

Learning to Cohabit

Vincent Voillat, artist

Interview with Tony Côme, art historian

At the centre of stones, Curved rocks and a crack, The ravine of the little... The titles of French artist Vincent Voillat's exhibitions (born 1977) clearly announce his obsession: the stones are watching him. He picks them up, elevates the act of collecting to the status of art and, through a combination of overlaps and reversals, shows how contemporary sculpture can define itself in ways other than the outright rejection of this traditional material. Whether they wound (in demonstrations) or heal (in lithotherapy), whether they are learned, militant or even deceptive, they are always a little bit storytellers. He therefore sets about making their narratives resonate and questioning the beliefs associated with them. His work, in order to fully play with the power of minerals, invents a place for itself at the crossroads of disciplines — between geology and geopolitics, between archaeology and alternative medicine, marquetry and exquisite corpse, lapidary art and tuning. His most recent works defuse certain processes of repression, and the calls of the stone seem increasingly suggestive. Up against, right up against the stones, in thick plumes of marble dust, the artist delivers, if not a manual of classical erotology, genuine lessons in cohabitation. Polished, matter becomes a surface of contact. Soliciting, it summons our bodies, our deepest and perhaps most widely shared impulses. Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa, by his own admission, had once felt "compelled to kneel down to touch with [his] tongue the glistening marble threshold" of a Californian villa.

The mineral seems to have gradually established itself as your world, your preferred material.

How did this taste for stones come to you?

On the occasion of an exhibition organised by the MU collective, within which I evolved for more than fifteen years, I began a series entitled *La Collection* (2015), based on a very simple, almost childlike symbolic gesture: bringing together two mineral elements collected from different contexts. The stones are cut, polished on one face, and then glued together. I started by collecting from the places where Rimbaud and Verlaine disappeared. After having been more than passionate, destructive lovers, they followed opposing trajectories. For me, it was about reuniting them again by forcing fate a little, defying a form of reality by manipulating stones, proposing an alternative temporality. This piece gave my work new directions. It was at that point that I learned to master this material and equipped myself accordingly — it remains very artisanal, and I insist on that. Even if the mineral was already present in the narrative of my childhood, *La Collection* marks the beginning of a fascination with this field. At different scales, it can raise both material and symbolic questions. It creates landscape, produces typologies of architecture, engenders fictions, legends, beliefs. Having studied science before entering the Beaux-Arts in Grenoble, I

found in this vast territory an interesting balance between very pragmatic and very sensory elements.

Rosalind Krauss speaks of sculpture as "a medium strangely located at the junction of immobility and movement, of arrested time and time passing." By inverting stalactites (Stillatitium lapidem, 2020), by bringing together pebbles collected from different time zones (La réunion, toucher les deux côtés de l'horizon, 2020), you exacerbate this strangeness. How would you define the time proper to stone?

This material imposes its own time, it's true. It's vertiginous, actually. Our existences are adjacent: I am here and the stones I handle are here too, at the same moment, but one quickly realises that they existed long before us and will no doubt endure long after us. Today, I feel compelled to counter the symbolic relationship usually deduced from this observation — I'm thinking of the monument, the tombstone. I've come to regard stone as a malleable material, almost fleeting. In my work, the notion of cohabitation has taken precedence over representation for eternity — which always implies a form of superiority or, on the contrary, of failure. I would tend to say that we share with stone a certain continuity, that the boundary between what is living and what is not living may not be as obvious as we would like to believe. Many stones were once bodies belonging to the animal kingdom. The human being, through their presence and activity, continues to enrich mineral diversity.

In the tradition of famous forgers, claiming as much the mason as the archaeologist, you produce numerous geological aberrations, false proofs, and you project stone far into fiction. Why, very paradoxically, choose to make such a story — as one says — with "the imperturbable stone, which neither feels nor knows"?

This material is interesting precisely because it can be read like an open book. For many centuries, it was indeed a support for writing. I played on this by producing the *Emojis* series (2023), inscribing in stone glyphs belonging to the digital era. As the work of archaeologists demonstrates, the mineral landscape gives access to certain forms of knowledge, it delivers scientific evidence. But it can also give rise to narratives that have absolutely nothing rational about them. It has generated completely wild beliefs, people have speculated and firmly believed. These two aspects seem to me compatible. Stones possess a particular memory, whether projected by humans or intrinsic — it matters little. They reactivate historical or social dynamics, they catalyse existence, force us to think through narratives that are neither necessarily false nor necessarily true. One day, I dreamed of a character who walked around without a head and carried a stone in their hands. When I lived in Montmartre, at the Cité des Arts, I often crossed paths with the statue of Saint Denis. According to legend, he was decapitated at Montmartre and his head rolled down the hill to the basilica that bears his name today. This dream inspired the *Céphalophores* series (2017) — stones fitted with hair implants, which put all these narratives in perspective: the religious myth, the history of France, my dream. These pieces are very troubling. In my studio, they frightened me a little — I put them away. I love it when our pragmatic

relationship is disrupted. I don't question the contribution of the Enlightenment, but we can rediscuss it, renegotiate it, de-categorise it. When Vinciane Despret, a philosopher close to scientists, gives voice to animals, her demonstrations are always convincing, but at the same time she opens worlds of speculation and narration that allow us, the better to understand our environment, to take a small step sideways. My works are situated in this place, where narrative generates unease, where it calls for no precise answer. And in this perspective, the mineral material is an ideal companion.

Is that why you became interested in lithotherapy, a practice always oscillating between medicine and magic — if not outright deception? What role does art have to play at this dangerous crossroads?

In 2016, with Émile Degorce-Dumas and Haily Grenet, we created the Institut d'Esthétique, a curatorial space hosting a cycle of performances. It was concerned with aesthetics, in the artistic sense of the term, but also in the sense of bodily beauty. Since I was already passionate about stones, I became interested in lithotherapy with, I must say, a certain wariness. I assembled the two stones most commonly used in this field: tiger's eye and rose quartz. The first is an iridescent stone that was once precious but, following colonial history, was downgraded. Today it is so widely used, so exploited — in lithotherapy precisely — that it is on the verge of becoming precious again. It is generally cut into small spheres — hence its name. It is the stone of sight, of vision, the one that would allow you to see the world as it is, to see through the night. It is the stone of mediums, the one carried for protection against bad luck. The other is more common. Because this quartz is pink, it has become the stone of love, the stone that produces empathy, and so on. I assembled them because, in my view, they refer to the qualities of the good artist. Tiger's eye allows you to stay one step ahead, to protect yourself from critical attacks and, by thwarting obscurantism, it also becomes a political object. To temper the ego that might arise from such qualities, I associated with it the rose quartz, which gives the capacity to turn toward the other. During a performance, I placed these stones for fifteen minutes on the forehead, heart and stomach of participants, leaving it up to them whether to believe or not. Afterwards, I collected testimonies. And I was very surprised: often, something seemed to have happened. Such are the powers of stone.

Should we see in your work a conscious bifurcation from the history of statuary?

At the Beaux-Arts in Grenoble, we were encouraged to deconstruct all the constitutive modalities of classicism — or at least of statuary. I therefore defended gestures that moved as far as possible from this history, perhaps out of fear of a certain conservatism. But, fairly recently, I changed my stance and began interrogating these forms very directly. I asked myself why stone, at a given moment, became the support of representation par excellence. I asked myself what, in the gesture of the classical sculptor, did not belong only to the past and how I could, today, reinvest the field of statuary. I spent the lockdowns in a house in the Dordogne, near an abandoned granite quarry. I had brought my tools and, taking advantage of this disorienting period — the end of a world in a

certain sense — I went through the very physical experience of this particular materiality. I began to reproduce gestures that moved toward figuration, to take up fairly literally forms of statuary from prehistoric times to more modern forms — up to Brancusi, let's say. There, I understood that traditional modes of representation and a more conceptual approach were not necessarily incompatible.

What are your modes of supply? Is picking up stones here and there also a way of not exhausting the seams?

Most of my pieces have been made from marbles from deconstruction sites. This choice is pragmatic — these reclaimed materials are more affordable than those sold in quarries by stone industrialists, certainly — but it is also explained by the fact that I try to listen to the world. I am very sensitive to contemporary thinking on the environment — that developed by Bruno Latour in particular. When we talk about stone, we inevitably talk about extraction and therefore potential exhaustion. It is a natural material that cannot be recomposed, that is not infinite. If I had not recovered these marble elements — these rare, luxurious materials to which great attention was once paid — they would very probably have been crushed to end up in concrete or under a layer of tarmac. Here, we clearly move away from the history of classical statuary, which is born from an exceptionally homogeneous block, without fault, in a very pleasurable way. With these already-shocked stones, doubly fragile, which must be reassembled, it is entirely the opposite. They come from different places on the planet. They would naturally never have found themselves here. They immediately impose themselves as symbols of the Anthropocene, in its ultimate phase. Thus, I work to reconstitute a geology that is not real, that is very speculative. I listen to the stones I find, as one might with the phenomenon of pareidolia — I let myself be guided by the nature of the material and existing forms. Echoes, back-and-forth movements allow me to nourish a genuine dialogue with these particular deposits. Certain types of stone refuse to be associated, are incompatible. The pleasure here lies in these challenges in terms of assembly. I seek to produce new forms, sensual, almost functional, insofar as I invite viewers to become touchers. I work increasingly often for the touch. I attempt to engage a dialogue that also passes through a set of bodily experiences.

Is it a matter of provoking agalmatophilia — the love of statues?

Agalmatophilia remains a form of perverse anthropomorphic projection, made in the face of a passive body that can be abused. Stone is not a cold material, not a dead material. It is quite the opposite. It seems to me alive, or at least potentially very close to us. It belongs to us as much as we belong to it. It is not animism for all that. We must deterritorialise stone, requalify it in order — and I insist heavily on this — to see in it a full existence rather than a simple material. Statuary must frankly seize this aspect: the sensory, fundamentally linked to desire, and no longer be in denial. When I work stones in my studio — marbles especially — it generates a great deal of dust, and very quickly I can no longer see anything. So the hand becomes my third eye and sensuality imposes its reign. Beyond its abstract meaning, linked to narrative, stone also has this capacity to

suddenly and very directly solicit the body. The animate seeps through the inanimate — it becomes almost sexual. Lately, I have been working on forms that invoke the notion of intimacy. I define certain sculptures as introductive or penetrable. It is quite clear. Among the new relations of cohabitation I mentioned, some can be very direct, very explicit.