

"I have a strong visual idea that I use to bring out my thoughts and questions. A picture is a scene, a kind of theatre through which I create a new world and write the scripts. I like to get minimal with visuality, to go deeper in my thoughts. Pureness is an idea itself. The pureness, even the puritanism of my pictures is a moral approach. If form and visuality can be philosophical then that is in my photographs." (-Nanna Hänninen)

Potentiality of Form

*An Introduction to the Work
of Nanna Hänninen*

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Translated by Michael Münchow

The Finnish visual artist, Nanna Hänninen (b. 1973) works with a formal language that is strangely intangible. Her photographs set out from a material world with recognisable objects from everyday life: boxes, paper and stickers. Obviously ordinary, trivial things whose existence and poetic potential we typically overlook or take for granted. But not so in the case of Hänninen. Her eye for even the most insignificant and dispensable objects forms the basis of the visual universe that she explores with a visual sensibility and acute awareness.

It is an absolutely minimal universe that Hänninen puts forward. She makes use of very few props, indeed, to create her sparse and puritanical spaces. Her universe contains an element of fiction, since her seemingly real pictorial spaces, consisting of physical objects, do in fact appear quite unreal. The actual scales within her photographs remain vague and hard to define, making it difficult to orientate oneself within the pictorial space. The objects seem at once close by and far away. Her pictures suggest a grounding within reality, but appear at the same time to eschew it. There is, in other words, something 'unheimlich' about Hänninen's 'heimliche' universe.

The pictures are saturated with a whiteness that Hänninen consistently and rigorously, barring a remarkably few number of exceptions, allows to permeate her photographs. Hänninen is seemingly never tempted to let colour play any role, but lets the white colour carry the mood of her ideas. Her works are aesthetically refined and delicate, cleared of noise and superfluous effects. She courageously focuses on what is simple and trivial and thus creates a radically minimalist aesthetics that, in her photographs, allows for inexhaustible investigation and exploration.

The photographic pictorial spaces defy any subjugation to form, and yet they are concerned with precisely that: giving form, defining form, and creating space around form. Hänninen's visual move is characterised by simplicity and a repeated insistence on the possibility of objects to materialise and become form. The vague suggestions of emerging form are created by an almost monotonous, tedious slowness. The pictures are roaring with silence. But this is not to say that her pictures are boring. On the contrary. They constitute an invitation to explore the everyday spaces with a contemplative, or almost meditative, attunement, and the pictures are rich in discovery to those that have an eye for it. And so does Hänninen who, in her photographs, puts focus on a familiar world.

The photographic medium

Like many contemporary artists, Nanna Hänninen works primarily with photography. Since the 1980s, this medium has dominated contemporary avant-garde art, and it is particularly within photography that many innovations have occurred. The interest in the photographic medium should be seen in the light of the basic preoccupation within contemporary art, as regards how reality allows itself to be portrayed in art. How our existential experiences and insights may be translated and interpreted within an artistic visual universe. Traditionally, photography is perceived as a medium with a privileged relation to reality

itself. Since its invention in the mid-1800s, visual art has used photography as a truthful 'witness' with respect to events and occurrences. Erroneously, one thought that photography was incapable of lying, twisting, or manipulating truth, but that it portrayed reality 'as it appears'. However, it is obvious that photography remains an interpretation of what has been seen.

These in a sense diverging views of photography have formed the basis of contemporary use of the photographic image. On the one hand, the notion that reality may be captured on a sheet sensitive to light is accepted. But on the other hand, one has also come to realise that the discussion concerning the special relationship between photography and its representation of reality is only interesting to the extent that one acknowledges the immanent un-reality of photography. That photography, just like a painting, remains a subjective, constructed fragment whose statement is determined by the gaze behind the photographic lens.

Artists like Nanna Hänninen work with this paradox of photography in an attempt to ground and interpret an experience of reality within an artistic visual universe. Hänninen is preoccupied by the particular visuality and aesthetics of photography, but it is basically its relation to reality that seems to determine her choice of medium.

The formalist base

One could term Hänninen's artistic project a neo-modernist investigation of the formal possibilities of photography. Not in the sense that she is solely preoccupied with reproduction of form and definition of space. Her formal and conceptual background lies rather within modernist photography as it emerged in the 1920s and '30s.

Modernist photography explored aesthetic ideas through visual innovations. Leading artists like Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, Walter Peterhans, and Albert Renger-Patzsch used unconventional methods of looking at the world and challenged the established notion of the possibilities of photography. The artists behind the Bauhaus school and the New Objectivity movement did, for instance, through their experimental photography, point towards forms that would otherwise have remained unseen and unnoticed. The starting point was the industrial world, and they sought to disclose the diverse appearances of that world by way of fragments, rather than portraying them in terms of being a visual totality. Motifs became divorced from reality, and so modern photography brought into focus the ability of photography to concentrate one's gaze on the beauty of the individual object. The result was that the sharply defined images came close to geometrical abstraction.

That photography, to Moholy-Nagy for instance, should acquire a prominent status at the Bauhaus school was partly due to the political ideology prevalent at that time. Photography was thought to be fundamentally democratic because it, unlike painting, is open to mass production. It was in keeping with the modernist conviction that art should be torn from its elitist pedestal and made available to the 'people'. A photograph may be reproduced and thus break down the barrier between high and low culture. The German philosopher Walter Benjamin put it thus in his 1936 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction':

"For the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an even greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility... instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics." Quoted from *Art and Its Significance*, Stephen David Ross (ed.), State University of New York Press, 1987, p. 530.

Photography acquired a special status within the modernist perpetual search for 'novelty'. It contributed to revolutionising art, since the photographic image so radically severed the links between art and the constraining ties of tradition. Photography contributed to enabling art to operate politically. Avant-garde

photography was founded on the modernist creed that art could change the way of looking at the world and so too, in the final analysis, how that world appears.

Nanna Hänninen's portrayals of the objects of reality within abstract pictorial spaces are in keeping with this ideology. Her references to the ordinary and the particular celebrate the grounding of form within the social sphere. She comments on our view and perception of occurrences within reality by anchoring her photography within a fragment of the present and by capturing its significance. And she makes us aware of how the world looks, and so she also contributes to an awareness of how we see the world.

The actual relevance of the visual experiments of the 1920s and the modernist faith in the political and social potential of art gain new significance in Hänninen's photography. Her aesthetics distinguishes itself from modernist photography, partly by using colour as a sustaining factor, and partly by blurring the shapes of the object. Her subtle visual space is very much influenced by poetry and by suggestions that threaten to dissolve form. Her visual space operates – as did the politically motivated photography of the 1920s – on both the aesthetic and the social level, and so her artistic production is lodged within the neo-modernist perspective.

The legacy from Düsseldorf

In Germany, photography has a long and solid tradition, and the medium is today dominated by one of the very central schools, the so-called Düsseldorf school. Thanks to the couple Bernd and Hilla Becher who, among others, taught at the academy of Düsseldorf during the 1970s and '80s, photography has acquired a prominent position within contemporary art. The Becher couple positioned themselves in continuation of modernist photography and photographed the architectonic structures of industrial society (mines, silos, cranes, factory buildings). Without commenting sentimentally on its demise, they sought, through series of images and recurring forms and objects, to retain the clarity of the picture. Their art represents an insistence on a rigorously composed picture without any exaggerated use of visual means. It is here a question of a conceptually sustained photography that, through a pure and minimalist pictorial space, pays tribute to the structural, systematic, and functional.

The legacy from the Becher couple has resulted in a trend where art, setting out from a photographic reality, comments on the one hand on the space of reality and on the other hand on the aesthetic space. Distinguished artists like Andreas Gursky, Thomas Demand, Axel Hütte, and Jürg Sasse all work in large scale colour photographs of post industrial society: the apartment block, the metropolitan city, and everyday detail. This is a structurally rigorous photography that focuses on an architecturally based pictorial space. Their starting point is characterised by their interest in, for instance, excerpts and ornamental patterns. With a systematic, conceptually cool, and objectifying gaze, they capture, through their output, the repetition, the conformity, the system.

One cannot underestimate the significance of the Düsseldorf school to contemporary German photography, and more generally to photographic expression as it exists today. It thus seems quite natural to link Nanna Hänninen's work with the minimalist and cool pictorial universe of the Düsseldorf school. Her explorations of the genesis of the picture, her belief in the impact of form, and her formalist considerations regarding the reference of photographic pictorial space to the social sphere undoubtedly have their roots in the photographic pictorial universe, as it emerges from Düsseldorf.

Thomas Demand has had a particular influence on Nanna Hänninen. His life-size models in paper and cardboard, simulating an actual location, point in a particular manner to the construction of the photographic pictorial space. His photographs simulate reality by mimetically reconstructing it before the lens of the camera. And this is done through a minimalist approach that systematically precludes any coincidence. Similarly, Hänninen is preoccupied by how an architectural space determines the generation of our gaze, and how it determines not only our experience of the picture itself but, in a broader sense, the view we bring to the world.

Setting out from this pictorial universe, Hänninen has created her own personal statement. Her photographs contain a kind of poetry, a sensibility, giving to the works an aura of something other and more than a cool, objectifying registration of space. The interest in the forms and expressions of reality and the link between pictorial space and post-industrial culture are, in Hänninen's pictures, translated into a sensuous and material pictorial universe. This lies in continuation of the Düsseldorf school, but at the same time maintains its own individual expression.

Material minimalism

In her work, Nanna Hänninen draws on a number of traditions. She is primarily inspired by photographers, but her ties to, for instance, minimalism of the 1960s is also evident. In her works *12 Boxes* (2001) and *Untitled #I* (2002) she thus depicts simple geometrical shapes produced in the same material, and she works with shapes that appear in modules. Like the minimalists of the 1960s, she empties the object of content and presents it in its pure materiality. She does not seek to express her own temperament or emotional state. Her inspiration from minimalism is hence both conceptually and visually determined.

The choice of industrially manufactured modules is justified in terms of their visuality and their self-referential quality. And they allow Hänninen to explore the pictorial space and its creation. Hänninen's work is comprised by a fascinating paradox. On the one hand the object insists on being visible, conquering the photographic space, but on the other hand it also threatens to disappear, to dissolve within its own materiality. Despite the vaguely defined shadows, the form seems to float in a weightless space. But at the moment when the eye defines and recognises, for instance, the box or the paper, as in the work *Potential Object I* (2001) it is as if the work recedes backwards and appears as a geometrical, abstract pictorial surface. This also characterises the photographs *Space I-VII* from 2001-2003. Hänninen says of the photographs:

"Somehow I think that the photographs Space I-VII are more purely visual than anything else that I have done before. I have been photographing 'fake' landscapes (except Space I). They are spaces that are created from small items or paper. The photograph makes these items seem real. There is almost nothing political or social in these works."

The pure white paper sheets are not at first easy to discern. The visual space is only slowly established. At a distance, one initially senses a horizon, seemingly consisting of a cloud or a mountain top. As one draws nearer, the structure of the paper appears to stand forth. The paper is placed in the foreground of the picture and seems almost tangibly present at the surface. The minimal space is characterised by a sensuousness that is created despite the coolness of the white colour. There is no discouraging distance between work and viewer. Hänninen succeeds in transforming the at times impersonal expression of minimalism into a highly subtle, intense, and above all physically present universe that occasionally allows a gesturing towards a figurative visual space.

Me as Hero (2002) and *Memory Low* (2003) are instances of how language interferes with the visual experience and adds to the work a significance by way of content, a long way from the classical minimalist stance. She has photographed a text that remains illegible in all of the works. With the text, the paper is disclosed in its materiality. The titles of the works are both carriers of content, but also contribute to the absurd statement of the work. With a good deal of (self)irony, they may suggest a title of the illegible text while the content remains utterly meaningless. *Paradox of Secret Manifest* (2001) is so far the most minimalist work by the artist.

"You can hardly see anything in the picture... it seems as if the object, the paper, is actually there behind the acrylic glass. But it is a photograph. I think that this work is the most conceptual and minimal that I have done."

The work draws on the white monochromes of the Russian avant-garde artist Kasimir Malevich. Just like Malevich, Hänninen is preoccupied by the white colour and by the materiality and structure hiding be-

hind this coloured nothingness. But with this work she also touches the immanent discussion of art and photography regarding the object and its representation. As she says herself, the paper is so markedly present on the surface that one is led to believe that it physically is a paper sheet and not its representation. The idea of an empty space is here formulated in its most extreme and conceptual statement without Hänninen letting go of the materiality of the object and its ability to give form to the visual pictorial space.

Although the conceptual starting point is the conceptually based universe of works within minimalism, the pure, white pictorial surfaces also contain an element of personal presence. As is often the case with Hänninen's photographs, there is a reference in the title of the work that points beyond the narrowly defined pictorial space. Through the titles, she points towards an associative visual reading, where the arbitrary space of the paper sheet creates reference to a familiar object (as in the case of Airplane #1 and #2, both from 2003), thus breaking off from total abstraction.

The sublime present

Despite these suggestions of landscape, the works appear indescribable and abstract. In this context, the reflections on the sublime by the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard are of particular relevance. He formulated his thoughts on the basis of the American minimalist Barnett Newmann's text on the sublime from 1948. Lyotard's theory of the sublime is, unlike both that of Burke and Kant, not grounded in nature, but rather in avant-garde and in the abstract work in particular. On the possibility of describing the indescribable and indeterminate, Lyotard says:

"The sublime is the feeling that something will happen despite of everything, within the frightening emptiness, that something will happen and that not all is over. The place is here, the most minimal occurrence." Quoted from 'Newmann: The Instant' in: Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, Stanford University Press, 1988, page 84.

To Lyotard, the abstract work makes possible the experience of the indescribable. The topic of the sublime is the sensation that something will happen, an actual content of which one cannot speak. In the words of Lyotard, the sublime cannot be represented, but only hinted at. This is to say, that what cannot be articulated is that to which the work must testify. It is in the present and within the physical space of the work that the sublime must be experienced. Lyotard formulates the indescribable within the concrete and says that the sublime does not refer to 'something else' beyond this world, but is rather grounded in the abstract work.

In his understanding of the sublime, Lyotard draws on minimalism and its aesthetics devoid of content. The experience of Hänninen's works Space I-VII may be formulated through the thoughts of the French philosopher, since her suggestions of form and pictorial space describe the indescribable within the concrete. Her universe is not grounded in a world beyond the present one, but rather in the work itself. It is thus in Lyotard's description of the sublime that the experience of Hänninen's work is to be found. Her minimal pictorial spaces are empty, emptied of occurrences and events, and there is this absolutely disturbing premonition that something is about to happen: that form will dissolve, that it will disappear into pure abstraction and empty nothingness.

Hänninen remains stubbornly ensconced in lack of meaning, and in these works she insists on visuality as idea, as the sustaining element of the picture. One is tempted to say that it is not even the materiality of the paper that has created the conceptual starting point, but solely the pure form which in its lack of content is self-referential and without foundation in any spiritual or metaphysical context.

The social dimension

One of the recurring problematics within the work of Nanna Hänninen concerns the relationship between the visual and the social. That is, the divide between being visually conscious about the basic formal elements of the picture, while these are simultaneously linked to an external concrete reality. One is prone to view Hänninen's work as a purely formalist based photography, but it is not as simple as that. Her abstractions regarding the possibilities of form actually contain a distinct obligation towards the social reality of which Hänninen is a part.

"Instead of order, I started to see chaos in things. I have been trying to catch the idea of society which is filing, sorting and systemizing things to be more secure and organized. I see a great paradox because setting up security measures you cause insecurity of something unknown... this series (Fear and Security) is about the fear of losing control."

Hänninen's understanding of the psychological and mental mechanisms of society are the starting point of the series Fear and Security as well as a number of other works including Evenly divided chaos I and Keep Under Control I (2001) (Fear and Security). The titles of these works are carrying sense. They are not just descriptive, but contain references to the artistic intention. And as they suggest, the works are about security (and the fear of losing it), control and chaos.

One should hence not be mistaken about the poetic and sensuous portrayal of the trivial object. As the quote indicates, there is, beneath her formal investigations, a distinct social awareness and a desire to commit her art to social problematics. Her orderly and systematic compositions are to her a commentary on the attempt by society to structure, organise, and create a safety-net against chaos. Her starting point may well be the formal investigations of the genesis of the picture and the emergence of form, but as a visual artist she links her output to considerations regarding post-industrial society.

The series Fear and Security consists of ten pictures of trivial elements that seem so fragile that the slightest movement would dissolve the form and make the space collapse. In Fear and Security II (2001) bare, white paper sheets are spread out in a seemingly arbitrary system. They have an almost monumental character that contributes to making the photographic space concrete. This is not the case in Fear and Security V (2001), where stacked envelopes appear almost flat, because the surrounding space is not even vaguely defined.

The last two pictures in the series are distinguished by the paper being only indirectly present. Just the contours of the sheets are visible on account of to the sand comprising the edge of the absent paper sheet. These pictorial universes are constantly hovering between being on the one hand well ordered, structured, and controlled, while on the other hand sustaining the ever-present risk that the system will collapse.

Hänninen speaks of the fear of losing control, and it is precisely this that the pictorial composition makes concrete. The pictorial elements appear as transient moorings within an abstract universe, and this contributes to the pictures containing an element of something unknown and uncontrollable. Her works are thus both a commentary on the rational, functional society and at the same time a visualisation of the fundamental fear of anarchy within the system.

One could hardly term political this reference to a reality outside of the picture, but with her visually seductive works and with her choice of title, one senses, despite the abstract and construed suggestions, a distinct awareness of, and an artistic reflection on, the reality lying at the base of the photographs.

The ever-present nature

As has already been suggested, the almost abstract pictures contain a strong association to nature. The diffuse and vaguely suggested pictorial space has a clear reference to landscapes. And these works remind one of the romantic depictions of the grand, elevated and boundless qualities of the landscape. This is however not to say that Nanna Hänninen's starting point is figurative. But precisely the elusive pictorial space and the just barely visible horizons seem to confirm Hänninen's fascination with the notion of the boundless, the sublime impenetrability.

"Infinity as an idea and visual element follows through all my pictures."

Hänninen's impenetrable pictorial universe is not as such a portrayal of landscapes, but her depictions of the white space possess grandeur and a magnificence that is due precisely to her fascination with the boundless. There are here parallels to an experience of nature that is best described as an experience of the sublime in a romantic, Kantian sense.

The sublime signifies the intangible, inconceivable within the uncontrollable and overwhelming effect that nature has on human beings. The sublime feeling is, as opposed to the beautiful, connected to the grandiose and uncontrollable, and it was this that formed the basis of the new view of nature of the 1800s. Nature was thought of as a place where the artist found an expression for her spiritual emotions. The sublime or the exalted thus had distinct existential undertones. In the encounter with the frightening and beautiful nature, humans realised their inferiority in relation to God. The representations of nature were consequently an expression of the human experience of heaven and hell.

Hänninen is hardly that religious in her outlook, and there are no elements within the pictorial space that make probable the connection between the boundless and the existential. Yet the connection to the romantic age is relevant in this context, because all of Hänninen's pictures hold a reference to nature, or a memory of an experience of nature that is grounded in the inexplicable and inconceivable. The pictorial spaces open up like snow-clad landscapes towards infinity, and her poetic, almost quiet and silent generation of form contains spirituality not far from the romantic depictions of the sublime.

The legacy from Finland

In a number of earlier works, Nanna Hänninen has taken nature as her definite starting point. The landscape genre is as such part of her overall output, and in her observations of Finnish nature, one finds a similar search for the boundless. Not surprisingly, Finland has a long tradition of portraying nature. It seems to be the ever-present premise of Finnish mentality, and thus nature has also occupied a special position in Finnish art.

At all times, landscape has been a natural source of inspiration to artists who, by setting out from nature, have contributed to formulating a particular Finnish aesthetics and view of the significance of nature to human existence. This has also been the case within photography which in the 19th century contributed to establishing a Finnish identity and sense of a nation on the basis of depictions of nature. Up through the 20th century, there were artists like Jorma Puranen, and indirectly also Esko Männikkö, who represent a trend within Finnish photography where the idea of human attachment to, and dependence on, nature have constituted a central starting point.

Hänninen belongs to a generation that rejects mythologies and stereotype images of Finnish nature and not least the cliché of a Finnish national soul. She does not share the romantic view of a pure and unspoiled nature providing a frame for human existence. But she is undoubtedly conscious of her tradition. It lies as part of her visual legacy, but just like her fellow women artists like Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Heli Rekula, and Salla Tykkä, Nanna Hänninen's work is an unspoken rejection of traditional Finnish visual aesthetics.

Traditionally Finnish art has retained a mythology of the harmony between humans and nature, but this is not Hänninen's objective. Her references to, and personal interpretation of, nature contributes to tying her work to Finnish tradition, but her work stands in distinct opposition to both Puranen and Männikkö. Her work seems in no way to view nature on the basis of traditional premises, nor does she in her aesthetics lean against her Finnish predecessors.

While Nanna Hänninen is to a certain degree situated with Finnish tradition – even if mostly in opposition to it – her aesthetics is to a much larger degree to be located within a wider, international context. With globalization, the talk of particular national sensibilities and aesthetics has virtually grown silent, and it is today a much broader artistic frame of reference that influences the output of the individual artist. It is for instance a fact that neither Ahtila, Tykkä, Rekula, or Hänninen have a definite shared Finnish background. In content and expression they are quite different, and their works belong to traditions that cannot merely be linked to the Finnish. In spite of this, Hänninen has with her work positioned herself as a distinct innovator within Finnish art history and Finnish history of photography in particular.

Signs of the time

Nanna Hänninen's work is situated within a period when the experience of the divine was replaced by the private and the intimate. Since the 1990s, a substantial part of contemporary art has been characterised by a definite focus on the intimate and familiar. To a large number of young artists today, personal experience seems to be the only honest starting point for art. They convert their own experiences into valid visual insights regarding reality. Thus also for Hänninen who with her accounts of everyday trivialities creates new and surprising angles with respect to the intimate universe.

In Hänninen's case, it is obviously not an instance of some kind of confessional art, where the artist divulges corporeal and emotional experiences onto the surface of the picture. Nor is it the private home of the artist that constitutes the pivotal point of her accounts of the trivial space of everyday living. Yet it seems natural to place her in this context, because her pictorial universe is very intimate and possesses an element of personal presence. The aesthetics of everyday living characterises Hänninen's starting point, but she primarily uses it as a springboard for more formal investigations of the pictorial genesis itself. Conceptual photography, as it was established by artists around the Düsseldorf School, remains to Hänninen the most significant point of reference. The idea of the pictorial space and about the potential of form is the driving force within her work. Structure, order, and systems characterise all of her photographs, but there is nothing cool and distanced about her poetic pictorial spaces. She takes reality at face value, but she adds to it an intimate nerve which situates her artistic expression at the interface between cool minimalism and the private sphere.

The divisions between objectivity and subjectivity, rationality and irrationality, are tensions within Hänninen's work that are hard to define unequivocally. Her pictures all contain an element of paradoxical contradictions, but the boundaries are blurred and one is left with an open visual field that creates space for aesthetic experiences and considerations regarding the artistic expressive potential of form and reality.

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The quotes are from conversations with the artist and from her personal statements.