

MAKING DREAMS

The Breakthrough of Contemporary Photography in Finland

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Finnish contemporary photography is part of the most interesting photography at the moment. This article gives a view to this phenomenon by analysing the factors behind the success. Finnish photography is seen here as an example of a well managed cultural product. The issues in this article are: reflecting the state of the success, how it happened, what the artists and their works are and what kind of roots and background Finnish Photography has.

The discussed artists are limited to those included in the 30byTaiK exhibition at the Finnish Museum of Photography 4.5. – 15.8.2004 in the Cable Factory, Helsinki. It will be shown in Kulturhuset in Stockholm under the title “Personligt” in autumn 2005 and in Berlin in the fall the same year. When the large exhibition started in Helsinki it included 33 artists with 176 mostly large works and 4 video installations. Later it will be even bigger. The exhibition is available also as a web site www.30byTaiK.com. It shows the Helsinki School, which includes Photographers who studied or teaches at the University of Art and Design, UIAH, in the recent years. It is not a whole image of Finnish Photography at the moment but it covers most of the successful photography artists.

The state of success

In the beginning of 2003 Hasse Persson curated an exhibition of Finnish Photography to the Hasselblad Center in Gothenburg. Also a seminar concerning “Why a Finnish Success” was organized. In the seminar many Swedish participants were worried about the situation that Finnish photography is more interesting than Swedish. For Finns to be famous in the eyes of Swedes is always something good. This also shows respect to Swedish photography. Until the 1990’s Stockholm was the place for Finns to explore photography in the galleries and particularly the international photo art collection at the Fotografiska Museet in the Moderna Museet. The connection between Finnish and Swedish photography has long roots starting from the early 20th century.

The seminar was organized at the moment when Finnish photography had been in focus for some years and was developing to be a phenomenon. The development for success was started by the professor of Professional Studies, Timothy Persons in the year 1997. He was asked by rector Yrjö Sotamaa to teach artist management to the photographers and ceramists. The main issue was how to sell your works abroad since Finland is such a small market for art photography.

One of the main factors for the success has been art photography education in Finland, which is on a very high level. It is taught on the BA-level in Turku and Lahti. MA and doctoral level are available at the UIAH in Helsinki. Part of the students comes from abroad, for example from Germany and Sweden.

The technical and theoretical education was on a high level in the TaiK photography education also in 1997. But students needed more tutoring on how to present and sell their works. Timothy Persons' idea was to teach the students how artist management works in a real international art world context. His goal was to go to the art fairs with the most promising students. All students were involved in teaching but only some were selected for the events. That of course raised some resistance. But the first lesson was that the art world is not democratic. Timothy Persons wanted to show how you have to work hard for your rights and make art of the highest quality. The second lesson may be that an artwork is not to be sold if the quality of art is weak.

Timothy Persons is an artist himself, a painter and a ceramist. He has been working as a gallerist and started his first gallery in the late 1980's. "Persons and Lindell" showed artists like Donald Judd. This experience has helped Mr. Persons to make a very good international network among the galleries and museums.

In the beginning director of the Finnish Museum of Photography Asko Mäkelä was asked to teach how art museums and galleries work in their selection process. The goal in the education was to show how to present your production in a professional way. Together with Timothy Persons they organized situations where the students had to present their works to a fictive museum director and a gallerist – in English. The students had to produce a portfolio of themselves with a one page introduction to the art works. This helped many to get more self-confidence. It was easier to fail before the teachers than in a real situation. For the teachers one could make a new, better try. Students also heard about weaknesses and strengths of their artworks and presentation.

This education was not about the development of ideas or how to make an image. All the students decided themselves what kind of images they wanted to produce and what was the content. Artist Management studies were focused only on how to manage the production process and the presentation of the piece of art to the customers in a professional way.

A lot of effort was put to make an unbreakable chain of good quality from the idea to the realisation of an artwork. It is essential that the permanence of the artwork is to be taken into account in the print, framing, packing and transportation of the works. A photograph as a medium is fragile and easily vanishes if wrong materials or working methods are used. Conservator Riitta Koskivirta from the Finnish Museum of Photography taught about the approvable materials and methods in printing, framing and packing the artworks. From the beginning the goal of education was to meet international museum standards in the materials and handling of the artwork.

The first opportunity for the students to show works in public was during the opening of Kiasma, the contemporary art museum in Helsinki 30.5.1998. Timothy Persons hired some 800m² to show students works. The space was renovated and painted mostly by himself. The gallery TaiK was founded. Gallery TaiK is actually a virtual gallery since it does not have a steady place. It is up always in a new location suitable for the situation. Many international gallerists, museum directors and curators visited the first exhibition because of the opening of Kiasma. One third of the works were sold and the process got a good start.

The next step was to open a booth at the Stockholm Art Fair 1998. The Finnish Museum of Photography bought large series from Elina Brotherus and Andrei Lajunen to guarantee that the photographers had money to produce the works for the Fair. The acquisition was noted also in the Fair. Museums, collectors and galleries got interested in the photographs. TaiK-gallery was the best selling gallery in the Stockholm Art Fair that year. The audience was amazed of the quality of the photographs by students. For collectors it was an interesting option to find something new happening in art photography. Word of the very promising young Finnish photographers was spread.

The timing for this education was good. There was already interest toward Finnish photography after Esko Männikkö. He was known as a worldwide star. The other photographers coming from his country were also looked at with interest. Esko Männikkö is a good example of a mythical Finnish man. He does not talk much. Actually he talks quite seldom - like do all the men in northern Finland. There is a story of Esko Männikkö's exhibition opening in New York where he was present. Nan Golding comes in and asks if they could exchange an artwork. Männikkö says slowly to her: "I hate your works. I change nothing." He has also surprised galleries by staying in Finland and going for fishing with his silent friends instead of going to the opening of his exhibition. True or not, Esko Männikkö was the mystical man from the beginning. His success started when Peter Schjeldahl wrote an article about his works in ARS 95 to Artforum. In the article he tells that he bought one of Esko Männikkö's work for himself, which was a quite unusual statement. On the day when Artforum came out, New York gallerists tried to find out who represents him in New York or in Finland. They smelled business. But Esko Männikkö did not have a gallerist and did not even talk so much and even less in English. Claes Nordenhake started then to represent him from Stockholm. Esko Männikkö was the first internationally marketed Finnish photography artist.

Real Business

Hasse Persson states that: “Finnish photography is blooming” in his book “Photographs as Collector’s Items” in this series of lectures 2003. Collectors in Norway, Holland, Sweden, France, Germany and in Finland has invested quite much in the Helsinki School. They see it as an important part of contemporary photography.

The focus of the marketing of Finnish contemporary Photography has been in art fairs. The real business is there. Also the fairs are a great possibility to make your art works known for the international market and press. Gallery TaiK has been presenting students works in all Stocholm Art Fairs after 1998. Also it has been present in Paris Art Fair several times during the Mois de la Photo, one of the leading events in photography marketing in the whole world.

As part of the events of Mois de la Photo 2001 Musee de la Photographie in Paris showed Finnish Photography in a special exhibition. Curator Andrea de Holzherr invited Andrei Lajunen, Elina Brotherus, Jyrki Parantainen and Ola Kolehmainen to this dignified house. Gallery TaiK has been a great success for many years during Mois de la Photo in Paris. The collectors have always been invited to the openings of TaiK exhibitions. Connections have been active all the time also by phone. The world of photography marketing showed its respect to Timothy Persons by inviting him as a member of the board of the Mois de la Photo.

30byTaiK at the Finnish Museum of Photography marked the beginning of an important phase in Finnish Photography. Over twenty gallerists and collectors came to the opening with their own money to see and hear the latest news of the Finnish phenomenon. That shows the level of their real interest to the artists and their works. Among many international visitors during the exhibition were the Friends of the Photography Department of the Ludwig Museum in Essen who visited the exhibition with the director Ute Eskildsen. Visitor’s wide knowledge of contemporary Finnish photography was notable. This is maybe the best indicator that something is happening.

Germany is a very important market for Finnish Photography. Berlin Art Fair has also become an opportunity for Gallery TaiK to present Finnish photography.

How should one describe Helsinki School? British curator and writer Val Williams participated in Helsinki Oracle-conference in 2000 among 130 photo museum directors and curators. Her point of view on Scandinavian photography was very interesting. According to her, Scandinavian photography has a common outlook of much open space and clear forms. She compared Scandinavian photography to Scandinavian design and saw many things in common. This kind of clearness in space, colour and form is very typical also for the Helsinki School images. In this formal framework Ola Kolehmainen and Pertti Kekarainen concentrate in the forms of buildings and interiors giving them conceptual meanings. Artists like Aino

Kannisto, Elina Brotherus and Ulla Jokisalo examine feminist issues interpreting memory and identity that Jorma Puranen has been taking up in his images. Ilkka Halso's digital constructions of landscape, the holy place for Finnish nature photography, shows what may happen to our nature if pollution goes further. In the formally clean images there are several different questions are an essential part of our society's political problems.

Success on their own

Even the 30byTaiK is the most visible in Finnish contemporary photography it is not the whole story of what is happening in Finland in art photography. At this moment there are also some 15 photography artists who are showing their works independently around the world, like Pentti Sammallahti. Also artists included in the gallery TaiK events are showing their works in other galleries and group exhibitions. All together there are some 50 Finnish photographers with international reputation.

In Finland artists have quite good possibilities to get support for their exhibitions or travel to their private exhibition openings. Arts Council gives travel support yearly to some 40 art photographers for their private or group exhibitions abroad. Also Frame, the Finnish Fund for Art Exchange, is very active in supporting art photography. Some embassies, like the Embassy of Finland in France has been important and very professional in helping in different ways when organizing art photography events in Paris and also in other parts of the country.

The Photography Commission of the Arts Council has supported over 100 photography books with quality support during last 20 years. Books of photography artists production has been very important in presenting artists work to the world. A book is also an essential part of the marketing and shows the professional level of an artist.

Frame and the Hippolyte-gallery run by the Art Photographers organisation are the main sources for curators coming from abroad to Finland. They have almost two hundred fresh portfolios by Finnish photography artists.

Winterthur Museum of Photography in Switzerland is one of the leading museums in Europe. When it opened in new premises in November 2003 the director Urs Stahel curated an exhibition of the eight most interesting young European photographers in an exhibition called "Ordnung & Chaos". Three of them were from Finland: Nanna Hänninen, Marjaana Kella and Juha Nenonen. And this is only one among the many exhibitions abroad where Finns have a central role. It will be very interesting to find out the number of private and group exhibitions abroad when the research funded by the Academy of Finland concerning the internationalisation of Finnish photography will be ready in the year 2008. Finnish art photography has been exhibited abroad for decades. Before this happened through the Photo Clubs and their international exhibitions or through cultural exchange between the states. Now it is taken place through professional marketing.

Video has become a part of photographers work. Artists like Heli Rekula, Elina Brotherus, Veli Granö, Eija-Liisa Ahtila and Salla Tykkä use video as an essential part of their work. Some of them nowadays use more video than photography. In Santeri Tuori's video piece Karlotta, 2003 the photograph is a layer in the video and the work is shown as a video projection.

In general Finnish photography seems to be able to introduce the kind of wide range of photography that interests the audience right now. The content fits to peoples ideas of an interesting image varying from crazy ideas of flying to interpretations of a woman and to ecological statements. The images are not too provocative to be lived with in a private apartment although they have a message.

What is needed for success?

Without good ideas are touching on something important no art may rise to the public interest. It helps young talents if the level of the education is very good and the university may help in getting contacts with the real art market from the beginning.

Timothy Persons talked about his strategies in the seminar “Kaukametsä” in Kajaani, Finland 2004. The seminar was focused on the marketing of Finnish culture abroad and organized by the Ministry of Education. In that seminar Timothy Persons put his ideas of marketing in nine statements that he marked by stairs on the stage. Success may come for a University and it’s students if you have:

- a) Creative students
- b) A good quality education
- c) The university has a will to support arts management
- d) Professional personnel to go for art fairs
- e) You have a different strategy for each fair
- f) Connections to the galleries
- g) Connections to the collectors
- h) Connections to art museums and art halls
- i) Support by the University, sponsors or the state

The lessons of Professional Studies may be summed up in seven main lines.

1. You can’t sell bad images.
Print quality must meet the museum standards.
Framing must be professional also in materials.
Packing must meet museum standards.
2. Know the trends and follow them – or break them and make something special.
Content must be strong but too provocative images. are hard to sell to a wide audience.
3. You have to have good relations to galleries, museums and art halls: develop them.
Presentation material must be updated regularly.
Keep clients updated of what you are working with.
Do not underestimate your clients.
4. Make sure to inform about the number of works in different series to avoid misunderstandings.
5. Keep prices on the right level.

Find a good gallery that makes the selling of the works and you can concentrate in making new works.

6. Be sure that you have three production lines going on all the time to keep your production fresh: one set of works finished and ready for an exhibition, a second set in production and a third as ideas and sketches.
7. Images are stories – tell them to the audience.

Some day the wind stops - also for the Finnish contemporary photography. All events will be replaced with a new, fresh one. When this happens it is not your fault if you have done business with the best images that you can produce. You have done your work as well as you can. It is only the market that has changed. Maybe you are not able to change your style to follow the new trends. If your images are good they will sell always – maybe less than earlier, but there is an audience and a market for them. After 20 years you are a star again when the retro times are back. Sometimes it takes 100 years.

Success is not everything. Like Hasse Persson said to me once: “We should invest only in the images we really like.” If the images are close to the artist and to the collector it has been worth making and buying them.

Main events in the Finnish history of photography

Year	Period	Artists
1842	First photographic image 3.11.1842 of a Nobel-house in Turku by daguerreotype method.	Henrik Kajander,
1890's	First photographer who intentionally makes photographic art, landscapes, was I.K. Inha	I.K. Inha, Daniel Nyblin, Vivi Richter, Reinhold Hausen, J. Reinberg.
1910's	Pictorialist period	Wladimir Schohin, Harald Rosenberg, Signe Brander, Ivan Timirjasev,
1920's - 1930's	1 st period of modernism and formalism	Vilho Setälä, Heindrich Iffland, Heikki Aho, Björn Soldan, Erik Blomberg, Eino Mäkinen, Aarne Uusikylä, Georg Tschernochvostoff, Otso Pietinen
1940's	Wartime and lack of materials	
1950's	The 2 nd period of modernism related to German Subjective Photography	Per Olov Jansson, Otso Pietinen, Eero Raviniemi, Hilja Raviniemi, Matti A. Pitkänen
1960's	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Realism of the country, which is building itself up again after the war. • Images are much influenced by the "Family of Man" –exhibition shown in Kunsthalle, Helsinki. 	Matti Saanio, Caj Bremer, Seppo Saves, Martti Brandt, Kristian Runeberg, Bert Carpelan,
1970's	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political realism and great black and white photo documentaries • The Finnish museum of Photography starts its activities. Hippolyte— gallery was founded, 	Ismo Hölttö, Mikkö Savolainen, Pertti Hietanen, Risto Vuorimies, Ben Kaila, Antero Takala
1980's	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Art photography starts to deal with more personal histories 	Pentti Sammallahti, Jorma Puranen, Stefan Bremer, Timo

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internationally oriented • Vanhan galleria (gallery of Old Student House). • Theory of Photography come to the focus • Postmodern thinking 	Kelaranta, Jan Kaila, Ulla Jokisalo, Ari Saarto, Magnus Scharmanoff, Jyrki Parantainen, Kari Soinio, Pekka Turunen, Ritva Kovalainen, Marjukka Vainio
1990's	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Art photography integrates in art. Art museums start buying photographs. • The Finnish Museum of Photography re-organized in 1996. • Video becomes a common part of the photographers work • University of Art and Design starts professional studies 1998. 	Esko Männikkö, Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Elina Brotherus, Veli Granö, Pertti Kekarainen, Heli Rekula, Jouko Lehtola, Petri Anttonen, Juha Nenonen, Heidi Tikka, Tuomo Manninen, Juha Metso, Marjaana Kella, Andrei Lajunen, Joakim Eskildsen, Ilkka Halso, Riitta Päiväläinen, Ola Kolehmainen
2000's	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International interest towards Finnish photography • Art museums and galleries in Finland start show photography. Helsinki City Art Museum and Kiasma. Galleria Anhava and Artina. • 30byTaiK at the Finnish Museum of Photography, Helsinki, Stockholm, Berlin, Brussels, Antwerpen, Paris 	Salla Tykkä, Jari Silomäki, Santeri Tuori, Nanna Hänninen, Aino Kannisto, Sanna Kannisto, Miklos Gaál, Maarit Hohteri, Sandra Kantanen, Janne Lehtinen, Ville Lenkkeri, Niko Luoma, Tiina Itkonen

Asko Mäkelä

Asko Mäkelä (b. 1958) has been working as the director of the Finnish Museum of Photography since 1996. He has been in charge of organizing international congresses on museum management of the cultural heritage in the digital age. Before FMP he worked as a curator of media arts at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki. He has curated over a hundred contemporary art exhibitions starting from an avant-garde gallery in the early 1980's (Vanhan galleria) and published several books on art, media and photography. Asko Mäkelä has been working as an art critic (AICA) and a professor of Media Education. He is a member of the Arts Council of Finland until 2006.