

Beautiful Dresses, Lots of Money, and Hard Days for Security Guards: Remarks on Pilvi Takala's Practice

Rael Artel



¹ Rael Artel, "Modestly Checked Boundaries," in *Hotell Pärnu Rael Artel Gallery: Non-Profit Project Space 2004–2008*, ed. Rael Artel (Pärnu, 2009), pp. 22–24.

² It is common in Takala's practice for her to appear in a situation for a short period of time, but she has also worked over a longer period—*The Trainee* (2008) was performed during one month in the marketing department of Deloitte Finland.

³ Like she does in the videos *Easy Rider* (2006) and *The Announcer* (2007) and the installation *The Messengers* (2008).

● Five years ago, when writing about Pilvi Takala's work, I was fascinated by the way she was developing her work within different communities: how she observed them, played with their inner logic, and tried to infiltrate them and jam them up.¹ The main characteristic of Takala's practice is the situation she creates in order to manipulate the surrounding people: a collective of co-workers, a group sharing the same interest or hobby, or a random crowd of consumers. Rather than having a common topic or theme, her work's unifying dimension is her unique working methodology. Examining Takala's work today, I have to admit that the core of her practice has remained the same as it has grown even more solid and central. She continues to challenge the specific set of rules silently agreed upon within a particular group of people, and in so doing reveals some unexpected aspects of social structure and group behavior in public and semi-public spaces.

Takala does not produce conceptual objects, nor does she objectify concepts; her artistic practice is a practice in its most direct sense: consistent, continuous, and based on carefully planned activities. What is presented in art spaces through edited and post-produced documentation is often simultaneously an action and a state of being. Takala often positions herself in the midst of experiments that may not have a clear outcome in the beginning² or hires an actor to interfere in a particular setting in the public space.³ Her work is practice in a prescriptive sense: it tests a theory or hypothesis and at the same time gathers information about social structures for new theories.

One could map out Takala's use of main accessories or devices—she likes to play around with attire as a coded system that stands for group membership as well as for the social status of the wearer. Besides bodily features, clothing is the first means of communication about the identity, beliefs, and lifestyle of a person. The artist also seems to love money, not as an exchange value, but as a security risk and as an object of desire. Money makes the world go round and makes people act in specific ways and Takala knows that. Operating with outfits and cash, she questions the functionality of security systems and causes false alarms among security guards or people

responsible for the well-being of a specific community. Are her modest interventions as much of a threat to established institutions as people's reactions suggest?

- One of Takala's first pieces uses attire to examine the anatomy of a community. *Event on Garnethill* (2005), realized during her studies as an exchange student at Glasgow School of Art, predicted the direction of her upcoming practice. The artist wandered the streets of Garnethill (one of the neighborhoods of Glasgow) in the official uniform of an old and prestigious private Catholic School, St Aloysius' College. The final piece, a small hardcover book, documents the adventure of squatting the uniform as a status symbol and becoming an illegal member of a restricted community. Several interactions between real pupils and the fake one culminated with the action of revealing the foreign body. The work might at first be seen as a comment on an old-fashioned school system, but in the framework of Takala's continuous practice, it is also an attempt to gain access to a particular community, its strong traditions and clearly manifested identity. *Event on Garnethill* could be seen as hacking the system and just waiting to see what will happen. The intervention ended when she gained the attention of a responsible teacher and a small-scale local scandal erupted as a consequence.
- If in *Event on Garnethill* Takala attempted to infiltrate a specific community via uniform attire, then in *Wallflower* (2006), Takala invests in a contrasting outfit. The performance takes place in Pärnu, a popular health resort on the Western coast of Estonia. Like Cinderella arriving to the ball, the artist participates in a dance-evening, a version of the traditional Finnish summer pavilion dance. Mostly elderly couples enjoy themselves dancing to old-fashioned music while the artist, a younger woman, sits alone in a shiny dress the whole evening, waiting for somebody to ask her to dance. The girl sits and the hours pass. What an unpleasant situation! On the one hand, the piece evokes embarrassment and bitter-sweet discomfort. On the other hand, it raises the question: What is the artist looking for in a territory that is clearly not hers? The territory she tries to fish in is shared by a particular community with a clear set of rules. This struggle between these contradictory feelings seems to be shared by the dancers in the spa in Pärnu as well as by the viewers in front of the screen. *Wallflower* is a clever interference that points to the characteristics and value systems of one generation as well as to unwritten rules based on nationality. The performative experiment comes to an end, producing the same result as several of Takala's works: before and after her intervention, the community continues to function and protect the interests of its members.
- Another appearance in a fancy dress happens in front of the gates of Disneyland Paris in *Real Snow White* (2009). The artist shows up

4 Jennifer Allen, "Dress Sense: Snow White, Architecture and Intolerance," *Frieze Magazine* (May 2010), p. 19.

as a Snow White, looking exactly like the character we know from Walt Disney's cartoons. This sensational lady immediately attracts the attention of all the small princess-like girls, alarming the security guards. After she experiences some moments of fame, the security guard takes over the situation and sends the artist to a restroom to change. Jennifer Allen reads this video in relation to migration and "aestheticization of citizenship" in today's France,⁴ but I would rather see it in the light of Takala's practice as an ambitious attempt to penetrate a powerful entertainment enterprise. Walt Disney has hijacked a popular fairytale character for the sake of earning profits and claims the rights to have the "real" Snow White inside their well-protected wonderland. Takala is questioning the intellectual property rights and functioning principles of huge entertainment conglomerates. Who has the right to dress as a popular character, and what makes the character "real" or "false"? Why is the amusement park so afraid of having a visitor who looks similar to one of its employees? Fear is a great force that Takala manages to make visible in *Real Snow White*, and in several of her other works.

- *Broad Sense* (2011) challenges the house rules of another monstrous apparatus, this time a political one: the European Parliament in Brussels. This establishment is so massive, and involves such a great number of employees that neither speak a common language nor share the knowledge of the basic practical regulations applied inside the organization. In the intervention, Takala returns to her main targets of examination: the uniform and the functionality of security systems. First, she tries to find out what dress code is permitted inside the building of European Parliament by sending requests for information to Parliament's national offices, and she receives a wide range of very different answers. Then, she drifts around in the endless corridors of the Parliament building and of course gets noticed by bored and idle security guards who send her out or away. This work makes the viewer wonder how this organization as a whole can function at all, if even the simplest procedure of entering the Parliament building is not clear. Are there any common rules, or does everybody just make them up as needed? Is this just a big complex of misunderstandings, confusions, misinterpretations, and contrary messages? Takala's work also reveals how much of our lives is dependent on the random and selfish decisions of people working in the service industries: secretaries, security guards, and cleaning ladies are often the ones deciding what we can have or access.

Another attention-catching instrument is, of course, money. As cash or as virtual currency, in one's pocket, or just as earning potential, money is a great trigger for action. Takala uses the multifaceted potential of money in the most direct and influential way in her piece *Bag Lady* (2006) performed in Arkaden Shopping Mall on Potsdamer

5 This performance was repeated as a part of the 5th Berlin Biennale in 2008, and took place in Alexa mall in Alexanderplatz, Berlin. In 2011 *Bag Lady* was performed again in Woluwe shopping center in Brussels as a part of *The Other Tradition* exhibition at Wiels, Brussels.

Platz, Berlin, and designed to be exhibited as a multiscreen slide projection as well as an artist's book.⁵ The story is very simple: a decently dressed girl walks around the mall, shops for some everyday commodities, and drinks a cup of coffee in the dining area while carrying her cash in a transparent plastic bag. Shopkeepers, security guards, and fellow shoppers express opposing reactions: they either constantly stare and give surprised looks or they demonstratively avoid looking. Some tell her to hide her money. The performance refers to possibly the most important commodity in a consumer society—security. This slight intervention sheds controversial light on the fragility of the social order, where private property in the form of money or product is such a holy cow that it is under constant intuitive public control.

Cash is always a security risk, even in relatively small quantities. Takala staged a similar control-situation in its extreme form in her installation *Castle* (2011), a board game specifically designed for children, which consisted of 1500 one euro coins, a table that constantly calculates the amount of money on it, and instructions for building cool things with coins, all installed inside security gates.⁶ I see this work as a continuation of *Bag Lady*, just as a more elaborated version of a controlled situation around cash. While safety in shopping malls is produced by private companies and their guards, here Takala distributed the task of securing the cash among the visitors, half of them underage. According to the artist's words, both the children and the adults were aware of the tension in the situation, but the children had a more direct approach to the money as a material. "The adults responsible for educating the kids both about art and money seemed to be more nervous and concerned about the money being real while the kids were just excited to play with money—some sat there for hours very concentrated."⁷ In spite of the different (self-)control mechanisms, at the end of the exhibition, there were 215 euro missing . . .

6 The title *Castle* could be seen as a metaphor of well protected community inhabited by selected members. This also refers to a collective of common interests (*Players*, *Wallflower*, *The Switch*), a company (*The Trainee*, *Real Snow White*), or a political establishment (*Broad Sense*).

7 Pilvi Takala in a private email conversation with author in November 2011.

8 It is not the first time Takala has been interested in the life and thoughts of invested players—her first attempt to get into serious playing circles was in 2005 in Istanbul, where she produced two works in all-male teahouses where men spend all day playing games.

- ● While in *Castle* kids are playing with money, in *Players* (2010) kids are betting with money. *Players* focuses on a group of friends, all in their mid-twenties, most coming from Nordic countries and making their living from online poker.⁸ Takala's brother is one of these players who doesn't merely make a living, but is rich enough to live a luxurious life in a hotel in Bangkok and enjoy leisure activities that "common" people can't even dream about. *Players* is quite different from Takala's other works: it is a neutral insight into a community, and we don't always feel sure as to whether or not this community actually exists. In *Players*, all the roles of the poker-boys are played by the cross-dressed artist herself, possibly for security reasons. The video illustrates a voice-over that describes the daily activities of the group of friends and introduces rules of the community. As money is not an issue, the players always gamble on who pays for everyone's meal or for the night out. This time, Takala

stands inside the community (or is, at least, a close observer) and performs the invented everyday rituals that determine the dynamics of this group.

- How can someone make a lot of money? Although the lifestyle depicted in *Players* remains an unachievable dream for many, there are countless techniques people use to make more money. Takala worked with financial wishful thinking in the performance
- *Money Making Strategies That WORK* (2011), which took place in Utrecht in a hotel conference room. As a professional consultant, Takala performed a lecture where she introduced the paying audience to different ways of earning money, with special focus on people who make their living by teaching others how to make money. The ten-euro tickets to the event came with a 200 percent guarantee: a twenty-euro refund, covered by the artist, could be requested without explanation after the event. To many, the potential to become rich is a seductive proposition, but as in other widespread pyramid schemes, the only one who ended up making money with the lecture was the artist herself.

No work stands out or drops out from the body of Takala's practice; all of them are connected, and they lend each other new possibilities of interpretation. Over the years, her work has grown more multilayered and more diverse. Sometimes it seems that in each work, the artists invents a new experimental game. She shows up playing her own game in the middle of an ongoing game, confusing the other "players" about the rules. She tries her fortune in widely varied communities and social systems, plays the lottery with social situations, and bids on people's reactions. Sometimes, the game works and bingo! the artist gets lucky. Sometimes, her attempts are stopped by other "players" even before the start, but she quickly returns from another angle. Sometimes, the end result of the experiment is predictable, and other times, it is unexpected. I am curious about what kind of situation she will challenge next. Good luck, Pilvi!

Some Questions for Pilvi Takala from Silke Opitz

Silke Opitz: One could call your pieces interventions or investigative performances and intervention-based videos, but beyond these classification terms, what you think about these “two steps” in your work seems important, both in relation to format as well as audience. The first audience for your work is the affected people, who mostly don’t come from the art world and don’t see your installations. The final work is presented to a second audience in art institutions. How do you value the intervention at the location against the installation in the exhibition? How do these parts relate to a whole that you regard as the entirety of the work?

Pilvi Takala: My work depends on the live event, and getting out and doing it drives my whole practice. The “affected” people are also some kind of audience to my piece, whether they ever find that out or not, but I believe that their experience differs a lot from the experience of the art audience who sees a final piece. I don’t really think of them as an art audience. They have a more personal and subjective relationship to the events, and it might be stronger or weaker than the one of the art audience. I seldom have a chance to find out how these people experienced the events in retrospect. I just have the immediate reactions that I captured and I’m probably missing many responses. During the intervention, I’m only interested in how these people react to it as a real event, not what they think of it as art. There are also people who might have seen me try out something that I’ll never edit into a piece, maybe something totally insignificant, that they barely notice. Would it be fair to call them an audience?

So the final edited piece is the art, the tool for communication. It couldn’t exist without the intervention—the real events are the content, even in a piece like *Players*. The piece is the part I have control over and it is the part where I hold the responsibility to show something interesting. This part has a larger audience and I think it also has more potential to communicate something beyond the experience of the single event. Seeing the real events from a distance, as a viewer of a video, it’s possible to analyze them in a larger context. I wouldn’t be satisfied with just doing interventions without documenting them and working with the material. Making the piece is also a tool for thinking for myself and a way of preserving the experience.

A few of my pieces are actual performances for an art audience. I also have experimented with combining the audiences by repeating *Bag Lady* as a performance after the original intervention. I found it successful, but different from the original piece. The audience had to find the correct way to react to this “performance,” where there was really nothing to see and the question of the “audience position” became quite strong. They first had to find me in this huge mall and most of them failed (they might then think that was the point). The ones who found me had to decide whether to copy the rest of the audience (and try to identify the audience) or whether to do something else, like ask me for money, which someone did. Later, I had all the security guards following me, which actually made it look more like a performance. So many interesting things happened in the repetition, but the book/slideshow might be an even cleaner presentation of the idea of *Bag Lady* in the end; at least I feel I have more control over that.

I don’t feel like the audience of my art pieces and the people involved in my interventions are necessarily two different groups that don’t mix (maybe it’s wishful thinking). Even an art professional or at least a member of art audience might be affected by my intervention without knowing it is art and the other way around. Of course fine art is not exactly a mass media and most people don’t go to exhibitions, but I feel my work is accessible to everyone once they encounter it. I’m always open to showing my works in different contexts. I have shown *The Trainee* in an airport lounge and also other video pieces in public spaces. I also show in film festivals that attract at least a slightly different audience.

Silke Opitz: As you deal with behavioral codes, customs, and rituals, I wonder if your artistic practice affects your private life? Or do you privately encounter things that you then explore in your pieces?

Pilvi Takala: I definitely encounter things in my private life that I want to research further. I have my radar on full time, scanning for interesting things. I often dive quite deeply into my subject area, and that affects my private life. When I’m trying to understand something, it’s a daily practice. When the project is over, I often put aside most of the material, but some things stay. I learned to play poker and really worked on becoming professional (which failed), but nowadays I rarely play poker. During the one month at Deloitte for *The Trainee* I had to be Johanna Takala after work as well, because I would bump into my colleagues in town and it was easier to keep going non-stop than it was to relax and get into it again. Later, when I had become more or less the freak at the work place, I did feel genuinely disliked and even bullied. It felt really bad. A couple of times I had to call one of my best friends during lunch break just to talk to someone who liked me and thought I was normal. It was an endurance performance.

Silke Opitz: I think you are not simply revealing something to the people witnessing an intervention at a specific location or the people who see your work in art spaces, but also to a third party: yourself. Both you and your audiences are learning not only through observation, but through personal participation. Your experience making *The Trainee* made me think about Marina Abramović's *Rhythm 0*, where people were given the option to use certain objects on Abramović's body in an art gallery. *The Trainee* seems to be a kind of updated post-postmodern version of that piece. The differences between your work and hers include the fact that you are not in the gallery, you are interacting in real life, and your action is psychological, while hers is also physical. Because there is no visible abuse, but rather invisible bullying, I wonder about the psychological effects of your practice. How much does a character overlap with your own identity? How do you prepare? Did you take acting lessons? And how extensively is your script written beforehand? What rules govern your behavior? How do you manage to never get annoyed, or grow impolite? How do you remain so "neutral"?

Pilvi Takala: Abramović's practice has a lot in common with mine in terms of having the artist's presence in the center of the work, especially when the presence means being involved with others and letting yourself be affected by them.

I didn't take any acting classes, but it seems I have an ability to appear calm with a straight face in almost any situation. Actually many people ask me precisely this question: How did I manage to go through with it without laughing or crying? So that is the skill they see in the work. Like skillful painting or sculpting, keeping a straight face is something a five-year-old can't do. I get respect for that, but not always as an artist. I've met people who find my work interesting, but would claim it's not art, which is great compared to simply being an uninteresting artist.

My characters are more like costumes I wear than something I become. I'm always present in those situations, extremely aware of the discomfort I'm purposefully creating. I think that professional actors really become the characters they portray, but in their case the characters have to be more whole. My characters are like sketches. They have just a few features and are designed for certain situations. My generally minimal attitude and straight face have to do with keeping the action "clean." Not saying or doing anything unnecessary is as important as doing the right kind of thing. When I did this sort of intervention for the first time, for *Event on Garnethill*, I didn't even think of playing a character. I just really wanted to experience what would change for me on my street when I dressed up in the uniform. I wanted that to be the only act. So I didn't want to dress up in the uniform and try to make friends with the kids, or dress up in the uniform and enter the school. I just wanted to dress up in the uniform and be on my street. So I made these rules: to stay in the public areas, not to approach anyone myself, and not to lie. Also, all the later characters had some basic rules of operation and some kind of vague

logic explaining why they would be doing what they were doing. For example, one back-story was that I dressed up as Snow White because I was a huge fan and made this awesome costume at home which I always wore at costume parties. My rules were to stay polite and nice, to stay a true Disney fan, however they treated me, and to be completely unaware of a real Snow White other than the drawing. I never want to appear mentally ill, so that's why this logic is kind of important. The reason to ride the elevator all day in *The Trainee* was that an elevator is like a train and it's easier to think there, and that working without laptop or paper or anything, just in your brain, is sometimes good for your brain.

I always think beforehand of responses to possible questions, but as the whole point is that something unknown will happen, I just have to come up with something following the logic of the character. That's why, although I have had to use actors for some projects, I prefer to play the role myself. Others might misunderstand the concept and do or say something that the character wouldn't do.

Silke Opitz: Does your practice of playing different characters ever lead you to want to become someone else? Is there someone you would like to become, even temporarily, outside of your art practice?

Pilvi Takala: I would love to be extremely skilled, like an acrobat, dancer, singer, or a player of a certain instrument, simply because it seems to be such a joy to perform with something like that so well. Characters in my work are mostly outcasts, and so uncomfortable to be, that I'm often relieved to be myself again. I use the characters to understand the people around them. I seldom want to be someone else. I could imagine I'd be a bit more eager to swap if I were born in a place of constant conflict or poverty, where you strive just to stay alive, or even if my possibilities for traveling were more restricted due to my nationality.

Silke Opitz: How do you film your work? How do you deal with not being able to capture on video everything important that happens during the intervention? How much of your work exists in post-production?

Pilvi Takala: There are a few different levels of manipulation going on in my work. In the simplest terms, it's me manipulating a situation with a certain act, or instructing an actor to do so. For example, *Real Snow White* is really straightforward documentation footage, where minimal editing was necessary. Also, the situation allowed my cameraman to film without hiding the camera, as there are always ten other people filming *Snow White* at the same time.

The person filming for me needs to be someone who can stay cool about filming in secret and behave like nothing is going on, but at the same time be able to follow the events, making sure that the camera is on and pointing in the right direction. Normal cameraman skills are secondary.

I only have had friends filming for me and it would be maybe wise to use the same person every time, but I often work quite spontaneously and in different countries, so it's not so easy to get the same person to come. Many of my works are filmed by Juha Laatikainen who I studied with, and later by Siri Baggerman, who was not afraid to pass through the European Parliament security wearing spy cameras. I never asked permission to film anywhere, except for *The Trainee*, where I could place cameras in the office during the night and everything was filmed without a cameraman.

In some works, I arranged to have extra actors push the situation in the direction I wanted it to go to. In *Easy Rider*, I arranged the second guy to be willing to lend his jacket, which then encouraged the whole tram to take part in the events. I could have repeated the performance as long as I came across someone who was willing to give his jacket, but I was not so interested in the question of whether someone would be so generous. I was more interested in the next step. Sometimes, I need to remake my material. *Bag Lady* images are almost completely taken after the actual intervention. In *The Trainee*, the video stills from the PowerPoint of

me working in the office in a normal way are made afterwards to have a kind of introduction, because I only started to film when I stopped working normally. In *Broad Sense*, I was kicked out once when the camera was not on, so I went to the same spot another day and got some footage to illustrate that situation, although I wasn't kicked out that time.

I never decide beforehand how the final piece will look. The editing process is always guided by my initial experience and I try to shape the material to match it. I try to keep it clear and short, so I leave out parts that I find repetitive or insignificant. I usually have a general idea of what the piece should include right after the intervention.

Silke Opitz: You don't make these pieces just to explore something for yourself, you are communicating with others in the intervention in the public space, and then you are showing the filmed results again to another audience. Your work seems to be driven by your attitude towards others. Nevertheless, you always keep a certain distance from your audiences in your work. Could this attitude be called misanthropic?

Pilvi Takala: A misanthrope is defined in the dictionary as a person who dislikes humankind and avoids human society, and I would say I'm the exact opposite. I use an outsider's position within my practice, but as you say, I'm not doing the work just for myself. I want to share my work and have as many people as possible see it and find it interesting. I am trying to communicate and take part in something. By exploring different communities, I'm actually becoming at times a misfit, but always a part of them rather than taking distance from them.

I have a girl cousin my age and we had our winter holidays at a different time because we lived in different parts of the country. So I would go to visit her every year when I had my holiday, and then go to school with her because she didn't have holiday. I really enjoyed that. It was really exciting to go to another school, to be part of another community, even though the other kids in her school would think I was a bit weird for wanting to go to school when I had holiday.

Silke Opitz: When we spoke about the films of Michael Moore, you said you like to avoid the strategy to prove a point that Moore often uses. Your work is far from Moore's, but I think, in another way, you are on a mission too. It is a lighter, more effortless and unimposing version, more like a proposal.

You don't focus so much on extreme behaviors of the human being; rather, you are looking at the unnoticeable ones while withholding judgement. So, the work is not about what we are able to do (to others) under extreme circumstances. Even when you are entering the field of politics, your first priority is not to make an overtly political work. So, what is it that interests you about the human being?

Silke Opitz: Would you say you are telling us about the real or reality in your work? In this context, an advertising slogan comes to my mind: "Life is not a spectator sport"—so how does this pertain to you in relation to the people you are investigating?

Pilvi Takala: I'm trying to create a situation where something new emerges, but as you said, the new thing is something very small. I'd rather have people see my work, and genuinely accept the minimal change it proposes than pose obvious political statements with my work that would be instantly rejected by the people who disagree. For me, there is a value in being able to make a work that seems harmless enough so that a person with opposite political views can engage with it and be open to it, at least to some degree.

The word "stretching" describes my practice well. I'm stretching my own experience in the research, stretching my own personality when playing my characters, and, most importantly, stretching the possibilities of certain situations, which then invites the audience to stretch their perception. This is a small and gentle movement, but might leave permanent traces, stretch marks.

Pilvi Takala: I do think I am describing reality. It's reality from my perspective, totally subjective, but also real in the sense that I'm not offering any kind of conclusion. I'm not making clear statements about certain groups of people or judging certain kinds of behavior. People often draw quite surprisingly different conclusions from my work, depending on their position. So it seems simple, but it is actually complex, which is quite real to me. I don't repeat the same interventions in different countries to avoid providing some kind of comparative research material of how different nationalities deal with certain things. I'm not sure how real my work looks to you, because it includes constructed characters and some remade material, but I'm actually quite attached to the idea that it must be real and that its being real gives value to my work. To me, "real" means relevant, and that's what I want my work to be. This is funny when you think about *Real Snow White*. In my eyes, I'm the real one, of course.

Silke Opitz: I think it might not be common, especially for a woman artist, to focus on delicate, poetic, intimate issues as well as tough political topics. What I find interesting regarding this potential "division" in your work is that although you are not dealing primarily with the female body, there is no escape from it. In your art practice, as in real life, even if you try to behave in a gender-neutral way, a female role is put on you.

Pilvi Takala: This division, or rather, the impossibility of the division is central to my work. To me all the works are both delicate and political. Some works might seem more political because of the place or subject they deal with, but I feel those works are no more soft or silent. *Broad Sense* would be the first work one would label as political because it takes place in a political institution, but if you look at my actions in a piece like *The Angels*, they are much more tough. In *Broad Sense* I really do nothing but enter the European Parliament and walk around. The fact that I am female is just unavoidable and even if the piece deals with something completely different, it also drags along the female body. There's no point trying to be neutral about it so it's better to use what is already there. Being female made many of my pieces possible and I probably would have done something else instead if I were male.

The characters in my work mostly look like me, have my voice and my face, so it's hard to divide the character from me. It's also hard to say whether I'm inside or outside of a group or a place when I'm doing my interventions. I'm actually bouncing back and forth, revealing what it takes to belong somewhere and how little can get you excluded. The title of the book and the exhibition *Just When I Thought I Was Out . . . They Pull Me Back In* is based on this tension between the outside and the inside. The Mafia depicted in *The Godfather* and later "The Sopranos," where the quote comes from, is an extremely rigid example of what I am interested in, a rule system that governs a community. It has to do with the impossibilities of stepping outside of my body when doing an intervention, of being neutral and of getting out of a situation when it suddenly gets uncomfortable. My work happens in this moment of tension, where some would rather get out, but are pulled back in, where everybody is taking part.

When you get out and are pulled back in, something changes. It's just a stretch mark, almost unnoticeable, but a permanent change. So although there's no escape, it's possible to negotiate the space we are trapped in.

Careful Whispers—The Politics of a Wallflower

Mika Hannula

●
Innocence.

A beginning loaded with expectations, anticipations, and assumptions. A word with content that goes all over the place. It is, at the same time, over-determined and under-defined. It is a chance and a challenge. A dead end with a wallflower stuck on it.

Innocence.

As a strategy, it is so very abused and under-used. It is a concept that seems to be commoditized, through and through, so that it is almost impossible to touch, get closer to, or take seriously.

Innocence.

Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps this is an act that embodies and hints at a counterforce and an empowerment that might make a difference; that slight alteration of parameters, shifting the balance, managing to shape and shake the site and situation. It is, potentially, the surprise effect of making something political.

Let me repeat: perhaps, perhaps, perhaps.

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Two works by Pilvi Takala. Two works that are clearly different in approach and scale. Yet again, two works that share similar tendencies and strategies of going into and staying in places where a silent and coy manner matters the most. It is, simply but so very effectively, something we are not accustomed to. These works are *The Trainee* (2008) and *Real Snow White* (2009).

The former work can take various shapes and forms in its installation, which consists of a two-minute PowerPoint presentation, three videos, an electronic key placed into a vitrine, a "Welcome to Deloitte" letter, and a variable number of pieces of office furniture, depending on the exhibition site. The PowerPoint and the videos add up to nearly fifteen minutes of moving images. The work is also shown in a single-screen format, with a duration of thirteen minutes.



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The latter work is a straightforward single-screen piece slightly longer than nine minutes that can be shown on both a monitor and a projector. With *Real Snow White*, Pilvi Takala takes us and, first, herself to the peculiar place called Disneyland located just outside of Paris, France. The work is, on one level, about her dressing up, carefully and with gusto, as a Snow White, and then trying to enter through the gates into the Disneyland amusement park. But even if she has the proper ticket, and even if she is just trying to visit this entertainment factory, she is denied access. Not only is she denied, she is escorted away from the gates, away from the promises of Disneyland.

In the former work, she is not trying to get anywhere; she is already inside. She is inside an accounting company, an international company with an office in Helsinki, Finland. She is dressed up as an office worker in order to melt in with and be part of the so-called collective of a workforce at this specific company. On one hand, what she does is to act, as the title states, as a "trainee" for a period of one month.

The setup is worth spelling out in detail. She is and she is not a trainee. It is an art project. She is invited to be a trainee, an artist in camouflage. She is allowed to film, in secret, and her aim is the hardest aim of all: to do nothing. She is around, hanging back. In the spaces described with the lovely term "landscape offices," and in the various rooms for coffee breaks, etc., she did next to nothing. She made a deal that only four persons in the company knew what was going on. These people included the head of the whole business enterprise, the chief of the marketing section, an employee at the same section, and a person from the human resources department. In the videos, the discussions between the various employees commenting on this weird trainee's behavior are drawn from the e-mails to three of the four persons in on the deal (the human resources person kept herself out).

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The Trainee was a collaboration with the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, Helsinki, and the accounting company Deloitte. The work was first shown at Kiasma, and then it was bought by Deloitte and donated to the collection of the museum.

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Real Snow White was first shown in Istanbul, in the hall of a shopping mall at the İstiklâl Caddesi. The installation consisted of a table, the dress of the leading figure, and a flat-screen video.

On the third day of the showing, the owners of the shopping mall had had enough and demanded the piece be removed. According to the owners, displaying the work was too much of a hassle. The worried shopkeepers said that people stopped in front of it, blocking the entrance instead of going into the shop.



● These are the facts. They are the facts that we need to build a case, an argument, and a context. And then something else comes.

It is the moment, not the monument, which I define as political. Why do I insist on calling it political? That is a fair question, but there are more reasons to address these works as very special ways of making things political than there are reasons to be scared of using the big bad word.

It is the moment of the metaphorical act of turning the lights on and off. On and off. Not switching every half-second, but flipping it every now and then, in variable intervals, in moments when we least expect it to happen.

It is the moment when we all of a sudden become aware of the small but significant alterations in the conditions of our conditions.

These are the sites and situations that are relentlessly and mercilessly constructed by our social and economic environment. These are the habits of our hearts and minds that guide and guard us. These are the acts that we perform without paying attention.

It is the moment, not of truth or of illumination, but of waking up, just a little. Not too much, but a little. It is the moment of recognition and recollection.

It is the moment when passive attitude becomes active participation, when the camouflage—the carefully conspired act—gains its wounds, scratches, and stitches. It is the moment when the presumably innocent strategy of Pilvi Takala comes out of the closet and . . . the moment becomes a place.

It is the moment, not of revelation or reassurance, but the moment of hesitation. All of a sudden, we see and recognize more than we did before. We see a change. Something that was, no longer is. Something has taken place. Something has happened.

There is no shout. There is no halo. The lights are off, and they are on. And they are on, and they are off. We hear careful whispers. We feel for it: the shadow of a smile. We are, indeed, playing the part. We are taking part in the game. We get intimidated; we get tainted. We get burned—and healed. We get both, not one or the other.

But we are not innocent, or at least, no more innocent than Pilvi Takala is. We are part of the mess, and part of the problem. We might be encouraged to laugh: to laugh at the reactions of the not so willing or not so acknowledged participants in the gates of the



notorious park in Paris and in the offices of the highly competitive and just as highly controlled atmosphere of the firm in Helsinki.

But the act of laughing at something is not without its dangers. It is the thin line between love and hate, the thin line between us and them, between an object and a subject. And it is a line that gains its constant and abrupt articulation and actualization in the acts we act while watching the acts performed and caused by Pilvi Takala.

And these acts are political. They are. They make us aware that we are part of the joke. We are, at the best of times, both laughing at someone and laughing with someone. We are aware how cruelly and how consistently the things we take for granted shape and make our everyday lives; lives lived through extremely strong assumptions of what is right, what is wrong, what is to be done, and what is absolutely not to be done in the varied conditions of our conditions.

But is it really so?

● Both works, *The Trainee* and *Real Snow White*, have these very singular moments that cause, metaphorically speaking, headaches and heartaches. And since we are in the mood for love, let's throw in yet another example of figurative speech: what we see here is a garden. It is a garden with fully blossoming flowers. It is not a garden made by flowers of romance. It is a garden of melancholy roses.

The moments that I am addressing here are the key events and elements in these stories. These are elements that might have been anticipated by the artist, but they have not been planned. They are the results of the acts taking place inside within a site and a situation.

In Paris, France, the headache and the heartache, and the melancholy rose, is most effectively visible in the conversation, in the argument that the semi-helpless guard is having: with himself, Snow White, and the hordes of kids in the middle of it all. We are presented with a scene. A scene where a young European woman dressed up as Snow White tries to enter through the gates. Even before that very entrance, this dressed-up figure catches the attention of creatures whose attention span is hardly worthy of the word "span." The kids see her, and the kids want a part of her. They want to touch her; they want her autograph. They want a picture. They want everything, and they want it now. Right now. In between the wish and its fulfillment appears the guard of the enterprise. The guard is asking Snow White to go away. Snow White is acting surprised. She is asking: But why? What did I do? And the kids keep coming, and they



want their Snow White now, they want their kiss and their kick. Now. The guard talks in the direction of both of their desires. His stance toward the disappointed Snow White is firm. He says she is not allowed to enter. The answer is no. To the kids, he says, please continue, this here is not the real Snow White, the real Snow White is inside the gates. In response, the person dressed as a Snow White, the person not allowed to enter the real life of the disneyfied Snow Whiteness, asks: "I thought the real Snow White is a drawing?"

In Helsinki, the scene is multiplied; it is an accumulation of scenes. It is repeated and then repeated again. We see the reactions of the co-workers of the trainee, and we read the growing number of troubled voices.

What is this trainee doing just sitting around? Why is she not doing anything? What is wrong with her? The scene gains its ultimate poignancy as the days go by and the trainee, with care and stamina, articulates who she is and that she is indeed trying not to do anything. These repeated statements become more condensed. The next scene is performed inside the see-through elevator of the company. The artist/trainee has decided to speed up things a little. And this acting out of the non-act of not doing anything is manifested in her choice to spend one day in the company's elevator. The trainee is going up, and then she is going down. Other people, her co-workers, are also going up, and then they are getting out. But the trainee stays in the elevator. Soon enough, the same people that once went up with her go down with her. The co-workers recognize her, and then the moment arrives with the fanfare of headache and the heartache—there stands the singularly brilliant melancholy rose. People get nervous, then they get worried. They are very unsure about what is happening. And then someone coughs up the courage to ask: "What are you doing?" The trainee answers: "I am riding up and down the elevator. Being on the move helps me to think." We see and we feel the faces of the co-workers. They are puzzled, and they are pissed off. They clearly understand what has been said but they do not comprehend what it means. As a consequence, they send an avalanche of complaints and worried e-mails to the head of the marketing section and to the main boss.

Who is this crazy woman? Shouldn't she be taken away?
She is sick; she is dangerous.

●
Drama and dramaturgy. Of the everyday and the anyway. Days spent searching after a meaning and nights spent looking at the meaning. Seeing something, something just about to disappear.

Who speaks, and what do they say? Who is silenced?
Who is there to listen?



And how are we able to play a part in our own lives, to activate ourselves as a participant, not as an object who is used and abused, bought and thrown away? How are we to be alive, and to be alive together?

We hear the voices, oh yes we do (if we concentrate). And, if we are ready for them, we can let them have an effect on us.

We need to open up. Open up and stay open. Stay here. Listening. Listening with care.

They are careful whispers. Careful whispers of the political kind.

