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In Focus: Pilvi Takala

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The Finnish artist's subtly transgressive video performances



At the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, the colour of your badge denotes your relative importance. 'Every encounter begins with an unabashed glance or two down at the other's badge. It is Davos Man's defining gesture,' as Nick Paumgarten recently put it in a *New Yorker* essay about this 'miniature society, at once fluid and defined'. It is ambiguous and exclusive communities like these that Finnish artist Pilvi Takala infiltrates in her videos and performances.

Last year, for the work *Broad Sense* (2011), Takala obtained a badge to attend public hearings at the European Parliament in Brussels. Because many of her works hinge on adopting a particular mode of dress in order to blend in, she emailed representatives of each of the eu member states to enquire about the official dress code, only to find that – other than a ban on shirts with political slogans – there wasn't one. So Takala printed the 19 responses she received onto 19 T-shirts, and wore some of them on her visit to the Parliament. Though her badge only granted her access to designated events, in hidden-camera footage, we see her wandering in and out of a forum on human rights, a presentation by the Prince of Libya, and sampling wine and cubes of cheese at a buffet. In between, she encounters a Kafka-esque maze of security, bureaucracy and

rules of access. None of Takala's behaviour is openly disruptive, but her bending of the dress code and stretching the privileges of her badge are enough to expose an underlying lack of unity in the governing body.

Takala typically trespasses in smaller microcosms, using herself or hired actors and a hidden camera to document a single, subtle act of transgression of established social conduct. In doing so, she unsettles the unspoken rules of these ambiguous societies. Takala, with her unassuming but stubborn demeanour, has just the right tenor of awkward tension and implicit danger. When watching her videos, it's easy to forget that she is not breaking any specific rules (though the person secretly filming her may be at risk). Like artists such as Sophie Calle, Adrian Piper or Andrea Fraser before her, she tests the boundaries of how threatening or non-threatening a young female artist violating social codes can be.



Bag Lady, 2006, slide. All images courtesy Diana Stigter, Berlin, and the artist



Real Snow White, 2009,
DVD still

For *Bag Lady* (2006), Takala spent several days browsing in a Berlin shopping mall while carrying a clear plastic bag filled with wads of euro notes. While this obvious display of wealth should have made her the 'perfect customer', instead she only aroused suspicion from security guards and disdain from shopkeepers. Others urged her to accept a more discreet bag for her money. Takala's interest in the cultural codes of showing or spending cash is also ever-present in her 2010 video *Players*, in which a narrator describes his tight-knit community of Scandinavian professional online poker players living in Thailand. Almost anthropologically, he details how he and his comrades spend their copious free time and money, while residing in Bangkok's Scandi Tower: 'The more stupid or unnecessary but expensive something is, the more baller it is,' he explains. 'Having ice cubes made of iced tea in your iced tea is balling [...] Having a nice pool, but almost only going there to wait for the cleaner to finish, is balling.' In the video, we see Takala, in Thailand, re-creating the activities he describes – playing poker or sipping drinks by the pool – revealing the shared sense of loneliness and alienation of Europeans abroad, breaking the codes of their adopted culture.

Takala also brushed up against the unwritten laws of capitalism in *The Trainee* (2008), for which she procured a job as a trainee in the marketing department at Deloitte in Helsinki. In her documentation of this month-long performance, Takala sits motionless, like a modern-day Bartleby, at an empty desk. When co-workers attempt to make polite conversation, she replies that she's 'doing a bit of brain-work' or 'working on my thesis'. But a string of increasingly urgent inter-office emails she obtained shows what they really thought of the new trainee with 'very short hair': 'Obviously she has some sort of mental problem.' We see how disarmed her colleagues are by her refusal to conform to the rules of the corporate workplace. But we also see how difficult it is for them to break out of their own habits to openly confront her. One video documents an entire day Takala spent going up and down in the office lift. 'You're thinking again?', asks a bemused businessman after his second encounter with the artist. 'It helps me to see things from a different perspective,' she explains.

In all these interventions, Takala's attempt to 'see things from a different perspective' emerges as a metaphor for art making, and the suspicion and trepidation with which it's often regarded in the culture at large. The loneliness that Takala herself likely experiences as an itinerant artist is captured most poignantly in *Wallflower* (2006), which she filmed in a traditional Finnish dancing club. Though the clubs are mostly popular with elderly couples, Takala arrived, unaccompanied, in a rippling floor-length ballroom gown. She sits alone all night until, finally, an old man asks her to dance, and leads her gracefully across the otherwise empty dance floor. Takala's performance demonstrates how even the most modest or minor infraction can begin to make small, visible cracks in the ice of the social order.



The Trainee, 2008, DVD
still

Pilvi Takala lives and works in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and Istanbul, Turkey. Her work was recently included in the New Museum Triennial in New York, USA, and her solo show 'Just when I thought I was out ... they pull me back in' was on view at Kunsthalle Erfurt, Germany, until April. An accompanying monograph has just been published by Hatje Cantz. Takala's work is currently included in group exhibitions at De Hallen, Haarlem, the Netherlands, and Network, Aalst, Belgium, and will be featured in the public art programme track in Ghent, Belgium, opening 12 May. Her solo show at Kunstlerhaus Bremen, Germany, opens 1 June.

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