

# Present Situation in Finnish Photography

*Ritva Tähtinen*

In order to describe the present situation in Finnish photography we have to go back about twenty years. That was the time when the changes in the turbulent sixties really started to affect cultural life. The renewal of art administration was based on the memorandum of The Aho Committee (1965). There the necessary steps to support and develop the art life were defined. At this phase the community of photographers was splintered into six organizations, which held little unity. The chances the new policies promised were seen by several of the leaders of these groups, though, and they pulled the groups together under a couple of banners. As the easiest question to reach an unity upon, appeared to be the founding of a photography archive, it was agreed at the finishing meetings to name and define this as *The Photographic Museum of Finland*. Obviously, there had to be a dissipant group founding a society for a similar museum, but the photography organizations held to their unity and got the public support to their own statutes.

Strengthened by this public debate the founding of the Central Organization of the Photographic Associations, *Finnfoto*, a year later, 1970, succeeded also and really kept the amateurs as well as professionals together, discussing the elementary steps to create an envi-

ronment for growth in photography in the country. Three central questions were raised: the experts to be recommended to the art committee system, for the central and the provincial nominations, the legal status of photographs (the copy-right law), and the education. The nominal training in photography had in fact declined in the sixties to nonsense. The radical waves had stormed through the Institute of Industrial Arts, which housed photography, film and TV under the topic of Camera Art, also. In the renewal period photography was established well timed in with plans and suggestions in the Institute of Industrial Arts in Helsinki, on its way to become a university, and in The School of Crafts and Arts, founded in the town of Lahti. The sprouts planted have gone through wind and weather, but the time was right and the crops are appearing here and there. The field has not been a vacuum and neither should it be. The disputes, dissipants, and new groupings all belong to the fruitful development of the photographic field.

In the beginning of the eighties the attitudes to photography have been changing. The seventies were a time for one idea at a time only, starting with The Social Reform through images, and, moderating slowly to a visually balanced

personal statement. The education had its effects, through new generations of students, and through teachers, who had to learn a lot more to be able to continue as leaders of the opinion.

The multitude of new impressions, slowly developing through the international literature, visitors, and visits built up faith in the individual choice and dedication in work. The effect of Arno Rafael Minkkinen has to be mentioned; first in the mid seventies, when defeated by the opposition of teacher colleagues, and a new in the early eighties, when his personal devotion to search for the creative strong point in each student was loved by the students and accepted by the teachers. The effect is deeply planted in the attitude of many of his former students in their pursuit of a vision. The faith in an independent art photography has risen to a new level of discussion in the recent years. Mixed media have strongly entered the photographic scene in the works of several artists. The urge to try to find acceptance by the traditional artists' community seems to have been a challenge to some photographers.

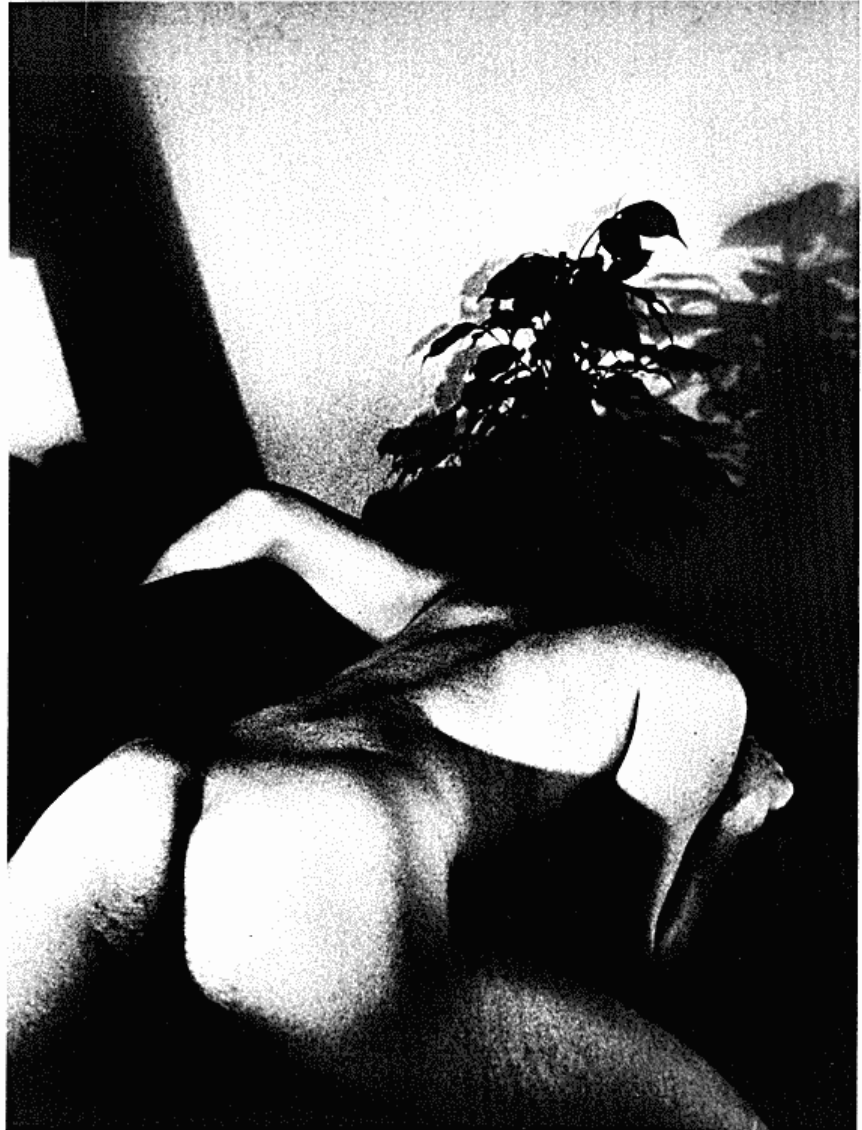
The new thing really, establishing the art photography even more firmly to the conscience of people as an integral part of cultural life, are the *regional centres*. They are popping up now around the country. One of the best functioning is the *VB-centre* in Kuopio, with its own house, and town and state support exceeding the others. The origins of the *North of Finland* centre are in the organization, which started in Oulu and spread to the whole of the North. It was the widest geographical area, with a net of exhibition connections and a wide support from the photographers, too. One gal-

lerybased organization has been in Lahti, one in Tampere and one in Joensuu for several years already, but these three have not been building up the regional activity to any dimensions yet. In Turku there are groups of young photographers working together with other artists, not really forming a regional centre but a community of sorts, which has activities affecting the area. Jyväskylä is a little bit similar. The newly founded centre in Mikkeli has set its task in colour area, building a lab for workshops and individual projects. This specialization is wellcome, the possibilities for working with colour being very difficult outside the schools. This is also seen reflected in the scarcity of colour shown in exhibitions and publications.

So what is the scene in photography really like in Finland? Where can you see the results of the new breed and the competition given by the older generations?

The regional centres of course try to maintain galleries. These are very often initiators in the field, because in Helsinki the situation has not improved in many years. The Gallery *Hippolyte* has lost much of its steam, because the funding is deficient, and the voluntary work cannot carry on year after year. *The Finnfoto Gallery* has really been active with new photography, especially since it opened »*The Room*«, a small experimental space. Part of the work shown is Finnish, but very often they show new foreign photographers.

*The Photographic Museum* is participating with a couple of exhibitions, of our own make, but they usually are historical surveys or one-man shows. Biannually, the museum still gives space to the very young, inviting several new



*Kari Soinio: From the III  
exhibition of the young, Focus.  
From the series Mirror.  
Black and white.*



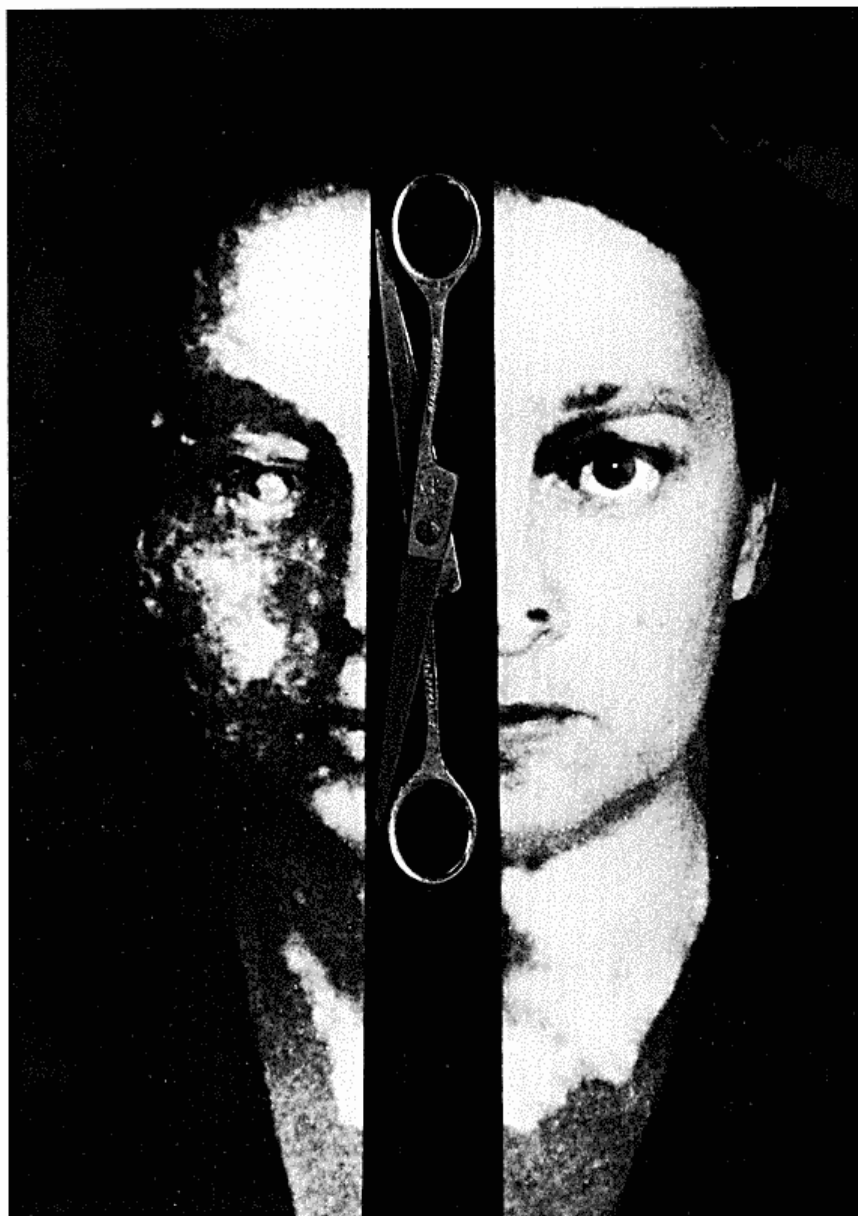
photographers to a show. This show has become very popular among the other art museums in the country, and it circulates the two years period intensively. Mainly the museum is showing foreign exhibitions, some celebrities of course, but also pursuing connections to countries, which are not well known in Finland for their photography. The museum's location, in the capital city, is of decisive importance, with all the foreign cultural attachées cooperating eagerly. These three spaces are the only ones in permanent use in photography in Helsinki. Oc-

*Kari Soinio: From the III exhibition of the young, Focus. From the series Mirror. Colourslide.*

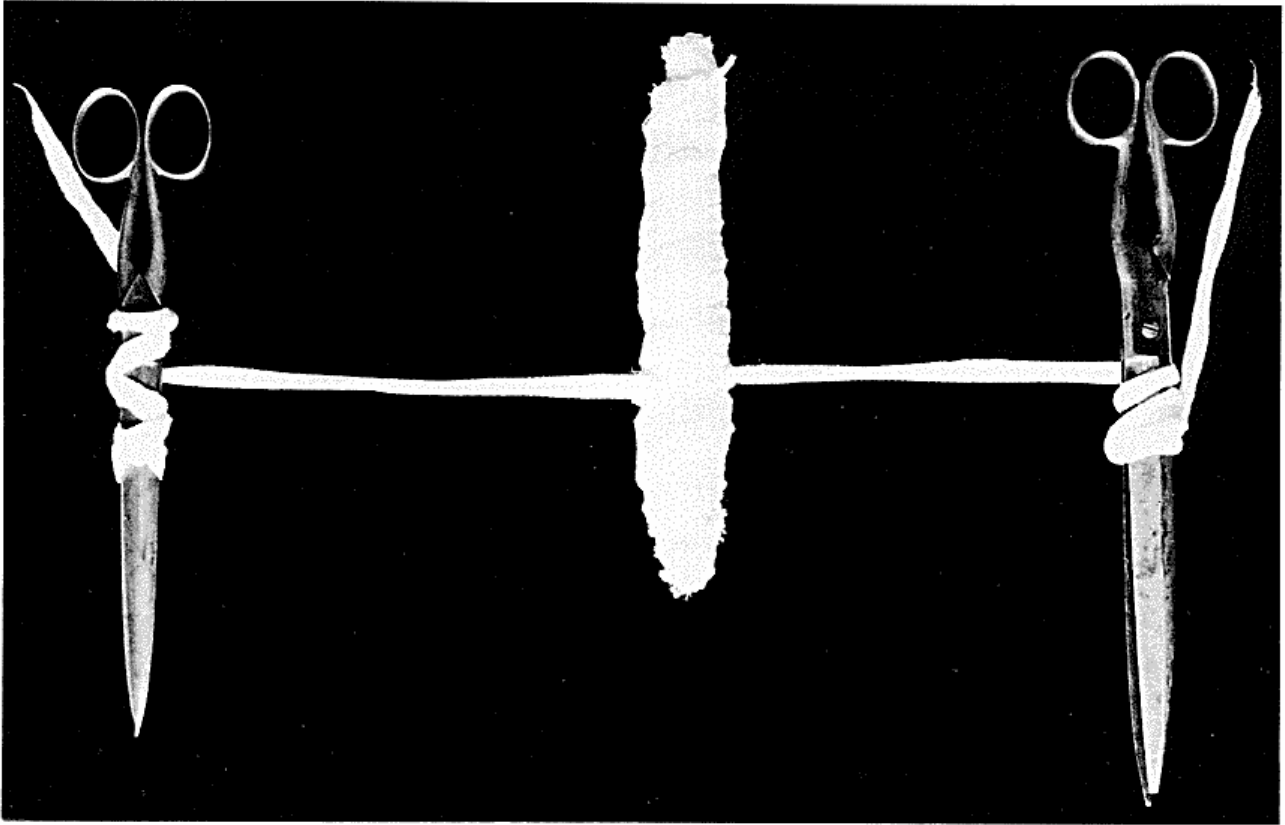
asionally, *The Amos Anderson Art Museum* and *The Helsinki City Art Museum*, as well as *The City Museum*, arrange photography exhibitions. The Student House used to show experimental photography, but the space has been cut down to a small scale. The exhibitions circulate nowadays very often all over the country. The museum has a net of connections to other museums and to other gallery spaces. The regional art museums take photography exhibitions into their programmes rather regularly, and small versions of shows are formed to travel in their domain in town museums, libraries and other cultural spaces. The regional centres usually have a gallery as a base, and the exhibitions, furthermore, travel around the region. Even they are involved in importing foreign shows especially to seminars and workshops, which seem to be a part of the yearly or biannual program.

## Content of exhibitions

The contents of the new Finnish exhibitions are varying. Partly, the artists are still working with a visualisation of feelings, like *Ulla Jokisalo*, who very intensely has scissors on her mind. The associations can also be very loose like in *Kari Paajanen's* work; he connects other media to photographs, be it a souvenir from the street of foreign cities or scraps from the family attic. His



*Ulla Jokisalo: From the series  
Private Fantasies, 1989.  
Black and white.*



works nowadays, more often than not, are installations of mixed media, where photography may be a link to other associations or it may even disappear altogether.

There are strong supporters of the pure straight, photography, who refine black and white images to perfection. *Pentti Sammallahti*, an »old« master of this direction, has been involved also with the improvement of printing (press) techniques, working with his students with varying solutions on books, portfolios etc.

*Ulla Jokisalo*: From the series  
*Private Fantasies*, 1989.  
Black and white.

*The documentary photography*, which for a while was »banned« by the exhibition photographers, is experiencing a new rise. The English have been in the lead, shaping much of the new documentary and work is done in that style; they have also been influential concerning the use of colour. A documentary based style could

be the description of *Jorma Puranen's* photography. It is really fiction in colour and black and white and Jorma's attachment to Lappland and its myths somehow seeps through into the images.

There are important photographers, working on documentary reportage and portrait, according to the pure tradition of the art. They cannot be forgotten when the scene in Finland is under observation. They are also participating in the exhibition and the publishing work done, although they do not that often make the headlines of the critics, who seem to prefer anything new and challenging.

The nature photographers are there as well; their work is mostly done in colour and they are seen in publications on natural phenomena, be it the threatened forests or species, as e.g. bears or swans. The large public in Finland presumably knows the names of *Hannu Hautala*, *Kari Soveri* or *Jorma Luhta* better than any of the art photographers. In their field, they are real experts and have lead many amateurs to improve on their photography, both concerning the print quality and the treatment of the subject and the image composition.

The serious amateurs are following the developments in the art photography closely and there are talents raising from that group regularly. The formal education in photography is a very limited speciality, and it still cannot prevent the traditional way of entering photography.

## Financial support

In the following, I want to describe the financial conditions of photography on Finland.

The grants are a support for many of those, who seriously work with art photography. Many of them have a teaching position as a part time activity, which also gives interesting challenges with the students and helps to create contacts to the outside world. The public money has not increased much in the last ten years, but for the support for photo publications (4-6 books a year, depending on the size and printing techniques) and now also for the regional centres. The selling of photographs is very slow and investing in photography is not the habit of the Finns. In fact even special offers connected with some international master photographers' exhibitions, have not resulted in purchases, but a few known individuals.

The magazine *Valokuva*, which was published eighteen years by The Central Organization *Finnfoto*, has become the property of a publishing company. Although the editorial line basically is supposed to maintain the same, there are points of weight in the professional stories, trying to attract more prenumerations from the traditional trades of photography. The magazine *Kamera* continues in the amateur line, recently carrying quite a lot of the video instructions, an aspect appealing to advertizers. In regard of the literature on photography, and in addition to those mentioned above, the yearbook of the museum of course belongs. Now number 18 is on the way; it forms a unique series in Scandinavia and as it, from the beginning, has listed the photography events in Finland yearly and shown samples of the works, it also is a comprehensive handbook on developments. The museum has published four pocket books containing translations of leading essays



Ritva Tuomi:  
*Earth, Fire, Water, Air, 1989.*  
Colourslide.

by well known international writers from Baudelaire to Allan Sekula. These publications are not making profit, in fact, they interest only a small section of photographers. The museum has also tried to divide costs with three books, co-published the Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, John Berger's essays on photography and Victor Burgin's central theme, *The End of Art Theory* in Finnish. The series of »Hard B:s« is an even bigger financial loss, but hopefully an investment for the future. The initiator and primus motor in these projects has been photographer *Martti Lintunen*, who has a passion to search for theoretical literature.

*The Finnish Summer Events* are a matter known to a lot of Scandinavians.

In the seventies the summer events began growing up in the countryside, having usually some local interest as a basis. In this way started

in the early seventies the *Iisalmi Camera Event*, having the symbiosis of film and photography as the basis. The activities based on amateur workshops, seminars, exhibitions and film showings. The event suffered from primitive surroundings and faded in the beginning of the eighties. Now it is trying to start again, having a brand new house of culture as surroundings. *The Pori International Photography Event* started in 1974, its function very much in the interest of the *Satakunta Museum* in discussing the role of photography museum work and promoting documentary photography generally. The Photographic Museum of Finland has been one of the organizing parties in the ten days events held. Now the events has a three point structure. The regional museum in Tammisaari joining in. The localities are going to be Tammisaari, Helsinki, or Pori on a biannual basis. The event *Photography – every day's art (Valokuvataide Arkitaide)* has been a biennale in Helsinki, and concentrated on experimental and young photographers. The University of Industrial Arts participates in an event at Savitaipale, which has special workshops and has drawn amateurs to it. Jyväskylä has started in September 1989 with a triennial, which aims at discussions on new trends in creative photography.

The events have been suffering of a minimal budget and lack of accurate information well in advance, but they are filling a need of getting together and discussing. Can't that be as good a reason for existence as any?



*Ritva Tuomi: From the III  
exhibition of the young, Focus.  
A sentence from the bible? Trust  
the Lord from all your heart?  
Black and white.*

