Find me a rock, play me a fire

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Found

Remember, you told me this story which was so very comprehensible? A little girl has to go hiking with her parents. Her father is looking for some minerals. He wants to expand his set of inorganic collectibles. The landscape, no matter how sublime, has very little to offer. The girl becomes impatient, with nature and with her guardians. The adults suggest she should try to find a special stone, one that would be pleasurable to hold[1]. She hunts for the right stone eroded by non-human, continuous, very slow and for us, inaccessible forces. The haptic of the »feely« does comfort her.

There is so much going on in the world (socially, politically, economically, ecologically, and beyond those terms), but I find myself thinking about minerals and rocks…quickly discovering that there is more to them then just inorganic material. Questions seem a good starting point: What is the difference between a stone and a rock? What can we think about them? Do they think? If so, how to think like they do? How does geology influence us? How do we influence geology? How can we conceive the link between human time scale and geological time scale? Why scale? Soon my somehow naïve quest unfolds into an unsettling scene.

It was in one of the notebooks from the »100 Notes – 100 Thoughts« series, published as a prelude to »documenta (13)«, that I found a text by Jill Bennett. I knew about the notebooks and I knew about the rather cheesy attempt to »publish the unpublishable«[2], but it was impossible to get a proper overview when they were released, at least I felt like that back then. It took a friend to attract my attention and discover the very small, blue-grey pamphlet titled »Living in the Anthropocene/Leben im Anthropozän«[3], five years later. Thinking about the balance between human and natural forces on a global scale Jill Bennett states: »The Anthropocene is, then, the dramatic denouement in a grand narrative of planetary history. The entire world population suddenly finds itself part of this »cene«[4]. Bennett goes on to describe a paradigm shift. This shift might appear small but sparks something fundamental, previously separate scenes overlap and collide. Time becomes »a little more slippery«[5] - or perhaps it always was. It might be in this overlap where discontinuities become visible. »We are challenged to think about the effects of the human present and near past reaching far into the future.«[6] The Anthropocene is a proposed new geological epoch, an interval denounced by the acceleration of collective depletory human activity on earth, and the resulting profound and permanent geological change on a planetary level caused by (us) humans. The term might be questionable, however it is clear rocks, stones, minerals and shortly non-human agents, are (irrevocably) marked by human activity. Those marks/markers challenge us to think about the effects of the human present and near past reaching into the future, even far into the future. Which of today's invisible consequences will become visible?

Perhaps we are all part of the same »cene«, but certainly we do not all play the same role. In her essay »Women's invisible labor and the art world«[7] Macushla Robinson pinpoints, as the title already implies, the relationship between capitalism and women's (invisible) labour. »Just as capitalism relies on appropriating the socially reproductive capacities of women, it also relies on appropriating the biologically reproductive capacities of non-human agents such as rivers, minerals and oil mined from the earth.«[8] She identifies this relationship as based on a bias between men and women, culture and nature with women being attributed to nature and nature being secondary to culture, thus exploitable by it. Culture, reason and logic (associated with men) allow the subordination of nature and with it women insofar we accept them as nature and nature as exploitable.

Flint stone appears rather unimposing. It is often dark grey or brown, sometimes with a little red, yellow, or white. Flint is chemically not very pure quartz; impurities and its fine-grained structure can make it dull and almost dirty. Some people would say that flint is technically not a mineral, but a rock. Flint is hard and it splits in a very useful way, with some chips coming off leaving sharp edges. If hit with e.g. pyrite[9, 10], a flint stone might produce some sparks. This property makes flint a possible fire-starter. Here comes its potential for significant change.[11]

The control of fire by early humans was a decisive point in the cultural aspects of evolution.[12] Fire makes us human. Perhaps early fire occurred through direct lightning strikes. With time humans learned how to tame and utilise it. Soon we understood how to make sparks on our own, fuel for the organ that made (and makes?) culture possible: the brain. Being able to control fire independent from chance, catapulted early hominoids into the realms of culture.

The »Rocks that Look Like Faces Museum« in Chichibu, Japan has 1700 exhibits on display. The museum is very small and remote I believe. The collector's widow is organising the collection and managing the museum. It is recommended to call before a visit to make sure someone is there to open the door. Just recently the story went viral on online platforms like Amusing Planet, Dangerous Minds and Bored Panda. Due to the agenda of those websites (to amuse, to endanger, to bore) it's easy to find imagery depicting stones, rocks and pebbles. They are beautiful. Some look like animals or comic figures, others are a material manifestation of Edvard Munch's painting »The Scream«. A significant number looks utterly human. Looking at them makes me think how stones not only have the power to change the face of humanity, they might have a face.

Sci-fi…we have to go into the realms of fiction. We are challenged to think about human activity far into the future, deep into future. »Future inhabits the present, yet it also has not yet come.«[13] To work »deep into the future«[14] involves thinking about discontinuities, breaks, hesitation within the present. How can we imagine a radically other way to organise a scene/scenery? Organised in an equal, not subordinated way. Equal, but distinct.

If the present is the key to the past, the future might be the key to the present. Maybe that's the pleasure stored away in a rock, a knowledge about past, present, future, a knowledge to come. A knowledge far from being a thing, a pleasurable thing – not even some-thing your hand ever held before, a »beyond-feely« from another scene.

Lost

1 The German term »Handschmeichler« names a thing one can hold in its hand, being both pleasing and flattering at the same time. It's often made of wood, stone, metal, mostly smooth, always very handy and… pleasing.
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3 J. Bennett, Living in the Anthropocene/Leben im Anthropozän (dOCUMENTA (13): 100 Notes - 100 Thoughts, 100 Notizen - 100 Gedanken #053), Berlin, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Berlin, 2012.
4 Ibid., p.6.
5 M. Haver, Modern Waste and Industrial Ruins in the Anthropocene, CENHS, (web blog), 8 September 2016, http://culturesofenergy.com/modern-waste-and-industrial-ruins-in-the-anthropocene/, (accessed 22 December 2016).
6 K. Fortun, Ethnography in Late Indusrialism, Cultural Anthropology, vol. 27, no. 3, 2012, p. 446-464.
7 M. Robinson, Women's invisible labour and the art world, e-flux conversations, vol. 20, no. 39, 29 November 2016, http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/womens-invisible-labor-and-the-art-world/5430, (accessed 28 December 2016).
8 Ibid.
9 Pyrite is named after the Greek word for fire.
10 Geology and Earth Sience News and Information, (website), 2005-2016, http://geology.com/minerals/pyrite.shtml, (accessed 28 December 2016).
11 R. Milton, Museum of the Stone Age, (website), 2009-2015, http://www.stoneagetools.co.uk/what-is-flint.htm, (accessed 2 January 2017).
12 University of Utah, The pyrophilic primate, Science Daily, (web blog), 12 April 2016, https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2016/04/160412160555.htm, (accessed 28 December 2016).
13 M. Haver, Modern Waste and Industrial Ruins in the Anthropocene, CENHS, (web blog), 8 September 2016, http://culturesofenergy.com/modern-waste-and-industrial-ruins-in-the-anthropocene/, (accessed 22 December 2016).
14 Ibid.