

## What's new, Aino Kannisto? Interview by Nadine Dinter

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Nadine Dinter January 29, 2025



I met Aino during the opening of her show at the project room of the Helmut Newton Foundation and was very curious to learn more about her inspiration for the series “Hotel Bogota,” her ways of preparing such a long-term project, and the way she works in general. It’s therefore all the more a pleasure to share our deep and thorough conversation with all of you today. Enjoy the read!

**Nadine Dinter:** In most of your photographic series, you are playing the protagonist; though the images we see of you are not the classic kind of self-portraits? What’s your take on this?

**Aino Kannisto:** My photographs are not self-portraits in the traditional sense, I’m not representing myself or actual situations of my life. Instead, I am creating fictional characters and presenting them in fictional scenes. However, my photographs are of course telling about me, my internal world, and the emotional landscape within.

**When starting out, were you inspired by other photographers? If so, who were your idols?**

**AK:** In the early ‘90s, before my studies of photography, I had the privilege to see some of Francesca Woodman’s works and also Sally Mann’s photographs of her children exhibited in Finland. It was the time of pre-internet and before cheap airfare, and being able to see interesting, important photographic art wasn’t easy. Artbooks were often the best way to have access to photographic art.

The sublime beauty of Mann’s portraits of her children have ever since been my go-to source to restore my faith in photography. The spontaneous, gauzy beauty of Woodman’s photographs, her intense artistic productivity, her life cut short

by depression—all affected me greatly as a young artist taking my first tentative steps and becoming aware of my own persistently lurking depressive episodes.

In the beginning of my studies, I fell in love with the brutal beauty of Nan Goldin's photographs, her imminent way of using light and color, producing beauty out of vulnerability, wounds, and loss. Cindy Sherman's early works, her black-and-white film still-looking photographs of herself playing various roles intrigued me—her huge commercial success in artworld comforted me that such a playful approach and feminine imagery was acceptable, even celebrated, in a still-predominantly male-dominated art world.

Diane Arbus's voyeuristic, ever-so-beautiful photographs of people hidden from the everyday imagery, Joel-Peter Witkin's way of combining beauty with extremely morbid subject matters fascinated me. Both of them worked as a proof that in art it was possible to talk about anything and not get rejected as long as there was a level of aesthetic perfection there.

The cool and composed beauty of Irving Penn's reduced portraits, and Helmut Newton's wild, imaginative, even humorous photographs both proved that there was space for artistically ambitious and uncompromising approaches in photography in a superficial, capitalistic, commercial world.

**At the project room of the Helmut Newton Foundation, we currently see your series “Hotel Bogota,” shot in 2012/2013. Please share some more information on how you came up with the idea, how you planned this project, and which roles/characters we see on the various images, impersonated by you.**

**AK:** The whole idea of my shooting in Hotel Bogota, Berlin was thanks to my gallerist Susanne Breidenbach and Joachim Rissmann's longtime friendship. Mrs. Breidenbach had told me about the wonderful hotel before she introduced us to each other at Paris Photo in the early 2010's. Mr. Rissmann straight-out invited me to visit his hotel and stay over there for free in the unoccupied rooms in order to shoot on the hotel premises. That was the most generous and, artistically, the most fruitful proposition ever in my career.

I immediately fell in love with the relaxed, bohemian, decadent olden-times atmosphere of the Hotel Bogota—the rich mixture of decades and styles layered in the décor of the rooms there.

**How do you prepare for a photo shooting? What's your way of working, and do you have a particular routine?**

**AK:** The starting point of most of my photographs is the location: I'm either scouting locations or stumbling into places or interiors that correspond with my internal visual world.

Sometimes I find a piece of cloth that is the starting point for a picture, and then it's a question of finding a place for the dress or the suit and creating a character with a hairstyle carrying the garment.

I've been typically carrying around a huge bag of clothes and props—some kind of a poor man's theatre wardrobe—when travelling or going to possible places for photoshoots. After deciding the location and scene, I start scavenging my wardrobe.

It's important for me to compose a visually intact scene, where every detail and hue of color is together building an entity where everything seems to belong and be at their place.

I'm not particularly skillful when it comes to using make-up, but I've always enjoyed the creative process of alternating reality, enhancing or disguising things with make-up, garment or paint. Not in my everyday life however, I steer towards bodily comfort, I'm very lazy when it comes to dressing up or using make-up or accessories.

I normally set the camera on a tripod, compose the frame carefully, possibly add some artificial light combined with the existing light. It's like a theater stage for me. The camera stays still, the person in the picture might move here or there before the final image is done.

In the pictures where I myself work as the protagonist, I have an assistant standing behind the camera and pressing the shutter release, typically my ever-so-patient husband or a generous friend I've been travelling with.

**How long did the project last, and did you work alone or with a team?**

**AK:** The Hotel Bogota pictures were shot between 2012-13. The timeline for the project was dictated by pure chance. After the initial invitation to come shoot at Hotel Bogota, Berlin in November 2012, I made several week- or two weeks-long visits there until late 2013—when the hotel unfortunately was closed down due to some grand real estate business maneuver—after which the building, in my understanding, was turned into office spaces. My heart still aches for that. The place was such an aesthetic cornucopia, a great visual wonderland, I could have easily continued to work there for years.

My tiny, intimate work team consisted of either my husband or a generous Finnish friend and colleague, who travelled to Berlin twice with me in order to assist me with the photo shoots.

**Your fellow photographer Karen Stuke also took her self-portrait-series during this time. Did you happen to meet her on site?**

**AK:** I met Karen Stuke at our shared opening at the Helmut Newton Foundation. As openings are often socially hectic situations, and I'm easily overwhelmed around crowds, I didn't really manage to talk with Karen. I did, however, take time and carefully studied her piece of work exhibited there. I found the display of the interior photographs combined with exit route maps very elegant and touching.

I love it that so many other photographers have, over the decades, had photoshoots on the Hotel Bogota premises. Knowing that makes me less sad of the closing of the place.

**After having worked in the field of "self portraiture" for more than 20 years, you did a series called "Children Pictures," featuring a group of kids playing in the woods and by a lake. What was the triggering moment for this new series and different subject matter?**

**AK:** I was at a turning point in my life, going through fertility treatments and contemplating the meaning of my life. An unsuccessful round of IVF had thrown me into murky waters, I was trying to face a prospect of possibly never becoming a mother, and trying to figure how to deal with the pain of it.

At the same time there were a bunch of most-wonderful children very present in my life—my nephews and nieces and children from my husband's previous marriage. I felt very strongly a need to focus on those children that were already existing, spending time with them, instead of losing myself completely in the sorrow and sense of loss.

Starting to make photographs with these children was, for me, combining two things that made the most sense in my life: art and being there for those you love, connecting with others on a most-immediate and profound level.

**What's your next project?**

**AK:** I've been collecting material and planning new works by combining old photographs from my family's archives with objects found from flea markets, the kind of assemblage work that was popular amongst Dadaists in the 1920's and that you can find heaps of on Pinterest nowadays. I've been very inspired by Joseph Cornell's boxes ever since I first saw his assemblages at MOMA 15 years ago.

**Your advice for the young generation of photographers?**

**AK:** Making art can provide you with a pure sense of happiness and meaning in life. Try your best to nurture that. And keep in mind that it has very little or nothing to do with the rest of what it entails to be a professional artist. Dealing with the unavoidable and undesirable parts of the art world and financial struggles related to being an artist can be very dispiriting and depressing. Again, it has nothing to do with why art is important and why it makes sense to use your life for making art. Art can save lives, yours included.

**For more information, check out the artist's IG account @iknowainokannisto**

**Current exhibition:**

**"Hotel Bogota" – Aino Kannisto + Karen Stuke  
Through 16 February 2025, at the Project Room of the Helmut Newton Foundation, Berlin**