

CATALOGUE OF CORRESPONDENCE

A COLLECTION OF ROCKS FOUND IN THE GOTHENBURG MUSEUM OF WORLD CULTURE

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Royal Anthropological Institute

Anthropology & Art

A new open-access publication series edited by the RAI Anthropology of Art Committee. The series stems from the international conference Art, Materiality and Representation organized by the RAI in collaboration with the British Museum and the School of Oriental and African Studies in 2018. Its aims are to make available to a wide audience works that engage with the connections between visual, material, aural and other expressive human practices and the lived worlds in which they take place from an anthropologically informed perspective.

We solicit new contributions from anthropologists and others – such as archaeologists, art historians and practitioners – that will enhance and expand our collective understanding and appreciation of this important area of social life.

Guidelines for submission:

Texts should be of maximum 8,000 words (including endnotes and references). We welcome original works that explore the meaningfulness of images, artefacts, sounds and performances and engage with anthropological approaches and/or analysis. There are no restrictions regarding the emphasis on the visual and textual aspects of the contributions and authors are welcome to discuss their proposed submission with the editor (paolo.fortis@durham.ac.uk).

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I – LITTLE FAMILIAR OBJECTS

UNFIXING TAXONOMIES IN THE ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUM ARCHIVE

BY ALYSSA GROSSMAN

As long as museums and galleries remain the repositories of artifacts and specimens, new relationships can always be built, new meanings can always be discovered, new interpretations with new relevances can be found, new codes and new rules can be written.

(Hooper-Greenhill 1992:215)

Hurl a rock and you'll shatter an ontology, leave taxonomy in glistening shards.

(Cohen 2015:2)

Seeing through things

Is it possible to ever fully 'know' an object? How can we begin to understand the complexities of artefacts that have been sitting for decades in an ethnographic archive? Anthropological museums have tended to fix their collections in time and space, presenting them as static and bounded in order to render their contents legible. Confronted with an unfamiliar artefact, we view it through particular linguistic, cultural and political categories – modes of understanding that pre-exist our encounter with it. In other words, we are often directed to look at what is already known.

How might we become more active viewers, unfixing ethnographic collections, unlearning their given narratives, seeing them as assemblages of objects whose meanings shift and evolve through time? How to generate encounters with them that extend beyond colonial projections of the exotic 'other', recognizing their untold or disregarded histories, as well as their place in the present moment?

An unexpected collection

In 2018, I began to conduct fieldwork in the archives of the Världskulturmuseet (Museum of

Field notes, 4 October 2018

Anna the conservator brings me a shallow cardboard tray that is lined with a white foam pad. On top of the pad are six rocks and a printed-out copy of the email I had sent to her containing the specimen numbers I had requested to see. Anna tells me she could only find six of the eight rocks on my list for today, but if I want, after lunch I can go back with her up to the storage area and look around some more.

The stones are smaller than I expected. The catalogue numbers are inscribed directly onto their surfaces with a fine black pen, the ends trailing into little flourishes. Oh, I should get you some gloves if you're going to be handling these, says Anna, and goes off to fetch me a pair of turquoise latex gloves. I thank her and take the gloves and carry the tray down the hallway into the library.

World Culture) in Gothenburg, Sweden. I was a resident of Gothenburg at the time, but this work was also a remote collaboration with US-based visual artist Selena Kimball, stemming from our mutual interest in an unexpected collection of rocks we had encountered in the museum's online catalogue. The project is part of a longer string of cross-disciplinary dialogues we have been building over the past two decades, bridging our respective fields of social anthropology and contemporary art through combined research and practice.¹

The rocks had been gathered in the early part of the twentieth century by Baron Erland

¹ Our more recent collaborations are described on the website for our art/anthropology collective, General Assn.: www.generalassn.com (accessed 14 June 2023).

Nordenskiöld, a prominent Swedish ethnologist who specialized in indigenous South American material culture and cultural history. From 1915 until his death in 1932, Nordenskiöld served as Head of the Ethnographic Department of what was then the Göteborgs Museum, the non-European (and largely Latin American) collections of which were transferred to the Göteborgs Etnografiska Museum (Gothenburg Ethnographic Museum) when it was established in 1946. After this museum closed in 1999, its contents were moved to the Gothenburg Museum of World Culture, which opened to the public in 2004.²

During Nordenskiöld's field expeditions to Bolivia, Peru, Argentina, Panama, Brazil and Colombia over the course of several decades, he sent back sizeable quantities of tools, baskets, pottery, carvings and other artefacts to the museum. Scattered amongst these items were hundreds of ordinary rocks. They were different from the museum's other collections of implements and ornaments made from stone; these were rocks with no obvious function or anthropological value. They were never exhibited to the public. When I arrived at the Museum of World Culture's archives and requested to view them, they had been sitting in storage drawers for over a century.

What did Nordenskiöld see in these rocks, and why did he want them in the first place? Why were they in a museum of anthropology, rather than a museum of geology or natural history? As peripheral parts of the museum's collection, how had they been identified, described and categorized? What were the rocks' own histories and associations? What other potential meanings or stories did they contain? Why had no other researchers paid them any attention until now?

² For a detailed history of the Gothenburg Museum of World Culture, as well as a longitudinal analysis of its practices of collection and classification, see Muñoz 2011.

Archive fragment, 16 November 1926

To: Mr. Harry Gibson, Consul General of Sweden, Caracas, Venezuela

From: Mr. Harry Bratt, Consulate of Venezuela, Gothenburg, Sweden

Dear Sir and Colleague:³

I herewith beg to introduce to Your good self, Professor Baron Nordenskiöld which together with his Wife and Son and Dr. Linne is making a eploration trip through Venezuela. I should be very pleased if You will be kind enough to render him and his company all necessary service not only because he is a prominent Swedish explorer but also because he is a special friend of mine.

For everything You can do for Baron Nordenskiöld, I beg You to accept my best thanks in advance.

With heartfelt compliments Yours very truly,
Harry Bratt

If rocks could talk

Rocks are often characterized as silent and unmoving; but why couldn't they be cast as active narrators of their own histories? As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen asks, 'What if stone, so often thought uncommunicative in the density of its materiality, can also be affect-laden, garrulous, animated?' (Cohen 2015:51). Rocks have made notable appearances in the realms of modern literature and art: Samuel Beckett's character Molloy sucked on sixteen of them in a compulsive ritual (Beckett 1955); Virginia Woolf stuffed handfuls of them into her pockets as weights for her suicide by drowning (Lee

³ Irregular spellings have been retained from the original.

1997); Vija Celmins created her own sculptures of meticulously painted bronze casts duplicating individual stones she collected from beaches and deserts (Vincler 2019).

A search in the Gothenburg museum's online catalogue using the keywords 'stone' and 'South America' turns up 5,129 objects. Most of these are utilitarian artefacts, including axes, grinding stones, arrowheads, pipes and beads. Within this subset, I counted 144 rocks that did not have any discernible use or purpose. Each one is labelled with its geographical origin and date of acquisition, but the catalogue gives few additional contextualizing details related to provenance, geological composition or cultural significance.

Neither did I uncover references to these rocks in Nordenskiöld's archived notebooks or publications. In one of his journals, he noted that in large parts of the Americas, particularly around the Californian Sacramento River Delta and the Amazonian Gran Chaco watershed, there were shortages of hard, easily split stones. He relayed an anecdote about the French naturalist Alcide d'Orbigny, who collected South American natural-history specimens for the Paris Museum during the 1820s and 30s. When d'Orbigny accompanied a group of indigenous people from the rock-poor area of Mojos to a stone-filled mountainous region, they apparently were so enthusiastic about the abundance of rocks that they wanted to gather them up and bring them all back home, though it soon became clear that this would be an impossible task. Such inhabitants of 'stone-poor' areas, Nordenskiöld wrote, had to settle for making their tools from wood, bone, teeth, copper or bronze instead.

Where stones were present in the landscape, they surfaced in a range of contexts. Nordenskiöld explained how tribes that lacked clay vessels would heat up stones in a campfire, and then put them into water-filled baskets to boil their food.

He also described a cairn, called an '*apacheta*', at the base of the Condor Pass in the Chila mountain range, where passers-by would offer a stone to the spirit of the pass to protect themselves during the journey. He mentioned some 'asphalt clumps' that native Californians used as decorative fringes on their grass costumes, and he gave a brief description of an '*acuanele*', a fossilized bone-turned-stone that Cuna shamans used for curing those whose souls were said to be possessed by evil spirits. And there was Nordenskiöld's (1900) article in the prestigious journal *Nature*, about bits of slate he had found off the coast of Patagonia, the concave shapes and internal gas-bubble formations of which, intriguingly, made them float on water.

Archive fragment, 11 December 1926

Hälsovårdsnämndens Bakteriologiska
Laboratorium
Sahlgrenska Sjukhusets Växel
Änggården, Göteborg

I hereby certify that Baron Erland Nordenskiöld in the month of December 1926 has been vaccinated against smallpox (*variola*), typhoid (*typhus abdominalis*, *paratyfus A* and *B*), dysentery (*paradysenteria*) and cholera.

Signed by: Dr. A. Wassén

Aside from these titbits, Nordenskiöld's notes about rocks were few and far between. These artefacts clearly were not a prominent part of the Museum of World Culture's collection. Granted, ordinary rocks can be easy to dismiss or overlook. While stones lie at the foundation of most archaeological research, rocks with no apparent functional, cultural or historic value do not typically command the attention of social anthropologists.⁴ At one point these rocks from

⁴ With the notable exception of Tim Ingold (2007).

the Americas had been regarded as important enough to be picked up off the ground, shipped across the world, itemized and placed in storage. But today, they qualify neither as cultural relics, nor as curios, nor as antiques. Apart from their geographical origins and historical associations, there is nothing to physically or scientifically distinguish them from a handful of stones that anyone might find lying in the dirt outside their own front door.

And yet my collaborator Selena and I were curious about these overlooked fragments of the museum's holdings. Rocks possess lifespans that far surpass those of humans, giving them an enduring 'archival force' with a potential for long, intricate histories of 'human-lithic enmeshment' (Cohen 2015:39). Having persisted through the chronicles of prehistory, they embody memory on a geological scale. Formed by this planet (and others), their origins and metamorphoses are sedimented and imprinted and stored within their materialities, shapes, colours, dimensions. Their edges inevitably chip and wear away, erosions whose textures serve as further evidence of the rocks' journeys through time. The individual and cultural narratives they accrue can be diverse, fluid and idiosyncratic, with connections to spiritual beliefs, cosmologies, mythical legends and memories.

Such objects should not be reduced to a set of scientific labels. With their unbounded qualities and tangled associations, rocks cry out for exploratory and inventive methods of research. Embracing hands-on, improvisational routes into the ethnographic archive, Selena and I have been testing out cross-disciplinary (anti-disciplinary?) strategies for analysing and interpreting this assortment of 'useless' rocks. We have drawn inspiration from practices of 'curature' (Hamilton and Skotnes 2014) within museum settings: mobilizing techniques of bricolage, assemblage

and defamiliarization to interrogate and re-script colonial histories.⁵ We have embraced the methodological strategy of 'controlled rummage' (Bracey and Maier 2020:15), combining chance encounters and open-ended practices of 'rooting about' with more directed processes of research and scrutinization, to explore the less valued and less visible corners of the archive.

Field notes, 29 June 2018

I decided to look through the photo archives today. The photographs are stored in manila file folders, which are stacked in big red cardboard boxes organized according to the countries and regions of various ethnographic expeditions. There are probably around 200 of these boxes on the shelves. I went through the first sixteen of them today. Inside the files, black-and-white photographs are pasted onto large stiff sheets of paper, with index cards giving additional information, like 'Catalogue Number', 'Location', 'Tribe', 'Subject', 'Photograph by', 'Date', 'Negative Number', etc.

We approach Nordenskiöld's overlooked collection not in the sense of Jean Baudrillard's interpretation of 'marginal' objects of modernity (2005:86), which, as in the case of antiques, are accorded special status through their lack of perceived functional value in the present. We instead approach them in the vein of the early twentieth-century Surrealists' appreciation for the found, outmoded and obscure. They believed that unexpected encounters with obsolete or forgotten objects could release subjective associations, recollections and responses not normally accessible to the conscious mind (Laxton 2019:83–4). In a similar vein, Walter

⁵ For discussion of the application of 'curature' in a previous art-anthropology collaboration between Selena Kimball and myself, see Grossman 2017.

Benjamin recognized the radical and liberating potential of refuse and discarded commodities to trigger moments of historical awakening (1999:389) through their abilities to carry traces of the unconscious, rupture settled narratives about the past, and offer new understandings of the present and future (Grossman 2015). Employing Surrealist techniques of collage, automatic writing and ‘involuntary sculpture’ (Conley 2006:138; Kelly 2013:47), Selena and I have investigated these inconsequential artefacts, analysing their devalued material remains as conduits for dormant memories and emergent desires. Our resulting texts and images aim to destabilize deep-rooted colonial taxonomies, through igniting alternative practices of attention and actuating new ways of looking at, understanding and responding to these objects.

An encyclopaedia of material culture

While the rationales behind Nordenskiöld’s selection of rocks are patchy, tenuous and all but forgotten, the history of this particular collection connects solidly to the larger institutional and political narratives of so many existing ethnographic collections: those binding anthropology and colonialism, and those linking the organization and management of the archive to the administration of order in the world. Sweden is a country that often eludes identification as a former colonial power, but from the seventeenth to nineteenth century it ruled over colonies in Africa and the Americas. The obsession with accumulating, organizing and administering knowledge as a form of imperial control became entrenched in the mentalities and practices of Swedish scientific and bureaucratic institutions, and the Göteborgs Museum was no exception.

Archive fragment, 12 September 1907

To: Erland Nordenskiöld

From: C.N. Börrison

...[A]ll the Indians living in the rubber plantation barracks on the Rio Itenes, the boundary river between Brazil and Bolivia, are in their employers’ debt to the extent of several hundred or a couple of thousand pesos. The wages they earn are so scanty that they are unable to pay off their debts, their expenses for the year always exceeding their income. That state of affairs prevails in the whole of Bolivia and throughout Peru, where rubber is found. A practical result of it is, that, if you want to engage an Indian as a man-servant in any of those districts, you have first to buy him free, that is to say, pay off his debts to his employer, whereupon he becomes your slave. This system is in force with all the owners of rubber plantations, exceptions being exceedingly rare.

For the first four decades after its founding in 1861, the museum displayed the totality of its holdings in a single location, interspersing local artefacts of historical interest with art objects and miscellaneous items from what were then deemed faraway and exotic places. By 1905, the objects from Swedish peasant communities and non-European cultures had begun to be more routinely categorized as ‘ethnographic’, in contrast to the ‘historical’ or ‘artistic’ objects attributed to upper-class, urbanized European societies (Muñoz 2011:59). When Nordenskiöld became director of the ethnographic department of the Göteborgs Museum in 1915, his approach to managing the collections demonstrated scientific, rather than antiquarian, inclinations. He took down the ‘cabinet of curiosity’-style displays to showcase the entirety of the museum’s collection. He proposed to arrange the objects thematically,

and he introduced a policy of keeping certain items in storage to facilitate research, and publicly displaying others for educational purposes. In 1923, all remaining items of Swedish origin (apart from indigenous Sami artefacts) were transferred to other institutions, leaving only non-Swedish and non-European artefacts within the 'ethnographic' division of the Göteborgs Museum.

Field notes, 17 May 2018

Usually I never see anyone else in the archive library, but today when I arrived, there was a woman sitting at one of the two tables, looking through some photographs. As I stood in front of the Nordenskiöld shelf, she asked me what I was researching. She told me her name was Stina, and that she was also an anthropologist, doing some research on one of Nordenskiöld's final students. She was probably in her fifties; she had long hair and round glasses, and was wearing a T-shirt and pink trousers with ruffles going down the sides.

Stina was Swedish but had done her Ph.D. at Cambridge. And she happened to do her MA thesis on Nordenskiöld, so she knew a lot about his biography and his work. Apparently he had a fascinating life, and his wife Olga often accompanied him on his fieldwork trips, which made for interesting dynamics because he was more of a nobleman, while she was a woman 'of the people'. Stina said she didn't think Olga had written anything about these experiences, but she recommended that I read Nordenskiöld's ten-volume *Comparative Ethnographical Studies*. These, she said, were published in English, and would give me a clear sense of his approach towards anthropological concepts, particularly his unusual take on cultural diffusionism, which was noticeably distinct from the perspectives espoused by his contemporaries such as Franz Boas.

Nordenskiöld devoted significant resources and energy to building up the museum's holdings. He hoped to amass enough objects to turn the ethnographic department into a South American 'encyclopedia of material culture' (ibid.:62), in line with the utopian pursuit of comprehensive knowledge prevalent amongst other colonial powers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Van Alphen 2015:44). He was largely successful: of the approximately 100,000 artefacts currently in the Museum of World Culture's collection, nearly 63 per cent are originally from Latin America (Muñoz 2011:95). Many of these artefacts were gathered during an era when European colonies in the Americas were consolidating into nation-states. At that time, the European colonisers were mobilizing technologies of political and cultural domination to reinforce their own newly formed national identities. The scientific discourses of anthropology and ethnology offered convenient tools for constructing and othering indigenous populations by classing elements of their material culture as exotic and different, and for justifying the imposition of administrative rule that intertwined bureaucratic principles of 'inclusion, law and order' with practices of 'killing, exclusion, appropriation and violence' (ibid.:182).

As one of its mechanisms for organizing and administrating the materials seized from these colonies, the Göteborgs Museum implemented a card-catalogue index in 1933. Objects that the museum had acquired before 1912 were numbered from 1–6,000; after that point, they were each given an identification number that consisted of the year of acquisition, the number of the collection to which they belonged, and their ranked order within that collection (ibid.:95). By 1948, two years after the collections were moved to the Gothenburg Ethnographic Museum, a

total of 78,000 artefacts were in the system, each with its own identification number, a brief written description and a small, hand-drawn illustration (ibid.:70).

When the Göteborgs Museum closed in 1999, and its contents were relocated to the national Museum of World Culture, the collections were divided into two distinct categories: 'ethnological' (of non-European origin) and 'archaeological' (divorced from contemporary living memory) (ibid.:121). The card catalogue was digitized and made accessible online, and most of the original drawings of the objects were replaced by newer photographs. Currently, each digital entry contains the name of the artefact, its catalogue number, the date and place of its acquisition, its material and dimensions, where it is stored and a sentence or two about its purpose or function.

The age of the catalogue

What happens to objects and our understandings of them, when they are absorbed into new organizational systems? In his 1966 book, *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault examined how Western European concepts of order, reason and truth came to be historically and culturally constituted. He noted that new systems of knowledge and knowledge production emerged during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These scientific approaches to classifying, framing and arranging information about the world through abstract taxonomies and tables departed from previous Renaissance-era systems, which presented groups of objects in formats more closely resembling spectacles or shows (fairs, cabinets of curiosity, theatre productions). The Age of the Theatre, with its magical, atemporal, haphazard juxtapositions of objects had ended, and the gridded, hierarchical Age of the Catalogue had begun (Foucault 1966:143).

The Enlightenment-era categorizations of worldly things demanded new linguistic and textual systems of management. The establishment of archives, records, filing systems, indexes and other 'monodimensional taxonomies' allowed things to be 'tamed, named and displayed', streamlining their meanings through coordinates, graphs and tables (Hooper-Greenhill 1992:138–9). Once an artefact is inscribed into an official register, it assumes certain codes of scientific meaning, becoming a piece of 'data' that is incorporated into a larger institutionalized economy of museum artefacts that are collected and circulated, often with little relation to their origins or source communities (Nichols 2016:142). Designating an object as an ethnographic specimen consolidated the grip that the administrative powers held over the material world. It shifted the focus away from an object as a unique entity with individual qualities, and towards its existence as an abstract category within an inventoried system. These developments following the end of the sixteenth century pointed to a 'new field of visibility being constituted in all its density' (Foucault 1966:144), paving the way for new power relations and subject positions, both for those doing the research and those who were identified as objects of research.

This is not to say that in the Age of the Theatre there were no such things as library or museum catalogues. According to archival historian Heather MacNeil (2016:37–8), catalogues did exist in the Renaissance era, but they adhered to a fundamentally different organizational logic. The earliest catalogues were detailed descriptive lists of collections, with the aim of contextualizing and publicizing their contents. They were sometimes alphabetically organized, though more often their registers were grouped thematically, with an emphasis on

the 'underlying symbolic resemblance' between assemblages of objects (MacNeil 2017:14). These early catalogues, which MacNeil refers to as 'ideal-topographical inventories', could also be viewed as conceptual maps, with their lists of contents corresponding spatially to the physical arrangements of the particular archival system in which they were stored (MacNeil 2016:49). They served as repositories for narratives of 'wonder and spectacle' (ibid.:42), referencing both the material properties of artefacts and their less visible attributes, such as their historical and mythological associations, their mystical and medicinal uses, and their links to individual and collective memories.

Archive fragment, undated

The collections from the forest tribes in South America can be seen in the Göteborgs Museum. If we visit the museum, remember that all of these tinder-boxes, stone axes, feather ornaments and more, are not mere curiosities, but rather documents, which tell us a great deal about the history of mankind. We have largely the great virgin forest to thank, for the fact that such things are still in use today. Esoteric as they are, these objects of the Earth's Stone Age have found their final residence.

Erland Nordenskiöld, 'Jungle Walks in Bolivia and Brazil' (unpublished field notes)

These systems of organization were in stark opposition to the subsequent, more abstract taxonomies that focused on systematic details, observable measurements and comparable facts. Eighteenth-century inventories were indexed and cross-referenced according to quantifiable factors such as material, size and place of origin. The classificatory logic of museum and archive catalogues had shifted from one of 'storage memory' (accumulative and unsystematic)

to one of 'functional memory' (selective and rationalized) (ibid.:51–2). As Baudrillard observed (2005:103), the concept of storage implies a group of heterogeneous objects, while a collection denotes pieces which, positioned in relation to one another, serve to create a larger meaning as a whole. This shift reflected the priorities of early modern political culture to regulate and methodize knowledge in order to gain control over the supposedly disorderly world, and to establish authoritative institutions whose role it was to educate new citizens in the emerging nation-states.

According to Foucault, the Enlightenment-era systems of inventory were not about the discovery of new objects of curiosity, but rather about introducing the 'possibility of a constant order into a totality of representations' (1966:172). The new-found prominence of administrative documents as instruments of governance worked hand in hand with the rise of the information state, a disciplinary apparatus exercising control over individuals and populations. Historically, archival authority has been complicit with the nation-state; according to Francis X. Blouin, Jr., 'The underrepresented, the disfranchised, the conquered, and the suppressed did not create documents or, if they did, sadly, those documents are not represented in the archives.' (1999:104–5). Today's archival institutions stand as 'nostalgic, memorative signs of the nation and former empire' (Van Alphen 2015:45), holding up their taxonomies as indisputable signposts to direct visitors and researchers through present-day museum exhibitions, libraries and other historical depositories.

Patterns of the imagination

Contemporary critics and scholars in the fields of art history, historiography, cultural studies, museology and archival theory have continued

to build on Foucauldian refutations of the notion that taxonomies reflect inherent or natural categories in the world (e.g. Currall, Moss and Stewart 2004; Geismar 2018; MacNeil 2017; Spijksma and Lehmann 2017; Van Alphen 2015; Von Oswald and Tinius 2020). As Foucault pointed out, while Enlightenment-era proclamations of natural order were often based on discernible characteristics, these divisions were purely nominal, 'a matter of convenience and quite simply a pattern produced by our imagination' (1966:160). With any group of objects that constitute a collection, it is we as human beings who select and categorize and arrange them, revealing the limitations and biases of our own personal, cultural, historical, religious and political perspectives (Currall, Moss and Stewart 2004:135). Collections are not found, they are built whenever an object is removed from its original context and repositioned within a group of other objects (MacDonald 2006:82). These designations may be based around a given set of rules and assumptions about the objects' relationships to one another, but they are ultimately culturally specific and arbitrary constructions.

Following the post-modern turn in the field of archival science, on the heels of Hayden White's 'new historiography' research (White 1973), archivists and archival scholars have increasingly acknowledged the subjective nature of data categorizations, the contingency of meanings stored within these structures, and the power dynamics permeating the practices of cataloguing and preserving collections (Greene 2002; Manoff 2004). As Hannah Turner writes (2016b:164), all institutional documentations of material culture must be recognized as historical epistemological practices, with their own vocabularies and apparatuses for producing and organizing knowledge. It is only by re-

engaging with existing forms of documentation, confronting the contents of archives and re-working ontologies within existing classificatory schemes that we can begin to take essential steps towards the decolonization of archival spaces.

Field notes, 17 May 2018

At one point Stina showed me her latest find in the archive: some black and white photographs of a bespectacled, middle-aged white man. 'This was Nordenskiöld's last student, Henry Wassén,' she told me. He was director of the Göteborgs Museum from the 1960s to the 1970s, and he died in 1996. 'I actually studied under him,' she said. 'He was an old-style ethnographer... He used to type all his postcards. He never wrote them out by hand. Every single postcard I ever got from him was typewritten. And I used to graduate in status with each one I received. First, he addressed me as Miss, and then it was Doctor. I kept waiting for the time when he would call me Professor, but he died before that could happen.'

Only very recently have museum catalogues begun to be approached as potential arenas of decolonization, let alone critically investigated as objects of anthropological research (Marsh *et al.* 2021; Turner 2020).⁶ In a 2016 special issue of *Museum Anthropology* devoted to museum

⁶ See also Ananda Rutherford's work with the 'Provisional Semantics' project at the Learning and Research Department at Tate, which focuses on the decolonization of museum and heritage institutions' catalogue entries, search terms and interpretations (curatorialresearch.com/decolonising-practice/ananda-rutherford-on-provisional-semantics-documentation-and-decolonising-collections-management – accessed 22 June 2023); the blog of freelance curator Kathleen Lawther (acidfreeblog.com – accessed 22 June 2023); and the 'Museum Affordances' project led by Paul Basu at SOAS University of London (re-entanglements.net/about_ – accessed 22 June 2023).

documentation and knowledge production, Turner writes that the 'ethnographic specimen' is not just passively recorded but actively constructed through anthropological cataloguing practices (2016a:105), a process that echoes the formation of collections described above. An object comes to be viewed as ethnographic through powerful scientific tools and technologies that reinscribe and remediate it through anthropology's authoritative maps and interpretive frameworks (Geismar 2018:xx-xxi). Along these lines, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998:3) writes that objects assume an ethnographic identity through the ethnographer's own practices of selecting them, removing them from their original surroundings and re-situating them within new contexts and relationships. There is nothing inherently ethnographic about 'ethnographic objects', they could just as easily be perceived as unusual curios, representative specimens or specialized art objects of connoisseurship (ibid.:25).

Twenty-first-century museums have been increasingly credited for their projects that prioritize curatorial experimentation and collaboration, or that invite members of the public to participate in creative re-interpretations, 'mashups' and remixes of collections (Kidd 2014:117). Contemporary artists have also been devising innovative techniques to address the complexities inherent in the subjective processes of categorization and exhibition.⁷ Such projects involve challenging racist and imperialist

structures through reading colonial collections against the grain; paying close attention to neglected or overlooked cultural artefacts; questioning the originally intended meanings of historical documents; employing creative research methodologies to uncover counter-memories and hidden histories attached to archival objects; and developing innovative and decolonizing modes of museum interpretation and display (Birkin 2015; Burton 2005; de Jong 2016; Enwezor 2008; Foster 2004; Van Alphen 2015).

Field notes, 17 May 2018

'Are you going to be looking at the old catalogues?' Stina asked me. 'You must look at the actual catalogues of the collected artifacts, and not just at the images in the online system.' She pointed to the huge rotating card catalogue machine sitting across the room. It had a button you could push, with shelves that revolved around until you found the file you were searching for. 'That apparatus is fantastic,' Stina said, 'the way it is set up and the way it moves. All the cards have hand-drawn sketches of the objects, made by artists. You just don't get that kind of information from the online catalogue.' I told her I was definitely interested in the card catalogue. 'I think they should set up an exhibit in the World Culture Museum with that machine,' she said to me. 'They could copy all the cards inside it, put them in, and let the public use it and look through it and interact with it. It's a huge part of the experience of being in an archive.' 'That's a great idea,' I said to her. 'Well,' she said, 'I thought it was a great idea. I first brought it up thirty years ago, but nobody has been listening to any of my ideas... Yes, to use that machine is glorious!'

⁷ In 2004 the African American artist Fred Wilson was invited to install a temporary exhibition at the Gothenburg Museum of World Culture. Entitled 'Site Unseen: Dwellings of the Demons', Wilson's artistic intervention used artefacts from the museum's archives to critique ethnographic museums' tendencies to display objects detached from their cultural contexts and the people who originally made and used them.

The obscure intelligence of things

Yet these types of experimentation are not as new as they might seem. Around the time that Erland Nordenskiöld became head of the Ethnographic Department at the Göteborgs Museum, a group of French Surrealists began to mobilize playful yet incisive methods to question the European field of anthropology and its colonialist systems of classification. From its founding, the Surrealist movement was committed to ‘exploding established categories’ in the interests of the ‘revivification of human thought and experience’ (Kunda 2010:254). In his 1924 *Manifesto of Surrealism*, Andre Breton defined Surrealism as ‘Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express [...] the actual functioning of thought.’ (1969a:26). Its adherents blurred the boundaries between art and science, inverting and negating conventional distinctions between high art and popular culture. They also fused methodologies of arbitrariness and chance with objective, positivist modes of investigation. Through defamiliarizing the familiar and subverting accepted forms of intellectual enquiry, they sought to amplify spaces of perceptual sensibility, access unconscious dreams and yearnings, and cultivate new ‘modes of attention’ that would challenge established political and artistic categories of thought (Dezeuze and Kelly 2013:5).

The Surrealists attributed to objects a certain power, an uncanny capacity to possess latent meanings and associations not always visible to the naked eye (Conley 2003:128). Similar to Walter Benjamin’s view of photographic images as carriers of the optical unconscious, the Surrealists saw objects – particularly found, everyday, industrially produced, non-Western and obsolete objects – as physical manifestations of intimate psychological states (Harris 2013:17). As Breton wrote (1969b:255),

the object is ‘something spiritual that seems to be material’, containing ‘visual residues’ from the external world which correlate to inner mental layers, memories of the past, traces of imagined futures. Particularly alluring to the Surrealists were objects found in nature, with their inadvertent and delightful anthropomorphic resemblances. For them, the natural world was intimately connected with inner consciousness; in the oddly shaped root, shell or stone they recognized the externalization of hidden desires (Kelly 2013:44).

Field notes, 29 June 2018

Photographic images of rocks:

- Catalogue Nos. 3939D, 3933D, 3940D: Giant stone sculptures carved with human faces and forms, San Augustin, Columbia, 1913–1914. Photographer unidentified.
- Catalogue No. 3675: Huge rock formations in the Tarija Valley, Bolivia, 1901–1902. Photograph by Eric Von Rosen.
- Catalogue No. 10421: Eroded stone boulder in Bolivia, 1947. Photograph by Stig Ryden.
- Catalogue No. 801D: Line of large paving stones set into the ground, labelled ‘Old Indian Road in Ancient Forest’ in Rio Gaira, Columbia. Photographer unidentified.
- Catalogue No. 5794: Olga Nordenskiöld in front of painted wall of a rock cave near Chimeo, between Pilcomeyo and Tarija, Bolivia, 1913. Photographer unidentified (could be Erland Nordenskiöld?).
- Catalogue No. 581I: Olga Nordenskiöld drawing on a rock cave wall with chalk in Saipina, Bolivia, 1913. Photographer unidentified (Erland Nordenskiöld?).

According to Breton, Surrealism endeavoured to harness the elemental ‘poetic consciousness’ (1969a:34) of such objects, to delve into their ‘strange symbolic life’ (1969c:163) and, as he

borrowed the words of Sigmund Freud, to plumb their links to the 'deepest layers of the psychic mechanism' (1969b:273). The Surrealists also wanted to uncover and relay qualities that extended beyond objects' original forms, meanings and narratives. Such a mandate meant that their artistic challenge was no longer about successful visual representation, but rather about the accurate translation of mental perception. For Breton, 'making mental representation more and more objectively precise through the voluntary exercise of imagination and memory' (ibid.:277) was the only way to dialectically reconcile the realms of perception and representation. To address this challenge, the Surrealists employed techniques conducive to channelling subconscious forces, through methods such as collage, bricolage and juxtaposition.

As a means of defamiliarization, collage involves removing things from their original contexts and placing them into new and unexpected arrangements. These dislocations might occur through movements within physical space – as in the Surrealist practice of creating poems through re-assembling bits of unrelated newspaper headlines. On a larger scale, the periodicals *Documents* (1929–31) and *Minotaure* (1933–9) were examples of Surrealist publications bringing together disparate works by artists, poets, musicians, anthropologists, sociologists and other scientists, exploring what Dawn Adès called the 'obscure intelligence of things' (1978:230–1). Through their incorporations of traditional scholarly studies along with jarringly positioned images and abnormally scaled reproductions, these journals boldly broke with existing academic conventions. They celebrated the exotic and the mundane, the sacred and the sordid, with their messages and meanings emerging through deliberate collisions

between the realms of ethnography, fine art, archaeology and popular culture.⁸ Through their acts of de- and re-contextualizing cultural realities, these publications tapped into what the Surrealists saw as the revolutionizing potential of unconscious and irrational thought.

But collage is not always about a physical process of dismantling; it can also occur within an object, text or image, resulting from a shift in its conceptual treatment, or by an alteration to its process of composition. The Surrealist endeavours of automatic writing and drawing, as well as 'involuntary sculpture', can themselves be viewed as collages of matter, thought and feeling, conduits of 'unconscious psychic urges' (Dezeuze and Kelly 2013:5). Such automatic practices involve methods of free association to spark surprising juxtapositions of mental images, which disturb the mind through their poignance, absurdity and beauty. The Surrealists valued such 'collages of the imagination' for their capacity to awaken the mind to the 'limitless expanses wherein its desires are made manifest' (Breton 1969b:37).

Archive fragment, 1912

The spiritual and material cultures of a people are naturally intimately related to each other, so intimately in fact, that in reality they cannot be distinguished.

Erland Nordenskiöld, *The Cultural History of the South American Indians* (1999 [1912])

An involuntary sculpture (or an involuntary museum catalogue) similarly comes into being through the discovery of unexpected, accidental

⁸ By a strange twist of chance, Erland Nordenskiöld happened to publish an anthropological article in an early issue of *Documents*, about the origins of the load-carrying balance in South America (Nordenskiöld 1929).

or impulsive elements. It can be formed in multiple ways: shaped by natural or organic forces that pre-date human intervention; constructed through a combination of salvaged or discarded materials; channelled into being through a relinquishing of conscious control over the creative process. The term ‘involuntary’ in this sense does not imply passivity or reluctance, but rather coincidence and spontaneity. It is not dissimilar to the phenomenon of ‘involuntary’ memory, or Proustian acts of remembrance triggered by the overwhelming sensory experience of a random element from the past suddenly erupting into the present.⁹ An involuntary sculpture is an active agent with its own volition and inclinations, while the artist (or anthropologist) is an interlocutor who responds to an object’s ‘chance configurations of form and function’ (Kelly 2013:42) to help awaken its visceral and communicative powers.

Field notes, 29 June 2018

Catalogue No. 20 237: In a box labelled ‘Gran Chaco expedition, Argentina, 1920’ I saw photographs of landscapes, huge desert cacti, gauchos posing astride horses, Swedish anthropologists poking their heads out from mosquito-net covered tents. One photograph showed an anthropologist facing the camera, grinning, his arms filled with gourds, which were also stuffed down his shirt. There was even a gourd perched on top of his head.

At the heart of the Surrealist projects involving collage and defamiliarization was the critical interrogation of the social and political regimes in which they lived. They designed

⁹ See Grossman 2015 for a discussion of the affective, visceral and collage-like characteristics of involuntary memories I encountered in the context of my fieldwork in post-communist Bucharest.

their methods explicitly for anti-positivist and subversive purposes, in order to shock modern and capitalist sensibilities. As Breton proclaimed, ‘We must not hesitate to *bewilder sensation*’ (1969b:263, orig. italics), as making work that ‘confuses and baffles bourgeois society’ was key to building a new and better world (ibid.:215). While their work often featured non-Western and ‘primitivist’ objects, this was not an extension of European practices of cultural appropriation, but rather an explicit critique of such practices and assumptions (Kunda 2010; Mileaf 2001). Their constructions constituted ‘anti-categories’, which were neither artistic nor scientific, designed to shatter traditional forms of cultural interpretation.

Breton himself relished the discussions ignited by the Surrealists that led to what he called a ‘crisis of the object’ (1969b:257) triggering playful yet profound interrogations into dominant Western systems of categorization. As Maria Kunda notes, the Surrealist approach to ‘staging objects’ was ‘worlds apart from museum classification systems’, with its presentations of radical alterity strategically marshalled to destabilize European colonialist and positivist evolutionary systems and ideologies (Kunda 2010:75). Kunda’s choice of the word ‘staging’ is noteworthy here, as it harkens back to Foucault’s ‘Age of the Theatre’. The Surrealists’ radical arrangements of images and objects had a marked resemblance to the pre-Enlightenment-era systems of artefactual organization. Setting their own rules, rejecting the conventions of the ‘Age of the Catalogue’, their assemblages deliberately broke with the ‘Western order of things’ to expose the artificial and repressive nature of modernist categorizations of cultural meaning (Clifford 1981:549).

Storied and sensorial engagements

While the Surrealists' activities during the 1920s and 30s rattled the institutional underpinnings of scientific interpretation, it wasn't until the 'crisis of representation' shook the field of anthropology fifty years later that the Surrealists' critiques were brought back into emerging scholarly debates. At that point, many anthropologists had become wary of the unequal power dynamics underlying their own research practices and of the scientific categorization of knowledge. Some of these anthropologists invoked Surrealist ethnography (or 'ethnographic surrealism', in James Clifford's words) to repudiate the common misconception of culture as a unified, bounded entity, to call attention to the fictionalizing nature of representation and to point to the multiplicity (and ultimate untranslatability) of cultural experience (Clifford 1981). Yet debates within the discipline of anthropology about the relevance of Surrealism were relatively short-lived.¹⁰

Though further enquiries into human-thing relations and object-oriented-ontologies have surfaced in recent decades, the Surrealists' provocations in the field of anthropology are still largely absent from these conversations. Yet their legacy continues to be relevant. While not explicitly evoking the Surrealists, some researchers and conservators are more intrepidly experimenting with collage and juxtaposition in their current re-thinkings of artefact presentation and classification. The archaeologists Konrad Antczak and Mary Baudry, for example, use the term 'assemblage of practice' to propose a contemporary theoretical framework that 'adumbrates the contours of

things rather than forcefully tidy[ing] them into a predetermined and neatly packaged taxonomy' (2019:87). This notion of the adumbration of an object's existence resonates with a Surrealist reading of objects as unfinished and open-ended, capable of transcending their original definitions and intentions. In the field of museum studies, Sharon MacDonald describes the curatorial technique of 're-centering', which deliberately undercuts taxonomical rationales through applying novel and non-traditional criteria in object selection and display (2006:93). This form of letting 'objects themselves come to the fore' (ibid.) was also a Surrealist priority; they used objects to forge links with real and imagined spaces, emphasizing the range and fluidity of their known and unknown meanings.

Archive fragment, undated

When one wants to study the Indian cultural history in this district, he can do it to the highest degree, to seek to reconstruct tribal culture out of archaeological material and from the first missionaries' stories, as long as several of the smaller tribes still have their culture, which is of great value for an ethnographer.

On my travels I therefore have always tried to make my way into the large forests to learn about some of these independent – or partly independent – tribes. Sometimes I have failed, but several times I have succeeded in making collections and studies of these deep-forest Indians.

Erland Nordenskiöld, 'Jungle Walks in Bolivia and Brazil' (unpublished field notes)

¹⁰ For discussions of the historical and conceptual intersections between anthropology and Surrealism, see Clifford 1981; Foster 1993; Grossman 2017; Kelly 2007, 2012, 2016; Richardson 1993; Sansi 2014; Schwanhäusser and Wellgraf 2015; Stoller 1992.

Judith Spijksma and Ann-Sophie Lehmann (2017) raise important concerns about the contemporary strategy of 'mixing', or the reorganization of museum displays by intentionally grouping together items previously

separated by discrete typological categories. On the one hand, too much interpretive discretion might result in the omission of certain stories; on the other, incorporating too many perspectives risks losing the thread of a comprehensible narrative. As these authors point out (ibid.:5), 'mixing' often draws upon notions that inadvertently continue to essentialize other people and cultures, ultimately reinforcing the institutional power of the museum. They offer several examples of recent strategies that museums have used to successfully work around these drawbacks, such as grouping together objects from different historical periods, or assembling items from a range of disciplinary perspectives. Other strategies involve focusing on the shared material relationships and properties of unrelated collections, or using a 'story-approach' to link disparate objects through contextualizing the encounters and interpersonal dynamics that contribute to their biographical narratives (ibid.:11).

As Tim Ingold suggests, a 'storied' knowledge takes the meanings of things as perpetually unfolding through their ongoing engagements with their surroundings (2011:163). Rather than reducing an artefact to pinpointable coordinates on a conceptual grid, we should follow the paths of movement and fields of relations it generates during its ever-changing existence. In this way, a thing becomes significant not through processes of classification, but through recognizing its relationships and encounters, what Ingold refers to as wayfaring, or threading one's way through the world in a 'meshwork' of knowledge (ibid.). While a story-approach to artefact organization may still reflect the curator's own biased perspectives, its emphasis on the partial and emergent nature of these stories facilitates a more complex understanding of objects. Things need not be taken as bounded

elements within an established system, but can instead be understood as entangled in relations with humans and with other objects, moving and fluctuating over time.

Archive fragment, undated

No tent or field bed can be brought on these wanderings. [...] One's bed is the ground, or sometimes a hammock. I suspect that the rheumatism that is plaguing me these days stems from the fact that for a couple of years of my life I slept lying on the ground, without a proper bed. Even my wife, who came with me on some of my most challenging forest hikes, never had any other bed than a scrap of tent cloth, a blanket and of course a mosquito net.

Erland Nordenskiöld, 'Jungle Walks in Bolivia and Brazil' (unpublished field notes)

Constructing a storied knowledge of ethnographic artefacts calls for alternative forms of identificatory language, ones with subjective framings, evocative descriptions and tangential observations that resonate with the more whimsical, idiosyncratic assemblages of the Age of the Theatre. Pointing to the marked absence of affective discourse in ethnographic museum catalogues, Cara Krmpotich and Alexander Somerville observe that the language of catalogued records can tell us a great deal about the relationships between human bodies, emotions and material culture (2016:187). They argue that evaluative and personalized descriptions convey the 'active presence' of artefacts more effectively than declarative or prescriptive formulations.¹¹ As an alternative

¹¹ See the Labelling Matters project at Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum, led by Marenka Thompson-Odlum and Sarah Ogilvie, addressing the racial stereotypes and colonial legacies in the museum's typological arrangements and languages of labelling and display (www.prm.ox.ac.uk/

to the authoritative voice of most catalogues, a linguistic sensitivity to objects' sensorial qualities can facilitate a more nuanced awareness of their material existence and associated human relationships (ibid.:178). As David Howes *et al.* argue (2018:319), we should be using multiple sensory modalities, instead of emotionally detached forms of visual observation, to apprehend museum objects. Rather than fixating on categories such as chronology, morphology and provenance, we should account for our aesthetic experience with these objects, how we are sensing, feeling and interacting with them (ibid.:333).

These priorities align with the process-relational paradigm that Michael Shanks calls the archaeological imagination: 'the faculty through which past worlds are made real to us', incorporating the multisensory dynamics of encountering and interpreting archaeological remains (Shanks 2020:48, 60). From this perspective, material fragments are not mere representations of the past, but rather the means through which pasts and presents are connected and continually rearticulated (ibid.:61). Instead of organizing archaeological remnants according to 'timelines and distribution maps rooted in universally applicable systems of classification and categorization', an archaeological imagination is sensitive to the ways in which remains embody the 'dynamic interplay of the presence of the past' (ibid.:55, 47). Humans who study the world are invariably part of it, and our readings of its shards and residues must stem from our participation in their continuous re-imaginings and re-makings.

labelling-matters – accessed 26 June 2023). See also Modest and Leijveld (eds) 2018, and the Words Matter programme of the Research Centre for Material Culture in the Netherlands.

Field notes, 18 October 2018

Anna didn't have a chance to gather the list of rocks I had emailed her this time, so she told me we could go through the storage area and look for them together once I arrived at the archive. It takes time to search for these things. There is a massive amount of stuff on those shelves. If you were to see a selection of these rocks displayed behind glass in an exhibition, they probably would come across as anonymous and boring. But when you start searching for a particular rock, even if it's just a matter of trying to read the catalogue numbers written in tiny spider scrawl on its side, it becomes curious and compelling.

And then after you spend ten or fifteen minutes inspecting it, turning it over in your hand, trying to find words that will render its shapes and forms imaginable to someone else, it becomes familiar, in a way. You develop a relationship to it, and this relationship gives it a new meaning. Now whenever I come across a photograph in the online catalogue of one of the rocks I have retrieved from storage and studied, I feel a wave of recognition, like I am seeing the face of someone I know.

Unfinished collections

And so, we return to the rocks gathered over a century ago by Erland Nordenskiöld. This 'Catalogue of Correspondence' contains my textual 're-descriptions' of twenty-five stones that I selected from the storage drawers of the Gothenburg Museum of World Culture's archives, along with Selenia's photographic images of sculptures that she made in response to my field notes and written descriptions. Re-description is a term that the Latvian American visual artist Vija Celmins has used to explain her own practice of turning photographic images and found objects into paintings and sculptures.

Generating ‘dialogues between different modes of production and perception’, this meticulous process of transcribing physical layers from one medium to another has the effect of conveying something recognizable while simultaneously undermining the stability of the original source materials (Jacobus-Parker 2018:89).

The images and texts in this Catalogue of Correspondence offer audiences an avenue for further archival research into one small segment of the Museum of World Culture’s extensive collections. Yet our re-descriptions are also in themselves ‘experimental, provisional objects’, not unlike Max Ernst’s Dadaist collages that he deliberately misidentified as sculptures in the captions accompanying their photo-enlargement reproductions (Johnson 2017:170). Such a fabrication, according to Adrian Sudhalter, was Ernst’s way of pointing to the ‘semiological instability and epistemological uncertainty’ of visual and verbal systems of signification (2016:163). Fully cognizant of the unreliability of photographic imagery and its fraught relationship to labels and classifications, Ernst was laying bare the illusion and instability inherent to scientific, interpretive authority. At the same time, like the other Dadaists and Surrealists of his era, he was making use of the very media he questioned, in order to materially capture some of the world’s unknown, contradictory, irrational and invisible qualities.

As Spijksma and Lehman argue, there is no set formula for conveying the ‘complicated multiplicity of things in a form that is relevant to today’s audiences’ (2017:16). In approaching our own archival practices as affective, subjective and lyrical acts, Selena and I have sought to awaken new critical insights into the complexities of visual and textual regimes of knowledge. Interweaving past and present narratives and materialities, our iterations of these rocks aim

to instigate exploratory and cross-disciplinary conversations that rupture and critique traditional anthropological mechanisms of collection, classification and display. This catalogue should not be taken as a conclusive report, but rather as a step in an ongoing, generative process of re-casting objects into alternative discursive, visual and material frameworks that invite new and embodied forms of observation, attention and reflection.

Archival fragment, 1912

Unfortunately, in ethnography, we work with many facts which it is [sic] impossible to check up or prove. [...] I consider the absence of such control to be the weakest spot in ethnography. We know that a faulty observation of, let us say, the anatomy of an insect, will soon be checked; but a faulty observation regarding a human conception easily finds its way into a book, and remains there forever.

Erland Nordenskiöld, *The Cultural History of the South American Indians* (1999 [1912])

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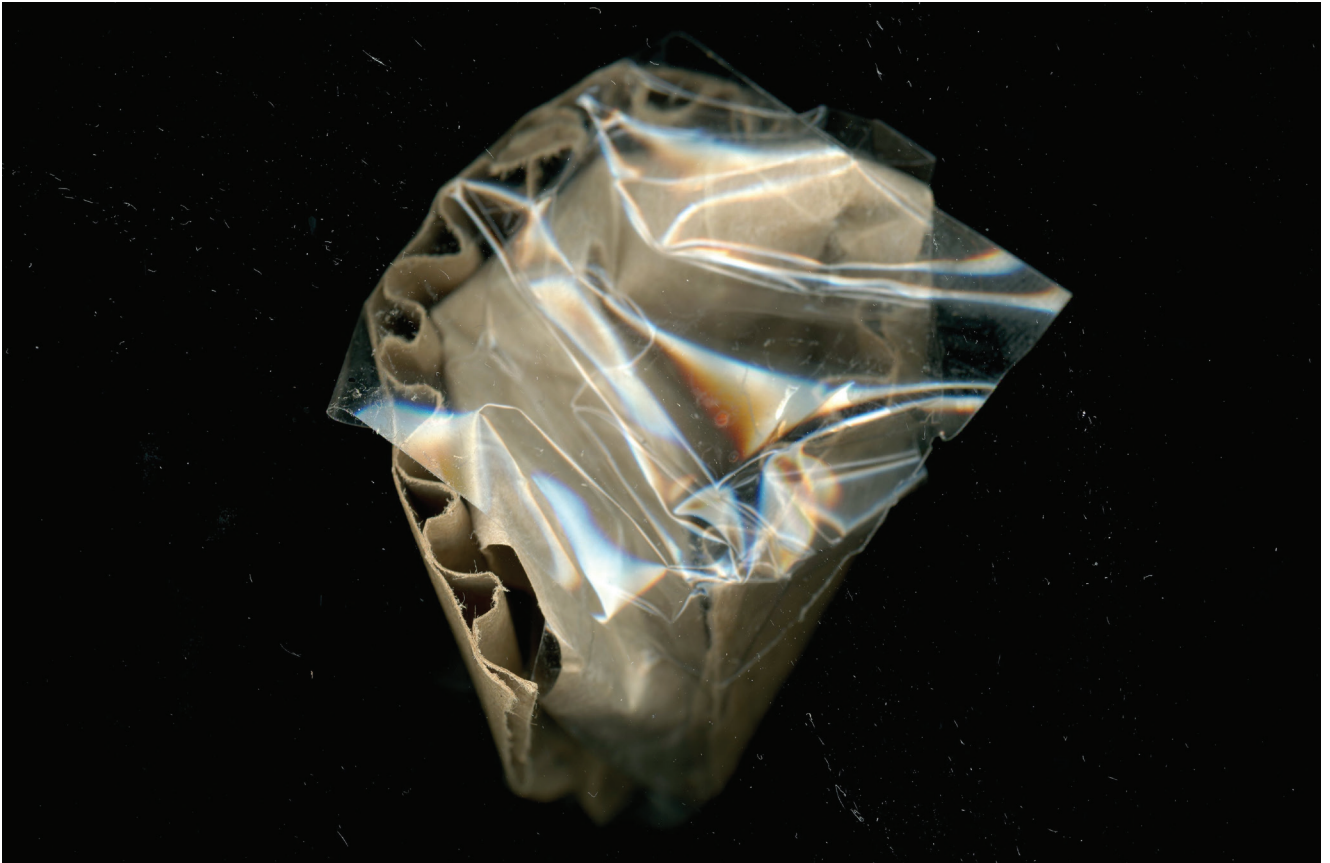
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II - CATALOGUE OF CORRESPONDENCE

IMAGES BY SELENA KIMBALL WORDS BY ALYSSA GROSSMAN



Inventory number 1915.02.0014p

General catalogue number 15244

Search word stone; stone fragment

Material lithic; stone

Length 3 cm

Collector Erland Nordenskiöld

Date of acquisition 1913–14

Provenance Chilón (17° 58' 60S; 64° 35' 60W), north-east of Pérez, Mizque Valley, south-east of Cochabamba, Santa Cruz, Bolivia (South America)

Description This rock looks like it could be made of amber or some kind of pollen-coloured resin, though I don't think it actually is. It is small, trapezoidal, with a flat bottom. If you set it down on its base, it resembles a miniature mountain, with its peak lightly squashed by a giant's thumb. The left side of the mountain is yellower and cloudier than the rest of it, with faint scrapes and scratches. It could possibly pass for a dried-out lump of rubber cement.



Inventory number 1915.02.00161

General catalogue number 15266

Search word stone

Material lithic; stone

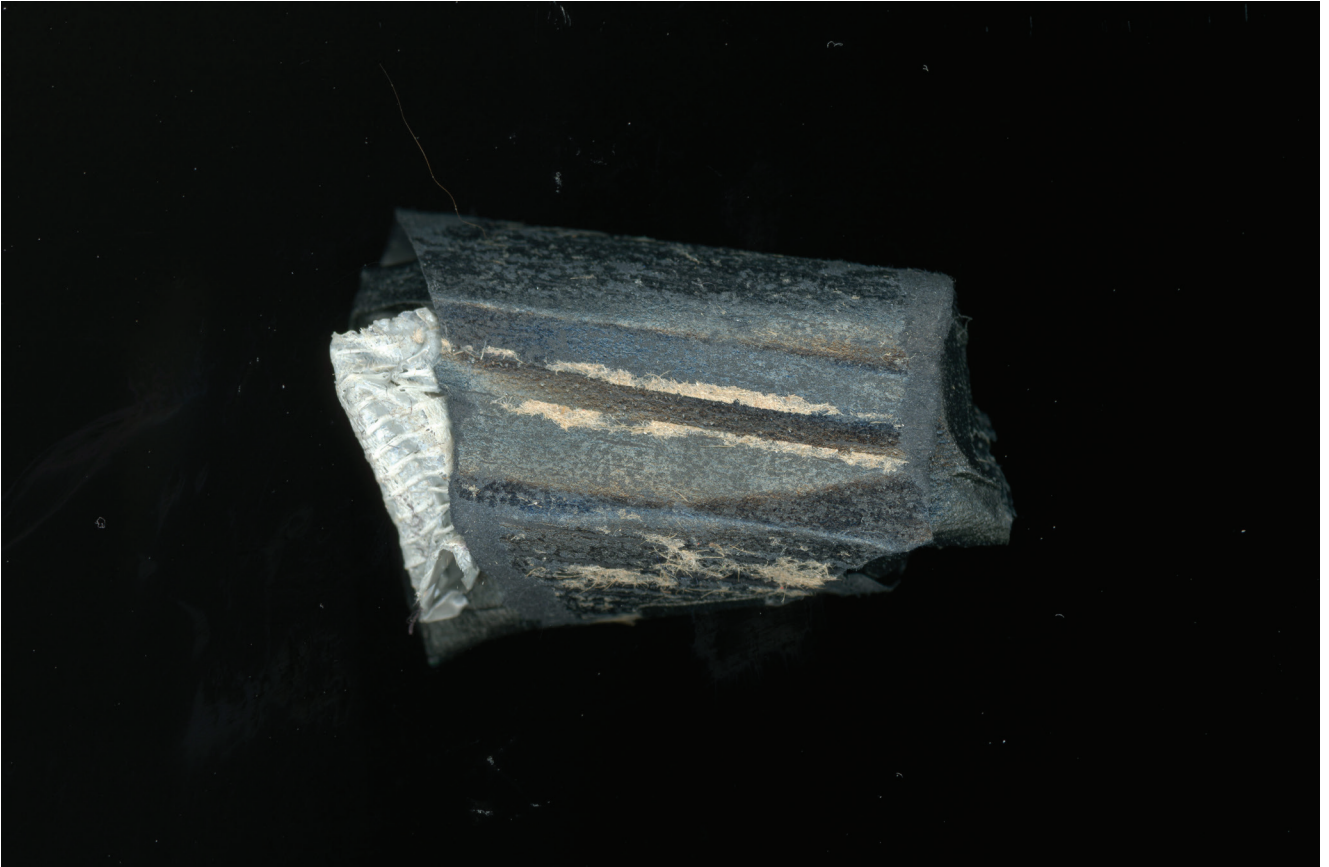
Length 4 cm

Collector Erland Nordenskiöld

Date of acquisition 1913–14

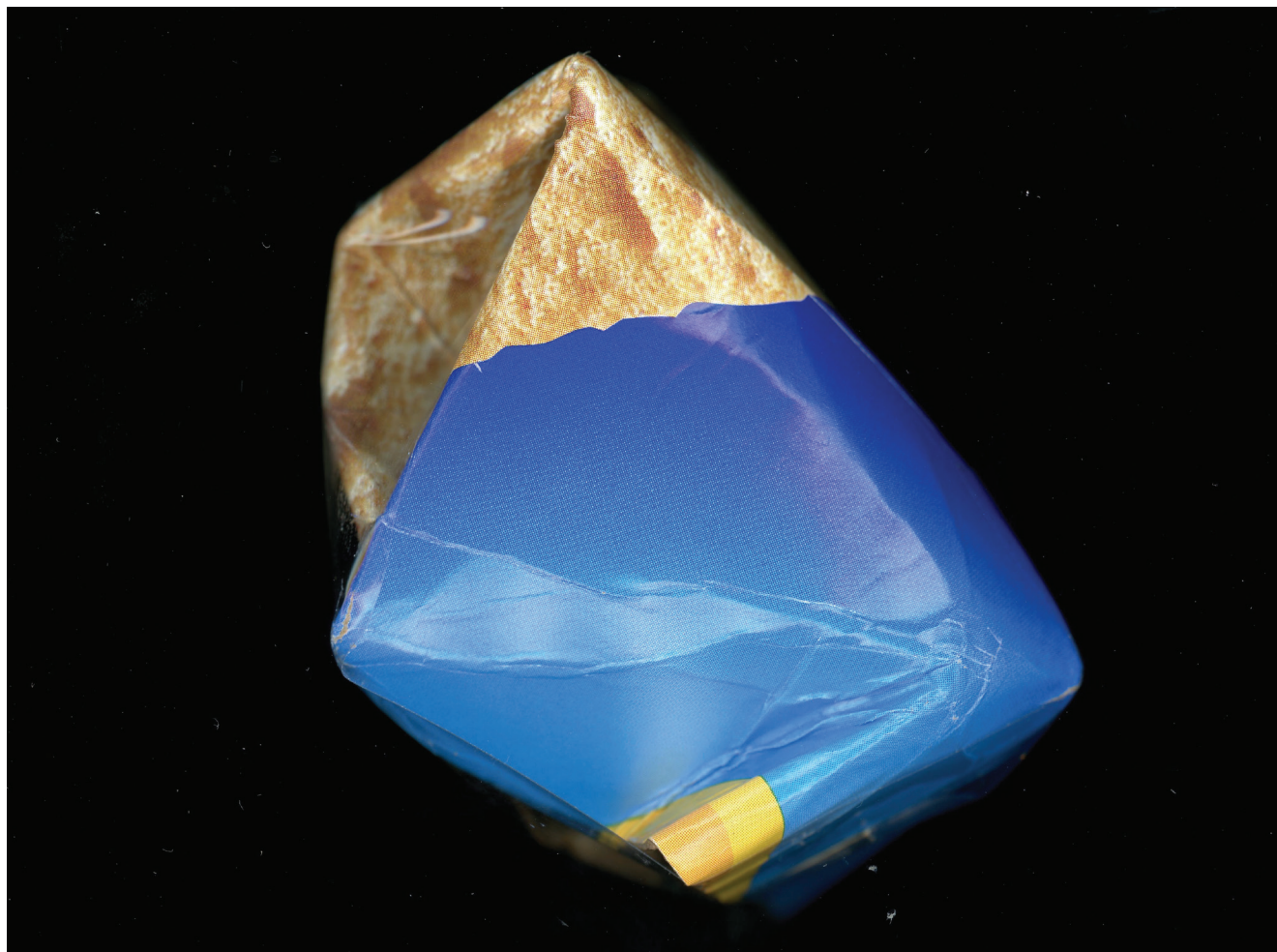
Provenance purchased in Chilón, exact location unknown (17° 58' 60S; 64° 35' 60W), north-east of Pérez, Mizque Valley, south-east of Cochabamba, Santa Cruz, Bolivia (South America)

Description A very red rock. Roughly the shape of a pentagon; fits in the palm of my hand. Its sides are smooth, sloping out like a pyramid. The top consists of layers that look like a crumbling wall – red giving way to grey around the edges, a thin mustard-yellow line peeking through on one side. For some reason I take a sniff of this rock and find that it has a strong odour. I can't explain why I am tempted to smell it. None of the other rocks seem to give off any scent, but this one does. I am sitting here in the archives sniffing and sniffing this rock. What does it remind me of? A basement, maybe. Damp stairs leading down into a damp basement.



Inventory number 1915.02.0017o
General catalogue number 15286
Search word stone; stone fragment
Material lithic; stone
Length 2.2 cm
Collector Erland Nordenskiöld
Date of acquisition 1913–14
Provenance Holguin (18° 13' 00S; 64° 10' 00W), north of Valle Grande, Mizque Valley, Santa Cruz, Bolivia (South America)

Description This rock is nearly black. It is very small; maybe it was chipped from a larger piece of stone. It has a trapezoidal shape. Its exterior has notches and abrasions; it looks as if someone has taken a miniature chisel to the top layer and marked out three separate angular gouges. The underside has thin lines cut into it that resemble cuneiform letters, but I don't think they were made intentionally.



Inventory number 1915.02.0017s

General catalogue number 15290

Search word stone

Material lithic; stone

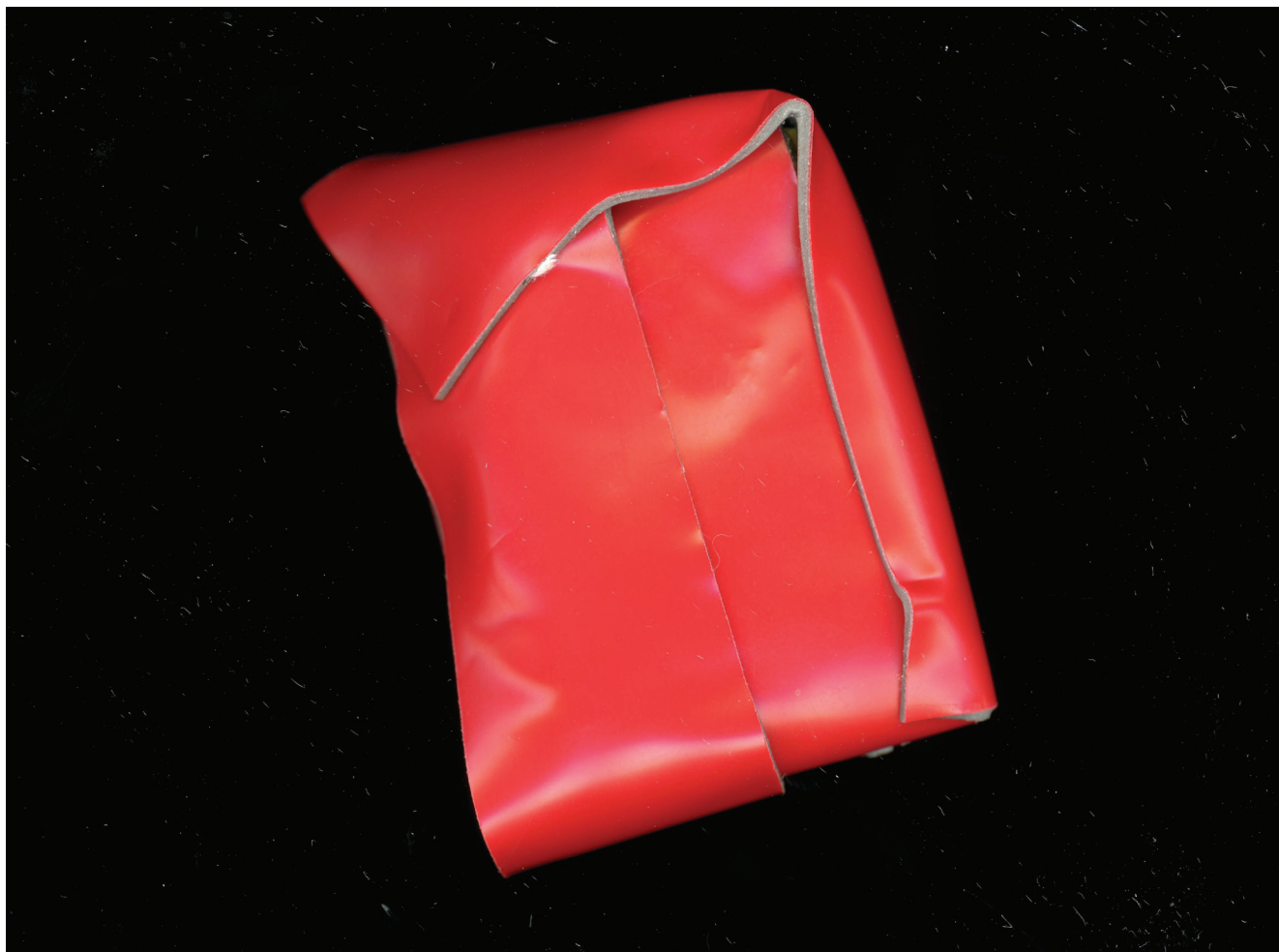
Length 5.6 cm

Collector Erland Nordenskiöld

Date of acquisition 1913–14

Provenance Holguin (18° 13'00S; 64° 10'00W), north of Valle Grande, Mizque Valley, Santa Cruz, Bolivia (South America)

Description I am attracted to this rock. Its colours are subtle but rich. It has a tortoiseshell quality, with warm shades of brown that remind me of a scuffed leather shoe. It is in the shape of a raindrop, but a slightly damaged raindrop that has been flattened by someone's palm. Its base looks like it was left for too long on a fire – singed and blistered, criss-crossed with lines and scratches.



Inventory number 1915.02.0017t

General catalogue number 15291

Search word stone

Material lithic; stone

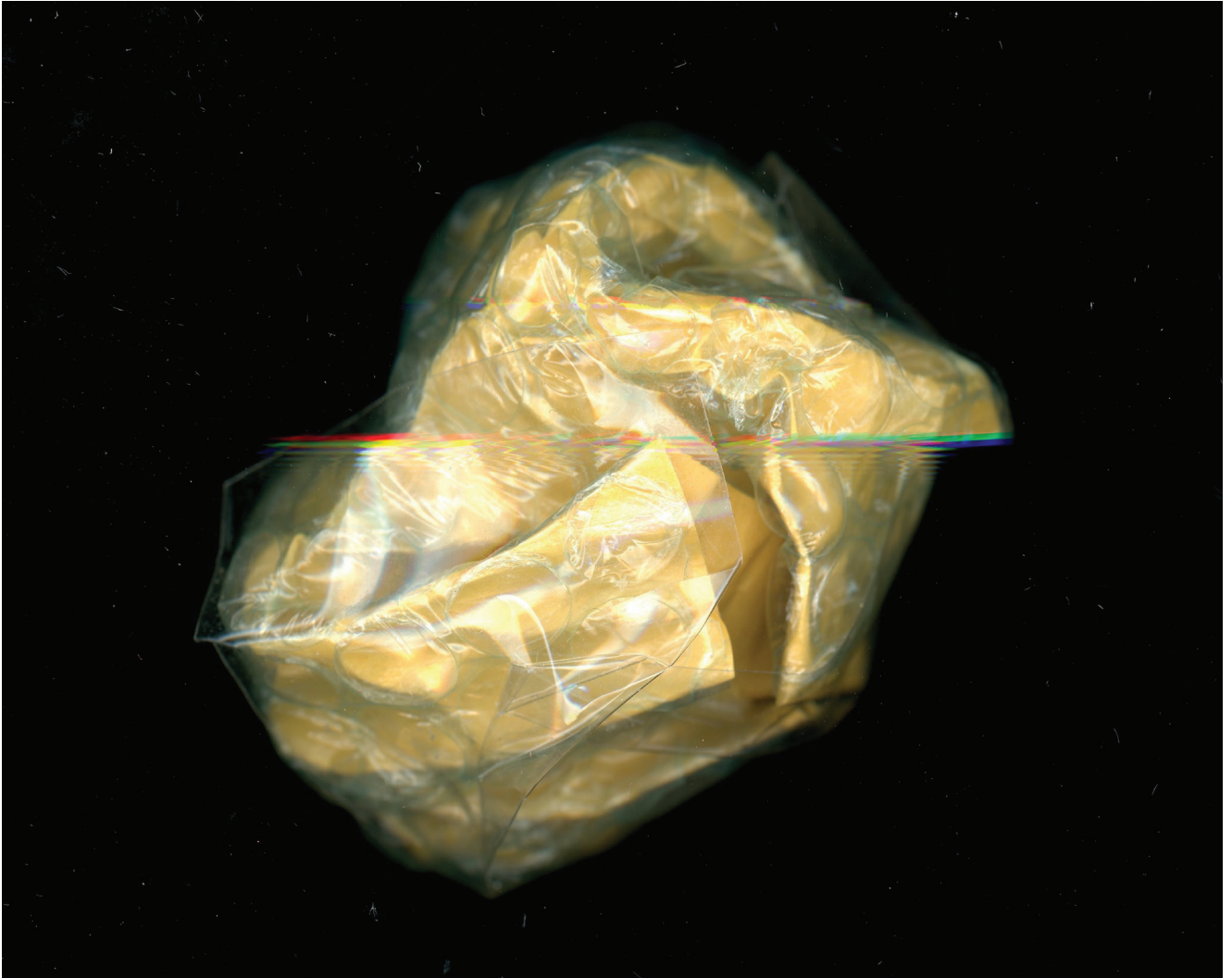
Length 3 cm

Collector Erland Nordenskiöld

Date of acquisition 1913–14

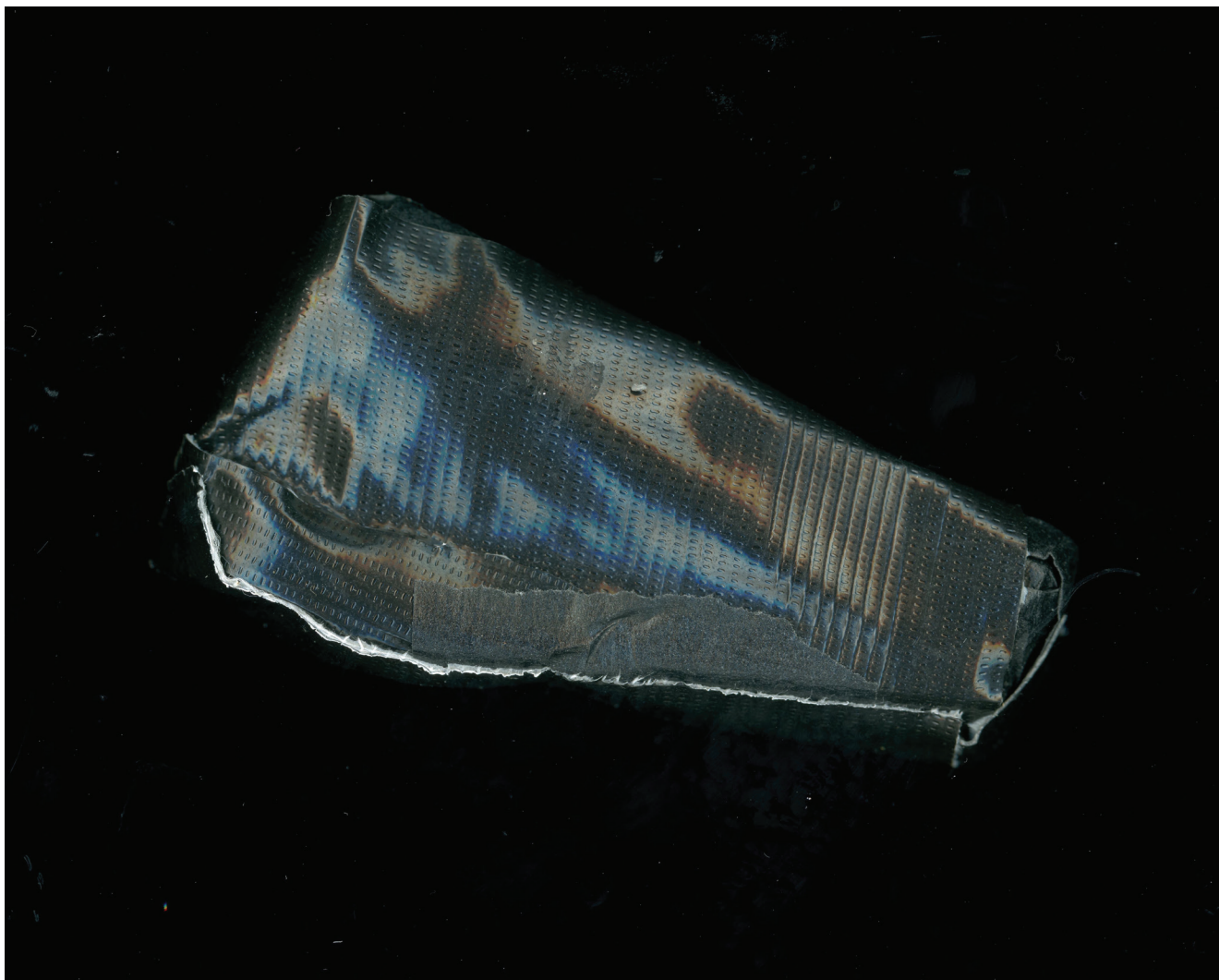
Provenance Holguin (18° 13' 00S; 64° 19' 00W), north of Valle Grande, Mizque Valley, Santa Cruz, Bolivia (South America)

Description This rock is brick-red, rectangular, small enough to completely disappear when I enclose it in my hand. It doesn't look like it's been polished, but its facade is smooth, flecked with faint scratch marks. Maybe the shape is more of a parallelogram than a rectangle. It has a slight protuberance along one of its sides. There are two minuscule sparkles on one of its faces, barely visible, embedded in the stone's outermost surface. The sparkles look like faraway stars.



Inventory number 1915.02.0021i
General catalogue number 15456
Search word stone; stone fragment
Material lithic; stone
Length 2.5 cm
Collector Erland Nordenskiöld
Date of acquisition 1913–14
Provenance Pulquina (18° 06' 00S; 64° 25' 00W), east of Pérez, La Franca, Mizque Valley, south-east of Cochabamba, Santa Cruz, Bolivia (South America)

Description This rock is in the shape of a semicircle, a setting sun. It is a translucent grey colour, scattered with shimmering flecks and dull indentations. The front side is more mottled, but the back is smooth, almost glowing. This might be because the rock has broken open and the back could actually be the inside of the rock's flesh, made visible. It feels unprotected and exposed.



Inventory number 1915.02.0021j

General catalogue number 15457

Search word stone; stone fragment

Material lithic; stone

Length 4 cm

Collector Erland Nordenskiöld

Date of acquisition 1913–14

Provenance Pulquina (18° 06' 00S; 64° 25' 00W), east of Pérez, La Franca, Mizque Valley, south-east of Cochabamba, Santa Cruz, Bolivia (South America)

Description This stone is dark, the colour of polished walnut. There is a little nub on its underside, as if it were a gently squeezed piece of soft clay. If you rubbed off the outer layer of the rock, the whole thing might be a deep red underneath – there are subtle slivers of this red showing through. Its form is smooth and swollen, with some bulges. It looks remarkably fluid for something that is so solid, like it could have been underwater for a long time.



Inventory number 1915.02.0039p2

General catalogue number 16000

Search word stone; stone fragment

Material lithic; stone

Length 4 cm

Collector Erland Nordenskiöld

Date of acquisition 1913–14

Provenance Incahuasi, Chuquisaca, Bolivia
(South America)

Description This rock is compact, shaped like a generous wedge of pie. It is a muddy red-brown colour, making the black handwritten catalogue number on its surface difficult to see. The rim of the wedge, where the pie's crust would be, has chipped off. There are streaks and indentations throughout. It looks as if it could use a good scrubbing.



Inventory number 1915.02.0040h1

General catalogue number 16037

Search word stone; stone fragment

Material lithic; stone

Length 3 cm

Collector Erland Nordenskiöld

Date of acquisition 1913–14

Provenance Zapatera, north of Yacuiba, Tarija, Bolivia (South America)

Description This rock is really tiny. Its stratified layers resemble a diagram of the earth's crust that you might find in a geology book. The layers form wavy lines of grey, pink and lilac. In profile, it almost looks like a little pig's nose. The bottom of the rock shows similar striations, with a ridge made from a chip that covers its top half. So many details in such a small bit of stone.



Inventory number 1915.02.0040i1

General catalogue number 16038

Search word stone; stone fragment

Material lithic; stone

Length 2.8 cm

Collector Erland Nordenskiöld

Date of acquisition 1913–14

Provenance Zapatera, north of Yacuiba, Tarija, Bolivia (South America)

Description This appears to be a flake from a larger stone. It is a thin oval, with a bulge on the lower right side, not unlike a cartoon speech bubble. The left part of the rock is dark tan, and then about two-thirds of the way across, it abruptly changes to reddish brown. The patterns on this rock resemble a drawing of an island on a map, with delicate contour ridges marking the changing elevations down to the coastline.



Inventory number 1915.02.0040j1

General catalogue number 16039

Search word cast-off; stone cast-off

Material lithic; stone

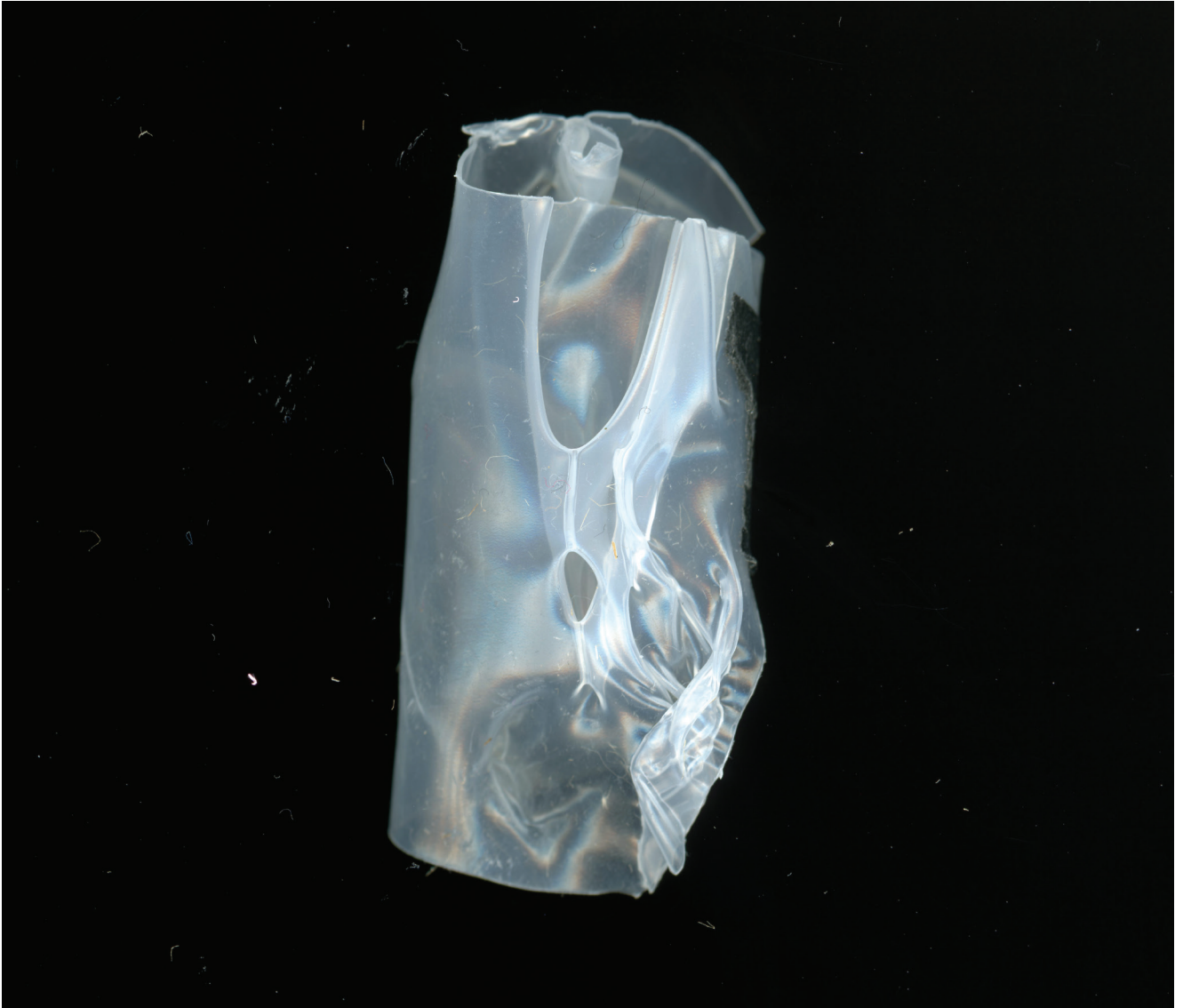
Length 2 cm

Collector Erland Nordenskiöld

Date of acquisition 1913–14

Provenance Zapatera, north of Yacuiba, Tarija, Bolivia (South America)

Description This rock is shaped vaguely like an arrow. It could have been a chip that came off a larger piece, when the larger piece was being made into something functional. All its edges are sharp. The back surface is smooth, slightly concave, with no dents or imperfections. Aside from one striated edge, it is a nearly uniform pearly mauve colour.



Inventory number 1915.02.0089b

General catalogue number 16301

Search word stone

Material lithic; stone

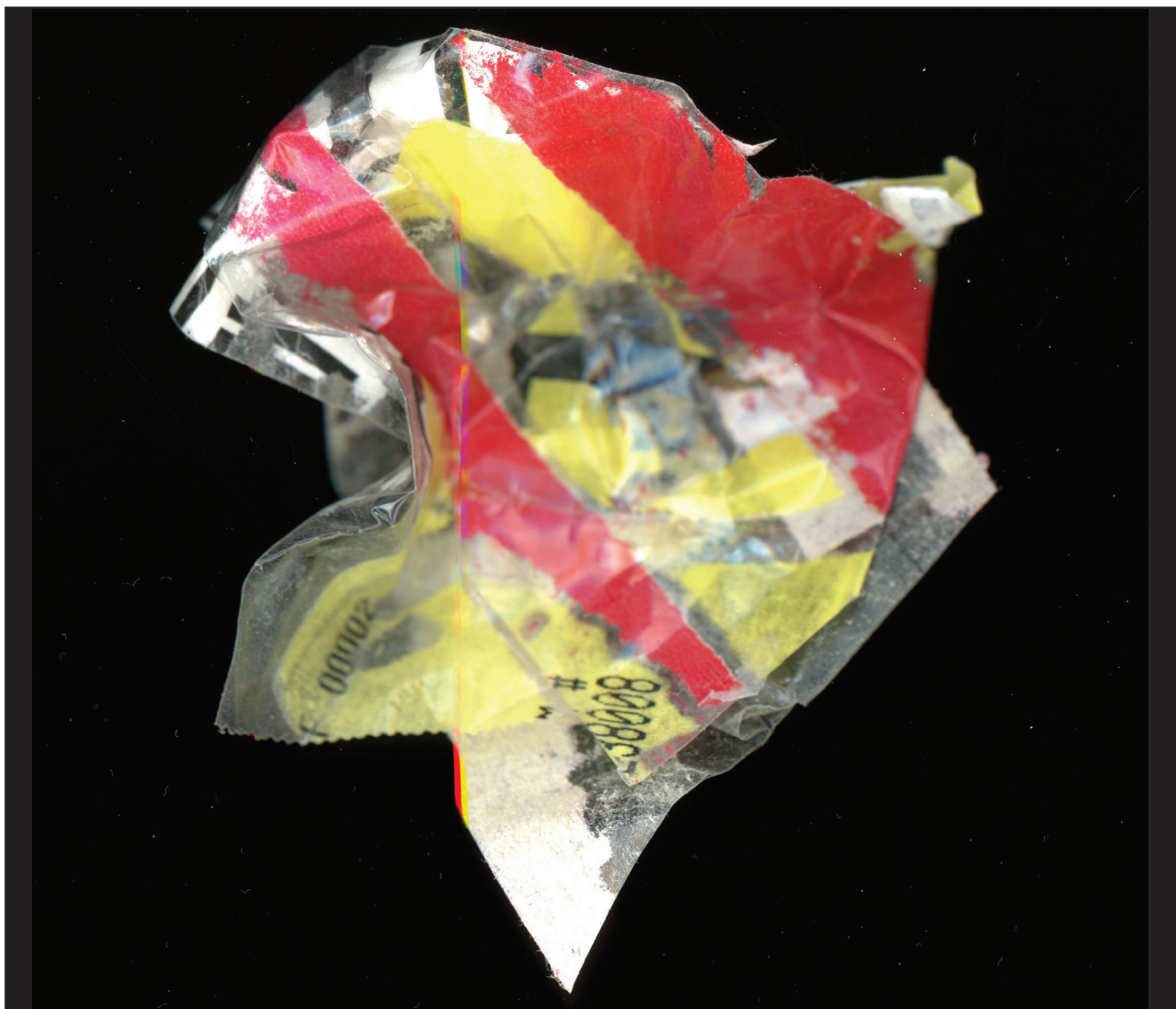
Length 8 cm

Collector Erland Nordenskiöld

Date of acquisition 1913–14

Provenance Grave 1, Guaracas, Upper Parapiti River, Southern Bolivia (South America)

Description This rock has a slightly curved ridge along the top right corner, like a line traced by the arc of a compass. It is a dirty lavender colour, with a scratch on its bottom front face, and a ragged top edge. Its base is slick but not shiny, with some thin, scuffed patches in the shape of a lumpy backwards L.



Inventory number 1916.12.0020

General catalogue number 18419

Search word colour stone

Material lithic; stone

Length 4 cm

Collector Erland Nordenskiöld

Date of acquisition 1908

Provenance Ihuitihuembe (Iboitihuemba – 19° 46' 60S; 63° 23' 60W), Caipipendi Valley, north-east of Camiri, Santa Cruz, Bolivia (South America)

Description I was immediately drawn to this rock when I saw it in the online catalogue because it was red and shaped like a heart. What seems to be its logical front face has a few grazes on the top left side, revealing a fierce brick colour through its chalky surface. On the back face is a patch where a distinct layer of stone has chipped off, exposing a lighter shade of red underneath. It almost seems like you could peel away the rest of the heart's outer layer, like the prickled hull of a chestnut.



Inventory number 1927.06.0161b1

General catalogue number 34219

Search word stone

Material lithic; stone

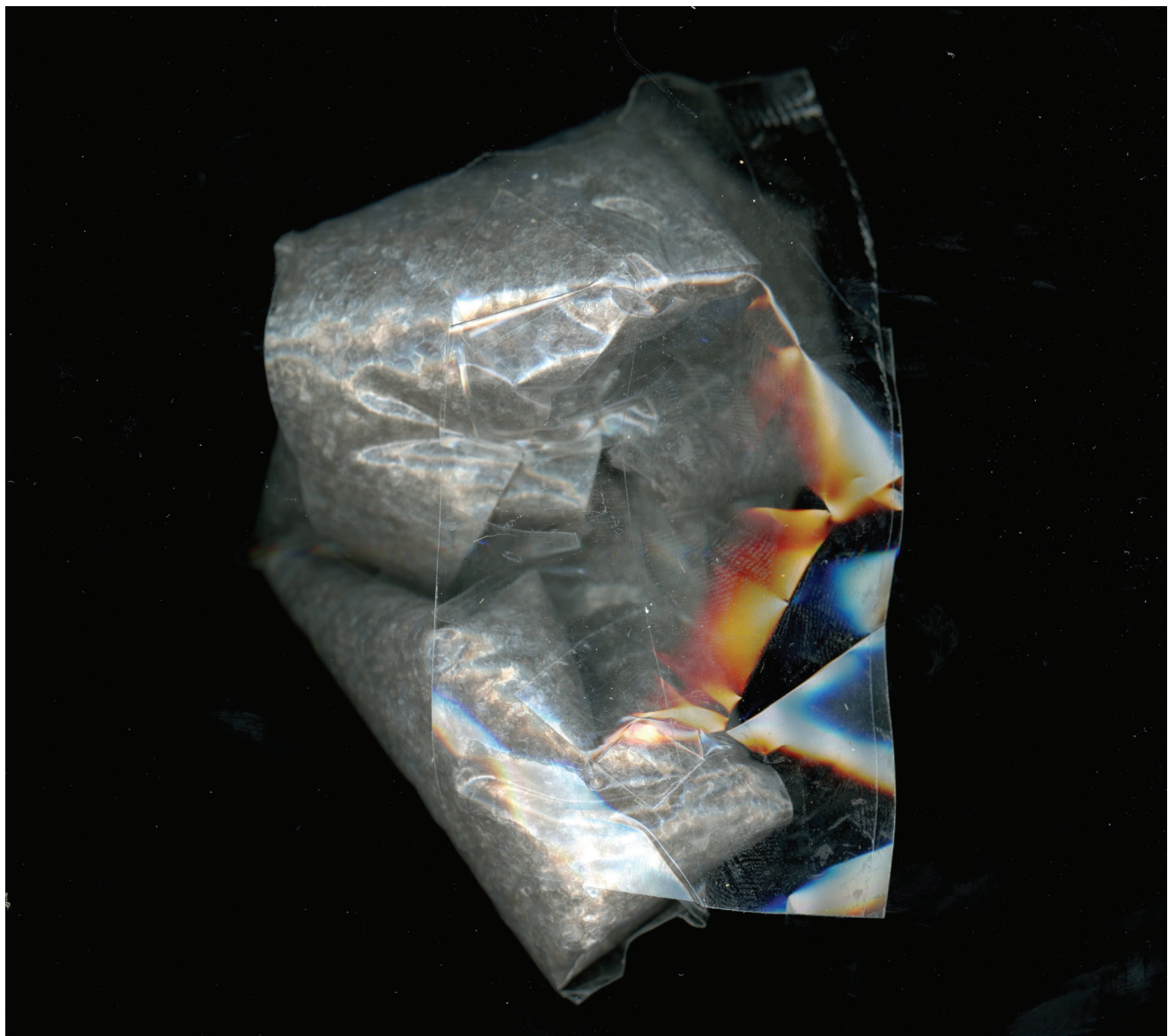
Length 5 cm

Collector Erland Nordenskiöld

Date of acquisition 1927

Provenance Bruceville Mound, Cosumnes River,
Lodi, California (USA)

Description The base of this rock is in the shape of an isosceles triangle, and it rises into a softened pyramidal structure. The top layer of the pyramid has an orange tinge. The left face is chipped along one edge, which appears to be greenish underneath. There is a depression in the place where the tip of the pyramid should be. The stone has an aura of dull smoothness.



Inventory number 1927.06.0161m

General catalogue number 34202

Search word stone

Material lithic; stone

Length 7 cm

Collector Erland Nordenskiöld

Date of acquisition 1927

Provenance Bruceville Mound, Cosumnes River,
Lodi, California (USA)

Description This rock is heavy and solid, small enough to fit in my hand. It has a cubic shape, though some of the faces of the cube are irregular and crumpled. The other faces are smooth planes. The rock itself is grey, with undertones of green or oxidized bronze. If its outer layer were scraped off, or if the rock were polished, you might find a pale-olive colour underneath.



Inventory number 1927.06.0161o

General catalogue number 34204

Search word cooking stone?

Material lithic; stone

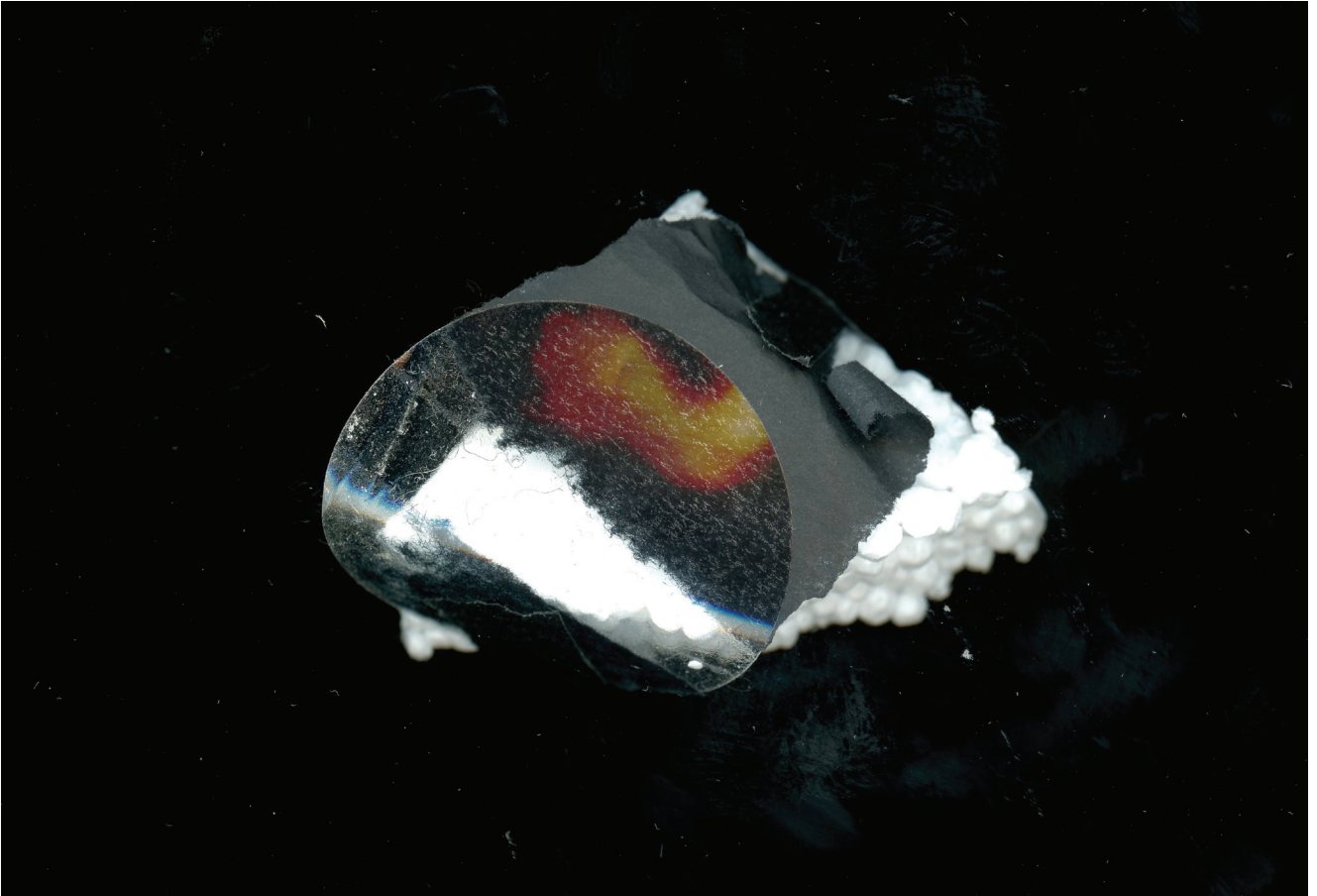
Length 6.5 cm

Collector Erland Nordenskiöld

Date of acquisition 1927

Provenance general surface, Bruceville Mound,
Cosumnes River, Lodi, California (USA)

Description This rock has a slight basement smell. It is the size and shape of a lady-finger cookie. Its colour is the light brown of sun-bleached wood or dusty bark. Its texture resembles the dried-out remains of an old bar of soap. On one end, some layers have chipped off, and you can see pink strata in the stone's composition. If I were to put my fingernail underneath one of these layers, I could probably pry off a large part of the rock. I stick my left (un-gloved) thumbnail under the crack and exert some pressure. It moves. What if I were to pry it right off? What would the stone look like underneath? Would it be smooth, or show evidence of other layers? Maybe the inside of the rock has more pink in it. When I rub it, some grey powder is left behind on my gloved fingers.



Inventory number 1927.06.0161t

General catalogue number 34209

Search word stone

Material lithic; stone

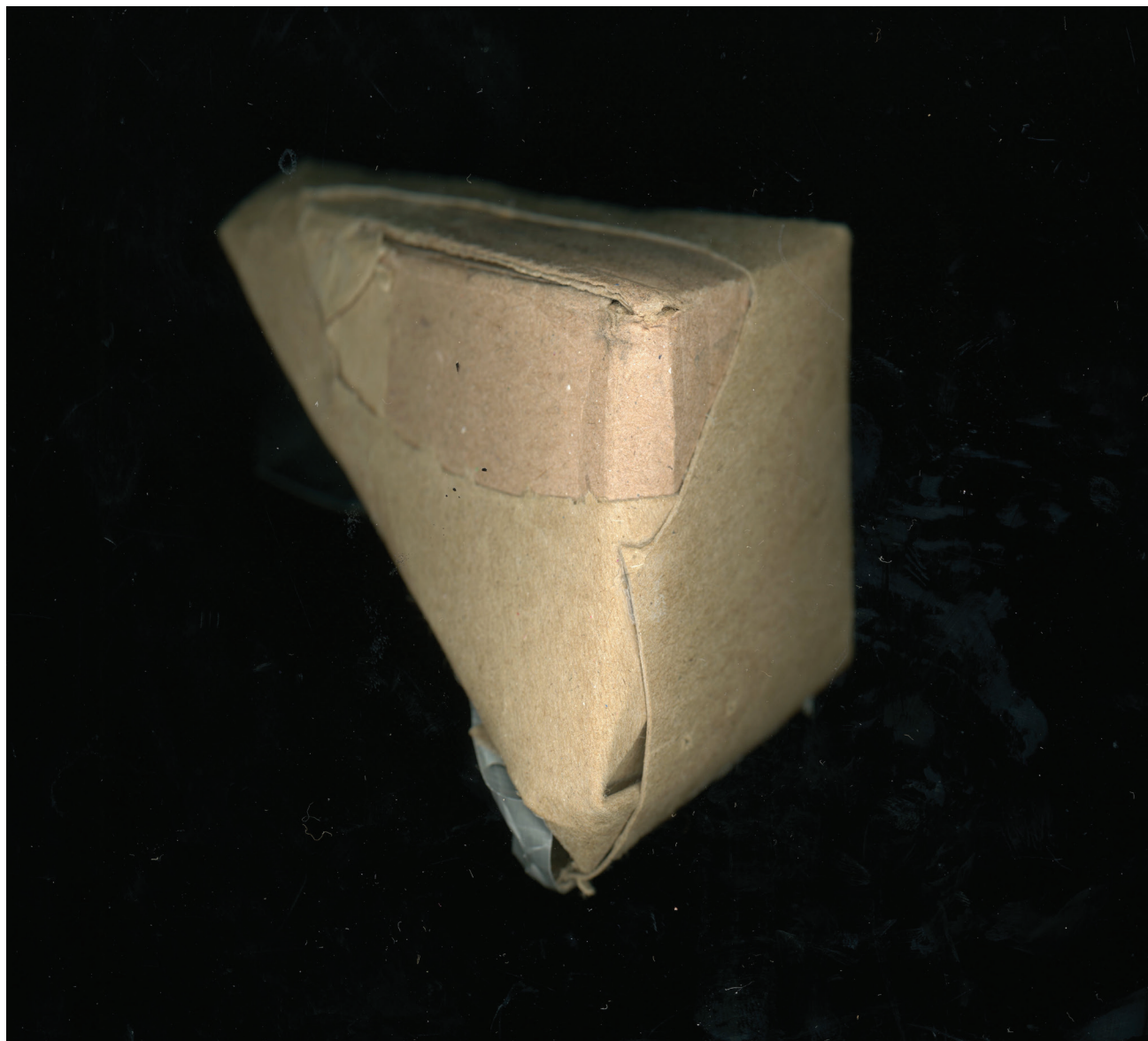
Length 6 cm

Collector Erland Nordenskiöld

Date of acquisition 1927

Provenance Bruceville Mound, Cosumnes River,
Lodi, California (USA)

Description This is a tricky one to describe. It's got a flat bottom, curved into a horseshoe shape. If you were to trace its base onto a piece of paper, you would get the upper half of a rising sun. The top of the rock extends to a pointy dome, like the cupola of the Taj Mahal. Most of it is a deep and varnished orange-brown colour, like old timber, streaked with lines and wrinkles. One of its faces looks like the edge of a burnt log, rough and uneven.



Inventory number 1927.06.0161x

General catalogue number 34212

Search word mortar; mortar fragment?

Material lithic; stone

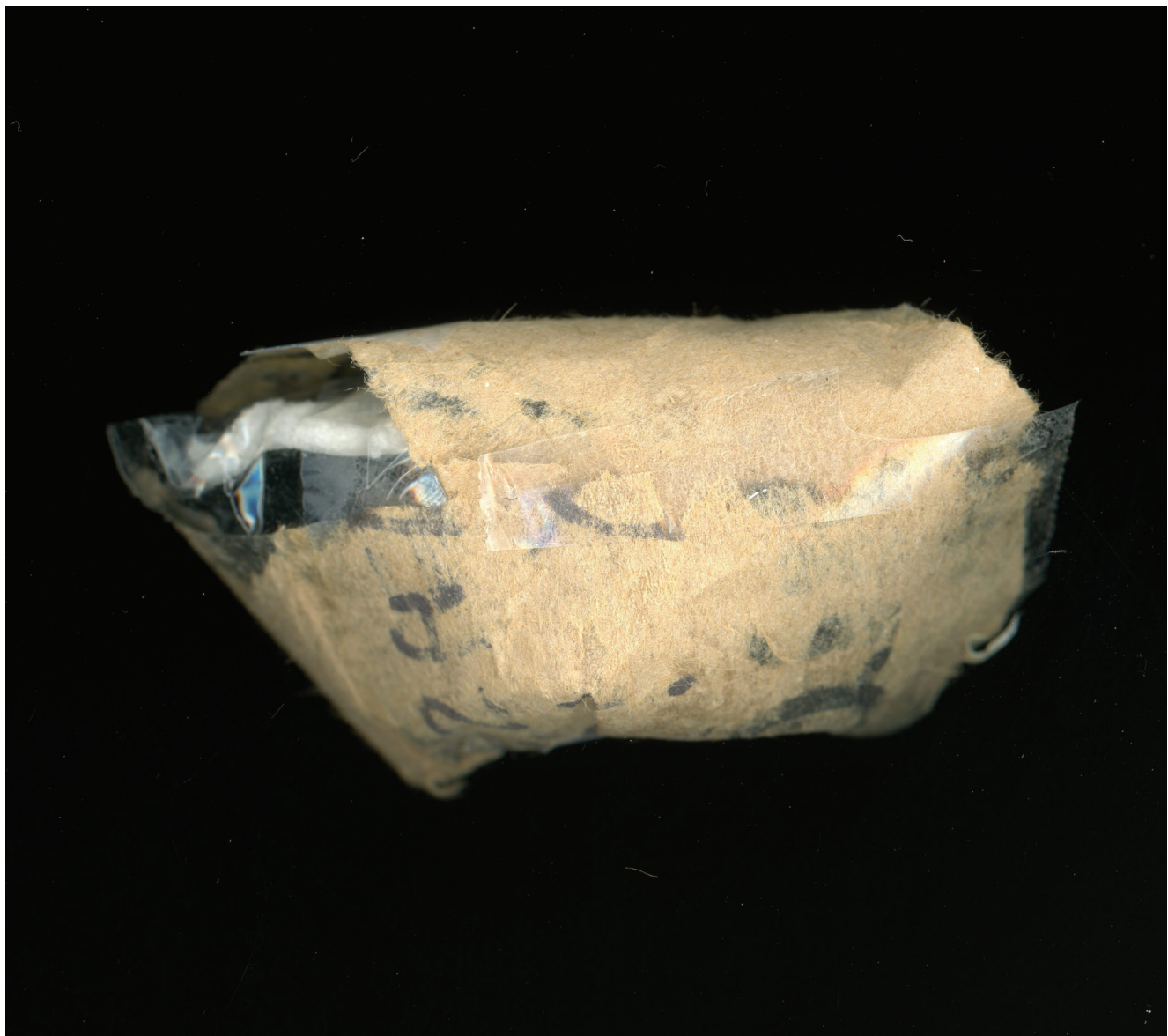
Length 6.3 cm

Collector Erland Nordenskiöld

Date of acquisition 1927

Provenance Bruceville Mound, Cosumnes River,
Lodi, California (USA)

Description This rock has the colour and texture of a dirty Jerusalem artichoke. It leaves traces of brown dust on my pink glove. It looks like a cross-section of a concrete pipeline, but one that is filled with cement, not hollow. It has a fairly clean edge on one side, but on the other side there is a diagonal piece that juts out, a big fang sticking up a few centimetres from the middle.



Inventory number 1927.06.0161z

General catalogue number 34214

Search word cast-off; obsidian cast-off

Material lithic; stone

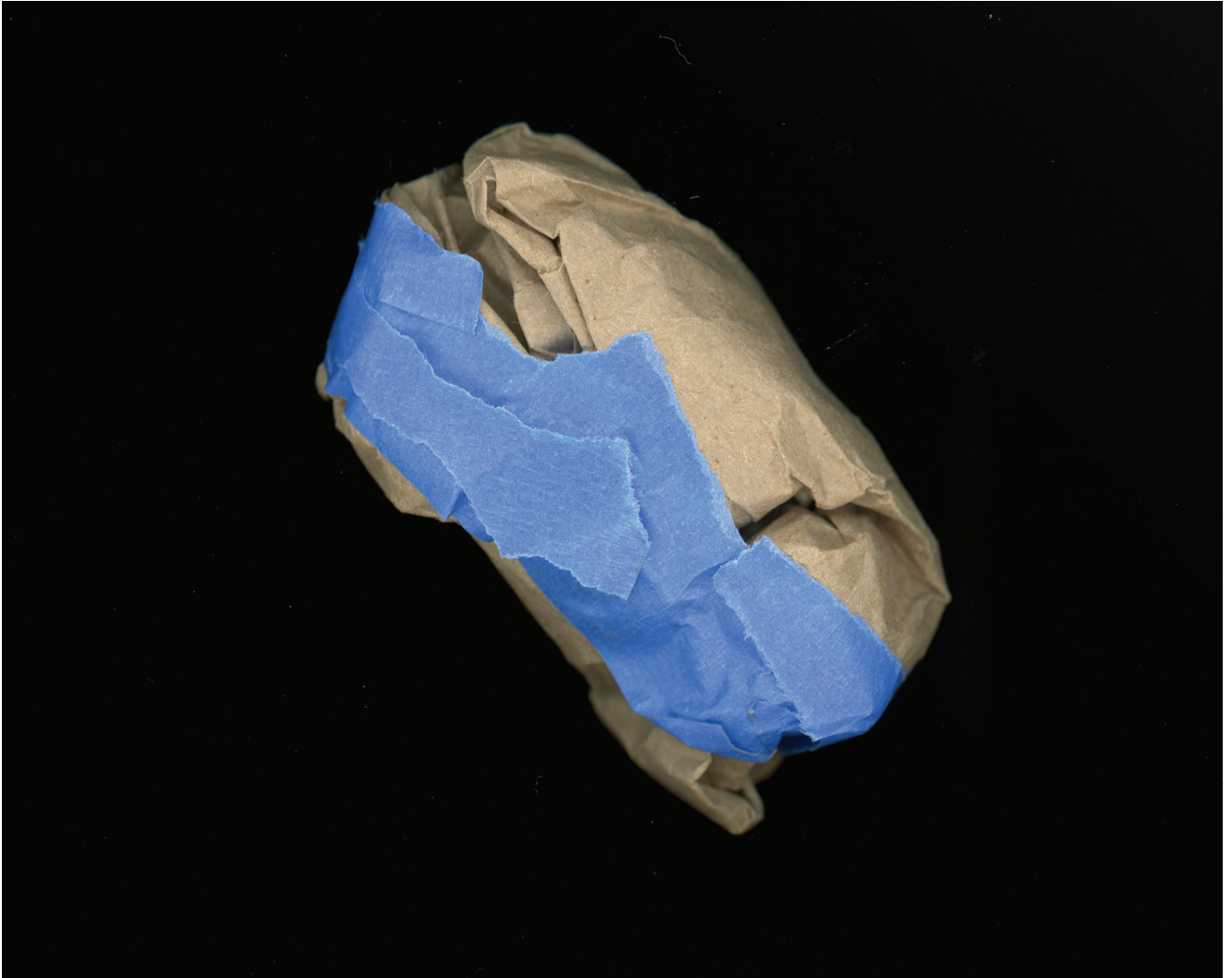
Length 6 cm

Collector Erland Nordenskiöld

Date of acquisition 1927

Provenance general surface, Bruceville Mound,
Cosumnes River, Lodi, California (USA)

Description One side of this rock is a matt greyish brown, but the other is an unexpectedly beautiful shiny black obsidian, like an antique ceramic tile. It almost looks like it could be black glaze on top of clay. If you set it down with the shiny side face up, it resembles an ankle sock, with the toes pointing towards the right. The composition of this black substance is remarkable.



Inventory number 1927.06.0216

General catalogue number 34465

Search word stone

Material lithic; stone

Length 7.5 cm

Collector Erland Nordenskiöld

Date of acquisition 1927

Provenance Bruceville Mound, Cosumnes River,
Lodi, California (USA)

Description This rock could easily be mistaken for a potato. It is the size, shape and colour of a small baking potato. It is heavy when I pick it up. It has one flattish surface that it naturally sits on. The top is curved like the back of a cat resting on its haunches, slightly wider where the cat's rump would be. Its surface is rough (potato-like) and leaves traces of dirt on my blue glove as I roll it around in my hand. I am holding it in my right hand as I am using my left to write these notes. It really does look like a potato that has just been dug out of the earth.



Inventory number 1927.06.0252

General catalogue number 34539

Search word crystal; rock crystal

Material lithic; stone

Length 5 cm

Collector Erland Nordenskiöld

Date of acquisition 1927

Provenance Bruceville Mound, Cosumnes River,
Lodi, California (USA)

Description This is definitely a crystal. It is transparent and colourless, packed with thin shards of what look like icicles or broken glass or firecrackers. The shards catch the light like a prism, showing flashes of pink and green and yellow from certain angles. The crystal is a six-sided cylinder, whose sides come together at an angled point on one end, and a blunter point on the other. The blunt end looks like the crumpled edge of a stubbed-out cigarette; it is grubby and opaque and kind of wrinkled.



Inventory number 1927.06.0333

General catalogue number 34793

Search word stone

Material lithic; stone

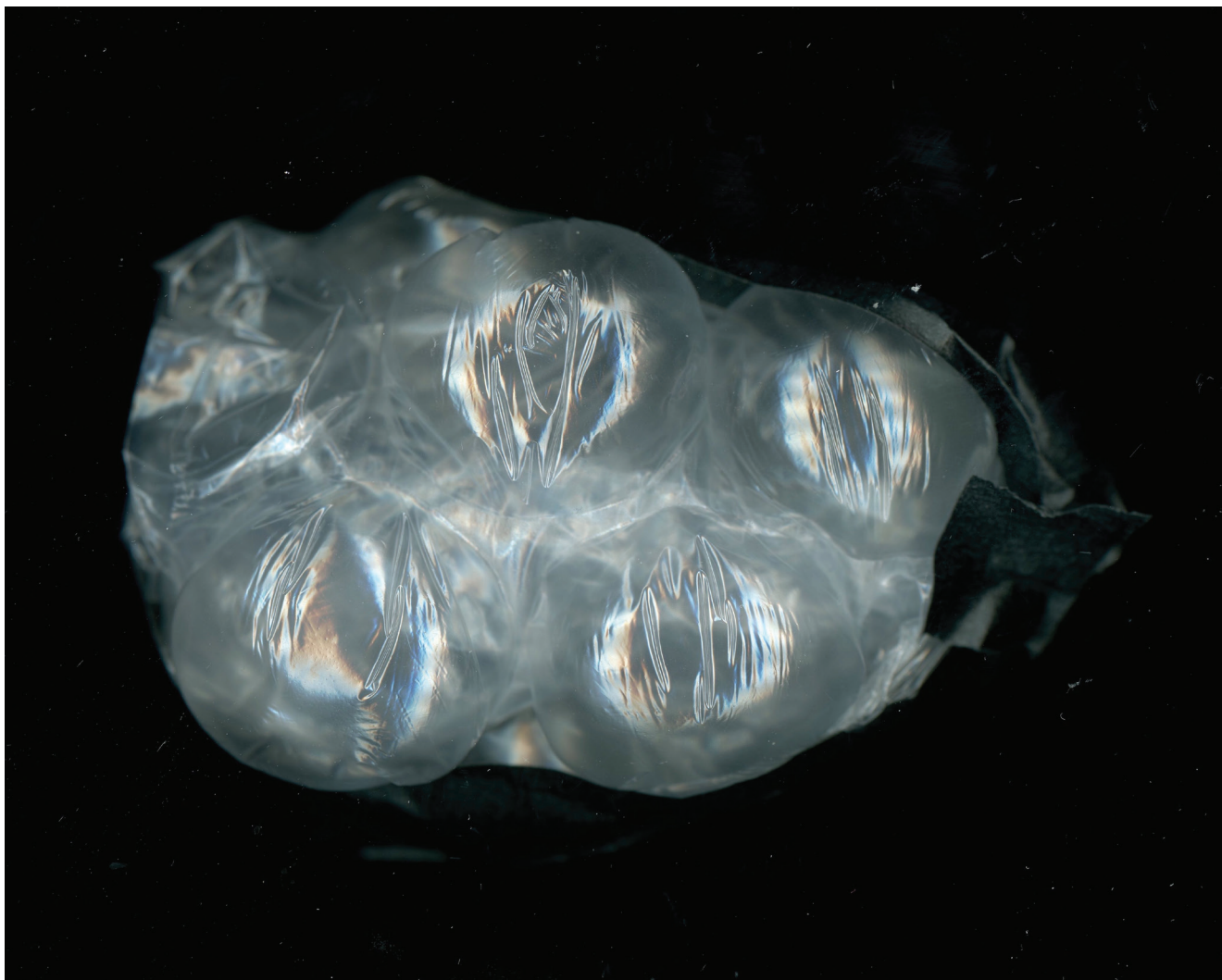
Length 10 cm

Collector Erland Nordenskiöld

Date of acquisition 1927

Provenance Bruceville Mound, Consumnes River, Lodi, California (USA)

Description This stone is oblong, like a thin candy bar with rounded edges. When I hold it in my fist, its ends poke out from either side of my palm. The rock is medium grey, smooth but not lustrous, uniform in texture. The contrast between its colour and my pink gloves is striking. On one side of the rock is a barely perceptible horizontal line, darker in colour, crossing its length. I wonder if this line originally could have been a ridge that over time has worn smooth. When I trace it with my finger, it doesn't seem to be raised at all.



Inventory number 1927.27.0476

General catalogue number 41457

Search word stone

Material lithic; stone

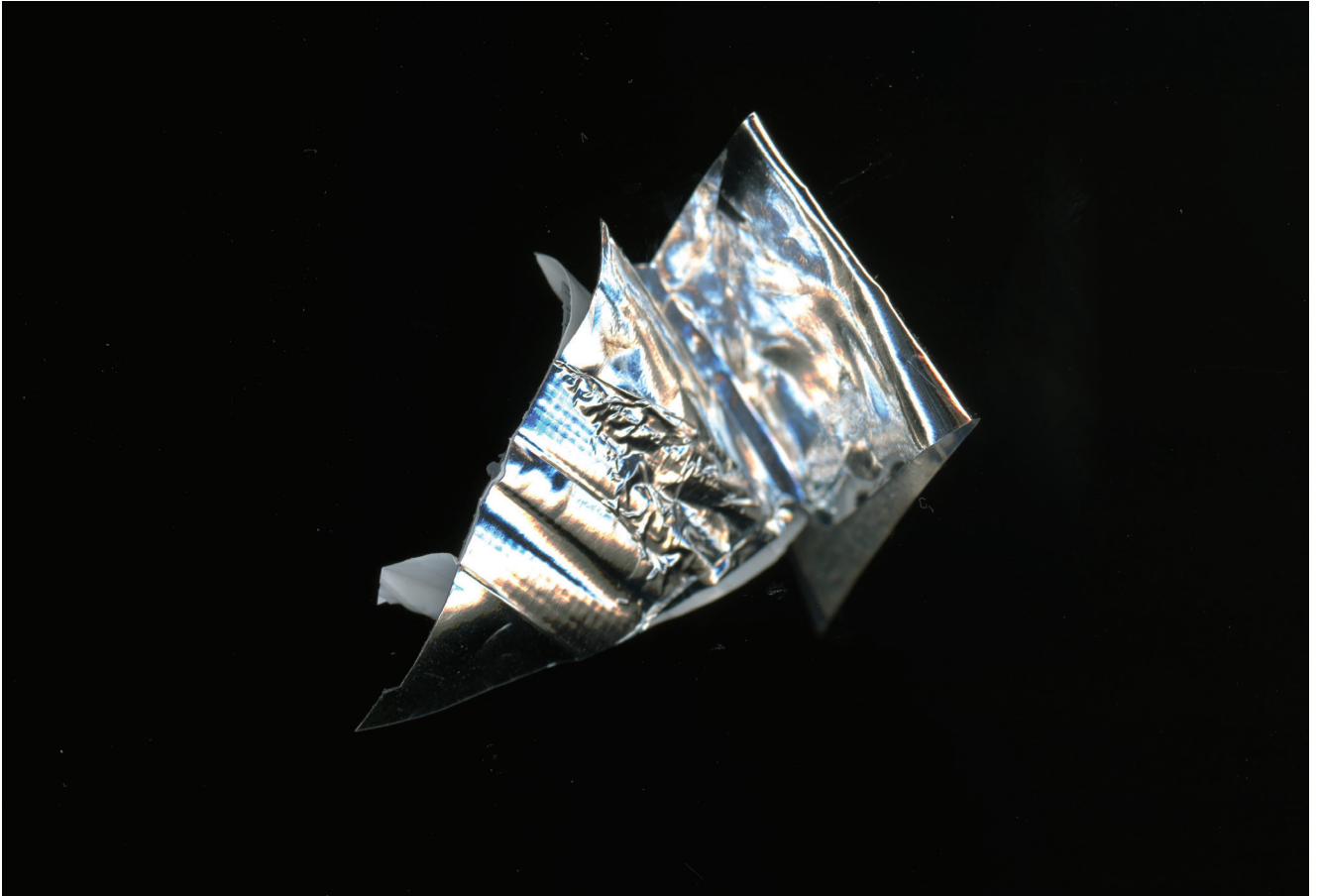
Length 5.2 cm

Collector Erland Nordenskiöld

Date of acquisition 1927

Provenance Baudó River, Chocó (Colombia)

Description This rock looks like it could be the inside of a geode. It is a creamy amber colour, made of tiny, compressed crystals. It's shaped like an almond or a human eye. One of its faces is sparkly and radiant. When you flip it over, it looks more three-dimensional and rises into a mound with a circular indentation in the middle, like the iris of an eye. From a bird's-eye view, with the iris facing you, it resembles a cross-section of a volcano, severed close to its base. The rock is a strange combination of something that is both muted and nearly glowing.



Inventory number 1927.27.0477

General catalogue number 41458

Search word stone

Material lithic; stone

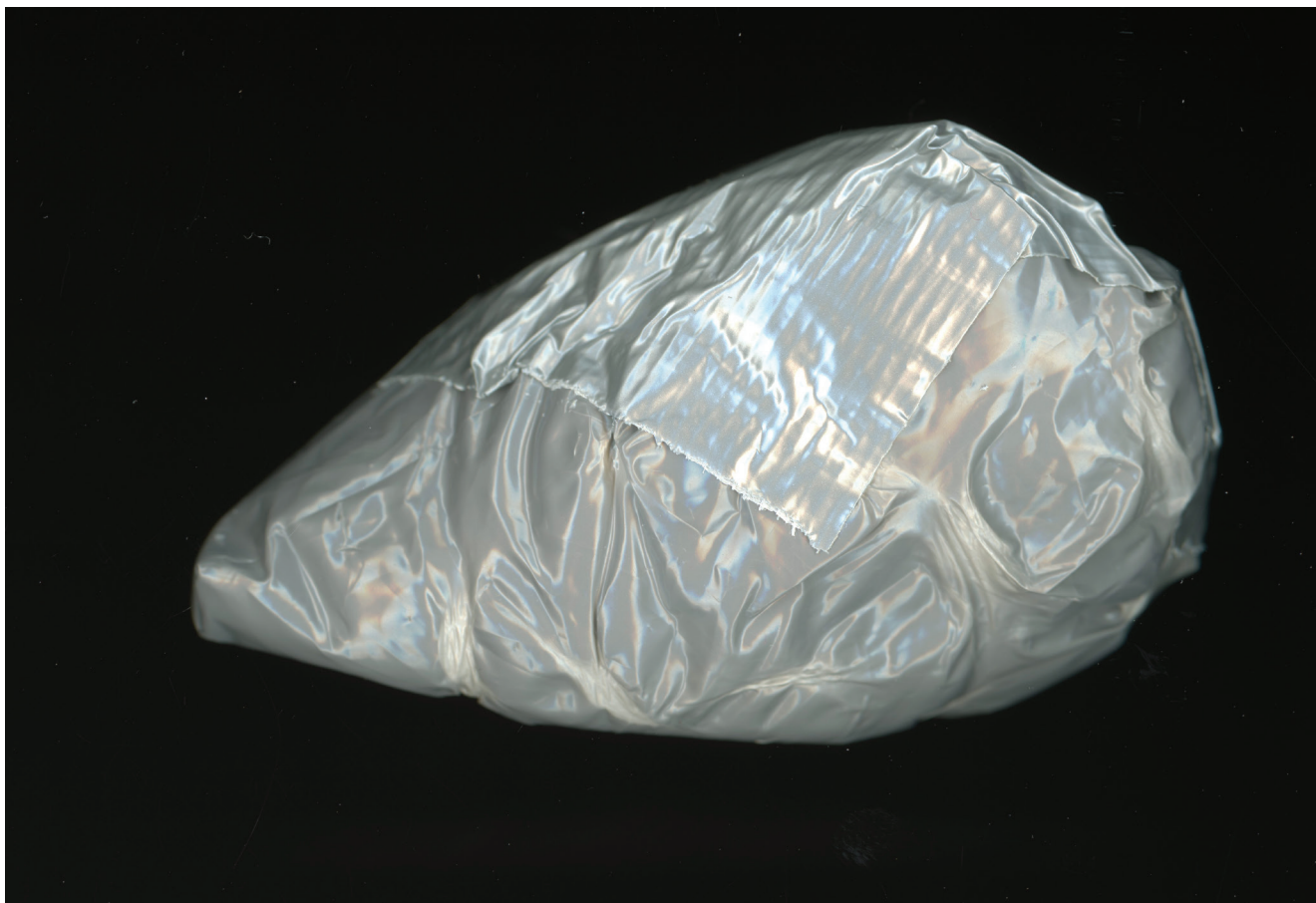
Length 5.5 cm

Collector Erland Nordenskiöld

Date of acquisition 1927

Provenance Docordó River, tributary of the Docamparó River, south-east of Pizarro, Chocó (Colombia)

Description This rock is dense and rugged but luminous. It might have some obsidian in it. It fits perfectly in my palm. The outline of the rock looks like the silhouette of a mountain. The top part is craggy and rises into a ridge. It has smooth, multicoloured stripes: dusky grey, then light grey, then a slightly darker stripe, then one that is even darker. The back face of this rock is incredibly complex.



Inventory number 1938.45.0227

General catalogue number 60715

Search word stone

Material lithic; stone

Length 6.5 cm

Collector Erland Nordenskiöld

Date of acquisition 1938

Provenance Pisco or Ica, Peru (South America)

Note Archaeological tool. Unknown use. Artefact acquired by the museum from Erland Nordenskiöld's estate, distributed in September 1938.

Description This rock is gorgeous. It is shaped like an elongated teardrop. The surface appears to have been polished, and it is mottled like the fur of a calico cat, with small brown patches alternating with lighter whitish-blue patches that look like you could dive into them. The bottom part of the teardrop leads to a rounded point with a crack at the tip. Along one side is an indentation about the length of a thumb. It looks as if the side of the stone has buckled from the pressure of being held too hard. This stone was meant to be held. It's not heavy but it has heft. It feels special.

Anthropology & Art

A new open-access publication series edited by the RAI Anthropology of Art Committee. The series stems from the international conference Art, Materiality and Representation organized by the RAI in collaboration with the British Museum and the School of Oriental and African Studies in 2018. Its aims are to make available to a wide audience works that engage with the connections between visual, material, aural and other expressive human practices and the lived worlds in which they take place from an anthropologically informed perspective.

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Katerina Hatzikidi
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Robyn McKenzie
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Eloise Govier
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Carine Ayélé Durand
- Volume 8** *Catalogue of Correspondence*
A collection of rocks found in the Gothenburg Museum of World Culture
Alyssa Grossman and Selena Kimball

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