

This column will change your life: Helsinki Bus Station Theory

'The theory claims the secret to a creatively fulfilling career lies in understanding the operations of Helsinki's main bus station'

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I've never visited Finland. Actually, I probably never should, since it's a place I love so much on paper - dazzling, snow-blanketed landscapes, best education in the world, first country to give full suffrage to women, home of the Moomins - that reality could only disappoint. Even the staunchest Finnophile, though, might be sceptical on encountering the Helsinki Bus Station Theory. First outlined in a 2004 graduation speech by Finnish-American photographer Arno Minkkinen, the theory claims, in short, that the secret to a creatively fulfilling career lies in understanding the operations of Helsinki's main bus station. It has circulated among photographers for years, but it deserves (pardon the pun) greater exposure. So I invite you to imagine the scene. It's a bus station like any big bus station - except, presumably, cleaner, and with environmentally-friendly buses driven by strikingly attractive blond(e)s.

There are two dozen platforms, Minkkinen explains, from each of which several different bus lines depart. Thereafter, for a kilometre or more, all the lines leaving from any one platform take the same route out of the city, making identical stops. "Each bus stop represents one year in the life of a photographer," Minkkinen says. You pick a career direction - maybe you focus on making platinum prints of nudes - and set off. Three stops later, you've got a nascent body of work. "You take those three years of work on the nude to [a gallery], and the curator asks if you are familiar with the nudes of Irving Penn." Penn's bus, it turns out, was on the same route. Annoyed to have been following someone else's path, "you hop off the bus, grab a cab... and head straight back to the bus station, looking for another platform". Three years later, something similar happens. "This goes on all your creative life: always showing new work, always being compared to others." What's the answer? "It's simple. Stay on the bus. Stay on the fucking bus."

A little way farther on, the way Minkkinen tells it, Helsinki's bus routes diverge, plunging off on idiosyncratic journeys to very different destinations. That's when the photographer finds a unique "vision", or - if you'd rather skip the mystificatory art talk - the satisfying sense that he or she is doing their own thing.

There are two reasons this metaphor is so compelling - apart from the sheer fact that it's Finland-related, I mean. One is how vividly it illustrates a critical insight about persistence: that in the first weeks or years of any worthwhile project, feedback - whether from your own emotions, or from other people - isn't a reliable indication of how you're doing. (This shouldn't be confused with the dodgy dictum that triggering hostile reactions means you must be doing the right thing; it just doesn't prove you're doing the wrong one.) The second point concerns the perils of a world that fetishises originality. A hundred self-help books urge you to have the guts to be "different": the kid who drops out of university to launch a crazy-sounding startup becomes a cultural hero... yet the Helsinki theory suggests that if you pursue originality too vigorously, you'll never reach it. Sometimes it takes more guts to keep trudging down a pre-trodden path, to the originality beyond. "Stay on the fucking bus": there are worse fridge-magnet slogans to live by. Just make sure you take it off the fridge when your prudish relatives visit.

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