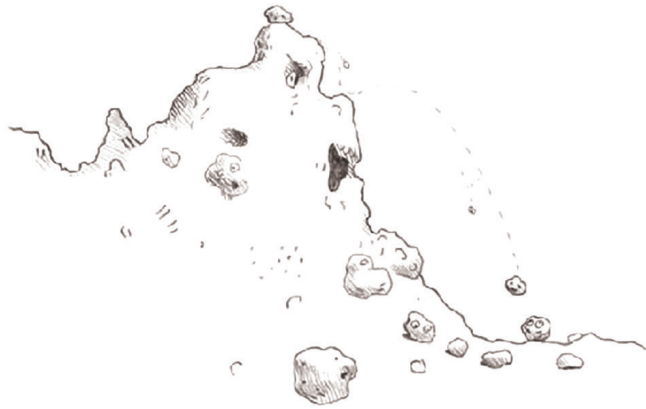


Ten Questions to Jane Bennett
Egill Sæbjörnsson



Drawing by Egill Sæbjörnsson

1. Egill Sæbjörnsson: Can we say that art is its own species, which might have co-existed with human-kind just like the dog was bred from the wolf?

Jane Bennett: I like the idea of art as a species, or, even better, art as a “vital force” that joins up with different earthly bodies at different times and places. So, art would have an existence that retains a moment of independence from the artist. Art as a force that sometimes joins up with the “creative genius” of, say, a da Vinci, but other times with the striped bodies of zebras, or the graceful curve of a plant stem as it reaches for the sun, or the striated layers of granite.

It’s also interesting to note that some people today challenge the idea that humans domesticated the wolf to produce the dog. They contend instead that it was the wolf, hanging around human garbage sites, who altered his/her own behavior (pace, taste) to become-dog. Some of these dogs liked to herd and thus helped to make possible a human economy of livestock. Based on this view, it was the wolf-dog that induced the human-animal to settle down and become agricultural. I suppose one could say, analogously, that art lured the artist into being.

2. Is art older than art history indicates? Is there art without humankind? Are worms artists? Are minerals artists?

The question “Are worms (or minerals) artists?” loses some of its sense once art is understood to be a lively, active force in the world, rather than a technique or talent of humans exclusively. If art is defined primarily as a means to human ends or an expression of human selves (or not only those things), then it’s more apt to say that worms and minerals and people can sometimes be co-actants with the force of art.

3. Could it be that art is partly controlling humans? Is the oil on the canvas controlling the artist just as much as the artist is controlling the oil?

Yes, it seems clear that when different combinations of materialities engage with each other (the oil, the artist-body, the canvas, the movements and sounds of each, etc.) the agency is distributed across the assemblage that forms. No one element is in “control,” or if it is, it does not reign for long. I don’t know if the oil exerts more or less power over the resultant “work of art” than the artist does. It’s probably impossible to discern exactly the distribution of agency at work in any given instance. But it seems most reasonable to identify the collective, the assemblage, as the real locus of agency, rather than any individuated element therein.

4. Do you believe that our mind is not in the brain but extended to our whole body and perhaps to a certain extent into the whole body of the universe?

The question of the extensity (spatial boundary) of “mind” is an extraordinarily complicated one! I don’t think plants or artifacts have self-consciousness, though their materials may very well engage in internal feedback loops and intra-species forms of communication. There was just a *New York Times* piece on April 28, 2012 describing how “a pea plant subjected to drought conditions communicated its stress to other such plants, with which it shared its soil. In other words, through the roots, it relayed to its neighbors the biochemical message about the onset of drought, prompting them to react as though they, too, were in a similar predicament.”¹

I am intrigued also by the direction that the theoretical archaeologist Lambros Malafouris is pursuing. In his article “Between brains, bodies and things: tectonoetic awareness and the extended self,” Malafouris focuses “on the complex interactions between brains, bodies and things,” and, drawing together “threads of evidence from archaeology, philosophy and neuroscience,” he presents “a view of selfhood as an extended and distributed phenomenon that is enacted across the skin barrier and which thus comprises both neural and extra-neural resources.”² In another paper, he again argues that “contrary to what classical cognitive science believes and cognitive archaeology often implicitly reiterates, what is outside the head may not necessarily be outside the mind.”³

5. Is humankind one body, like the body of an individual is a housing complex for many dependent individuals called cells and bacteria?

I don't tend to think of humanity as a single body or mega-organism; the image of a swarm of human-nonhuman assemblages (with variegated textures and powers and durations) works better to capture the messiness of things.

6. How do stones talk or—let's say—express themselves?

Like me, a stone expresses itself by its characteristic pace, its distinctive shape and texture, and by the idiosyncratic or historically contingent ways it affects and is affected by other bodies. A stone's pace of change and movement is usually (except when it falls off a cliff and instantly smashes into bits) slower than that of a human body. Stones can express themselves also by hitching their wagon (or allowing themselves to be hitched) to other bodies, like that of Egill Sæbjörnsson and his video projectors.

7. If one stone falls from a mountain top and hits another one on the head, is that communication?

Yes, I can see some good reasons to count it as a nonlinguistic form of communication—that designation would focus people’s attention on the materiality of communication.

8. Given that everything on Earth comes out of magma, or that living creatures descend from inanimate materials, are humans walking and talking stones?

Yes.

9. Have stones affected the development of humans? How are they an important part of present-day life?

There was a whole age named after stones. Stones are slow and smooth and can fit nicely into human hands. People still get stoned, for good and ill.

10. What is intuition?

Perhaps intuition is one of the names we give to that peculiar mode of transmission between bodies, which can’t be explained through any model that natural science currently offers. If we think of that transmission as a communicative current that flows between bodies qua bodies, then “intuition” would name an individual human body’s experience of that flow. The American poet Walt Whitman referred to this as an “electric swiftness” or “sympathy” between bodies; he meant to draw attention to the propensities or inclinations that some materials have for others. In the Preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, he writes: “*What is marvellous? What is unlikely? What is impossible or baseless or vague—after you have once just open’d the space of a peach-pit, and given audience to far and near, and to the sunset, and had all things enter with electric swiftness...?*”⁴

This interview was reprinted from *STONES according to Egill Sæbjörnsson* (2012) with permission of the authors. 🌍

Endnotes

¹ Marder, Michael. “If Pease Can Talk, Should We Eat Them?”, *The New York Times* 28.04.2012, New York, 2012

² Malafouris, Lambros. “Between brains, bodies and things: tectonoetic awareness and the extended self,” *Biological Sciences* vol.363 no.1499, 12 June 2008, p. 1993.

³ Malafouris, Lambros. “Knapping intentions and the marks of the mental,” in *The cognitive life of things: recasting the boundaries of the mind*, Cambridge 2010, p. 15.

⁴ Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, preface to the 1855 Edition, edited by Michael Moon, Norton Critical Edition, New York 2002, p. 621.