Treasures in Transition
- On Connecting to Stone.

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ABSTRACT

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The things we have an intimate connection to, handle, collect, and move around with us, are treasures that we need to hold on to. They are important in coping with the balance of movement and stability in a fast-changing world. This project is an investigation of the relationship between people and objects through the making and handling of stones. I explore why and how we connect intimately with physical objects, how they become treasures to us and what it means. Through digging into the stones, connecting to their story of endurance, change and solidity, and eventually letting them go, I explore the role of touching and paying attention, in making and relating to objects and transformation. The stone objects are made from pieces of rock I have collected while travelling. All of them have been transformed by human hands before I picked them out, and many have been given out and then returned to me. Through this ongoing process of transformation and physical encounters, it is becoming clear to me that connection is not only about solidity and stillness, but also about being part of the transformation. Stone as a material is both solid and changing. I aim to make objects of stone that attract and encourage people to engage with them – to experience the pleasure and groundedness that slowing down, zooming in and getting in touch can offer.

Keyterms:
Stone, transformation, material culture, object, touch, tactility, craft.

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"Without the grounding force of objects, we would be adrift in a void without measure or weight. Objects provide us with a tangible source of comfort, something to hold on to in a shifting world."


The intention of this paper is to develop an understanding of why and how we connect intimately with physical objects, and what this means in the context of a fast-shifting society. Is there a point in slowing down and getting into stuff, while we move from one place to the next? What is the role of touching in making and relating to objects and transformation? Through the material of stones, I want to investigate the dilemma of searching for solidity and a sense of belonging in a world that is constantly changing. I will focus my investigation on objects in relation to transition – things we take with us and hold on to for a period of time. I call these objects treasures in transition.

Treasures because they are things we value and care for, and in transition because they are of value to us in coping with going from one place to another and because they are only with us in a certain form for a limited period of time.

As the quote above refers to, relations to physical objects are important in coping with the balance between movement and stability. Objects can provide comfort and stability in unfamiliar situations, a sense of grounding and belonging, a sense of self and privacy - that makes them important to us (Ramljak 2005). Facing a fast-changing society is not unique for our time, but we do in general experience less direct physical encounters as a consequence of our digitized world (Gallace 2015). At the same time, many people experience living in states of transition - always on the way to somewhere else, to achieving some goal – mentally as well as physically. My project and investigation can be seen with this background, not as a critique of the pace itself of modern life, or digital society, but as a pointer towards complimentary ways of valuing experience.

I use stone as the material for this investigation for several reasons: first, the material properties of stone is an expression of solidity and transformation at the same time - it is present and physical in a very tangible way. At the same time, it is part of a history and a process of transformation that is much older than us. To take a material and transform it to something else is what makers/craftspeople do – materials are in a state of transition in our hands. This concrete process of transformation is an inspiration for this project. The materials I use have all been in the hands of other makers before they came to me, they are part of other projects, and my intention is to make objects that will be attractive enough for other people to want to get involved, connect, take them into their hands – to create solid encounters and at the same time continuing the process of transformation.
BACKGROUND

The background for the project is my own experience of longing for connection and solidity in states of transition. I like things - I connect closely to them, find joy and wonder in them and miss them when they are not around. I am also a traveller, who for various reasons has not stayed very long in the same place for many years. Sometimes this leaves me with a strong feeling of being in transition and lacking a sense of belonging, of home and privacy. The stronger this feeling gets, the more stuff I start moving around with me. Stuff that connects me to places or people, at the same time reminding me that I was there, and that I am not anymore, or stuff that just lets me put my personal imprint on an anonymous, rented room and provide a feeling of home and continuity every time I pack and unpack it. The objects change, some stay with me for a while, some get replaced. Some have a function – a cup, a candle, a pair of socks, but the function is not what makes them important. Apart from wanting things around me, I also get a strong urge to make things – to use my hands – to get physical. I want to create and leave my own marks. This is how I felt when I first began to work with stones a couple of years ago. What I am doing in this project and paper is an attempt at connecting this personal experience with a bigger story – the craft field, and the fact that a lack of physical encounters is an issue for many people (Ramljak 2005). I want to investigate the relation between people and objects through the making and handling of stone objects. But before we get to the objects I make, I will look into suggestions within material culture studies, about what makes objects attractive and what makes them important in society today.

THEORY & CONTEXT

What makes objects attractive and important?

According to the anthropologist Daniel Miller, material culture is an integral part of our life, but its importance has been neglected in the studies of society. Things have been looked at as mere representations of relations, but they are really agents in our life. He argues that things make people, just as much as people make things, and that ultimately there is no separation of person and object, (Miller, 2010 s.60). One reason the study of things has been neglected is the general assumption that if you pay a lot of attention to the material world, you do so at the expense of paying attention to other people, but this is far from always the case. Showing compassion for things is often closely connected to the ability to show compassion for others, as well as oneself (Miller, 2008). The crafts curator Suzanne Ramljak also argues for the importance of close relations to objects. She writes about the importance of tangible objects in terms of keeping us grounded, providing a sense of connectedness. Ramljak identifies three features that makes objects attractive to us on an intimate level: small scale, elements of secrecy and tactility (Ramljak, 2005). The appeal of objects of small size is related to a feeling of control over, and ability to manipulate, the objects. Furthermore small
details also require extra investment and attention - it requires taking a closer look, cutting out the surroundings and staying focused. It thereby increases our involvement. The same is the case for objects with hidden or secret components. As Ramljak puts it, getting close and immersed in the details can lead to a "slowing of time and a thickening of experience" (Ramljak, 2005 s.191). The third feature – tactility or the experience of touch is essential for human development and for how we understand the world. We get to know the world through our senses and the touch sense is what gives us the most detailed information; it is touching that makes the world real (Gallace, 2014 s.10). But tactile stimulation not only gives us information about the world, it can also improve our well being. Research shows that areas of the brain respond to pleasant tactile sensations by releasing oxytocin - a hormone related to bonding behaviour (Gallace, 2014 s.12). However, in a time where so many encounters take place in the virtual reality, our touch sense is increasingly under stimulated. Without taking the place of human relations, it is interesting to note that intimate relations to objects actually can provide many of the same responses and rewards as intimate relations to other people. Objects used to relieve our need for tactile experiences are known in many cultural traditions from rosaries to teddy bears (Ramljak 2005, Gallace 2014). The importance that specific objects can have for small children's well being is well known, for instance, a close connection to a toy. This phenomenon has been termed in psychology as a transitional object, an object that is not part of the child's body, but still not fully recognized as belonging to the external reality – as such helping in the transition from being one with the mother to becoming an individual person (Winnicott, 1953). Once the child feels safe, the object is no longer needed and the connection is lost. Even though we grow up to understand the relation between our body and objects, they can still help us in states of transition. Actually Ramljak argues that intimate objects, or what she calls tangible art objects, can aid a transition back to our self. This is important for our sense of identity, but hard to achieve in our busy, exposed lives. She also argues that interaction with tangible art objects not only reduces tension and strengthens individual growth, but also are a source of great pleasure (Ramljak, 2005). This points to the kind of interaction I would like to facilitate with the stone objects, but also to the issue that doing something just for the pleasure of it, does not seem to be valid in a result-oriented society. According to the art historian and philosopher Dorthe Jørgensen, we are so focused on outcomes and productivity that we lose the ability to treasure things and experiences with no apparent utilitarian purpose, such as feeling pleasure, and this makes our lives poorer (Jørgensen, 2006). In the beginning of this project I felt I almost had to look for an "excuse", an explanation for making/holding/having objects without a practical function. But the practical function of objects does not actually tell us much about our relationship to them, according to Miller (2010). Where Ramljak writes about the importance of objects being
tangible, Miller argues that it is the humility of things that makes them important. Because we grow up with things and learn through them, we do not really notice them, but actually they are quite determining for our behaviour. “Material objects are a setting” (Miller, 2010 s. 50). So in this context their function is what makes us aware of what is appropriate and inappropriate. This means that by placing the stone objects in a setting that is associated with, for instance, sitting down, sharing and touching, I can encourage certain forms of interaction. I can also point to certain ways of relating to the objects by calling them treasures – because this is a familiar term, with certain connotations.

**Treasure objects, craft and the handmade**

The simple definition of a treasure is a very valuable thing, and to treasure something is to take great care of something because you love it or consider it very valuable (Cambridge Dictionaries online, 2015). In this way, I attempt at setting the scene for people to think of and treat the pieces as objects of value. The term value has many meanings. The way I interpret value here is as a subjectively attributed value – a personal value that lies in the story, time and care put into the stone by its makers and handlers. The term treasure also has many connotations. The kind of treasures you find in the royal Danish treasury of Rosenborg Castle, for example, is a collection that contains many old jewellery and hollowware objects made of precious stones and metals – objects that might seem to have a practical function, but really are more a display of power, monetary value, access to rare materials, skilled workmanship and connections to faraway places (Hein, 2006). The treasury at Rosenborg castle was kept hidden from the public, and the treasures themselves often concealed inside boxes and shown only to chosen people in the court. It was not until 1838 that the collection was made accessible to the public (Kongernes samling Rosenborg, 2015). I think of the objects I make as having a relationship to this original quality of hidden secrets – carried in a pocket, kept at one’s home, rather that being worn or put on display. The lack of practical functions in the stone objects is also in itself an important aspect of their treasure quality – that their ability to provide pleasure and well being is enough. The term treasure is also associated with ideas of hunting for something unique and hard to find. In this project the hunting aspect refers to the search for material, as well as the search into the material, as I will explain in the chapter on Method & Material. While the preciousness of treasure object are associated with expensive and rare materials, it seems there is a tendency towards a new or complimentary definition of what is precious.

There is a tendency in society to value the tactile, handmade and time consuming. Also artists turn to this way of expression as a response to a lack of physical encounters in our technological age.
A similar reaction to changes in society was seen in the Arts and Crafts movement in the second half of the 19th century, when the Industrial Revolution changed the modes of production and the role of the craftsman. The movement was a call to appreciation of the decorative arts and the quality of craftsmanship (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2015). In the craft field then as now, the body is often directly involved in the actual process of making – the work is done by hand, or with handheld tools directly to the material. This practice often leaves marks on the finished pieces and according to the art critic and studio potter Polly Ullrich, this aspect is one of the features that makes handmade objects attractive today. The risk involved in making something by hand, the "moment-by-moment human decision that are recorded in the act of making", gives us the possibility of witnessing the process of making - of transformation, that we experience less and less in other aspects of life. (Ullrich, 2005 s.205). My project and investigation relates to this tendency, as a pointer towards alternative or complimentary ways of valuing experience – of treasuring and of being present in physical encounters. In case of the stones, I hold them in my hands during the entire work process, and the traces of tools and machines is one of the aspects that I wish to reinforce in the objects. Not only by leaving my own marks, but also by working in materials that already have marks from other makers.

With respect to the handmade, the craft field and within that the corpus and jewellery fields, has some obvious qualities, being characterized by a close connection between body and material, both in making and in finished pieces. Craft objects often provide tactile qualities that are experienced foremost with our touch sense and strengthen our experience of intimacy with the object. Although jewellery and corpus are intimate objects - attached to the body or handled by the body (the hand, mouth, etc), they also play important roles in social relations. Jewellery is often worn to be seen, as a direct symbol of class and status, for example, marriage and wealth. Likewise, hollowware can be important objects in social situations or rituals – framing a particular event (for example the crown regalia kept in the Rosenborg treasury). The intimate and social aspects are interconnected, but in this project the importance is placed on the personal relation to and value of a specific object, and not so much on the social or monetary value. It is the experience of touching and investigating an object - the handheld quality - that I want to explore in making and in handling the treasure objects. They are meant to be held and carried, to be movable - brought from place to place, from home, out and back. The material I work with has been in and out of many hands already and I wish this process to continue. Stones are characterized by enduring this process of change; they have a history of enduring and transformation in them which I will examine in the next chapter.
"Stone is the matter of our earth, not only supporting and sustaining, but grounding and comforting us. Its vast age and ability to endure is reassuring, as the timescales in which it exists are beyond our imagining, beyond our limited life cycle."

Sarah Coulson, in Patrizio, 2011. p.19

The world of stones

On the one hand stones are associated with rare treasures of everlasting beauty and preciousness, on the other, they are so common that we don't even notice their presence all around us. The ideas, uses and qualities associated with stone are innumerable. I am mostly interested in stone as a physical material and part of an ongoing history of transformation, as referred to in the quote above, and as pieces of rock with potential for me to transform. That said, I am aware that I work with notions of scale and monetary value by using granite, marble, soapstone and other types of stone traditionally used for both buildings, sculptures and household objects, but not usually associated with small precious objects. Using material that is quite common and affordable makes the objects more accessible. Using types of stone that are recognizable, but somehow out of context, adds to the discussion of how we value objects. I have collected all the raw material for the project over the last couple of years, from different places in the world. It is material that somehow already has a treasure quality to me – because I associate it with places and people and personal stories. All the pieces have been part of other projects, but at some point lost their connection to these - some are found in quarries, some in sculpture studios, or construction sites. In a few cases I know exactly what was being made of the bigger block of stone from which I collected the fragments; in most cases I don't, and we can only guess. But there is something wonderful about considering the possibility, that the small piece of marble in your hand could very easily come from a big marble block that was the material of great sculptures or majestic cathedrals – this context provides a sense of belonging. The story of the stones adds to the sense of them being in transition and still part of something bigger – other parts of them living on somewhere else. The objects are now in transition with me, they are being transformed, but as I pass them on they become available as carriers of other people’s stories and imprints.

The word ”stone” covers a category of material so large it is hard to grasp – from enormous mountains to tiny diamonds. However, the first kind of stone we usually think of is that which is found in nature, such as on a beach. If we talk about stone in a jewellery context, we will think of precious stones of colour and small size. In the context of the built environment, stone is often associated with expressions of power. It was the royalty and church that built with stones; it is
their monuments that are still standing – in both cases the stones are expressions meant to last. In
my research I found that the term ”stone” actually describes a very specific category of material,
distinguished from other fragments of rock. ”Stones” according to the geologist R.V. Dietrich are
pieces of rock of a certain size that have been detached by natural forces from their original place
on earth - their bedrock, and have been obviously modified by weathering or erosion (Dietrich, 1980
p.9). These are what many stone collectors set out to find. And from the shapes and surfaces they
can identify the origin and natural transformation process that a specific stone has gone through. So
in this respect the material I work with is not actually stones, but fragments of rock. However I will
keep calling them stones, but this discovery made it clear to me what it was that made the pieces I
picked stand out. They had all been obviously modified by human hands. They are of course made
by nature, but the process of detachment and transformation is mostly facilitated by human hands -
they all have signs of other makers and their tools. As a maker it is this process that I continue to
make myself part of. As previously mentioned, their value for me lies in their physical qualities,
their story, how their story connects to my story, and in the work put into them.

I point at you. I ask to see you – ”yes, that one on the right, at the back”. I really ask to see you, so I can pick
you up, out of the crowd and touch you. Feel the lines and curves of your hidden sides. I see that someone was doing
something to you – I feel a cavity the size of my thumb. I wonder what the thought was and why it stopped? I want to
pick it up – the thought, the movement. Maybe if I just continue moving in the lines all ready there – dig deeper,
something will emerge that was in someone else’s mind. I will connect with that someone.


Transformation in the making - working in stone.
The material of stone is solid and fragile at the same time – it is a contradiction that makes it
suitable for this project. Working with stone is a very physical, strenuous, loud, wet, dirty and time-
consuming process, which in my case, leads to a close connection between myself and the material
– as if we were both being transformed! I am holding the material in my hand continuously when I
work. I am informed by the feeling of the shape, all the while using my touch sense. Touch is the
most important, but sight and hearing also assist me in deciding what kind of pressure to put on the
stone or the tool. Former experience of the work methods is also at work, but as I work in many
different types of stone and because they all have unique characteristics, it is not always of great
help. The stones hide cracks, colours and lines inside which can appear at any moment. There is an
element of surprise – an agency on the part of the stone, and the unforeseen and uncontrollable
keeps me alert, even though the work is often slow and monotonous. It is an exploration of the shift
between movement/stability, of zooming in and out of action. I try to work with my hands, the tools
and the material intuitively, in the relation between the stone and me, and let things happen and shapes appear in a shift of control/no control, concentration and ease. During my previous work with silver I built something up; the process was additive. In working with stones I carve something out. I have one solid piece, and I remove instead of adding. It’s almost a search for a shape, an attempt to simplify or get that which is the most important out of something that is already there - a hidden treasure. I attempt to work intuitively out from the characteristics of the particular stone I hold in my hand and without a final result in mind, but rather with an awareness of continuing a process of transformation that is already happening. I want to keep it open and let the ”mistakes” be part of the making – not being on the way to somewhere else. At the same time I have at the back of my mind a set of ”operative elements” – to get other people to want to engage and connect to them. Strong tactility, small size and elements of secrecy (Ramljak, 2005), shapes, signs of tools, hands, and possibilities of customizing the objects. A challenge in the work is to keep a balance between working with an open mind and working towards a result, between trying to control, and letting go. During the project I spent a period of time working very intensely, nonstop and without interference, in a workshop in Imatra, Finland. I did this to experiment with intensifying the experience of the transformation process. The following excerpts are from a diary I kept during this period.

31/1 -2016. I didn't know if the pieces were ”going” anywhere. I decided just to show up! Just to keep doing what I was doing - which was to grind a hole with a diamond ”ball” into a hard piece of black granite. A piece my nephew had picked up for me in Sweden last summer. A hole the size of my thumb – to rest in. I sat there for an hour, I started to relax, not bored – not unaware, at least not for long – I knew that if I changed the pressure and my hand slipped for a second, I could ruin the contrast between the raw stone and the smooth. I was doing and being. STAYING. I was also being stuck there in the doing, in one place, my sleeves getting wet, my hands getting cold, the hole getting deeper. Slow enough to not need reflection and decision making constantly. I would do – then get up, clean the piece, look, feel, decide the next step. All the decisions are exhausting, but also fun!?

4/2-2016. It's like I'm afraid of changing them too much now – like I am holding back. Because I can't go back if I fuck up? Because there is only that on piece of stone from that place? Because I'm scared of getting it wrong? That is the problem of working with ”loaded” material. I need to BRAKE something!!

8/2 -2016 I need to re frame. I'm confused and all over the place. I am doing exactly what I didn't want. I'm hurrying, shifting focus, moving fast, thinking of results, deadlines, trying to control. I need to pick one piece and stay with it and let the things happen that happen by them self when I relax – the things the stones ask for! Or maybe something IS happening in the moment and I just haven't had the time to see it yet?

(Louise Bech. Stone diary. Imatra, Finland.2016)
Excerpts from my work diary show how difficult it was to maintain the balance of staying and moving, doing and being, controlling and not pushing for results in the work. Lee Ufan explains the dilemma this way:

If one starts by from planning, one will, in reality, gradually move away from the plan. If one starts out from place (things), a plan will gradually emerge....what is most important is that the process of making evolve through negotiations between consciousness and the outside world and the work come into being while still containing the unknown. (Lee Ufan, 2010. "The Art of Encounter" p.551).

Sharing stones
The main part of this project has evolved around my personal relation to the stone pieces - picking them out, bringing them with me and working with them. However, over the course of the project the focus moved from my history with the objects, to the history of the stones I was working with, and also started to involve other people, as it had in a way always done. It went from collecting and making, to sharing and eventually even asking people to add their own imprints on the treasure objects. I invited friends and acquaintances to choose one or more pieces to take with them and if they wanted, they could do something to the pieces or add something to them before handing them back to me. I tried to let their experience with them be as little controlled by me as possible. It was almost like the process started by itself – like the objects wanted to move on, and I was surprised to see people's interest in them when they found them lying around my apartment, for instance. I invited people who came to my house and workspace anyway, or I brought the stones to social events with friends. The only criteria was that they did not work in the craft field, as this would give me more unexpected inputs and also make my own approach and role as a professional maker, clearer. Some times my friends would then share the stones with their family and friends and broaden the field of people involved. As I encouraged people to get directly involved in the work process, I realized it meant I had to let go of control of some pieces – potentially of all of them. This made it clear that some pieces meant more to me than others – that other peoples opinion could change my view of them too, or increase their value to me. In this way I let the stones continue their process of transformation, I added to their stories, and I let other people add to their stories by giving them an opportunity to connect with the stones. At the same time I connected to these people through the stones; they became part of the project - underlining the theme of transition and belonging.
DISCUSSION

The starting point of this project was my personal experience of travelling and missing a sense of belonging, that led to collecting materials, and working with stone. It was about staying with things. Taking time to connect, investigate and allow this to happen in a private relationship between me and the material. I wanted to respond to a pressure of producing visible measurable results by stressing the value of the personal relation and trying not to define a final outcome. The process made me realize how hard it is not to fall under this pressure of creating measurable results, but also how frustrating it is not to know what you are getting at. Staying focused and letting things go their own way, not looking for new input when it seems like nothing is happening is not easy. But things did happen, and it made the process easier and more playful to think of the objects not as finished pieces, but as part of an on going process of transformation.

The intention to investigate why and how we connect intimately to objects led me to eventually engage other people in the project as well. I wanted to see how they reacted, how the objects and my own relation to them would be influenced by sharing. It underlined the aspect of transition – making it real to me. And it made me aware that transformation is not only happening when I reshape the material with my tools and hands, but also takes places when an object is picked up and moved from one context into another and when it is handled. I see this as a transformation of value, rather than form. Both are related to the senses and to paying attention and taking time. There was often a difference in the pieces people favoured out from their first visual encounter to when they started touching them, as well as an expression of surprise of how strong the experience of touching the pieces was.

During the exhibiton, the pieces was placed on low benches and available for the visitors to touch and move around. Some people just walked by, but others engaged in different levels – standing close, bending down to look closer, crouching down to get to the level of the benches. Many needed a bit of encouragement to touch, clearly because you are not usually alowed to do so in an exhibition context, but positively surprised when they found out it was okay. Sometimes there was questions and talk about the project, the material, or peoples own experience, but in most cases people would quietly engage with the objects, investigate them, play with them or just hold them. Observing other people's ways of picking and holding the stones, talking about them, organizing them and in the sharing before the exhibition also working with them, raised many questions. Questions around control of the material, making and ownership. These questions are challenging in the context of the corpus and gallery world; who is the owner when there is more that one maker? What is the status of the skilled craftsman, when ”unskilled” people get involved? Whose name
should be on the piece if any? These are interesting questions that I would like to investigate in the future. However, the question of balancing the outward and inward attention – the movement and stability is still relevant. I discovered that much was happening in the making, when I stayed with the stones in the same place in privacy, and I still find this experience important. That is also why I did not just watch or interview people about the stones, but let them take the stones home with them, as a way of encouraging them to relate more intimately to the stones – to touch and handle them. The way people would wrap the stones during transportation for instance, was an example of interaction that told me as much about their relation to the stones as words could. The exhibition of course was a different setting, but it was a great to witness how some people actually stopped and took time to engage with the stone objects, among the many other projects. Touching each one of them – some in silence and some commenting on how powerful or peaceful, playful or emotional it made them feel. A smaller or more intimate setting might have encouraged this even more.

CONCLUSION
In this project I set out to explore the role of intimate physical encounters with objects, and what it means to us, in a fast-changing, digitized society. I used my personal history of travelling, my practise as a maker and the material of stone to explore this. The project developed from focusing on my personal relations to the stone objects in collecting, making and handling, and to a situation where the objects moved on and other people got involved again. I found that there are things to learn about relating to objects from both the private and shared approaches, and both are important and interconnected. I also found that the touch sense was crucial in developing a sense of knowing the material and belonging/connecting to the ongoing story of the stone. The physical encounter with the stone objects gives me, and other handlers a pause from moving – a possibility to zoom in and get into the material world, treasuring it while knowing we all are in transition.

In this way I am trying to cope with transition by taking part in it. It became clearer that connection and belonging is not about solidity/stillness, but about being part of the transformation. Still to become a part of something we need to engage with it and stay with it - with the things around us. Through this paper and project it becomes clear that there is a gift in looking closer, touching and connecting intimately to objects, a gift that can offer us a stronger sense of self and belonging. But I think that this gift is sometimes missed, because we have so much to be aware of and move on so fast, looking for results. For me, working with the stone material has only made it more precious to me. I have a feeling of being a small player in an already ongoing transformation process. We think of stones as everlasting, stable, solid, but the stones are always in transition – the shape I give them
is not final, but an expression of this interesting contradiction and the transitional quality of being “in-between”. This leaves room for others to engage in the objects with their own experiences, references, stories, and is an invitation to reflect on transformation, both in the process of making and in nature and life as such.
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