



## GATHERING #7: Kant, Leibniz, Caves, Crystals, Art, Nature

*I fucked up, and lost our chat thread -- Save me! Save us! Drop some thinking about what happened today in here, so we can preserve some documentation! - DGB*

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Here, I will get us started: by the end, much of what we had been discussing seemed to converge, for a moment, for me, in this crazy thing that I did not know about:



Which is called the “Makapansgat Pebble” -- and is a “manuport” (do I have that right?); namely, a rock that some very early humanoid picked up and carried around (because it looked like a face -- this is not a sculpture...)

-D. Graham Burnett

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Yes – a “manuport” – along with, most likely, the “Venus of Tan-Tan” found by some Homo erectus and then probably “accentuated” with a tool. (See also “the Venus of Berekhat Ram,” a fantastic name. Should be a short story by Arthur Machen.) Another relevant word is “geofact.” Wikipedia says, somewhat gorgeously: “Geofacts could be fluvially reworked and be misinterpreted as an artifact.”

A relevant and informative passage from [ESTAR\(SER\)'s blog “Communiqués” \(November 17, 2014\)](#), attributed to a “member of the IFRAO (International Federation of Rock Art Organizations)”:

*“3 million years ago, the earth had just entered the Placenzian Age of the Pliocene, and Australopithecus africanus walked the earth. It was the age of the giant Arctic camel, and of the largest ever flying bird: Argentavis magnificens. In a cave in the present-day Makapan Valley in South Africa, an A. africanus community left a small lump of reddish-brown jasperite, later retrieved by 20th-century archaeologists.*

*This bit of stone has two deep, close-set eyes under a flat brow, broad cheekbones that sweep up to a round microcephalic skull with a ridge marking a hairline. Below a nose-like indentation, there is an open, meditative mouth with gently curved lips.*

*Did A. africanus somehow work this stone to make a crude face, so so long ago? Hardly, we are told. They could not have made tools capable of it. Microscopic examinations indicate that natural, nonhuman (or non-humanoid) processes were responsible for the stone’s appearance.*

*What apparently happened was that, struck by the resemblance of this stone to himself – or rather, to those like himself – some Australopithecus picked it up from a stream bed and carried it back to the home cave, over tens of miles. What did he and his cavemates do with it when it arrived? Whatever they did, would it have met the definitional requirements of a “formal community,” however isolated in space and time from other such communities?*

*The utter mystery of what a humanlike animal and a humanlike object would have had to communicate to each other partakes of the darkness of the origins of [communal aesthetic appreciation.] ... It is not that this encounter with nature awoke a slumbering sense of “aesthetic appreciation” in this apelike man. It is not that the category of aesthesis was discovered in this moment. It is that aesthesis was already in the world, ape and stone being of course part of this world.”*

[“Communiqués” \(April 6, 2015\) also has a short bit on pareidolic faces.](#))

And one more thing that I had wanted to bring in for everyone during the chat was the novel by Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus* (among my very favorites) which deeply concerns itself with the boundary between organic-inorganic in art-making, which it aligns (among other things) with the boundary between life-giving, form-making creative madness, and madness as death-in-life. The hero Adrian Leverkühn makes a deal with the devil (who speaks only in High German, and) who promises “wait one, ten, twelve years, until the illumination, that bright radiant annulment of all lame scruples and doubts, reaches its pitch ... Osmotic growths will sprout *sin pudore* from apothecary seeds.” The “apothecary seeds” in question are crystals of potassium dichromate and copper sulfate, which under “osmotic pressure” generate forms resembling plants. And here is the full passage (from what I posted in the chat) from *Doctor Faustus* about frost on windowpanes:

“Everything would have been fine and he could have moved on to other things, if what was generated there had kept, as it ought, to symmetry and pattern, to strict mathematics and regularities. But for it to mimic plant life with impudent legerdemain, to fake the prettiest fern fronds and grasses, the chalices and stars of flowers, for it to play the icy dilettante in the organic world – that was what Jonathan could not get over, what set him shaking and shaking his head in something like disapproval, but also in admiration. Were these phantasmagorias an imitation of plant life, or were they the pattern for it? – that was his question. Neither, he presumably replied to himself; they were parallel formations. Nature in her creative dreaming, dreamt the same thing both here and there, and if one spoke of imitation, then certainly it had to be reciprocal. Should one take the children of the soil as models because they possessed the depth of organic reality, whereas the ice flow ers were mere external phenomena? But as phenomena, they were the result of an interplay of matter no less complex than that found in plants. If I understood our friendly host correctly, what concerned him was the unity of animate and so-called inanimate nature, the idea that we sin against the latter if the boundary we draw between the two spheres is too rigid, when in reality it is porous, since there is no elementary capability that is reserved exclusively for living creatures or that the biologist could not likewise study on inanimate models.”

- Catherine Hansen and Audra Esanu

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Hal Foster recommends [this Meyer Schapiro article](#) (which is something of a classic), in connection with thinking about the walls of caves as places for images and image-making.

ALSO! Hal himself just did a lecture on Bataille and cave art as part of the Mellon Lectures last year. Check it out [here](#).

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We discussed Leonardo's exercise of looking for figures in soot (or clouds) and how finding (or wanting to find) an image among the infinite points of information presupposes a faith system about how things are organized in the world, and who can identify and assign meaning to them. Perhaps this is related to the Wiel reading last week....

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We discussed the autonomy and heteronomy of attention in making, interpreting, encountering, and appreciating images. The standards for truth in image interpretation (the fish really are fish), the "disenchantment" of nature that our mechanical explanations produced by replacing the "wonders of nature as creator" explanations. Images that tell a story and images that convey accurate information. The omnipresence of images.

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Museum of Jurassic Technology Fruit Stone exhibit  
[https://www.mjt.org/exhibits/foundation\\_collections/fruit\\_stone/fruitstn.html](https://www.mjt.org/exhibits/foundation_collections/fruit_stone/fruitstn.html)

We discussed two "geofacts;" Suiseki & Chinese picture stone (made of Jasper)

And pondering the liminal space between nature and artifice recalls the Blanchot text on the everyday - how animating forces draw forth significance from the mundane which readily recedes back into the mundane.

This recalls the Borges passage:

"Music, states of happiness, mythology, faces belaboured by time, certain twilights and certain places try to tell us something, or have said something we should have missed, or are about to say something; this imminence of a revelation which does not occur is, perhaps, the aesthetic phenomenon."

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The exercise brought to mind constellations and the shapes and bodies that we see in them. The question of the fossil seemed to echo many of the questions of the photographic and brought to mind Hiroshi Sugimoto's "[Pre-Photography Time-Recording Device](#)" series. Since I

started looking for faces in my house, I have been seeing them more and more... on the street, in a tree, peering out... - Zach McLane

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I had a question for Justin that I wrote into the chat thread: Is there a good reference for the early modern European distinctions between 'accidental' images of devotion and of nature that you mentioned? This is something I am interested in in my own work (in a medieval Islamic and contemporary context) and I was hoping you could point me towards something I did not know. Thank you! - Khaled Malas

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There's so much to think about here and I'm gratified indeed by all the input. Thank you! One very interesting question that came up in conversation with Jeff Dolven afterwards concerned the distinction between looking and making, and, *mutatis mutandis*, reading and writing. I think he will not mind if I quote him: "To see the bison in the cave wall," Jeff writes, "is also to make the bison is to see it and so on. One might have thought of that imaginary first act of representation as a triangle, with the gaze of the maker shuttling between object and the made image (where the object is something seen, or something remembered, but in any case distinct from the medium in which it will be rendered). But no: it is something more like a feedback loop, with the image, given and made, at one pole, the I at the other." Jeff's comments made me think of some other dimensions of the question that I would have liked to be able to bring up, had there been more time. One is the significance of the common idea that began to be articulated in the seventeenth century, according to which magical or demonic powers often manifest as an ability to influence the outer shape of external matter by means of the imagination alone, but that this exercise of the *vis imaginationis* is not categorically different from what we do all the time when we see faces or bison in stone, e.g. The power of a mother's imagination to shape a foetus is also an instance of the same power, and the power of nature to generate 'fish' fossils in limestone is fundamentally the same as these other imaginative-productive activities of human perceivers-doers. So on this view the deep question of the origin of art really is all mixed up not just with demonic/daimonic poiesis, but also with the question of attending, or, to put this point in Jeff's helpful terms: making and looking really are two modes of one and the same power.

On the topic of manuports, I find the following thought experiment helpful. We all agree that *collections* of all sorts might be considered art objects, worthy of aesthetic attention, etc. Think of a glass menagerie, or any number of modern art installations. A dozen or a hundred natural objects grouped together are thus a sort of artifact. But what if there are only five such objects (seashells, say, or pebbles)? What if there are only two? What if there is only *one*? Here things start to get weird, because a lone object does not on most accounts constitute a collection. But what if it shows evidence of having been *collected*, in the sense in which one "collects" one's car-keys before heading out? This seems to be the back-story of the Makapansgat pebble, so

even if it shows no signs of having been modified in any way as an individual object, with respect to its intrinsic properties, it has been modified relationally: it's been moved to a new location, for one thing, evidently in view of its natural aesthetic properties. It's weird indeed to realize that even where there is no "art", in the sense of artifice or transformation of a pre-given natural object, but only relocation of that object, we can still discern the evidence of a past act of attention, suggesting again that looking precedes making (conceptually if not literally chronologically).

- J. E. H. Smith

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In our conversation, I found some agreement on the genuinely Kantian insight that nature is the source of our imaginative contents and aesthetic feeling – as the case of cave art so nicely displays – and that, at the same time, we might not be able to say that nature is objectively "creative" (contrary to what the beautiful Thomas Mann quote in the chat suggested: that is rather a Schopenhauerian view).

Creation rather happens by the interplay of natural processes (outside us and in us) and our attentive perception. Or so I gathered from the Gathering.

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