



Cave Dialogues  
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## Cave Dialogues

Anyone who has common sense will remember that the bewilderments of the eyes are of two kinds, and arise from two causes, either from coming out of the light or from going into the light, which is true of the mind's eye, quite as much as of the bodily eye.

– Plato, *The Republic*

Prehistoric pictures, engraved or painted, are gestural signals from ancient minds without letters. We often use the word *art* to describe those early traces of the human creative impulse even though our knowledge of them is limited.

It is not strange that we do so. The prehistoric traces are often beautiful, and they tend to radiate a mesmerizing aura.

The *how* and *when* of prehistoric art are interesting and approachable questions. The answers can tell us something about the cognitive skills and craftsmanship of the ancient creators and sometimes also the context. The *why* surrounding the prehistoric painted caves or stone engravings is a much more open question, triggering a broad range of speculation, interpretation, inspiration, artistic amplification, and aesthetic dialogue for the spectator.

### Haptic Research

For me, the curiosity towards prehistory was sparked by an encounter with ancient stone engravings in Fontainebleau, France. I had climbed in the area for 20 years and had a vast amount of experience in scaling the sandstone boulder formations. But I had no experience in interpreting the petroglyphs, neither scientifically nor artistically. The most natural and productive way for me to approach these mysterious signs was to let myself be inspired to make art. Through making art, I figured I could merge the haptic knowledge I unconsciously already had embodied through my climbing with an artistic approach to the prehistoric engravings. In that way I might add an aesthetic layer to the already existing documentation and interpretation of the signs. Perhaps then I could open a new space of meaning to accompany the historical aura of the signs. Metaphorically speaking, I could add yet another layer to the Fontainebleau Palimpsest.

This added layer would not only be inspired by the engravings themselves, but by the climbing as well and the totality of impressions from the surrounding nature and from the insights on prehistoric art as it presents itself to us here and now. The creators of these specific engravings could not read or write, so whatever meaning they had in mind, it was probably connected to materiality, gesture, and direct experience. I like to think they were approaching experiences of transformation and change.

### The Heart of the Boulder

The motivation to look deeper into these signals came as an impulse when encountering a book depicting the stone engravings.<sup>1</sup> I had been traveling to this area to climb the sandstone boulders without knowing about the existence of the petroglyphs. I had climbed the boulders, gripping their holds, and experiencing their sandy surface through the skin of my fingertips. I was occupied with my hunt for boulder problems, failing to notice the subtle traces from thousands of years of human presence in the area. When I finally became receptive to the signals engraved in stone underneath shelters and inside shallow caves, they fascinated me with their beauty and mysterious radiance. I began to visit the caves instead of climbing the boulders. I crawled together with the archaeologists to get glimpses of the engraved lines in the dark; this time exploring the boulders from the inside, touching the lines and crevices made by our ancestors instead of only

clinging to the exterior surfaces of the naturally eroded stones. A confusing yet enlightening question immediately occurred when encountering the engravings: Haven't I seen something like this before?

Rightly so. Some years before being introduced to the engravings, I had made a group of abstract drawings with faded color on large sheets of paper. They were called *Haptic Drawings* and were inspired and activated by my climbing in Fontainebleau. To my surprise, the prehistoric abstract grid petroglyphs had interesting aesthetic similarities with these tactile artworks. My tactile experiences of the sandstone boulders had created an aesthetic and, in a way, esoteric *anticipation of the past*. The pictures had predicted and prepared me for my encounter with the engravings. I had become a medium for the forces living inside and outside of the Fontainebleau boulders. The traces on the paper sheets resembled the character of the prehistoric lines. As if my abstract drawings were already there, in stone. They were engraved lines that could be perceived as pointing inwards, towards the heart of the boulder. Oppositely, in my drawings, the lines were protruding outwards, they are reliefs. In my mind's eye, I imagined the Mesolithic engravers standing at the back of my studio wall, engraving the paper from the backside, reaching out, touching the back side of my large black sheets of paper with their flint tools. Following this imaginary scene, it was as if I had helped them with my hands, pulling the paper outwards, using magnesium and lightly colored pigment to enhance the light and the friction on the surfaces, leaving white marks of chalk on the face of the drawings.

### The Missing Link

In his text *The Creative Act* from 1957, Marcel Duchamp wrote: "To all appearances, the artist acts like a mediumistic being who, from the labyrinth beyond time and space, seeks his way out to a clearing. If we give the attributes of a medium to the artist, we must then deny him the state of consciousness on the esthetic plane about what he is doing or why he is doing it. All his decisions in the artistic execution of the work rest with pure intuition and cannot be translated into a self-analysis, spoken or written, or even thought out."

Duchamp gives artists the attributes of being mediums for messages they are not necessarily totally aware of themselves. He categorizes art as something which evokes emotions within the spectator that are not necessarily in tune with the original intentions of the creators.

Duchamp's text came to my mind as I approached my own artistic work in the wake of the meeting with the prehistoric signs. Would I get any closer to understanding why these signs looked like they did, why they had been made, and why they had made such an impression on me simply by making additional art myself? Could I by acting like a Duchampian medium tune into the creative states of our prehistoric ancestors? And even more importantly: Would this encounter with prehistory make my art more interesting to myself and to the public?

Duchamp continues: "In the chain of reactions accompanying the creative act, a link is missing. This gap, representing the inability of the artist to express fully his intention, this difference between what he intended to realize and did realize, is the personal 'art coefficient' contained in the work."<sup>2</sup>

Duchamp gives the artist a mediumistic role – a channel through time, if you may, whose intentions plays only a minor role in the reception



Front: "Reworked Haptic Drawing", 210 x 200 cm, 2013-2020, magnesium, dry pastel and acrylic on paper  
Photos from Fontainebleau by Geir Harald Samuelsen (2017)

and interpretation of his or her own work. Through this he describes a gap, a dark spot, a missing link, as he calls it, in the chain of events from creation to reception.

Like many artists of the avantgarde, Duchamp drew inspiration from many sources, including different forms of spiritual practices and alchemy, the medieval art of transmutation of matter and non-matter.<sup>3</sup> In an interview from 1953, Duchamp stated: "The true artist, true art, is always esoteric, [while] the modern approach to art is based on competition, on making art exoteric."<sup>4</sup>

### Unconscious Feelings of Self

Science is attempting to bridge this gap through excavation, dating, and constantly updated thinking. Abbé Breuil (1877-1961) and Henri Begouën (1863-1956), the men who were the first to examine the Lascaux Cave paintings in the 1940s, formed the hypothesis of *prescience magic*, suggesting that prehistoric humans attempted to influence the result of their hunt by painting, engraving, and drawing it in caves. A shamanic hypothesis was advanced by the Romanian writer and scholar Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), suggesting the figures depicted in the caves were representations of visions acquired during a trance-like or near-trance state.<sup>5</sup> In the text *Middle Stone Age engravings and their significance*, contemporary archaeologists Christopher Henshilwood and Francesco d'Errico write: "Engravings are perhaps the only category of potentially symbolic early material culture that still reflects the complete set of cutting actions performed by the artist. As is the case with drawing, engraving reflects deep unconscious feelings of self" (Freeman & Cox, 1985; Thomas & Silk, 1990) while, at the same time, engravings organize a shared visual culture (Cox et al., 2001).<sup>6</sup>

### The Platonic Contrast

The engravings in Fontainebleau are mostly from the European Mesolithic era, approximately 10,000 years BP. They were first discovered in the 1860s but remained relatively unexamined until recently, when a team of archaeologists from Sorbonne led by Professor Boris Valentin began a project to document and examine them.<sup>7</sup>

There is presently a consensus concerning the dating of the engravings due to, among other things, extensive findings of lithic tools used for engraving purposes in close proximity to the shelters. Some stylistic comparative analyses have also been used.

The engravings are mostly abstract with attempted straight and slightly bent lines, modernist looking grids,<sup>8</sup> holes, and cross-hatched patterns which may resemble ladders and stars. They are located underneath shelters and inside shallow caves. The caves are usually quite small with space for one or very few individuals at the same time. Sometimes the engravings are carried out on vertical stone surfaces. At some places, the engravings are found on the cave floors or on the shelter ceilings. Occasionally they follow the shapes of the natural stone wall, making them into sculptural entities with tactile, three-dimensional qualities.

When confronted with the engravings, you get a sensation that the creators wanted to pass on messages with a universal, geometric meaning. The signs might have been engraved to represent some kind of abstract Platonic, contrast to the organic, anthropomorphic, and biomorphic character of their surrounding boulders and hills.

The environments surrounding the engravings add a strikingly mysterious atmosphere to the

experience especially when daylight is vanishing. Then the surrounding stones become animals and supernatural creatures, and you are transported to an animated world or another state of mind. It is not unreasonable to assume the prehistoric rituals had animistic overtones. Nature changes from being natural to being cultural.<sup>9</sup> You feel observed by it.

### Shadows and Gestures

After the initial conceptualization of the mentioned *Haptic Drawing* project in 2013, some years passed by before the interest to artistically retrace or to reenact the experience reappeared. This time I decided to rework the drawings in the wake of my encounters with the petroglyphs. Why?

Inspiration, yes, but not only. When working artistically with ancient traces, you are adding another layer of meaning to the experience. In a sense, you are tapping into and accompanying the silent, ancient creative impulse, not necessarily interpreting the traces. With your added artistic layer, you are amplifying your encounter with the inscriptions as well as your experience of the trees, the boulders, the birds, the moss, and the whole atmosphere in your own time.

I figured that the surfaces of my previous artworks had to be reworked and touched with the new embodied fingertip knowledge and totality of experiences from my encounters with the Mesolithic petroglyphs. I had observed how the archaeologists had bent down to examine them, unconsciously resembling and reenacting the Mesolithic bodily gestures. I had observed how they discussed the engravings and even touched them with careful respect, how they illuminated them and sometimes also watched them in dim cave light in the afternoon.

So, I accepted what I felt to be an invitation from the stone itself and from the ancient engravers: to dim the room, to sit down in front of the dark surfaces, adding layers of light and matter to the existing pictures, observing them change in front of me – some signals being muted in the process and others being transmuted into new sequences of moving forms with a different material direction and energy. Transmutation through destruction and reconstruction. A continuous palimpsest of shadows, layer upon layer of invisible and visible gestures.

### Notes:

- 1 Breteau, 2016
- 2 Duchamp & Dachy, 1994
- 3 Baas, 2019
- 4 Duchamp, 1969
- 5 History & Site
- 6 Henshilwood & d'Errico, 2011
- 7 Lesvignes et al., 2019
- 8 Krauss, 1979
- 9 Tilley, 1994

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