

SPECIAL REPORT: THE ART OF COLLECTING

Frieze Project Finds Artistry in Decision-Making

By Nina Siegal

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The artist Pilvi Takala won this year's Emdash Award from Frieze — and the £10,000 that comes with it — just to give the money away.

Her decision is not an act of charity but a project that she calls a conceptual artwork that challenges 8- to 12-year-olds from a low-income neighborhood in London to suggest ways to spend her prize money. She is giving them £7,000, or about \$11,000, of the total, and will keep the rest to run the project and document the results.

"If they want to buy candy with the whole budget, that's O.K., but they have to be able to explain it," said the 32-year-old artist. "That can be art. Artists do this. Art is a perfect place to have them do whatever they want because art is the best place to do unpredictability."

Ms. Takala's videos and performances often explore how people react when she or others break unspoken cultural rules. For example, in a 2006 slide show and performance she called "Bag Lady," she walks around a Berlin shopping mall with a plastic bag full of euro bills, gauging the reactions, and several shopkeepers try to convince her to use a more discreet purse. In her 2008 video "The Trainee," she takes a job as a trainee at the financial advisory firm Deloitte, only to spend whole days at an empty desk or riding up and down in an elevator, filming the reactions of her perplexed and frustrated co-workers.

It is Ms. Takala's objective as an artist to subvert the rules and to see how people react to that subversion. She was not as interested in what the children decided to do with the money as in how they reached their decision.

"I wanted to create a situation where people who are not normally in power are in power," she said. "Just the fact that you hand over this power to a group of kids is interesting enough as art, as experiment. It doesn't have a clear purpose."

This new project began in August when Ms. Takala went to a youth center in East London and first met with the children who are acting as her committee. She told them the rules — essentially, that there are none — only that they had to decide how to spend the money together, as a group.

"They took that part quite seriously," Ms. Takala said. "Because it was their only real instruction."

Then she asked the children to write down their first ideas, anonymously. The results of their initial brainstorming:

"A giant water slide."

"A house for my mom."

"A trip to Jamaica."

"A private treehouse for everyone on the East Side."

Over the next few days, Ms. Takala took the children to the park, then to a film studio and spent a bit more time discussing their ideas, which led to more sophisticated plans for how to spend the money. One boy named Taylor proposed the idea of a giant sign of his name — "like graffiti, but a sign," said Ms. Takala — and though the children liked the notion it led to a debate about whether it made sense to use only one person's name. Or should they use everyone's name?



Pilvi Takala asked the children she worked with to reach a consensus on how to spend the prize money. Courtesy of Pilvi Takala

As the discussion progressed, the children thought it might be best to make a sign with the area's postal code, E3, to include everyone. Then they switched to another idea: to build a new piece of furniture.

Beyond this, Ms. Takala has declined to disclose any information about the children and their decision-making.

"To me, it's as top secret as the Pentagon Papers," said Ms. Takala. "I don't want anyone to guess what it is before it's done."

The results, she said, will be revealed at Frieze London this week, but she does not expect there to necessarily be any kind of obvious product that people can see, and probably nothing that resembles fine art, like a sculpture or a painting.

"Art didn't seem to be any kind of concern for this group," she said. "They were just thinking art can be anything, so it doesn't matter. Which is nice, so I didn't have to go into that conversation about 'what is art?'"

Ms. Takala was born in Helsinki, educated in Finland and has been living in Istanbul on and off since 2005; she now lives there with her husband, the Turkish artist Ahmet Ogut. She has undertaken solo shows in London, Amsterdam, Berlin, Lisbon and Stockholm, and has won the Prix de Rome scholarship. She won the Norman Prize for best short film at the Stuttgart Winter Film Festival in 2011.

"I was initially interested in Takala's proposal because of its process-focused nature," Nicola Lees, the curator of the Frieze Foundation, which is responsible for the artist commissions for the fair, wrote in an e-mail. "And also because it was a project that addresses the format of a prize with a notion of generosity and playfulness."

She said Ms. Takala's project reminded her of Marcel Duchamp's "Fountain," a urinal he presented at the annual exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York in 1917. Because the show was meant to be open to anyone, without judges or prizes, the society's refusal to exhibit Duchamp's "readymade" pointed out the fact that people still had very clear ideas of what was art, and what was not.

Ms. Lees said that this project, however, was more of a conceptual work, in which the process of creating the piece is more important than the results. She compared it to recent works by artists like Michael Asher and Palle Nielsen, who both made artwork in which children were participants and co-creators.

It also references a piece by the Libyan-Italian artist Adelita Husni-Bey, whose 2010-11 video, "Postcards from the Desert Island" documented a three-week workshop in which French students were asked to build a desert island in their school hall, Ms. Lees said. The video shows them grappling with how to govern themselves, without the aid of adults, and the organized anarchy that ensues.

Ms. Takala's students play in a similar type of sandpit, and she documented their progress on video as well.

During her first week with the children, she was particularly interested by their need for her approval for their ideas, though she repeatedly told them it was completely up to them to decide how to use the money.

Ms. Lees has been fascinated by this pedagogical approach to art since 2008, when she started working as senior curator of public programs for Serpentine Gallery in London, and it has been central to her work coordinating the Frieze Foundation's interdisciplinary program this year.

"This complements the other Frieze Projects, as they all have a very performative feel about them and a focus which lies beyond the notion of an 'object' or a 'product,'" Ms. Lees said. "With the recent pedagogical turn in curating, the art world is very used to works that operate in a similar way."

Is Ms. Lees concerned that the resulting artwork will be viewed as naïve or childish, and therefore undercut the professionalism of the fair? She says that she expected the money to be spent in a childish way, but that the project is not only about how the money is spent — it is about the artist's act of giving young people the power to make decisions.

"As we all know, many artists have continued to endorse André Breton's declaration that 'the mind which plunges into surrealism relives with burning excitement the best part of childhood,'" Ms. Lees said. "This is an example of the continuous dialogue about the notion of childishness in contemporary art."

For Ms. Takala, it is particularly interesting to learn how the children came up with their own system to decide how to spend the money.

"I wanted it to be a group decision to see how they then negotiate within the group," she said. "Do they think everyone has to be happy, or do they just vote so that the majority have to be happy? Within this group of children how do they negotiate the outcome? That's what I'm most curious about."