

Did Women Make Stone Tools?

*The “sterile” layers, so called because they were devoid of cultural forms, presupposed the disasters of a cataclysmic event whose only traces were the void.*¹

By modernist account, the slow chaos, anarchy, and individualism of prehistory abruptly gave way to the Neolithic Revolution (c. 10,000 B.C.), when sophisticated stone tools, cultural symbols, abstraction, and social collectivity inaugurated “early man”:

One day, at the twist of a road, perhaps in a group; perhaps alone, a new kind of man appeared. He was much larger than the inhabitant who for tens of thousands of years occupied these places without contestation. He was much larger, more slender, more human.²

The art historian Maria Stavrinaki suggests that Georges Bataille’s obsession with prehistory is due to its lack of narrative, an unrepresentable and “nameless duration that no subjectivity has experienced.”³ This negative character produces *historical difference* in dialectical tension with a modern understanding of time (not to mention the frenetically coercive rhythms of capital). Not knowing what came before is itself a fictionalizing mechanism, an inversion; allowing us to find in every archaeological remainder—a stray hammerstone, core, hand axe, or the cave drawings at Lascaux—“a response that [gives] rise to a question.”⁴

Fittingly, then, anthropological studies of the Neolithic era very often approach the *documentary* form. A 1971 article by Jay Ruby published in *Film Comment* summarizes the nascent field of Anthropological Cinema, listing Clyde Smith’s *Early Stone Tools* (1967) alongside Jean Rouch’s *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960) and Robert J. Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922) as essential viewing:

A “technique” or “how to” film demonstrating how prehistoric man produced his stone tools. Because it is so difficult to verbally describe the process, films like this one are an essential part of courses in archaeology.⁵

Here the documentary function is twofold; first, in the medium of film, and second, in the deskilled resumption of a practice that emerged on the brink of prehistory. This speculative work—a romantic attempt to repeat those “distinct traces of strokes or knocks against some other equally hard, but more brittle stone”⁶—is also known as flint-knapping.

From approximately 2015–2019 A.D., Nina Könnemann presented several series of small-scale, chipped ceramic works—or *lithic reductions*—in an array of *blanc-to-blush* colors and a few different exhibition contexts on two continents. More than any of her recent video works, which observe the loose activity of subcultural groups (smokers, stilt-walkers, hen parties, pandemic pets), Könnemann’s sculptural forms, handmade via percussion and pressure flaking, materially and experimentally document this popular form of early art as it is actively—and passionately—

practiced today by enthusiasts. Absent rich sources of obsidian and flint, one possible substrate for the amateur knapper is ceramic; the most common supply for which is discarded toilet porcelain.

For a five-day period in mid-March 2023 A.D., in the basement at Gandt, Könneman will perform her process for the first time for the camera, and a live twitter feed, jamming blunt actions that belong to the difficulty and frustration of *longue durée* into the rude, perpetual refresh of the 24/7 news stream to create a new kind of disjointed cinema, in very real time. Rather than exhibit any finite “tool”—those rare successes culled from errant strikes, heart-rending breakages, countless failures—Könnemann’s subterranean residency instead offers a blow-by-blow account of the hewing, and the intertwined contingencies of chance and skill. Whether anything at all will result from this experiment, of course, is open to question.

The main difficulties consist, first, in making the blow fall exactly in the proper place; and secondly, in so proportioning its intensity that it shall simply dislodge a flake, without shattering it.⁷

Hesitation, indecision, and blurry ideas of what one is making usually result in mistakes: platforms that are poorly prepared cause irregular or poorly terminated flakes, and failures to plan ahead result in a misproportioned piece and errors that have to be overcome at the expense of design. This is why some points are more desired than others. They are more difficult to do well, riskier.⁸

—Kari Rittenbach

¹ Maria Stavrinaki, *Transfixed by Prehistory: An Inquiry into Modern Art and Time*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (New York: Zone Books, 2022), 245.

² Georges Bataille, *The Cradle of Humanity*, trans. Stuart Kendall and Michelle Kendall (New York: Zone Books, 2009), 155.

³ Stavrinaki, *Transfixed by Prehistory*, 287.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jay Ruby, “Toward an Anthropological Cinema,” *Film Comment* 7.1 (Spring 1971): 39.

⁶ Sven Nilsson (1868), quoted in L. Lewis Johnson, “A History of Flint-Knapping Experimentation, 1838-1976,” *Current Anthropology*, 19.2 (June 1978): 337.

⁷ Sir John Evans (1906), quoted in *ibid.*, 338.

⁸ John C. Whittaker, *American Flintknappers* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 201.