

# **Darkness & Light: Contemporary Nordic Photography**

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Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden have an active and challenging photography scene. The exhibition *Darkness & Light* at Scandinavia House in New York in spring 2014 is a contemporary showcase featuring ten photographers who represent Nordic photographic art. We meet Tonje Bøe Birkeland (NO), who often plays the part of fictive historical characters in her enacted photographic narratives, to challenge and give new perspectives on the times we are living in. The boundary between fact and fiction is blurred also in Thora Dolven Balke's (NO) new work, in which she continues to use various kinds of photographic mediums, such as polaroids, albums or films. JH Engström (SE) presents photographs from a series describing a life far from Stockholm, far from the big city. Joakim Eskildsen (DK) is featured with a morose picture story, *American Realities*, in which he portrays people and environments he came across on his travels around New York, California, Louisiana, South Dakota, and Georgia. Ulla Jokisalo (FI) often uses a cut-out technique to produce mostly one-offs, based on photography. She will present a sequence of works exploring relations, longing, and her own personal history. Bára Kristinsdóttir (IS) shows examples from her exotic series *Hot Spots*, which portrays the culture surrounding Iceland's geothermally-heated greenhouses. In her film *The Big Scene*, Tova Mozard (SE) enacts a therapeutic talk between her mother, her grandmother, and herself, about feelings, memories, her family and the relationship to her father. Nelli Palomäki (FI) participates with a few of her monumental, incisive, and fascinating black-and-white portraits. Katya Sander (DK) is showing her photo-essay *TIFO (event)*, in which she uses photographs as a form of freeze-frame close-ups, approaching the aesthetics of documentary film. Finally, we meet Pétur Thomsen (IS), who has regularly documented the controversial Kárahnjúkar Hydroelectric Project since 2003, in magnificent photographs of the contemporary Icelandic scenery. These ten photographers from different backgrounds and generations demonstrate the breadth and strength of contemporary Nordic photography. The photographic medium has a fantastic potential to document and explore our lives, moods, and emotions. Living in the Nordic region, in the northernmost part of Europe, means having to relate to darkness and light—both measurable and perceived. This is something all Nordic photographers are experienced in, and contend with, in one way or another.

Nordic collaboration goes back a long way, and countless attempts have been made to define or summarise the Nordic spirit in both politics and the arts. The Nordic Pavilion at the Venice Biennale is a recurring event. The Nordic Council awards prizes every year for literature, children's and young people's literature, film, music, and nature and the environment. The Nordic Council of Ministers and its committees support various collaborations and networks in the arts and sciences. One of many is NORDIK, for art historians in the Nordic countries, and another is the Nordic Network for the History and Aesthetics of Photography, for scholars and post-graduate students in photography at Nordic universities. There have been many exhibitions on the theme of Nordic art, such as *Northern Light. Realism and Symbolism in Scandinavian Painting 1880–1910*, which toured several museums in the USA in 1982 and 1983. This exhibition was part of the Scandinavia Today project initiated by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Another example is the acclaimed exhibition *Nuit Blanche* at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 1998—a period when many Nordic artists broke through internationally—artists who are still highly successful. A more recent example is the *Malmö Nordic 2013* festival, a collaboration between galleries and museums in Malmö, which attempted to capture and present a personal cross-section of current Nordic contemporary art.

A few exhibitions have also been produced to show Nordic or Scandinavian photography. One of them is *The Frozen Image. Scandinavian Photography* (1982), which was organised by Martin Friedman at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, and also formed part of the Scandinavia Today project. This exhibition featured both historic and contemporary photography from the Nordic region. Just over a decade later, it was followed by *Stranger than Paradise. Contemporary Scandinavian Photography* (1994) at the International Center of Photography in New York. This was perceived as a sequel to *The Frozen Image*, with its selection of 20 photographers from the generation born around 1960. The exhibition *Faces and Figures. Contemporary Scandinavian Photography* (2001) was organised and held at Scandinavia House. Another ambitious project was the Nordic venture at Paris Photo in 2006. In all these exhibitions, the curators and catalogue writers have attempted to identify what is specifically Scandinavian or Nordic in Nordic photography. Although their conclusions vary, they seem to agree that there is no unequivocal answer. Several of the writers, do, however, mention nature and the countryside as recurring

features throughout Nordic photo history. These texts refer to each other and tend to make generalisations, which is obviously hard to avoid in this kind of summarising introduction.

While working on *Darkness & Light*, we quickly realised that it was impossible to find a common style or theme among today's active photographers in the Nordic region; we did, however, come across a few intriguing general tendencies and similarities in their subject matter or approaches. Many photographers focus on themes of fantasy, poetry, moods, and beauty of various kinds. The landscape is a recurring theme in many oeuvres, but it is the urban landscape that is being explored now. Younger photographers travel and often work on projects in other parts of the world. The breakthrough of digital technology has naturally influenced the photographers and artists who are active today. They relate to photo history in various ways, but several of them have adopted older image ideas and tried them using new technology. In June 2012, a seminar, *Nordic Now!*, was organised in Copenhagen by the editors of the publications *Filter* (DK), *Objektiv* (NO), and *Photo Raw* (FI). Photographers and researchers were invited to talk on Slow Photo, Hybrid, Private and Analogue Love—themes that had been noted in contemporary Nordic photography. Their lectures have been published together with interviews and portfolios in an eponymous special edition that gives a comprehensive presentation of the latest trends in the work of photographers active in the Nordic region.

There are both similarities and differences in the national photo histories of the Nordic countries. In recent years, new books on national photo history have been published that describe the development of photography from 1840 to today, and which have provided a new historical and theoretical foundation for further research into photographic collaborations and contacts between the Nordic countries. Contacts between Nordic photographers date back to the early days of photography in the second half of the 19th century, and they blossomed when the pictorialist style prevailed in the decades around 1900. One example is the Swedish magazine *Nordisk Tidskrift för Fotografi*, which was published by Fotografiska Föreningen, and where each issue contained reports from all the Nordic countries. Collections and museums of photography have been established in different places in the Nordic region. In Denmark Museet for Fotokunst in Odense opened in 1985 and is now part of Brandts, a museum for visual arts. Since 1996, Denmark also has Det Nationale Fotomuseum in Copenhagen, which belongs to the Royal Library. In Norway, since 1995, Preus Museum in Horten is the national museum for photography, and takes responsibility for both art photography and cultural history photography. In Finland, a museum of photography was founded as early as 1969, and since the mid-1990s, it operates as a fully-specialised museum for photography, with its own premises in central Helsinki. Iceland has had the Reykjavík Museum of Photography since 1987. Sweden has substantial collections of photography at Moderna Museet and Nordiska Museet in Stockholm and the Hasselblad Foundation in Gothenburg.

The theme for *Darkness & Light* is photography after the Second World War. The Danish photographers working in a traditional pictorialistic vein reverted to the early-20th century in search of a starting point for their art. The young photographers, instead, ventured out into Europe, and the photographer Jesper Høm returned after many years in France, with new ideas on the potential of photography. He founded Delta Photo together with other photographers, including Ole Brask and Gregers Nielsen, which led to a regeneration in Danish photography. Documentary photography was the main point of interest, but visual artists such as Albert Mertz and Richard Winther also explored the potential of the medium in their respective practices. It was not until the documentary photographer Morten Bo founded his school of photography, Fatamorgana, and the Royal Danish Academy of Art started its laboratory for drawing and photographic technology, led by the photographer Per Bak Jensen, that Denmark could offer an alternative to studying abroad. Many students in the 1980s and 1990s nevertheless chose to leave Denmark for higher education, and several of them still live and work in New York, such as Joachim Koester and Ann Lislegaard, or Berlin, like Joachim Eskildsen and Katya Sander. Several galleries changed their orientation in the 2000s and began showing photography. This contributed to making Danish photography visible on the international art market. Over the two recent decades, Danish photography has generated a long list of successful photographers, including Mads Gamdrup, Nicolai Howalt, Trine Søndergaard, Adam Jeppesen, Astrid Kruse Jensen, Gitte Villesen, and Ebbe Stub Wittrup, whose practices involve widely different

expressions and approaches, but who have stuck with photographic techniques even if several of them combine this with video.

The success of Finnish photography can be traced back to the late-1960s: The first grants for photographers were introduced in 1967, The Finnish Museum of Photography was founded in 1969, and photographic studies at the university level were introduced in 1972. Social documentary was the dominating trend, with Ismo Hölttö, Matti Saanio, and Mikko Savolainen at the helm. In the 1980s, the word “subjective” was frequently used to describe the photographers’ newly-awakened interest in the personal sphere and identity. Some photographers focused their practices almost entirely on formal and aesthetic aspects. Ulla Jokisalo, Timo Kellaranta, and Pentti Sammallahti were the first professional photo artists. Women photographers were brought into the foreground by the exhibition *26 Photographers* (1983), which included photographs by Ulla Jokisalo, Raakel Kuukka, and Leena Saraste. At the turn of that decade, like many times before in history, Finland received new impulses from Sweden in the form of postmodernism and Anglo-American photography influenced by feminist and postcolonial theory. This prompted many to challenge traditional documentary photography, and artists such as Jorma Puranen began producing “staged photographs”. Finnish photography experienced an international breakthrough in the mid-1990s, when Esko Männikkö became famous for his portraits of rural Finnish bachelors. Since 2004, a large number of Finnish photographers who exhibit their works abroad are referred to as “The Helsinki School”. These include Elina Brotherus, Ola Kolehmainen, Anni Leppälä, and Susanna Majuri. The Helsinki School has proved to be a highly successful branding in the attempt to highlight contemporary Finnish photography in exhibitions and books and at art fairs in Europe and the USA.

Landscapes and nature are often the first thing that comes to mind when dealing with Icelandic photography. Although the country is small and sparsely populated, its topography is dramatic and affects life deeply, which has made it the obvious subject for both Icelandic and visiting photographers. After the Second World War, however, photographers began working in a more documentary tradition, showing Iceland as a modern society, with better financial resources thanks to the fishing industry and support from the US Marshall Plan. There are no opportunities to study photography at university-level in Iceland, so photographers have trained abroad. The most pivotal change came in the mid-1960s, when several photographers who were working in a distinctly artistic and conceptual genre of photography returned to Iceland. Among the more famous of these are Leifur Þorsteinsson (who studied at Dansk Fotografforenings Fagskole in Copenhagen) and Guðmundur Ingólfsson (graduate from Folkwangschule für Gestaltung in Essen, Germany). Both have had a seminal influence on Icelandic photography, with their *street photography*-like style, and their images inspired by *New Topographics*. Since the early 1990s, the contemporary scene has continued to develop, from traditional landscape photography towards photography that explores issues relating to man’s impact on nature and the environment. Katrín Elvarsdóttir, Einar Falur Ingólfsson, and Pétur Thomsen belong to this new generation of photographers.

In Norway, the first photographers who showed photography as art were both amateurs and professionals. In the 1950s and 1960s, Kåre Kivijärvi and Kjell Sten Tollefsen became famous. Nevertheless, 1971 is considered to be the year when photography made its debut on the Norwegian art scene. That was when Kåre Kivijärvi, as the first photographer, showed his work at the traditional Autumn Exhibition in Oslo. When Forbundet Frie Fotografer was founded in 1974, followed by Fotogalleriet in 1977, this engendered an active scene for art photography and lively contacts with Nordic colleagues. A few of the names in this generation of photographers are Dag Alveng, Per Manning, and Tom Sandberg, the last of whom represented Norway at the Venice Biennale in 1995. For many years, few educational opportunities were available for photographers in Norway apart from apprenticeship. After the Second World War, the options were either to study abroad or to participate actively in amateur photography clubs. Christer Strömholm’s school of photography in Stockholm had a crucial influence in the 1970s on a group of Norwegian photographers who later helped to start the organisation Forbundet Frie Fotografer. But it was not until 1990 that Norway obtained its first university-level photography school, Institutt for fotografi, in Bergen, with Robert Meyer as its first professor. Meyer’s curriculum focused on postmodern, conceptual and digital photography. The photographers who

appeared in the 1990s include Ole John Aandal, Signe Marie Andersen, Mikkel McAlinden, Torbjørn Rødland, and Vibeke Tandberg.

Swedish post-war photography had a strongly documentary orientation. One prominent figure on the Swedish scene was Christer Strömholm, who has inspired several generations of photographers since the 1960s. Among the students of his famous Fotoskolan, which existed between 1962 and 1974, several are now successful photographers and teachers. Anders Petersen is perhaps the photographer who more than any other has furthered Strömholm's legacy, but JH Engström, Catharina Gotby, Tuija Lindström, and Lars Tunbjörk have also risen to prominence alongside a generation of photo artists who emerged in the 1990s with a background in Sweden's art colleges. These include Magnus Bærtås, Annika von Hausswolff, Annica Karlsson Rixon, and Maria Miesenberger. Their acclaimed works, which are often serial, deal with issues of identity, gender, and the representation of women. In recent decades, images of globalised and urban life have become more dominating, and narrative structures from film and video are being explored. Artists experiment in the borderland between reality and fiction, realism and enactment. Examples of this can be found in works by Martina Hoogland Ivanow, David Molander, and Tova Mozard.

In the early 2000s, Nordic contemporary photography became a major presence on the international art scene. The cause of this rise in popularity was the so-called photo-based art, which grew into a vital element of contemporary art in the late-1980s. In the shift from modernism to postmodernism, galleries and museums started to exhibit monumental colour photography together with other artistic media. This phenomenon could be seen in Berlin, London, New York and Paris, and eventually made its way to Copenhagen, Helsinki, Oslo, Reykjavík, and Stockholm. The period is distinguished by the emergence of many women photographic artists, and this trend has continued on the Nordic photography scene. At the beginning of this essay, I stated that many interesting things are currently going on in Nordic photography, and this exhibition is just one of many examples of exciting collaborations and creative encounters between photographers, critics, curators, and scholars in and beyond the Nordic region.

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This project began in 2010, with an invitation to organise an exhibition of contemporary Nordic photography at Scandinavia House. The project team included Ingrid Fischer Jonge (former Director, Museet for Fotokunst, Odense), Jens Friis (Curator, Brandts, Odense), Elina Heikka (Director, The Finnish Museum of Photography, Helsinki), Ingrid Nilsson (Director, Preus Museum, Horten), María Karen Sigurðardóttir (Director, Reykjavík Museum of Photography, Reykjavík), and Anna Tellgren (Curator of Photography, Moderna Museet, Stockholm). Project coordinators were Reetta Haarajoki and Tiina Rauhala.

## **Selected Literature on Nordic Photography**

*Nordic Now!*, texts by Kristine Autzen, Christine Hansen, Sigrid Lien, Jens Erdman Rasmussen, Anna-Kaisa Rastenberger, Mette Sandbye and Anna Tellgren, ed. Camilla Kragelund, Hannamari Shakya, Nina Strand, Musta Taide, Aalto Photo Books, Helsinki 2013.

*New Nordic Photography 2013*, introduction by Dragana Vujanovic, ed. Jenny Blixt and Dragana Vujanovic, Hasselblad Foundation, Göteborg 2013.

*New Nordic Photography 2012*, introduction by Dragana Vujanovic, ed. Jenny Blixt and Dragana Vujanovic, Hasselblad Foundation, Göteborg 2012.

*New Nordic Photography 2011*, introduction by Dragana Vujanovic, ed. Jenny Blixt and Dragana Vujanovic, Hasselblad Foundation, Göteborg 2011.

*New Nordic Photography 2010: On Display*, introduction by Linda Frisk, ed. Linda Frisk, Hasselblad Foundation, Göteborg 2010.

*New Nordic Photography 2009 – From now on*, introduction by Linda Frisk, ed. Jenny Blixt, Hasselblad Foundation, Göteborg 2009.

*New Nordic Photography 2008: Common Grounds*, introduction by Linda Frisk, ed. Jenny Blixt, Hasselblad Foundation, Göteborg 2008.

*Ny nordisk fotografi 2007/New Nordic Photography 2007: Sense of Loss, Sense of Gain*, introduction by Liv Stoltz, ed. Gunilla Knape, Hasselblad Center, Göteborg 2007.

*Nordiske stemninger – vor tids landskabsfotografi*, text by Marie Louise Helveg and Lars Schwander, Arken Museum for Moderne Kunst, Ishøj 2008.

*Sign. Nordic Black and White Photography*, introduction by Sune Nordgren, Kalejdoskop, Stockholm 2008.

*Photo Nordic. Danemark, Finlande, Islande, Norvège, Suède, Paris Photo 2006*, ed. Andréa Holzherr et al, Ambassades de Danemark, Finlande, Islande, Norvège, Suède/Centre Culturel Suédois, Maison du Danemark, Paris 2006.

*Scandinavian Photography 2. Denmark*, text by Daniel Strom, Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College, Iowa 2006.

*Scandinavian Photography 1. Sweden*, text by Niclad Östlind, Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College, Iowa 2005.

“Photographie et video”, texts by Harri Laakso, Raimundas Malasauskas, Lars Movin, Margrét E. Ólafsdottir, Anna Tellgren and Hanne Beate Ueland, *L’Art Nord*, no 7, 2004.

*Women Photographers – European Experience*, ed. Lena Johannesson and Gunilla Knape, Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, Gothenburg Studies in Arts and Architecture no. 15, Göteborg 2003.

*Faces and Figures. Contemporary Scandinavian Photography*, texts by Ann Sass and Øivind Storm Bjerke, The American-Scandinavian Foundation, New York 2001.

*Stranger than Paradise: Contemporary Scandinavian Photography*, texts by Jan-Erik Lundström and Steven Henry Madoff, The American-Scandinavian Foundation, New York 1994.

*Nordiska landskap. En antlogi/Nordic Landscapes. An Anthology*, text by Jan-Erik Lundström, Lucida 9, Alfabeta Bokförlag, Stockholm 1989.

*Künstlerische Fotografie in Skandinavien heute*, textes by Dag Alveng, Bernd Dieckmann, Tove Hansen, Heinz Hemming, Ritva Keski-Korhonen, Leif Wigh, ed. Günter E. Hass and Stephen von Wiese, Kunstmuseum, Kulturamt und Volkshochschule der Landeshauptstadt Düsseldorf und die Autoren, Düsseldorf 1986.

*Skandinavisk kunst og fotografi*, ed. Arne Eggum and Bodil Stenseth, Oslo Kommunes kunstsamlinger, Munch-museets skrifter 4, Oslo 1988.

*Ansikten av idag/Faces of Today. Scandinavian Photographers Classic and Contemporary*, introduction by Mikael Timm, Lucida 6, Alfabeta Bokförlag, Stockholm 1987.

*The Frozen Image. Scandinavian Photography*, ed. Martin Friedman, texts by Henning Bender, Bert Carpelan, Lennart Durehed, Arne Eggum, Johns Erichsen, Bo Grandien, Solveig Greve, Rune Hassner, Gudmundur Ingólfsson, Ismo Kajander, Michael Metcalf, Robert Meyer, Knud Nellemose, Bjørn Ochsner, Jan Olsheden, Alla Porter, Rolf Söderberg and Leif Wigh, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis 1982.