

# Press, Release

How We Might  
Begin to Think  
of Stones as  
Recordings

*Physical Releases*  
Fake Music

Willy Smart  
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*If we desire a record of uninterpreted experience, we must ask a stone to record its autobiography.*

—Alfred North Whitehead

*Art exists...to make the stone stony.*

—Viktor Shklovsky

*And the pure joy  
of the mineral fact*

—George Oppen

*I'm becoming terribly interested in facts—facts are hard rocks. You can't escape.*

—Clarice Lispector

A contemporary contention in Precambrian paleontology concerns the delineation of mineral and organic bodies. *Vernanimalcula guizhouena*, a 600 million year old fossil reported in 2004 was initially hailed as the earliest example in the fossil record of bilateral symmetry in a biological organism, possessing an identifiable mouth, gut, anus, and possible sense organs. This claim has been rebutted and rebolstered in a series of responses immediately following the article's original publication. Detractors claim the fossil can better be read as an effect of mineralization than as biological organization.

In either case, the fossil is a record and this is a disagreement about recording. The mineralization interlocutors center their argument not on the recorded object but the transformations effected by the recording itself. What the proponents of organicism here fail to take into account, the mineralists argue, is the transformation a body undergoes after death. Or the body that is only corporealized after death. The structures of crystallization that simulate an organic body in the *Vernanimalcula* fossil evidence action after the sediment has been laid down. The recorded body is not inert.

A rebuttal by Stefan Bengtson in Science Magazine ends with this quip: “Nothing in paleontology makes sense except in the light of taphonomy and diagenesis.” Taphonomy, taking its prefix from the Greek Taphos, burial, is the study of fossilization, of slow transports of decomposition and mineralization. Diagenesis is the conversion of sediment into sedimentary rock – compression, chemical and structural transformation. These are useful terms for readers because the terms are attuned to the dissemination of records over the objects recorded. To read a record is to read its passage through time. What is recorded is not only the moment of inscription but the vital swerve of the record itself.

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Throughout the 1980s, paleontologist Chonosuke Okamura self-published a series of “Original Report[s]” on his microscopically-aided readings of limestone from Mount Nagaiwa in Japan. To Okamura’s eyes, these 425 million year old sediments contained fossils of miniature humans, miniature gorillas, miniature dogs, miniature dinosaurs, and so on. Despite the anachronism of dinosaurs with humans, the mineralized bodies evince cultural behaviors: hairdressing, religious activity, art-making. Evolution then is only a matter of scale; humans have always existed in their current form

though not always at their current size. It can be assumed that these Silurian humans were examining limestone slabs of their own for evidence of their own miniscule forebears.

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Limestone is an aggregate of bodies. Or more specifically, an aggregate of bodily housings and frames. Water-dwelling microorganisms outgrow their shells of calcium carbonate. In shallow waters, the discarded shells cannot sink and disincorporate into their component parts of calcium and carbon; instead, layers of ooze form, which eventually harden into stone. Individual shells can sometimes be picked out of limestone but the material is less a record of discrete bodies than of a will-less collective. The ooze is slush of living organisms and outgrown shells. Limestone only forms under these conditions of muddled proximity, only in the ooze of compressed mineral and living bodies.

Limestone is porous, weatherable. Landscapes of limestone are pocked and caved; limestone structures made by humans increasingly require oversight and intervention given the accelerated wipe of acid rain after the industrial revolution. Conservation attempts to stabilize what remains of the damaged body. What has been secreted from this body—what has been released—

however is outside the reach of conservation. Terra rossa is the name for the clay composed of mineral residues of dissolved limestone. This soil can be transported to or used in areas of wine production for its fast drainage properties, but it cannot be secured and contained in the same manner as a decaying gothic chapel. The acid rains that clean names from limestone grave markers disperse grains of muddy terra rossa.

The bodies recorded in limestone are not singular and are not laid down all at once.

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A stone record is not a simple cipher for a memory because the moment of inscription remains open. In other words, the record function is always pressed down. There is no discrete moment of inscription but a continual pressing and repressing. A palimpsest would be a neat model for this sort of multiplicity but the recording is not a strictly sedimentary process, not just layers laid over layers. Each body recorded transfigures the bodies already-recorded. While we cannot help but be bound up and set down ourselves in this ongoing recording, we can cultivate a mode of reading these recordings even as we inscribe them. Taphonomic reading.

Taphonomy, in its paleontological sense, seeks to understand the process of fossilization in order to gain knowledge about the once-living body now fossilized. While taphomy in this sense does attempt to uncover a singular body, its methodology upsets the notion of a singular "author" of the recording: the once-living body is no more the author of the fossil than the organisms that decompose the body, than the climatic conditions of the burial site, etc. An online introduction to taphonomy lists a number of taphonomic processes, each of which must be taken into account in the reading of a fossil: Abrasion, Articulation, Bioerosion, Dissolution, Rounding, Encrustation, Fragmentation, Orientation, Size. It would be simple enough to extrapolate a taphonomic table to apply to recorded objects more generally.

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In addition to a wide range of industrial and domestic applications, calcium carbonate derived from limestone is used as a dietary supplement for calcium deficiency. Calcium is crucial for bone growth but also helps fire nerve impulses and relaxes muscle spasms. Less common than hypocalcemia, or calcium deficiency, hypercalcemia can be thought of as an overmineralization of the body. Kidney stones are one effect of an elevated level of calcium in the bloodstream. The stones are

literally stones, composed of inorganic minerals shaped and crystallized within and by the living body. Their formation is more convoluted than the neat line from calcium supplements to calcium stones suggested above but nevertheless this illustration demonstrates the overlapping incorporations and incompatibilities of organic and mineral bodies.

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Along with Chonosuke Okamura, Roger Caillois is an important forebear in what might be called lithography if the term wasn't already taken in the 19th century to describe a quite limited subset of possible stone writings. In his 1970 proto-new-materialist reverie, *The Writing of Stones*, Caillois uses his personal rock collection as touchstones for reflections on inhuman art, temporalities, and writing. Script is the right word here, for Caillois motions towards not only the calligraphic inlays of stones—"signs so turned in upon themselves that they refer only to their own form"—but the future these scripts preempt and call on. Caillois describes the imperfect geometries in a particular agate as a kind of striving and failing but a slant all the more striking in its brokenness: "By their very strangeness the failures they perpetuate become for me so many speaking portents, or at least emblems. They somehow announce the coming, in the distant future, of a



species that makes mistakes, a being in whom freedom and imagination, together with their necessary disappointments, will be more important than successes due to infallible and inevitable mechanics. They presage new powers, imperfect but creative.”

The record is not read for the past but for the production of possible futures.

Adorno locates as well a latent futurity in phonographic records, describing them as “black seals on the missives that are rushing towards us from all sides in the traffic with technology; missives whose formulations capture the sounds of creation, the first and the last sounds, judgment upon life and message about that which may come thereafter.”

Caillois seems less concerned with the implied attribution of will or unity to nature than with an attention to its swerves and pulls. More than an attention, an enthrallment or ecstasy, a total involvement in the object. For Caillois, the mineral sphere subsumes the human; unlike Okamura’s limestone, the scripts Caillois reads in stone do not reflect back an image or confirmation of humanity but something less coherent, less realized, less codified.

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These stones are records that ought to be read. As Callois and Okamura demonstrate well, the specific acts involved in this reading are not set in stone. Reading, as a term here, is less useful in its intimation of a code than of a stance, of the relation of reader to text. This is a dynamic position involving mutual flows of energy. But before we can be the readers of these records, the records themselves must be released.

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