

Emanuele Coccia

Preface II — 2022

It represents the purest form of collective memory. For centuries, we have used it to record the most important words: those stating the law in a town or recording and celebrating the dead and divinities. That may also be the reason that the spaces we live in have often been created by excavating a void in its body. We live our lives supported by it, and its contours shape our environment. Rock is the most familiar and at the same time the most mysterious material on our planet. It's everywhere: there is not a single instant in which our lives are not accompanied and shaped by it.

And yet, our knowledge about rock is sparse: we see it as a rough material, shapeless and devoid of a genuine material identity. We are happy to reduce it to the abstract ideas of ubiquity and solidity. We have relegated interest in and use of rock's immense variety — chemical, form, texture, and even spiritual — to a marginal and suspect category of knowledge. Even the artistic discipline that has made the greatest use of rock — sculpture — has always tended to pay little attention to the tremendous richness of form inherent in rock, the aim being on the contrary to introduce into the body of rock forms and images utterly divorced from the life of rock.

Vincent Voillat's entire body of work could be described as an attempt to resist this odd collective amnesia. Certainly, it has the great merit of compelling not only his followers, but also the cultural sphere in general, to open up to the neglected and often scorned richness of rock. It's a kind of new mineralogical and petrological inventory, but no mere record of the taxonomy traced by chemistry and geology. It's the second step that allows his work to be recognized as invaluable. The rocks and stones of his works are not presented to us as though they were specimens or exemplars of a universal type. On the contrary, they reveal a uniqueness that is not chemical or morphological alone. It is as though the first hypothesis underpinning his entire aesthetics were a new kind of mineralogy: each stone is an individual in the same sense that each living creature is one, and this individuality is easier to grasp through art than through science. As is clear, for example, in *Les visages vagues* (2019), each stone is an individual that must be guessed at in its idiosyncrasy and, above all, listened to: the stones sing and each one tells something that no-one else will ever be able to articulate.

However, this singularity does not preclude commingling: on the contrary, stones and rocks are unique because, just like living species, they are produced by encounters between and the fusion of other rocks and stones, as witnessed by the series *La Collection* and *Rudus limenis : les décombres du seuil* (2021). And this is not just a specificity of their being: each rock and stone has agency, and each in its unique manner. Hence, as the title of one of his most provocative works

tells us, *les pierres aussi ont droit au repos* [stones also have the right to rest] (2018).

This perspective is, in fact, much closer to science than one might imagine. In 2008, the US geologist Robert Hazen published a very significant article on what he and his colleagues termed "mineral evolution". It was argued that rocks and stones undergo evolution, that they come with a history as all beings from the living world do. "Earth, he wrote, today boasts around 4,300 known species of minerals, with as many as 50 new types being identified each year [...]. Yet the mineralogical diversity now found at or near Earth's surface [...] was not present for much of the planet's history. Indeed, both the variety and relative abundances of near-surface minerals have changed dramatically over more than 4.5 billion years of Earth history through a variety of physical, chemical and biological processes¹."

This mineral wealth, this odd proliferation of "petrodiversity", is a characteristic of our planet. "Mineral evolution occurs on all solar system objects, but in particular on terrestrial planets and moons, in a variety of guises²." Even more impressive, though, is that "the single most important cause for mineralogical diversification is Earth's surface oxygenation combined with biological activity, which may be responsible directly or indirectly for more than two thirds of known mineral species. Thus, for at least the last 2.5 billion years, and possibly since the emergence of life, Earth's mineralogy has evolved in parallel with biology³." Not only are the evolution of rock and that of living creatures two parallel processes, but it was the latter that directly or indirectly precipitated the proliferation of forms in the mineral realm.

Rocks and stones, and all their forms, colours and forces, are, in fact, the result of life on this planet. They testify, therefore, to nothing less than to the life that shaped them. It is difficult to conceive of a more revolutionary idea. On the one hand, minerals are artefacts, or objects produced by living creatures rather than simply occurring "naturally" in a manner indifferent to their presence. On the other hand, for this very reason, mineral evolution ought to be seen as a kind of artistic progress: "petrodiversity" represents the collection of stones and rocks that life extracted and chiselled from the material that composes the planet, simply by living. Be it a mountain or a rock, everything that is solid has the same status as a work of art. But unlike artefacts conserved in a museum, these works of art are produced by an infinite number of species from the most diverse possible realms. One could almost see it as a giant tattoo that Life etched on the surface of a planet that became its conjoined twin.

Voillat's work seems to both assume and radicalize this intuition. It invites us to view rocks and stones as works of art, but above all allows us to understand that to make art out of rocks and stones is to extend the inherent, intimate life of each stone rather than force it into an entirely different domain than its habitual mode of existence. Rocks and stones are always the first expressions of planetary life considered as art. In each rock and stone, all species, all realms, all living beings sing out in chorus. This is why *Les pierres tuning* (2019) seem to us to be so natural, unparadoxical: regardless of whatever marks we try to etch into rocks and stones, they will always lie over an infinity of other marks that other living species placed there before us.

On the other hand, if rocks and stones are works of art, their action upon us is equal to if not greater than ours on them. In the second half of the last century, the British archaeologist John Lubbock taught us to divide the history of human technologies (and by extension of the arts) on the basis of humans' ability to work different types of stone and metal. It was on this basis that we began to distinguish between the Palaeolithic and the Neolithic. The idea that rocks and stones are dependent upon our intervention to become works is only an illusion, however. Perhaps we should reverse the nineteenth century classification system and start to measure the degree to which rocks and stones, as the emissaries of all other species, shape us? Our transition into the Anthropocene cries out for this new dialogue with the rocks and stones of the entire planet.

¹ Robert M. Hazen et al., « Mineral evolution », *American Mineralogist*, vol. 93, n° 11-12, 2008, pp. 1693-1720, p. 1693.

² *Ibid.*, p. 1711.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 1712.