

## How about the Future?

The idea of fighting the advance of climate change is anything but new. The history of this fight, however, is a history of failures: instead of stopping the change we are now trying to adapt to it and limit global warming. We are aware that if global temperatures continue to rise at the present rate, the challenges to humankind will be insurmountable. It is also obvious that the sixth mass extinction is well on its way. Still, greenhouse gas emissions keep growing, and biodiversity loss continues. We know the impact of our choices on the planet. And yet we often ignore this awareness in our everyday choices.

Acknowledging these facts is in the core of Nanna Hänninen's recent works. Her series of photographs visualize the research of climate change and the moral imperatives of climate awareness. A decidedly present-day artist, Hänninen tackles her subject with a scientist's analytical approach, and some of her latest works are based on conversations with climate researchers in the Finnish Meteorological Institute.

Her new photographs, shot against a black backdrop, are conceptual still-lives. Nanna Hänninen sees herself first and foremost as a conceptual artist, which is manifest in the importance she gives to the materials and specifications of her works. In *The Balance of Knowledge and Selfunderstanding III*, desert sand, a cord and a mirror encourage the viewer to moral deliberation, and in *Melting Ice*, the screw clamps are trying to hold together a lump of ice from the Arctic Ocean. These works are reminiscent of traditional still-life compositions; instead of action or everyday scenes they depict mere stillness. Hänninen lays out the situation of our planet on a researcher's desk with discipline, concision and very few elements.

From an individual point of view, acute global problems may appear too distant and overwhelming to comprehend. Hänninen is by no means trying to heighten our anxiety. She neither inundates us with shocking pictures of suffering nor tries to appeal to our emotions, and the viewer is not forced to discuss or take a stand on the themes of her works.

We hardly need art to provoke discussion in contemporary society, which is "so full of conversation of all sorts that we are about to suffocate on prattling and babbling," as Teemu Mäki points out in his essay collection *Taiteen tehtävä* (Function of Art). Mäki, an artist and PhD in fine arts, suggests that pondering social problems when looking at art may be outright harmful, as the discussion in itself feels rewarding and makes us think we've accomplished something. Thus looking at art may become a substitute action that hinders critical thinking.

Nanna Hänninen's work, however, seems to ask whether a work of art could be used as a means of rational thinking. Apparently Hänninen once planned a career in photojournalism. But unlike journalists, Hänninen does not address social phenomena in real life but photographs them safely in a miniature world of her own creation with any randomness removed. These solemn studies, constructed in the quiet of the studio, band together well with Hänninen's earlier minimalistic works.

### *Now Is Now - Studies on Experiencing Time*

The beauty and the problem of photography is that it freezes reality despite the fact that everything is in constant motion. How to represent this motion and change? Hänninen's series *Every moment is a moment* is an attempt to solve the problem: each work focuses on two consecutive *now* moments, two minuscule microunits in the long line that constitutes our experience of living.

The works in the series *Every moment is a moment* are studies in time – but can art really examine time *per se*? Does it actually examine the experience of time passing? Physical time is another matter, one of life's most complex mysteries. Hänninen's photographs, however, evoke the bond between time and space: time is change that occurs in space, and with modern satellites we can see into the distant past. Hänninen slows down the movement of objects against a black backdrop, which brings to mind a ray of light traveling in space, covering a given distance while measuring the time. Kari Enqvist, a Finnish professor of cosmology, points out that in cosmic perspective, the speed of light is a fairly slow trot.

In recent years, Hänninen has been working under the title *Now is now*, and the series *Every moment is a moment* falls under this heading. *Now is now* refers to the relationship between the present and history, as

well as our constantly recurring chance to choose – it is easy to criticize decisions made in the past, but how many of us realize that the history of tomorrow is made today? If we want to act, the time is now.

### *The Importance of Curiosity*

To a child, her mother's handbag represents the unknown world of an adult woman, to be looked into only by permission. As an adult, you take up your mother's handbag for different reasons, perhaps to do something for her. Then again, it is often said that everything you need in life can be found in a woman's handbag. *Mother's Handbag (and the importance of curiosity and other mysteries of life)* is a venture into the past, into one's own history, but it is also an suggestion: it dares the viewer to look bravely into life's mysteries.

Curiosity is the force that propels humankind forward. In *Unsolved universe* and *Understanding the big picture* Hänninen, in a way, salutes curiosity and research. When the scrunched-up paper springs out from the metal case, and the paper "flame" shoots up bright and joyous, it is impossible to turn back.

### *Future at Stake*

Among Nanna Hänninen's latest works is a series of photographs shot in the Mojave desert, which is home to one of the most ancient organisms on earth, the creosote bush. Using a black backdrop Hänninen focuses our attention on the plant that is able to clone itself and go on living as long as 18,000 years. The backdrop frames only a part of the plant that reaches beyond the backdrop and out of the picture. By featuring a plant that thrives in dry soil as a scene from the future, the artist seems to give us a warning. There may also be a comforting, post-humanist thought: the creosote bush could be one of the survivors on our planet, and its capacity to disperse cannot be controlled by humans. Life always seeks to find a way to prosper.

In her early works, Nanna Hänninen has recorded feelings of insecurity in the post 9/11 society. From the early 2000s on, she has concentrated on portraying the individual experience in society and themes of insecurity, exclusion, and our need for and the impossibility of control. At present Hänninen is looking into the potential functions of art outside galleries. She has devised a facilitation technique based on photographs, using conceptual thinking inherent in contemporary art as a communication and problem solving tool for communities.

In the debate on climate change, the role of artists and exhibition organizers remains ambiguous. The art field relies on a system that burdens the environment. Works of art – even critical works addressing climate change – are transported long distances into museums where temperature and humidity are closely controlled. Indeed, transport of artworks and people to various locations is a basic premise for showing art. Some artists have started to question the conventions of the art world in their works. The art community needs to consider their actions critically – which works of art are worth burdening the environment, and on what grounds?

In her most recent works Hänninen shows an increasingly active ambition to modify our way of thinking. How and why does art affect us, and how can we make use of this process in everyday life, outside the art scene? In Hänninen's new works, her awareness of the earth's alarming situation is even more pronounced: a dodecahedron thrown on the snow smokes, forgotten, until it bursts into flames. How about the Future, then?

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