

RECIPROCAL CHOREOGRAPHY

Laise Elisabeth Arnold, Helsinki, Winter 2023

"...we have to learn new ways to tell stories that are simultaneously about human histories, and also about histories of the natural world. Because of the way particular structures of knowledge have dominated the last several centuries, people have managed to separate these histories. The result is that there are particular ways of storytelling about humans, and then there are wholly different ways of storytelling about plants and animals, or rocks and climate, and we don't know how to mix these up very well. They have different genres, different expectations, and so most of the time we tell stories about humans as if we humans lived in a vacuum. And, in the same way, when we tell stories about plants and animals, or rocks and climate, it's as if they lived without humans. So somehow, the challenge of the Anthropocene is to figure out how to bring these ways of understanding the world together."

Anna L. Tsing, Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Santa Cruz

What are the shapes of encounter between humans and rocks?

While the title is carrying a certain provocativeness which is asking for elaboration, I want to first focus on the question followed by it, as the idea of reciprocity will become more apparent later on.

What do I mean by shapes of encounter?

An encounter one can have with all kinds of actors. While a common definition of encounter describes something unexpected, in the context of this experimental research on shapes, I understand encounter as a planned, physical interaction with certain physical and non-physical side effects. I hereby draw on the ideas and definition of the open/interactive platform "A Feral Atlas" - *"The More-Than-Human Anthropocene"*, which understands "feral" as the way all kinds of more or less animate agents react to the "extra", (feral) effects of human interventions and built infrastructures. While Anna L. Tsing (Jesse Bazzul, Interview, Reimagining science education in the Anthropocene, 2021), is mainly referring to more immaterial or harder-to-trace materials and the effect they have on other than human beings, I am however more interested in the physical characteristics of the shapes, which encounters take and what they, purposely or unintendedly, convey. In this regard I am extending the definition of "shape of encounter" from accidental forms left in the rock by infrastructural elements, to deliberately chosen shapes integrated within the architectural site of the parliament, which seek to initiate physical encounter.

The intention, in the following, is to sufficiently link those two categories of a) shapes either left as "accidental" side products and b) a shape intentionally placed as an inviting gesture. The findings of those two categories of the research of the site will result in a physical artifact. The aim of the artifact is to create a scenario of performative encounter that allows engaging with "matter" on a more horizontal and so to say "anthropomorphized" level, to challenge existing narratives and forms of relationship.

Rock formations have a ubiquitous presence in Finland and the Helsinki region. The so-called Finnish Precambrian crust is a shield formation of granite, of which the exposed appearance shapes a large part of the Southern landscape. However, those "Finnish" topologies have undergone a drastic shift, during the course of the past century. In a book about Finnish landscapes and infrastructure (Jaatinen, 1967) I found the following description of two images: "The new road was quarried through rock, and the above sight now replaces the landscape". Such shifting of topologies is a form of "visual proof" of the entwined histories of the human and the natural world. While humans are "progressing" and expanding, altering, and renovating, matter is shifted and changed in its form, structure, and location. Drastic shifts are rarely questioned and supported even by anthropocentric storytelling. But who is shaping whom? Clear is the unequal distribution of power that defines the human-rock relationship, but what are the immaterial effects rock presence has on "us"? And how is this effect even utilized and planned in, during the process of erecting architectural sites?

The Actor-network theory (ANT) describes that: *actors, which can be human or non-human, material or immaterial, come to be how they are through a process of interacting with other actors.* During the experimental research, I was interested in how this would manifest itself in physical form. What are these forms of interaction between humans and rocks on a material level?

Materials are something we interact with all the time - so it is something very practical, however, the theories around it, like for example New Materialist (Jane Bennett) ways of thinking, seem to be rather disconnected with the real tangible matter and practices around it. While the majority of material practices are still often lacking in convincingly bridging theory and practice, some individuals in the arts have managed to successfully integrate vibrant matter and their empirical qualities to tell more inclusive stories that are diverging from the normative discourse and agenda around the topic.



Image: Front door, building Kallio, Helsinki

Arguably, to co-create with a more-than-human ecology, can provide an attempt to bridge the gap and sufficiently link and work with the reality and agency of matter, with a process of artistic practice, beyond a traditional perception of material properties and their application.

*What forms of interplay exist between humans and the matter rock?
How can we work with the material, instead of working on the material?
And what does it mean to build with, to follow the rock?
How can I co-create with a rock? And what shapes would that take?*

For my co-creation, I'm equally intrigued by the diverse solutions and forms of coexistence as I am fascinated by the often brutal nature of infrastructural intervention or collision of buildings with the rock. While it can be hard to not perceive those appearances as loss, they certainly and quite bluntly show the reality of the current and predominant forms of relationship we have with matter. How can theories, that challenge the dominant discourse and idea around matter being inanimate and passive, assist a less anthropocentric storytelling? And what would be a physical manifestation and approach to storytelling, that makes one engage with matter in a surprising and unusual way?

Even though the cityscape is still defined by rocky areas, which are often located in a park setting, I felt the need to examine a site that somehow presents a colliding and connecting of rock in its more or less natural state and that of human-built, infrastructure. Through an investigation of the physical forms of interplay present at the site of the Finnish Parliament building and its adjacent rock formation, I started to dive into the more recent history of Helsinki and how during the course of less than 100 years the appearance of the landscape had changed.

The unusual urban "grid" of Helsinki's neighbourhood Töölö was supposedly due to its rocky nature, but most rocks that had pierced the ground there, fell victim to the housing developments between the 1910's onward until the 30's. The Finnish Parliament is located just at the border of this neighborhood, a symbolic location that was chosen in the first round of the architectural competition. Back then, this part of the city was still relatively undeveloped, and the location was a deliberately chosen spot, not only because of the hillside from which one could look over the city and the city would look back at you, but also because of the large rock formation present at the site. It can be said for certain, that if the parliament would not stand

here today, the rock formation next to it would not be here anymore either. However, during the planning and erection of the parliament, following Finland's independence in 1917, a large portion of the rock had to evade the performative stage of democracy. The drill holes, which were used to place explosives in the process of removing parts of the bedrock, are still visible. Some seemed to have withstood the force of the explosion and are still "intact" canals, with two openings, while others just show as a scraping mark. The drill holes tell a story about the time when the site was prepared to be built on. Much like the brutal cuts and scratches that are visible alongside highways and in the metro tunnels in and around Helsinki.



The location proves also of interest, as it embodies a certain political and representative dimension of rock. The Finnish Parliament building's massive stone architecture purposely conveys indestructibility. An architectural monument of a nationalistic ideology built to last forever, using stone and archetypes to mark their place in the line of important buildings of history.

While the rock is a continuation of the building, it stays at the same time separate. This is not only due to the rough cut but also the visual appearance of color differences. Granite consists of mainly 3 types of minerals (quartz, feldspar, and black or pale mica) and can have a varying color, even in two spots of close proximity. The rock formation which extends next to the building is covered with lichen and other flat growlers, but it still shows it's mainly brown-toned with a few red spots colored granite characteristics. For the parliament building, however, red Kalvola granite was used, which has been extracted 100km up North, leaving a cavity in the landscape.

Standing on the top of the rock of the "Eduskuntapuisto" (Parliamentspark) allows one to see all those different shades of granite at one glance, creating this visual assemblage of forms of rocks and nuances of colors.

Through performative encounters over the period of the past weeks, and here encounter is to be understood as an intensional act with unpredictable "outcomes", I gained a certain intimate distance with not only the parliament building and the adjacent rock but also with the infrastructure of hostility and selective gestures of hospitality. However, the site around the government building is mainly defined by forms of hostile, infrastructural intervention, signifying clear and mostly exclusive access, while other parts are completely fenced off. This kind of elements of infrastructure creates a contrast to the otherwise more and less homogeneous stone surfaces, only differentiating in their more or less smooth appearance. Their distinct-shaped bodies are often kept in polished optics and always in a metallic finish. It is the same kind of gold and silver, which I encountered inside the building during a guided tour offered to curious visitors (of Finland). The metal parts were used to highlight or accentuate certain parts of the infrastructure of controlled access. One of those parts of the parliament building are the doors, which either allow or prohibit access, but certainly make your gaze stop for a moment.



Image 1 left: Excerpt publication, *Tumbling Ruins*, Henrike Naumann, Angela Schoeneberger and Andrea Brandolini/ Image 2 right: 8mm film camera, Front of the Finnish Parliament/ Image 3 right: 8mm film camera, drill hole, rock formation Eduskuntapuisto





*Left side: Top view sculpture handshake with a rock, 3D scale model with casted and partially polished aluminium optic, in scale 40 x 90,5 x 40,5 mm
Right side: Exposed bedrock adjacent to the parlaments building*

Since my arrival in Finland, I have been fascinated with the appearance of door handles. I'm not sure whether it is their actual design, the choice of material, or simply the contrasting appearance to the stone-faded "vernacular" of central Helsinki. A door handle as an infrastructural object embodies a form of choreography between matter and (hu)man. Their shape and material are thoughtfully chosen, to signalize and invite for access and with this initiate encounter.

"The surface of an old object, polished to perfection by the tool of the craftsman and the assiduous hands of its users, seduces the stroking of the hand. It is pleasurable to press a door handle shining from the thousands of hands that have entered the door before us; the clean shimmer of ageless wear has turned into an image of welcome and hospitality. The door handle is the handshake of the building. The tactile sense connects us with time and tradition: through impressions of touch we shake the hands of countless generations. A pebble polished by waves is pleasurable to the hand, not only because of its soothing shape, but because it expresses the slow process of its formation; a perfect pebble on the palm materialises duration, it is time turned into shape."

Juhani Pallasmaa, *Architecture and the Senses, The Eyes of the Skin* (2012)

"The handshake of a building" is an object-oriented ontological approach to the infrastructural element of door handles which does not only describe the beauty and care put into this detail of architecture but also uses poetic words to describe that the users (humans) enter a form of choreographical relationship with the building, as soon as they are entering while pulling open its doors. As Juhani describes the door handle of the building as a handshake, giving the building characteristics which "we" can relate to and simultaneously suggests for it to have its own agency, I want to use the same gesture, a handshake, as tool and object for encounter to symbolically enter and represent a form of "reciprocal choreography" (Florencia Colombo & Ville Kokkonen. *The National Museum of Finland. (2018). Man Matter Metamorphosis 10 000 Years of Design, Man Makes Things And Things Make Man*) with a rock.

*Can I capture a handshake with a rock? And what forms would that take?
How would it look, how would it feel to touch?
Is it smooth or rough?*

*Would it not always be my handshake, my interpretation of that?
Would a too literal translation of a handshake not carry a pathos
of something didactic and also create a layer (me), between the
viewer/user and the rock itself?*

*What is this handshake really, the moment of interaction?
Touching? Is that not the scraping, the exploding?
Would a handshake not be those post-natural forms of the rock, at
the points of collision of infrastructure?
The feral data, the shape of human impact on the rock?*

Questions I have asked myself during the process of prototyping the artifact with the conclusion the final shape might be secular. Important is the gesture and attempt of it, the shift of thought and the idea of the encounter with matter, in a way, we feel emotions primarily through our sense of touch.

The idea and meaning of a handshake gained another layer in the context of the political site of the parliament.

*What does a handshake embody?
What does it mean? What are the politics of representation and
what are the limitations of it?
Is a handshake a promise of reciprocity?*

Every time I was climbing the rock formation, my hands studied the rounded and shaped edges and nooks and crannies of the rock. *What does it realistically mean to co-create with a rock?*



While I was prototyping, my hands were my eyes (Juhani Pallasmaa, 2012). I used my empirical, situated knowledge of materials present at the site and the shapes as a dynamic guide. It is an attempt to simultaneously give a form while also projecting a function into existing, feral, forms. Understanding co-creating as in the incorporation of shapes that are present at the site, while new forms were given through my interpretation of a welcoming gesture of a rock. It could be rightfully argued that a handshake with a rock is difficult to materialize and close to impossible to imagine, but exactly because the artifact portrays also the limitations of human expression of this relationship while embodying a humanizing approach, it strengthens the narrative.

What would be the value in the attempt to portray a handshake with a rock?
A handshake holds strong symbolic value, signifying a form of mutual agreement or simply showing reciprocal liking and care. In order to care, it requires an understanding or acknowledgment of the intertwinedness and entanglement of a more or less plural form of actors. To quote Anna L. Tsing: "...we have to learn new ways to tell stories that are simultaneously about human histories, and also about histories of the natural world..."

The idea of a handshake embodies a certain anthropomorphism, a humanizing gesture we are all very familiar with and a form of encounter we usually only have with humans and occasionally with our beloved pets, this gesture blurs hierarchies that are dominant in our anthropocentric worldview and way of storytelling. While the title provokes, as it suggests a form of a dynamic relationship with something we perceive normally as static, the aim of the artifact is to create a scenario of performative encounter, a "reciprocal choreography", through a handshake. between humans and rock.



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