily Dixon, the Daily Mirror, For Your Eyes Only, Vogue magazine, Beeno, Paradise Lost. Each one is a particular book or text, printed material. And one of these books that are published was Plato's Republic, in which he writes and has the allegory of the cave. And in this allegory, this is where he splits mind and matter. So he proposes that we're all prisoners inside the cave of this material world. And that true reality, real reality lies outside of the cave. And that it can only be accessed through the mind. And this definitely did not correspond to my early experience of caves, where the actual cave itself is where reality comes from. And this piece, that's this text that I had pulped, came out looking like brain coral. But with the folds of the brain are on the outside of the head, rather than on the inside of the head. And so I kind of liked this muddling up of this neat division that Plato had made between mind and matter. By this is a kind of way of inverting them and merging them. So it's interesting to think about the fact that Plato's idea about truth being outside of matter, is dependent on both the materiality of the written text and on the biological brain. This is the piece that has been reworked for the current exhibition Hollow Earth. And here it is proposed as a kind of remodelling a remaking a rethinking of Plato's cave. And it is also proposed as a model for the next work that I made, which was, of course, inevitably to make a cave. So in art history as an artist, one is always supposed to follow some sort of precedent, some art historical precedent. And I thought, Well, why stop with the Renaissance or the Modernist? Why not just go back to the very beginning? So I wanted to get beyond postmodern post modernism, by heading radically backwards. And at the time, there was this big split between theory and making, you either did the theory or you did the making, and the two didn't speak to each other. But I wanted both and I wanted to merge. So

helping 100 philosophy and theory books, I constructed a walk in cave. This work was first shown at East International in Norwich in 1997. And it then became a kind of travelling cave and it was shown at various places, such as in London at the Approach Gallery in 1998, in an exhibition called A to Z which was curated by Matthew Higgs also at the Witte De With Gallery in Rotterdam, and Magazine 4 Bregenz Austria. So it was a moving cave and it turns out that the very beautiful Magritte painting of the cave allegory, which you can see on the show in Hollow Earth is borrowed or what has been learned by Norwich castle. So, so for me, this is a very personally pleasing kind of alignment of a portal in time in place. So Plato had proposed that reality lives outside the cave. So the next step was to go out into this world to look for this real. And at the time, virtual reality technology was just emerging. And so taking a Sony Digi cam, I decided to make my own virtual reality film. So I made it with a hand in front of the camera, just walking my way through the city. What became clear to me was just how detached and alienated it felt. And I knew that I had to find a way to reconnect to the world. And that I would have to do this by going back inside a real cave. Around this time, I was asked to participate in an exhibition with a group called sensational mix in Rotterdam about the 2010 Football World Cup in South Africa. Knowing nothing about football, I decided to concentrate rather on the foot. And I had remembered a cave in South Africa, where a 3 million year old hominid called Little Foot was being excavated. So this little foot is now relative of the Sasquatch, Bigfoot, or of the baby dinosaur. So how can I get from Rotterdam to Little Foot to football, and pick up the threads of my own history, not from the south, but now from the north. And so began the tracing and reweaving of a tangled tale of human diaspora, colonialism, and the global capitalist exploitation of FIFA, which is current once again. The exhibition took place in the Afrikaanderwijk in Rotterdam, where the streets are named after the nationalist heroes of the Dutch South African settlers. Everyone living there now is completely oblivious to the historical meaning of these names. But to me, they were not dead ghosts, but familiar and reverberating with my lived reality of apartheid, South Africa, the catastrophic impact of which I was witness to, and his legacy still shapes life in the south now. It was hard to gain the trust to film in the community. But what broke the ice was, of course, kicking a ball around with the kids. So next, the next stage in this in this exhibition was that I

got a residency at UNESCO. The UNESCO site in South Africa called The Cradle of Humankind. And this is where Little Foot's cave is. And this was my first experience of just how political hominids are. Friends and connections seem to be drawn into an opaque web of unfathomable power games and institutional and political. And this even resulted in threats from lawyers. And I wasn't sure what I had put my foot into. Access to the fossil too Little Foot turned out to be impossible, even though I was on this residency, and I was told that the archaeologist didn't want a crackpot artist in his cave. The residency was set in the middle of the bush and it was surrounded by wildlife, mostly buck and hyenas and monkeys and vultures. There will also be many other smaller caves. And in absolute desperation, I decided to make my own Little Foot. And so I started to create the tableau of Little Foot two. And then one day out in the veld, I spotted a figure walking towards me. And we struck up this wonderful conversation in which he marked out pre hominid, hominid and sapien time for me onto the landscape, from that thorn bush to that ridge, and so on. And then he introduced himself to me in this extraordinary moment, as the head of Past, which I thought was a fantastic title. But it turned out the Past is actually the name of the organisation running the site. And he then asked me if I was the artist in residence, followed by is that you that's been messing in my cave, so mumbling a confession, I explained that I couldn't get access to the real Little Foot and that's what I was, I was missing in his cave. And to my relief, he laughed, and he said that he thought it was a very good likeness. And he added that he would get me the real one. So I wasn't banking on it. Given the experiences I had, but a few days later, I was given a number to call. I had been there a month, and the following day was actually my last day there. And in the middle of an electric Highveld Storm with a disconnecting telephone. I had to find a way to fight and convince this archaeologist to let me go down. And finally he relented, and he said, be there first thing in the morning. So there I was first thing in the morning at the Origin Centre tea room, having breakfast with Little Foot's foot, which he took out from a plastic bag in his pocket. It seemed, I didn't live up to his fears of a crackpot artist, and he very soon warmed up to the detective story of how a Little Foot was put together. But that's another tale for another day. Little Foot reveals the anatomical evidence of mutation when apes descended, but maybe they actually fell downwards from the trees to the ground to become human. So

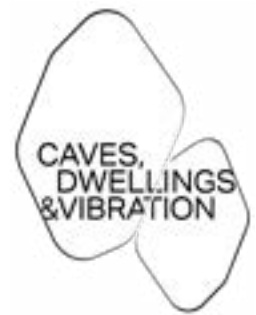
contrary to the usual graphic representation of an upward direction, the ape standing up to become human. With that implication of progress. Actually, we first came down to earth to be human. Curiouser and curiouser. Cried Alice. Now, I'm opening out like the largest telescope that ever was. Goodbye, feet, for when she looked down at her feet, they seem to be almost out of sight. Maybe getting so far off. Oh, my poor little feet. I wonder who will put your shoes and stockings on for you now, dears? I'm sure I shouldn't be able, I shall be a great deal too far off to trouble myself about you. You must manage the best way you can. But I must be kind to them thought Alice, or perhaps they won't walk the way I want them to. The excavation of Little Foot actually lasted for around 20 years, they actually took 20 years to take her out. And when I was there, they were very close to moving her. At which point that 3 million years stillness would have been lost because they would have moved her. And I wanted an image of this long, fossilising time exposure. The existing documentation of Little Foot was all archaeological. And I felt that the image should not be exclusively scientific, but it needed an alternative recording, which is why I was absolutely determined to get down there. We began our descent into the cave. Stepping further and further through aeons of strata, and through the materiality of geological time. Arriving in an anti chamber, we were met by a man with a light and he led us further into the void to a smaller hollow, where the earth seemed to compress in a way that was very similar to my childhood experience. I wasn't sure what to expect, and I couldn't really see anything remarkable just dust and dark, converging. shuffling along a ramp. All I could see was an insignificant pile of stones. The man was illuminating it as if it were important, but I felt deeply disappointed and guessed the fossil was inside the small, uninteresting pile of rubble. And this was such an anticlimax after all the months of effort. But then, something happened. As I changed position leaning over to the side, that portal just split right open, ripping through millions of years, like a cataclysmic special effect exploding inside me. And she and I collided face to face in a shocking encounter. Staring into my 3 million year old self. She stared back equally startled. And she and me and time merged. Of course, this was a death scene and looking death in the face is always unnerving. Particularly as this face was now my face millions of years ago, and unmistakably, somewhere between animal and human. And here she seemed to be either grimacing and terror, but also





grinning in a kind of huge cosmic Cheshire Cat joke. It doesn't matter which way you go. So the cat if you only walk long enough, you're sure to get somewhere. There she was travelling very very, very slowly. Like some 2001 Space Odyssey astronaut. Taking aeons. Millions of aeons to go through an earth gate, becoming us, becoming self aware, dreaming of what we might become, but unaware of what we will become. Back up on the surface, as the storm broke, unleashing thunder and lightning amongst the vultures and the monkeys. I have never felt so intensely alive and connected and filled with wonder. Later that day, I heard the news that Eugène Terre'Blanche, the white supremacist leader, had been murdered, and South Africa teetered on the edge of violent eruption. The following day, President Zuma announced the discovery of a new hominid in the cradle of humankind, appealing to common humanity in a call for unity. This was a newcomer called Naledi, meaning star in Sotho. She was found in the Rising Star Cave, I could feel the great tectonic plates of history shifting, and the pool of threads from the deepest past through the colonial history into the present and into me. So back in London, in 2013, an exhibition at the British Museum on Ice Age art was subtitled arrival of the modern mind in everyday use, modern means up to date, the future but from a postmodern perspective, it becomes nostalgic outmoded. Sorry getting a bit of, I don't know if this video is playing. No. There it is. We're getting we're getting the modern now. It's arriving modern is arriving. Okay, so in everyday use modern means up to date, the future, but from a postmodern perspective, it can also become nostalgic and outmoded. Adding to the confusion paleoanthropology uses modern to describe all homosapiens modern behaviour is defined by more sophisticated tool technology and intentional mark making. It was previously thought symbolic representation emerged suddenly in the Upper Palaeolithic caves of Europe, which is always called the great leap forward. And this was around 40,000 years ago. But in 1991, as the apartheid regime in South Africa was being dismantled, discoveries were made at a coastal cave near Cape Town of ochre stones with intentional engravings dating to 75,000 years ago. So modern behaviour is moving much further back in time and heading south. Then there's modernization, the modernization of the Industrial Revolution, and the 19th century, which marks a dramatic development in human technology. And modernism as a cultural movement then, was both forward and backward looking,

imagining future utopias, but also yearning for a pre industrialised past. We still define ourselves now with all these prefixes like post and ultra and trance. So model has developed this amazing kind of elastic capacity to move backwards and forwards in our attempt to position ourselves in time. And any clear linear and linear meaning is gone. And we are wondering, disorientated, lost in time. paleoanthropologists Curtis Marean has put forward the theory that shortly after modern humans first appeared, we were very nearly wiped out at about 100,000 years ago, the population dramatically declined as the planet entered a long glacial period. So DNA research points that everyone alive today is descended from a small group, possibly only in the hundreds. So we may actually have been down to just the hundreds on this planet as humans. And this is from this group in the Blombos region. So they were the sole survivors of our species. And actually, perhaps we are all from Cape Town in some way. I wondered if these earlier people were trying to inscribe themselves into the earth to extend themselves materially into the future beyond their own disappearance? Is it a record? Is it a message to us now? So Blombos is part of a cave and cultural complex along the east coast of Cape Town, close to where I grew up, and I was able to organise the film at a key associated site called Pinnacle Point. Here, the researchers are investigating the correlation between climate and the emergence of symbolic culture. At the top level, which is the present is the Pinnacle Point, luxury development and golf course, a bleak and ugly manifestation of the American dream. And this overlays the strata of European colonialism. And the earlier hunter gatherer groups, going all the way back to emerging modern humans. The chemical fertiliser, which is being used to maintain the golf course, is contaminating this unique underlying record of our 160,000 years in which our pre human presence is embedded. And we are literally wiping ourselves out of the geological record. I was lucky enough at this time to have conversations with David Lewis Williams, who wrote a book wonderful book called The Mind in the Cave. And in this book, he puts forward that abstract markings appearing in rock art throughout the world at different times are very similar, because they emerge during altered states of consciousness, which is widely practised by all homosapiens. And that our spectrum of consciousness, waking, dreaming, trance and so on was the same then as now. Based on neurological research, during trance, the mechanism of the visual

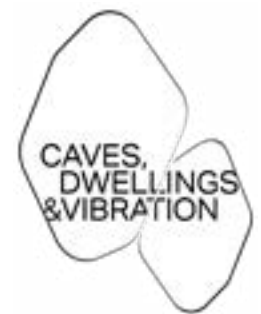


perception is reversed. And instead of actually seeing the external world, we are literally seeing the internal structure of the brain. And we then project this outwards as a hallucination. So it really is a kind of brain scan in a way. So whilst we think we are seeing visions, we are really just looking at the inside of our own head, same head through time. We don't know, we can't know what they meant then. But we can't help but overlay them now with our own psychological projections. So we recreate the past according to the present needs and anxieties. In a further book called *The Shamans of Prehistory*, which he co wrote with another anthropologist. This theory is then applied to European cave art, and he links the European cave art to shamanism and altered consciousness. I was very fortunate to get a three month residency and exhibition exhibition with Maison des Arts Georges Claude Pompidou in France, which is situated near the Pech Merle iceage caves, and next door to Andre Breton's house in a small village, very beautiful village called Saint Cirq Lapopie. So, the aim of my project was to try to layer up these three different moders, the modern of Blombos as in modern human behaviour emerging the modern behaviour of the modern behaviour at the in the art of Pech Merle. And then modernism in relation to Breton, the idea of the modern mind the sort of European idea of the modern mind, sorry, in Pech Merle, and then the idea of modernism in surrealism in Breton. I was extremely privileged to get permission to film in the caves, which was an amazing experience. And I was really intrigued by a panel which is called the Black frieze, which is filled with magnificent renderings of now extinct animals. And it's all about bodily functions, very sexual and scatological. And I felt it was very Freudian. Freud's method, which was based on the talking cure, actually came out of his early use of cocaine, in which altered states of consciousness allowed for the uncensored flow of thought. And I was thinking about the strong correlation between psychoanalysis and shamanism and how Surrealism was rooted in the psycho analytical theories of Freud. I had started making large decalcomania screens. So decalcomania is a type of monoprinting which was used by the Surrealists and Breton to stimulate readings of the unconscious and JG Ballard writes about them. They reveal eroded, rock like forms that touch some deeply buried memory, perhaps at an early stage in the formation of the brain's visual centres before the wiring is fully in place. The exhibition space was right next door to Breton's house, it was this beautiful big old, pseudo

mediaeval building and the installation extended over a large lower room and a small cave like upper chamber. So, using the architecture to fracture reflecting, layer up all kinds of wonderful new alignments started to emerge. In overlaying the three zones, certain of these mergings became very intensified. So firstly, there was the change in weather and its relationship to extinction. At Blombos, the near disappearance of humans at Pech Merle retreat into the case for survival, the animals that had become extinct, and then the Industrial Revolution and the Anthropocene. So 75,000 years old, the Blombos was this response to an existential threat at Pech Merle, as I said the images were of no extinct animals. And what it also did was make visible a perception of man as as animal and also as animal spirits as a projection of the human mind. And with surrealism the decalcomania's they in a way represent the surface, the surface itself, the rock face, the screen reflecting back the images of our unconscious. So in contrast to Plato's desire to escape from the cave, I think we need to submerge further into real caves to try and see ourselves in the dark, not as opposed to human fantasy, or as doomed to our failings and the forces of nature. But in the same way that the initial recognition of ourselves as an ape, evolving over vast amounts of time revolutionised our understanding. I think there is something that we are not yet seeing about ourselves. The thing that we have not managed to change from the very beginning, is our modern human behaviour. Perhaps some new self recognition would appear in a cave somewhere that will help us. Okay, thank you.

María Angélica Madero 37:47

Great, thank you so much for the talk. Let me be wary of time. Sure, how are we doing? Great. So it's a real honour to be here with Laura Emsley. We met at the Slade 10 years ago. We've been in dialogue for all this time, including a residency that I curated in Colombia, a long time ago, where you're looking at some pictograms, and a really recent in in July, a residency we did together in the north of Spain, where we visited loads of caves. So can we get the presentation going, will will show some of this research. And so more than a conversation, it has been really me trying to understand Laura's method and Laura's way of working to like, very ground, breaking work, trying to think the underground, the dark, the caves, also minds, there's a part of her work that has the deals with



minds, and also hallucinations for like 30 years. So I would like to start talking a little bit about the title of your work, like seeing the underlying implications of this. What is this idea of submerging? So in your work, I see a correlation between merging and submerging or throughout the whole talk in the way that you are submerging, to try to find ways to merge. So I want to kind of ask, what is that space of the cave because this is like why we're here as well. And in your talk, I picked up a little bit how you manage or you deal with like, what we would say our binaries, so inside and outside mind and body, modern consciousness, torch and virtuality present and past accidental and intentional in terms of like the cave is accidental, but the paintings are intentional, but also the singular encounters and those existing narratives that you're contesting. So what I would like to ask is, why should we think inside the cave?

Laura Emsley 39:55

Okay, well, I guess that relates to why I go inside a cave. Not a sort of thing we but yeah, I guess I think we should all go inside. And I would encourage everybody at some point to go inside a cave and take your kids inside a cave or what you know, it's one of the things that we should all definitely do. But I think that for me why it's really important to go back to the cave and go in actually inside it and think there is because that is really where we first externalised our mind outwards into the material world, and actually inserted it into the material world in this kind of extended mind. And that's what the Blombos stone is. It's the first, it's the first known I mean, perhaps it was earlier, but it's the first one we know of we we did that, where it's the beginning of represent kind of symbolic representation, which we have lived with as a kind of extension of ourselves till the present day. So that's really where it first started. And it's, it's not it when it happened like that. It wasn't, there wasn't a separation between the cave or the surface and ourselves. It was a it was a relationship. And I liked something that Kathryn said yesterday, Kathryn Yusoff mentioned yesterday, which I absolutely agree with. And that is that, really the cave participates in the painting or the making, I think that the caves have made us we are partly geological, because we are wired in to the cave. So that's where that early, that Ballard quote I mentioned earlier, where he talks about us being wired into the cave, in an early stage of our neurological development. So I think that we are wired in neurologically to the caves. And I think that what happened was

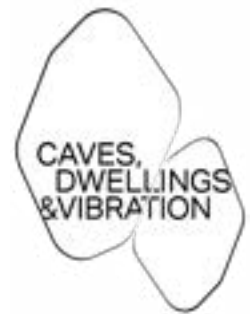
that somewhere along the line, and that's where Plato's cave comes in, comes into it, where he's he disconnects us from that relationship to the cave, and he sort of creates this separation of the mind as being the, the superior thing or, or where reality lies. So I think we really need to put our minds, we need to reconnect our own minds to our very early connection to it. So that's why I think we should go back.

María Angélica Madero 42:20

And we do that through submerging. So I see this idea of sub merging in order to merge. And that's, you know, the cave holding all those contradictions that we were talking about. But also, once you go inside there, there's also this idea of emergence, which you mentioned, and emit emergence, which is when something unpredictable, arises a, from a complex system. This is precisely I think, the way you're working, because you do put together a series of assemblages, surfaces, objects, moving images, time that enable for that emergence to appear. And I think you also move although you talk about some archaeological objects, you move away from that fetish of the archaeological object, because you're interested in those relations. Yeah. Yeah, in the thing itself, but it's like what relations does it establish? And what does it reveal that radical materiality reveal about the present? So I wanted to ask, what does, what role does emergence play in submerging merging?

Laura Emsley 43:25

Okay, so I guess, to get to the emergence, if I start with, with the merging, so for myself, the initial motivation was really because I felt so displaced because of my colonial upbringing that I had, where I've found myself in South Africa, where my relationship to the land was very problematic. So I felt very disorientated and uncomfortable with that connection. And then coming to the, coming back, or whatever it was to the UK, and then feeling very sort of disconnected. So I felt as if I was really just drifting off and floating away from the earth, and I just couldn't feel connected to the earth. So my initial motivation to actually go into caves was as a way of really trying to just put myself back into the earth to just connect to the earth, some way where it wasn't where I could get into it without all of this confusion of all this other stuff that I that I got disconnected. So that was my initial motivation was really to just try and put myself right back into the earth. And then of course, that's



the process that starts to happen, because, you know, I wanted in some way to reweave my connective tissue to the earth. And what happens when you go into caves is you get very disorientated. And when you're disorientated, you let go of all the existing structures that you have. They just disappear and you start to unravel those things. And you kind of end up with this unravelled space. And then there's a moment in which things because because it all gets unravelled, you can actually then start to move things around. And what happens for me anyway, is that it's not so much that I start moving them around, but they start to move around. And that's always that wonderful moment, of course, for all artists, when you make a work when you speak about how the work starts making itself, and that's really what happens for me is that it's when the when the things actually start moving themselves around, and making these kinds of alignments. And through those alignments, the moment you hope for, and sometimes you get them is the transformation. It's not just that you put one thing there, and you put another thing, and there's a relationship, but it's when you layer them and they merge. And actually, they transform into something that you've never seen before. And in that there's a kind of revelation that you see something, a kind of truth or a kind of understanding that you've never seen before. So that's kind of the hope. And also, the why the cave works so well to do that is because it acts as a kind of Gestalt. So it can hold all the fragmentation, all the multiplicity, it can hold contradiction, it can hold conflict, it can hold different kinds of knowledges. And it can hold it all in this unity. It's a kind of Gestalt. And that's the really important thing about the cave for me. Yeah,

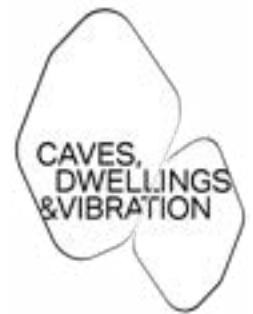
María Angélica Madero 46:29

Yeah, it's great. So in your practice, what I see is like, so we did submerge to merge to something emerges. But for me, what starts to emerge are like, You challenging those existing narratives of time. Yes. So it doesn't only emerge something that appears physically in the work, which we can also see that and you could I think, at length, explain some of the, you know, actual physical stuff that starts to happen, like, for example, in this work, the shadow, which is part of the work, etc. But not only physical things happen, but also your narratives start to emerge. Yes. So can you describe what are those narratives? That you're thinking that your work allows you to think?

Laura Emsley 47:12

Yes, I mean, I guess that the big meta narratives for me, because of how I was born into the world, are always about progress, direction and colonial narratives. And for me, it's very much about trying to rework roads. So for instance, if I think about that, in relation to say, the Blombos stone, what the Blombos stone does, this is the this is the image I showed earlier, where, you know, previously been thought that the modern mind and representation and art and drawing and everything got invented in this great leap forward in Europe, in European caves or anything from like 40,000 years ago. But the discovery of the Blombos stone completely inverts that narrative. It's a kind of copernican revolution, really, which I think that we still haven't really quite internalised in our culture, of really understanding that inversion. So that is a sort of specific way in which, you know, that kind of narrative gets challenged for me and gets reworked, Added that and part of that is this idea that the figurative of the European caves, is something that we all love, we all love the horses and the fabulously rendered images of animals. They're so brilliant. They're as good as renaissance paintings. And this is because we hold up the Renaissance as this superior model of progress that had developed from something very crude to become this very sophisticated form of representation, which we see figurative artists being. But in fact, if you look at the European caves, there are as many abstract images, they are, in fact, not many more abstract images than figurative images. And they are without hierarchy. So you can see that for the people making those images, they did not have a hierarchy of the figurative as being superior to the abstract, as well as the fact that we think of abstract thinking as a superior or at least it's a it's a sophisticated way of thinking. We think of it as being more sophisticated rather than the literal of the figurative. So there's a sort of conflict going on in these narratives for me, why do we think? Do we think abstraction is more primitive? Or do we actually think it's more sophisticated? So the narratives are very contradictory? So for me, it's a kind of unravelling and a reworking of those His kinds of narratives and the other one, I just want to mention the stories about the Anthropocene because I think that's really important because in terms of modernism, we see this as this big technological progression. But of course, what it's actually what it's actually done is accelerated us towards our own destruction. So is





it really, you know, progress. So it's those narratives about progress? Which way are we actually going? That I'm, I'm trying to connect these processes to

María Angélica Madero 50:35

Great. Yeah. So following up on that idea of progress, and light and enlightenment, I wanted to ask because I see your work doesn't try to bring to light something which you've seen some people interested in caves, where it actually wants to stick to the dark. And that has to do you mentioned depth formations, portal, descending, you know, like, we're not ascending in evolution, but we're actually like falling down descending into the cave. And also, you connect it to Lewis Carroll, which is like through a passageway, then you appear somewhere else. And that place where you appear, is a bit absurd and surreal. And that space that is also physical, it's also psychic. So you mentioned the unconscious, the irrational, the experience, and that's phase and hold statements, multiplicity. So I wanted to ask, why should we stick to the darkness?

Laura Emsley 51:32

Okay, so the darkness for me is where we look for what we don't already know. So, you know, if we see something, if we look in the light, it's what we already know, we already see it, and we already know it. So it's really, really important to look in the dark. And, and because in the dark also this, you know, you're able we're able to let go of the rational, and of the known structures. And it takes us into that world of the unknown into the world of the surreal. And here is where the possibility is for the new to arise. So it's about kind of taking us back to the kind of point zero and allowing something, something that we haven't seen before, to come out. And part of that I think is, is this, I'm really just an old fashioned existentialist actually, I sort of think, and I think that we it's interesting, because I think we are in a very existential moment of having to confront our own extinction or the possibility of our own extinction now, and I think, is that what is so important about that it's not nihilistic or negative for me to think about that, because it's when you face that reality, and you actually really look at it, and you really stay with it and experience it, that you start to get to a point where you can really feel and work out what is it then that is of value? In the face of that, in the face of

that reality? Not in the face of wishful thinking or being connected to everything or whatever it is, you know, what, in the face of that brutal reality, which is that, you know, we're kind of in an existence, which, which doesn't, in which we mean nothing. How do we formulate value in relation to that? So I think that that's tremendously important in staying with the dark, that we that we have to face that, and make our sense of self and value in in relation to that. And I think that sorry, just about it's about accepting our limitation, and fragility, rather than sort of the the idea of the control of the Enlightenment, the scientific control, that we will come into this light of knowing, and then we will be able to control everything, somewhere, we have to understand that we are fragile, and that we can't control everything. And that we have to stay with that and find a way to live within that context. Yeah, yeah. And I think part of that darkness as well, it's also about stillness, you know, because also, I talk about her stillness, this kind of 3 million year old stillness, which is amazing because it's, you know she in a way kind of, is a is a index or of our sense of being human because we define ourselves as these creatures that came down from the trees or whatever and stood up this definition of the foot is absolutely fundamental to our narrative of who we are as human. And there she stayed for this 3 million years, which while the whole of human evolution was happening, So what happens when you have the dark is that time, you don't see time moving in the dark, because you don't see things moving. And we don't see things moving, that's when time stops. So it kind of stops time. And you really experience that 3 million years as an actual entity. It preserves time, it preserves time. It's an absolute capsule in which that 3 million years is preserved. Yeah.

María Angélica Madero 55:33

So I want to pick up on that on those 3 million years, I think you described at length, your experience of looking at Little Foot, and after looking at those images, which I think you haven't shown ever before. So it's very exciting that you can, I mean, that we're experiencing those images. So I googled Little Foot. And if you google Little Foot, you will see that she looks like an object, she doesn't look the same. She here she looks as human, she looks like us. And there's a big difference in the representation, the scientific image that like puts her out of the context of the cave, and she's an object and a bit less shocking than seeing

your images. And I want to see what I want to talk about because we talked about existing big narratives. I want to talk about the single thing, singular encounters in your work. Yeah. And how did that encounter with Little Foot then started to impact on your practice?

Laura Emsley 56:29

Okay. Yeah. I think that this thing about as an artist, I don't want to be in my studio making, making stuff about the world, I want to really situate myself in the world. I don't want to be creating some kind of science fiction or some kind of fantasy. I want it to be situated in the real. For me, the real is absolutely key. And I think that when you see these images of Little Foot that you google, what has happened is that she has been taken out of reality. She has been removed from that 3 million years from that context. And so she just becomes a singular object. So for me, it was really important that she remains within this, this reality, because it is the relationship between reality and imagination that I'm interested in. There's a quote from Benjamin, where he says, Walter Benjamin, that is where he says, imagination is the realisation of the real. And that is what distinguishes it from fantasy. And then I'm also very interested in Baudelaire's idea that imagination reveals the secret and intimate relationships between things. And that's what I'm trying to work with, and then connect those up to the larger narratives.

María Angélica Madero 57:56

Yeah, so how does it connect, then that radical materiality of the encounter to the present? Yeah, you mentioned a bit in your work was going on FIFA? Yeah.

Laura Emsley 58:07

So it's then how does that real experience of her. How do I then connect it to these meta narratives and to what's actually going on? So you know, it's a restructuring of the narratives which are about the progress of ape to human. So I'm trying to rework that narrative through that through my experience of her. Also, other narratives of her they have then humankind kind of this, this huge diaspora of humankind, this kind of global diaspora, colonising humans colonising the world. And that leads me to back to the Rotterdam situation to my situation here in Europe now, notions about immigration into Europe. And then thinking,

Well, what about the immigrations out of Europe, in in colonialism to the settler colonies of which my history is tied to? And then also, where does something like FIFA and FIFA's global capitalism fit into that? So it's how do I take that very raw encounter with her and connect those threads to those events? And that's what happens in the work that I'm trying to do.

María Angélica Madero 59:18

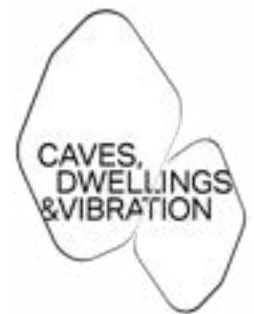
Yeah I know, the this idea of revealing the secret of things, secret relationships. Yeah. I think it's really key in your work, especially because what you mentioned is not about fantasy. It's, it's about the real. So how does you mentioned that time collapses? Yes. And that it's not time travel? Yes. So what happens in that encounter? And how do you, you talked about actually, you talked about compressing time. Compressing time. Yeah. So how does that happen?

Laura Emsley 59:46

Yes, I mean, the compressing time is happens through the collapsing of time. Yeah. And that is because partly because of the dark, you know, that helps to collapse it. But what I'm really trying to do Do all the time is all the time is to find this this way of, of converging. It's not about getting into a time capsule and travelling back into the past, or she doesn't travel to where I am. But it's a way in which the past the present and the future merge, and they become a kind of single substance and you feel yourself as suspended in the substance and, and you are there in that zone with her simultaneously. So you really experience it as a presence, rather than as an absence or going back into something. It is a kind of where it all kind of merges into one sense of substance, one sense of continuous experience. So we are kind of held kind of suspended in time and also in the cave. The cave is what holds us kind of suspended in that time. I think that's yeah.

María Angélica Madero 1:00:57

That's great. Yeah. Last part, I want to just talk about the present of the work really briefly. I know we want to, to listen to you, your questions, but I think it's really important to see where your research is going. Because it's so I think you're all the time thinking with new discoveries and new things about archaeology. And as I mentioned, in July, we were in the



north of Spain, where we visited six caves. A lot of anthropologists, this was organised by Alfonso Ragan. And yeah, we talked about the memory of strata, DNA, the materiality of archaeology, all these things. Can you just briefly describe what are you thinking right now? Where is your work?

Laura Emsley 1:01:40

Okay, I'll try to briefly, briefly, briefly be brief about 5 million years quickly. So I think I think about the the work that I'm trying to do now in the European caves, a lot of that is related to Neandertals. Obviously, the Neanderthals were big in the European caves, especially the Spanish caves. At the moment, I'm really fascinated by this idea that, in fact, perhaps we did not, we did not actually come up with the idea of figurative art. Of that, in fact, we copied the Neandertals, that the and the Neanderthals actually had a very crude form of figurative art, which we then copied when we got to where they were. And this really sort of links in to the other thing for me, which is important. And that is this gap between the inscribed image that we have from Blombos in South Africa. And then there is this gap that's, it's 75,000 years ago. And then we have a massive gap between that and the sort of first things merging that we start to see outside of Africa, as as Sapiens started to move out of Africa, but there's nothing in between. So where is that? And that's the thing I'm really, really curious about, because obviously, it must be there. So oops. So we're obviously just looking in the wrong place, we're not looking hard enough. So I'm really trying to work with that. I'm also trying to work with the idea of the matrix. So in archaeology, the matrix is actually the soil that gets kind of discarded afterwards, that the matrix is what holds the objects. So you know, what happens in a dig is that that is just kind of thrown away somewhere. So I'm trying to work with that matrix. And think about that relationship, which goes back to that image I showed about as wiping ourselves out of the geological record. So if we take ourselves out of the earth, and what's left is just the earth. So I'm kind of working with that relationship. And thinking about that also, very much in relation to the anthropocene. And then lastly, just one of the ongoing projects is that cave that I mentioned, that was the papier mache cave, which contains 100 theory and philosophy books. My aim is to return all of those books to a particular cave somewhere. And so at some point, I'm actually hoping to return Plato's allegory to

a cave around here somewhere so that I want to I want to put them all back into the cave.

María Angélica Madero 1:04:22

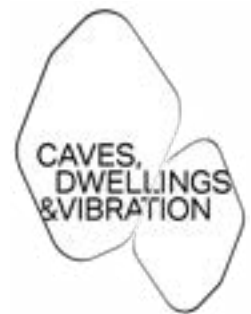
Great, so we're gonna welcome some questions from you. Please wait for the mic before talking. Yes.

1:04:39

Think that was so fascinating, thank you so much. And I have a question about mark making in the caves and drawing. And thinking about at what point when you're working with archaeologists things kind of turn into something that's considered to be maybe vandalism or how is contemporary mark making sitting on top of all of these other types of engagement with place? Yeah. How do those things kind of sit on top of one another? And where does the permission stop and the value stop or something around that? That's yeah,

Laura Emsley 1:05:14

it's a very sensitive area, you know, which, which, you know, Little Foot was my first site. And it was, it was a real wake up call for me and kind of, wow, this is very political. This involves all kinds of things, you know, that I hadn't thought about. And those, there is this huge, which would, you know, archaeology is struggling with all the time is that conflict between access, and preservation, and who gets to have the access? It's very contested. And I think that in a way, part of my advantage, and all the for all artists, I think, is there's an advantage and a disadvantage, because in the one way, somehow, because you not part of the sort of PhD programmes that are trying to come at it through archaeology. I almost got to the front of the queue, in some way, it's like at Pech Merle, I actually got to film there, because I was an artist. But if I had been an archaeologist, I wouldn't, wouldn't have got that permission. So in some ways it can be, but I think it also is that one has to be really, really, really respectful as an artist to those sensitivities. But also, then you come up against that resistance. And, you know, who owns what it was, like, who owned that image of Little Foot? You know, I was a, we needed another image of that fossil, you know, and I thought that the image belongs to all of us, and not just to science. But they had control of that image. And it was only through pure luck that I had sort of got in there. And



also been when I was desperate and trying to make my own Little foot tableau. You know, that was hard, because I was in an archaeological sensitive site, and I was working with some other little cave, which they weren't interested in. But what if I had disturbed something or? So? Yeah, I think it's just it is a very sensitive area. I don't know if you have any thoughts about that?

1:07:28

We were talking a bit last night about the caves around here. And whether when young people go in and make marks on the walls, they have less value, I see this as well. Okay. Yeah. And that connection seems, you know, yeah so immediate and so urgent. Yet somehow the contemporary ones feel like, you know, or a contemporary artist, indeed, going in feels like, you're going to disturb something.

Laura Emsley 1:07:51

I guess I guess that's got something to do with that in a way that the problem is that the older ones, or they can tell us something. Which, I mean, obviously, the new ones can also tell us something, but we have more access to what the new ones can tell us. The problem is that the fragility of those old ones, the kind of the way in which they, if we lose them, we're really lose information. Whereas now, we still have that information, or we can get that information from somewhere else. So that for me is the tricky thing.

1:08:38

Thank you very much for a very fascinating talk. And it kind of certainly made alot of for your work, it kind of made me rethink the cave and re reimagine the cave. And you use the word earlier, hierarchy. And it made me think of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which is always presented as a triangle, even though he didn't imagine it that way himself. And it just to me, the cave is a kind of could be like a metaphor for for human needs. Because it meets the very basic human need of shelter, which I'm guessing was its original kind of function, if you like, but also the highest level of of human need the need for self expression. self actualization through art and representation also exists within the cave. So I'm thinking a better way to represent Maslow's hierarchy of needs isn't isn't a triangle or pyramid but as a cave.

Laura Emsley 1:09:38

Yeah, that's lovely. That's very nice. Yes. So in a way, the cave is a kind of leveller of those kinds of hierarchies which which ties in very nicely for me for you know, we do that that those needs on the needs of having a dwelling are as great as the needs of expressing oneself in art, they are not, there is no hierarchy there. We need them both. Because we are embedded in the material, and we are psychic creatures. So we are, we are both.

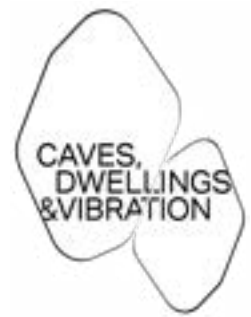
Ella Finer 1:10:14

I had a question, thank you so much this has been really wonderful. And I have a question in a way, I guess that brings together questions of access and questions of need, and not just then need but also about wants or desires in terms of access. Because when you were talking about brilliantly, you said, on entering the cave, you let go of existing structures, and behind you, there was an image of scaffolding entering into a cave. And it just made me think, I guess, about kind of how we enable bodies to enter caves. And for what purpose? Or is it for touristic purposes, as well as research purposes? Yeah. And then who feels entitled, in the sense to go into the cave? So? So thinking about infrastructures, really, and I guess, can we let go of all structures? And it talks to this tension that you say about all this contradiction that the cave holds contradiction that to enter the cave in even the most respectful or careful way there might have to be some thoughts about kind of human intervention or building or infrastructural work. So I just wondered if you could talk about what your experiences have of these different ways of entering a cave?

Laura Emsley 1:11:39

Gosh, that's such an interesting question. And I mean, I think, you know, I think yesterday, there was an people, you know, people were talking about how that was something that came up in the talk yesterday with Flora and Frank that that way of, you know, of how you get in there is part of the experience. So if you go in with a tourist group, you if you're going on the guided tour, which which does give kind of pretty wide access, obviously, that's, you know, you want that wide access, but it's a completely, completely different experience. If you go in with yourself





and a cameraman, and a guide, you know. And as an artist, I was getting the opportunity to do that. And I mean, it's a totally different experience, that way of going down into the cave to see Little Foot only, you know, that hardly anybody was allowed in there except him and, you know, the guys working on it. What was interesting for me in that was, it was quite kind of makeshift, you know, there wasn't. But you could really tell that everybody had been and was working in that space in a very kind of pragmatic way and scientific kind of way. And because for me, it was this completely overwhelming, emotional existential moment. It was quite interesting how that then affected everybody else there. And there was a very different sort of Yeah. This was in Spain. Yeah.

María Angélica Madero 1:13:28

That that's a closed site to the public. Yeah. Only archeologists.

Laura Emsley 1:13:34

Yeah. But I think that again, just goes back to you know, that thing of how this is a this is a conflict. It's always this conflict between who gets access, but how do we also have the information? I don't think there's an easy answer. And it's always political, and it's always about power and invested powers. Yeah, I think it's difficult.

Emma McCormick-Goodhart 1:14:00

Thank you so much. Little Foot makes me think of another Alice level, which is that many of these marks were made by either infants or adolescents. Infants are adolescents in certain caves. And that certain fossilised footprints have been left by adolescents. And as you speak, of how the narrative received so much more attention than the abstract. So do walls receives so much more attention than floors, you know, for so many reasons, but how, what what can we do, to devote ourselves to the floor, so to speak, so to watch to use keys, to devote ourselves or try to devote ourselves to the floor?

Laura Emsley 1:14:58

Devote ourselves to what?

Emma McCormick-Goodhart 1:14:59

The floor, the floor, the floor, the floor, as in the ground.

Laura Emsley 1:15:05

Oh, isn't the ground? Wow. Okay, so yeah, I mean, but this is the great thing about a cave is that when you go in you get so spatially disorientated, you know, everything starts to float. And you also, you know, you feel the whole weight of the earth, you know, whether it's under your feet or around you, you really feel the weight of the earth. And I think the floor is, but it's quite interesting to see because I'm thinking about Altamira where, actually, when this was like the Spanish cave, we're in the very early beginnings of finding these images. They were going in and looking at it was predominantly a father and his daughter that went in, you probably are all familiar with the story of and everybody was looking at the floor. And it was only this little girl who wandered off with the light and she looked up. And she actually saw on the ceiling, the paintings and so I think, I think it's maybe sort of just about looking everywhere. You know, and sort of, maybe not dividing it up into floor and ceiling. I mean, that, again, is about orientation, you know, in Alice, it's like, where is the north? Where is the south? Where is the antipodes? You know, let's try and rethink the spatial interconnections. But yes, I think, you know, the floor. I mean, it always amazes me as well how most of these finds happen through children or dogs. I mean, there's also the mining thing, which is huge, you know, because that is what uncovered most of it. Yeah. But it's yeah, it's the it's the dogs and the kids that find it. And maybe because they just not looking in the places we're supposed to look.

María Angélica Madero 1:17:00

I'm sorry, we have to finish now. But you can come and talk to Laura. Thanks so much, Laura. It was really good. Thank you everybody. Thanks for coming and attending.

Colophon

Curator: Canan Batur

Assisted by: Philippa Douglas

Technician: Jim Brouwer