The Aesthetics of Stones

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In this paper, I shall examine the aesthetic experience afforded by stones – in particular the kind of smoothly rounded enchanting pebbles that invite us to handle and collect them – and argue that it is not simply an experience of natural objects, but that their appeal is related to their being comparable to artefacts, although the workmanship was enacted not by a human but by superhuman forces. Such stones have, as it were, an ontological position between natural aesthetic phenomena and artefacts and summon us to connect with our earthly origins. Finding a stone that is pleasing not only to the eye but, more importantly, to the hand can bring one into contact with the planet's deep past. I explore the affinities between stones and Korsmeyer's (2019) *Real Things* – rare, old or singular artefacts, characterised by genuineness and a distinct aura, that invite us to come closer to and touch them. | *Keywords: Stones, Artefacts, Genuineness, Touch*

1. Introduction

Many of us have probably had the experience of finding or being given a simple stone, a small, smooth and softly rounded stone that fit perfectly in the hand and pocket. Perhaps it was white, grey or had streaks of colour, silky as a baby's cheek or with a fascinating texture or form, perhaps there were several of them that we were searching for on a beach, or a single one that someone had chosen for us. Such stones exert a particular kind of attraction that has similarities to the appeal of artefacts with aesthetic qualities, but also strongly invite us to handle them, to seize and take possession of them. Why are we so fascinated by them that we may want to spend hours on a pebbly beach trying to find a flawless, surprisingly coloured or velvety stone in a form of treasure hunt?

In this paper, I shall examine the aesthetic experience afforded by such stones and argue that it is not simply an experience of natural objects, but that their appeal is related to their being comparable to artefacts, although the workmanship was enacted not by a human but by superhuman forces. Such stones have, as it were, an ontological position between natural aesthetic phenomena and artefacts and summon us to connect with our earthly origins. Finding a stone that is not only pleasing to the eye but more importantly to the hand can bring one into contact with the planet's deep past. I will explore

the affinities between stones and Korsmeyer's (2019) *Real Things* – rare, old or singular artefacts, characterised by genuineness and a distinct aura, that invite us to come closer to and touch them. In the case of stones, the past is so remote that the notion of an aura may not seem to make sense, as an aura presumably emanates from human beings that have created, transformed or handled the objects in history. At the same time, we are allowed to have actual, tactile experiences of them and they invite us to make them part of our world.

2. In Love with Stones

Special stones, ground and polished by sea and ice, appear in a great deal of short stories and novels. A white stone plays a central role in a famous Swedish children's book with that title, *The White Stone* (*Den vita stenen*), by Gunnel Linde (1964, in English 1966), that was turned into a TV series in 1973, since then a classic.[1] Two children of early school age are the main protagonists: Fia, daughter of a single mother and piano teacher, Ms. Pettersson, who board with the circuit judge and his housekeeper Malin in a big manor, and orphaned Hampus who arrives at Fia's town together with his uncle, cobbler and father of six children, that constantly move around. It is the end of the summer holidays and the timid Fia does not long to go back to school where she is snubbed by the other children – the story is set during an undefined interwar period and single mothers are not highly regarded. When Fia and Hampus meet, he pretends to work as Prince Perilous (*Farornas konung*) with the travelling circus that visits the village at the moment (Prince Perilous is the name of the circus's lion tamer that appears on posters all over the village). On her side, Fia presents herself as Fideli, and they start a game around the little white stone that Fia-Fideli carries in her pocket. In this game, the two children give one another trials that when passed make them the (temporary) owner of the stone. Fideli charges Prince Perilous with painting a face on the church tower clock, tying the circus elephant to the schoolteacher's flagpole or putting an egg in the judge's bed. As holder of the stone, Fia is Fideli and dares performing acts that she would barely have the audacity to think of doing under her real name: keeping silent during a whole day long in spite of her mother's and the mean housekeeper's queries; playing a difficult piece at the piano in the café by the pastry shop; or gathering a huge, shiny treasure from all over the village. In other words, the centre of interest in this story is a stone that is described as white and smooth and it is to a large extent by touch that the children venerate the stone:

> 'Take care that nobody grabs the stone away from you' she said. 'There are lots of nasty children around here.'
> 'Nobody but you and me will ever touch it', Prince Perilous said, returning it to his pocket. (Linde, 1966, p. 86)

Fia carries the white stone in the pocket of her dress where she can handle it, and in the children's game of make-believe it gives them self-assurance enough to perform feats in the real world. The white stone transforms them from outcasts to brave anti-heroes, and their last but unintentional feat is to

[1] Directed by Göran Graffman, 13 parts, with Julia Hede and Ulf Hasseltorp in the main roles.

have the mean 'Aproned Witch' – the judge's housekeeper Malin – resign and leave her post for Hampus's step-mother, the shoemaker's wife.

A comparable function of a stone, that is really a piece of glass, is rendered in Tessa Hadley's short story *The Trojan Prince*:

> 'Look what I found on the beach', Connie says, fishing in the purse she carries. 'Close your eyes. Open your hand.'
> She used to give him sweets like this when they were children.
> He closes his fingers around it. It's nothing much – just a bit of sea-washed glass, smooth to the touch, a frosted blue. She tells him to keep it safe when he goes away, says it's her luck added on to his.
> (Hadley, 2012, pp. 77–78)

James, the boy who receives the glass stone, keeps it in his pocket during the difficult months of his apprenticeship with a cargo line (the story is set in the 1920s). Here the stone is a sign of affection, and of a connection that will last: it keeps him in touch with his future wife during his long months at sea.

Another novel that puts stones – this time precious ones – at the centre is Tobias Hill's *The Love of Stones* (2001). It is in one way the story of a jewel, commissioned by Duke John the Fearless of Burgundy in the beginning of the 15th century, and called the Three Brethren. But it is also very much a tale of stones and of their power: their political power in transactions between present and would-be sovereigns, their financial power, but more importantly their as it were magical power over people. The principal character, Katharine Sterne, is a young woman trading in stones, searching over the world to find the Three Brethren, that she has reason to believe was not lost as had previously been thought. Sterne describes stones as "a kind of drug, a crystallised heroin" (Hill, 2001, p. 46). Just like heroin, they give rise to violence, so it is a dangerous task Katherine has set herself. In distinction with heroin, however, stones outlive their owners, so that they sometimes become protagonists of many lives. Katherine declares that her own life is just a footnote to the Brethren.

Her interest in stones was sparked by a big amethyst she got for her eleventh birthday, and that she wanted to have with her all the time. She would sleep with it in her bed and even desired to eat it; on her way to school she would put it in her mouth. But it was a balas ruby at the Jewel House of the Tower of London that made her love stones, and made her life revolve around them. She had found a kind of love "that no longer requires people" (Hill, 2001, p. 147). Katherine describes the overwhelming desire to reach out and touch the ruby, and later, as a specialist of stones, she uses touch to help in the classification: "The stone is too warm to be a diamond. I can feel it now. The thermoconductivity is wrong. A diamond draws heat out of its surroundings, giving nothing back. [...] Other stones lack that clear, acquisitive iciness." (Hill, 2001, p. 11) Rubys, on the other hand, are warm. As if there was an intrinsic connection between their colour of blood and the tactile sensations they afford.

3. Stones and Real Things

Carolyn Korsmeyer has analysed the manner that what she calls *Real Things* – artefacts, or parts of them, that are old, rare or singular – can bring us in contact with the past through touch. These objects have the cognitive and ethico-aesthetic property of *genuineness* – a non-perceptual property that is experienced in a multisensory way where touch plays an essential role. Real things in this sense have, or are experienced as having, an *aura*: a quality that is dependent on understanding and the use of imagination, and we have an "urge to touch" objects possessing that quality (Korsmeyer, 2019, p. 16).[2] Often, however, we are not permitted to actually touch them, since museums and other institutions that hold rare and old artefacts usually prohibit touch. But being in the proximity of such objects is in Korsmeyer's account an implicit form of touch that presents their genuineness to us. The experience is characterised by emotions such as thrill, wonder, awe, and what is important is not the tactile sensation, but touch as the sense of our bodily presence to something that is really there, and that, in a version of Danto's indiscernible counterparts, is not reproducible. A copy may be indiscernible by the senses from the genuine thing, but will lack the aura: it will not provoke in us the feeling of being in touch with history.

What about stones? Can pebbles and stones be compared to Real Things, even though they are not produced by humans? Certain similarities between Real Things and objects of nature are mentioned by Korsmeyer, such as fossils, giant redwood trees and fragments of meteorites, that equally produce the urge to touch in us (Korsmeyer, 2019, p. 28). But stones do not possess historical value, if by history we mean human history, and touching them do not bring us into contact with people long gone (unless they have been transformed by humans into artefacts). In *The White Stone*, of course, the stone is kept among two children and thus touching it brings them in contact with one another – the touch of the other child is, to use Korsmeyer's term, "transmitted" through the stone (Korsmeyer, 2019, p. 47). The same is true of the glass stone in *The Trojan Prince* and of many of the stones that figure in *The Love of Stones*. For this reason, a stone or another natural object can bring us in touch with someone we know cherished it. In this way, stones can be imbued as it were with history and Korsmeyer's analysis permits such things to be called Real; it is not a firmly delimited category.[3] Here, however, I am first of all interested in the appeal that stones have as such, that makes us treasure them in the first place, and what happens to them when we do so. Prima facie, the thrill of encountering the genuine does not seem to be found here since we are not dealing with historical objects at all. Why, then, are we so fascinated with these stones, and what is the excitement felt when finding them and caressing them based on?

[2] The notion of aura is drawn from Walter Benjamin's seminal essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935), although Korsmeyer makes a more positive use of the term than Benjamin. Korsmeyer describes the relation between genuineness and aura thus: "I shall pursue the nature of genuineness as a property that warrants the value attached to the notion of aura" (Korsmeyer, 2019, p. 15). I will therefore use the terms as synonyms.

[3] Korsmeyer (2019, p. 162): "Treasuring an object for the past it embodies also characterizes relationships with small, domestic items cherished only by individuals."

Clearly the stones have aesthetic qualities that to an important extent are tactile. They are smooth, sleek, velvety, rough, granular, fit in the hand or in a pocket, or are perhaps too big or too sharp to be carried around. They also have various colours, absorb or reflect light on the surface or, as with crystals or diamonds, from within. To what extent can they also be said to possess the more complex property of genuineness? Stones often affect us through *actual* touch, when we are allowed to hold them in our hands, to our cheeks, feeling their silky texture in a sensual way. By contrast, genuineness in Korsmeyer's analysis is experienced in a nonsensuous manner, when we are in the physical presence of historical artefacts. The aura is a presentification of sorts of the people who made the artefact, who used, handled or cherished it, whilst the stone itself may appear uninhabited and silent.

Still, there are some similarities between stones found in nature and Real Things. For one thing, stones have age value, even if their age is a matter of thousands or millions of years. They bring us in touch with a past that is so remote it can barely be fathomed, long before the beginning of human time. Their age value may not be immediately experienced in an aesthetic and affective way, of course, since it requires some knowledge about how stones come about. But as we saw, genuineness is not a perceptual quality, so in this respect stones do not differ from historical artefacts. Even as children we have an inkling of their remoteness in time, so we can to some degree appreciate their age value, and encountering them can arouse our curiosity about the processes behind them.

What about the ethical value? Do stones have an ethical dimension that makes them comparable to rare artefacts and thus susceptible to the ascription of genuineness? The loss or destruction of individual stones does not appear to have the same ethical implications as damage of a rare artefact. Except for certain precious stones, they are not irreplaceable in a similar way as, let's say, the Tanagra figurines (3rd century BCE), the Three Brethren or the Dead Sea Scrolls. But if they do not have historical or artistic value, they have value as a part of nature and our aesthetic appreciation of them may lead us to become aware of our need of protect it. Coming in touch with stones may prompt us to reflect more deeply about the geological processes they are a sign of and about ourselves as part of the earth. This is one reason that they provoke in us a feeling of wonder and awe before the earth that has produced them and a sense of connection with it. At the same time, they tend to become something more than parts of nature: to be transformed into tools, into jewels, but also, as in the stories above, to become Real Things simply as they are.

4. Is the Stone Worldless?

This special role of stones and our occasional enchantment with them is paradoxical in that stones may seem to be antithetical to human existence and often figure as an example of its very opposite. Think of the fate of being petrified described in numerous myths and fairytales: from Lot's wife who was turned to salt, the many Greek myths where petrification occurs,

to C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, just to mention a few examples.[4] In the existential-phenomenological tradition a stone often appears as the paradigmatic example of the kind of being that, in distinction with the human being, is simply thrown into the world, without relating to the things around it, without projects and even without a world, if we are to believe Heidegger: whilst the human being is world-forming, the stone is *worldless* (Heidegger, 1984).[5] For Hegel, stone was part of "dead, inorganic nature" (Hegel, 1995, p. 124), whilst John Sallis emphasises that stone is not even dead since "[w]hat cannot have lived cannot have died, cannot be dead" (Sallis, 1994, p. 39). This prototype of the in-itself, the stone, that according to Sartre "does not have any secret: it is solid (*massif*)" (Sartre, 1956, p. 33), without alterity, also characterises the mental state of Antoine Roquentin, the protagonist of Sartre's debut novel *Nausea* (first published 1938): "I hadn't the right to exist. I had appeared by chance, I existed like a stone, a plant or a microbe" (Sartre, 1964, p. 84). A stone, then, appears as the very opposite of what is meaningful, an entity that is in most respects antithetical to us – except for its having extension, duration and weight. This is perhaps the reason that Sartre, like the myths and fairy tales, cherishes the tragical image of human traits that have been formed, or appear to have been formed, in stone: the "stony eyes" that recur in *Nausea*, or "the fixed, stony smile in the empty eyes of a statue" in *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre, 1956, p. 199). Is the stone, then, worldless, and can it only be brought into our world if it is "shaped by human hands", as Sallis (1994, p. 8) states? Or can it have a degree of genuineness and be assimilated to a Real Thing as it is, as I have suggested?

For one thing, the distinction between original and replica is applicable also to stones, although we do not that often come across forgeries of non-precious stones. It is easy, though, to construe a thought experiment where also ordinary pebbles may be faked. If Elon Musk's dream came true and humans had to start a new life on Mars, they might miss the kinds of stones that were present on Earth and produce copies of them – in other words, artefacts. I believe that our response to the fake stones would be different, and coming across a real earthly stone that someone had brought with them would produce another affective response than the fake ones. Genuineness in the sense of non-reproducibility – which is admittedly not the full sense of Real Things – clearly pertains to stones as well, even if we rarely have the occasion to pronounce that verdict apropos of cobbles on the beach.

On the other hand, precious stones such as diamonds are replicated, and the difference in value that we attach to real diamonds in distinction with cubic zirconia or cultured diamonds – in spite of their indiscernibility, at least to a layman's eye, from 'genuine' diamonds – can be compared to that we ascribe to historical artefacts. Needless to say, the story is here rendered more complex by the investment value of gems, and by the negative ethical value that accrues to real diamonds due to the conditions of extraction where child

4 Tales and myths where petrification occurs abound all over the world.

5 More specifically, the stone is worldless, the animal is poor in world, man is world-forming (Heidegger, 1984, §42).

labour, unsafe work conditions, environmental destruction and so on are common (as Katherine Sterne said, they "attract violence" (Hill, 2001, p. 46)). If we disregard their role as commodities and consider them simply as objects of exhibition or aesthetic enjoyment, gems attract big crowds of visitors, also in their natural, uncut shape. Diamonds are captivating not only for their beauty, especially when they are cut and fitted in jewellery, but as well of the way that they were formed by natural forces in the earth's mantle several billion years ago. Lab grown gems somehow appear less intriguing. If genuineness is a property that refers to "the condition under which [the object] came into being" (Korsmeyer, 2019, p. 60), then it can likewise explain why we value (aesthetically and financially) nature grown diamonds more than lab grown ones.

Although cut diamonds and other gems are usually made to be worn and thus to be touched, their visual qualities may appear predominant. They are perhaps too costly to be nonchalantly carried around in someone's pocket, but thinking of Hill's fictive account it is at least imaginable that precious stones as well are importantly appreciated through touch. With ordinary stones, their tactile qualities seem to play a more salient role in our aesthetic and affective response to them than with gems (at least if we are not stone traders, like Katherine Sterne). This indicates an important role for touch in aesthetic experience.

5. The Urge to Touch and Keep Close

One of my first aesthetic experiences was when as a child I visited the Swedish island Gotland in the Baltic Sea, together with my cousins. We liked to stroll along the beach searching for stones, shells and driftwood, and one day we came across a number of amazing small stones, coloured in red, green, yellow and brown, round and soft to hold. They turned out to be pieces of glass, as in *The Trojan Prince*, ground and frosted by the waves, and we were fascinated by their velvety surface and the mysterious light that appeared to shine from within. Their alluring character derived, I believe, in part from their origin, being a mixture of artefact and natural object, as the glass itself is made of sand, then into bottles that had been broken and transformed from sharp, dangerous objects into something beautiful and smooth to touch. This gave us a preliminary understanding of how other stones are formed. Further, it had to do with the fact that they fitted so well in our hands, where we would hold them and caress them, feeling a sense of trust and comfort in our connection with them.

With such pebble-like pieces of ground glass, the material is artefactual; it was first shaped by humans. There are of course natural glasses, such as obsidians and tektites, but these pebbles most certainly originated from glass bottles. However, they give us a clue to what is thrilling about smallish stones in general: they have been laboured by earthly forces, such as volcanoes, waves and other stones, and they have a very human size: small enough to pick up, heavy enough to give some resistance, polished enough to be enjoyable against our skin.

Further, they are found objects, with a status in between natural object and artefact, experienced as a kind of trove, a treasure that is personal, idiosyncratic, since we know that stones are not necessarily valued that much by others. As Hadley again, in another short story, *She's the One*, from the same collection I quoted earlier, writes:

> When Hilda came back from Dundee she brought Ally a stone she'd picked up on a beach there, oval and flat and black, striped with pinkish crystal. – Pounded by the North Sea, she said. In Hilda's house it was a beautiful thing, but it only looked odd among the ornaments on her bedroom shelf at home, as if a piece of outdoors had got indoors by mistake. (Hadley, 2012, pp. 188–189)

The thrill here is related to the sensation of discovery, of us noticing something that has not yet been seen by other people, but been hidden by more plain and rugged stones. In one of the few philosophical texts about the aesthetic experience of everyday stones that I know of, Wolfgang Welsch describes how he was strolling about the Californian coast collecting particular stones that attracted his attention and astonishment: "How can random inorganic pieces lying around be so aesthetically wonderful and narratively rich?" (Welsch, 2023, p. 146).[6]

The stones that invite us to touch them are also characterised by a kind of generosity: these beautiful things that fit so well in my hand are simply spread out on a beach or in a rocky landscape waiting for me to arrive and pick them up. At the same time, they are singular: each one is different from the other and have their particular aesthetic qualities.[7] In distinction with many historically and aesthetically valuable artefacts, we are free to take them in our hands and even (within certain limits) to pocket them. Further, we experience them with a generalised touch; we handle them and carry them around close to our bodies, as a child with her doll. Edmund De Waal in his family memoir *The Hare With Amber Eyes* describes the collection of Japanese miniature sculptures, *netsuke*, that incredibly survives the nazi plundering of his ancestors' property, and the urge not only to touch the *netsuke*, but to put one of them in his pocket and bring it with him. They are playthings that are so smooth to one's fingers that they invite us to carry them close to our body. De Waal writes: "Making something to hold out of a very hard material that feels so soft is a slow and rather good tactile pun" (De Waal, 2010, p. 13). This is said of a netsuke carved in chestnut wood, but it may apply to some stones as well, whilst made not by a 18th or 19th century Japanese carver but by natural forces. The pun is still there.

Both smooth, small stones and netsuke are things that summon us to keep them close. We can envelope them in your hands and in our clothes and they will move around with us. Both have something to tell us: "When you held a Japanese *objet*, it revealed itself. Touch tells you what you need to know: it tells you about yourself" (De Waal, 2010, p. 49). Importantly, when we touch

6 I want to thank one of the reviewers for informing me about this article.

7 I am thus not in agreement with Welsch's characterisation of them as 'mass products'; stones, no more than flowers, even if there are many of them, are stones 'mass produced' in the ordinary (or Benjaminian) sense of the term (Welsch, 2023, p. 146).

them they also touch us. It is often said that touch is bipolar, since tactile experience of objects always involves awareness of our own body (cf. Vignemont and Massin, 2015, pp. 296f.). But one could add that touch is to some extent bidirectional: in touching an object we are also touched by it, and even more so when it comes to objects that are Real, that are valuable for us and that appeal to us. Further, touch has the specificity that it presents things as existing independently of us. In other words, we become aware of ourselves as bodily beings through touch, and of the world's independent existence.

6. Earthlings and Real Stones

If we are attentive to these stones, *pounded by the sea*, they inherit certain qualities from 'real' artefacts: they are made *as if* by human labour, although the forces in play are more mysterious for the non-geologist, and we marvel at them. Knowledge about their origin will enhance the aesthetic experience without necessarily removing their mystery, and show that stones are not 'dead', and they do not merely age "by being worn away by water, air, ice, and sun" (Sallis, 1994, 26). Instead, they grow – over millions of years, lava flows transform to quartz that grows into amethyst, volcanic eruptions deep under the Earth's surface form diamonds under extreme temperature and pressure, rubies also grow under high temperature and pressure in the earth's crust, some of them being 3 billion years of age, and some of the rocks that give rise to stones started to form around 4 billion years ago – and even though they have subsequently been detached from rocks and received their appealing shape either from human cutters or from external forces such as water, ice and other stones, they still bear the traces of the geological processes that created them. In several books, geologist Marcia Bjornerud has shown that stones and rocks have things to tell us: they are not simply "dumb matter that we could outwit and exploit" (Bjornerud, 2024, p. 9) but beings that we can learn to understand. To geoscientists, she writes "rocks are not nouns but verbs" (Bjornerud, 2022, p. xiii). Perhaps the philosophical view of stones as pure, worldless objects that contrast with worldly humans, is the result of our society's being "geologically illiterate" (Bjornerud, 2022, p. xii). In reality we are, Bjornerud says, "Earthlings", creatures "born to a vast, old, rocky enigmatic planet" (Bjornerud, 2022, p. 109) that we must begin to take care of.[8]

So stones are less different from Real Things than we might have thought, and possess some degree of genuineness and aura, both because they indicate our common origin, and because their shape, size, visual and especially tactile qualities invite us to bring them into our lives. Their unfathomable age evokes awe in us and in an even more powerful way than rare artefacts, they summon "an awareness of transience" (Korsmeyer, 2019 p. 179).[9] The history they bring

[8] Or as Welsch (2023, p. 151) writes, "The human being has taken shape in a world which was essentially also stone world".

[9] Although put in different terms and from a somewhat different perspective, this is also the conclusion of Welsch: "Stones are not eternal, they are as temporal as everything else in evolution" (Welsch, 2023, p. 148). Bjornerud on her side affirms that "contrary to jewelers' assertions that they are 'forever', any diamond at atmospheric pressure is converting very slowly to graphite, in atomic-scale layers, from the outside in" (Bjornerud, 2022, p. 76).

us in touch with amounts to millions, sometimes billions of years and if we realise that we belong to this planet, we may start to listen more carefully to its messages, not least those of "a looming climate crisis" (Bjornerud, 2024, p. 93). This is the ethical value they imply for us, if we engage with them more profoundly.

Both the fact that rocks and crystals were formed over eons of time, and that ordinary stones have been shaped by processes that remind us of human workmanship, can give rise to feelings of thrill and wonder, and explain the magical power that some stones can have when they have also been picked out by us as singular. The affective components that are part of our response to stones thus have similarities to our experience of Real Things. The difference is that they do mostly not bring us in touch with human history, unless they have been transformed into artefacts. We often also experience them, aesthetically and affectively, through actual touch, frequently keeping them close to our body. In this way, they have, or come to have, an ontological status in-between natural objects and Real Things.[10]

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[10] I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for helpful advice and suggestions.

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15849585