



Peripheries as Healers

The Wasteland Talismans as a Case Study

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this thesis was to understand the concept of periphery in relation to areas and environments, and to gather information on the benefits of exposure to peripheries. A series of artworks was created to accompany the written thesis. The study was conducted to support the artworks by giving them a conceptual framework. The process of making a twenty-artwork series called Periphery Talismans (now my daydreaming is spontaneous) is described in the case study as a part of the thesis.

The sources used for the written part include books, articles and essays on topics that relate to peripheries. Wilderness, natural environments, abandoned places and wastelands and the aesthetics of peripheral places are all explored further. The theoretical foundation for the thesis is based on the writings of Marko Leppänen, the founder of The School of Esoteric Geography and Periphery Therapy. Other authors referenced include environmentalist and Pulitzer Prize winning poet, Gary Snyder, artist Jenny Odell and author and translator Ville-Juhani Sutinén.

The study revealed the importance of peripheral areas as equalizers. It was made clear that areas that have peripheral qualities are not only havens for wildlife, but also important places of rest and recuperation for humans became evident. Furthermore, it was revealed that seeing our minds and bodies as wild, instead of the normalized view of seeing them as civilized, can help humans experience healing and live more balanced lives.

Key words: periphery, polarity, wild, place, wasteland

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1 INTRODUCTION

The thesis is based on the argument that the spaces and environments people live and pass through have an impact on the person – their moods and well-being. A case is made for the positive effects of exposure to areas and environments that can be described as peripheral. In the written part of the thesis the center - periphery model is explored, as well as certain types of peripheries and their defining qualities. Further on, the qualities of peripheries are attached to art and a kind of periphery attitude.

The core of the thesis is supported by the arguments of the School of Esoteric Geography and Periphery Therapy, established by Marko Leppänen in the early 1990's in his geography degree work. The essence of this school of thought is that we humans operate in a world of polarity. A divide is easy to see, urbanization has turned most of the environments that we operate in into "centers", places that are mapped, paved, artificially lit and where natural elements are highly controlled, if not completely restricted. Leppänen believes that the constant exposure to these mostly artificial environments is not healthy for us humans. He believes that the opposite of center, the periphery, is the healer.

In addition to leaning on the core statements of the School of Esoteric Geography, the thesis also uses some of the concepts of author and environmentalist Gary Snyder, to further make the case for the importance and the healing that peripheries intrinsically produce. To bring the concepts towards the concrete, particular environments that are peripheral – such as wastelands and ruins, are studied. The sublime and the experience of awe are introduced as examples of the emotions brought on by exposure to peripheral places. Art and the periphery quality are brought together to see the potential of art as a tool for gaining the benefits of peripheries. This thesis is not an all-encompassing study into the topic of peripheries and their positive effects, but a study of a handful of aspects of them.

The case study is a series of artworks that have stemmed from the ideas of the written part. In making the conceptual artworks my goal has been to show

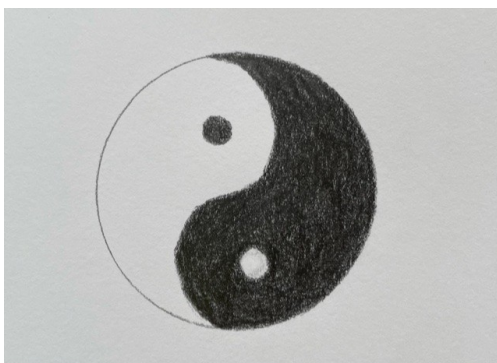
places and environments that I personally experience as peripheries. The places used are all different in how they represent the qualities of peripheries. To pinpoint the specific aspects of those peripheral places, I have taken the qualities into a more esoteric view and created talismans dedicated to each periphery. These talismans are artworks, but they are also sacred and magical objects that hold the healing potential of the periphery they are based on.

2 PERIPHERIES

In this thesis peripheries, as well as their opposites, centers, are looked at on the level of areas, physical places and geography. Further on the concept of periphery is broadened to encompass other things too, and to make a case for seeing art as a peripheral phenomenon. In common speech periphery has the meaning of a far-away place, a place or area at the border, far edge or even an area beyond the borders of something. A peripheral place is usually thought of as rural and non-urban. In this thesis peripheries are most of all defined through the center-periphery polarity. The center, the other half of the whole that makes up an environment and the opposite of periphery, means a place that is urban, inhabited by humans, highly developed, controlled and built.

2.1 Polarity: Center – Periphery

The dictionary definition of polarity is a condition or quality of having poles; inherent contrasting opposite properties or powers in a body (Merriam-Webster). Polarity is often understood to be a dynamic whole that consists of two opposing poles that attract each other. Polarity is a key concept in some spiritual and philosophical traditions. In Taoism polarity has the name and symbol Yin and Yang, the two opposite forces that shape all things, the energies of life. As well as seen as opposites, they are also completely interdependent, since a whole can only exist when both are present and in balance. The unity of life can only exist from the formation Yin and Yang together.



PICTURE 1. The Yin and Yang symbol (Vesiväki 2021)

The center (or core) – periphery model is one kind of a polarity. Centre and periphery are often used in cultural geography and in economics to describe the hierarchical relationships between places and societies. They are very useful terms but not necessarily precise. (Alenius 2014, 51.) In this thesis peripheries and centers primarily signify the characteristics of places. Centers are urban, built, lit with artificial light, occupied by humans, mapped, named and in many ways, controlled environments. Peripheries are not in active use by humans, can be considered wild, not necessarily mapped, ruled by the elements and considered useless by economic standards. Geologist Marko Leppänen has established a school of thought that is based on this polarity, arguing that peripheries are overlooked, and this causes problems on many levels.

2.2 School of Esoteric Geography and Periphery Therapy by Marko Leppänen

The manifesto of Esoteric Geography was first published by geologist Marko Leppänen, in his geography laudatur seminar that dealt with Haiti and voodoo, in 1992. In 1994 Leppänen's Master's thesis was called *Periphery therapy - the center and periphery problematic as the subject of esoteric geography*. The reception of the thesis was mixed, and Leppänen predicted that his work would find its audience properly in the 2000's. He states that he himself did use esoteric geography and periphery therapy in his work of environmental inventory. In the late 2007 his work was discovered by a group of explorer enthusiasts called Romantic Geographic Society, founded by artist Jussi Kivi. This meeting of the minds gave energy to both involved, as they shared values and interests. Both Leppänen and the Romantic Geographic Society practice exploring and other ways of appreciating peripheral environments. (Leppänen, 2010.)

The goal of esoteric geography is to understand areas in a wholesome way. It is based on the hypothesis of polarity. The word esoteric refers to the mind (Greek *ésō*, "within"), so esoteric geography deals with the way environments are experienced in the mind, and how the mind has an impact on the environment. (Leppänen, 2014.) Periphery therapy is the practical implementation of esoteric ge-

ography, which in turn has its roots in Jungian depth psychology and the belief that central and peripheral areas are equally important (Leppänen, 2008a). In practice this means that the School of Esoteric Geography brings awareness to peripheral places and areas - the opposites of central areas. It states that environments are out of balance, because the central parts are seen as more important, and peripheries are and have been seen as less important. A battery would not work without both of its poles, a tree cannot exist without its roots. This loss of balance has a negative effect on life in a broad sense. As environments are manipulated to be more urban, organized, lit up and mapped, wildlife has less space to live according to its innate needs. Humans are less in tune with nature, the environments that the species evolved in. The loss of darkness causes disruption to all the cycles that rely on the natural fluctuations of the seasons, as well as the cycle of day and night. Science backs up many of the claims of the School of Esoteric Geography; studies have shown remarkable positive effects such as lowered stress hormone levels from just 10 minutes of nature exposure (Hunter, Gillespie & Yu -Pu Chen, 2019), and that more nature exposure correlates with stronger communities and less crime (Weinstein et al. 2015).

Leppänen sees the controlled and hectic city center as the equivalent of the day consciousness of a person. In comparison, a peripheral place with lush natural elements is like the irrational land of the subconscious. Inspiration, new ideas, emotions and healing are all connected to the subconscious. It is not hard to see how important this wild side is to the human psyche, for it to be whole and healthy. (Leppänen, 2009.)

Leppänen has a huge problem with the way that regional planning perceives peripheral areas. It values the center and sees the periphery as something that must be made central as well, as if the periphery was a vacuum that simply lacks the elements of the center. Peripheral places are considered worthless, and changing them into non-peripheries, centralizing them, is thought to be development and enhancement. He states that instead they should be seen as the crucially important counterparts of the center. Polarity states that in order to be a dynamic entity, the whole must consist of two opposite poles, and the stronger the tension between them, the more vibrant the whole is. Often it is the case

that the centralizing efforts do not lead to a periphery becoming a center. Instead, the area is left in an in-between state, no longer a periphery, and certainly not a center. In towns Leppänen mentions this happening when areas of small wooden houses are paved, the streets straightened, when the forests surrounding residential areas are overly maintained, making them so sparse that they are no longer forests at all. All streets and pathways are lined with streetlights and all the wild and mysterious wastelands that have inspired play and adventure are tamed, combed and brushed into design parks. Of course, centers are just as important as peripheries. They are lively, use land efficiently, are laced with power and control, they are technically and economically useful and so they offer experiences of clarity, rationality, direction, speed and determination. These are all good things, if they do not have complete reign over everything. (Leppänen, 2014.) Peripheries, natural and wild environments are important environments to experience, because they remind us of the presence of non-central life. As more and more people live in central parts, nature to them is not the normal environment (Leppänen & Pajunen 2019, 184).

We humans as a species have however evolved to be the way we are in the natural environment. One alarming aspect of this is that younger generations are becoming less able to recognize the downgrading of the natural world. This is called environmental generational amnesia, and it has science backing it up (Jones et al. 2020). We are completely dependent on our environment, so not seeing it's decline is dangerous to our own well-being. Being exposed to peripheries we remember nature, our place in the world and the life-giving significance of its diversity.

2.3 Place

The word place is used to describe different kinds of physical environments and surroundings, regions, buildings and other locations. In the case of his thesis, peripheral places are examined, and their qualities further defined. It is useful to consider the meanings and identities of placeness further. The identities of places, the power that places can hold or can be considered to hold, as well as sacred places, are looked at with more detail, since they are useful in relation to

the case study, the art installation *Periphery Talismans (now my daydreaming is spontaneous)*.

Edward Relph is a geologist, emeritus professor and a keen expert on the definitions of place. He has a blog called Placeness, where he determines the identity of a place to consist of three essential components: forms, activities and meanings. Forms are the shapes of a place: topography, spaces, things and buildings. The activities are the goings-on in a place; both natural and human made processes. Meanings are related to the values that people attach to a place. They can be spiritual, political, cultural, aesthetic and ethical, such as traditions, memories and histories tied to the place. Just like the identity of a person is constantly shifting, so is the identity of a place, but also like in the case of a person, there tends to be a sense of sameness, as changes are for the most part incremental. (Relph, 2021.)

Humans live their lives in places. Places influence people and people modify places and choose places by mirroring their inner states. Often however, people are not aware of the relationships they have with places, or those relationships are not valued. (Leppänen, 2017.) Upon further inspection it is easy to see; all living beings are forced to have a relationship with their surroundings. Cultivating a meaningful relationship with the environment can be considered a practice of mindfulness.

Places are always related to other places, and they consist of space. Through places we can observe spaces, and through observing physical spaces, we can also observe inner spaces. Examining spaces tends to open more space, for thought, ideas, creativity and peace. Natural environments and peripheries are helpful with building a mindfulness practice, because they reflect the natural processes of time, the seasons and nature itself. Rooting oneself to a place, even on the level of the mind, is calming.

Globalism, travel, economic developments and politics, in addition to many other factors have made humans less local. In the developed world placelessness and the so called contemporary nomadic lifestyles have become prominent. The ongoing covid-19 pandemic has halted this trend at least momentar-

ily, but in general less people live rooted to one place through their lives. Buying local and other similar lifestyle trends are emerging; on the one side because of environmental reasons, but perhaps also because of the rootlessness and a lacking sense of local culture and community that many people experience, especially in urban areas. The definition of local, however is quite vague. Relph cautions on the unspecific nature of the term, stating that it could mean anything closer than international (Relph, 2019). As the environmental crisis continues to destabilize communities, economies and environments, the divide into peripheral and central places will become more and more pronounced. Peripheral places might also end up being the only local places, as globalism keeps expanding.

2.4 Sacred places and the power of places

Edward Relph states that there are numerous and multifaceted ways that the power of place is understood to exist. He has distinguished two main ways that the power of a place is assumed to express itself. One has to do with power being an essential quality of a place, for example in the case of sacred places. The other is that places have power that has been assigned to them; power that comes from institutions, communities or individuals. (Relph, 2017.)

Environmental determinism studies the power of a place over people, and how the environment might possibly steer a society in a particular developmental direction. Such thinking can lead to dangerous conclusions however it is clear, that the characteristics of a place do have a role on the local lifestyles, on the level of logistics and climate for instance. There are sensory and physical parameters that can be clearly measured and experienced about a place, but humans have always attached other aspects to places as well, unseen, more metaphysical and esoteric characteristics. National Geographic photographer, anthropologist and explorer of sacred places all around the world, Martin Gray states that all through their history humans have noticed and marked powerful places. These places have then been used for rituals, celebrations and the like. As humans have become detached from the natural world through industrialization, urbanization and other aspects of modern living, their ability to notice and

experience these intrinsic kinds of places of power has decreased. (Gray, n.d.) Gary Snyder expresses a similar belief by stating that his family has lived in the same area for a long time (Sierra Nevada, northern California, USA), but unfortunately the original people of the area, the Nisenan (or Southern Maidu) were almost completely displaced or destroyed because of the gold rush. This disappearance of the true locals means that there is no one to share knowledge of the sacred places. But Snyder states that he believes that as time goes by and they pay attention, they will be able to find them and feel them again. (Snyder, 1990, 84.)



PICTURE 2. Paintings on the ceiling of the Holy Cross Church in Hattula, Finland. Already before the medieval church was built, the location was a holy place. (Vesiväki 2018)

With agriculture the idea of good land was born. It means that land is considered good when it has soil that is productive, crops grow well, and it is essentially the opposite of wild land. Agriculture is constantly fighting against nature: insects, birds, weeds and so on. Hunter-gatherers would roam freely, understanding the wholeness of nature, whereas agriculture started looking at places as productive or not productive. (Snyder 1990, 84.) So perhaps agriculture can be seen as the beginning for the age of polarity on the level of land and places. Before agriculture, sacred places were also wild places. As agriculture took hold, the concept of cultivation was attached to spirituality. Snyder sees agrarian theology as the holy man weeding the wild out of his nature. Some sacred places

survived, as the lore from before agriculture was quietly passed forward. (Snyder 1990, 85.) Many sacred places remained sacred, but often under another reign.

Martin Gray has a reminder about the ways in which information about places is gathered. Academic knowledge about ancient cultures and the places they come from is acquired by scholars who live their lives in towns or cities, far removed from the natural world. The cultures and societies that these anthropologists and archeologists and other scientists study, were profoundly intertwined with nature. It is possible to list and catalogue the information that has been uncovered, but a deeper appreciation of the true meanings and impulses that those ancient nature-based societies, cultures and individuals came from, are most likely out of our reach. Gray thinks this is especially the case with places where festivals at the time of solstices and equinoxes took place. These sacred places where pilgrimages have and sometimes still do take place, hold transformational power. He suggests that many of the problems the world faces now, stem from ignorance. People have lost the connections to themselves, physically and spiritually, and also to other beings and to Earth. The power of sacred places could assist in rebuilding those connections. (Gray, n.d.) Snyder accounts hearing similar thoughts from a Crow elder in a conference on Native American leaders and activists;

“ You know, I think if people stay somewhere long enough — even white people — the spirits will begin to speak to them. It’s the power of the spirits coming from the land. The spirits and the old powers aren’t lost, they just need people to be around long enough and the spirits will begin to influence them.” (Snyder 1990, 42.)

2.5 Summary

On the level of areas, places and environments, a polarity can be distinguished. Centers are organized, controlled, built and occupied by humans. Peripheries are not in official use, they are ruled by the natural processes and are not productive in economic parameters. The School of Esoteric Geography and Periphery Therapy, established by Marko Leppänen, aims to bring awareness to the

unbalance between centers and peripheries. Environments matter, and when the environments people are exposed to for the majority of time are mostly central, an unbalance occurs. Exposure mainly to places designed to be efficient and productive, can lead to a belief that life needs to be the same way. Places can be seen to hold power and be sacred. Moving away from land-based living, people have lost touch with the power of places. However, it is suggested that re-connecting is possible. By spending time in peripheral, natural environments the relationship to the environment can be reinforced.

3 EXPERIENCING PERIPHERIES

Reporter and author of many books about his travels by bicycle, Matti Rämö, describes the experience of entering a central area after spending plenty of time in peripheral areas: With confusion we marvel at another type of a reality. Of course, we knew that Rovaniemi is a big town, but still the sudden transition into urban commotion feels too rough. On the road during slow haste the mind has time to adjust to the environment and become one with it. The details of existence approach more softly and discreetly, and there are heaps of fine details along the forest passage, but they leave space and time for experiencing and discovering. They are not like the tidal wave of the cityscape, saturated with neon lights, colors and advertisements. Especially moving image and text are for the mind like a stark digital flavor enhancer that forces itself into the perceptual world. (Rämö 2019, 164.)

Peripheral areas and places are not just natural environments, but also post-central, abandoned and forgotten places. They can be wastelands or ruins, abandoned structures or non-places. One important aspect of peripheral places is that they can't always be easily reached. Whereas outdoor city spaces consist of straight lines and square plots, peripheries are sometimes difficult or impossible to get to. They cannot be perceived completely at one glance. Hard to get to places are a refuge for nature to exist, grow and develop undisturbed. For humans they offer a spark for the imagination and a sense of adventure. It is not necessary to reach every place. Exploring an unknown place can be daunting and thus take courage. Stretching beyond the limits of comfort and that which is easy, equals opportunities for growth and new perspectives. The power of a place, and power over place, are aspects to consider when experiencing peripheries. The aesthetics of peripheries go beyond the aesthetics of landscape.

3.1 Nature, wild and wilderness

Natural environments, untampered nature, is the ultimate periphery. Nature on its own is simply nature, but when humans look at it, they tend to see parts of

nature as useless, as wastelands, as beautiful landscapes or as resources and so forth. One way that wastelands and ruins can be defined, is by the arrival of nature into the midst of culture. Nature is not welcome in the center. The history of banning nature is the history of the power and unpredictable character of wastelands (Sutinen 2016, 37). Western culture, from one perspective, is a culture of human achievements that intends to overcome and overtake the natural world. But nature has its way. No matter how exploited or wasted land is, when it is left on its own, nature will balance itself out eventually, it will again reach stability and biological productivity (Snyder 1990, 97).



PICTURE 3. Trees in a nature conservation area. (Vesiväki 2020)

Gary Snyder's (b. 1930) nine essays that span from 1970 to 1990 make up the book *Practice of the Wild*. In his essays Snyder covers vast fields of wisdom, knowledge and thought about the spiritual, natural and ancestral aspects about the wild, nature and culture. In the essays Snyder keeps leaning on the core concepts of nature, wild and wilderness. Nature to him is the existing world in all. The wild means the process, perhaps the process of life, of time. And when Snyder talks about wilderness he talks about the places where wild, the process, takes place. The world then, he sees, is ultimately a wild place – ex-

cept for a bit of human intervention. It is a source of deep intelligence, when it is observed and appreciated. This kind of learning, self-realization is one aspect of wilderness, and it is ultimately about bonding ourselves to the process of the universe. Civilized thinkers tend to attach negative connotations to the word wild, such as it being chaotic and savage, but for Snyder instead it is relentlessly and beautifully formal and free. The wild is the real world to which we humans, plants and animals, rainstorms and calm spring mornings, all belong to. (Snyder 1990, XXIX.)

All living beings have an innate drive to always strive for balance, optimal functioning, for homeostasis. Natural systems thrive when humans leave them alone. Ecosystems stay healthy when they are diverse. By seeing humans as wild and perhaps by rooting ourselves to place, listening deeply and meditating at sacred places, we humans can regain the ability to live in and with harmony with the wild, healing the processes and ourselves.

Wilderness and wildness then, are not just far-away places elsewhere. With a shifted perspective they are everywhere. All around as not only trees and plants and wildlife, but also in the form of fungi, mould, yeast. The human body is not only inhabited by wild bacteria and yeasts, but the body itself is wild, with instinctual processes taking place all the time. The conscious mind is a very small part of the whole system. The deep, unconscious places of the mind are the inner wildernesses. (Snyder 1990, 15 –17.) The inner periphery is fascinating and has been intentionally explored for healing, answers to many questions as well as art.

3.2 Wastelands

Wastelands, ruins and abandoned structures are essential peripheral places. The solitude, silence and emptiness of a wasteland can spark aesthetic impressions and meditative states. Wastelands can offer a truth that central places cannot. Urban and suburban areas are maintained, and their visual and structural elements are highly controlled. Wastelands are left to be as they are, and when wastelands or abandoned building are located in urban central areas,

they are intentionally overlooked. Central parts are based on efficiency, capitalist means and ends and an air of properness and officialness surrounds them. Wastelands are not in use, at least not officially. They do not produce clear meanings, nor do they serve clear purposes. If they are used, that use is unofficial. They are useless for the center therefore they don't really exist. The center values determined functions and wants to represent itself as finished and stable. Wastelands and ruins are loudly, or perhaps silently in-between. They are, from the viewpoint of the center, in a kind of limbo, and the center wants to either silence them to oblivion or to overtake them, to centralize them.

In his book *Kuolleiden muistomerkkien vuosisata* (The Century of Dead Monuments), author and translation Ville-Juhani Sutinen (b. 1980) takes a deep dive into the aesthetics of wastelands and ruins and other such non-central places and areas. He describes the impossibility of a final definition of wasteland since they are at the core, changeable and illusive (Sutinen 2016, 10). Wastelands are equalizers, shadows, they are the other size of the coin. There lies their importance as well; in order to see the whole, to remember that constant growth is not possible, and that not all things are profitable, wastelands belong in the world. (Sutinen 2016, 25.)

3.3 Abandoned structures and ruins

Ruins and abandoned buildings, when untouched, offer authentic experiences of the layers of time. They once executed a particular intention, but that intention was released when regular use and occupation of the place ended. As a structure was left without human attention, its intention became hazy, and the meanings that stem from that uncertainty are puzzling. The lack of upkeep – an activity practiced in the center – renders abandoned structures as truthful representations of history and the present. Abandoned places show what they were, what time and the elements do and serve as reminders of the ephemeral character of human achievements, and humans themselves.

Abandoned structures represent the periphery through their non-existing upkeep, layers of history and natural elements that take over the structure. In cen-

tral areas abandoned structures are not meant to be looked at but ignored. Abandoned buildings in urban areas go against the ideology of development and virility that the center represents. Not only do they visually break the code of control and efficiency, they also pose a threat to social order, since they can become places where people squat or otherwise execute activities and behaviors that are not accepted as the kind of official ways of conduct in cities and towns.



PICTURE 4. Interior of an abandoned house in Pirkanmaa, Finland. (Vesiväki 2020)

As urbanization continues to attract more and more people to cities, houses and other buildings are abandoned in rural areas. Enthusiasts who visit and document abandoned buildings have raised awareness of their existence through the internet. The visual impact of structures in various states of decay is often dramatic, since the commercial visual language that permeates the western world is based on glossy, bright, pristine and highly produced interiors, exteriors and objects. Sutinen states that the aesthetics of ruins are always the aesthetics of incompleteness (Sutinen 2016, 121).

Abandoned structures spark the imagination into action. In addition to showing the effects of time, the elements and various forms of wildlife, abandoned buildings expose fragments of human lives and aspects of culture that have passed. They expose the fragility of the systems that humans contribute to and that contribute to human life. Whereas wastelands have been around as far as we can look back, ruins and abandoned buildings are more recent, and closely attached to human history.



PICTURE 5. Kuusisto Castle ruins, Kaarina, Finland. (Vesiväki 2018)

Ruins have their own history and a history of how they have been looked at and seen. Some ruins are esteemed as valuable representations of times past, and some are popular tourist attractions. Old ruins fascinate the masses, new ruins are overlooked (Sutinen 2016, 118). It can be argued that in the case of popular ruins, their upkeep, reconstructed and rebuilt parts, signages and lights have made them no longer worthy of the status of ruins. Instead, they have become more like movie sets, re-imagined representations. It would be easy to make the assumption that ruins that have become popular attractions, undergone restora-

tion and are artificially lit and plastered with informational plaques, can no longer be considered peripheral either.

3.4 Awe and the sublime

Peripheral places and natural environments offer experiences of awe and the sublime. As humans have become mostly urban dwellers, exposed to built, and lit environments for the majority of time, experiences of awe have also become less available to them. According to the dictionary definition, awe is an emotion that combines dread, veneration as well as wonder, which are inspired by authority or by the sacred or sublime. A sublime experience is grand, it has outstanding spiritual or moral worth and it tends to inspire awe because of its elevated qualities of beauty, grandeur or transcendent excellence. (Merriam-Webster.) Typical natural, non-manmade sources for experiences of awe and the sublime are majestic environments such as waterfalls, mountains or the seashore. Places that make a person feel small and vulnerable. Dramatic conditions, such as intense weather or darkness can also bring about emotions that are at once both beautiful, inspiring and daunting. An awe-inspiring experience cannot be calm or pretty, it is gripping, dramatic, even shocking. In the words of Marko Leppänen, the sublime experience is one where the perceiver mirrors themselves against a landscape so big that it could devour or crush them. The experience is humbling, and so healing and accepting takes place. (Leppänen, 2016.) The impacts of awe-inspiring and sublime experiences have been scientifically studied. In a 2015 study it was shown that after having awe-inspiring experiences, people acted with greater generosity and made decisions that were more ethical (Piff et al. 2015).

The idea of the sublime came about in Western philosophy in the Romantic era. Many thinkers believed that through the sublime noble things could be understood, such as God. During Romanticism the concept of sublime was relevant also in how ruins were perceived, as they were both mesmerizing and scary. (Sutinen 2016, 125.)

3.5 Darkness

True darkness can be hard to find. Light pollution is a major problem all around the world. More than 80 % of the world has light polluted skies. The Milky Way is not visible to 60 % of Europeans. The amount of artificial light is not regulated, and sadly it effects places far from its source. Even rare and protected environments are reached by light pollution. (Falchi et al. 2016.) Light pollution has not been a much-discussed environmental problem but in recent years it has gained more attention and it has been studied more. Life and its cycles are based on the cycles of the sun and moon. The loss of dark nights is a very new development in human history and the history of the planet. Plants and animals rely on the fluctuations of light and dark to nourish themselves, to reproduce and to find shelter. This is coded in their DNA. Many migrating bird species as well as sea turtles navigate by the light of the moon and stars, insects are drawn to artificial light with devastating consequences. The way humans have lit up the night disrupts the natural cycles, and it is obvious how damaging this disruption is. When looking at light and darkness from the vantage point of the center – periphery polarity, it is obvious that darkness belongs with periphery.



PICTURE 6. Starlit sky in winter, Eastern Finland. (Vesiväki 2021)

Not only does light pollution cause damage to ecosystems in a multitude of ways, but it also takes away many awe-inspiring and sublime experiences. For

sighted people the amount of light at any given moment has a profound effect on the impression of a place. Atmospheres are dictated by perceptual aspects and our environments can seem completely different depending on the time of day and season of the year. When exploring a place in the dark, a completely different kind of keen focus and sensory openness is needed. Experiencing a place at an unusual time of day will most likely leave a lasting impression and form a strong memory. In the dark deeper inner states can be reached. As visual sensing lessens, it is easier to experience one's existence in another way. In dimness shapes soften as if to imply that everything is moldable, open to interpretations (Pajunen & Leppänen 2019, 90). In order to be able to see the stars, to get a sense of our celestial place in the universe, we need a truly dark place, and we need to give our eyes the time to get used to the dark. Science has made it possible to see images of far-away places in the universe, but only the personal body-based experience can bring forth the sublime experience. Light pollution is taking away the healing perspective that a starlit sky can bring, it robs us of a glimpse at our home universe.

3.6 Summary

Peripheral places are especially beneficial through first-hand experience. Nature, abandoned buildings, ruins as well as sublime experiences, such as the sight of the Milky Way in the darkness of night, can help a person see things from a different perspective. The contradictory feelings of amazement and fear, mixed with a sense of being a part of something larger, are at the core of the sublime experience. Such encounters make memories and help with coping with the difficulties of everyday life.

4 PERIPHERY, ART AND ATTITUDE

Because creativity requires space and sparks of interpretations, it also stems from peripheral places (Leppänen 2014). Art history provides many examples of peripheries being used as the inspiration and as the thematic content of artists' work. In the age of Romanticism, ruins were a huge component of the idealization of the past and the sublime. Landscape painting could in many cases be considered as art from and about the periphery. Modern art broke away from the traditions of depicting beauty and started looking for ways to discuss, study and make visible all the facets of life and art itself. Surrealism started digging into the subconscious for content and was highly influenced by psychoanalysis.

Today wastelands, abandoned buildings and environmental disaster sites are prominent in photography and other works, especially ones that refer to the climate crisis. In contemporary art peripheries have had a big role in expanding awareness about the environment and cultural institutions. In the late 1960's and early 1970's Robert Smithson brought wastelands into the spotlight in his works that remain icons of land art. Smithson's 'non-place' sculptures brought land mass from peripheral places into the gallery. His 1970 Spiral Jetty remains perhaps the most well-known earthwork; the massive spiral of land by a salt lake shore in Utah, USA still exists.

In Finland Jussi Kivi is one of the most prominent contemporary artists with peripheries at the core of his work. Kivi strongly resonates with the themes of Marko Leppänen's School of Esoteric Geography and Periphery Therapy. Kivi has explored many abandoned structures and ruins and translated them into hand drawn maps and other carefully crafted depictions of the mysterious and intriguing atmospheres and meanings of the periphery.

A case for art as a practice that happens in the periphery of society can also be made. Contemporary art explores and presents its themes often in conceptual ways. It takes forms that are not immediately apparent. Its intention is frequently to remind its audience of phenomena that are at the fringes of the perceived

world. Many artists use methods and techniques that take time, require somewhat esoteric approaches and even uncommon social behavior.

As the center is characterized by efficiency, usefulness, productivity and economic gains, art tends to lean more towards the periphery also because its benefits do not easily convert to measurable terms. There is however no doubt about the importance of art. Sadly though, just as in the case of peripheral places, such as wilderness areas and old forests, on the level of politics, art does not seem to be valued for what it is.

In order to experience and enjoy art, a certain attitude is required. Most of us humans live our days according to certain rules, traditions and expectations, within different systems of power. Art too has its conventions and structures, but in general it can be said that experiencing art requires an openness, curiosity and even playfulness. This attitude, more peripheral than central, comes from a different place than the everyday approach to things that is mostly thought of as rational. The peripheral attitude comes from the wilderness side of our existence.

4.1 Surrealism

The historical movement called Surrealism was born in the 1920s. During the First World War André Breton, at the time a medical student, became fascinated by the delirious, unconscious screams of shell-shocked soldiers while working in a hospital. Breton was interested in poetry and had been involved with Dada but ended up establishing a new movement officially in 1924 when the first manifesto of Surrealism was published. Surrealism started out as a movement that was most interested in language, with a goal of bringing forth material from the unconscious parts of the mind. Through different experiments the group that formed around Breton searched for methods to release the control of the mind. Automatic writing and hypnosis were two of the methods that they used. As more artists joined the group, also visual arts started to become a part of Surrealism. In the manifesto, Breton does sketch out a wholesome surrealist lifestyle, a philosophy of living free of the confines of the mind.

Both Dada and Surrealism were born during the chaos and destruction of World War I. The young generation of the time saw their reality as a hopeless mess, an insanity in which survival meant not trying to make sense of it but finding new ways to live. For Breton the periphery of the mind offered answers, a new language. The beauty of randomness, coincidences and chance meetings opened a completely new kind of aesthetic and creative framework.

Surrealism has had a major impact on art, poetry, culture in general and especially the commercial visual language, such as that of advertising. The work the Surrealists produced from their inner peripheries has in many ways become mainstream, but at the time Surrealism was radical and opened many new directions and methods for art. Artists could now bring forth the mysterious, unknown and peripheral.

4.2 Art, attention and being in place

As stated before, art can easily be seen as belonging to the periphery. In her 2019 book *How to do nothing*, about resisting the attention economy, artist Jenny Odell builds a strong case for the negative effects of the current day fast paced digitally inclined lifestyle. As a way to fight back, she offers wisdom about the benefits of grounding one's focus to the present moment and provides many examples of art and artist who have done just that. Odell's book links well to what was said earlier about placeness and the goals of the School of Esoteric Geography and Periphery Therapy. Odell wants to root the human awareness back into place. Being fully present and in (a) place a person will also be aware of one's place in the continuum of history and the more-than-human community. (Odell 2019, 17.) This resonates perfectly with the benefits of mindfully observing the truths of the wasteland and being present in the process of the wild.

Art can focus attention. Odell recounts Scott Polach's *Applause Encouraged* from 2015 as a piece of art that holds space for noticing. The project took place at a National Monument in San Diego, USA. By the sea on a cliff people were invited to sit and watch the sunset. Photographs were not allowed. As the name

of the work suggested, applause was given, and afterwards refreshments were available. (Odell 2019, 54.)

For examples of broadening the horizons of auditory attention Jenny Odell writes about composers John Cage and Pauline Oliveros. Composer, artist, music theorist and philosopher John Cage (1912 – 1992) is most known for his 1952 piece called 4'33". The composition is an absence of musical notes and sounds. It simply consists of four minutes and thirty-three seconds of sounds that are present in the space at the time of the performing of the piece. Odell elaborated on attending a performance of pieces from Cage's *Song Books*. The performance consisted not only of musical sounds but also from all kinds of actions on stage and beyond. Cards were shuffled, a person in the audience was given a present, the conductor made a smoothie and sipped on it. After stepping out of the symphony hall after the performance Odell noticed that her world had changed. She heard all sounds of the city with amazing clarity. It left her wondering how come she had never really heard them before. (Odell 2019, 292 – 295.)

Composer and musician Pauline Oliveros (1932 – 2016) created a technique called *Deep Listening*. Oliveros taught experimental music in the 1970's and through developing participatory techniques Deep Listening was born. It is simply the practice of listening, in any situation and circumstance, to what can be heard. What ends up happening through the practice is a heightened ability to perceive. Deep Listening also distances one from the cultural mental model of always quickly analyzing and judging, rather than just observing. (Odell 2019, 56 – 57).

When reaching one's attention beyond what is usually noticed, a transcending of the self happens. When we are curious and pay attention, we are open and can understand that we can't understand everything. Paying attention truly makes us realize that things and people are not just what we are used to seeing them as, but so much more. And their essence we can never fully grasp. (Odell 2019, 298 – 299). Art works as a pause. Engaging with a work, be it visual art, a music performance or a sculpture, is an action of shifting attention and being present. Experiencing art, just like experiencing a peripheral place is like press-

ing pause on the familiar mode of life-living. Taking a pause is a beginning for change, and healing to name one process, is a process of change.

4.3 Summary

When broadening the concept of periphery beyond the level of areas and geography, art can be seen as belonging to it. All through art history peripheries have inspired artists and different aspects of peripheries have been captured into artworks. Art today shares many positive effects with peripheries, one major one is grounding. Immersion to place, focused awareness and making deep connections to the wholesomeness of life open spaces within. In the era of distraction by devices, the internet and social media constantly stealing our attention, art and peripheries can bring us back to ourselves and the real, physical world of wild processes.

5 CASE STUDY: PERIPHERY TALISMANS (now my daydreaming is spontaneous)

5.1 Background and themes

With the artistic part of the thesis, the goal has been to express the characteristics of peripheries and to give them a form as talismans. The importance of peripheries and their abilities as stabilizers and healers led to the idea of not only depicting those qualities as artworks, but also inspired an intention to further work with those representations to make talismans that would radiate those benefits. The series is mostly made up of periphery depiction - talisman pairs. The series consists of twenty pieces, eleven of which are talismans.

Since peripheral places are illusive and often in an unstable state of constant change, the form, techniques and materials were to reflect that. Many different mediums were used, from acrylic painting to collage, photography and needlework. Artworks in the series are pieces of conceptual art and each is an individual piece on its own as well.



PICTURE 7. Jenny Vesiväki: *Wasteland (Pitkäniemi)*, 2021, photo collage on wood, 10x 20 cm

5.2 Materials

Environmental aspects have been a significant part of the written thesis and art making process both overtly and between the lines. Choosing the materials for my artworks came after the ideas and concepts. I began with a peripheral place or aspect, and then moved forward to how I wanted to depict it. With others I made the talisman first. The process was nonlinear. Many things had an effect on what materials I chose to use (logistics, money, working space, covid-19 restrictions), but most important criteria were the energy that the material possesses, especially in relation to the content of the artwork and the environmental impact. Since I am depicting wastelands, abandoned places and natural environments, it was obvious that I would prefer materials that relate to such places.

During the thesis process I happened to find a new home in a very peripheral area. The place, an old rural village school, has a shed and storage building in the yard. The structure is large, beat up and very much neglected. The shed, which also has been used as outhouses for the school, a hen house, a pony stable and firewood storage, provided many of the materials.

In her book *How to do nothing* about the perils of attention economy and how to resist it, artist Jenny Odell discusses usefulness. She draws a parallel between what the economy (capitalist system) does to an ecological system, and what the attention economy does to our attention. With both an aggressive monoculture seems to be the goal. If something is not useful or benefitted from, it will be discarded. (Odell 2019, 33.) Usefulness and productivity are qualities that are very much attached to centers and not peripheries. Many peripheral places have lost their status as useful and productive. As was discussed before, for Gary Snyder nature is everything in the world and wild is the process. In this sense, as I began to think about the materials I decided to use and further about where most of my found and upcycled materials were found, the web of meanings became very apparent. Usefulness, the environment and peripheries are not only present in my work on a conceptual level, but very much in a concrete, material way. The shed that has provided plenty of material and inspiration, is a

contradiction that pulls together the forces of usefulness, abandonment and value.



PICTURE 8. The shed. (Vesiväki 2021)

The items in the shed have been there for a long time. They have been accumulated through decades, many left there because they might be of value later (old wooden doors), to get them out of sight (big plastic wrappers) and some because that's where it is kept (sleds, saws, firewood). Nothing in the shed was considered too valuable, because the doors have no locks, not even working latches and the building is in many places in very bad shape, so it offers only relative shelter from the elements. Parts of it have been completely obsolete for decades (the pony stable and henhouse). It has been a perfect place to scavenge for materials that have the aura of the periphery. Scrap pieces of wooden board were used as a base for four works: *Wasteland (Pitkäniemi)*, *Trees Talisman*, *Periphery Home* and *Talisman for Dream (The Law of Space and Concrete)*. A piece of ceramic tile became the base for a dual piece (both a periphery depiction and a talisman) called *Hill-Lake-Trail*. Photographs of a glow-in-the-dark star that I found on the ground in the shed while looking for materials, are included in *Periphery Home*.



PICTURE 9. Jenny Vesiväki: *Hill-Lake-Trail*, 2021, collage on ceramic tile, 22 x13 cm

5.3 Working methods and techniques

It can be assumed, that artists have a stronger than average ability to gain messages from their subliminal, — as well as to value them. They create from their own inner periphery, and so the outer peripheries may also feel familiar, longed for and important. An explorer might possess a similar sophistication of the heart when they respect what they have found, without trying to change it into something that it is not. (Leppänen 2008b.)

Ever since becoming interested in wastelands, ruins and abandoned places and then nature, I have understood that all places have an atmosphere of their own. Over the years it has become a practice; exploring and experiencing and in a way, collecting places that have the most pleasant or intriguing energies. My list

is long, and I had planned on adding many more than the final ten represented in the series. However, as the process has been intuitive, these ten came first.

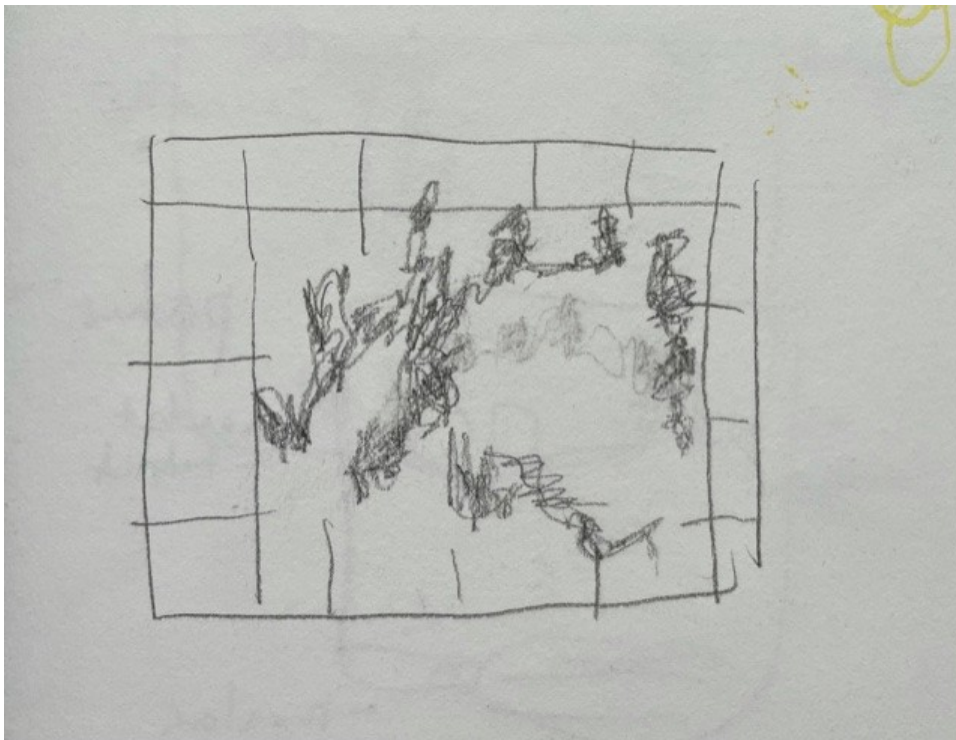


PICTURE 10. Jenny Vesiväki: *Wasteland Talisman (Pitkäniemi)*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 40 x 50 cm

The method of choosing and making has been very organic. From an early age I have been curious about Surrealism and have tried to implement the methods the surrealists used. In the case of this series of artworks that has meant an attitude of openness and curiosity; letting places and objects speak to me, without preconceptions.

The intuitive method links into a larger intention in general. Gary Snyder calls it practice; a deliberate sustained and conscious effort to be more finely tuned to ourselves, and to the way the actual existing world is. (Snyder 1990, XXVIII). Leppänen talks about it from the direction of approaching places; when doing it mindfully, we deepen our connections to the human condition and to the natural world (Leppänen 2017). As I spent time in peripheral places, mindfully listened

to them, documented them and looked back at others I had visited before, the qualities that needed to be represented, started to come up and take shape.



PICTURE 11. Jenny Vesiväki: Sketch for *Wasteland Talisman (Pitkäniemi)*, 2020

Drawing and sketching were the initial parts of the process. Some works are very closely based on the sketches, like the *Backyard Wasteland* and *Winter Home*. Some departed from the sketch in the process of making - painting or otherwise.



PICTURE 12. Jenny Vesiväki: Sketch (digital drawing) and finished painting *Backyard Wasteland*, 2021, acrylic on linen, 60 x 70 cm

I made most of the canvasses for the paintings myself. As mentioned above, most of the smaller works were made with found materials. In addition to the wooden board and ceramic tile, some found objects were used. Both of the *Backyard Wasteland Talismans* are photo collages on found objects, what I believe to be potholders made in woodworking class. The objects were found in an old school building and made for delicate picture frames for the images that depict my childhood backyard wasteland. In addition to previously familiar techniques like painting and taking photographs, I explored using resin for the first time. *Abandoned Daycare Center* is a piece commemorating the exploration of an abandoned place with my pet rabbit. I wanted the piece to express the beauty and sentimentality of the jewelry-like memory, and so covering the collage with resin felt right. Resin gives a collage a three-dimensional character and elevates it from a compilation of elements into a uniform object. It seals in the delicate nuances and sets them in place permanently.



PICTURE 13. Jenny Vesiväki: Detail from *Abandoned Daycare Center*, 2021

Trees Talisman was also glazed with resin. With this small work the resin gave the piece a more stable and grounded form. It was also important to glaze the middle part well, since the work has moving parts that can be closed to cover

the middle section, painted and drawn with a mixture of acrylics, pen and wax pastels.



PICTURE 14. Jenny Vesiväki: *Trees Talisman*, 2021, wood, wax pastel, acrylic, pen, resin, plastic, brass hinges, paper collage, approximately 12 x 30 cm

5.4 Periphery depictions

The places chosen as the subjects of the series of works, represent peripheries in different ways. The guideline has been to represent aspects of peripheries and actual physical places where personal experiences of the healing that peripheries can provide has taken place. There was an intention to find a language for depicting the periphery quality and to give examples of it. As the process was above all else intuitive, the represented places and aspects are varied.



PICTURE 15. Jenny Vesiväki: *Backyard Wasteland Talisman II*, 2020, photo collage on found object, 20 x 20 cm

Six parts of the series are based on actual places: a part of my childhood backyard, a wasteland and a forest by a lake, an abandoned daycare center and two different aspects of my home. The four remaining parts are based on more generalized aspects of peripheries; the sublime experience of a starlight sky, the experience of riding a bicycle in unfamiliar, peripheral places, the essence of trees and imagined peripheral places and environments.



PICTURE 16. Jenny Vesiväki: *Summer Night Bike Ride*, 2021, acrylic on linen, 60 x 80 cm

5.5 Talismans

Talismans are objects that are considered to have magical properties. Sometimes a talisman can also be non-material; an act that provides talismanic power. A talisman can be protective, or it can hold some other power. They are often used in ritual. (Paine 2004, 10.) The words talisman and amulet are often used interchangeably, but the difference is that an amulet is always considered to provide protection, whereas a talisman can have other magical properties. The history of talismans predates written history, but it is clear that they have

been used for a very long time and all around the world. They are usually personal objects, made for a specific purpose, as is the case with the Periphery Talismans.

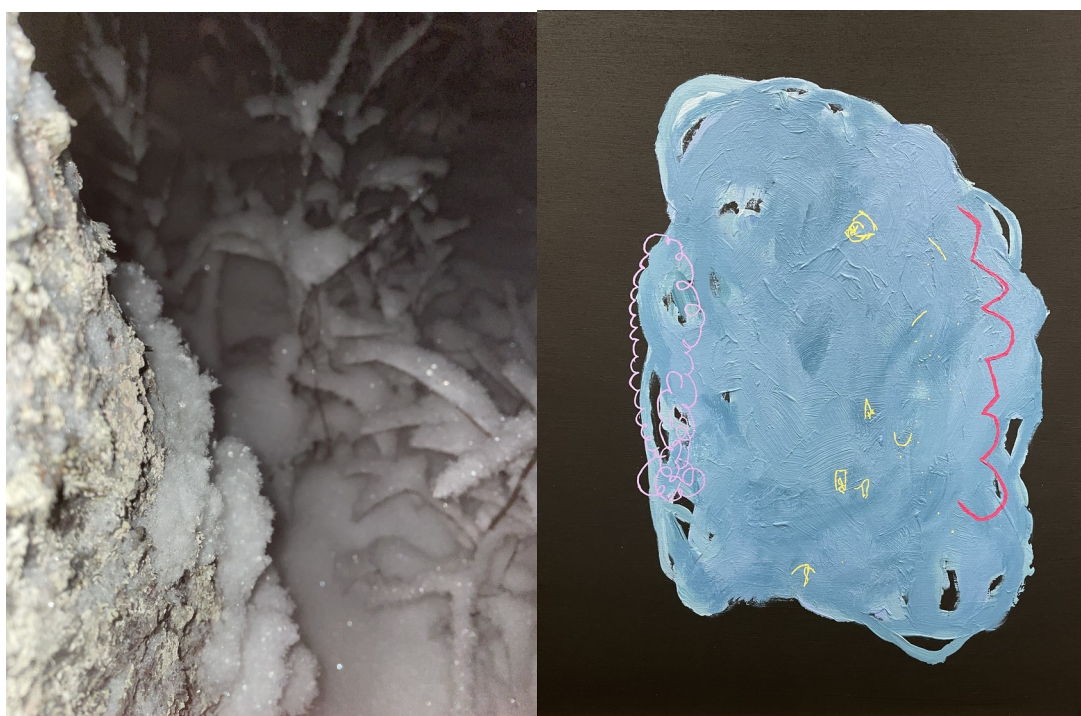


PICTURE 17. Jenny Vesiväki: *Night Bike Ride Talisman*, 2021, linen, cotton, glass vial with water, feather, ash, rock, thread, glass and crystal beads, ceramic, acrylic, lock, variable dimensions

In my series of conceptual artworks, representations of peripheral places, areas, observations and experiences are paired with talismans. These talismans are intended to hold some of the positive aspects of the peripheries. They are artworks, but also potentially personal objects that could be used to bring to the beholder, or viewer, aspects of the original place or atmosphere. My personal interest and fascination with religious artifacts, ritual objects and all kinds of magical and sacred things has influenced and inspired the making of the talismans. I wanted the talismans to have a very handmade, down to earth and esoteric feel to them. Some contain many symbolic elements; the *Night Ride Talisman* consists of an embroidered linen pouch hung in a beaded necklace. The pouch contains the four elements to protect the beholder: ash - representing the fire element, a vial of water, a rock representing earth and a small feather representing the air element. A painted charm to lure in the magic hangs alongside a

charm of glass beads and a garnet - a gem that is thought to have a grounding and strengthening effect. On the necklace part of the talisman one bead of carnelian represents vitality and creativity. The idea for the *Trees Talisman* came to me while gazing at the moon. The form, door-like wings over a wooden middle part, is inspired by religious icons and shrines. The doors can be opened and closed as preferred.

Two of the talismans (*Wasteland Talisman (Pitkäniemi)*, *Winter Home Talisman*) are bigger paintings. Two talismans are or contain elements that can be worn as jewelry (*The Sublime Talisman*, *Night Bike Ride TalismanXXXX*). Others are smaller size collages or paintings.



PICTURE 18. Jenny Vesiväki: *Winter Home*, 2021, photo print, 50 x 40 cm and *Winter Home Talisman*, 2021, acrylic on board, 50 x 40 cm

The talismans act as a gentle reminder of the human ability to use faith, ritual and meditation for personal growth and healing. In secular culture, I feel, there is a void and a need to experience aspects of the world and life as sacred. We all have the ability to assign meanings and to have faith in whatever we find important. We can strengthen our relationships - whether those be with people, animals, places or a higher power - however we would like. Artworks, such as talismans, can enrich, ground and support those practices.

5.6 Summary

The creative process of making the thesis artwork was challenging and fulfilling. The goal was to make a series of works that would depict the qualities of peripheries. With an intuitive method, chosen places and more conceptualized aspects of peripheries became a series of twenty artworks. The background study formed a strong framework for making the artworks and gave confidence to use different mediums and methods. The conceptual artworks are very personal, as they are based on personal experiences of particular peripheries. However, the feedback received from the audience has shown that the works do resonate with others too. A topic that has sparked so much personal interest seems to interest others as well.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The center – periphery model has been an inspiring concept to explore. As the model can be applied to other things beyond just geographical regions and places, it has birthed new ways of looking at the world. The writings of Marko Leppänen in the name of the School of Esoteric Geography and Periphery Therapy were a solid base to build the study on. Upon further reading, Leppänen, Snyder and Odell all wrote about things that mirror my personal experiences perfectly. Peripheries have been healing for me personally, therefore I wanted to look deeper into why that is the case. Once starting the process of exploring the characteristics of peripheries further, it became clear that those characteristics could be seen in other things too, as if to formulate a kind of general periphery quality and attitude.

The process of writing this thesis has been very interesting and it has provided me with a broad view of the reasons why peripheries need humans and why humans need them. It has opened a new way of looking at the creative process as well and validated many of the personal preferences and interests that stem from the peripheries of culture, the mind and geographical places as well. There remain so many more aspects of the topic that could be explored and studied and I am motivated to keep pursuing them. Peripheries could use more spokespeople.

Making a series of artworks dedicated to peripheries was demanding and fulfilling. At first the idea was to simply depict peripheral places, but it was soon clear that those depictions had to be more than figurative visual representations. The intuitive method was a rule that I followed, as I felt it was the only honest way to honor the true essence of peripheries. Combining conceptual with personal was challenging and demanded many inner dialogues about their balance. In the end the series does represent the balance of those aspects to a satisfying degree. Peripheral expressions were brought forth and made visible.

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