

## **Nanna Hänninen – Asymmetrical Exposures**

*“The time for reflection is also the chance for turning back on the very conditions of reflection, in all the senses of that word, as if with the help of an optical device one could finally see sight, could not only view the natural landscape, the city, the bridge and the abyss, but could view viewing.”*

Jacques Derrida (1983:19)

Every art form mirrors the period in which it is created. This is because style, when forceful enough, will always leave its mark on contemporary artistic production – whether it be painting, sculpture, design, architecture, etc.

Let us dwell on architecture for a moment before we move on to photography – the chosen art form of Finnish artist Nanna Hänninen. There can be little doubt as to which type of building is most characteristic of 20<sup>th</sup> century Western civilisation. It has to be the skyscraper. Skyscrapers combine functionalism and simplicity with an inherent, minimalist aesthetic. Their smooth, shiny facades, reflecting surfaces and their thousands of tiny, identical windows create the loveliest symmetrical patterns when seen from a distance. It is tempting to see in these patterns certain parallels – albeit unintentional – to the non-figurative, figure-less patterns so typical of decorative Islamic art. Seen in this light, there might seem to be some sort of unifying principle in the cultures of the world.

Skyscrapers are a triumphant expression of the inexorable laws of geometry, unparalleled since the construction of the pyramids in Giza three thousand years before the beginning of the Christian era. A skyscraper is essentially a gigantic polyhedron. A polyhedron is a three-dimensional geometrical figure with a number of flat surfaces, which both define and restrict it in space. Polyhedra come in many shapes, varieties – and sizes. The best known is the cube, the surfaces of which are squares. Another well-known polyhedron is the pyramid, the surfaces of which are triangles.

The largest polyhedra known to Man were the Twin Towers, which were once the centre of the World Trade Center in New York. They no longer exist. On the other hand they loom up in our collective consciousness to a greater extent than they ever did when they existed. They have become symbols.

### **The Transformation**

Even today, seven years after the terrorist attack in New York on September 11, 2001, it is still too early to assess the overall significance of ‘9/11’ for Western civilisation. The political, military and economic consequences of the attack have dominated newspaper and television headlines ever since – not to mention the consciousness of people all over the world. In contrast to this, the effect of the attack on the cultural and mental climate has been more indirect, more submerged, more intangible. But certainly by no means less drastic.

One of the artists who has embraced this global transformation – and indeed employed it as an artistic theme – is Nanna Hänninen. Her basic premise is that the world will never be the same after ‘9/11’. The same can be said of the pictorial art, which is the product of a transformed global consciousness. Nanna Hänninen’s most recent works, beautiful and crystalline as they may appear, are pervaded by a sense of turbulence and unrest. They may appear serene to the beholder, but they bear within them the unrest of our time.

Nanna Hänninen incorporates her own emotions and ideas about the Twin Towers attack in her interpretation of this milestone in modern history. To her, it is an event that calls for a subjective reaction: in the form of images. Apart from her emotional and intellectual reaction there is also Nanna’s fascination of the skyscraper phenomenon and her admiration of its beauty and structural purity. At the same time her fascination is tainted by her awareness of a skyscraper’s fragility and vulnerability in an age when wars are no longer fought out between armies of soldiers alone.

Seen in this light, the skyscraper shares a common destiny with the civilisation that invented it. Enormous and unending as it seems from below, it is a giant on feet of clay when attacked from above. In her photographic collection “Asymmetric Exposures” Nanna Hänninen tempers her admiration of the skyscraper’s enormity with a disturbing truth: that this miraculous construction with its concrete, steel and

glass can, in certain circumstances, be as frail as a house made entirely of glass. The skyscraper thus becomes an image of the fragility of our civilisation and its fundamental lack of stability.

## Asymmetry

Nanna Hänninen's newest works are the result of a highly specialised photographic technique, which is undergoing constant development. Just like abstract pictorial art, modern photography utilises its boundless potential by experimenting with a version of reality, which is not immediately recognisable. This is no accident. Discerning audiences have no desire to be reminded of what they already know. On the contrary, they expect art to transgress old boundaries and explore new territory. But in any artistic medium, the task of expressing anything fundamentally new has become more difficult than ever. It takes courage to reduce artistic expression to absolute adequacy. Which is what Nanna Hänninen does.

Nanna Hänninen has never simply used her art to visualise a world, which she takes for granted. This is why you will never see in her work any direct or reproduced references to all the well-known images with which we are bombarded by the printed and electronic media; images which are already imprinted on our mind's eye and stored in our consciousness. It is the artist's privilege to rise above simple registration and documentation. Instead, she moves forward towards a new truth – a truth, which is not a repetition of old, familiar truths, but rather their transformation or metamorphosis. On this level, truth does not belong to a certain moment of time or a certain locality. It has freed itself from the coordinates of space and time and creates its own patterns in the universe around us. In the universe of art, photographs can never lie, and never tell untruths. In an artistic context, everything that is beautiful is also true.

In her most recent production Nanna Hänninen creates new photographic expression by superimposing layers of skyscraper exposures. At first glance the effect is reminiscent of sheets of glass or of transparent, crystalline material creating a kaleidoscopic pattern when exposed to light. A paradox begins to take shape: the image of the skyscraper has now become a building brick in the formation of new images. The result is a collision of structures, transformed in the hands of the artist to a poetical symbiosis. New structures suddenly appear when shapes intertwine, overlap, colour each other, interfere with each other. Usually, when you superimpose one structure on another, the result is a zone that gets progressively darker as the process continues. However, in art it is quite legitimate to turn positive into negative and thereby "turn light around" – a technique with which Nanna Hänninen has experimented in the past. When you do it this way, the sum of added structures gives rise to a lighter, rather than a darker, zone. Irrespective of the amount of light present, it is here that the rotating effect of an image has its centre, its pivot, its axis. It is a circular movement which only time can bring to a halt. And time only does so for the sake of appearances.

All of these asymmetrical exposures usually exist in two dimensions. But three-dimensional space is also a player in the constructional process. First it has to be won, systematised and structured. Renaissance artist Paolo Uccello did something along the same lines over 450 years ago when he used spatial geometry to bring structure to an apparently random world. Nanna Hänninen, too, moves on into the third dimension and takes spatial geometry with her as her intimate ally. With its help she constructs a figure in space, a dodecahedron – a polyhedron with twelve surfaces, each one a pentagon. This new sculpture is simply a logical development of her work with space in a photograph – and with a photograph in space.

In the early days of photography there existed a relationship between reality and photography that was somewhat reminiscent of the traditional relationship between master and servant. On the whole it was the master who told his servant what to do. Today that servant has become his own master and photography has gained the freedom to dictate its own potential and its own limitations. It no longer needs to pay due to what can only be seen in the natural world. To exploit the photographic process in the way that Nanna Hänninen does is precisely *not* to repeat what her senses have already told her, but to construct a new world which is defined and controlled by the potential inherent to a photographic work. A medium that does not create illusions, but visions.

*Peter Michael Hornung, Artistic Editor of 'Politiken'*