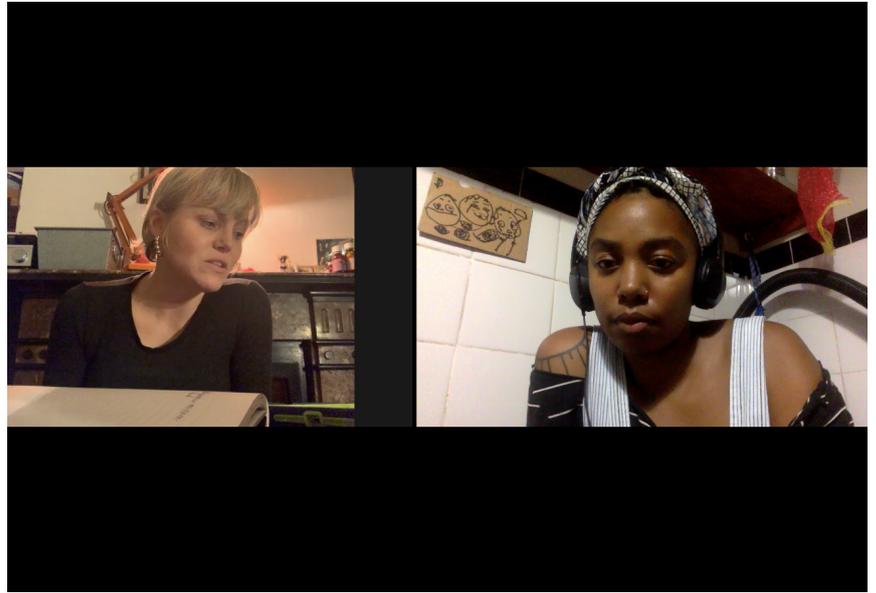


## Flora Parrott & Lindiwe Matshikiza Hearing from Artists



Flora Parrott (L) and Lindiwe Matshikiza (R)  
Image courtesy Lindiwe Matshikiza

*Flora Parrott is an artist and PhD researcher who blends geographical and artistic research methods to investigate experiences of darkness and the subterranean. Lindiwe Matshikiza is an artist, writer, director and performer who uses theatre making as an approach to collaborative work across disciplines. They co-produced a work which is displayed at MIMA in the exhibition Sonia Boyce: In the Castle of My Skin in Spring 2021. The exhibition is developed as a collaboration between MIMA and Eastside Projects, Birmingham. Flora and Lindiwe are in conversation with Olivia Heron, Assistant Curator, in January 2021.*

**OH: The starting point for your sound installation *I'm in the bath on all fours* (2019) was a field trip Flora made to learn more about a newly discovered fish, the cave loach. Tell us about the works and how your collaboration unfolded.**

FP: In 2018, I came across a headline about a new species of fish called the cave loach that had been discovered in Germany. I went over to meet with Dr. Jasminca Behrmann who had been studying it at Konstanz University. I also met with the diver who made the discovery, Joachim Kreiselmeyer. He told me about his cave diving club and how they had studied these caves for years. I became preoccupied with the idea of the club going down into the caves over and over again and eventually coming across these little fish that had been there all along.

The idea of the 'moment of recognition' has been central to this project but so has learning more about the biology of the fish. It evolved from a surface-dwelling, sighted species to a creature that has no pigment in its skin and an altered eye structure that means it has little or no vision. Its shape also became more elongated, and its metabolism decreased – they slowed and stretched as they moved underground. Central to this project is the way the fish navigate, which is very different to surface loaches. It seems to be something to do with sensors in their skin, they read the space through vibrations. This was interesting to me but I was unsure how to take it forward. My work is so visual and these are creatures that exist in the deep dark of the underground. The evening after I saw the fish I wrote a long and confusing email to you Lindiwe, and amazingly it seemed to resonate.

LM: I feel our creative relationship was seeded in that long walk we took across Johannesburg where we talked about all kinds of things, mainly art and what we were doing. We were in our twenties. We had just met, we hit it off quickly in a very short period when you were in Johannesburg and then we always wanted to find ways to do something together. Over the years it was like: 'What about this? Or this?' but we never quite found the right moment where it came together. I think seeing each other's work from afar and then meeting up when we were in the same place laid the



Lindiwe Matshikiza and Flora Parrott. *I'm In The Bath On All Fours* 2019. Installation view at Well Projects, Margate  
Images courtesy the artists

groundwork, setting up a feeling that when we have a chance to be together, it's a very rich talking and creating space. Somehow with this project, the right things aligned to make more momentum around that.

FP: What was so lovely was that in your initial email back to me when I was in Konstanz, you said you'd just been at a writing workshop and you'd been thinking about ultrasound, which immediately struck a chord with my thoughts about cave loaches. What is so reinforcing about working with you is that you are so perceptive, and have an ability to consolidate and transform seemingly disparate thoughts. The story of the fish came to represent something unseen but that you know is there; an experience that feels simultaneously incredibly close and yet distant. How you develop relationships through sense and intuition, and during pregnancy, with something within you but which you know nothing of. The story of the cave loaches, which is pretty obscure, makes sense through your narratives. It sits against everyday human experiences. I knew the story was relevant but I couldn't exactly say why. Your writing does that so succinctly Lindiwe.

**OH: What would you like the audience to feel when they encounter the works?**

FP: The works were made with movement in mind. The materials were put together in an attempt to think through what it might mean

to understand our surroundings through skin and touch. When I was making them I was thinking about air pressure and surface area, which is why the vellum and plastic are fringed. The objects also follow the narratives in Lindiwe's spoken word: hopefully the audience might catch a phrase and see the relationship with the materials. The 'moment of encounter' between the diver and fish was central to the thinking, so it would be wonderful if that was felt by the audience, like they've stumbled across a curious little world inside the structure.

LM: I find myself constantly coming back to the question, what does it mean to be discovered? After having existed for however many years?

FP: Around 25,000 years.

LM: It obviously says more about us and what we're aware of than about the actual fish. Equally, with ultrasound, we access a very private, developmental space. There are certain schools of thought that say you shouldn't be able to look into a pregnancy with ultrasound, you must just sort of intuitively be. And yet we find a way to look. The project speaks to the human fascination with science and discovery and the need to rationalise and understand something that's very, very deeply mysterious and very much longer and older and more complex than we can imagine.



Lindiwe Matshikiza and Flora Parrott. *I'm In The Bath On All Fours* 2019. Installation view at Well Projects, Margate  
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**OH: Can you talk about the theatrical elements of these pieces?**

LM: I think we had a mutual, intuitive sense that we would like to explore some kind of theatrical form. The sculptures that Flora worked on for this have a kind of playful, tactile, leaning towards set design feel. And I come from the theatre, so that's always one of the major angles I look at things from. How would this look and feel as a performance piece? How would you populate it? Which characters and people could deliver this text and exist in this world?

FP: Definitely. There was an early ambition for you to come over and be in these works, performing the texts. That wasn't possible, but in a funny sort of way, the evasion of that possibility is fascinating because it means the work has been empty. It meant to have you in it really. But your voice is there, and now there are going to be other voices there too and the bodies of the audience moving around it.

LM: It's so interesting what you say about emptiness and the suggestion of presences. It speaks back to the fish, ultrasound, darkness, caves and the subterranean, all the kinds of things we've been talking about. I think maybe that will be a defining feature of this work, to constantly be imagining something grandiose and quite formal, and yet never able to have bodies on a stage or in the room. Everything about this project is long distance, but there's something interesting about that. We did a

Skype reading in 2019 at Well Projects. They were load shedding in Johannesburg so I had no electricity. It was a candlelit dark space and I was performing to imaginary people. I couldn't understand who was there, what it felt like in the room, how my performance was coming across. It's been interesting rather than frustrating though and as a project it's started to occupy its own place in my mind.

**OH: The works are housed within a sculpture by Sonia Boyce which is the lodestone of the exhibition *In The Castle of My Skin* at MIMA, Middlesbrough. The show explores surfaces, boundaries, and intersections, between people, and between inner and outer worlds. How does your work speak to these ideas?**

FP: Being included in Sonia's show amongst this kaleidoscopic work enhances our project on so many levels. One of the most exciting elements for me was working with Lindiwe and handing over some creative control through collaboration, guided by other voices and looking at ideas through the lens of another artist. The exhibition, and Sonia's practice more broadly, is so inherently collaborative and to have the opportunity to explore ideas within and alongside the work of many other artists is very generative. It's made me think about adding complexity rather than streamlining as a way of working. Making more connections rather than editing down. Another unexpected and wonderful point of collision has been the correlation between the development of



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Lindiwe's script and the story in the novel by George Lamming after which the exhibition is named. Early on in our understanding of the tale of the cave loach was the idea of a displaced young person adapting to unfamiliar surroundings, like the tiny fish learning to navigate deep underground, having to think through a new register.

Our characters are still evolving and this show has given us the opportunity to have new vignettes read by voices from Middlesbrough and Johannesburg and so to really think about the journeys these characters might go on.

**OH: As artists you both explore the borders between practices. Interdisciplinary working facilitates new knowledge and approaches. Has your collaboration sparked any new ideas or ways of working you'd like to develop in future?**

LM: Collaborative work is a major interest of mine. You can work in a relatively traditional way in the theatre but I lean towards workshopping and working with diverse kinds of people to develop something that maybe doesn't look like a traditional theatre piece. This process has been very different again, it felt quite gentle, maybe because we are also working remotely from each other with different time schedules. We have conversations then go away and think about things in our own way. In that sense, it felt very freeing.

FP: I trust your work implicitly so it has been really generative to just let the two ways of

working bump up against each other over a long period of time. There's been something like that about this project from the start. Firstly with Dr. Behrman and Joachim Krieslemier in Konstanz, then with Well Projects, the event with you over Skype and geographer Professor Harriet Hawkins, and now with Sonia, Eastside and MIMA. I keep wondering how far it will go.

One of the things I find most interesting about the underground is how quickly it can become alien. Just a few metres down, it is like another planet. These spaces can give you a completely different perspective on the way we experience and navigate the surface. Now it almost doesn't matter that this project started with a tiny, almost invisible fish. It seems to be more about surface encounters and people, how we know and sense and adapt. Even if the story of the fish is not stated in future iterations, I think it gives the stories that emerge a richness.

LM: In terms of the form, the collaborative process we've built and keep repeating has been really inspiring to me. I think what we've developed has allowed for a kind of freedom. It becomes quite an intimate relationship, locked in on Skype or Zoom, like meeting on a different planet.

FP: The project doesn't seem to land, perhaps partly because of the way we've been working. I can't see it set permanently. It's fluid. It keeps shapeshifting.