



Stone Soup

*Sara Blosserille
Master Thesis
University of the Arts, Helsinki
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Master Thesis

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University of the Arts Helsinki

Academy of Fine Arts

Master's Degree in Sculpture

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2020

My thesis project is an installation titled Stone Soup. It was displayed during kuan Kevät, the MFA Degree Show of the Academy of Fine Arts in May 2019 at Exhibition Laboratory. The installation was articulated around a poem, which was made gradually in the same time of making the sculptures. It consisted of sculptures made of a variety of materials (such as wood, granite, paper, silicone, acrylic plaster, cotton, oil, moss, aluminium, wool, bronze, mushrooms, ciment, liquorice, ceramic, playdough, latex), as well as a pile of double-sided stone close-up posters, displayed on a dark grey puddle-shaped mat.

Among other things you could find ; a survival pack, a sprout emoji, a pitch gum tree, a big egg, a concrete maustekakku, a wheelbarrow, a glossy yolk, a souvenir drawing, a can of sardines, a dust rag, a growing leak, a bronze kantarelli, a rubber coated letter.

I often wonder - why do I want to eat things that are not edible ? What makes you want to touch something ? Does the desire dwell in me or in the object ? I feel like the sculptures that make *Stone Soup* are these questions and their answers.

The work is really an exploration of making things, as the interests were the ones of scale (in the mind and in the hands), materials (their time, dead or living tissue, liquidity or solidity), techniques (mental and physical casting, assemblage and building), which I will develop further in this thesis. With this written component, I wish to share a context of creation that led to the work, more than the intentions behind it, which remain unknown to me. If I explain everything around it maybe you will have enough insight to guess the rest ? As we say in France, the recipe is in the cake.

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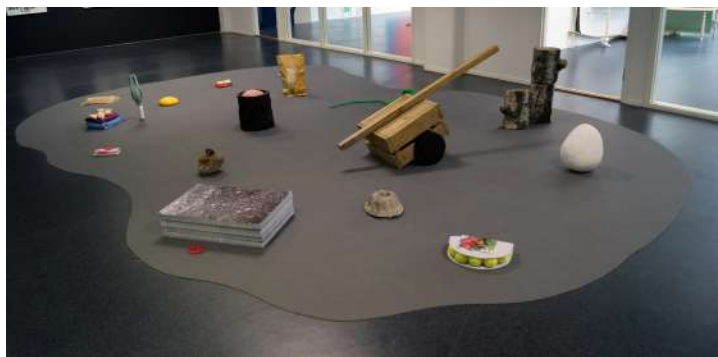
Stone soup

now the snow is melting on the ground
mixed with car juice and grit

sucking salty rocks
it's soup

in my hometown we put a stone in soup
peasant style
it massages the vegetables crushes them together
acting like a pestle
refining textures allocating juices
you can also put a tennis ball in washing machine to soften
linen

Stone soup is a folk story in which hungry strangers convince the people of a village to each share a small amount of their food for the stone soup, in order to make, finally, from poor bits, a rich and enjoyable meal for everyone.

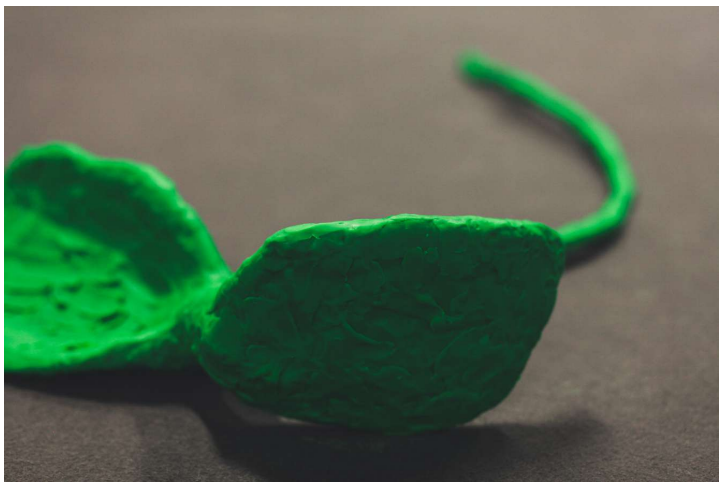






















Triggers



Picture 1: Bowl of Nebekh Fruit ca. 1479-1458 B.C.

Some time ago I was doing research online, when I encountered a 3000 years old Egyptian bowl of fruits (Pic.1). Not only was the ceramic bowl intact but the fruits inside as well; this wonder was an important trigger for me in thinking about time representation in relation with objects. The bowl of fruits made me feel as if I could feel time. I like the presence of things that will last less time than the three weeks it takes to my body to renew all its cells, and others that will last way longer than my existence. To have diversified surroundings, just as you would want to eat variedly.

Maybe the materials I used here that can illustrate this best are the two most different ones in their relation with time: latex (natural rubber which is dried tree sap) and bronze (alloy of copper and tin). The latex, notably because it decays quite fast, with its physical appearance changing quite a lot. The time scale feels somewhere between organic and durable, like a very slow compostable material. I use durable materials like when I make a bronze kantarelli – a mushroom would last only a few weeks, but its representation I made out of bronze, like the word itself, will last so much longer.

Another important physical trigger has been the pedagogical models of flowers by Dr Auzoux (Pic.2). They are fine papier maché models, with articulated parts, that you can open like a box; they have metal hinges and organ names labels written inside. There is something beautiful in their way of being artificial: they are quite obviously physical representations of a plant in the human mind – seen through the prism of science. Somehow it shows the link between artificiality and articulation of thoughts, something close to *how we see the world – that's the world*.



Picture 2: Pedagogical flower model by Dr. Auzoux 1877. Melon: female flower.

In terms of sculpture, I relate to those plant models for their status in between figurative and abstract, in between the thing and its representation. Something I really enjoy in making sculptures, which I see as a deeper way of thinking about objects, is that it helps reconsider the habit of categorizing. How things seem natural but are constructed representations.

I can't get rid of an annoying feeling regarding sculpture, that it often feels like creating a human world (as in perceived by and for humans) that is already too human-centered. There is a description of an orange by designer Bruno Munari, which helps me embrace this feeling though –maybe because it is playing the game to the full:

" Orange

This object is made up of a series of modular containers shaped very much like the segments of an orange and arranged in a circle around a vertical axis. Each container or section has its straight side flush with the axis and its curved side turned outwards. In this way the sum of their curved sides forms a globe, a rough sphere.

All these sections are packed together in a container that is quite distinctive both as to its material and its colour. Its outside surface is fairly hard, but it has a soft internal lining that serves as padding between the outer surface and the sections packed inside. (...)

The orange is therefore an almost perfect object in which one may observe an absolute coherence of form, function and consumption. Even the colour is exactly right. It would be quite wrong if such an object were blue.” (Murani, 2008, 83)

I feel very close to Liz Magor in her approach to sculpture.

In a talk she gave, she puts words to what made her do sculptures :

« What bothered me always was that the world was so far away from me... even if it was lying in my bed, the blanket was there, the pillow was there, but I wanted them closer. I want to know the world in a different way than just using it or looking at it. I wanted to absorb it, and that was frustrating because it would include everything –the rain that fell, mom and dad, my brothers, the dog, all the toys we played with... I didn't just want to have them, I wanted more than to have them. I didn't see how I could get past the barrier of me, my thinking, and them and their not thinking. » (Magor, 2015)



Picture 3: Liz Magor 2006. *Carton II*. Polymerized gypsum, cigarettes, chewing gum, matches, lighters, 29.2 x 53.3 x 48.2 cm

Her piece *Carton II* (Pic.3) embodies a sense of fullness that is very enjoyable. I remember, in primary school, feeling very happy, when I learned that our body was full – and not full of void separating our organs, like it was depicted in the science class models of the human body. This sculpture inspires in me the same comfort of density. Sculpture is a way of digesting the world while creating it. Her sculptures embody this very well; I feel the things going back and forth in her, it's like she managed to appropriate it for real through casting; it's a mental cast.

It makes you consider how the physical and mental membranes separating us from the world seem so closed, when they are actually so porous. All the things that are made around us embody a thought; « as some form of thought residue » (Nina Canell, 2014).

One of my favorite sculptures ever is Robert Filiou's *Optimistic Box n° 1* (Pic.4), on top of which you can read: « Thank god for modern weapons », and when you open it you read « we don't throw stones at each other any more ». Maybe because it is so « efficient », so much on the edge of an object, or maybe it just illustrates well something I want to share with sculpture. But I feel like I shouldn't explain it too much so that it doesn't lose its power, like a joke.



Picture 4: Robert Filiou 1968. *Optimistic Box n° 1 - Thank God for Modern Weapons*. Wooden box with stone, 10.8 x 11 x 11 cm

Catalogue



a survival pack

with all you really need
: a frozen scarf, a pastel drawing
from mum as a child and roughly
peeled potatoes.

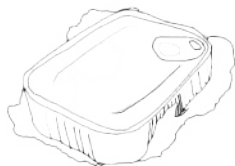
architecture of taste



paquets

Twin set of thick,
supplemented enveloppes
coated with rubber latex.

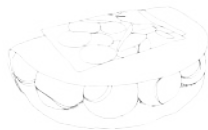
*Natural rubber is tree sap – wounds
of the trunk and branches yield tears
of yellowish gum which turns a
darker colour, even black, with age.*



when the sardine can looks back

Collected, shiny,
fitting in the hand, unopened
aluminium can containing half
a dozen sardines resting in oil.
Full fat, intense protein tissue,
free of any air.

*This attraction can lead birds to
enter a house or even try to steal a
shiny object. Birds may desire these
objects to decorate their nests, to help
visiting mates feel more comfortable.*



palko

A mauve folded shell
produces thick pods of a yellow
colour and coarse texture. It is
labelled as giving fruits-like
shapes.



yrtti

The compound branch divides into a pair of thick, slightly curved stipular evergreen leaves. Fully covered in vibrant green paste, the sprout grew up to 70cm long - in the center a metal vein is conducting all the energy from the branch to the leaves. Spreading essential oils into the broth.



yes, you can grow an idea in the garden of your mind

Very hard white cylindric handle trunk from which rises numerous large flat and long densely intertwined greenish leaves - getting its nutrients from a disc of clay it is growing from.

farmsoup



pitchgum tree

A mat conifer trunk crust, garnished with a pink gum heart. Mentally squeeze so the paste would overflow.

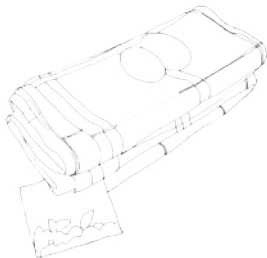
My grandmother was telling me that when she was little, they used pine tree sap as chewing-gum. It is sticky and slightly sweet, has a deep taste of the smell of forest which is very nice.



maustekakku

Heavy mass allspice concrete cake, with liquorice filling that would go through your basket.

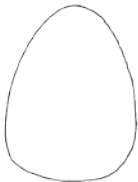
I'm coming out of the k-city market with a black salmiakki ice-cream in the mouth: the snow is mixing with the dirt of the railroad. As I lick the black cream - the cold gasoline smell.



play me a tune- tasteful and sweet

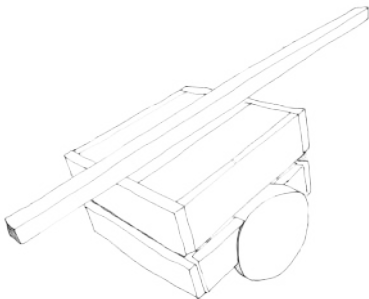
A pair of fuschia ceramic coated dragées sprouted on the top of the fabric.

can I have a lick ?



an egg

A human egg.



kotikärry

Reversed wheelbarrow made out of pine tree wood, nails and granite discs.

Trying so hard not to forget the image of an old wheelbarrow, in the field next to my grandfather's farm.

is the Flintstones set in the future ?

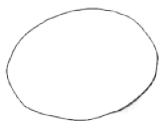


an award for the forest

A yellowish-brown alloy of copper with up to one-third tin, in shape of woodland fungal growth as a domed cap on a stalk, with gills on its underside. The chanterelle of bronze is laying on a bed of fragrant moss, that rises on wet granite stone. It is well stuck to the ground with its massive gravitational force, and getting slowly eaten by the moss, turning its minerals into more of itself. If from anything the taste of the soup comes from the mushroom.



3 rounded slices of fresh birch, which grows mushrooms. Bugs inhabit them, digging tunnels inside, leaving behind a pepper-like powder on the mat.



yolk

A glossy yolk is there, ready to break and spread its precious thick yellow life juice force into the broth.

the nutrient-bearing portion



"It is never we who affirm or deny something of a thing;

it is the thing itself that affirms
or denies something of itself in us."

Baruch Spinoza, *Short Treatise II*

Sculptural work : materials, techniques, scale, and display



Picture 5: busytoddler.com

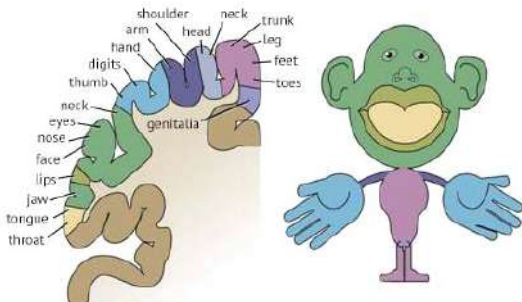
I remember being very small and making potions in the bathtub, with my mum's pearly shampoos, beauty oils and shiny jewelry. I would mix everything in a big pirate plastic boat, the wicked colors of bath bombs would foam all over the place, and glittery oils would make rainbow reflexions in the water. When I work I try to recreate this pleasure, so that I will always be driven by lust. Everything is driven by the feeling of « I like this ».



Picture 6: Objects collected by a magpie

First and favorite technique for me is collecting, in the woods, in the street, among my family's stuff. It holds two very distant purposes: it is a strong natural survival instinct in us animals – to collect food and dwelling materials – as well as of a more leisure activity of beauty and something close of the « discipline of looking always at what is to be seen » as Thoreau puts it (Thoreau, *Walden IV*). These *trouvailles* (lucky finds) I process, imitate, cast, carve, include, assemble. For me, making is definitely about understanding the world, and casting especially feels like such an important experience, as loads of the objects surrounding us have been casted.

The scale of the sculptures is one of a human, in the sense that every part can be carried between two hands, but the installation scale could be for another animal. The scales are relative to the importance in the mind : I was obsessed with the egg, so it is huge compared to the wheelbarrow, that was just somewhere behind in the landscape of my mind. Like in a somatosensory map (Pic.7) but for things, not body parts. By this fluttering scale and non functionality of the objects, I want to leave the voids and imprecise borders that happened through translation, from item of the mind to physical item. In a way it is sharing my inner objects, or putting my insides out.



Picture 7: Somatosensory cortex map: Body parts size in proportion with the level of their sensitivity.

I like to surround myself with various materials, just as you would want to eat diversified food: doughs, pastes, soft plant or animal based products, forest material, alive, growing organisms and manufactured goods. In *Stone Soup*, you can find: rubber, bronze, stone, moss, cotton, wool, mushroom, tree, silicone, plaster, playdough, tar, concrete, paper... more or less organic and synthetic materials that are common in domestic surroundings, so common we rarely question them, or even know where they come from and where they are made. I love materials so much and at the same time I don't really care about them.

While preparing the exhibition, I would always have in my ears playing Haruomi Hosono's album « Watering A Flower », which ended up being present in the spatial rhythm of the installation I think: something slow and anchored, something of a plant growing. The development of sculpture as slow as gardening... this makes me think of Miró's words which I feel very close to :

« I work like a gardener or a winemaker. Things come slowly. My vocabulary of forms, for example, I didn't discover it all at once. It formed itself almost in spite of me.

Things follow their natural flow. They grow, they nourish. It needs graft. It needs water, like salad. It matures in my mind.» (Joan Miró, 1958)

The sculptures were placed as items displayed a bit like they were scratched from a decal sheet on the grey puddle. The grey mat acted as a broth, sober enough to let the ingredients express themselves, acting as the glue that sticks things together. It is also a protection platform.

Thinking about it in retrospect, the display was definitely influenced by Jean-Luc Moulène's exhibition at Centre Pompidou I had seen a few years before (Pic.8). It was constituted of a variety of sculptures displayed on pedestals democratically dispatched in the room, which were in a neutral grey tone, similar to the floor. A display which supports the works and makes the rest disappear, presenting the works as a corpus that emerges from the mind.



Picture 8: View of Jean-Luc Moulène exhibition at Centre Pompidou, Paris, France in 2016

Forbidden snacks

Don't you think it's really lucky that the food tastes so good? How it fits so perfectly to our taste? I mean a strawberry could just be nutritious. Food is my first inspiration; I see foodstuff in itself so close to sculpture already: first, food items are forever interesting as objects with their diverse, beautiful textures, shapes and colors. Maybe it's very satisfying also because it's « the world » you experience the most directly through your body, by transforming it into yourself. They are a subset of our bodies, and the material that builds it. They are so bodily important, yet also intention forming and culture making. Just like sculptures.

It just feels so natural to work around food and its representation, because it's relevant to the outside that's within - and the insides out. We are an assemblage of food; eating constitutes a series of mutual transformations between human and nonhuman materials. In her essay *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, political theorist Jane Bennett proposes to consider food as actant: she articulates how food can make people physically larger but also build our cognitive landscape. For example she mentions studies which show that violent behavior is directly related to omega-3 deficiency .

My Strange Addiction (Pic.9) is a documentary TV show that interviews people who can't help themselves eating things you're not supposed to: rocks, glue, paint, toilet paper, tape... Pica is an eating disorder that involves eating items that are not typically thought of as food and that do not contain significant nutritional value, such as hair, dirt, and paint chips, at an age in which this behavior is developmentally inappropriate - because we all do it as children, as a way of discovering the world.



Picture 9: My Strange Addiction

Further than a medical condition, I think you can consider it as an allegory for a hungry soul, the « forbidden snacks » as a lust for discovery beyond the ways we are used to. An extension of hunger that reveals the link between matter and us. There is a powerful link between hunger and making sculpture I think; the deep desire to take the energy from materials. The egg you put in your belly is meant to be turned into heat, just as the log you put in the fire: the subtle limit between a thing being an object or foodstuff – for us the sprig of grass is an item of the garden when for the hare it is food – is very similar to the difference of a thing being an object or a sculpture.



Picture 10: Tinderbergen painting fake plaster eggs.

« If you want a nightingale's song pure of any mixture,
I advice the synthetic nightingale. »

Jean Giono

Supernormal stimulus

Nikolaas Tinbergen was a Dutch biologist and ornithologist, pioneer of ethology. His book *The Study of Instinct* (1951) is the rapport of his studying of stimulus that will trigger reactional behavior among animals. An egg will trigger brooding by the bird, feathers of a male peacock will trigger a sexual behavior for the female, a baby bird's wide open beak will trigger parental care... Tinbergen realises that he can recreate those stimuli by creating models and trying out different features: fake plaster eggs, cardboard butterflies, paper beaks... He notices that, by modifying certain stimulus, he can trigger even stronger reactions: eggs with a bigger size and more colorful stains will be more brooded than the real eggs containing the offspring, female peacocks will prefer models with exaggerated features to the real males, a rough wooden model of a female fish with a red belly will trigger males more than an accurate model with a less red belly.

This is such an interesting thing to think about regarding sculpture: instinctive reactions to certain shapes and colors. Thinking in this way underlines how sculptures are not only a 3d embodiment of an idea or sensation, acting as signs, but also simply, a trigger of biological stimulus. The study shows that animals will show behaviour in favour of the artificial stimulus, over the naturally occurring stimulus. This is why I find it interesting to show the artificiality of flavors and colors I use with glossy looks and saturated colors. Building fake natural items. Those stimuli are sugar for our brain. It would say it is linked with my generation's growing-up with TV food commercials, in which food freshness staging still works on us, even now that we know the subterfuges behind it (white glue as the milk in a cereal bowl, deodorant to make a fruit shiny, engine oil instead of maple syrup etc).



"The eye, a hand."

Edouard Manet

Items of the mind



I like the idea of sticking to the thought of sculptures as items of the mind. I am thinking, for example, about the piece *Kotikärry* ; when I say “*Trying so hard not to forget the image of an old wheelbarrow, in the field next to my grandfather's farm.*”. The purpose is not to recreate a credible wheelbarrow, but trying to literally make the object as it is in a souvenir, in the head. It is an exercise of concentration, to have as little thoughts possible that could interfere with the item as it is in your mind: don't try to make it logic, don't try to make it beautiful, just get it out of the head. Then, of course, things will get lost (or won) in translation, and that's what I find interesting. The translation of something from the mind to the hands.



Picture 11: "The Cat and Cat Cake" meme

Or more precisely, a spontaneity in the brain/hand/object translation: this is what I like in Manet's quote: "The eye, a hand". It is the immediacy, abstraction and freshness that literality allows: to actively decipher how life is literally given. In *Stone Soup* the presence of printed images is also a tool for literality, because image allows being literal: when you print a poster of something, it's when you are a fan.

For me being literal is a way of playing with the illusionist statement of “what you see is what you see”, which, as Bertrand Rougé puts it, actually really means “what you see is not what you see” and that things are not what they seem (Rougé, 2009) .



Picture 12: Edouard Manet 1880. Le Citron. Oil on canvas, 14 x 22 cm

The installation is built on a poem, and that is very important regarding its structure: I consider the sculptures as signs, almost like words. I feel very close to Barthes's semniological approach to poetry, but applied to sculptures. He says:

“poetry, on the contrary, tries to find an infra-signification, a pre-semiological state of language; in short, it tries to transform the sign back into meaning: its ideal would be to reach, not the sense of words, but the sense of things themselves. This is why it disturbs the language, increases as much as it can the abstraction of the concept and the arbitrariness of the sign and stretches as far as possible the connection between the signifier and the signified; the “floated” structure of the concept is here exploited to the maximum: unlike prose, it is all the potential of the signified that the poetic sign tries to make present, in the hope of finally reaching a sort of transcendent quality of the thing, in its natural (and not human) sens.” (Barthes 1957, 206-207)

There is something there about going back and forth in the different levels of meaning that a word – or an object – can have. This is where sculpture gets fun for me: when playing with its ambiguous position that is somewhere inbetween a representation and a thing of its own. If you can discern known figures and also have to deal with abstract ones, it allows this “floated structure of the concept” that Barthes talk about, and that's where I think the magic can happen.



End note

Thinking about it retrospectively, this work feels very pedagogical : now I see it as an embodiment of sculptural researches, more than an artwork of self-expression. Maybe it is what a master thesis work can be.

Writing about it, or, trying to figure out the work myself, some areas feel unreachable, as if some parts of the work were not genuine art making from me, but a well done homework for school. I remember the baby-blues after the opening was immense: what to do with the fact that there are so many things dwelling in the works for me, which are maybe not reachable for others ?

When my interests were in reconsidering things around us and their names, I feel like the work has a kind of conservative tone which is quite far away from what I intended to.

I had such an interesting time creating this work, and more than anything it felt like an exciting exploration of sculpture and its possibilities. The words of Robert Filliou resonate with the after-taste I am left with, over a year after the exhibition: « art is what makes life more interesting than art ».

I want to thank all the people who made the past years so rich and fulfilling for me.



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Images from the web (downloaded on 15.10.2020)

- 1: Bowl of Nebekh Fruit ca. 1479-1458 B.C. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, U.S.:
Image downloaded from <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/548940>
- 2: Pedagogical flower model by Dr. Auzoux 1877. *Melon: female flower*. Musée National de l'Éducation, Rouen, France. Image downloaded from <https://www.reseau-canope.fr/musee/>
- 3: Liz Magor 2006. *Carton II*. Polymerized gypsum, cigarettes, chewing gum, matches, lighters, 29.2 x 53.3 x 48.2 cm. Collection of Contemporary Art Museum of Montréal, Canada. Image downloaded from <https://artmap.com/macm/exhibition/liz-magor-2016>
- 4: Robert Filiou 1968. *Optimistic Box n° 1 - Thank God for Modern Weapons*. Wooden box with stone, 10.8 x 11 x 11 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, U.S. Image downloaded from <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/135457>
- 5: Image downloaded from <http://busytoddler.com>
- 6: Objects collected by a magpie. From the article *The girl who gets gifts from birds* by Katy Sewall for <http://bbc.com> 2015. Image downloaded from <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-31604026>
- 7: Somatosensory cortex map: in proportion with the level of sensitivity of body parts. <http://neurones.co.uk/Neurosciences/Tutorials/M4/M.4.2%20Sensory%20Cortex.html>
- 8: View of Jean-Luc Moulène exhibition at Centre Pompidou, Paris, France in 2016. Image downloaded from <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/cpv/resource/cAokR5R/rMR9Go8>
- 9: Screenshot from Youtube. *My Strange Addiction – Rocks for Dinner*. Screenshot taken from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_MaglPJKSmU
- 10: Tinderbergen painting fake eggs. Photography originally from Life Magazine. Image downloaded from <http://flickr.com/>
- 11: “Cat and cat cake” meme 2018. Image downloaded from <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/cat-and-cat-cake>
- 12: Edouard Manet 1880. *Le Citron*. Oil on canvas, 14 x 22 cm. Le Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France. Image downloaded from <https://www.musee-orsay.fr/>

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