All Photographs by Vibeke Mascini
A frog-shaped stone called elektron
by Vibeke Mascini

Introduction

Pre-modern notions considered electricity as a sacred phenomenon that embodied a spirit that animates matter. For the past few years, my artistic research has evolved around historic and futuristic concepts of electricity as a speculative agent of life. Combining natural and industrial processes with their energy as the binding force, my work addresses a fundamental dynamic that underlies materials and organisms. Using sculptures, installations, video and text I seek to channel a deep understanding of electricity by indicating its direct relation with its source. As part of a long-term collaboration with scientists, engineers, government employees and musicians I propose a conscious understanding of electric energy as a statement of interconnectedness and entanglement — between species, media and nature, matter and energy. Navigating this era of environmental fragility, my statement is embedded in a deep notion of intimacy. Witnessing the profound energetic relationship between our environment and ourselves we cannot help but experience profound empathy and concern.

The story: A frog-shaped stone called elektron reveals mythical stories and historic sources to the reader and is part of the abovementioned research.
A frog-shaped stone called elektron

“What child could possibly be found in such a state of ignorance as to believe that birds weep once a year, that their tears are so prolific…” Pliny the Elder, 23–79 AD, The Natural History

When it comes to the history of electricity, many storytellers will tell of the ancient trickster Prometheus, who stole fire from the Gods on Mount Olympus and gave it to humanity. Like flames, electricity can glow and crackle, it can clear a room of obscurity in an instance and it can sting without warning. Because the introduction of fire allowed humanity to develop in unprecedented ways — into ‘civilization’ — the new fire, electric fire, was long recognized as a phenomenon that could spark a revolution. We know it did, and it still does. But in the case of electricity, who do we point to as the bold person that went and snatched it? While Mary Shelley would also refer to her famous book as The Modern Prometheus, Doctor Frankenstein was only a follower of his real-life contemporaries — those modern scientists who first experimented with electricity, those who had seen a dead man’s eye blink after conducting electricity through his temples. So, whom do we consider the original electricity thief? Some hints may lead us to consider the possibility that it was not a human being, but a stone. This may be the story of such a stone, which should be acknowledged as the bearer of electricity.

In exploring electricity through the notion of theft, I should state that the way in which contemporary humanity has generated electricity may count as grave and extensive misconduct. However important and real the concerns surrounding the non-sustainable use of natural resources, I do not wish to talk about extractivism here. Instead, I want to look into the nature of electricity using the physical notion of theft. For when it comes to electricity, a phenomenon that incessantly balances between positive and negative, we are all ceaseless stealers and are all ceaselessly stolen from. And this applies to animate and inanimate subjects alike!* Who has not experienced a sudden spark from a handrail or a timid looking Persian rug?

* I have strategically left out the group of physical insulators here — those materials that ignore the intimate electric barter that occupies their surroundings — for in the exploration that is this text, I have little sympathy for those materials that fortify their boundaries and act as in and of themselves.
Moving around — feet brushing the rug, hands sliding along rail — our bodies take part in physical friction, generating a charge along the way. It’s only when we unsuspectingly tap someone’s shoulder or brush against something like an elevator door that a *ZZZAP!* reminds us of the physical exchange with our environment. It is those highly intimate interactions that I am drawn to, turning a seemingly passive object into an active subject by its ability to foster an electric charge. Electric energy thereby strikes me as the binding agent between entities that defies all categories of taxonomy and beyond. The encounter with a special stone confirmed these observations.

The pull towards the enigmatic amber stone goes a long way back. Accounts over 2,000–years old can be found of people finding amber along the Mediterranean coast, carried there by the tide. When rubbed, the luminescent brown fossil proved magnetic, attracting dust and eyelashes. Many powers have been assigned to amber over time, but its most extraordinary ones originate from the stone’s ability to move things towards itself. Norse tales describe amber embodying a soul. After all, a stone capable of such a pull questions our perception of the object as rigid and inanimate.

The ancient Greeks called amber *elektron*, after the sun *elektor*, whose rays might have been captured and rendered solid in this beaming, hand-held object. And it was from amber’s ability to hold a charge of static electricity that the word *electricity* was later derived. At the time, in Syria, amber was known as *harpax* for it dragged or snatched fine objects to it like a thief.

Realizing these notions of *elektron* and *harpax* might be among the first known observations related to electric energy, I felt the urge to explore other speculative powers and the origin stories assigned to amber around the world. Hoping this would enable me to experience electricity outside of its current, domestic realm, and beyond its Western categorization.

My research into such historic notions is ongoing and has only yet departed from more familiar terrain. As I happened to be in London when my interest piqued, this inquiry started on a grim January morning when I rang the bell on the top floor of the British Museum. Indoor bells make a curious statement; yet another private British ‘club’. This golden bell caused particular intrigue since it read ‘Greek and Roman antiquities’, not followed by ‘department’ or ‘archive’, creating the impression that you could summon an entire epoch by simply pressing a button. A young
A frog-shaped stone called elektron

woman opened the door, which in my mind had yet become a portal, inviting me to enter.

The space she led me to certainly felt like compressed history. The musty smell of paper and the sonic experience of dust, like indoor snow. There was the occasional quirky object, which marks any space where people with a strong niche interest spend a lot of time together. A paper garland portraying a conga line of Trojan horses decorated the upper arch of the door.

_Here’s the little fella_, she said as her gloved hands put the small piece of amber that I had requested to study on a velvet tray, especially for this occasion. I inspected the pendant, carved into the shape of a frog some 2,500 years ago. The latex gloves I was required to wear making it impossible for the warmth of my hands to meet the object. It was light in my hand, this 7cm-long frog made of what appeared to be the crystals inside a forgotten jar of honey. It surprised me how very obvious it seemed that this fossil had once been liquid.

Aside from the correct suspicion that amber is petrified tree resin, pre-modern Greek, Roman, Norse and Arab notions of amber’s origins were often fantastical. Stories include amber being shaped by the annual tears of Indian birds, the mourning of widows, female lynx urine, concentrated sea foam and a tiger’s soul.

While these descriptions are wild in their associations, the actual narrative of the material I felt resting in my palm seemed equally unfathomable.

That it started with ancient tree resin falling on soil we may still find many geological layers beneath the soil we now move around on. Imagine then how this sticky drop was hardened by sunlight and time, as the soil was shifted by ice age glaciers. Slowly it changed color as it ground along with the ice, and as it bobbed along no longer existing rivers and sea currents. It is hard to really grasp the amount of time that passed until it fossilized. Then it was picked up by hands whose blueprint was nowhere in sight when the stone was still a liquid. These unlikely hands grabbed tools made from other materials and crafted the tree’s resin, now solidified, into the shape provided by their imagination. They called it a frog. They called it a frog-shaped stone called _elektron_ or _harpax_, since it stole dust. Then the frog was lost, covered by soil, buried in it and there it remained. Long after entering yet a new epoch, other hands dug it up, brushed it off, collected it, assigned a catalogue number, put on gloves made from another tree’s liquid and weighed it in their hands. My hands, and its weight. This all happened across millions of years, and
here was its embodiment. A golden stone with hips. To believe this amber originated from the glands of mythical birds seems equally (im)possible.

With the amber frog between my latex fingers, I experienced a strange sense of pity for the shelf life of this object that so eagerly electrically interacts. Moved from glove to glove, I wondered whether it ever touches skin anymore. Perhaps the velvet tray might offer just enough friction for the amber to start pushing and pulling. Even if the stone is limited to momentarily snatch at things with its exterior, its interior contains elements seized long ago. Small, extinct ecosystems remain pristinely conserved in this vault of amber.

By the time the word *electricity* was coined in 1600, it was considered a unique entity, rather than a characteristic of something else. Able to be addressed autonomously, even as its agency always seemed defined by what it sits between: two poles or a hand and a stone.

So, if everything steals electricity and everything gives it away, this apparently puts us between roles: the robber and the robbed, Prometheus and the Gods. But these characters are depleted in that they assume ownership. After all, in order for something to be stolen, it first has to be considered someone or something's property. Which is an abstract notion for something as fleeting as electricity. With regard to the ancient myth, this makes me think that instead of Prometheus or the Gods we are more akin to Mount Olympus, as we embody locations where fire (old or new) sits for a while, with the duration of a spark or 135 million years.

*Note to reader:*

I smile at the thought of the scientists that advised me reading this and sighing about how I simplified things. For example, my free use of the terms electricity, electric energy and sometimes even static electricity. I am aware these concepts are not the same in ways that I don't fully understand. I have taken the liberty to use them anyway for the simple reason that I don't think the language available meets the experiences we might have of these phenomena, and I didn't see any harm in playing around a little.