

## DIALOGUES FOR A NEW MILLENIUM INTERVIEW WITH NANNA HÄNNINEN

*"The Finnish visual language is often quiet and empty, even philosophically speaking"*

Nanna Hänninen (1973, Rovaniemi, Finland) is a photo-based artist whose work revolves around concepts like alienation, fear, and emptiness. In this interview we take a closer look to Finland, Finnishness, the Helsinki School, and the key concepts behind her artistic practice.

By Paco Barragán/ ARTPULSE Magazine Vol. 2 No. 1 Fall 2010

*Paco Barragán –Let's take as starting point the show on contemporary Finnish art "Arctic Hysteria" that was on display among others at PS.1 in New York and Domus Artium (DA2) in Salamanca, Spain. I don't know if you saw the show, but I'm sure you're acquainted with most of the artists included in it.*

Nanna Hänninen –Unfortunately I did not have a chance to see the show, but yes I know many of the artists (Ilkka Halso was fellow student and Veli Granö was my teacher in my early studies) and the works included in the show. The name of the show "Arctic Hysteria" describes the works and artists quite well in my opinion. There is this certain special Finnish humor in many of them.

*P.B. –In a globalized and even post-national era like ours, a show like this certainly appeals to preconceived ideas and clichés about Finland. Are there specific traits that conform the Finnish character?*

N.H. –I suppose that the curators of the show -Marketta Seppälä and Alanna Heiss- deal with these cultural clichés as starting point for the show, be it in an ironical manner or not. Nevertheless, it really seems that the artists who were chosen are working with these so-called "Finnish" themes like environmental issues, nature, welfare state, and so on. So I guess the curators made a premeditated choice in order to deconstruct these cultural clichés associated with Finland. Yet, we could also interpret it as a show that works as a counterpart to the photo-based art of the Helsinki School, which is probably more well known abroad, especially after the success of Eija-Liisa Ahtila.

### FINNISHNESS AND INTERNATIONALISM

*P.B. –To put it differently: is there a kind of "finnishness" to Finnish contemporary art?*

N.H. –This is something that is often asked, not only by foreign viewers but by the Finnish themselves as well. I don't really know if there is a certain "finnishness" in contemporary Finnish art, but there might be some kind of finnishness there: this special crazyness that is in "Arctic Hysteria" could be an example of it. More than a cliché, it's a fact that we are a very small population (just 5 million people!), but a huge country (almost 340.000 km<sup>2</sup>). So there is too much space around us (in my opinion), and that makes us somehow feel empty and lonely. We all know what loneliness can do to a human being... And this is something that can also be spotted in our visual language, where you find images that often are quiet and empty, even in a profound philosophical manner.

And as earlier said, this particular crazyness, or better said, a certain "specialty" in our Finnish character, also stems from this emptiness/loneliness and the rough and harsh climate.

On the other hand, we live in a globalized world and Finns do have like the most cell phones and computers average per population in the whole world, and young people (especially artists) prefer to travel than to stay back at home, so I think that this "Finnishness" has quite a touch of internationalism too.

*P.B. –Finland is peripheral and geographically isolated, and as you said before the climate is very harsh. How does this affect or inform your practice as an artist?*

N.H. –I have been thinking this a lot lately, especially on how much the psychological history and state of mind affects the work, either directly or even on a more subconscious level. I think that it has a huge effect. In my case it made me overcome a big agony to be even able to express myself as an artist! Also as I said before about the loneliness and so on: if you look at my earlier works they were filled with white emptiness! And this must have something to do with me coming from Finland, even if I was addressing global issues like "fear" and "security" for instance.

*P.B. –Finland is well known for the high quality of its educational system, and in the art world for having institutions like the Finnish Fund for Art Exchange (FRAME) that support artists careers and also enable the possibility of studying abroad and accessing artists residencies. Besides studying in Finland, you too studied at*

*the Höhere Schule für Kunst und Gestaltung in Zurich, Switzerland. How was this experience?*

N.H. – It was very instructive! I loved my time in Zürich, but I think I was a strange bird over there because I was working a lot with my intuitions, and in Zürich they were very German theoretically focused at the time. But of course this helped me to push my own limits and have a new perspective of my work. And yes, the Finnish grant system is extraordinary. In our small country with hardly any collectors, a very small gallery structure, and no “old” money, it is our only chance to succeed as an artist, especially in the beginnings.

### **THE HELSINKI SCHOOL**

*P.B. –You are considered as one of the photographers from the “Helsinki School”. The group of artists included is very eclectic though. Is it more of a brand to easy categorize a series of new artists, for example like what happened in painting with the Dresden or Leipzig School?*

N.H. – Well I am not so aware of it, but the fact is that Gallery Taik from Helsinki was showing most of these young Finnish photo-based artists -including myself- many years before we got the “name” or brand “Helsinki School”. I don’t really think that it was never thought of as something that gathers artists around certain formal or conceptual issues, nor do I think that it’s a branding in the same sense as or copy of the “Dusseldorf School” for instance.

The facts are more simple: we all proceed from the same University of Art and Design in Helsinki and we studied with Professor Timothy Person. He did a great job and with his expertise and activities many of us somehow found our ways to the international art scene. We started to exhibit in museums abroad and many of us also started to work with foreign private galleries, like my case. Having said that, I don’t feel that I depend right now on the “Helsinki School” in a conceptual or formal sense. I think it was more of a working tool, a very useful one, in the beginning of my career. And as you know, like with the “Leipzig School” or “Dresden School”, labels can work very well, especially for the art market and the collectors.

*P.B. –I’m pointing it out because your work from a formal or even a conceptual point of view touches more with artists like Pertti Kekarainen, Sanna Kannisto, Ola Kolehmainen or Ea Vasko then for instance Janne Lehtinen, Wilma Huskainen, or Anni Leppälä?*

N.H.- Well, you’re right, we are an eclectic group of artists that come from the same school. And yes, you’re right when you affirm that I’m closer to Kekarainen, Vasko and Kolehmainen, as I too have other theoretical roots that inform my practice. And somehow I see that Lehtinen, Leppälä and so on connect more with the traditional way of expression in Finnish art -maybe in the same manner like some of the artists in “Arctic Hysteria”.

*P.B. –Maybe we should take the series “Fear and Security” from 2003 as a starting point to analyze your work as they formally, and even conceptually, connect with more recent photography.*

N.H. – Well, I was actually working with the “Fear and Security” series already by the end of 1999. In 2001 I was doing an artist residency near Rome when 9/11 happened. You can say that my work changed a lot since then, and so did our lives! Also from another point of view, as before the attack I used to have fear of flying and anxiety attacks on board, but then after 9/11 suddenly it was gone. Finally I came to the conclusion that there was not much we could do about it, so I better relax. And yes, the latest “Asymmetric Exposures” take issues related to “fear” and “security” as well, so there is a clear conceptual connection.

### **RANDOMNESS AND PERFORMATIVITY**

*P.B. –In your next series “New Landscapes” (2004-2006) you keep being formally very minimal, but your working method is totally different.*

N.H. –I accidentally took first shots with long exposure time when I was the first time in NY in 2000. I was on top of the Empire State building by myself, and there I started to experiment with these kind of shootings. But to be honest, it took me four years before I actually decided to proceed exploring this new way, both from an experimental point of view as well as theoretically. At that time I was living in Switzerland again and went for a visit to NY. I just had done my last shots for “Fear and Security” and “Potencial Objects and Spaces”, and I really felt that I needed to get out of my studio world and do some real landscapes. Actually, these “New Landscapes” where as close as I could get to the “real”. It’s funny, my minimalism seems to follow me everywhere, even if I haven’t the intention...

So the images are made during night time with a long exposure time. And while taking the photos, I often practiced a small performance with the large scale camera on my chest: sometimes I was walking or breathing very strongly, even laughing. Together with the landscapes portrayed, the camera captured my movements as well and they became part of the end result. In the final phase, I did some digital retouching with the computer here and there.

P.B. –*These “recordings” are very analytical and at the same time very pictorial. Randomness plays an important role in the end result.*

N.H. – As you can imagine, you never know the result in advance. Also because you depend on elements like the weather and city lighting, and these are aspects you can't control. So it had this strong performative element with me walking around the city with the camera and doing my photo shots wherever possible or simply when I felt like doing it. What was important for me was the selection of the places, for instance bridges, highways or airports that were strategically placed. But yes, and contrary to other studio series I did, here the end result depends on randomness. And I think this “randomness” resulting from the photographic approach reflects in a very subtle manner the randomness of our actual society and our lives.

P.B. –*The aesthetic of emptiness is very present. Can we understand this as an alienation of the subject in today's society?*

N.H. – This is precisely what I wanted to address with this series. And this was something that was especially affecting me personally at that point: I didn't really have a place that I could call home, I didn't have a regular job as normal people do, I was scared of dark big cities, and actually I still am...

P.B. –*In 2008 you did the public work “Walks from Dusk till Dawn” in Blåmannen, The Old Royal Post House, Sweden. How did you experience this shift in scale and also does the title here again refer to specific performative photo practices?*

N.H. – I remember that I had a tremendous time working with that project! I think that we -the team that was working with me and me- realized a big format photo-based installation. The house where it's placed is a beautiful old protected house in the middle of Stockholm, where 3 different governmental ministries are hosted.

The name refers again to the shooting practices: I was walking through Stockholm during these times either late in the evening or early in the morning. On top of that, I also had to fit my working hours so that my first and new born baby girl wouldn't be awake and started to miss me when I was away working. That was the hardest part of it all! And this is where the title comes from.

P.B. –*Your most recent works are “Asymmetric Exposures”. You go a little bit further with your formal experiments by means of playing with multiple exposures.*

N.H. – I bought a new camera when I went to an artist residency in NY in 2008. It was this middle format Mamiya 7 which fitted very well to someone who had to push the baby stroller, photograph and is pregnant of a second baby at the same time. I had the idea of multi-layers on the airplane to NY and then I just tried it out. I guess I like to use the camera the wrong way all the time! But I liked what I saw straight away.

P.B. –*“Asymmetric Exposures” plays with architecture and its exposure. Some of these forms represent some kind of decorative islamic patterns. Was this on purpose?*

N.H. – This was not on purpose, but when I was working I realized the connection between those patterns and my multi-layered exposures. Of course this gives it a different meaning to it, or, better said, it adds more complexity to the work. Skyscrapers are a symbol of modernist West society, and these designs resemble ancient historical patterns of islamic societies. And in actual globalized society different modernities with its own pace coexist, but even if they conform worlds that are so apart from each other, they still are dependent on each other. Just like human beings depend on each other.

P.B. –*Thank you for your time.*