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The Finnish Photo Book: The Effects of State Quality Support on Photographic Literature

English Summary

Quality Support for Photographic Publications

Quality Support for Photographic Publications is a government subsidy aimed at publications in which photography is used as an independent form of art and communication. Quality Support is distributed by the National Council for Photographic Art, composed of photographers and experts in photography. The appropriations to be used for this purpose are fixed annually by the Ministry of Education (€ 65 000 in 2004). The objective of the subsidy is to promote and improve the level and variety of Finnish photographic literature.

Quality Support is meant to cover expenses emerging in the actual publishing stage, such as layout design, colour separation, printing, binding, paper and cover materials. The commissioning of text for the publication and translations are further acceptable uses for the subsidy, and it may also be spent on marketing and distribution efforts. The material to be published must be presented in the application for Quality Support, and a specification of the printing work with a cost estimate must be included. The applicant should show proof of having begun negotiations with publishers. Only individual persons qualify as recipients; the subsidy is not available for companies, associations or publishing houses. The publication is expected to be finalised within approximately one year of reception, and the print volume must be at least 500 (250 in the case of portfolios). The recipient must provide thirty-five free copies for the National Council for Photographic Art for further distribution among the principal photography institutions and associations, and within the state arts administration.

Quality Support for Photographic Publications was established in 1982. It was designed by the National Council for Photographic Art in collaboration with actors in the field of photography. The idea of a publishing grant for photographers was first expressed in the 1965 report by the State Arts Committee, which drew up plans for a renewal of the state arts administration and funding system. This committee originally introduced photography in the Arts Council system. At the time, books were seen as an essential forum for photography, bringing the art form close to literature as well as cinema. Government publishing grants were required for liberating photographers from the demands of big publishing companies and the pressures of the market. The photographers' own work, often characterised as "free" or "self-determining" photography, was defined as art within the emerging Arts Council system.

In the 1970s, independent photography was often understood to mean social reportage of a left-wing orientation. Photographers' freedom of expression – in terms of both art and politics – and the wide circulation of their publications were used as arguments for the establishment of government publishing grants. By the early 1980s, when the subsidy was finally introduced, political activism among photographers, however, had, waned and many of them preferred to focus on more private and intimate topics. Social documentarism was abandoned for subjectivism, even aestheticism. The possibility of making inexpensive pamphlets on current issues was not regarded as important as the expression of artistry and the high printing quality of books and portfolios. The latter had become popular within free photography in the late 1970s, since they could be produced autonomously as pure author's editions. The ambitious Opus series was started in 1979 with Pentti Sammallahti's "Cathleen Ni Houlihan: An Irish Portfolio". The art printing of photographs was especially developed at the University of Art and Design Helsinki.

The Aims, Scope and Method of the Study

The study evaluates how the Quality Support scheme has affected the amount, quality and character of photographic literature in Finland since the early 1980s. The aim is ultimately to assist in developing the support form to correspond to changes in the publishing world and the role of publications in photo art. The publishing, distribution and marketing of Finnish photography books both on the domestic front and abroad is also charted.

The study is based on multiple data sources and methods. Data on the history of Quality Support, its aims and principles, the development of the allocation and the beneficiaries and the supported publications were collected from the archives and registries of government arts administration. The support-aided publications themselves were

examined in terms of genre, subject matter, amount of text, language, publisher and place of printing. The present state and the problems of publishing, distributing and marketing of photography books were charted by interviewing photographers, publishers, managers of photo galleries and booksellers. Articles and interviews published in photo journals were used as further research material.

Table 1. Applicants and recipients for Quality Support for Photographic Publications 1982–2004

| Year | Applicants No. | Recipients | | Appropriation | | | Average grant |
|-----------|-------------------|------------|----|-----------------------------|--------|------------------------|------------------------|
| | | No. | % | in current prices FIM | € | in 2004 prices € | in 2004 prices € |
| 1982 | 13 | 4 | 31 | 100 000 | . | 33 342 | 8 336 |
| 1983 | 13 | 5 | 38 | 120 000 | . | 36 865 | 7 373 |
| 1984 | 15 | 4 | 27 | 130 000 | . | 37 347 | 9 337 |
| 1985 | 19 | 5 | 26 | 190 000 | . | 51 520 | 10 304 |
| 1986 | 18 | 6 | 33 | 192 000 | . | 50 267 | 8 378 |
| 1987 | 18 | 6 | 33 | 200 000 | . | 50 520 | 8 420 |
| 1988 | 19 | 7 | 37 | 210 000 | . | 50 548 | 7 221 |
| 1989 | 20 | 5 | 25 | 210 000 | . | 47 413 | 9 483 |
| 1990 | 17 | 5 | 29 | 230 000 | . | 48 974 | 9 795 |
| 1991 | 21 | 4 | 19 | 240 000 | . | 49 059 | 12 265 |
| 1992 | 30 | 5 | 17 | 240 000 | . | 47 845 | 9 569 |
| 1993 | 30 | 5 | 17 | 270 000 | . | 52 718 | 10 544 |
| 1994 | 30 | 8 | 27 | 270 000 | . | 52 143 | 6 518 |
| 1995 | 29 | 5 | 17 | 270 000 | . | 51 618 | 10 324 |
| 1996 | 29 | 6 | 21 | 270 000 | . | 51 323 | 8 554 |
| 1997 | 27 | 6 | 22 | 270 000 | . | 50 706 | 8 451 |
| 1998 | 27 | 9 | 33 | 300 000 | . | 55 555 | 6 173 |
| 1999 | 33 | 9 | 27 | 300 000 | . | 54 904 | 6 100 |
| 2000 | 37 | 9 | 24 | 300 000 | . | 53 112 | 5 901 |
| 2001 | 35 | 7 | 20 | 300 000 | . | 51 801 | 7 400 |
| 2002 | 33 | 10 | 30 | . | 59 000 | 59 642 | 5 964 |
| 2003 | 32 | 7 | 22 | . | 59 000 | 59 112 | 8 445 |
| 2004 | 24 | 7 | 29 | . | 65 000 | 65 000 | 9 286 |
| 1982–1984 | 41 | 13 | 32 | . | . | 107 554 | 8 273 |
| 1985–1989 | 94 | 29 | 31 | . | . | 250 269 | 8 630 |
| 1990–1994 | 128 | 27 | 21 | . | . | 250 739 | 9 287 |
| 1995–1999 | 145 | 35 | 24 | . | . | 264 106 | 7 546 |
| 2000–2004 | 161 | 40 | 25 | . | . | 288 666 | 7 217 |
| Total | 569 | 144 | 25 | . | . | 1 161 334 | 8 065 |

Government Grants and Photographers' Products

Between 1982 and 2004 altogether € 1.2 million (in current prices) were allocated in the form of Quality Support (see Table 1). In 2004, the total of € 65 000 were reserved for this purpose. The annual appropriation had almost doubled in real terms since the establishment of the subsidy. In 2004, Quality Support represented six percent of all state funding for photographic art (totalling € 1.0 million). The total of 144 grants had been awarded for the completion of 142 different publication projects. One in four applicants had succeeded in receiving the subsidy. In most cases (92 percent), the recipient was an individual photographer (the remainder were working groups).

By the end of 2004 as many as 128 books (or book-like publications), seven portfolios and one CD-ROM had been published with help of Quality Support. Out of the remaining six publication projects one had been cancelled (the subsidy was never paid to the recipient), one book had been finished but was taken out of circulation due to failed printing work, and four book projects financed in the 2000s were still under way with approval for supplementary reporting time from the National Council for Photographic Art. As the rate of completion of projects was approaching full 100 percent, the support scheme can be deemed exceptionally effective.

The range of the Quality Support-aided publications is wide, entailing portfolios, picture books and studies on photography (including a few PhD theses in so-called artistic research) as well as extensive exhibition catalogues. The amount and nature of text in the publications varies: some include fictive texts by the photographer or somebody else, some factual or scientific texts, for instance biological, ethnographic or art historical essays. The publications are increasingly designed for international distribution, which is reflected in their multilingual nature (in seven different languages at best) as well as their subject matter and approach. The newest genre among Quality Support aided publications is a type of exhibition catalogue published by an international gallery or an art exchange agency. Such a publication functions mainly as a means of introducing the artist and presenting pictures of his or her works.

In general, Quality Support aided publications differ from the mainstream photo literature, which is dominated by tourist-oriented locality or scenery books. These are often commissioned by major publishing houses, while most Quality Support aided publications are based on the author's original idea. The latter typically reflect photographers' artistic aims and their desire to experiment with new techniques, materials and modes of expression. In such publications photographs are not used as illustration but are given the leading role. The list of support-aided publications includes many renowned photo books from the last two decades. These books have been

praised by critics and given prizes and honourable mentions in photography and book art contests.

Publishing and Financing Arrangements

The majority of Quality Support aided books have been published as author's editions or in co-operation with small publishers (including photo associations, schools and galleries) (Table 2). Two small publishing firms specialising in photography, *Musta Taide* based in Helsinki and *Pohjoinen* based in Oulu, were established in the early 1990s. Together they account for 42 percent (43) of the publications that have come out since 1990. *Musta Taide* is currently the leading publisher of Quality Support aided photo books (thus far 29 in total). The journal *Musta Taide*, consisting of four or five issues per year, also receives Culture Magazine Support from the Ministry of Education (€ 25 000 in 2004). Most Quality Support aided monographs published by *Musta Taide* have come out as issues of the journal. Due to financial reasons, *Pohjoinen* gave up publishing photo books in the beginning of the 2000s. By then it had produced 14 support-aided books. After the emergence of the specialised photo book publishers, pure author's editions have become rarer in the annual total. In the case of *Musta Taide*, in particular, it is nevertheless more accurate to talk about joint publishing.

Table 2. Publishers of Quality Support aided books 1982–2004

| <i>Year of publication</i> | <i>Author's editions*</i> | <i>Large publishing companies</i> | <i>Specialised small publishers</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------|
| 1982–1984 | 4 | 1 | 4 | 9 |
| 1985–1989 | 16 | 4 | 5 | 25 |
| 1990–1994 | 15 | 1 | 11 | 27 |
| 1995–1999 | 6 | – | 27 | 33 |
| 2000–2004 | 11 | 2 | 29 | 42 |
| Total | 52 | 8 | 76 | 136 |
| Total % | 38 | 6 | 56 | 100 |

* Includes small publishing firms owned by photographers themselves.

The Quality Support scheme does not secure total funding for the printing stage, but covers currently some 25–40 percent of these costs. Photographers collect additional funds from a variety of sources, including other grant-awarding bodies and private sponsors. They may even use their bank savings or take a loan. Collegial assistance and volunteer works continue to play an important role, which gives

the making of photo books still an amateur flavour, even if it has been increasingly professionalized during the last 10–15 years.

The National Council for Photographic Art recently adopted the policy of concentrating on the most promising applicants rather than dividing the appropriation into insignificant portions (see Table 1). In the scarcity of resources, Quality Support can be used as a means of controlling publishing decisions and opportunities.

Advantages and Drawbacks of the Support Scheme

On the whole, Quality Support appears to have been an efficient measure for improving the level and variety of photographic publications in Finland. It can be claimed that government funding has rarely hit its mark so well as in this form of funding. Functioning as threshold money when photographers start negotiations with publishing firms or think about their own chances of taking the risk, the subsidy has helped in the publishing of tens of books that otherwise might have remained unpublished. The scheme has assisted in developing the specific nature of the Finnish photo book, which began to emerge in the late 1960s. Currently, its effects are also reflected in the existence of small publishers that specialise in photography.

The availability of a steady source of additional funding for the implementation of ambitious projects has bolstered the confidence of the authors and publishers of photo books. Awarded by the National Council for Photographic Art, the reception of Quality Support is an important incentive for a photographer. Quality Support lends prestige to a publication, and it is often mentioned in advertisements. In 1993 the National Council for Photographic Art adopted the practice of awarding Quality Support also subsequently for published books, which has emphasised the prize-resembling qualities of the support form.

Partly owing to the existence of government subsidy for the specific purpose, the publishing of photo books has increased notably in Finland during the last decades (Table 3). While the annual rate was some seven books in the beginning of the 1970s, it is now more than 50. In particular, Quality Support has boosted the production of “book art of images” to use the term launched by Taneli Eskola in his charting of photographic literature in Finland between 1966 and 2003. Currently two in five books in this category have been published with help of Quality Support.

While the study indicated that the overall impact of the Quality Support scheme has been highly beneficial, a few weaknesses were noticed as well. Information about new entries does not spread as widely or quickly as it should. Outside the capital, there are not many bookshops or other outlets displaying and selling quality photo books of this type. They tend to remain publications of narrow circulation.

Some Quality Support aided publications were even missing from the Helsinki University Library to which six free copies of every publication should be delivered. The National Council for Photographic Art has not taken an active role in the marketing of Quality Support aided publications. Neither do all photographers themselves seem interested in advertising and selling their creations. It may suffice for them just to have the book realised and to spread some copies among friends and colleagues.

Table 3. Photographic books and portfolios published in Finland 1970–2003

| <i>Year of publication</i> | <i>Photographic publications</i> | <i>Average per year</i> | <i>“Book art of images”*</i> | <i>Quality Support aided publications</i> | <i>QS publications of all photographic publications</i> | <i>QS publications of “book art of images”*</i> |
|----------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|---|---|---|
| | No. | No. | No. | No. | % | % |
| 1970–1974 | 33 | 6,6 | 6 | – | – | – |
| 1975–1979 | 70 | 14,0 | 6 | – | – | – |
| 1980–1984 | 146 | 29,2 | 31 | 9 | 6,2 | 29,0 |
| 1985–1989 | 188 | 37,6 | 56 | 25 | 13,3 | 44,6 |
| 1990–1994 | 197 | 39,4 | 81 | 27 | 13,7 | 33,3 |
| 1995–1999 | 236 | 47,2 | 83 | 33 | 14,0 | 39,8 |
| 2000–2003 | 209 | 52,3 | 80 | 33 | 15,8 | 41,3 |
| Total | 1 079 | 31,7 | 343 | 127 | 11,8 | 37,0 |

* Included in Taneli Eskola (2003). *Kuvan kirjoja – Finnish photo books 1966–2003*.

The consumer prices of photo books vary noticeably depending on the distribution system and the number and nature of the agents involved in the process. The use of intermediary services may more than double the price of a book. For photographers themselves book sales usually bring very little revenue after expenses. Yet books may have an indirect effect on their income by functioning as discrete and elegant promotion material. This aspect is nevertheless rarely brought up in arts political discourse.

The growing internationalisation of Finnish photography is reflected on the increase of publications, both as a means of presenting art works and as works of book art in themselves. Currently the export prospects of photographic works seem promising. To realise this potential, the National Council for Photographic Art is advised to cooperate more closely with FRAME, the Finnish Fund for Art Exchange, in financing internationally oriented photo books and find-

ing venues for their marketing. The government has now invested in the development of the "Finnish photo book" for more than two decades, and the time seems ripe for making it into a proper brand. Combined with increased efforts on the domestic front, the making of high quality photo books might even become profitable some day.