

# LOVING THE GRID

## Ola Kolehmainen's Minimalist Photographs



Ola Kolehmainen in front of a poster depicting his work *Super Composition*, 2006

*His elements are repetition, architecture, and the camera: Ola Kolehmainen's photographs of structures, patterns, and grids adhere to the austere Minimalism of a Donald Judd or Dan Flavin. Yet despite this, his brilliantly colorful images radiate something mysterious. Where does it come from? Alistair Hicks decided to investigate and visited the artist, some of whose works were recently acquired for the Deutsche Bank Collection.*

"Space! Colour! Light! That's how I choose the locations for my pictures," explains Ola Kolehmainen, a leading photographer of the Helsinki School. His choice of buildings betrays his deep love for Minimalism. He still has the note a workshop teacher, Christie Johnson, once slipped him advising him to look at three artists he's still looking at: Donald Judd, James Turrell, and Dan Flavin. There is a strong sense of structure in his pictures, often a very obvious grid, yet invariably he subverts these clean, repetitive patterns. The same goes for his use of colour and light: the light sources are frequently a mystery, while the colours often undergo change.

Architecture supplies the subject matter for all his work, but when I interviewed Ola on the terrace of his wooden house on his island in the Gulf of Finland, there was no other building in sight. Indeed, the very occasional boat skimming between the archipelago was the only evidence of man's intrusion. Despite the elegant, Modernist lines, there is little indication that this is an artist's vacation home. Stacks of neatly packed logs are Kolehmainen's most evident contribution to island life, but rather than as intimations of Judd's work, they could equally be read as a leftover trace of his military background - he is the son of a general. Ostensibly, he does most of his work in his new home in Berlin and during his travels, but the peaceful island does supply a perfect base for the conceptual thinking that underpins the Helsinki School.

As a child, Ola showed little indication of becoming an artist. He worked his way through various sports before he went

to California on a school exchange at the age of eighteen. His best friend was a skateboarder who was starting to compete. Ola was induced to take photographs of the budding champion, which featured large in *Thrasher*, the skateboard magazine. On his return to Finland, he studied journalism at the University of Helsinki; he was into new jazz at the time and started taking photographs for music magazines and festivals.

In 1992, Kolehmainen switched to Helsinki's University of Art and Design to study photography. He found the image that set him on his present path in 1996: his photograph of a staircase in Tokyo contains strong horizontal and vertical lines gently challenged by curves. He further developed his concerns the following year in 1997 in his degree show *Temple* at the Kluuvi Gallery. The main work consisted of seven large photographs of a deserted Russian barracks in Paldiski in neighbouring Estonia. "Everything, including the window frames, had been stolen from the place, so all that was left were black gaping holes in a red brick wall," said Ola before explaining how he went about making the piece. "I was interested in continuing the space - to get a sense of the whole panorama. If I kept the position of the camera stationary, gaps would appear in the panorama, so I moved the camera to exactly the same distance and angle from another window further down the wall. I altered the space by going round the corner of the building to take a few more windows, and then I repeated one as I wanted a seventh image." Kolehmainen implements continuous repetition to build up the image. This is one of the main

reasons why he likes to make his photographs large and inserts them in sheets of Plexiglas: to emphasize their existence as objects.

Kolehmainen's rigorous positioning of the camera recalls the Bechers' Düsseldorf School. It is difficult to avoid comparing his results with those of Gursky, Struth, Ruff, Höfer, and many other German photographers. Yet Kolehmainen's process and ambition stand in stark contrast to professors Bernd and Hilla Becher's pursuit of objectivity. He begins with the presumption of order and reacts against it, altering space. It is as if he sees the Minimalist structures in which we live, both physical and intellectual, and then inserts the human element. With a subtle twist, his works turn from being solely concerned with infinite grids and abstraction to how we as human beings interact with these. "I love to use repetition as a tool," Ola says, "but you have to have something to transform it that isn't so pure."

After finishing university, Kolehmainen went to Paris to photograph churches. He studied about seventy-five churches, yet he was most influenced by the Institut du Monde Arabe; his interest in the Islamic grid led him to his first grid picture. More recently, he visited the Dia Foundation to see a Judd show, where he found himself concentrating on "the smallest of variations - so small, but the repetition of the forms makes one examine the space between them."

"I concentrate on what is essential in a space, building, or structure and leave out things that are unnecessary, which I call visual noise," says Ola. Sitting with him on a lonely Baltic island, it was tempting to believe that this peace is partially responsible for the contemplative clarity of his art. "I like to think it is a quiet man's work," he says. "One needs time to react to the pictures; I want them to be objects of meditation and not mere images." We don't all have an island of our own, but we can all enjoy Ola Kolehmainen's pictures and the freedom of thought their powerful structures trigger.

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