

The Real Smiling Rock
Living document/Text/Presentation
2015

Go to www.ebay.com. Navigate to the category called “Everything Else.” Within it you will see categories like “Weird Stuff,” “Totally Bizarre,” and simply “Other.” This is the outer limits of eBay, a place for items that defy categorization.

Set your minimum bid relatively high, at \$1,000, for example. Now you are scrolling through the crème of the dregs of online auctions.

This is where the smiling rock resides.



The smiling rock is a small agate geode. Buyers can use the Buy It Now function to purchase the smiling rock for \$1,000,000, or they can suggest a lower price, which the seller can accept or reject.

The smiling rock has been listed on eBay for more than five years. It has been viewed more than 28,000 times, and 97 people currently have the listing saved in their eBay Watch List. Nearly 200 offers have been made to purchase the smiling rock for amounts less than \$1,000,000, and none of them have been accepted. I have kept the smiling rock in my eBay Watch List for three years.

The eBay listing has evolved over time as the images, title, and item description have changed.

Saved in your Watch list | Remove



very rare real smiling rock oak This is a real rock

Item condition: --

Price: **US \$1,000,000.00** [Buy It Now](#)

or

Best Offer: [Make Offer](#)

[Add to list](#)

Bucks Join eBay Bucks and earn **2%** back on this item. See conditions

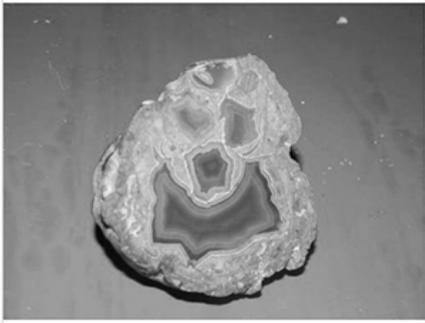
Shipping: [Read item description or contact seller for details.](#)

Delivery: [Varies](#)

Returns: [3 day money back, buyer pays return shipping](#) | [Re](#)

 **eBay Buyer Protection**
Covers your purchase price plus original shipping.
[Learn more](#)

This screen capture was taken in November 2012 from eBay's U.S. site:



One sexy smiling rock, its a gold apple diamond oak Box shape Very Rare
Come feast your eyes upon a rock smiles
1 Aufruf pro Stunde

Artikelzustand: **Neu**
Übersicht: 201 Preisvorschläge

US \$1.000.000,00
Ca. EUR 803.632,42

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★ Zur Kollektion hinzufügen
77 Beobachter

Neu | 7 Fragen an den Verkäufer | Verkäufer akzeptiert Preisvorschlag

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Exactly two years later, in November 2014, this screen capture was taken from eBay Germany:

Last updated February 11, 2015, the description currently reads:

*** Update *** it is still smiling ***

This is a rock that smiles I hand cut this rock open and I seen it was looking back at me. I have been cutting rocks for yrs and never seen any thing like this before “it scared the shat outa me”This would make any person happy since it always smiles back i came to realize over the years never once have i seen that a frown on ether rock

This Rock is not painted it is 100% Real Natural Rock . THIS ROCK HAS BEEN FEATURED ON FRONT PAGE OF BIDMONKEE in 2011. :) I Enjoy all the people that looks at it cause where its at right now it sees nobody and would love to be seen by people. It would always smile for someone if they had it, right now if i went where I have it stored at it would give it a big smile like always “ If Who ever was to buy it It would never frown once it would keep smiling.

The item’s condition is given as “new,” and international shipping is not guaranteed.

The eBay seller calls himself guitarpickman.com. He has primarily sold guitar picks that he shaped and polished from stones and coins. He currently has a positive feedback percentage of 100% and a “Feedback Score” of 188. Outside of www.ebay.com, he has sold his guitar picks from his Etsy store and from his own website, www.guitarpickman.com. Most of the picks were selling at a set price of around \$20, which buyers could pay using PayPal. Sometime between 2013 and 2014, his website went offline. Now, for reasons unknown, the URL redirects to a sushi catering business in Arizona.

In 2012, I made my first offer on the smiling rock, for \$100. It was immediately rejected. I made several more offers that year, the last and highest being \$1000, which was also rejected. In late 2012, I saw that the smiling rock had been sold for \$10,000. Somehow I couldn’t believe it, so I contacted guitarpickman.com via eBay’s messaging service to ask if it really had been sold. He replied saying that the rock had not been sold and that it was being relisted. I never found out exactly what happened, but I presume that someone made an offer in error, in haste, or in jest.

I thought about the smiling rock from time to time and would check in on it, revisiting the eBay listing to see what was new. One update included a modification to the title claiming that it was “sexy,” along with the usual descriptors like “rare” and “oak” (one of a kind). Another update was a new picture, of a child holding the smiling rock next to her face. Presumably it was to demonstrate scale and compare smiles, but it also changed the tone of the eBay listing. While still being rare and sexy, this smiling rock was now also of a wholesome family type.

A breakthrough came during the summer of 2013.

I was telling the tale of the smiling rock to a friend when she asked a question so obvious and so crucial, I could not believe I had never asked it myself: What about the other half?

This changed everything for me. The eBay listing had thus far only pictured one half of the rock, but obviously there had to be a second half. The rock’s inner smiling face was only discovered when someone happened to cut it in two. I had a lot of questions. Where was the other half? Had it been destroyed? Was it a perfect mirror copy? Was it included in the auction? Would both halves cost \$2,000,000? Or could I buy one half for \$500,000?

Coincidentally, the listing was updated soon after, and a photo of both halves was added.

The second half was different. It leaned to the right rather than the left. The top of its face was less pointy, making it seem shorter. Its left eye was cloudy. It was missing the indentation marking the left temple. And it had a mineral deposit curving down its right cheek that looked like a big, grey scar.

To me, it seemed inferior. The physical quality of the specimen was comparable, but something felt off, almost counterfeit. I imagined that when the rock was cut open, the original smiling rock (that is, the first half) was the first to look out onto the world and witness the shock on guitarpickman.com’s face. The second half was like an afterthought, the younger twin tardy to the miracle of its own birth.

At this point, I began to realize that I had become involved.

I felt offended by the second half, as if its existence made the first half less rare, although I knew this wasn't exactly logical, since the two halves were once a single stone. The first half seemed to have a distinct personality, and the item description was its voice, even if it was written by guitarpickman.com.

The smiling rock (the first half) was “always smiling” and has a “smile that will last forever.” It was a charmer, an optimist, a people person, but the second half was never described. Was it moody? Was it arrogant? Was it insincere? Why did guitarpickman.com reveal the existence of the second half so late?

In June 2013, I decided to find out more about guitarpickman.com. From his website I found out that his name is David Melton and he was likely living in Arkansas. A Google search didn't reveal much, so I paid \$2.00 for an online background check. I now had his current and several previous addresses, phone number, and next of kin. I looked up satellite images of his house on Google Earth and wondered in which room he kept the smiling rock. Was it prominently displayed in his living room? Was it on his bedside table to greet him every morning? Was it stored away in a box? Were both halves together?

Guitarpickman.com wrote, “Where [the smiling rock is] at right now it sees nobody and would love to be seen by people.” Its calling was to make people smile, but few people saw it in this small town in Arkansas. The eBay listing provided a stage for this tragic clown to shine, and it functioned as a platform for the development of the smiling rock's online identity. The listing allowed many people to own the smiling rock, in the sense that the eBay Watch List is a kind of virtual collection of objects. My Watch List is full of things I will never buy but simply want to bookmark for the possibility of a collection.

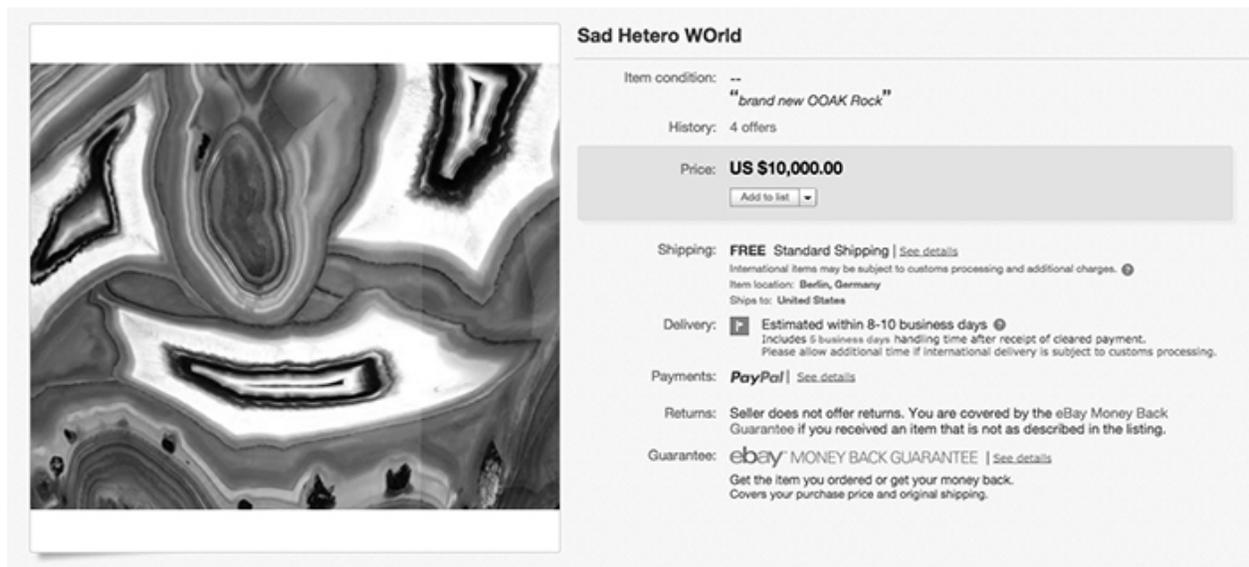
My feelings of ownership over the smiling rock eventually made me aware of how precarious that ownership was: eBay auctions that have ended will only remain in a user's Watch List for 60 days, so if the smiling rock ever sold, the listing would disappear shortly after. Perhaps as a way to assert my own agen-

So the story was over. Then what?

The next logical step was that the story should become a short film, so I started to write a script that focused on the character of the narrator. Her initial intrigue evolved into an obsession with the smiling rock. The fact that her offers were denied only fuelled her bidding fever. But there was a twist...

The eBay buyer joined an online dating site and there she met someone who looked like the smiling rock. Specifically, his profile picture was the primary image of smiling rock from the eBay listing. They began a correspondence.

During fall 2013, I began working on an exhibition that would feature digital prints and sculptures spawned from this developing script. The prints were 3D models of virtual smiling rocks that I designed, one of which was used as the image for online invites and the press release, which was an eBay listing selling a virtual model of a smiling rock for \$10,000.



The press release posted on www.ebay.com.

The text in the item description was almost identical to that of the “real” smiling rock listing (as of December 2013), with the addition of the date and time of the opening. It reads:

very rare real smiling rock OoAK This is a real rock

This is a rock that smiles It's a goold apple diamond box shape 4 gift its
sexy × cool

This Rock is not painted it is 100% Real Natural Rock .

THIS ROCK HAS BEEN FEATURED ON FRONT PAGE OF
BIDMONKEE in 2011. :)

It was hand cut open and seen it was looking back . I Enjoy all the people
that looks at it cause where its at right now it sees nobody and would love to
be seen by people. Give This SEXY oak ROCK SMILING ROCK a loving
home. Found it in teh ground and thought it was nothing special. Prob Laid
there for yrs b4 it got found. ITS sexy smile will be looking out at you for yrs
and yrs.

If Who ever was to buy it It would never frown once it would always
smile back

Friday, December 6

18:00 – 21:00

The exhibition was titled “Sad Hetero World” and opened December 6, 2013,
at Gillmeier Rech in Berlin, Germany.

One of the exhibition reviews appeared on rhizome.org on January 17, 2014.
It contained a link to the press release eBay listing for my virtual smiling
rock, as well as a link to the listing for the “real” smiling rock.

On July 22, 2014, David Guitarpickman (his Facebook username) shared a
link to my press release eBay listing with the comment “#lawyer.” He want-
ed to find legal representation to sue the person who, he said, had switched
the picture, but who was using his “song and dance” on another eBay listing.
That same day he contacted the rhizome.org reviewer via Facebook to say it
wasn't right to use his words to sell another “crappy rock they want to say is
a smiling rock.”

I deliberated what to do. It seemed likely that Guitarpickman would under-
stand my intentions if I simply wrote to him, but my unease in breaking the

communication seal made me hesitate. It was becoming so real.

On July 30, 2014, I contacted David Guitarpickman on Facebook to introduce myself, explain the press release, and ask if he would like to be involved in the project.

He responded quickly, saying he was still unsure if my press release eBay listing was a fake listing, but that he was happy if his “real” listing was used. Before I could respond, he wrote again, seven hours later. He admitted he first thought I was “messing with him,” but then saw things differently. Now he was “speechless and in kinda shock and aww” that his rock had inspired me. He wanted to participate in the project, saying it “would bring great joy in [his] crazy hillbilly life.”

Two months later he wrote, “Help me sell my rock lol.”

Now as his Facebook friend, I had much more access to David Melton’s life. The child holding the smiling rock in an early eBay picture was Melton’s daughter, who had grown up quite a bit since the photo was taken. There were many photos of his guitar picks, and he also shared photos of stained glass he had made himself. Melton had his own metal roofing business and regularly went out to collect rocks. He often found arrowheads, and he once found a ring near a creek, but couldn’t tell if the gemstone was real. He is fond of doughnuts and live action role playing. He got a puppy in the spring of 2014 that grew into a large German shepherd. He went to Red Lobster on May 3, 2014, and got a bad sunburn on August 4, 2014.

In the summer of 2014, I finished my script, which had expanded into a feature-length film and immediately went into production. Guitarpickman.com had become a character in the film, and since the soundtrack would feature guitar prominently, I thought that it would be perfect if David Melton could contribute to the soundtrack somehow. I asked if he played guitar. He answered that he did not.

On October 12, 2014, I received an invitation to exhibit my work during Reed Arts Week 2015 at Reed College in Portland, Oregon.

I finished shooting principal photography in Berlin on November 17, 2014, and flew to New York for an extended trip on November 18, 2014.

I planned to produce a new work during my travels in the USA, and I eventually proposed that I show the “real” smiling rock during Reed Arts Week. I wrote to David Melton on Facebook (he had since switched his last name from Guitarpickman to Melton) asking if he would be interested in loaning me the smiling rock to show in an art exhibition. He responded the same day: “Hello yes I’m interested ☺”

The terms of the loan were drafted, and a rental contract was made. David Melton would be paid an honorarium, and the costs of shipping and insurance would be paid by Reed College.

The actual value of the smiling rock had not yet been determined because it is a unique item that has never been sold. David Melton was asked to declare the value of the smiling rock so that Reed College could acquire the appropriate insurance in case of damage, loss, theft, etc. He initially gave the sum of \$1,000,000, then \$50,000, and finally a lower sum that both parties agreed upon.

Because Melton was having trouble sending emails from his account, his correspondence with one of the Reed curators had to continue on Facebook. David Melton and I now had one mutual Facebook friend.

On February 4, 2015, I flew back to Berlin and was therefore unable to attend the exhibition during Reed Arts Week, March 3–7, 2015.

I would not see the real smiling rock.

~~Lindsay Lawson~~
~~February 14, 2015~~

On February 17, 2015, David Melton messaged me on Facebook, saying he couldn’t find one half of the rock. He had drunkenly misplaced the better half somewhere in his house. I had no other choice than to accept that only the

second half would fly to Portland for the exhibition.

Then I started to think the second half was actually the better half.

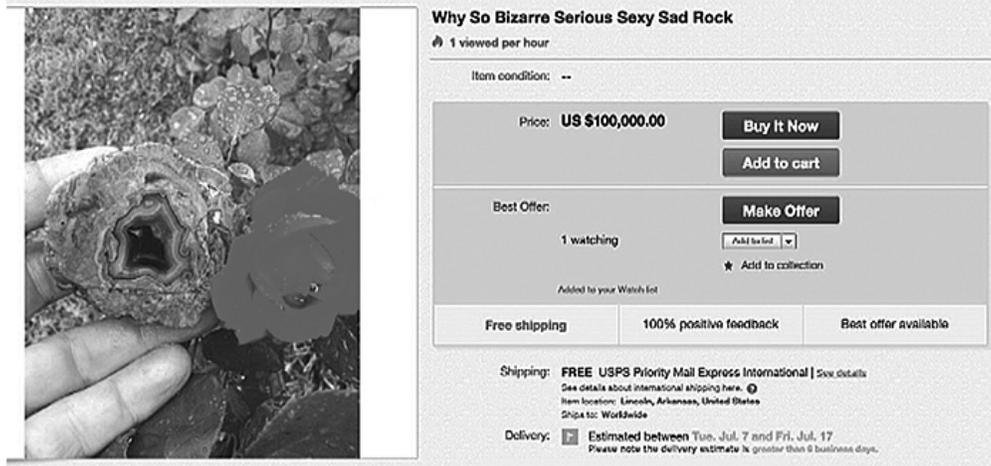
It was the half that had come through, and although the absence of the better half was obviously David Melton's fault, I couldn't entirely convince myself that the first half wasn't somehow standing me up.

That same day David Melton and I had our most personal conversation yet. We Facebook chatted about his life in Arkansas, that he had never left the state, and that he had never been on a plane. He had not bothered to look at my Facebook pictures before and he said he thought I was beautiful. Then he asked if we were supposed to meet, saying it would be "very strange and cool" if we met because of a rock. He apologized in advance if I was married or "taken for." I told him I have a boyfriend but maybe we would meet someday.

The smiling rock showed up on time and in good spirits at Reed College, although the curators were distraught that it had arrived in only a paper envelope, with no bubble wrap or other protection. Concurrent with the exhibition, I gave a Skype talk about the smiling rock that ended with 20 minutes of questions, mostly coming from me as I asked the Reed students and professors what the smiling rock was IRL. The smiling rock was shipped back to David Melton along with a copy of the exhibition catalogue.

On April 10, 2015, David Melton emailed me a picture of the first half of the smiling rock. He had put out a \$50 reward for its safe return, and it had been found! Apparently, it had ended up in a trash can full of Mexican opals that were about to be turned and polished. David took the smiling rock out for Mexican food to celebrate.

On June 6, 2015, David Melton sent me a Facebook message containing only one link. It was for his eBay listing of a sad rock. This rock would cost only \$100,000.



The item description reads:

This is the saddest rock on earth no matter what happens this rock is still sad. I took the rock to dinner and a movie “still sad, “let it smell some flowers “still sad, let the rock have an elephant ride “sumbitch still sad.” Liquored up his azz, “sad” took it to Colorado “ingrate bastard was still sad” I don’t know what to do he is still sad I even let it visit with the famous smiling rock... didn’t help any, stayed sad

Lindsay Lawson
May 20, 2015

I received an email from John G. Hampton on March 5, 2015, inviting me to participate in an exhibition about rocks. I decided to make a 16 mm film, which would function as a screen test of the smiling rock. I animated its face to blink, smile more, and smile less. The simple act of setting the face in motion made it appear astonishingly life-like, even though it was clearly an animated image. I shared a clip of the animation with David Melton, who responded saying it was “sooo cool!!!!”

In the spring of 2015, I was contacted by A. E. Benenson about showing the smiling rock in an exhibition he was curating with Kristen Chappa at 221A in Vancouver. I emailed David Melton on September 29, 2015, to ask if he would like to loan the smiling rock again. This time it would be travelling internationally. He immediately agreed, signing his email as Dragon Slayer.

Another contract was written, including a loan agreement, an honorarium for Dragon Slayer, and insurance for the smiling rock. This time the insurance was slightly higher, but still significantly less than \$1,000,000.

On October 22, 2015, David Melton sent a Facebook message asking how I was doing. He just wanted to chat because he couldn't sleep. It was 1:30 a.m. in Arkansas and 7:30 a.m. in Berlin, so we were both chatting from bed. He said it was sad I still hadn't seen the smiling rock and asked a string of questions because he thought I knew a lot about him, but he knew little about me. He asked if I smoke, if I drink, what I like to eat, and if I ever had moonshine. Apparently, David Melton loves moonshine.

He also said he loves pizza and that he eats lots of steak and a little bit of raccoon and squirrels. I told him I did not believe he ate raccoons and squirrels and he admitted he did not. He sent a picture of himself holding his pet raccoon named Rocky. I wondered if he had been presenting himself as more of a rural countryman than he was. He had previously mentioned that he had never left the state of Arkansas, but his eBay listing for the sad rock said he had taken it to Colorado. David Melton clearly perpetuates a playful fluidity in his online identity, so his conflicting statements left me unable to draw any conclusions.

On October 25, 2015, David Melton sent me an audio message on Facebook. He had recorded himself playing his first song on the guitar.

The smiling rock was sent to Vancouver on October 28, 2015.

For the second time, I would not see the smiling rock.

Lindsay Lawson
October 31, 2015 🌐