

# Gender-Based Violence in Arts and Culture

Perspectives on  
Education  
and Work



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Marie Buscatto, Sari Karttunen and Mathilde Provansal (eds), *Gender-Based Violence in Arts and Culture: Perspectives on Education and Work*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0436>

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Information about any revised edition of this work will be provided at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0436>

ISBN Paperback 978-1-80511-448-2

ISBN Hardback 978-1-80511-449-9

ISBN PDF 978-1-80511-450-5

ISBN HTML 978-1-80511-452-9

ISBN EPUB 978-1-80511-451-2

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0436

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Cover design by Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

## 5. The Helsinki School: Gendered Image Shaping and Gender-Based Violence in a Photography Branding Project

*Leena-Maija Rossi and Sari Karttunen*

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### Varieties of Gender-Based Violence in the Art Context

On the cover of a glossy photography book there is an image of a young woman, sunken in a bathtub so deep that we can only see the upper half of her head. The title of the book, printed on the cover, is *The Helsinki School, Vol. 4: A Female View*.<sup>1</sup> In the foreword the primus motor of the Helsinki School, curator, teacher and gallerist Timothy Persons writes:

This book helps clarify why so many women have emerged as the leading figures from the Helsinki School. Each artist portrayed here is unique by her own making. However, they all share one common denominator and that is of experiencing the same educational model. (Persons, 2011, p. 7)

The Helsinki School was launched in the early 1990s as an educational, branding and marketing effort for photographic art at the University of Industrial Art and Design Helsinki. First wider in scope and using the title Gallery TaiK (the acronym for the Finnish name of the university, Taideteollinen korkeakoulu), the project later focused on cooperation with the Department of Photographic Art and came to be linked to its study programme. The title 'Helsinki School' started to spread after the German critic Boris Hohmeyer published an article in 2003, describing

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1 The cover photograph is Aino Kannisto's *Untitled (White Tub)* (2008). It is the artist herself posing in the photograph.

how Persons saw the working methods of the Düsseldorf School of Photography—established by Hilla and Bernd Becher in the 1970s—as a model that could be applied in Helsinki (Hohmeyer, 2003).

In the above quotation from the book, Persons claims that women have played a significant role as key actors in the project, and indeed all eight artists who have been featured most frequently (appearing five times) across the six major Helsinki School volumes published by Hatje Cantz between 2005 and 2019 are women.<sup>2</sup> As mentioned, one of the books, and the related touring exhibition, is dedicated solely to women photographers. However, the founding members of the Helsinki School were all male,<sup>3</sup> and its educational model has been in male hands: all the professors in charge of it have been male. Given the power imbalance between the two genders, it was not entirely unexpected when, in early 2022, Finnish media reported on accusations of sexual harassment brought by several female students, with this allegedly perpetrated by the two male professors in charge of the School's educational and curatorial practices, Persons (until 2022) and Jyrki Parantainen (between 2006 and 2017) (Kartastenpää, 2022; Paananen, 2022a, 2022b). While the #MeToo movement reached Finland right after its global onset in October 2017 (Honkasalo, 2018), discussions of gendered misconduct in the arts have largely centred on film, music and theatre (see, e.g., Paanetoja, 2018; Pääkkölä et al., 2021). In this chapter, we delve into the complex interplay of the increasing female visibility and the pervasive male dominance that still prevailed at the beginning of the twenty-first century in the field of visual art in general, and at the Helsinki School in particular.

During the heyday of the Helsinki School—the 1990s and the early 2000s—the notion of the gender system as binary was still very strong in Finnish society, and pervaded art discourse as well. Publicly at least, most artists identified themselves at the time as either male or female, and in the case of the Helsinki School we thus find it legitimate to write about violence directed towards women in particular as gender-based

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2 Tiina Itkonen, Ulla Jokisalo, Aino Kannisto, Sanna Kannisto, Sandra Kantanen, Anni Leppälä, Susanna Majuri and Riitta Päiväläinen. A total of 75 artists (36 women, 39 men) were represented in the six volumes published by the Helsinki School.

3 Curator and later Adjunct Professor Timothy Persons, Professor Jorma Puranen and Rector Yrjö Sotamaa (see Persons, n.d.).

violence. We are fully aware of the proliferation of gender terminology in this millennium, of the complexity of gender as a phenomenon and even of the binary in itself being a form of institutional violence. In this chapter, however, we use mostly the terms current in the Finnish context between the 1990s and the 2010s.

In her widely influential article written in the late 1980s, Liz Kelly (1987) suggested that various forms of violence against women, ranging from everyday sexism and harassment to rape and femicide, should not be conceived as isolated incidents but as forming an integrated whole in which they reinforce each other. Kelly's conception of a '*continuum* of violence' explains how seemingly minor forms of violence contribute to a culture of misogyny, enable more severe forms of abuse and maintain the normalisation of violence against women in society. This dynamic sustains gender-based violence as a systemic phenomenon. In our discussion, which focuses on the allegations of sexual harassment within, and the artistic imagery of, the Helsinki School, we connect Kelly's notion of a *continuum* with a wide concept of gender-based violence, one including homo- and transphobia. As we use the term, it encompasses various forms of violence that are directed at individuals based on their gender; such violence has a disproportionate impact on cisgender females, but is also directed at gay cisgender men, transgender women and men, and non-binary people at large (Karkulehto & Rossi, 2017). Gender-based violence can manifest in different forms, including physical, sexual and psychological. In its economic form, it encompasses financial control, deprivation of resources or economic exploitation (see, e.g., European Institute for Gender Equality, n.d.). Symbolic violence represented and reiterated through art and media fuels gender-based violence in its reinforcing stereotypes, normalising abusive behaviour and perpetuating unequal power dynamics pervasively through societal institutions and cultural norms. It legitimises straight cis men's dominance over women and gay and trans men, contributing to the acceptance and continuation of gender-based violence as a systemic phenomenon in society (see, e.g., Thapar-Björkert et al., 2016).

After presenting our data and methods, we will first provide a detailed description of the concept and practices of the Helsinki School. Then, analysing both written and visual material, we will investigate the various forms and instances of gender-based violence allegedly

experienced by female students and artists within the School. Our chapter aims to demonstrate how gender-based violence in its entirety, including the gendered shaping of the images of female artists as well as their artworks, contributed to the persistence of male domination in the export and training project despite the number of female representatives and the high visibility given to them. Our analysis targets not only the representations of gender-based violence in the artworks produced by the Helsinki School but also the conditions attending the production of those representations.

### Aims, Tools and Materials

This chapter continues the collaboration that we started in the early 2000s in the research project titled *Polar Stars*, funded by the Research Council of Finland. The project explored the internationalisation of Finnish photographic and video art.<sup>4</sup> Our interviewees, representing the field of Finnish photography of the time, drew attention to the selective access of students to the Helsinki School. Some also discussed extensive efforts aimed at shaping the students' artistic production, sometimes requiring them to exploit their own personal experiences. However, there were no indications of sexual harassment in the interviews, which were for the most part conducted in 2007. In this chapter, we update our research, and examine the export project from the perspectives of visual sociology and gender studies and through the lens of comprehensive gender-based violence.<sup>5</sup>

Our aim is to scrutinise how diverse forms of gender-based violence operated within the Helsinki School at the same time as it cultivated a public image centred around female artists. For this purpose, we have carried out both visual and textual analysis of the large-scale

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4 In addition to the authors, the project involved Kati Kivinen, Anna-Kaisa Rastenberger and Juha Suonpää, and it was conducted at the Finnish Museum of Photography.

5 Our research project ran between 2005 and 2009, during which time the Helsinki School was gaining more international visibility. We dealt with the School in several of our publications (see, for example, Karttunen, 2009, 2010; Rastenberger, 2006, 2015; Rossi, 2012; Suonpää, 2011). The project group collaborated with Alain Quemin, a French sociologist of art, who conducted a visual sociological analysis of the first volume in the Helsinki School series (2005), and also considered representations of gender (Quemin, 2012, 2015).

photography books representing the School's artists and their works, published between 2005 and 2019 by Hatje Cantz, a well-known international art book publisher. All the volumes include introductory chapters by Persons, artist introductions and short texts by other art world practitioners. We also discuss on a detailed level the media material which exposed the gender-based abuse that allegedly took place within the export project. The visual representations of gender and sexuality are analysed via theory-informed close reading of the distinct ways of portraying young female bodies, often female members of the Helsinki School posing in the photographs themselves.<sup>6</sup> We ask whether the gendered image-shaping of both the photographs and the export project as a whole also represent a form of gender-based violence. The analysis of both textual and visual material is framed by critical feminist studies of visual culture and cultural work at large, and by feminist research on gender-based violence (Bronfen, 1992; Butler, 2004; Carter & Weaver, 2003; Cuklanz, 2000; Projansky, 2001).

## From Stardom to Hardship

The Helsinki School developed out of a coaching project for photography students in the early 1990s at the University of Industrial Art and Design Helsinki, now known as the Aalto University School of Art, Design and Architecture. The curator, Timothy Persons, who held a position as Adjunct Professor, began to internationalise the photography programme together with Professor Jorma Puranen, a photographic artist, under the leadership of Rector Yrjö Sotamaa (Aalto University, n.d.; Paananen, 2022a).<sup>7</sup> A module of internationalisation studies was established in the Master's Programme in Photographic Art<sup>8</sup> in which a handpicked group of students was taught how to write an artist

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6 We will not address representations of male bodies due to their scarcity in the Helsinki School books, and because these representations do not constitute gender-based violence in our reading.

7 Puranen (b. 1951) taught photographic art at Taik between 1978 and 1998, acting as professor between 1996 and 1998.

8 At that time this was the only Master's programme in photographic art in the country. Photographic art was defined and organised as a subfield of visual arts in Finland in the 1980s. The Association of Photographic Artists that was established in 1988 has currently over 450 members.

statement, taken to international art fairs and introduced to curators and collectors (Paananen, 2022a; Persons, 2014; Korpak, 2021). After reshaping the concept of the University's gallery, Persons established a physical gallery space in Berlin. The School also started to include former students and teachers at Taik, eventually increasing its membership to as many as several dozen artists. Persons himself has been involved with international networks, being, for instance, a member of the Board and the Honor Committee of Paris Photo (Paananen, 2022a; Paris Photo, n.d.-b), and has subsequently enabled the School's photographers to present their work internationally, especially in European venues.

The Helsinki School was largely celebrated as a brand, and a success story of internationalisation in the Finnish art scene (see, for example, Korpak, 2021; Mäcklin, 2021; Uimonen, 2012) until, in early 2022, it came into the public eye in a different light. The media began publishing allegations of abuse of power, sexual harassment of students, lack of transparency of operations and ambiguities in funding. The malpractices were first reported on *Long Play*, a web platform of critical journalism, in an article by an independent investigative journalist (Paananen, 2022a). The discussion immediately spread to the national mainstream media (for example, Kartastenpää, 2022) as well as various social media platforms. In the following days, several new allegations of sexual harassment against students were brought to public attention. *Long Play* soon published another article on the case (Paananen, 2022b). Aalto University launched an internal investigation into the matter, following which it terminated the programme, and Persons (b. 1954) retired after a slight reprimand made public by the University (Aalto University, 2022a, 2022b). As of 2022, The Helsinki School is no longer associated with Aalto University but rather continues its work as an entity associated with the Berlin gallery, now under the name 'Persons Projects' (The Helsinki School, n.d.). In the following, we draw on the published statements of the former female members of the Helsinki School when discussing different forms of gender-based violence and gendered structures of power in the field of visual art and art education.

## Recurring Sexual Harassment within the Helsinki School

For the original article reporting on the malpractices, Karoliina Paananen, the *Long Play* journalist, had interviewed several people who had been chosen to be part of the Helsinki School (Paananen, 2022a). They described distinct power dynamics and processes of screening, pointing out how the Aalto photography students were first taken up as ‘candidates’ for some art fairs, later becoming members proper, and how the School divided the photography students hierarchically into two groups. Several former students also told Paananen (2022a) about being inappropriately approached during their studies, behaviour that could be framed as ‘grooming’. In the present case, grooming consisted of the gradual manipulation of students in which boundaries are blurred and inappropriate behaviour is normalised, often leading to emotional or sexual exploitation under the guise of mentorship (compare Ramstedt, 2024, on similar cases in classical music). Persons had, for instance, asked one female student to an afterparty of an opening, but there was nobody else there—except Persons, who wanted to discuss the student’s personal life, including a possible boyfriend. He also wanted to walk arm-in-arm from the restaurant in which they had met and, according to the student, told her that he wanted to ‘kidnap her to his villa [...] to see some kittens’.<sup>9</sup> The student felt threatened by the suggestion. Many female students told the journalist how Persons had commented on their looks, pried into their personal lives and later discussed their private issues in front of other students.

Aalto University’s handling of harassment cases was challenged in the *Long Play* article (Paananen, 2022a). The representatives of the University interviewed for the article either said that they had no part in running the Helsinki School, or emphasised that the School had benefited the University and Finnish photography at large. Only one of the teachers, a female professor, Marjaana Kella (whose own artwork had previously been presented within the frame of Helsinki School), openly questioned the practice of commercialising the

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9 The quotations were initially in Finnish and have been translated by the authors for inclusion in the article.

students' work from early on.<sup>10</sup> She had also spoken to the Human Resources Department and the University's lawyer about two cases of harassment (Paananen, 2022a). Persons was given a formal warning for his inappropriate behaviour in 2018, but there was little confidentiality in the University process: if the students made their complaints under their own names, Persons found out who had complained about him and, according to the students, made angry and threatening phone calls to them. What is more, many students interviewed by Paananen (2022a) said they did not take their cases forward, because they worried about being able to finish their degree at the University and even about their future career.

Persons has been very influential in the European photographic scene (Paananen, 2022a; Paris Photo, n.d.-b) and arguably has had enough power to include as well as exclude photographic artists from that setting. Significantly, his role at Aalto as a teacher-cum-curator also provided him ample opportunities for the use and abuse of power (Paananen, 2022a). Persons himself, when interviewed for the *Long Play* article, denied the accusations of physical abuse, and even the fact that the University had given him an official warning in 2018. He only admitted that he had 'complimented' the students' looks, but had been told that 'one must not say such things nowadays' (Paananen, 2022a), obviously referring to the repercussions of the global #MeToo movement. The dean of the Aalto School of the Arts, Design and Architecture agreed in the article that Persons did wield considerable power, and that 'the use of power always includes the possibility of using it in a wrong way'. He also mentioned that collaboration between Persons and the University had come to an end, but cited financial reasons as the cause: the journalist reports the dean as saying 'No matter how great a job they [the Helsinki School] have done, we have to cut expenses' (Paananen, 2022a).

The female students' stories accord with Sophie Hennekam and Dawn Bennett's (2017) claim that sexual harassment pervades the creative industries to the extent that it becomes normalised, with many women accepting it as an inevitable aspect of their professional environment and career progression. Hennekam and Bennett define

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10 Kella (b. 1961) acted as professor of photographic art between 2017 and 2020. She participated in two Helsinki School volumes (2005 and 2011).

work-related sexual violence as any form of unwelcome sexual conduct, comprising unwanted remarks, gestures, and physical contact, including situations where sexual favours are exchanged for employment opportunities. Their analysis takes into account the context, relying on an understanding of the specific social and economic organisation shaping the creative industries (compare Caves, 2000; Menger, 2014). Hennekam and Bennett (2017) identify four main factors that contribute to the prevalence and tolerance of sexual harassment in these industries: competition for jobs, industry culture, gendered power relations, and the importance of informal networks. The Helsinki School stories show all these factors at work.

### Blurred Lines between Work and Personal Life

While informal networks are crucial for employment and career advancement in the creative industries, networking can reinforce existing power imbalances and exclusionary practices, leading to environments where sexual harassment may be normalised or overlooked to maintain professional relationships. The fluidity between work and personal interactions can blur the lines between acceptable behaviour and harassment, making it difficult for individuals to recognise and report misconduct. As Hennekam and Bennett (2017) note, taken together these dimensions shape the culture within the creative industries, influencing attitudes towards sexual harassment and perpetuating its prevalence within the workforce. These characteristics are prominent in the story of Eva Persson, one of the former students whose experiences of sexual harassment by Timothy Persons were detailed in the second *Long Play* article (Paananen, 2022b).

According to Paananen (2022b), while pursuing her photography studies, Eva Persson was also working at the Helsinki School's gallery. The work demanded a lot of travelling, and Persons and the student usually stayed in modest hotels in separate rooms. However, on one trip, Persons booked them a shared room in an expensive hotel, justifying this to the student on the grounds of saving money and promising to sleep on the floor. She recalled responding, 'I said that was fine, as long as I have the bed' (Paananen, 2022b). In the evening, Persons asked if they could sleep in the same bed after all, but the student refused. In the night, she woke

up to find Persons crawling into her narrow bed and wrapping his arms around her. She recalled, 'When I asked what he was doing, he answered: "Just making myself comfortable"' (Paananen, 2022b).

Another time, Persson told the journalist (Paananen, 2022b), Persons invited Eva Persson to his country house, where he was staying with his children. The student agreed to the invitation, thinking it would be safe with the children present. At night, Persons came to the room where the student was staying and asked her to go outside with him. She refused, but Persons persisted. The student became frightened and thought it best to get up. Outside, Persons started to make passes at her, and she became paralysed. She recalled, 'I noticed I was defeated. I could not escape the situation; it was not possible. I could not make a scene [...] I did not say no, I did not fight. I gave up' (Paananen, 2022b). After this episode, the student worked with Persons as a gallery assistant for a while longer, but then changed to another field completely. She had not talked about her experiences before 2022, but decided to share them after Persons had claimed in the first *Long Play* interview that he had never approached any student sexually.

Another female student told Paananen (2022b) a story of a visit to Persons' country house as well: they ate, drank wine and the curator-teacher asked if they might go take a sauna and go swimming. Nothing happened in the sauna, but later, when the student had gone to sleep, Persons suddenly came to the room, climbed to her bed, and pressed his penis against her. The student got up and went to another room. Later she blamed herself for having been naive and did not tell anybody about the incident. She eventually gave up on photography as a field altogether. *Long Play* interviewed four other women who had quit photography and switched careers (Paananen, 2022b).

As mentioned, informal networks play a crucial role in establishing and advancing careers in the creative industries. Participating in these networks often leads to the boundaries between professional and personal life becoming blurred, especially in situations involving alcohol consumption. In the visual arts, exhibition opening parties and private showings represent just such situations. Eva Persson's work at the Helsinki School's gallery included establishing relationships with the art world. She told Paananen (2022b) that on one occasion, when a party was thrown for art influencers in a prestigious Helsinki

residence, Persons invited the student to a room where he was having a conversation with a Swedish museum director. The student presumed the purpose of the meeting was networking, but when she went in, Persons asked her to show her breasts. The student said that she was unable to say anything in the situation, so she just left the party. In this incident, Persons could be interpreted as demonstrating his position of power to both the student and the visiting museum director (see, for example, Wilson & Thompson, 2001); at the same time, he completely objectified the student. The case also illustrates the common mechanism whereby women are reduced from their professional role to their gender role (see, for example, Saresma et al., 2020).

### Toleration Fuelled by Multiple Factors

Hennekam and Bennett (2017) note that their research participants often found themselves in ‘gendered dependency situations’ in the creative sector. Referring to research concerning other industries, the authors state that sexual harassment arises from men’s economic power over women and that dependency situations enable sexual exploitation and coercion. Hennekam and Bennett see this as consistent with the fact that women tolerate more intrusive types of sexual harassment from higher-status males. Eva Persson’s working relationship with Persons is an example of such gendered dependency. Power and economic imbalances foster a cycle of tolerated harassment. Observing the acceptance of sexually charged behaviour can lead female students to perpetuate such conduct, sustaining an environment in which harassment is accommodated.

The statements from female students in the Helsinki School align with previous studies that have identified various reasons why harassment often goes unreported and fails to be revealed (see also Chapter 2 and Chapter 7 in this book). Victims often doubt their experiences, unsure where normal behaviour ends and intentional harassment begins; Gunilla Carstensen (2016) refers to this ambiguity as a ‘grey zone’. Women, particularly those socialised in industries where harassment is normalised and job security is tenuous, may opt for individual discretion out of concern for career repercussions. Hennekam and Bennett (2017) cite a number of reasons for this behaviour. These include fear of revenge, reluctance to be perceived

as a victim, concern about being labelled overly sensitive. Moreover, women may be sceptical regarding the likelihood of the harasser facing consequences, have limited awareness of their rights and lack adequate access to external support. Organisational or occupational characteristics and power imbalances may further inhibit reporting.

The investigative articles published by *Long Play* on the Helsinki School case shed light on several structures that perpetuate violence against women, both within art education and in the art world at large. The female students told the journalist that they had experienced sexual harassment on the part of male teachers; male students did not tell similar stories. Because of the male professors' positions of power in the art world, the female students felt that they could not jeopardise their careers by making their experiences public. Homosocial male bonding (see, for example, Sedgwick, 1989) further protected the leaders of the Helsinki School from accusations of malpractice. The instances of violence identified range from physical acts to more subtle forms, and the *continuum* formed by these incidents can easily be interpreted as exemplifying the intersectional symbolic violence that older, influential heterosexual men exercise over younger women. This is proven by the threatening atmosphere, in which the students kept quiet due to fear for their academic progress and further career. This atmosphere was repeatedly reported in both *Long Play* articles, which were based on several student interviews (Paananen, 2022a, 2022b).

Maria Isabel Menéndez-Menéndez (2014) has criticised cultural industries and their discourses for legitimising certain power relations and for subtle practices that contribute to the reproduction of symbolic violence against women. For instance, competitive structures and outright sexual harassment may be tolerated in an art university if people at the top level of the hierarchies insist that 'the benefits are bigger than the harm done', as was the case in the Helsinki School (Paananen, 2022b). It is crucial for symbolic violence (see also Karkulehto & Rossi, 2017) that the members of the dominant group believe that their own domination is legitimate (Menéndez-Menéndez, 2014).

## Familial Industry Culture Favouring Gender-Based Violence

In her chapter in this book (Chapter 8), Alice Laurent-Camena writes about people in cultural scenes forming relationships resembling family ties, and about these ‘families’ not wanting to wash ‘their dirty linen in public’ (see also Chapter 3 in this book). The members of the Helsinki School have similarly described their community as a family, or as a succession of generations. It is performatively repeated in several texts concerning the Helsinki School that the uniqueness of the School’s educational method lies in the interaction between different generations of artists, where both explicit and tacit knowledge is passed on from one generation to the next. As Hilla Kurki, a member of the Helsinki School, said in a 2016 interview (Virri, 2016): ‘Maybe it’s a dysfunctional family, but all families are dysfunctional’. Interestingly, this observation was published several years before the allegations on malpractices became public and before #MeToo became a global movement.

The way a family closes its ranks became evident when soon after the first *Long Play* article appeared, former photography professor Jyrki Parantainen published an op-ed piece in *Helsingin Sanomat*, the largest subscription newspaper in Finland, together with two other senior Helsinki School artists, Elina Brotherus and Sandra Kantanen. In their joint piece, they defended the School and maintained that ‘friendships, open criticism, argumentation and differing opinions are part of the same parcel; harassment of any kind is not’ (Brotherus et al., 2022). Brotherus, who has spoken in public about the importance of feminist practices and role models in the art world (for example, Paris Photo, n.d.-a), did not acknowledge the claims of her younger female colleagues regarding the Helsinki School, but rather allied herself with Parantainen to refute their accusations. The joint letter-to-the-editor by Brotherus, Kantanen and Parantainen may also be recognised as an example of the way the older generation of the Helsinki School, bound as they were in their day to Persons, the leader of the School, have in turn come to exercise power over the younger artists or students. This kind of complicity is not to be taken as voluntarism, but rather as a complex effect of the domination process: the acts of obedience and submission, in no way acts of full awareness, are acts of knowledge (of a structure) and recognition (of a legitimacy) (Menéndez-Menéndez, 2014).

## Gendered Paradox of Male Artists' Power and Intentions

In the second *Long Play* article, several female whistleblowers not only told more stories about Persons but also denounced Parantainen for approaching students in an inappropriate manner and having started relationships with students during the years he was teaching at Aalto University.<sup>11</sup> The narratives describe him seeking physical contact with female students in bars and at school parties and, for instance, kissing students without any warning (Paananen, 2022b). These behaviours do not come as a surprise, given that it has been a characteristic of Finnish photography schools' 'industry culture' for professors and students to interact in a non-hierarchical manner and often spend time together outside the institution. Parantainen did not respond to the *Long Play* journalist's phone calls and messages at first, but eventually sent an email explaining that in his view the time teachers and students spent together was 'consensual' and that 'the claims about relationships and "kisses" were rumours and interpretations' (Paananen, 2022b).

In his own photographs selected for the Helsinki School books, Parantainen depicts cityscapes or people, mostly women or girls. His works showing female characters often prompt reflection on gender-based violence. One example is *57 Optional Spots to Crack the Bone* (2004) from the *Dreams and Disappointments* series that was featured in Volume 5. In the photograph, a young woman leans her hands on the edge of a stainless steel sink in a white-tiled men's restroom, with the urinals visible in the background. She is wearing a shiny, nude sleeveless party dress, with a neckline revealing her cleavage. Her party purse lies on the sink. Water is flowing from the tap, but the woman pays no attention to it, instead gazing earnestly, perhaps desperately, to her right, outside the frame. The woman's black mascara is smudged, and her hair is dishevelled. Each of the fifty-seven potential fracture points of bones is marked on the female figure with a small nail, connected by a thread to another nail outside the figure. The combination of nails, wire and number markings lends the photograph a scientific touch.

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11 Parantainen was Professor of Photographic Art at Aalto University's School of Arts, Design and Architecture between 2010 and 2017 and its predecessor University of Arts and Design Helsinki between 2006 and 2010. He started his teaching career there in the early 1990s.

According to Parantainen himself, his series *Dreams and Disappointments* aims to direct the audience toward the reassuring possibility of a happy ending (Silva, 2008). In Winter 2024, *57 Optional Spots to Crack the Bone* was for sale at Artsy, where it was described as depicting a friend of the artist as a young bride to be, with all her doubts and fears prior to her wedding ceremony.<sup>12</sup> However, when analysed through the lens of gender-based violence, the frozen narrative of Parantainen's photograph appears to depict a moment of crisis and an underlying threat of violence faced by the young woman. Artsy also contextualises this twenty-year-old artwork as reflecting 'the turbulent times and general lack of awareness of domestic violence that was just becoming a major issue back in 2004' (Artsy, n.d.). Given the recent revelations concerning the Helsinki School, the idea that meaning-making within this context leads to a "happy ending" appears increasingly untenable. The tension between the testimonies of female whistleblowers and the artistic intentions articulated by a male professor creates a striking paradox.

### Gendered Image Shaping: Women's Aesthetic Labour

Not only in the performing arts but also in such art forms as the visual arts, the practitioners' physicality and bodily capital, 'aesthetic labor' (Mears, 2014) or 'display work' (Mears & Connell, 2016) may assist in gaining visibility in the art market and access to its informal networks. In the case of the Helsinki School, female bodily capital also emerges as a resource to be used in photographs. For instance, the branding effort has to some extent utilised the bodily capital and aesthetic labour of its female members. In the first *Long Play* article, one of the students said that Persons had suggested she 'get inspired by another female artist, who posed naked in her works' (Paananen, 2022a). Female students have also been expected to engage in emotional labour by drawing on their personal traumas in their artmaking (Paananen, 2022b). For instance, in *The Female Point of View* (2011), Milja Laurila's childhood trauma is referenced when discussing her work (see also Chapter 6 in

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12 See <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/jyrki-parantainen-57-optional-spots-to-crack-the-bone>

this book).

Nude photographs are indeed not uncommon in the six Helsinki School volumes, although not all of them are self-portraits. Elina Brotherus (b. 1972) does a lot of nude studies, but there is little sexual reference in her photographs. She often works alone and photographs herself using a cable release. The photographs are taken from afar, she often has her back turned towards the viewer or looks straight out of the photograph, facing the viewer in a direct and unabashed manner. In a feminist art historical frame, her photographs may be conceptualised as pictures of non-eroticised nakedness rather than sexualised nudes (see, for example, Nead, 1992). Some of her pictures, nonetheless, make references to the *Venus pudica* type of classic art historical pose (Vänskä, 2005), which contains contradictory references: in covering their pubic area with their hand, the women in the old paintings and sculptures simultaneously direct the viewer's attention to it. The same arguably happens in the photographs by Brotherus. In her interviews she has insisted that she is not interested in representing female sexuality (see, e.g., Hujanen, 2018), and does not care if the human figure is a man or a woman. Yet she has also made a series of photographs in which two male painters are painting her posing naked as a model, quite obviously hinting that she is conscious of the masculinist tradition of the heterosexual male gaze (Mulvey, 1989). Through this series, and many others, Brotherus clearly establishes that she herself is in control of the process and representation in her images. Accordingly, she participates in the already long *continuum* of feminist photography, and feminist art at large, emphasising female agency (see, for example, Reckitt & Phelan, 2001; Reilly & Nochlin, 2007). Having ambitiously constructed a strong agency of her own in the art world, she has also lent her images to the gendered image shaping among other women artists who 'have emerged as the leading figures from the Helsinki School' (Persons, 2011, p. 7).

Several female artists associated with the Helsinki School appear to have been strategically used both for crafting the collective image of the School and enhancing the market success of the branding effort, implying an economic form of gender-based violence. The project involved not only young students but also established photographic artists, ones who already had extensive experience in international collaboration and exhibition activity and many of whom were female

(for example, Elina Brotherus, Ulla Jokisalo and Marjaana Kella). As Anna-Kaisa Rastenberger (2006) noted, inclusion of such established artists in the Helsinki School concept was crucial for the credibility of the entire brand and presumably beneficial for obtaining public funding as well. Many of the participating female artists have dealt with personal, intimate issues, giving the branding effort a feminist edge and theoretical foothold, contributing to the School's endeavour to present itself as conceptually oriented. Nevertheless, it should be observed that, in its interpretive framework, *The Helsinki School, Vol. 4* (2011) does not offer a critical contemporary feminist approach to photography but chooses terms that take us back to the 1980s and to the simple gender binary, a violent system in itself. The photographers whose work is presented in *Vol. 4* supposedly self-identified as women at the time, and we have not observed any gender-queer or non-binary identifications or representations within the Helsinki School.

### Women as Victims, Women as Powerless in Photographs?

Aino Kannisto (b. 1973) is another of the Helsinki School's core photographers who has focused throughout her career on photographing herself. Unlike Brotherus, she does not present herself totally naked; instead she changes her clothes and the settings of her photoshoots, and produces images that look like film stills (evoking such predecessors as Cindy Sherman and Nan Goldin). With these frozen moments she invites the viewers to fabricate narratives around the 'stills', that is, to ask, What happened before the image was taken, and what will happen afterwards? In the light of the recent allegations concerning gender-based harassment, it is interesting to look at some of Kannisto's photographs as somewhat symptomatic of the tensions that have arisen within 'the School' since. For instance, in several photographs in the series *Hotel Bogota* (2013), the female 'protagonist' can be read as anticipating something sexually violent or unpleasant to happen, or has already been attacked, either sexually or otherwise.<sup>13</sup> In one of the images, her figure is seen lying on the bed on her stomach,

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<sup>13</sup> See <https://www.personsprojects.com/artists/aino-kannisto?x=works/hotel-bogota>

wearing only a blouse and black garters, her arms laying impassive on her sides, her face looking apathetic. In another 'still' she is lying on her back on the floor, and the viewer is looking at her from above, through a balustrade. Has the woman been pushed down the stairs? Her eyes are open, but the stare is vacant; she has tousled hair on her lifeless face. The suggested narratives and atmospheres of the images are grim, oppressive or ominous at worst, joyless and serious at best; it is quite clear that at least some of Kannisto's photographs represent gender-based violence, its anticipation or aftermath, which can ultimately be death. Moreover, there are no signifiers of strong agency, only ones of ambiguity and frozen waiting.

There is one shared pattern in many of the photographs of the Helsinki School's female artists: whether they pose themselves in their images or use other models, in many of the photographs the women turn away their gaze or hide their faces from the viewer. For example, this is the case in the images of Aino Kannisto, Anni Leppälä, Susanna Majuri, and Heli Rekula. Alain Quemin (2015) also draws attention to the absorptive mode of the Helsinki School portraits, adding that the subjects' eyes often remain hidden. Rekula (b. 1963), who works as senior lecturer at Aalto University, only participated in two Helsinki School books (2005, 2007). Rekula has often posed nude in her own photographs, and critically studied corporeal malleability, submission and exposure in her work. In the Helsinki School volumes, however, she has used other models as well, and some of the images are quite straightforward references to either gender-based violence or poses for sexual services. Quemin (2015) mentions Rekula as one of the few Helsinki School artists in whose works issues of gender are brought up critically. For instance, in Rekula's photograph *Desire (Pain)*, 2004, we can see the head and shoulders of a red-haired young woman; she is shot in profile, turning a (heavily made-up) black eye towards the viewers, wearing a neck brace and a very low-cut décolleté black dress. Two other photographs, *Stage I* and *Stage II*, from 2006, are shot on a bed with an extremely tall, padded beige headboard; they depict an isolated figure of a woman bending over or sitting naked in profile so that we cannot see her face, only her long blond hair/wig. Both poses are easy to read as signifiers of sexual availability, even though the beige and white surroundings and bright lighting distinguish them from stereotypical

pornographic conventions. In the context of Rekula's own work, these photographs read as feminist statements, but within the sterile context of the Helsinki School, this interpretation does not feature prominently. The images are aesthetically quite clinical, and fit the signature cool aesthetic known as 'international clean', associated with the Helsinki School's books and exhibitions at its prime (cf. Heikka, 2004; Uimonen, 2007).

## Art Education and Branding Supporting Practices of Gender-Based Violence

In this chapter, we have examined the diverse forms of gender-based violence connected to the Helsinki School—an educational, branding and marketing effort at the University of Industrial Art and Design Helsinki, which became part of Aalto University in 2010—throughout its entire period of activity, from the 1990s to the 2020s. We have been asking whether the gendered image-shaping of the photographs created by the artists participating in the project and the School's educational practices and marketing measures combine to form a *continuum* of gender-based violence. In public, the Helsinki School was celebrated as a unique promotional and educational effort—until winter 2022, when the media exposed ambiguities in economic matters and accusations of sexual harassment.

In our reading, the School presents an example of the ways in which not only straightforward physical sexual harassment but also more subtle forms of symbolic violence are facilitated and allowed to prevail in the creative sectors. We have identified several factors working to sustain this kind of multi-level gender-based violence in the case of the Helsinki School. To start with, there was intense competition for visibility and career prospects among the students and even senior artists, both nationally and globally. The harassing practices could continue because the School was built upon gendered dependency relations and male bonding. Moreover, the School's culture was imbued by the importance of informal networks and the construction of an idea of one big, multi-generational family. These factors became obvious when close reading the media material provided by the investigative journalism of the *Long Play* platform. While several female artists have been portrayed

as prominent figures within the Helsinki School, recent discourse has highlighted the number of female students who have abandoned their studies and pursued different careers due to gender-based violence that occurred in the course of the branding scheme.

We have also analysed some photographs published in the Helsinki School books produced by the curator-promotor-educator Timothy Persons. The visual appearance of the School has been described as 'international clean' by journalists and art professionals (see, for example, Heikka, 2004; Uimonen, 2007), and there are not many photographs whose content would raise immediate 'interest' in terms of gender-based violence. 'International clean' refers to a polished style that prioritises technical precision. While the works are large-scale and visually striking, the term subtly hints that the focus on form may overshadow emotional depth or narrative engagement. Rastenberger (2006) notes that the subjects of the images are dominated by empty spaces, as well as coolly aesthetic portraits of individuals and objects. Heikka (2004) observes content-related blind spots in the Helsinki School works, connecting this to the logic of market forces. As the aim is to appeal to both non-commercial (museums) and commercial (collectors) audiences, serious disruptions are avoided. The themes are rather 'apolitical' within the context of contemporary art, and if they are explicitly political—including gender issues—their aesthetic is allusive and cool, Heikka observes. In our interpretation, such 'formatisation' taking place within the School may also fall under gender-based violence, as it shapes the image of female artists and affects the form, content and interpretation of their artworks. When taking a closer look at the Helsinki School volumes, we found photographs that may be interpreted as representing, through their fictional narratives, either premonitions or the aftermath of physical violence. In the context of the gendered image shaping and hierarchy of the School, investigated through the lens of gender-based violence, these images begin to resemble bruises on the surface of what has been described as 'international clean'.

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