

Take Your Time

An Interview with Niko Luoma

By Lyle Rexer

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Lyle Rexer: I've been looking at your work for more than a decade, and yet I don't know how you became interested in photography, and how you developed such an unusual angle on the medium.

Niko Luoma: I started late, and in some sense my career was the result of an experience that had nothing to do with art or photography: military service. The military was not my thing, but I was assigned to a communications unit, and they needed someone to document activity. I volunteered, and that became a kind of springboard. Once I was out, then, through a friend of my parents, I became involved in the music scene. That is, he looked to me like a jazz guy, but in reality he was a photographer! I was into progressive rock, King Crimson, Captain Beefheart and jazz. I met not only musicians but artists, and I thought, maybe I can combine photography and music. The problem was that there were no jobs in Finland in the 1990s, so in 1993 I enrolled in the New England School of Photography, and for two years I concentrated on the nuts and bolts of photography.

Lyle Rexer: That sounds like a working man's path in the field—photography as a tool, like a Swiss Army knife. But the practical path, which might have led into

anything from forensics to fashion, was not the one you followed. You became an artist, and an abstract artist at that.

Niko Luoma: It wasn't the practical path, for sure, and that is first of all because I met David Akiba, who was my professor. His critiques were tough, but at the same time he showed me his own experimental work from the 1970s and 80s. I read between the lines, and the message I got was, this is how to become an artist. The curiosity and the willingness to experiment are what an artist does. I first saw paintings by Francis Bacon and later by Willem de Kooning.

Through them I experienced how an artist sees, and how the artist is able to translate feelings into images. I was like a piece of fly paper; everything stuck to me. When I transferred to the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, I understood what I wanted to do.

Lyle Rexer: You were crossing boundaries early on.

Niko Luoma: At the SMFA students built their own programs, and I wanted to try many things. I could study sound art and make sculpture in bronze. I explored issues of 2D and 3D. I remember an early series titled *Vowels*, from 1995, in which I photographed my speaking mouth with Polaroid film using a pinhole camera, then re-photographed the results. My photo work was based on performance. I was following the Viennese Actionists from the 1960s in documenting my performances, but I wanted an independent identity for the photograph. I played with slowness by using a pinhole to collect longer exposure times. I felt that forces were performing with film and the camera. You might have the same performance but create a completely different record depending on the choices you made. I loved the symbiosis, and the fact that I could not predict the outcome.

Lyle Rexer: You made the choices, set up the system, signed on, shipped out, just to

see where it would take you.

Niko Luoma: And I still do that! The performances now involve light, materials and time, and the dialogue is between calculation and unpredictability.

Lyle Rexer: Between a rule-based system and chance. It reminds me of the painters and conceptual artists of the 1970s.

Niko Luoma: Photography is perfectly suited to those ideas. It has clear limits based on its technology, but its outcomes are always in flux, never fully predictable.

Lyle Rexer: What we are describing here is the work of yours that made its first and perhaps most profound impression on me, the huge prints of the *Symmetrium* series from 2011. With their thousands of organized lines, representing the film's repeated exposure to a shifting light source, I couldn't help thinking of these as museums of time—the exact opposite of Cartier-Bresson's decisive moment. These are spectacular collections of moments, frozen in an image of order that is itself an archive. They drew me into intricate, dizzying labyrinths.

Niko Luoma: I had in mind to create what a photograph cannot be. It can't be abstract, and it must be connected to the past, because the present that it represents passes away quickly. But I thought it could be different. I wanted the photograph to have its own present, always open. So I reduced the elements to light, materials and the camera. This got me deeply interested in the inside of the camera, where the actual registration occurs, when light strikes the film, but also what happens in front of, and behind the camera. I wanted evidence of this process, and I was determined to keep it simple. I continue to believe in this simplicity. For the *Symmetrium* series, I used straight and curved lines of light. I shaped the light. I was thinking of the lines in Barnett Newman's paintings, a painting like *Onement One* (1948), for example, with its single ragged stripe. I asked myself, what if I repeated the exposure five, ten,

a hundred, twenty thousand times?

Lyle Rexer: That was the performance.

Niko Luoma: Yes. Doing it was like a meditation. I had to use my body during these repetitions, a little like a butoh dancer. The film negatives I produced were printable, and there was no equivalent to anything in the world, no sense that something had come first before the image.

Lyle Rexer: Of course, I can only imagine that, in spite of the growing interest in photographs without conventional pictures—so-called abstract photography—you must have faced a lot of questions, especially in the photographic community.

Niko Luoma: My work faced a lot of resistance from supporters of the Cartier-Bresson school of photography, as you already hinted. They asked what? And why? They tried to catch me off guard with all kinds of technical questions. And still today, I see the words “not photography” written on my grant applications. Painters, on the other hand, are more likely to say, “You do interesting work”. And after twenty years, I think that audiences know what I do. At the same time, most artists don’t fully understand what they are doing until much later. How can you define what you hear, feel and intuit? I have to explain all this to myself later, long after the fact.

Lyle Rexer: That’s a slow process. It reminds me of something the photographer Bill Brandt said, that what we are after is not in a hurry.

Niko Luoma: If the process is beautiful, it will be slow.

Lyle Rexer: These two themes, process and beauty, really come to the forefront in the *Adaptations* series. As far as I know, it’s the first series of yours that depends on or refers to previous sources, works of art that moved and fascinated you.

Niko Luoma: I look at it as a progression. In all my other work, I add to reality,

by building an image that has no other antecedent relations. For this series, I am engaged in a process of reduction. I was reading about Cezanne's paintings and their analytical reductiveness. In terms of visual perception, everything can be reduced to tubes, cones, spheres and cubes in combination. So I did my own variations of standard space. How many lines, how many light exposures, would it take to define space on film? That's what I was doing in the *Symmetrium* series without realizing it. Like a Cubist, I collected multiple events, multiple time frames, slightly different perspectives. I began to look more at Picasso, especially *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1907). What if I dismantled it and put it back together again? How could photography be part of that process? I really put my feeling into this intensive looking. I thought this might be just a one-off, a learning experience, not a body of work. But something happened.

Lyle Rexer: Of course, Western art has a tradition of inspired adaptations, not to say appropriations, so why not you?

Niko Luoma: I asked myself, "Did I ever really look at this painting?" Now I see the structure, I hear the sound of the work, I sense the rhythm of the process by which it was made. Looking is musical! It's a matter of weight, space, direction, balance. Picasso's painting became a sound—with improvisations, themes, a melody he returns to.

Lyle Rexer: That physical, full-body aspect of your relation makes sense when I understand that your seeing of your source material is mediated through your own body. That is, the crucial step for you seems to be making a drawing or drawings of the work in front of you, almost like a map. Is the intention to break down the original painting, the source image, into zones of color in order to build it back up?

Niko Luoma: My drawings are not exactly about zones of color but more about

energies. The initial drawings try to understand and channel those energies. I keep a notebook as I work not only to maintain the impression of the painting, the feeling of it, but also to see where I am as I reconstruct it. It also helps me to know when to stop. I never know how the “adaptation” will look in the end, but the first drawing always marks the root. The notebooks are my tools, but people have convinced me to show them with the finished works and in the book in order to give access to the process of making the photographs.

Lyle Rexer: How do you choose your source images?

Niko Luoma: I choose paintings that are important to me, that interest me, but on a purely visual level, I don't care what they represent – a portrait by Francis Bacon, Van Gogh's sunflowers, or the village of Guernica destroyed by German bombers, or a swimming pool in Los Angeles by David Hockney. I reduce each painting to a system and try to produce the light equivalent on film. I look at the space of the painting, the forms, and the palette. Then I plan how to organize my light sources, in what shape and dimension, using which colors, according to a fairly simple additive system that enables me to manage the overlap of the colors on the negative. In the case of *Guernica* (1937), there were some challenges. Picasso painted it in black and white, so I had to translate that into a system of colors. And the size of the painting made it impossible to recreate in a single negative. I had to make two in order to print. The result is a completely abstract work, and yet when it was exhibited in Spain, people who saw it knew immediately what it referenced.

Lyle Rexer: The Hockney adaptation really struck me that way—it's one of my favorites—because it is such a clear parallel to the original, but so different.

Niko Luoma: It was a surprise to see where I wound up, with something that is almost recognizable, almost a copy. The photograph is based on *Peter Getting Out of*

Nick's Pool (1966). Hockney had already reduced his thinking, his visual language, to simple elements, almost like a cartoon. But the painting has a sense of space and even sound, and getting it right requires very specific placement of light. It is really quite intricate. I made many mistakes along the way, but they add to the composition. They help it along. That is the nature of the process.

Lyle Rexer: Looking at your adaptation, I go back and forth between my memory of the painting and the photograph, appreciating each one more every time.

Niko Luoma: That is how the series works. People know a work like *Sunflowers* (1888), and they can go back and forth between the created photograph and their memory of Van Gogh's painting. In the process, they become more and more aware of what they are seeing, of their own experience of seeing, comparing, measuring, and remembering. I think we need this awareness. Think of Picasso studying *Las Meninas* (1656) by Velázquez. Copying the masters is how artists used to learn. Invention was the consequence of a process of looking. Too often, we think we see, but we are really not looking at all. Every image is different, and every image I make is distinct. I have to slow down to make them, and I want people to slow down. You paraphrased Bill Brandt earlier, and I'll second that: what I am after is not in a hurry.