



## Female artists work and creativity in the rural: Beyond core and periphery

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper we suggest that far too often economic geographic theory has been based on simple core-periphery dualism that mask the reality of creative work in rural or peripheral areas. We take a relational approach and suggest that being on the periphery does not necessarily mean isolation from the centre nor does it mean relegation to lower levels of professional and creative possibilities. The study examines a sample of female contemporary visual artists in the rural Swedish region of Värmland and suggests that affordability and work-life balance are the essential reasons for the locational choices of these peripheral artists. Once settled they employ two strategic coping mechanisms: embracing the creative possibilities of being on the edge; active creation of network spaces and relations. We suggest that for creative workers' binary spatial divisions are not appropriate and that more nuanced relational geographies support both rural and individual creative careers. In particular, we emphasise one such binary: the presumption that whilst urban creativity is collective, rural creativity is individual and lacking the benefits of closeness and agglomeration. Rather than the dualism presented in the creativity literature, we suggest that the case exposes the importance of thinking relational, spatially and temporarily in terms of project and career life cycles. These artists are not making black or white choices between the social city and the isolated rural but attempting to mix the advantages of both together through translocal processes and networks.

### 1. Introduction

In this article we study female professional visual artists that live in a remote rural area. Our concern is less on their contribution to rural or regional development or their position in a field of activity, but rather how their working lives, professional spaces and mobilities intertwine. The motivation for this is that far too often economic geographic theory has: been based on simple core-periphery dualism (Pugh and Dubois 2021); that mask the reality of creative work in rural or peripheral areas (Duxbury 2021); and has overlooked and understudied the spatiality of women's working lives and creativity (Reid-Musson et al. 2020).

For the purpose of this article, we look at a group of female contemporary visual artists in the rural Swedish region of Värmland. This is an interesting case we argue since they exemplify the complexities of peripheral working. They are topographically peripheral since they work in a peripheral and rural region. They are topologically peripheral by virtue of being far from a sector centre. Thirdly, they are topologically peripheral by virtue of being women in a male dominated sector: a sector where women's incomes are substantially less and where

their work has been consistently undervalued and underrepresented (McRobbie 2016; SOU 2022).

The study suggests that the locational choices of these peripheral artists are based less on career or work-based rationales but on affordability and work-life balance; and that locational choices and mobility are driven by life cycle aspects. We find that though the driver of location is not work-based, once settled they employ two strategic coping mechanisms in an attempt to negotiate the potential disadvantages of peripherality: embracing the creative possibilities of being on the edge; and active creation, and maintenance, of network spaces and relations. We take a relational approach and suggest that being on the periphery does not mean isolation from the centre nor does it mean relegation to lower levels of professional and creative possibilities.

We suggest that for these female creative workers, binary spatial divisions are not appropriate and that more nuanced relational geographies support both rural and individual creative careers. In particular, we emphasise one such binary: the presumption that whilst urban creativity is collective, rural creativity is individual and lacking the benefits of closeness and agglomeration. Rather than the dualism

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presented in the creativity literature, we suggest that the case exposes the importance of thinking relationally, spatially and temporarily in terms of project and career life cycles. These artists are not making black or white choices between the social city and the isolated rural but mixing the advantages of both together through translocal processes and networks.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. The periphery in a relational perspective

Notions of core and periphery have been central to geographic analysis. In economic geography the core has long been understood as the urban; and the role of cities as drivers of the creativity and innovation that underpins the knowledge economy has resulted in a considerable ‘urban bias’ (Shearmur 2015, 2017). Literature on the location of cultural and creative industries has traditionally highlighted specific global clusters of firms, processes and networks such as Hollywood, London and Tokyo as central to these industries, involving industrial networks driving creative and innovative processes forward (Jones et al. 2015). The spatial concentration of cultural and creative industries is traditionally explained by factors such as informal labour market processes (Caves 2000; Florida 2003); the role of value creating processes (Pratt 2006; Jansson 2014); the role of markets and consumers (Wrigley and Lowe 1996; Crewe and Beaverstock 1998; Aoyama 2007); knowledge creation and diffusion (Leamer and Storper 2001); the role of the built environment (Molotch 2002; Hauge and Hrac 2010); and financing (Hesmondhalgh 2002). Although some literature highlights a division between first and second tier locations (Brydges and Hrac 2019) to nuance the understanding of centrality, it is clear that some locations remain peripheral, both topographically and topologically (Power and Collins 2021).

As Grabher (2018) notes, this has implicitly led to the assumption that the periphery, and the rural as its exemplar, is of a lesser order and can be seen not just as a backwater for creativity and economic activities but as an obstacle. For activities, such as the art world, distinguished by immaterial or symbolic products, it is urban or Marshallian affordance that have gained most attention and been most lauded (Scott 2008; Lorenzen 2018; Currid 2007; Glaeser 2011; Power and Scott 2004).

Against this background a growing literature has alerted us to the ways in which non-urban areas and systems can harbour or lead to dynamic cultural and creative economic activities (Collins and Fahy 2011; S et al., 2008; Luckman 2012; Grabher 2018; Bunting and Mitchell 2001; Hautala and Jauhainen 2019; Warren and Gibson 2014; Ray 1998; Gibson 2002; Bell and Jayne 2010; Collins and Power 2019; Power and Collins 2021). These illustrations of the potential for creativity and cultural industries in rural areas mirror calls for a broader reappraisal in economic geography of how we understand the periphery and how we understand the core-periphery dichotomy (Duxbury 2021; Pugh and Dubois 2021; Glückler et al. 2022; Grabher 2018; Shearmur 2017; Woods 2007).

Central to questioning stark dichotomies between the core and the periphery has been the relational approach in economic geography. A relational perspective emphasizes that to understand social and economic outcomes and connections, it is of fundamental importance to understand the social relations between actors (Boggs and Rantisi 2003; Bathelt and Glückler 2018). The relational perspective distances itself from an atomistic view of places and people (Doel and Hubbard 2002) by stressing that connections through networks are crucial to explaining and understanding preconditions for different activities and spaces. A weakness with this perspective is, arguably, that it can be quite flat as it is incapable of identifying the hierarchies of underlying factors that may constitute building blocks in explanatory models (Sunley 2008). However, although relational perspectives have mainly been interested in analysing processes in micro (geographical) case studies, rather than exploring hierarchical causalities and universal laws, such an approach

can contribute to the development of a conceptual abstraction aiming to be “applicable across multiple contexts” (Bathelt and Glückler 2018): 190). Glückler et al. (Glückler et al. 2022) suggest that geographic periphery should be seen as a positionality across different dimensions - a territorial dimension and a network dimension:

“geographic peripherality cannot be properly analyzed without making a clear distinction between geographic peripherality (location in territory) and network peripherality (position in a network). [...] our framework strips peripherality (and centrality) of its normative connotations, allowing it to be approached as a relational position rather than as an inherent quality, and proposes a vocabulary that allows the framework to be applied for empirical analysis.” (Glückler et al. 2022):232)

Power and Collins (2021) share a similar approach and stress the relational positionalities that can define peripherality. They suggest that peripherality can be by virtue of being on the edge of a region (topographical peripherality) or by being positioned on or near the edges of a network (topological peripherality).

### 2.2. Topographical and topological positions

In this section, we will argue that three relational positions define periphery in our case study. The first is topographical or territorial in the sense of being located in a territory far from urban centres. The second and third are topological or network peripherality: being positioned far from industrial network centres; being positioned as marginal due to gender.

Notwithstanding the importance of topographical or territorial peripherality – even in an industry for highly mobile products such as artwork, geographic distance carries with it transactional costs - it is how workers deal with topological or network peripherality that we find most decisive for their work and creativity. Networks create access to various forms of specialized resources, both from the actors’ individual networks, but also how these networks are expanding as nearby individual networks overlap. At a spatial level, the scope and efficiency of networks is also a result of actors’ mobility, i.e., that mobility itself expands the networks and that permanent relocations further expand the networks at local national and global spatial levels. There is a ‘messy’ geography here of overlapping and fragmented networks that are constantly evolving. The complexity of topological positions lies in both the number of networks and the number of connections in and across networks but also how over time networks and positions change.

A further complication to this picture is that like all pictures it is in the eye of the beholder. If there are multiple topological peripheries and centres, there are multiple actors constantly reflecting and acting on their relational position location. In the case we present below, actors are continually trying to work out what and where the core may be and how they should relate to it or visit it.

This uncertainty and relational work may be an important part of the creative process as well as the career and project cycle – it helps rather than hinders artists to work out where to place and position their reputations/products in crowded marketplaces. What it alerts us to is that relational thinking is an essential part of work in such sectors. Secondly it alerts us to the reality that change and complexity is inevitable for all relational positions.

Based on relational thinking, we understand that the same place can be central and peripheral at the same time (Dicken and Malmberg 2001; Bathelt and Glückler 2003; Grabher and Ibert, 2013). In other words, we can assume that both the centrality or peripherality of creative places, people and communities may vary over time (Barnes 2018; Vermeulen 2018; Power and Collins 2021). Hence, positions change over time but so have the ways in which workers can inhabit the world and where they work. Access to technologies of all sorts has allowed many workers to be increasingly mobile in their work. Working from home and having multiple work sites is increasingly mainstream

(Reuschke and Ekinsmyth 2021). In rural and mobility studies such change has given further credence to the idea of ‘translocality’. Translocality has been used to describe and understand socio-spatial interconnectedness, place attachment and identity formation beyond nation state borders (Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013). As Brickell and Datta (Brickell and Datta 2011:9) write, a translocality perspective entails an interest in local contexts and “the situatedness of mobile actors”.

Research has shown how similar features, processes and practices or ‘ways of doing things’ have diffused from one place to another (Hodkinson 2004; Kruse 2010; Maly and Varis 2015), involving the idea of “being identified with more than one location” (Oakes and Schein 2006:1). Translocality can be seen as a concept that emphasizes the positions and relations actors hold in spaces created through mobility, networks and technology, while at the same time stressing the importance of local context. Our focus lies on artists’ situated everyday relations, on multi-directional networks, on short term mobilities across localities both within the nation and transnationally, and how these relations enhance creativity and supports artistic careers in the rural. Translocality as concept leads us to nuance our understanding of phenomena and the relation between places as ‘polycentric’ (Maly and Varis 2015).

### 2.3. Time-space, life cycles and the periphery

If sectors – such as the artistic field – are characterised by translocality, networks and relational positions then these processes unfold in time as well as in space. Time constitutes a crucial barrier or constraint: meetings, relations and exchange between individuals are temporally and spatially bounded processes and phenomena (Hägerstrand 1970). Time and space do not exist separately but are inherently intertwined hybrid processes (May and Thrift, 2001). Not only do we need to go beyond core-periphery in our theorisation of workers and fields but also focus more attention on: the ways in which spatial hierarchies change over time; and how workers change their spatial relations as their needs change over time.

Peripherality or centrality are not static and it seems to us that thinking in terms of ‘life cycles’ is a way of attempting to encapsulate the inherent temporality of spatial relations and contexts. On a broad level, places themselves seem to have life cycles. Places can grow towards centrality: Hollywood gradually eclipsed New York as the centre of the US film industry (Scott 2005); a small peripheral film centre such as Galway gradually gained recognition (Collins and Power 2019). Or places become less ‘core’: Florence rapidly lost its status as the Italian fashion capital in the 1960’s (Segre Reinach 2006) to Rome which in turn lost it to Milan.

A life cycle perspective on products is well-established. Callon, for example, views products as ongoing processes where the inherent qualities of the product are continuously reevaluated (Callon et al. 2002). Storper and Venables (2004) suggest we view products and projects as both assemblages and outputs similarly exhibiting life cycles where various stages requires different spatial fixes and needs. Shearmur (2015) suggests that some processes during a products’ life cycle require a higher intensity of interaction with the surrounding context and can thus be described as extroverted and may to a greater extent be found in topographically central locations. Other processes are characterized as more introverted, involving less external interaction and may to a greater extent be established in more peripheral locations. Different phases of production or different phases in a product’s life cycle will tend towards different levels of core or periphery.

Then of course, people have lives, life cycles and life courses. People have careers, reputations, skills, etc that are valued in different ways and in different contexts over time. Careers, ideas, knowledge and work are deeply embodied and emotional, and develop both over time and in space. A life cycle perspective is important and underlines the ways in which our behaviours change over time. As Storper and Venables (2004) note the intensity of being part of the in-groups that urban buzz seems to

rely upon carries with it both benefits and costs. Whilst urban experiences can be good for career development and knowledge production, the intensity and costs of being in such environments might not be sustainable or desirable over time or when you enter a new phase in life. We react to the times we live in but we tailor our work to the times of our life; in doing so we can attempt to seek out the spaces that suit us best.

If we take a life cycle perspective in the case of workers in the cultural sector the issue of precarity is especially important. Literature underscores the idea that cultural and creative knowledge workers are especially subject to precarity (Gill and Pratt 2008; Banks 2019). For workers in the fine art sector there are few full-time jobs and workers are subject to exceptionally high levels of freelance work and self-employment; self-employment that is equally made by choice as it is a necessity (Markusen and Schrock 2006). This is structural to the industries as it affects general and multidimensional factors such as creativity, working and employment conditions.

If those workers are women, they are subject to a double precarity: they are exposed both to the general difficulties that cultural workers face as well as the challenges that working women face (McRobbie 2016). Female artists as a group have long been underrepresented in art collections and the art world (Nochlin 1971), command lower prices in art markets (cf Kopf, 2015), and in Sweden have generally lower incomes (kulturanalys 2024). In terms of work culture there is arguably a masculine norm in creative production that you prioritise work over other elements of life (McRobbie 2016). In the arts (and indeed academia) there is a norm that idealizes and lifts the importance of work: it is a calling; a passion; you are not in it for the money. Art work is seen at times not as ‘work’ but as something else - it may thus be controversial as an artist to be in it for the money, to ‘sell out’, or to view art as simply a job. Notwithstanding cultural norms in work lives, precarity implies an enormous material pressure to prioritise work above all else. Consequently, this may disqualify general ideas of family building in the traditional sense, including when children come into the picture.

The case presented here shows how artists’ work and move to deal with precarity during their lives, but also how they balance social and family life more specifically with the (often taken for granted) demands placed on artists in their work lives. For some artists, getting balance between work and life (especially parenting) means cutting costs and risks and winning time by moving away from spaces they associate with work prioritisation. This can involve migration to cheaper areas such as suburbs (Gibson 2011) or rural and peripheral areas. Cutting costs or moving nearer to care resources can be crucial during those periods in life when constant work or high earnings cannot be sustained.

Life cycle stages will affect locational and spatial choices. However, this does not mean that a move from the core means subsequent creativity need be of a lesser value. Indeed, rural, peripheral or marginal spaces can be places of refuge, or sites for experimentation (Cattani et al. 2017), or sites of protest ((Prechter 2013) cited by Grabher 2018; Grabher 2018)). Creative potential and agency can be facilitated as well as hindered by being on the outside, at the edge, or being an outsider or deviant. Occupying such identities or spaces outside norms or main-streams can afford creatives freedom or perspective to be genuinely novel or make novel combinations and formulations (Sweetman 2013). Additionally, nature and the environment can be seen to be foundations, inspiration or resources for creative practice. So even if a move from the core to the periphery severs access to the core – which we argue does not happen – there is no reason to think that the continuing creative career and output need be any less. The foundations and conditions for creative work may change as one moves from core to periphery or vice versa but the creativity and work continues.

### 3. Methods

The research presented in this article is built on a mix of three different qualitative empirical materials: an in-depth interview study, analysis of published public and formal documents and websites, and

participant observation. This combination of various empirical sources allows us to triangulate the findings from each observation in the different methods used (Flick 2004).

The primary empirical material is based on a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews (Wilson 2012) with professionals based in the rural Swedish region of Värmland: 12 female professional contemporary visual artists working primarily with visual art with a wide range of techniques but primarily painting and sculpting; three of the artists also worked at times with performance art techniques. The artists were all highly skilled with university degrees in arts. Most of the participants were in their 30s, while one was in her 20s and three in their late 40s and early 50s. All except three of the sample had children. Some were already well-established artists while others had just started their career path and were additionally supporting themselves through part time jobs within the education and service sector. In addition, interviews with two male artists and 10 curators and network creators active in the region were carried out. Seven of these participants were interviewed together as a group. This material provided relevant information for understanding the context in which the female artists are professionally active.

Different sources were used to identify both the artists and other actors, such as media articles, exhibition catalogues, Instagram profiles, and artist websites. In some cases, the snowball technique was used where participants were asked to suggest other artists who might be interested in participating in the study (Noy 2008). All participants were contacted via e-mail and provided with an information letter about the project's aim and purpose.

Three interviews (including four participants) were conducted face-to-face on site in the participants' home and/or studio. Much of the study was conducted during 2021 and 2022 which was the period when COVID-19 prevented researchers from travelling, the major bulk of the interviews were facilitated using mixed communication technology. While the Swedish Covid-19 strategy generally dealt with the pandemic through fewer and less extensive lockdowns than in many other countries, the pandemic did place restrictions on mobility and public gatherings. Many areas of the cultural and creative sector suffered considerably: for example, theatres, museums, and concert venues were closed for long periods. However, restrictions hit urban regions and institutions harder than less densely populated areas and in the fine and visual art sector many of the production processes and market mechanisms could function more or less as usual. Statistics show that incomes for visual artists in Sweden increased during the pandemic and that activity levels were largely unaffected (Myndigheten för kulturanalys, 2024)

Six interviews were conducted over the telephone and 9 using the videoconferencing platform Zoom. Those who chose to be interviewed over the phone did so either due to being on the move during the interview or described a form of online platform fatigue, preferring not to use a screen. Despite some preferring the telephone, online interviews can be described as versions of traditional qualitative interviews, however demanding a minimum of technological and logistical requirements of the participants (Lobe et al. 2020).

Interviews were semi-structured and topics explored the participants' educational background, their work experience within the arts, reasons for moving to the region, their professional local, national and transnational networks, the relation between place, identity and creativity, infrastructure for art in the periphery, experiences of being self-employed, and gender dimensions of being an artist and entrepreneur. The interviews were not video- or audio recorded using the platforms internal device, rather a manual audio-recorder was used, and interviews were transcribed verbatim. The interviews were analysed through multiple readings of the interview transcripts, where overarching themes emerged. These themes were later coded into smaller themes in relation to theoretical concepts.

A consent form was distributed to the participants via email informing them of what the information would be used for, as well as

their rights as research participants. Time was given in the beginning of the interview to go through the consent form and to ask/answer potential questions. Participants are pseudonymised in the article.

The second source of empirical data was targeted web-based research of published documents and websites (Krippendorff 2013) aiming to gain an overview of the art scene in Värmland and local networks of collaboration between different artists, art institutions such as museums, galleries, and folk high schools, and independent local initiatives such as artist collectives.

The empirical data also consists of participant observation (Herbert 2000; Laurier 2010) of two web-based events; a 'finissage' (a final ceremonial ending of an exhibition); and a regional literature and arts festival. Participation in two performative walks together with artists and audience were undertaken. However, since the bulk of the empirical collection took place during the pandemic fieldtrips were more limited than planned for, though two field trips were conducted in Värmland making it possible to visit nodal points and gain an embodied understanding of the art spaces and the local environments in which they were located. The researchers engaged with the community during the project: for example, participation in an arts festival in Värmland where preliminary results were disseminated and discussed.

#### 4. Artistic practice in the periphery

The region of Värmland is situated in Sweden's western inland on the border to Norway and in the Swedish cultural imaginary is known for its deep forests and for its historical iron mines and industry. It is a predominantly rural region of around 280,000 inhabitants with a low population density: 16 inhabitants per square kilometre compared to the EU average of 118 (SCB, 2019). Culturally Värmland also takes pride in a story telling tradition ('berättartradition') and has been home to a number of nationally and internationally renowned authors and poets (such as Selma Lagerlöf, Gustav Fröding, and Göran Thunström). In visual arts, a colony of artists who settled by the Racken lake in the beginning of the 1900s - Rackstadkolonin - paved the way for an art and craft scene that has continued with contemporary artists such as Lars Lerin and Lena Cronqvist. In general, there are approximately 2000 enterprises within the creative sector in Värmland (Region Värmland, 2021), involving among other, film, music, theatre and art. The number of professional visual or fine artists is approximately 100 in the region. While the concentration of creative enterprises is not as large in Värmland as in other areas of Sweden, a focus on culture and contemporary art is increasingly visible in regional planning. The region is in many ways a typical case we find throughout the world: a region that is not especially prominent in the arts but increasingly values what it has; a region where arts professionals life and work at a distance from mainstream art markets and scenes.

The primary focus of the visual art professionals we interviewed was showing and selling their works in commercial contemporary art markets and we show that there is a set of artist driven strategies, mobilities and spatialities that support this. Nonetheless it is important to understand that the visual artists we have studied are part of a larger ecosystem of public cultural, political, and economic supports. There are many parts to this ecosystem but three key elements are worth noting. Firstly, at municipal and regional levels there is direct funding for arts activities and artistic entrepreneurship. Secondly, there is direct funding that is distributed from the state to regions through a so-called cultural cooperation model ('Kultursamverkansmodellen'). In the model, central government funds are distributed via the Swedish Arts Council (Kulturrådet) to the regions, which in turn distribute these to regionally important cultural activities. The distribution takes place on the basis of regional cultural plans and in consultation with other cultural authorities and organisations. In addition to funds from the central government, regions and municipalities contribute a substantial part of the total financing of activities in the model. Thirdly, there is a large number of individual grants and stipends of different types both from state actors

(principally Konstnärsnämnden – the Swedish Arts Grants Committee) and private foundations. In all three areas, the distribution of funds is often made through competitive application processes that demand considerable work; to the extent that accessing such funding could be seen as part of the normal commercial logic of the sector and such funders could be seen as ‘customers’ for artistic work. Over and above specially aimed support, it must be noted that cultural careers are financed in indirect ways through the general Swedish welfare and educational systems and policies such as parental leave and allowances. Thus it is important to note that a broader ecosystem of (financial or in-kind) support exists and that rural-based artistic practice is hardly conducted in isolation from wider cultural and economic support systems: they are doing much for themselves but have access to a wide range of other support structures.

It is against this background that we introduce the case of female professional contemporary artists located in Värmland. We argue that these artists develop an interesting set of work practices that both attempt to cope with peripherality and to benefit from their position on the outside and in the periphery. Their professional lives are conditioned by three levels of peripherality: a topographical peripherality far from urban centres; a sectoral peripherality far from industrial network centres; and crucially a peripherality based on the art world’s long history of the marginalisation and exclusion of women.

##### 5. Locating in the periphery: life-work balance, career cycle and time

The most striking aspect of our empirical study was life-course migration: the majority of our case study had moved to Värmland, and had moved after having children. While concentrations of creatives, schools, galleries, and cultural institutions draw young artists to the city (Hautala and Jauhiainen 2019), for artists faced with childcare and precarity the countryside may offer relief from financial stress and ways to combine an artistic career and family life (Mitchell et al. 2004).

Many of the artists in the study emphasized affordable housing and access to larger and more appropriate studio space as important factors that made Värmland attractive. It was relatively common that the artists had grown up in Värmland, migrated to pursue an education and career in a larger city, and later decided to move back, often in relation to building a family. Linda was one of the artists who had decided to move back to Värmland after having studied and worked in Stockholm:

I live in the place where I grew up. It was for economic reasons. That was why we moved here, to the countryside ... when you have small children and you can move more easily ... you don’t have to pay studio rent, you have much more space and it is close to my parents. (...) Our life with toddlers made us want to simplify things a bit and that’s why we ended up here in Värmland (Linda, established artist).

For Linda, owning her own studio made it easier to balance work and family: studios are a central space for artistic practice (Sjöholm 2010). However, being an artist in the periphery has been more challenging than she had expected. In particular distance from art market institutions was pointed to by many participants as a challenge. Linda noted that there are far fewer commercial galleries in the countryside where art can be sold or exhibited. Where exhibition opportunities exist, there can be an expectation to exhibit for free in order to be part of the community. Linda maintained it had been a challenge to maintain her status and identity as a professional artist while wanting to contribute to local art scenes. Living far from mainstream art markets does not mean being cut off and artists, like Linda, still collaborated with gallerists in urban centres and continued to nurture and develop networks built before moving:

... thanks to having a gallerist in Stockholm, I have always felt like ... it’s because of the contacts that I made there that I ... There is something about being able to keep in touch with the network that one has built over the years. At the same time, one is very far away

from those contacts. And my husband, he had not really gotten to that point of having an established network before we moved, so it gets ... for him it is harder to move forward ... because he did not have those contacts (Linda, established artist).

This illustrates two key challenges described by artists in our study: (i) the difficulty of gaining entrance from the outside to networks in mainstream centres; (ii) the extra transaction costs involved with maintaining established network relations. Again and again, artists emphasized network relations as key aspects of their careers just as they implicitly assumed that urban centred networks are the most important.

Others, also in the process of building a career, stressed that though network relations can be a challenge, a key element of peripherality has been the ability to focus more on core work practices: in particular the actual making of art such as sculptures, paintings and place based installations in nature. In our study they suggested that moving to the countryside decreased financial stress and need for extra jobs or parallel careers, and increased the time spent focusing on artistic production. Elisabeth, a young artist who had moved to Värmland from a big city in Europe, put it this way:

Living in the periphery is a possibility to be freer. This is freedom for me. To have a house, and when you are not struggling over the economy all the time. I have the luxury - yes, I can work only three nights every two weeks [at her extra job] and I have enough money to be an artist (...) I see it as an alienation that you must work a full-time job and then build a career as an artist on the side. Even successful artists must have a job on the side, everyone does! More and more people realize that it is a constant struggle and will move to the countryside to have more freedom (Elisabeth, established artist).

There is an extensive literature on artists’ precarious work life, where insecure and discontinuing employment, freelancing, and short-term project work is the norm, and where risks and responsibilities are put on the individual to handle on her own (Gill and Pratt 2008; Mahon et al. 2018; McRobbie 2016). Simultaneously, artistic work is described as ‘passionate work’ (McRobbie 2016) where work and life are seen as interchangeable and the love for what one does is sought to make up for the lack of security.

What is important to underscore is how precarious working conditions intersect with gender norms and might play out differently for men and women. Overall, despite being highly educated, female artists in Sweden earn less than their male counterparts and far below average earnings (SOU 2022; Myndigheten för kulturanalys, 2024). Moreover, female artists are childless to a greater extent than women in the general population, while male artists have more children than men in general (Flisbäck 2010). Even though gender equality is a widely-held goal in Swedish society, notions of the ideal artist are still built around a masculine norm that romanticises detachment from familial commitments in order to pursue an individual creative expression (Bain 2005). One of our interviewees, Sofie, describes it like this:

But what I see around me, the artists that I have met here, it is not so easy to survive as an artist. They are all combining family life also, and that I find very Scandinavian. Because coming from where I come from many artists are either single or have no kids or ... the successful artist, they give everything to their art. And it’s also demanded of you and is an idea of who the ideal artist is. The women artists that I know that are successful are often ... not moms (Sofie, established artist).

For some of the artists, the expectations created from both sets of norms can create a sense of ambivalence and a high pressure to be able to “do it all”. Many highlight a contrast between the ability to be flexible with their time when children are small but a difficulty saying no to commissioned work due to the fear that it will lead to fewer work opportunities in the future. As Maria explains:

I still think that it is possible to have it all. Or rather, I expect it, that I can have children and a career too. One can make it work. But at the same time, when I had my first child, I exhausted myself, because I was trying to do a sketch commission while I was on parental leave, but my brain didn't work ... so I have been careful ... during the time when they have been small. I have said no to many things because I don't want to exhaust myself. But that you pay for long after, of course (Maria, established artist).

The Swedish welfare system has generous paternal and sick leave provisions aimed at improving gender equality and at helping working parents balance family and work but entitlements are largely based on taxable income from 'normal' employment forms. This can be particularly challenging for artists as important income, such as artist scholarships or arts grants, do not help them qualify for certain social security benefits. Several of the artists in the study have had to work both during parental leave and when they or their children have been ill:

So, even if I now have an art grant, that money is not taxable (...) So one ends up outside of the system. And that's a bit bitter, in relation to the security system, because if I get sick now when I am on an artist working grant, I won't get any sick leave or leave to take care of my children if they get sick. So, then they will have to come with me to the studio. It is an insecure way of life (Anna, established artist).

In such situations, proximity to parents can play a role in being able to balance the work of family life with art work. Discussing young people's precarious work life, researchers have noted how significant others are often included in work trajectories where relational ties are both emotional and instrumental to the ability to pursue life and career goals (Cook and Woodman 2020). In this case we see that artists seek out spaces and relations that serve their life and career choices during vulnerable moments in their career when they are subjected to a double precarity as female cultural workers with family nurturing responsibilities.

What the above illustrates is how creative workers might change their spatial relations as their needs change over time. The move to the periphery carries with it rewards as well as challenges, but central to how the move conditions their professional work is managing relationships to wider networks and domains (the 'art scene') whilst at the same time focusing on creativity and making. Embracing the creative potential of the location, accessing networks, and developing new ways of being proximate to networks become the overriding questions locational choices force the artists to deal with.

## 6. Time and space in creative processes

In this section we focus on how artists leverage local context for creativity, and on strategies artists use to create proximity to art scenes. We emphasise the translocal connections and movements that artists engage in during the process of creating art, showing the dynamic ways in which both peripheral and core spaces intersect and play different roles in the project life cycle. We discuss what advantages working from the periphery may have for the creative process. Nevertheless, we also highlight how living and working in the topographical and topological periphery might create difficulties for early career artists who in addition had weak ties to local creative networks.

### 6.1. Nature, shelter and solitude: space for creativity

Artists in the study emphasized having more time for creativity as important for their decision to move. Many described lives in the centre as constantly striving to keep up with the latest trends and art conversations, visiting new exhibitions, and being relevant through visibility. So, while more time for artwork was connected to a release from financial stress as showed in the section above, it was also connected to the creative process and being able to shelter the creative process from

buzz (Grabher 2018).

Elisabeth, for example, suggests that:

To live in [Värmland] is a bit too lonely, but it is good for art. For me it was needed to be creative. When I was in [city name] I had a lot of activities, I had a gallery, I did my residency, but I was so much into the buzz, always on the go, no time to just stop and produce. I would always have a meeting or something, and I was feeling that I need calmness, I need to be alone. I think historically many artists had their studio in the countryside and it is not for nothing. It is because they also needed some moment of solitude, to take distance and reflect (Elisabeth, established artist).

This resembles what Shearmur (2015) describes as an introverted phase in the project life cycle where external interaction with peers is necessarily low-frequency. After her art education, Elisabeth ran a gallery while working to establish an independent artistic career. She had visited Värmland during a student residency and was struck by the calmness of the area and the nature. Solitude, concentration on her own work, and avoiding externalities motivated her to move.

The absence of power and control from the centre has been emphasized as an important asset of the periphery in earlier research (Glückler 2014; Hautala 2015; Barnes 2018). While the periphery can offer solitude and time to reflect, it can also act as a shelter from critique or from being too influenced by other people's work. One of our interviewees, that was about to move from Stockholm to Värmland at the time of the interview, described the Värmland art scene as "punk" and thought of it as an easier place to experiment and that the scene seemed more independent and detached from more commercialised and tourist-oriented art-markets.

Being in the periphery may help to get away from other's gaze during the production process. In a conversation with Molly, we talked about the importance of creating professional networks, but also how sometimes one needs distance:

I think that it is super important [professional networks]. But at the same time, it is kind of difficult to also distance oneself from it. (...) Actually, we only moved to the countryside because it was cheap, but one of the good consequences for me was that I was able to screen a bit more. Because I didn't have that constant access to other art (Molly, established artist).

The creative potential of the rural was not just by virtual of absence, distance or solitude but also in a set of unique rural affordances that could be used in creative processes:

I work with nature materials. I pick things that surrounds me. (...) I think that the resistance that the rural provides ... the strivings that I think exists in the rural, the intractable ... That there is nothing here and that nature is always so palpable. That has become so important for my artistry that I need to have it (Molly, established artist).

Here solitude and restriction accommodate and spur the creative processes; just as creativity arises from a creative dialogue with nature.

As Hrac et al. argue, creativity is a complex process involving inherent tensions between individual and collaborative practices, between tradition and innovation, and between isolation and interconnectedness (Hrac et al. 2022). Such tensions seemed to underpin much of the working lives we met in Värmland. Molly has been working as an artist for five years after graduating from an art academy in Norway. While she lives and works from a house in rural Värmland, she also has a studio in Oslo and frequently travels there to work, and exhibits in galleries across Norway. While peripherally situated, artists also pointed to a multi-nodal context and proximity to other Nordic city regions as important for professional networks and for commercial outlets. Their use of different contexts seemed to follow a project life cycle. For example Molly, like Elisabeth, suggested the rural offers a sheltering of the creative and making process, but this is followed by a shift to the urban, enabled by mobility and technology, when dialogue,

gallery space and valuation become important to the project.

For other artists, nature or solitude are not highlighted as assets, but rather the possibility of being more flexible regarding who to collaborate with where and when:

For me it has worked out well, to not belong to something specific (a particular artistic milieu), you are your own. Since I live here, I have a gallerist in Gothenburg, and I have lived in Stockholm. I feel like I am part of several things (Anna, established artist).

Anna is one of the artists who chose to move to find better work-life balance. Having small children means she is not as mobile as she was, but she suggests she can still take advantage of being involved in several art scenes at once. Short term visits and exhibitions help keep her in the loop with her gallerist and with networks in several locations. For her, the detachment from living in the countryside paradoxically makes translocal and multiple detachments more possible: detachment from a dominant core makes attachment to other spaces possible. All our respondents emphasized an idea that whilst aspects of work are centred in the everyday location, their wider work life projects and careers could be seen as translocal and thus polycentric. In the next sections we report on different ways they attempt to create and work in translocal networks and art work spaces.

## 6.2. Creating space for art and artists in the rural

The recognition of solitude's role does not mean living in isolation: all the artists interviewed also pursued strategic local network building. Networks were created between artists in Värmland through temporary gatherings, for example group exhibitions arranged by local galleries, museums, and artist collectives that functioned as crucial nodes shaping the local contemporary art scene. As described earlier, many of the artists emphasized the luxury of affording studio space at home but this was counterposed against missing out on spontaneous meetings they suggested might happen more in collective or shared space. As a way of dealing with this deficit they tended to invest heavily in those networks or events that existed locally, or by building new local network spaces.

Many of the artists suggested that a sort of collegial responsibility and local transparency had developed locally. They were aware of each other and tried to support each other's attempts to relate. At a minimum this meant that they saw it as a responsibility to show up if another happened to exhibit locally both to show support and to gain insight. Hans, a local curator we interviewed, thought this to be a difference between urban and rural artistic networks:

(...) Take Malmö for example, almost every artist there works in a studio collective, where many artists are gathered in the same workspace. Whilst here, almost everyone has their studio at home, particularly those who live in the outer periphery. But I would still say that there is a closer network here than there. People know to a greater extent who each other are and what one is working with and if somebody has an opening, people will show up. So, I guess that is an advantage of living in a region with about 100 professional artists instead of 5000. That it gives a more familial feeling one could say. (Hans, curator in a local museum).

While the urban context offers an extensive range of nearby potential contacts, peripherality delimits the number of possible choices and probable contacts. This potentially means that the network quality is better, as it consists of fewer contacts but stronger bonds and greater transparency. If the volume of possibilities in urban settings can represent a 'tyranny of choice' (Schwartz 2004), a rural context can act as a helpful filter.

Art is not always a solo project and several artists suggested that networks were not just about interaction and spontaneity but a necessary component of many artistic projects. As more and more art and culture grants are project-based, artists in our study found it fruitful to gather people from different artistic fields to collaborate on projects as

collective actors. Andreas is a member of one such collective:

The idea from the start was that we would gather together a group of artists - more brains so to speak -in this little town, who needed studio space. Some are writers, some play music and some are visual artists. So, we have different takes on art, which means that we have a breadth when we apply for project funding. That was the idea, to gather different brains and from that organize different projects (Andreas, established artist).

For artists in the study, this has meant starting art festivals, organizing residencies for visiting international artists, opening galleries in old barns, and a window gallery in a closed down shop. This "do-it-yourself" attitude contributes to making spatial and social connections as both artists and spectators from different parts of the country and internationally come to view, create, and exhibit their art in these peripheral exhibition spaces. Some of our participants have described this as a way to create space for art in the rural, where there have not often been possibilities for the local population to take part in contemporary art. This has also created possibilities for young artists to be able to show their work, make connections and learn how to apply for art grants from more experienced artists.

Even long-established artists have described such actions as a way to evolve as artists since they are able to take charge of the whole process as well as learning from curating other artists. Some explain that you need to "think out of the box" when you have few resources and platforms, and this is good for creativity. Sofie, who had moved to Värmland after many years of travelling and working all over the world described the experience in this way:

(...) with the window gallery we have for the past six years been inviting artists from all over to exhibit there, which is also a way for us to meet people. That's how you can have a feeling that you are still a part of a common cultural ground. There is culture going on, this is not a cultural wasteland. But we are the ones making it. When I was living in [European city] I felt that I was part of a culture that was being made by gallerists and curators and ... you know ... I didn't feel like I was part of that landscape myself, I was just more like an ornament (Sofie, established artist).

Such created spaces for art in the periphery were, several of the artists said, not necessarily production oriented but were important to artistic encounters and creating opportunities for artistic related conversations. In order to facilitate artistic encounters and discussion, this process is often about inviting the local context to take part in the external, and vice versa. This translocal process is, in other words, less about sheltering the creative process and more about inviting external actors and ideas to the local in order to increase creativity and knowledge exchange.

While these collaborative cultural platforms are important to creating space for art in the rural, they also make space for artists in the rural, and link the periphery to the outside. Even though many prefer to work in solitude during parts of the project life cycle, in other phases, collaboration is both necessary and sought after, but they have to create these spaces themselves.

## 6.3. Activating external networks

If solitude and calm might be good for hands-on art making, other phases in the project life cycle demand visibility and active engagement in promoting artwork to gallerists, buyers, and audiences. Research regarding the rural creative economy has highlighted how information and communication technologies have become essential to rural creative work and helped extend artists' geographical reach and open up for global markets (Herslund 2012, 2019; Roberts and Townsend 2016). However, we find that though digital tools can create new opportunities, they are principally used as informational tools rather than as drivers of change. Other types of mobility are still considered central to activating

networks and capturing value.

In many sectors video call and online collaboration software make homeworking and relocation easier. In our case these are mentioned but social media is emphasized over such technologies. While Anna, is not as physically mobile as she used to be in her early career, she actively uses her Instagram profile to promote her work:

Now people find each other easier due to Instagram, I think. And it leads you to the rest of the world as well. I have been invited to things in USA for example ... and Amsterdam ... just because of Instagram. They have just been following me on Instagram and then I have gotten invited to group exhibitions because of that. I didn't travel there though, but my artworks did. Still, I think it's a good way to network (Anna, established artist).

Here social media led to invitations, exhibition of work, and connections. As such they represent spaces of mobility in themselves that allow work to travel and for connections to translocal networks.

Social media has certainly made it easier to expose one's work, keep in touch with gallerists and artists in multiple locations, and stay in touch with what is happening on the international art scene. However, for younger artists trying to become visible social media does not compensate for presence in proximate networks:

I feel like I am losing contact with the networks that I have, unfortunately. Before COVID19 I often travelled to Stockholm to meet colleagues from art school ... there are of course a lot more artists who live in the larger cities, which means that you meet other artists through mutual friends, go to exhibitions and get introduced to people and see these art spaces ... most of these spaces I have already seen on Instagram, but it's not the same as being there and meeting the gallerists and talk to initiative takers (...) There was this young and vibrant gallery that I was following on Instagram and that I really wanted to visit. But then when I got there, I realized that I had followed them for six months and really invested time in that, but they had no idea who I am and that I have been following them. It became so obvious how much of an outsider one is when one cannot participate in a way that makes people know who you are (Lisa, recently graduated artist).

During the pandemic, Lisa moved back to Värmland but the pandemic prevented her from travelling and she could no longer take part in what was going on in Stockholm to the same extent. For Lisa who is at an early stage of her career, she considered that this has become an obstacle to her career, as embeddedness in a particular network or art scene is suggested to require presence. For artists in the earlier career stages the project is not just particular works or collections to be sold but a longer-term project based on reputation and attaining a position or visibility in the field. Short term projects require certain types of space (such as studio production space or sales spaces), longer-term projects often involve more relational spaces where reputation and value can be built up and continually enacted. It is for this reason that all the artists interviewed underlined the travel and short term mobility as central to activating and building networks: face-to-face interaction based on mobility was planned for and accepted as important.

Our study occurred partly within the period of the pandemic and even in rural Sweden face-to-face interaction and mobility was effected. Nonetheless external networks continued to affect the region though how they interacted with those on the ground changed. An example is where just when the pandemic hit, two Danish artists who were to create an exhibition together with an artist group in Värmland could no longer travel to Värmland. Instead of travelling the Danish artists sent working instructions and forms for their artworks and then the Swedish artists carried out the actual production and installation (which was outdoors). This is an example of how networks can facilitate production processes, how networks can survive lack of face-to-face interaction, and how networks can allow for new forms of collaboration. However, as soon as it was possible to travel the Danes came to Värmland.

Theory tells us that even if communication technology can overcome geographical distance and create proximity, it cannot easily replace the features of face-to-face interaction that are essential for building trust and communicating recognition and belonging (Storper and Venables 2004). Moreover interaction at a distance may not fully convince people that they are not missing out and fear of missing out can affect interpretations. The vibrancy of the core is in some ways an unquestioned received wisdom both for us researchers and for the artists in this study. For much of the pandemic core scenes disappeared and post-COVID working practices and the wide adaption of remote working may have hollowed urban agglomerations or lessened their intensity in ways this study cannot see. However for those working in the periphery there continues to be a perception that the interactive grass is greener in urban art centres. This assumption guides artists to attempt to recreate buzz through collaborative activities and exchanges locally as well as to actively work translocally in the hope of retaining or gaining access to the imagined urban maelstrom. For creative work there is an imagined periphery as well as perhaps an imagined centre.

## 7. Conclusion

In this study, locating in the periphery is most often based on reasoning rooted in perspectives on life cycle where artists seek to find a life-work balance. Female artists are often struggling with lower average incomes than male colleagues and often facing greater responsibility for basic needs in nuclear family constellations. Despite Sweden being a society where parental roles are shared to a greater extent, female artists found it difficult, especially when children are young, to balance working in a sector characterised by precarity and individualisation predicated on traditional masculine working norms. The situation that female artists face makes the periphery potentially an attractive locational choice, but real or perceived relational peripherality brings with it a new set of business and career challenges with a resulting set of spatialities.

The paper identifies a number of strategies that female artists use, both to be able to operate in the periphery, but also how they can use their peripheral position in their creative production. The first strategy identified is based on cutting costs in order to focus on core business activities. For our subjects, the periphery offers opportunities to create conditions for viable economic situations through, for example, social support from family and friends as well as lowering costs for both housing and workplaces. The second strategy focuses to a greater extent on the creative process and the creative potential of the periphery. The creative process consists of different phases where reflection and solitude may be important components in 'sheltering the creative process' (Grabher 2018) just as these creative phases may benefit from access to unique rural affordances such as contact with nature. The third strategy deals with the ways in which the artists both maintain already established network relationships and create new ones. By interacting in translocal structures, they reach places that constitute relevant nodes for both creativity and marketing. The empirical examples show how mobility as well as social media are crucial for maintaining these relationships when located in the periphery and indicate that many such working lives are essentially translocal just as they are polycentric. However, whilst established artists managed translocal careers relatively successfully, artists in the early stages of the career cycle seemed to struggle to establish networks and connect to the core. When establishing a career temporary presence in the core supplemented by communication technology and social media can be relatively superficial and not enough to create the kind of quality interactions needed to build strong translocal networks.

Arguably, the life of artists in the periphery involves a multidimensional fabric of strategies made up of a complex balance between everyday aspects and creative endeavours. We find that these strategies are also about going in and out of both topographic and topological peripheries in order to sometimes be in the periphery and sometimes in



the centre. It is thus about how different complex work and life cycles overlap with each other and how the studied artists make use of their topographical and topological positions in their professional working lives.

The strategies identified and discussed in this paper relate to possible policy implications. First, while it is clear that artists manage to much themselves and that networks consisting of family and friends are important for budgetary/economic reasons and a functioning everyday life, indirect subsidies through the general Swedish welfare system and direct support from regional and national cultural policy play crucial roles. Second, both the strategies for sheltering the creative process as well as maintaining/creating new network relationships point at possible implications for better understanding of the importance of mobility policies in the cultural sector. While digital platforms and social media seem to help facilitate already established networks (though more research is needed on this topic in relation to workers in the periphery), creating new networks appears to be more efficient in face-to-face settings. Support for art producers in the periphery should prioritise helping peripheral professionals local interactions and translocal mobility.

In conclusion, despite our study being relatively limited in scale and scope, we hope to have made a small contribution to challenging core-periphery dualism and the often taken for granted dichotomy between core and periphery that has been problematized in a growing body of literature (Pugh and Dubois 2021). The paper underlines the importance of shifting focus from an understanding of the periphery as one-dimensional and static, to understanding the periphery as a process and a state with multiple meanings: both topographic (spatial) and topological (relational). We also contribute to challenging the presumption that whilst urban creativity is collective, rural creativity is individual and lacking the benefits of closeness and agglomeration. Rather than the dualism presented in the creativity literature, we suggest that the case exposes the importance of thinking relational, spatially and temporarily in terms of project and career life cycles. Most importantly to us, our study is another piece addressing how much economic geography and creativity studies have overlooked and understudied the spatiality of women's working lives and creativity (Reid-Musson et al. 2020). Our hope is that more research will be able to contribute to the underdeveloped policies (Duxbury 2021) that deal with cultural and creative work in rural and peripheral contexts and particularly that such further research should focus on support for professional women operating in the periphery.

#### Data statement

Due to the sensitive nature of the questions asked in this study, survey respondents were assured raw data would remain confidential and would not be shared. Data not available/The data that has been used is confidential.

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**Tina Mathisen:** Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Johan Jansson:** Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Dominic Power:** Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Conceptualization.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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The data that has been used is confidential.

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