

## 5. Crafting with nature: Rock paintings as Art of relations in embodied relational learning

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**Abstract** This chapter explores the affordances present at Salmijärvi rock art site in Finland and the human experience of them in local Sami and Finnish cultural context. Rock paintings are intriguingly intertwined with land- and soundscape developed through geological and hydrological processes over millions of years. The anthropo- and zoomorphic features of rock and the exceptional echo facilitate perceiving more-than-human people that inhabit the rock and initiate a process of connection and co-crafting. As part of a wider array of cultural practice with drumming, dancing, and offering, they contribute to the practices in Art of relations and intergenerational embodied relational learning. This relational view challenges dichotomic ontologies and explores ways out of environmental crises toward sustainable futures.

**Keywords** rock art | sacred sites | embodied learning | cognitive landscape | immersive soundscape | relational states



**Figure 5.1:** Salmijärvi rock art site in Vihti, in southern Finland.

## INTRODUCTION

This journey begins from a place – as any journey does: I leave home and drive hours along motorways, turn onto small country roads, hardly larger than tractor tracks in the forest. I park the car, take my skis or a kayak from the roof of my car, and continue along a path several kilometres by walking, skiing, or paddling through a lake to remote nature sites. This creates a transition rite of its own from urbanity to wilderness, to the nature sanctuaries of the Sami and, partly, the Finnish stone age ancestors: the rock painting sites.

A high, steep cliff rises awesomely straight from the water. Its reddish colour is partly natural and partly painted with a mixture of red ochre, grease, blood, or eggs (Kivikäs, 1995, pp. 22–23; Lahelma, 2008, p. 18). Nearly all 140 rock painting sites in Finland are placed by the water, right above the water level, and towards the sun. Most of the paintings depict elks, anthropomorphs, and boats, but there are also other mammals, birds, snakes, fish, handprints, and geometric signs. Many patches seem to be rubbed rather than painted on the cliff.

The paintings are often quite simple, consisting of an elk or a few, some anthropomorphic lines, boats, and unrecognisable patches of red colour. Often, it's rather the impressive features of the place which make the experience of a rock art site exceptional: the forms of rock, soundscape, reflections on the water surface, and the rays of the sun playing on the cliff. The geological and hydrological processes have crafted the rock for millions of years, creating rock art sites as some masterpieces of art crafted by the processes of nature.

In this chapter we explore rock paintings, their landscape, and soundscape at Salmijärvi rock art site in Vihti, in southern Finland (Figure 5.1). Salmijärvi offers a window to ponder about the set of affordances (Gibson 1979) present across the wider field of 140 rock art sites and the human response to them in the light of Sami and Finnish folklore and ethnographic sources. This exploration starts from a place as an open process where the affordances present provide the emerging patterns and differentiation in the context of two local cultures. Methodologically, we combine the emic approach with a reflection on the ways of understanding the landscape in Sami and, to some extent, in Finnish cultures, and combine this with the etic approach of outside, academic practices of comparison and analyse. This kind of situated knowledge formation process corresponds with indigenous and also Sami understandings of the environment as cultural and cognitive landscape (Helander-Renvall, 2010; Magga, 2013; Näkkäläjärvi & Kauppala, 2017).

We consider the embodied experience of seeing, hearing, tasting, moving, and feeling at the site as an important part of building a relationship with the place. This experience, the specific qualities of the landscape, and past acts of transformation together all create a place for embodied relational learning. In

the framework of relational epistemology and ontology (see, e.g., Helander-Renvall, 2010; Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2021; Virtanen et al., 2021), they contribute to the building of a relationship and communication between the human and more-than-human worlds.

It is Ulla, the first author of this text, who has been wearing out her shoes, scratching the skis, and scraping the kayak on her way to the rock painting sites. It is her voice that seeks to echo the experiences provided by rock art sites and to reflect on them in the local cultural contexts. The second author, Biljana, is a “passenger” in this text, sensing the direction of its movement and helping to navigate according to an imagined compass of this anthology. From her side view, with no previous knowledge whatsoever about rock painting sites, the passenger seat provides excellent conditions for the initial exercising of “pyrrhonic skepticism” (Haukeland & Naess, 2008), which is, as mentioned in the first chapter, criticism with openness to what new experiences might reveal. This journey has challenged Biljana’s lack of awareness of the Sami peoples’ and their ancestors’ holistic spiritual connections with sacred places and inspired her humbleness and admiration. Hopefully, this chapter might also influence the reader in a similar manner.

## **ROCK ART AND SAMI NATURE SHRINES, THE *SIEIDI***

Many rock painting sites have been relatively well dated in Finland by the shore displacement methods to a period between 7000–3000 BP (Jussila, 1999, pp. 113–133; Lahelma, 2008, pp. 33–35; 2012, p. 17; Poutiainen & Lahelma, 2004, pp. 59–80; Seitsonen, 2005, pp. 6–7). The archaeological findings connect them with the Comb Ceramic culture that arrived in Finland from the east and south-east approximately at the same time. The earlier Mesolithic culture – that did not make rock paintings or pottery – apparently merged later with the Comb Ceramic culture, and they both contributed to what is presently known as the Sami and, to some extent, the Finns as well. Albeit it is the Sami culture that shares more continuities with the ancient rock painters: their livelihoods have been very similar in terms of gathering, fishing, and hunting while the Finns have relied more on cattle raising and agriculture. However, in some Sami areas outside Finland the rock art tradition continued until the Middle Ages (see, e.g., Mulik & Bayliss-Smith, 2006, pp. 36–37, 50–51; Shumkin, 2000, p. 225; Simonsen, 2000, pp. 47–48), while rock painting seems to have ceased in the areas of the emerging Finns. Today, there are still thousands of rock carvings and paintings in present-day Sami areas, for example, in Alta in Norway and in the Kola Peninsula in Russia. They form some of the largest rock art sites in Europe.

Rock painting sites correspond in many ways to Sami sacred nature shrines, called *sieidi*. They have similar peculiar features that often resemble human or

animal forms. The most respected *sieidi* have been called *Gedgge olmuš*, which means a Stone-person. A specific name for this type of *sieidi* signifies the importance of this feature in the culture. Archaeological evidence shows the offering of food at both rock art and *sieidi* sites, which tells us about similar sacrificial use and the animation of both places (Äikäs, 2015; Lahelma, 2008, pp. 130–134). Rock painting and *sieidi* sites also share a similar soundscape with exceptional echoes (Lassfolk & Rainio, in press; Rainio et al., 2017; Valovesi, 2020; Valovesi & Rainio, 2022). Furthermore, Sami drums have been decorated with similar images to those on rock art (Lahelma, 2008, pp. 58–59, 123–125; Luho, 1971; Pentikäinen & Miettinen, 2006, pp. 75–82).

But there are also some differences between the *sieidi* and rock painting sites. The most notable is that red ochre has only been used at rock painting sites (for the possible use of a plant-based paint, see Kailamäki, 2022), whereas the *sieidi* have been smeared with grease and blood. Another difference is that the *sieidi* are to be found in different types of landscapes that have supported the purpose of the specific *sieidi*. The fish *sieidi*, for instance, help with fishing, and they are placed by the water in a similar manner as rock painting sites. Other types of *sieidi* can be found in mountains and forests, and they may help with the proliferation of reindeer, herding, or finding game. However, some *sieidi* have been so powerful that they could help in several ways like fishing, hunting, and reindeer herding (Paulaharju, 1962, pp. 138–139; 1932, p. 12).

## THE MORE-THAN-HUMAN WORLD AT SALMIJÄRVI ROCK ART SITE

This specific journey takes me to Salmijärvi in Vihti in southern Finland. I have been there several times but this time I am skiing to the site on a late winter day in March. I am skirting around cracks and pools of water. The glittering ice predicts the imminent arrival of spring. A wide cliff face, stretching several hundred metres along the shore, falls straight to the water – or rather to the ice now – and its steep, reddish rock is visible from a distance. Snow is melting above the cliff, and the water is dripping down in small streams. The drops make a jingling sound on their way down the rock. The cliff responds to the sound with reverberation, and, suddenly, I'm amidst of the spring concert of falling water drops.

You can listen to the concert of reverberating water drops in the following link (Figure 5.2): <https://youtu.be/AsTgb-5r4Jo>. The water drops accompany the sound of my sliding skis as I continue towards north along the cliff, tempted to occasionally hum on the way. On the northern part of the somewhat concave red cliff face, the rock responds to my humming with a wonderful echo. I realise I'm right in front of the rock paintings now. My humming grows into singing



**Figure 5.2:** The concert of falling water drops at Vihti rock art site.

with an echo that is reflected over the cliff where another echo responds to it as a chorus, creating an astonishing songscape of co-singing with the cliff. Singing feels like an appropriate way to greet the cliff. I sense a growing connection created by the co-singing that deepens into an immersive soundscape, and I feel accepted by the site.

Curiously, I ski closer. As my gaze slides over the cliff, my eye catches a face of a handsome man with a prominent nose and a beard, formed by deep cracks on the cliff (Figures 5.3a and 5.3b). Another crack forms a more feminine face stretching over the rock surface to join the male profile. These two faces share a common eye of a big, roundish notch in the rock. What a wonderful play of nature! But could it be a coincidence that the pupil of the shared eye is red?

On the right side of the deep crack a brownish red elk is painted going to the right (see also Luukkonen, 2023, Vihti; Parkkinen & Wetterstrand, 2013, pp. 54–55). It has two ears and a muzzle painted over a long impression in the rock. There is an almond-shaped fissure in the rock that forms both the body for the elk and the right eye for the feminine face (Figures 5.4a and 5.4b). Can it be a coincidence that the pupil of this other eye is red as well? There is plenty of natural rosy, red colour on the cliff, also around the eyes, but both pupils have a slightly different shade of red – the same brownish red as the painted elk.

On the right side of the feminine face there is a hare-like form in the rock: it has two long ears made by long impressions with a curvy, red line on the lower part of

the other which makes a muzzle, and it has a notch for an eye. There is an animal-like rock painting with a roundish body on its cheek. The hare is one of the primeval animals that have been living in Finland ever since the ice sheet retreated, and its bones have been found in the fauna of the earliest dwelling sites (Ukkonen & Mannermaa, 2017, p. 60). In the Ural Mountains, from where the rock art tradition, apparently, came to Finland, the hare also has an important role in the mythology: the supreme goddess Kaltaś, the Golden Woman, of all the Ob-Ugrian in the Ural Mountains, is said to make her animal appearance in the form of the hare and the geese.



**Figures 5.3a (left) and 5.3b (right):** On the left a male profile with a beard, formed by the cracks in the rock, and in the middle a feminine face with a painted, red mouth. The faces share a common eye with a red pupil. On the right a hare formed by the impressions in the rock. Outline drawing Valovesi.

Kaltaś is believed to have breathed the soul into the first human being and is considered important both for the creation of the world and for the regeneration of life. She also endows people with luck in hunting and fishing. Kaltaś is said to appear in a human form as a beautiful young lady. The hare has also been one of the three main totem animals, along with the elk and the bear, of the Ugrian people (Gemuev, 2008, pp. 27–28; Sagalaev, 2008, pp. 79–80; Sokolova, 2008, p. 88). In Finland, Metsän emuu, the Mother of the forest, who endows luck in hunting, has also been called the Golden Woman, and part of the first hare has been given as an offering to her (Haavio, 1967, pp. 40–41; Harva, 2019, pp. 354–357).

The most visible rock painting with brighter red colour is on the lower part of the feminine face. A closer look reveals a water bird with a long neck (see also Lahelma, 2008, p. 276), probably a loon, an ancient bird that is still common in the area (Figure 5.5). The head and the body are formed by protrusions in the rock, the beak by thin fissures, and the eye by a notch. There is maybe a nestling or two on its back.



**Figures 5.4a (left) and 5.4b (right):** An almond-shaped fissure in the rock forms both the body for the painted elk and the right eye with a red pupil for the feminine face. Outline drawing Valovesi.

The tiny features of the nestlings are supported by micro details in the rock. On the other side of the crack there may be still another loon, marked with faint red paint.



**Figures 5.5a (left) and 5.5b (right):** A long-necked water bird, probably a loon, is painted swimming over a crack, carrying maybe nestlings on its back. A faintly visible other loon is swimming on the right side of the crack.

The paint is following a curvy, bird-like fissure in the rock. Intriguingly, the oval body of the bright red loon provides a red mouth – as if painted with lipstick – for the feminine face, contributing to its femaleness. The head above offers a nose. A third coincidence, perhaps, in the play of nature and the human touch? Or someone else has noticed this marvellous love story on the rock before me – and acknowledged it with paint?

The bright red loon is swimming over a crack to the left, with an open beak as if swallowing or carrying something, possibly a fish or an egg? There is plenty of good space for painting on the cliff, so the placing seems intentional. Cracks are in the folklore of both the Sami and the Finns connected to the sites of the *noaidi*, the Sami shaman, and *noita*, the wise person or magician of the Finns. The word crack, *lovi*, has a deep metaphoric connotation as a portal to the other world. To fall into a trance is *langeta loveen*, literally, to fall into a crack in Finnish. And *lovinoita*, the shaman of the crack, could enter the other world through a crack (Ganander, 1984; Haavio, 1967, pp. 295–314; Siikala, 1999). The simple gesture of placing the painting over a crack evokes a metaphorical connotation of interaction with the other world.

The loon is a magical bird in Sami and Finnish myths. It can dive to the underworld, swim in the middle, and fly to the upper world, connecting them with each other. The equipment of the *noaidi* and *noita* could be preserved on a skin pouch made of a loon, and spells could be thwarted by using an arrow made of a loon beak. In old hunting spells the loon is also addressed as Metsän emuu. And in Estonian dialects, loon can mean a goose nestling as well (SES, 2023, *kuikka*) – the other embodiment of our Uralic Golden Woman. In old folk poems the loon has been connected with those water birds that participated in diving for the soil from the bottom of the sea. In other versions, the world was created from the eggs of a water bird (Kaski, 2019; Rheen, 1897; Turi, 2012). Our loon is a good candidate for both.

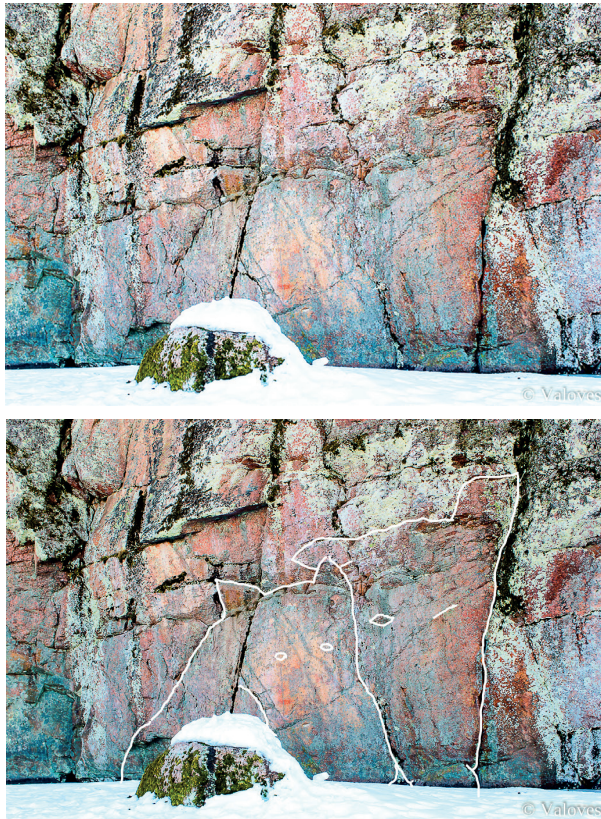
I retreat a few metres, and, suddenly, I realise that all the paintings are placed inside a big elk head formed by the cracks surrounding the light-coloured rock: it has two ears from the rock and two notches for eyes (Figures 5.6a and 5.6b). On the right side there is another elk head with two ears, eyes, and a tongue also formed by the rock, leaning towards the elk on the left. The elk has been one of the major providers of food in the contemporary economy. It's also the most common animal depicted in rock paintings. The elk and the (rein)deer, which are often interchangeable in language and folk poems, are central in Sami mythology with a connection to ancestor myths like Meandash, as the guardian animal of the *noaidi*, and as a central figure in many ceremonies (Ernits, 1999; Itkonen, 1984; SES, 2023, *hirvi*, *peura*; Lahelma, 2008).

In front of the paintings, there is a big boulder with a flat top that is piercing through the ice. It forms a perfect altar for the site. I lay a piece of a salmon sandwich on the top and pour some tea onto the ice. I enjoy the fish provided – albeit from other waters – and share it with the Stone-people, as it has been the custom.

I feel accepted by the site, and, hesitantly, I draw a drum from my backpack. I give it a try with some slow, soft beats, and the cliff responds with a powerful sound that invites me for a faster tempo. The sound grows into astonishing, vibrating echo between the drum and the cliff. The profile of the man seems to wake up: yes – he has become interested in what I'm doing and has his red eye fixed on me! The atmosphere is getting too intense ... and I have to stop drumming.

I'm ready to leave now and start retreating from the cliff. I stop for a last contemplation and to co-sing with the Stone-people as a farewell. Here, further away from the cliff, it's easy to hear that the echo of my singing responds directly from the painted cliff. And I realise that the paintings I've been looking at are also placed on a giant elk head that is formed by the cracks (Figures 5.7a and 5.7b). It has two big ears, closed eyes, and, possibly, a tongue. It's partly overlapping the two smaller elk heads like a mother standing behind the two calves in front. Together they look like an elk family engaged in drinking water from the lake. A perplexing point of conjunction of the rock and the human eye!

On the left side, leaning towards the giant elk, there is a giant human-like face. It has two eyes and a mouth from the cracks, a protrusion for a nose, and a big, red tongue sticking out. And then, while I'm singing, I see the Stone-person smiling at me. I slide away over the frozen lake, balancing on the membrane that separates and connects the tangential worlds.



**Figures 5.6a (top) and 5.6b (bottom):** The rock paintings are inside an elk head formed by the cracks in the rock. To the right, there is another elk head, also formed by the cracks. Outline drawing Valovesi.

## THE ART OF RELATIONS

Rock paintings at Salmijärvi are closely intertwined with the details of rock surface: the faces formed by cracks with the eyes and the mouth marked by red paint; the loon swimming over the crack, with the protrusion for the body and the notch that shapes the eye; the elk with the almond-shaped body of the fissures, on its way over the impression. Clearly, the rock paintings are not placed on the rock wall as if it were *tabula rasa*, a plain canvas. Instead, rock paintings seem to avoid unbroken surfaces that would, from a modern point of view, provide a “perfect”, smooth background: fragmented natural forms evolve, grow into rock paintings placed over them. The paintings are crawling over natural cracks, protrusions, and impressions and beyond frames we imagine a painting should have. Maybe it’s the cracks – the openings to the otherworld – that are more significant than the paintings themselves? Cracks where the paintings rise from and disappear into as portals to the other world where the things are born from, where they return, and where the shamans travel to negotiate for the preconditions of life?

The painting also demarcates the convergence of the faces, the hare, and the elks in the rock, evolving into a greater narrative of the place. The loon and the elk are evidently painted, growing out from the details of the rock surface – but who is the artist? The paintings are intertwined with the sculpture-like shape of rock crafted during millions of years by the forces of nature: tectonic ruptures that have lifted the cliffs, volcanic eruptions, the ice smoothing the surface during the processes of moving in the Ice Age, water, wind, the sun, and frost remodelling it. The humans have been no more than modest participants in the celebration of these magnificent geological and hydrological processes that have created the art of the rock through a spectacular play of the universe.

This is not art for art’s sake resulting from an individual creative impulse, manifested on the wall of a rock gallery. Rather, it’s the co-crafting of human and more-than-human people world, with a whole community participating in the celebration of relations: painting, singing, drumming, dancing, and sharing food – as we can see portrayed in many rock paintings (Kivikäs, 2001, p. 150; 2009, p. 145; Miettinen & Willamo, 2007, pp. 126, 159; Valovesi, 2020), hear through the exceptional songscape, and know from the archaeological finds of offerings. These practices contribute to the experience of place in the process of situated knowledge formation. Through these embodied practices the community participates in negotiation and the active co-creation of a balanced way of life with the greater forces in the world. The themes of rock paintings and their placing in relation to the rock’s surface, combined with the multisensory affordances, point to an analogous understanding



**Figures 5.7a (top) and 5.7b (bottom):** An elk calf with rock paintings in the middle, a giant elk on the right, and a laughing human-like face on the left, all crafted by the features in the rock. Outline drawing Valovesi.

of the cognitive landscape to Sami *sieidi* sites. Yoiking (the Sami way of singing), drumming, dancing, and offering have been central ways to initiate a relationship with more-than-human world that is recognised at *sieidi* sites. These activities are also used to enter an altered, relational state of consciousness which is necessary for a Sami *noaidi* to travel between the different spheres of the world to negotiate for the sustainable way of life (Fellman, 1906, 1961; *Historia Norwegie*, 2006; Holmberg, 1915; Itkonen, 1946, 1984; Schefferus, 1963).

Rock paintings could possibly be called community art. However, the community here includes both humans and more-than-humans that together are co-crafting and celebrating their relationship. Or could the paintings be called “art in-situ” because it’s the place where the paintings arise from? Is this a form of environmental art – where nature is the main crafter – or ecological art with an ecological

unity of human and more-than-human co-crafting together? Whatever we call it, nothing is changed, only acknowledged and enhanced: the painter, the singer, or the dancer is not separated from the place but, on the contrary, is a part of it. There is no audience, only participants embracing the co-creation together with other beings, fully embedded in experiencing the place and relating to it. Maybe we could call this the “Art of relations” or the “Celebration of relations” in the wider framework of relational epistemology and ontology that the art contributes to?

## EMBODIED RELATIONAL LEARNING

Rock painting sites seem to be carefully selected for their qualities in landscape and soundscape that initiate a process of connecting and communicating. They provide similar liminal, multisensory experiences which are described in the activities at *sieidi* sites that invite those present to engage through yoiking, drumming, and dancing. These activities contribute to sonic and kinetic driving which are known to aid altered, relational states of consciousness (Harner, 2013; Winkelman, 2000). Adrian Harris (2015) uses the term “deep body” to describe the vast part of cognition that exists between awareness and cognitive unconsciousness. Certain processes like being in the wilderness, drumming, or meditating can trigger the human mind to slide from the everyday consciousness into this deep body where the borders of the mind and the body, the self and the environment, dissolve, leading to an experience of a connection between the inner and outer world.

Many indigenous people have learned to use this deep body intentionally in processes of situated knowledge formation. Deep body is also a source of creativity and learning, where new ideas surface and ripen from an intuition to a realisation (Harris, 2015). These processes open another pathway to knowledge creation and learning. They differ from, or rather broaden the framework of, the embodied learning by consciously using deep body to access the knowledge situated there. Learning to use the resources in deep body by experiencing, relating, and acting out the discovered insights has been central in many indigenous cultures. At rock painting sites, the visual, audial, tactile, taste, and kinetic senses intertwine into a rich, multisensory experience of the place, facilitating a process of embodied learning (Anttila et al., 2017; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).

The “states of relatedness”, as Nurit Bird-David (1999) calls them, create powerful experiences that have been guiding the worldview of many indigenous people. Linda Hogan (2015) talks about the re-cognition of our place in the whole of creation, with relationships and responsibilities as co-creators and participants within the whole of the living world. Relational states play a substantial role

in the process that could be called “Embodied relational learning”. This kind of learning embraces the relatedness not only among human-people but also across the species, the co-existing more-than-human world understood as living, conscious, and acting in both visible and invisible biological, geological, hydrological, cosmological, and other forces that participate in co-crafting the world we live in.

## CRAFTING A RELATIONSHIP WITH NATURE

The human ability to experience places through the senses has probably not changed since the days the rock paintings were made: we can still see the paintings, hear the birds and water drops singing, smell the flowers, taste the berries, and feel movements. As Hein Bjartmann Bjerck (2012) has pointed out, we can still share similar experiences as the people who painted the cliffs, although our interpretations may differ from theirs. Our embodied experience at rock art sites may be one of the few things that we still have in common with them.

In Salmijärvi rock art site we can see how the landscape facilitates the perception of human and animal-like features on the rock, further animated by their participation in singing by the excellent echo. The placing of rock paintings in relation to the amazing geological and hydrological formations integrates them into greater narratives, culturally acknowledged by the human touch of red paint. It poses an intriguing question about how much the rock face and the painting were intertwined to mark the sites of access and communication with the more-than-human world. And what kind of narratives did they carry over from Uralic traditions to the new terrains with continuities in the narratives of the present-day Sami and Finns?

Painting has been just one expression of human multisensory creative potential that has contributed to the intergenerational experience and regeneration of myths, knowledge, and her-/histories through the affordances present at rock art sites. In a relational framework, rock paintings form one media to initiate and regenerate a relationship with more-than-human world. It contributes to the Art of relations and together with other media they participate in the co-crafting of the world in the greater Celebration of relations.

The landscape, soundscape, and rock art images point to a similar cognitive landscape as at Sami *seidi* sites and to the similar use of a relational states with the process of situated knowledge formation. Relational states allow us to tap into the resources of the deeper body with the experience of unity between human and more-than-human world. They also provide a pathway for creativity and insights

to arise which have transformative power in intergenerational embodied relational learning.

This relational view builds on the worldview (ontology) that considers humans as just one of the participants in the co-creation of the world. It challenges our dichotomous categories of mind and body, and human and nature, as separated and urges us for a reconnection which has been lost in the process of modernizing – a reconnection that is desperately needed to ground our present path to the future.

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