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NORDIC  
PHOTOGRAPHY  
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# Nordic (Art) Photography

Today, photography plays a vital role on the Nordic art scene as a whole. It is shown in the best art museums and is sold by the top commercial galleries. This relatively new state of affairs reached its peak after the turn of the millennium, but began in the last half of the 1980s, when postmodernism came to Scandinavia and when magazines and small non-commercial galleries started to flourish. Now, twenty-five years after the establishment of the Nordic photography scene, the question is whether or not the medium has achieved full integration into the art world.

*Mette Sandbye*

Allow me to begin with a quote. In a newspaper interview with an art critic, a journalist asks: “Can photography be art?” The critic responds: “put briefly, it is a question of a photographer who catches his/her subject in the right way and – voilà – you have an art work.” While reading this article, you might ponder when and where this question was asked. A recurrent tendency within the photography world or “scene” has been to lament the lack of attention, respect and acceptance from the rest of the art world: from museums and galleries, cultural support or funding programmes, art critics, collectors etc. The problem with photography has always been: is it an art in its own right? Should it have its own institutions, histories, education programmes etc? Or should it be integrated with other media? As I see it, this indeterminacy is simultaneously the strength and problem of the medium: that photography is the same as any other tool with which to make art, and that at the same time it is so much more. One could argue that today, photography is fully recognised and accepted – in the Nordic countries as well as



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AS TERRAS DO FIM DO MUNDO

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## STUART MCINTYRE

MOTHER DAUGHTER IMAGES & ISLAND

14 JUNE - 1 SEPTEMBER 2013

## ALEN ALIGRUDIC

PARADIGM METAMORPHOSES

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elsewhere. Recently, for example, Andreas Gursky's *Rhein II* (1999) was sold at auction for 4.3 million dollars, making it the world's most expensive photograph. However, in early 2012, when the prestigious museum of modern art, the Louisiana in Denmark, presented a large Gursky exhibition, the museum felt the need to underline – in the catalogue, the press kit and the wall texts – that Gursky is “an artist” more than “an old-fashioned photographer”. “To work with Andreas Gursky and his photography is to work with true visual art”, museum director Poul Erik Tøjner wrote in the catalogue; “it is only as an afterthought that one realises that the medium is photography”. And he continued in the introductory exhibition wall text: “it is this delving into the incomprehensible richness of details that justifies his presence at a museum of modern art.” Would the museum have written in such a way about Per Kirkeby or Anselm Kiefer?

### 1985–95: A Vital Decade

As a preparation for this article, I plunged into a wealth of old issues of Nordic exhibition catalogues and photography magazines such as the Swedish *Bildtidningen / Index* and *F – fotografisk tidskrift*, the Danish *Katalog*, the Finnish *Valokuva*, the Norwegian *Hyperfoto* and the Icelandic *Ljósmyndarinn* (*The Photographer*), which existed for a short period in 1985–86 (there is no longer an Icelandic photography magazine today). These publications bear witness to a period during the 1980s and early 1990s when the Nordic photography scene was flourishing; one could call it the birth of the scene.

*Bildtidningen* was launched in 1977, and was later transformed into *Index*. By the time *Index* no. 2 appeared in 1996, it included thirteen pages with advertisements for galleries and museums presenting exhibitions of famous international names such as Andres Serrano, Thomas Ruff, Arno Rafael Minkinen, Nick Waplington, Irving Penn and “British Video Art”. All the magazines mentioned above included translations of what are now considered seminal articles by international authors. In its first year of publication *Katalog*, founded in 1988 and published by the Museum of Photographic Art in Odense, Denmark, included Donald Kuspit's “The Opera is Over”, followed by A.D. Coleman's “Further notes on the directorial mode” and Regis Durand's “How to see (photographically)”. In 1995, *Index* included Alan Sekula's now legendary “The Body and the Archive”, to name just a few examples from this thriving decade when the discourse around photography became much more precise, professional and in tune with what was being discussed within the art world in general.

### The Arrival of Postmodernism

An issue of *Index* in 1991 served as the catalogue for the exhibition *Lika Med / Equals* at The Museum of Modern Art in Stockholm – a much debated introduction to the new postmodernist currents in Swedish photography. With *Index* as the principal window, “staged photography” hit Scandinavia in the years around 1990, and Sweden was its most advanced



Cover:  
*Bildtidningen*, nr. 1, 1991.  
Published by Fotograficentrum,  
Stockholm, Sweden.

1  
The institute was later integrated as part of the art education at the Bergen Academy of Art and Design and no longer exists as an institute of its own.

2  
Jan-Erik Lundström, “Index/ Synsmaskinen. Introduction”, *Katalog*, Odense: Museet for Fotokunst, Dec. 1991, pp. 18–21.

frontrunner. This was mainly due to the possibilities of photographic education in Sweden at the time – especially in Gothenburg and Stockholm – and to the fact that photography teachers and curators such as Jan-Erik Lundström, Irene Berggren and Hans Hedberg were orientating themselves towards American art and French poststructuralism, introducing some of these mindsets and theoretical currents into Sweden. Berggren was the curator of *Lika Med / Equals*, which she organised around four themes: Value, Identity, Desire and Transformation. The exhibition provoked some controversy; among other reasons, it included non-art images from the commercial sphere. Later that year, the exhibition *Index* toured Scandinavia, showing a brand new, radical postmodern generation of artists who appropriated, staged and criticised the language and ideology of photography. *Lika Med* and *Index* were indeed exhibitions of *pictures*, and they came to represent the postmodernist boom in the early 1990s: in Sweden, one talked about “the Index Generation”. In Finland, the cultural exchange and support programme “Frame” (The Finnish Fund For Art Exchange) and the School of Art and Design in Helsinki, now called the Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture Helsinki, played seminal roles. The Ministry of Culture specifically supported the production of art books, and in the last twenty-five years more than 130 Finnish photographic art books have been published, markedly assisting the general international dissemination of Finnish photography. In Norway, the Institute of Photography at Bergen Academy of Art and Design, which opened in 1990<sup>1</sup>, soon became the central hub of postmodern photography. In Denmark, there was also a feeling of something new happening. The exhibitions *Tendencies. New Danish Photography* at Fotografisk Center (1992) and *Out of the Eye – the photographic image in the 1990s* at Kunstforeningen (1993) presented the new postmodern currents, and both exhibitions included Danish staged or appropriated photography by Agneta Werner, Grete Dalum, Ane Mette Ruge, Johnny Jensen and Lisa Rosenmeier, to name just a few. With only 320,000 inhabitants, Iceland is the smallest of the Nordic countries, and therefore its photography scene has been less developed than the others. But as early as the 1970s, Sigurður Guðmundsson was making conceptual photography that humorously questioned the language of photographic representation, as well as the dominant tradition of landscape depictions within Icelandic art in general. The documentation of Rúri's early performative work is also worth mentioning as pioneering within the recent history of Icelandic photography. Indeed, the landscape has been dominant in Icelandic photography, but in recent years many Icelandic photographic artists (for instance Spessi, Pétur Thomsen or Icelandic Love Corporation) have played with and challenged this national stereotype of the harsh, inhuman or romantic landscape. In the *Index* catalogue essay, one of the curators Jan-Erik Lundström, summed up the new mindset of photography: “The photograph as instrument and the



### Culture is not reflected in images; culture is produced in images

Jan-Erik Lundström

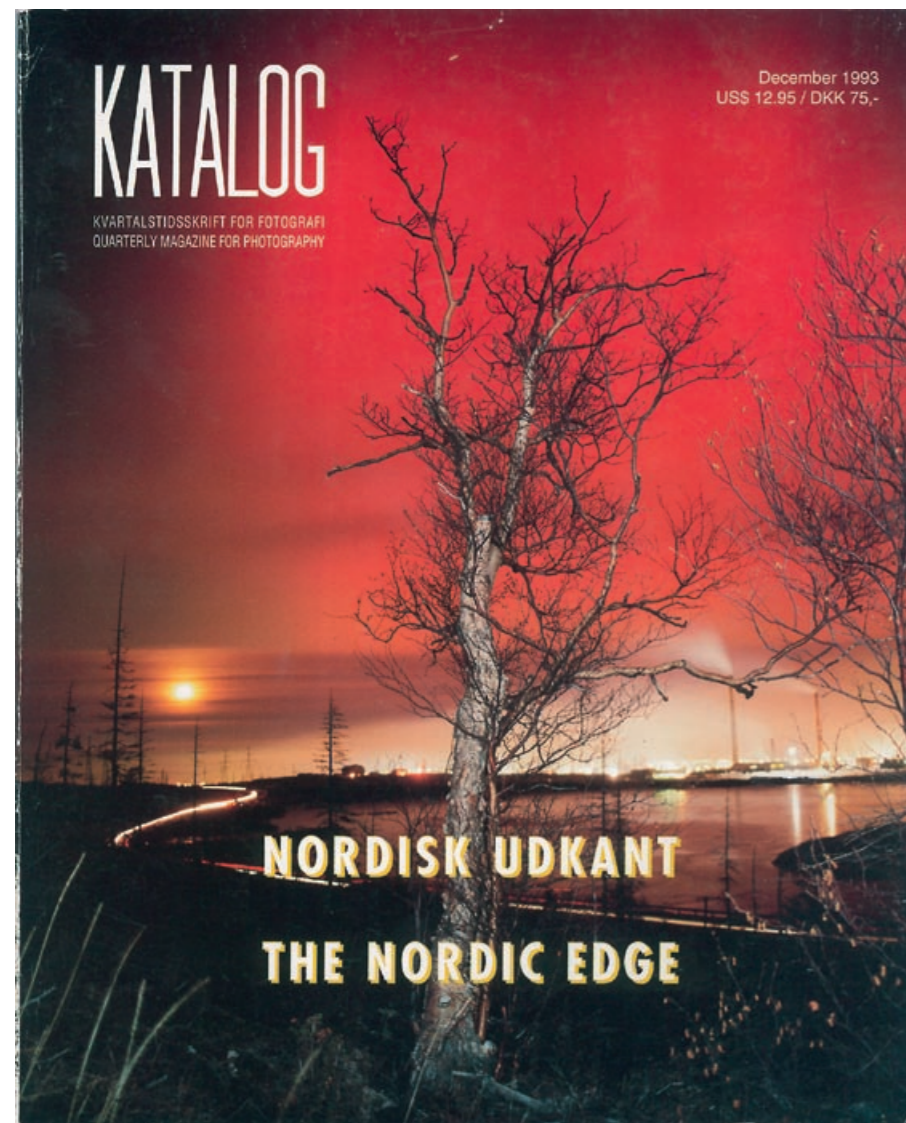
Cover:  
*Index – Contemporary Scandinavian Images*, nr. 3, 1992. Published by Fotograficentrum, Stockholm, Sweden.

instrumentality of photography in social and political developments have come under scrutiny ... Culture is not reflected in images; culture is produced in images.” He calls the artists in the exhibition – including Annica Karlsson-Rixon, Lotta Antonsson, Mathias Givell, Sven Westerlund, Cecilia Bergman, and Martin Sjöberg – “picture-makers who are interested in the visual culture in which we live”.<sup>2</sup> Women such as Lotta Antonsson, Annica Karlsson-Rixon and Annika von Hausswolff stand out as the front-runners of Nordic staged photography. All three later became teachers at the School of Photography at Gothenburg University. In Finland, Heli Rekula's “abject”, surreal and sometimes violent staging of female nudity was notable, and in Norway, Vibeke Tandberg staged herself as her own family members, including an imaginary twin sister; as various brides appearing in advertisements in different Scandinavian newspapers, and as a celebrity aid worker in Africa. In 1994, she had graduated from the Institute of Photography at the Bergen Academy of Art and Design which became the central incubator for Norwegian staged pho-

tography; Torbjørn Rødland and Mikkel McAlinden, central Norwegian representatives of staged photography, also graduated from the Bergen school in the 1990s. The black-and-white, existential subjectivism of former Scandinavian photography was blown away in favour of images that questioned and discussed subjectivity as an issue, together with gender, family, nature and sexuality.

### Madcap or Unrecognised? Special or Not Special?

In 1992, the editorial statement in issue no. 3 of the now bilingual magazine *Index* – which bore the subtitle *Contemporary Scandinavian Images* – is typical of the period: “*Bildtidningen* has been published since 1977 with 54 issues mirroring the climate of photographic culture in Sweden. In this period photography has not only been accepted as an art form among other art forms, but it has become the dominant and revitalizing factor on the art scene [...] in this way the artificial borderline between photography and the other visual arts has more or less disappeared.” In 1979, the American critic Carl Chiarenza had already argued that we should refer not to the history



Cover:  
*Katalog – Quarterly Magazine for Photography*, nr. 2, 1993. Published by Museet for Fotokunst, Odense, Denmark.

3  
Leena-Maija Rossi, “After the hype”, *Index*, no. 1, Stockholm: Fotograficentrum, 1994, p. 10.

4  
Hans Hedberg, “After the Hangover. A report from the Swedish art scene”, *Index*, no. 2, Stockholm: Fotograficentrum 1994, p. 21.

5  
Georg Sessler, “Suveränt förakt för fotokonsten”, *F – Fotografisk tidsskrift*, no. 4–5, Stockholm: Svenska Fotografernas Förbund, 1993, p. 19.

6  
Åsmund Thorkildsen, “Looking into the sober 90’s. A report from the Norwegian art scene”, *Index*, no. 2, Stockholm: Fotograficentrum 1994, p. 22.

of photography but to a “history of picture making”, and in John Tagg’s now legendary *The Burden of Representation* (1987), he claims that photography has no essence of its own, that there is no such thing as photography, but only *photographies*, in the plural. For the first two issues of *Index* (1994), a handful of central photography critics were invited to comment on their local scene. In no. 1, Leena-Maija Rossi lamented the “neo-poor society of the 90s” in Finland, compared to the late 1980s, during what she called “Finnish casino capitalism”.<sup>3</sup> Galleries had closed, she wrote, museums had less money, it was difficult for young artists to emerge, and there was a lack of plurality in general. Only a few years later, however, everyone was talking about the Finnish photo scene, or the so-called “Helsinki School”, which grew out of the School of Art and Design in Helsinki and was especially promoted by the teacher, organiser and curator Timothy Persons, who founded Gallery TAIK in 1995 to promote the young generation of photographers graduating from the school.

What can we learn from this shift in attitude in the space of only a few years? Well, that things go up and down, and that they often look better and brighter with hindsight. But certainly also that a strong and identifiable “scene” is dependent on the conscious adoption of a branding strategy, as Persons and others did to promote Finnish Photography. The material was excellent, of course, but the crucial issue was that someone saw this, sustained and promoted it. In the last half of the 1990s, Finland played the role of Nordic periphery in a very intelligent way, and as a result became the most internationally known Nordic country for photography.

*Index* no. 2 1994 continued with surveys from Sweden and Norway. Hans Hedberg, who was among the promoters of the new postmodern *Index*-generation in Sweden, described the scene there as an “energetic madcap” one.<sup>4</sup> The year before, however, Swedish photographer Georg Sessler had published a furious letter to the Swedish minister of culture Birgit Friggebo in *F-fotografisk tidsskrift* no. 4–5 1993, stating: “We photographers have a hard time being recognized as visual artists in Sweden [...] Art photographers have no platform in Sweden [...] now 160 years after its entrance on the scene photography is still an unrecognized art form.”<sup>5</sup> Thus even within the photographic circles themselves, there were disagreements as to the status of photography as art.

In those years, the gallery scene was already strong in Sweden, unlike in Norway, Denmark and Iceland, which took longer to develop; this meant that the Swedish scene was more integrated with the rest of the art world. In *Index* no. 2, the Norwegian report by Åsmund Thorkildsen states that the economic crisis in “the sober 90s” did not destroy Norwegian photography, because it had in any case not been shown in commercial galleries, but in institutions and artist-run-spaces such as Fotogalleriet (a non-commercial space founded in 1977 by photographers Dag Alveng, Bjørn Høyum and Tom Sandberg, later supported by the Union of Free Photographers, FFF).<sup>6</sup>

### A strong and identifiable “scene” is dependent on the conscious adoption of a branding strategy, as Persons and others did to promote Finnish Photography

Cover:  
*Valokuva – Finnish Photography*, nr. 3, 1987. Published by Finnfoto

7  
Marek Grygiel, “Some remarks on the photography of Nordic countries”, *Nordfotoart. New art photography and video from Scandinavia*, Warsaw: Ujazdowski Castle, 1994, p. 15.

8  
Steven Henry Madoff, “Stranger than Paradise”, *Stranger than Paradise, Contemporary Scandinavian Photography*, New York: The International Center of Photography, 1994, pp. 7, 6.



### A View from Outside

In 1994, the large exhibition *Nordfotoart. New art photography and video from Scandinavia* was shown at the Center for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle, in Warsaw, Poland. The press release underlined: “The works of these artists are considered to be among the most recent postmodern art currents.” The very positive catalogue text listed all the exhibition and education possibilities in Scandinavia, and ended: “Recently the artists from these countries have been investigating the universal problems of today’s world. At the same time they do not abandon their own artistic tradition. The use of photography and searching for its new contexts are the constant elements of postmodern aesthetics.”<sup>7</sup> Participants included Erik Steffensen and Tove Kurtzweil from Denmark; Timo Kellaranta and Rita Jokiranta from Finland; the Norwegian photographers Tom Sandberg and Fin Serck-Hanssen; Maria Miesenberger and Martin Sjöberg from Sweden, and from Iceland Borkur Arnarson and Svanur Kristbergsson.

In 1992, the International Center of Photography in New York (ICP) curated the exhibition *Stranger Than Paradise. Contemporary Scandinavian Photography*. Including names such as Tune Andersen and Erik Steffensen (Denmark), Jan Kaila and Kapa (Finland), Annica Karlsson-Rixon and Maria Meisenberger (Sweden), Lill-Ann Chepstow Lusty (Norway) and Borkur Arnarson and Svanur Kristbergsson (Iceland), it introduced itself as a new version of the 1982 exhibition *The Frozen Image: Scandinavian Photography* curated by American Martin Friedman. In the catalogue of the 1982 show, Scandinavian photography had been described as “an art of stillness”, but the American curator of *Stranger Than Paradise*, Steven Henry Madoff, who had gone through more than 150 portfolios of photographs from Scandinavia, refuted this as “essentially wrong”:

Nothing could be less still than the lacerating irony, the struggle with and satire of the Nordic cult of nature, the sheer mobility of Scandinavian photographers restlessly recording their contemporary world [...] Nothing could be less frozen ... In fact, most of these Scandinavian photographers seemed entirely fluid in the styles and attitudes of their European and American counterparts. The Nordic gene pool is alive with hybrids.<sup>8</sup>

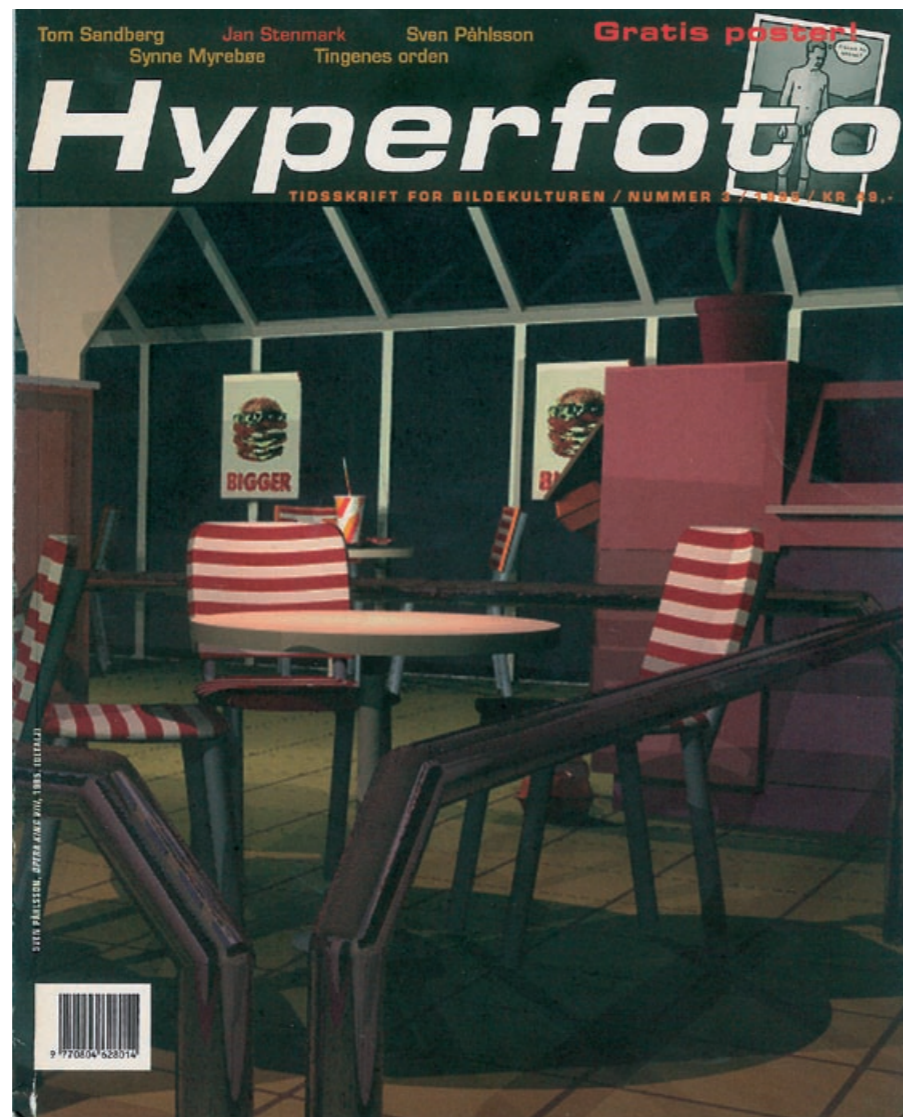
### Institutional Infrastructure

As elsewhere internationally, Nordic photography had taken a major step towards recognition on equal terms with painting when, during the 1990s, it increased in scale, branched into colour and turned away from reality towards staging its subjects and discussing general topics such as gender, sexuality, mass culture and capitalism. The photographs looked less like “photographs” and more like “art” and could thus be valued more easily as art. Another big step at around this time was the foundation of an institutional infrastructure around photography. In Denmark, the Museum of Photographic Art was founded in 1987 in Odense, and in 1999, The National

Museum of Photography opened in Copenhagen, based on the unique collection of the Royal Library. Galleri Image in Aarhus had already opened in 1977, and in Copenhagen Fotografisk Galleri was launched in the 1980s, and Fotografisk Center in 1996. The first history of Danish photography was published in 2004, and, with the employment of the renowned photographer Per Bak Jensen as associate professor in 1987, the Royal Academy of Art placed more focus on the medium. With regards to education, Sweden was even stronger than Denmark, with Nordens Fotoskola, the Valand Academy, Gothenburg and Konstfack University College of Arts, Crafts and Design, Stockholm. Exhibitions were held regularly at Fotografiska Museet under the auspices of The Museum of Modern Art and at Fotograficentrum in Stockholm, as well as at other galleries in that city such as Camera Obscura. Many Nordic photographers travelled to Holland, Scotland, England or Germany to get an art education – or to the Helsinki School of Art and Design. The Finnish Museum of Photography had been founded in 1969, and a handful of local photography centres, such as Ranta gallery in Oulu and Hippolyte and Finnfoto in Helsinki, opened later. Finland could also boast photography magazines such as *Valokuva* and *Musta Taide*, and it published its own history of photography before any other Nordic country. Norway also offered good photography education at the art academy in Oslo and especially at the already mentioned Institute of Photography under the Bergen Academy of Art and Design. The Preus Museum of Photography should also be mentioned (a private collection that was acquired by the state in 1995), and the photographic magazine *Hyperfoto*, as well as the book about the history of Norwegian photography, *Norsk Fotohistorie* (published in 2007). In Iceland, the small city-run Reykjavik Museum of Photography was founded in 1981 and is very popular, with 32,000 visitors in 2011 – an enormous number compared to the size of the country and its population. The National Museum of Iceland, which has included the The Icelandic Museum of Photography as a sub-section with its own exhibition space since 2004, owns a very large collection of four million photographs. Both institutions arrange regular photography exhibitions. The National Museum permanently shows its collection, and presents temporary exhibitions and research on the history of Icelandic photography. The art gallery i8 is also worth mentioning as a place to experience photography, as well as the artist-run space Kling og Bang and the Icelandic Art Center. Iceland has an Academy of the Arts, but many contemporary Icelandic photographers, like their Nordic neighbours, have typically studied abroad.

### Nordic Photographers Are Doing Well

Over the last fifteen years, photography has played a major role on the art scene internationally as well as in the Nordic countries, even though – at least in Denmark, Norway and Iceland – it is still harder to make a career as a photographer than as a painter. The development of photography as an art form, and



Cover:  
*Hyperfoto – Tidsskrift for  
bildekulturen*, nr. 3, 1995.  
Published by Hyperfoto, Oslo,  
Norway.

**For most contemporary photographers, the medium is just a tool in the process of articulating ideas, thoughts, dreams, fantasies and concepts that they share with many other artists**

of the theoretical discussions that took place from the late 1980s, have been crucial to the far more nuanced use and understanding of the medium that we see today, where most artists as well as the audience are aware of the fact that every photograph represents some degree of staging and artistic manipulation or work, and where most museums and galleries have accepted photography on equal terms with painting, installation art, video and sculpture. Today, allegorical, filmic, painterly, straight, documentary, conceptual and staging strategies are among the vast tools in the photographic artist's toolbox and there is no simple way to describe Nordic photography. The scene is alive, professional, energetic and internationally oriented. The institutional infrastructure is as strong as ever and therefore Nordic photographers are doing well. Whereas photography was previously shown at artist-run, non-commercial spaces such as Galleri Image in Aarhus and Fotogalleriet in Oslo, it is now possible to run a fully commercial gallery specialising in photography, such as the Peter Lav Gallery in Denmark, which opened in 2006. New magazines have popped up within only the last few years, such as the Norwegian *Objektiv* (founded 2009), the Danish *Filter* (founded 2007) and the Finnish *Photo Raw* (founded 2007). New festivals have appeared, including the annual Copenhagen Photo Festival (founded in 2010) and Xpseptember – Stockholm's Photo Festival (2004–10). Many museums, like the Reykjavik Museum of Photography, The Preus Museum in Norway and the Museum of Photographic Art in Odense, Denmark, hold their own smaller, but highly ambitious, photography festivals. The most important fact to underline, however, is that almost all the top commercial galleries now include and show photography regularly, and they represent Nordic photography at international fairs, not just at Paris Photo, but also at Art Basel and the other global commercial art fairs. Compared with the more explicitly 'postmodern' generation of artists, it is no longer so important for the artists/photographers of the new millennium to stress the dominance of photography in the construction of modern identity, power and politics, nor to fight for its acceptance as an art form on equal terms with painting. For most contemporary photographers, the medium is just a tool in the process of articulating ideas, thoughts, dreams, fantasies and concepts that they share with many other artists.

Let's now go back to the question of the origins of my initial quote in this article, where the journalist asks the art critic: "Can photography be art?" Readers may be surprised to learn that it was taken from the Danish newspaper *Politiken* of Friday 8 June 2012. So it would seem that magazines, exhibitions and festivals focusing specifically on understanding what photography is, and can be, are still as necessary as ever.

Covers:  
*F – Fotografisk Tidsskrift*,  
nr. 4–5, 1993. Published by  
Svenska Fotografernas  
Förbund, Stockholm, Sweden.

*Ljósmyndablaðið*,  
nr. 1, 1986. Published  
by Hálfjos og skuggar,  
Reykjavik, Iceland.

