

Durham Research Online

Deposited in DRO:

15 October 2019

Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Perlin, Jenny and Nieuwenhuis, Marijn and Nassar, Aya (2019) 'Feeling (y)our way in the dark : an interview with Jenny Perlin.', *Emotion, Space and Society*, 33 . p. 100596.

Further information on publisher's website:

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2019.100596>

Publisher's copyright statement:

© 2019 This manuscript version is made available under the CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 license
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Additional information:

Use policy

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a [link](#) is made to the metadata record in DRO
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Please consult the [full DRO policy](#) for further details.

This interview reflects on the artist's submission for this special issue

<https://vimeo.com/268479642> (password: orpheus). All images in this document are taken from the artwork.

A hole poses a challenge to our rational and affective investment in promise of groundedness, wholeness, firmness and light. The ungrounded is typically imagined and sometimes thought of as the irrational, unsound, and probably the meaningless. A lack, a void, a crack, something missing, maybe even a thing damaged. We wonder, however, if there is a possibility to feel our way from the politics of reason and move to an ephemeral poetics of art that inhabits the space inside the collapse of materiality. Can there be meaning within absence? Is there a place for us here in holey absence?

***** [name anonymised] tries to make sense, maybe a new sense, of what is essentially thought to be senseless. In *One Hundred Sinkholes*, the installation through which we got to know her first, ***** redraws large sinkholes in smaller forms and fills them with colours and geometric lines, before depicting them in a 16mm film. The film renders the images in graphite, insistently filling the whiteness of bordered voids. In *The Long Sleepers*, which she curated for this special issue, ***** takes us through the mythical and geological subterranean, *wondering* through caves and tunnels to bring (back) into question the supposedly known world of solidity and wisdom. In what follows, we interview her about the spatial, the affective and poetic practice of inhabiting and being-with the dark, the underground and the ungrounded in her art.

Editors: *The first question, perhaps most obvious, is where you got the idea from to work on the theme of so-called "long sleepers"?*

Interviewee: Since 2014, I have made four experimental films and several drawing series about *The Long Sleepers*. Through experimental animation, live-action film, drawing, and performance, I have explored the devastating phenomena of sinkholes, the formation and development of caverns

and cave tourism, mining mysteries in a novel by Jules Verne, the plagiarized origin of the Rip van Winkle story and its transposition from German folktale to American legend.

This ongoing project is a body of work collected around stories of figures who fall asleep underground and wake up 20, 50, or hundreds of years later. When awake, these individuals can take on a range of roles in society. In narratives they usually function as prophets, fools, or stubborn refuseniks. I began my research thinking about a long-ago trip I took to Ephesus where the Seven Sleepers story comes from. This narrative is found both in the Bible and Koran and describes pious believers sleeping for about 300 years in a cave outside Ephesus during a period of religious persecution. I had always wanted to explore these legends further. I've borrowed the term "long sleeper" itself from a paper by the Dutch scholar Pieter W. van den Horst, whose "Pious Long-Sleepers in Greek, Jewish, and Christian Antiquity" was one of the many texts I read while researching this project (van den Horst, 2015). Long Sleepers seemed like a perfect term to connect the themes I hoped to weave together in my works. Underground spaces, knitted together by tunnels and flowing waters, populated by albino creatures and foggy wraiths present a complex structure completely invisible to those who walk on the surface. *Long Sleepers* possess a secret knowledge of the interconnectedness of the underworld but cannot access it except through dream or foggy memory upon awakening.

We would like to know more about the examples you draw from. They seem to originate from across time and space, e.g. forgotten rivers in Latin America, German folk tales, Greek myths and others. How did you select the examples? What was your focus or thought process?

As an artist, I occupy a privileged position of being able to range widely across areas inclusive of image, sound, map, poem, chemistry, and anthropology--always an amateur in all areas, snapping up what fits the niches carved into my imagination. The Underground Rivers section was the first

part I made of this project. I have been fascinated with the routes that water can take, invisibly, under our feet. I'm less interested in the geology of it than in the metaphor of it. As one who works in an interdisciplinary way, I felt that underground rivers could represent the ways in which our minds make connections across time and space, wending their ways through the pleasures and chasms of different disciplines.

[Figure 1 here]

Caption I: Still from *The Long Sleepers*

Could you say something about the process of the producing the artwork? You, very poetically, speak about amateurism through a range of sources, one captivating medium in your work is film. Could you tell us more about the process of filming? The voice-over? The choice of music? And, of course, your 16 mm camera?

I work between methods of research and improvisation. Details from the research process embed themselves in my mind and attach to images that don't necessarily seem completely clear. To me, the poetics of taking months of my life to do an animation technique copying a short sequence from Jean Cocteau's film *Orpheus* means that the mark of the hand over time comes into the film as these trembling characters feel their way through the dark. The animated image then becomes simultaneously *of* the story (going through a cavern) and *metaphors* for the process of making creative work, the transpositions that Washington Irving made to Peter Klaus, the imaginative fantasy that Jules Verne sprouted, or the strange episodic film that I have here created.

Music is another example of when spontaneity meets dedication. I rarely turn on the radio, but one evening I was listening to Q2, which is the "alternative" classical radio station in New York. I was in the other room when I heard some really strange and amazing stuff. I ran to see what it was and just before the track ended I saw the title "Crystal Mooncone." At first, I thought it was a

person with a strange name but then found out it was a group of improvisational musicians from New York and Michigan. After that, I listened to all their stuff and contacted them to ask permission and they graciously granted it. So much of the music in this film is from their work. The opening music of the film is meant to lull you into some kind of sleepy complacency before being jolted by a track of Ween about Rip van Winkle. That part is supposed to be funny, as is the music in the end credits of the film, various covers of the Velvet Underground song “After Hours.”

For the voiceover, I worked to integrate factual and speculative elements involving my –as well as more scholarly- interpretations of the literary elements with more experiential language based on my own experiences but couched in a more neutral language. I have very rarely made a film with this much voiceover, but I was hoping to make something more direct and clear than I usually do.

Finally, I often think of Mary Ann Doane’s (2002) book *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* of the use of tunnels and moments of darkness and ephemerality as elements presenting both contingency and its recuperation in early cinema. I’ve been quite influenced by Doane’s work as I fumble my way through the winding caverns of 16mm filmmaking.

We get the sense there are many different times (so to speak) operating, represented and even questioned in your work, could we ask you to speak a little about the role and depiction of time and temporality in this and the previous project (100 sinkholes)?

I am generally interested in what I’ve tried to understand on my own of the writings of Henri Bergson, and despite the frustrations of the filmmaking process I still believe it’s the best way to express some of these ideas about the expansion and contraction of time. I engage with ideas of duration trying not to use the more typical cinematic language (i.e. quick cuts, slow motion, character-driven narrative), but with perhaps more embodied methods. The animation process slows me down and I believe that transmits in the film. Music pulls and pushes time in the most fascinating ways and I love to play with the contrapuntal relationships between picture and

soundtrack. The themes: sudden unexpected drops through the surface of the earth (sinkholes) into caverns and a bumpy stroll through an underground path, culminating in an out-of-body experience of complete and total darkness. Our subterranean Bildungsroman was supposed to bring us to self-understanding but in fact only results in disorientation, a foggy lens, and no real answers. Time dedicated and devoted is not necessarily going to get us where we intended. Mostly it brings us to a semi-familiar space laden with many more questions.

[Figure 2 here]

Caption II: Still from *The Long Sleepers*

We would like to return to the subject of ‘the hole.’ Initially, we got to know your work as an artist through your amazing ‘100 Sinkholes’ project, showcased in the Simon Preston Gallery in New York. Your ‘long sleepers’ project also refers to holes, albeit maybe more implicitly in the form of tunnels, caves and time holes (or holes in time, perhaps?). Could you tell us a little bit more about the way you think about holes? What they mean for you, how they work, what they represent, and how they make you feel?

The scholar-filmmaker Trinh T Minh-Ha’s writings have been an influence on me for many years. One of her essays, “Holes in the Sound Wall,” from 1985 (Trinh 1991, 200-206) makes the convincing argument that in film, the hole in the soundtrack (the dreaded silence without the traditional filling-in of ‘room tone’) is conceived as an error, a disaster, a failure. Trinh finds in the cinematic hole a productive space, also obviously reading it against the Freudian notion of the feminine “lack.” Film technicians for years told me that the holes, the mistakes, the flickers, my use of broken cameras produce irreparable errors.

There is a prevalence of intense technophilia in filmmaking and to work counter to it is to be constantly reminded of the holes in one’s education or abilities. The goals of image-making today

(as we have seen in the digital technologies' obsession with speed and resolution) is to render more and more visibility, to increase resolution and audio fidelity in order to 'be inside' the story more, to 'enter' the visual illusion (I am pushing the Freudian side of things here). Are you shooting with an Arri? A Red? Are you shooting 4K? What's your pixel resolution? What's the codec?

I counter this dizzying digital noise in my head by embracing the loss of self in a sudden sinkhole, in show cave tours, in fog, darkness, songs of blindness and obscurity. What can we know by making work that is image-based but looks towards a different experience of the visible? How do we create while feeling our way in the dark? How must we confront ourselves--our entrenched belief systems--in those fearful moments of the absence of light or obscuring of sight or of space?

[Figure 3 here]

Caption III: Still from *The Long Sleepers*

Regarding confronting oneself in the sudden darkness, there is of course an affective relationship that I, as a middle-aged white female artist, have to the sense of loss of self in this period of my own life.

I often think of Dante's opening lines to *The Divine Comedy* (2017):

Midway upon the journey of our life

I found myself within a forest dark,

For the straightforward pathway had been lost

Being an artist means one has frequent occasions to explore these holes. There's absolutely no reason to make art; no one is sitting outside my studio door begging me to make another film about sinkholes or 18th century folktales or anything like that. Starting a new project feels like a perpetual tug-of-war between the palpable thrill, the bodily *want* of making, connecting, thinking,

experiencing, and the of the tedium of doing, slogging. Thickets of self-doubt obscure the quicksand of quotidian demands on, specifically, the body, the labour, and the obligations that currently occupy this period of this particular artist's life. But the holes are an experience that is truly one's own, that can take as long or as short as necessary, that determine their own duration; that unfurl their darkness like a warm cloak where neither time nor space holds dominion.

You speak a lot about "darkness". How does this sense, this thing (?) work in the cave? Is darkness synonymous with invisibility? Do you think we can feel our way differently in the underground? What about smells, sounds and echoes in the cave?

Darkness in the cave. The first thing that comes to mind for me is the sensation you have while reading Dostoyevsky. In the sense that there is nothing gradual in the experience. Suddenly you in all your senses, without any supports, are plunged into darkness. That is how I feel when I read Dostoyevsky. You are immersed all at once in a world and you can't find a way to get out of it, even if it is both terrifying and thrilling simultaneously.

The other way I think about feeling the darkness of the cave is how relaxing it is. In the cavern tours you know the experience is impermanent, so there's kind of a bodily thrill in imagining all the frightening things that you can't possibly ever imagine living through, like being actually trapped in a cave. So the darkness is like a cocoon. First you feel your eye muscles straining to find some kind of 'cheat' in the dark, to glean a bit of dimness so you can discern outlines or forms. You feel like maybe you will be the first to discover the bit of light sneaking in, or that you might be the one who has the superhuman powers of being able to see in the absolute darkness. But it isn't true. There's nothing, no matter how hard you strain and even if you feel like your eyes might be popping out of your head. And then you give up.

In Mexico when we were in wetsuits and in a half-underwater cavern, we were floating on our backs. The water was cool and soft. I've never been in one of those sensory tanks but it must be

like this. The sense of disappearing is incredibly satisfying, and the fear washes over you and then washes away from you. But somewhere secretly you are also counting the seconds until the light comes back on.

Whenever I am in a cavern I am on a scripted tour. So my experience of darkness is tempered by the situation of being in a group of people all of whom are there for some kind of thrill and some kind of nerdiness and to avert some kind of touristic boredom on a temporary basis. I never feel that I am allowed to touch the things I want to (in fact the cavern tour is much like a museum tour, as you are not permitted to touch anything lest the oils in your fingers damage the ever-growing mineral figures). So my body's tentacles, the fingers, are off limits. I long to feel the cool walls of the cavern with my face, to have that dampness of the slowest movement of water down the walls activate the hairs on my cheek. In the underground the skin's antennae take over; you can practically feel the sonic wavelengths bouncing into your eardrums, and the eyes, those upside-down foolish lenses, completely retreat.

Invisibility: well, as someone who has always longed to have the power of invisibility, perhaps the cavern is a temptation. But there's also so much power in the notion of invisibility, you have access to sensations and connections to self, space, and others that you would never have otherwise. All kinds of hierarchies can be broken when you are underground and in the dark. Topography is different, relations are unmoored, alternate forms of knowledge speak in a language that you're almost able to understand. You feel like you are on the verge of some kind of colossal comprehension of secret interconnectivity. I have never been 'in space' but perhaps that's what that feels like too.

That sounds exciting! It reminded us of something you said about the freedoms and the sense of empowerment that comes with the invisibility of being underground. You mentioned that the rules of the "aboveground" continue to govern your movement in the

underground. As an example, you were telling us about not being allowed to touch the walls with your fingers on guided tours. Instead, you wrote, different body parts are activated (“hairs on my cheek,” “the skin’s antennae,” “sonic wavelengths bouncing into your eardrums”, whilst “eyes... completely retreat”). Would you agree that the underground enjoys a different politics, embodied differently, than the aboveground? Could you tell us a bit more? Is it possible to learn from the underground, or (forgive the pun), to make Notes from Underground? Maybe even to elevate some of its politics so as to challenge the rigidity of the world above?

I am certainly not a scholar of the underground either as metaphor or fact, so what I say has probably been written about far more elegantly many times before by many more qualified people.

The reason I started being interested in underground spaces (from childhood on, but most concentrated as an artistic area of inquiry starting in 2013) is because I strongly believe that the underground can represent a space of exploration and interconnectedness that is absolutely not mirrored on the surface. There is no parallel. Tunnels, caverns, sewers have their own logics, whether made by humans or natural forces (or more often than not a combination of the two). I find it extremely empowering to consider the underground as a space in which one can descend in one area (geographic, social, conceptual, or thematic) and invisibly wander, collecting experience along the way, and then come up in a completely different area (geographic, social, conceptual, and thematic).

I suppose in a more simple way I am describing what I feel an artist or a creative sensibility has permission to do, or should have permission to do, which is what I’ve always done and want to keep doing, no matter how strange it may seem, which is to make connections the way I understand them. This means that I have permission given my ‘underground mind-set’ to read about sinkholes or sunspots and to link these things with the ideas of American exceptionalism or Cold War politics

in a piece of writing, a talk, a film, or a series of drawings. 'My underground' leads me on paths that I would not access otherwise. I feel it is a space with potential for revolution, surprise tactics, and surreptitious, sabotaging humor and commentary. Walter Benjamin wrote in his short text titled "Chinese Curios" in *One-Way Street*: "These are days when no one should rely unduly on his 'competence.' Strength lies in improvisation. All the decisive blows are struck left-handed."¹

To offer surprise, the surprise of connections, the surprise of humour, is to dislodge categories. When an artist pops out of an underground wielding flags and noisemakers and weird animations, she hopes to create a space in which temporarily defies comprehension. That moment of non-understanding can be a space of liberation. And even though neoliberalism has co-opted the idea of multi-hyphenate identities, thus creating a category of the specialist in being non-specialised, freelance, gig worker, I think the real radicalism of the underground is that there are no categories that can be imposed on the echoing, damp, dripping space that is endlessly growing and decaying in a time-frame that has absolutely nothing to do with the regimented clock-time superimposed on lived experience from the invention of the train time-table until today.

The way you speak about holes to the underground inspires us towards to delve deeper. So, to pick up on this thread and your suggestion, perhaps we could take a detour to your 100 sinkholes project and to our meeting in the workshop. We were wondering how our conversation, you as an artist and us as geographers, might have inspired your thinking and feeling about sinkholes. Could you say something about that?

As an artist and occasional reader and thinker who generally feels out of place everywhere, I felt extremely at home among the specific world of geographers to which I was introduced at the workshop and conference. I even went so far as to mull going for a doctorate in the field afterward, so inspired was I by the way in which interdisciplinary projects and language and image circulated

¹ To be added: Benjamin, Walter (1979) "Chinese Curios" in *One-Way Street and other Writings*. London: NLB.

during our brief time together at the university. Maybe other artists are satisfied with the conversations around their work in the art world, but I would venture to say many of them long to have a setting in which to unpack productively the work that they do, not merely on the level of aesthetic impact but also and in my view more importantly on the level of the social, historical, physical and somatic senses in the production and reception of the work. To be among people thinking and discussing how holes, ruptures, gaps and fissures might be understood productively was deeply inspiring. It has helped me since then to continue to wrestle with this set of spaces (surface, threshold, underground) in ways that are not exclusionary and can support both the pleasure and awkwardness of losing one's footing along this bumpy, winding path.

[Figure 4 here]

Caption IV: Still from *The Long Sleepers*

This work was supported by an International Visiting Fellowship from the University of
Warwick's Institute of Advanced Study