

# Security guard, schoolgirl, Snow White ... the artist who films herself undercover

Interview By Elizabeth Fullerton

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Six months undercover as a security guard ... Pilvi Takala in Close Watch. Photograph: Ari Karttunen/Emma

**By infiltrating Securitas, Disneyland and Deloitte – where she spent days just riding the lifts – Pilvi Takala’s art thrives on creating toe-curlingly awkward situations**

What to do if a new colleague is over touchy feely when they greet you in the office? Or if a trainee sits staring into space all day doing “brain work”? Finnish artist Pilvi Takala specialises in orchestrating such awkward situations, in a mission to test how we navigate social conventions. “I think

discomfort is a very productive space,” she says when we speak on Zoom before a show of her video installations, aptly titled *On Discomfort*. “It’s where we reassess and negotiate norms.”

Wearing a disguise and an assumed identity, Takala has upset the workings of theme parks, corporations, shopping malls and even the European parliament, exposing the tacit rules that govern our capitalist system. The videos of her in action are often funny. In *Real Snow White*, she tries and fails to get into Disneyland Paris dressed as the cartoon character. A guard says: “You cannot go to the park like this because the children will think you are Snow White. There’s a real Snow White in the park.” Takala replies: “I thought the real Snow White was a drawing.”

But Takala’s performances, videos and installations are underpinned by serious social inquiry. Her practice explores the shifting fault lines of what is considered acceptable behaviour and why, from the perspective of insider and outsider. In 2018’s *The Stroker*, where she pretended to be a wellness consultant at Second Home, a hip Hackney co-workplace for entrepreneurs, people were clearly conflicted about whether they were entitled to find her touchy greetings invasive; they increasingly gave her a wide berth as she passed. For 2008’s *The Trainee*, Takala was an intern for a month at the consulting firm Deloitte, where her apparent inaction – spending entire days either “thinking” or just going up and down in the lift – made her co-workers angry and frustrated, even though they themselves were frequently going through the motions of working while in fact browsing the internet. Both films reveal a progression of behavioural responses by workers who soon find non-conformity threatening and “weird”. “It’s very human to create these strict normative systems that we all follow and we feel in a way good when we’re inside,” says Takala, “but of course it’s mega oppressive.”

The artist’s performative interventions have become more complex over the past two decades. Where her early works often consisted of films of one-off performances, she has subsequently experimented with hidden cameras and re-enactment of actions that have taken place over days or weeks. Last year’s ambitious multi-channel video installation *Close Watch* was the result of six months working under cover as a security guard for Securitas at one of Finland’s biggest shopping malls. Presented at the



Problematic scenarios ... Close Watch. Photograph: Pilvi Takala

Finnish pavilion for the 2022 Venice Biennale, it reflected on the opaque parameters of authority exercised by private companies over citizens. The films are presented in two rooms separated by a one-way police mirror, emphasising the unequal power dynamic of our surveilled existence.

Takala's role at Securitas required four weeks of training. She was eventually outed two weeks before the end of her stint by colleagues who had Googled her. After she finished at the firm, Takala invited her former workmates to join her in workshops with specialised actors to role play problematic issues she had encountered on the job. The films of these workshops form the gripping centrepiece of the installation, showing the guards acting out and debating scenarios involving the use of excessive force by a colleague, toxic masculinity in the control room and the casual ubiquity of racist jokes.

In one particularly disturbing sequence, the group watches three actors re-enact a situation in which a guard manhandles a drunk member of public. In a lively discussion afterward, the guards are pretty much unanimous that loyalty to colleagues would take precedence over pursuing justice for a victim. But as they rationalise and wrestle with these dilemmas and their own accountability, they take on board different views. "We're allowed to interfere with other people's basic rights," concedes one guard, adding, "It's frighteningly easy to abuse. I've seen people work in this field only to hurt others."

Observing this open dialogue within the safe space of the workshops is partly what makes *Close Watch* so powerful and moving; it feels like a constructive template for addressing similar problems in society at large, rather than simply rehashing well-worn criticisms of the underpaid and under-regulated security industry. That said, Takala hopes her work will have an impact on guarding at Securitas. "It's not like we change everything and it's happy ever after," she says. "But I wanted to engage with this industry from a hopeful place." The company has since instituted diversity and unconscious bias training for all employees, which may or may not be a result of suggestions she made after working there.

Takala's infiltration of social communities began in 2004 while on an exchange at the Glasgow School of Art. She was struck by the coexistence of two self-contained groups – that of the Glasgow art students and that of the nearby Catholic girls' school – whose different attire created a glass wall between them. She decided to investigate what would happen if she donned the school uniform, effectively switching tribes. "There's a lot of heavy taboos hanging over this uniform, even though I wasn't doing anything illegal or, to me, ethically problematic," she says. Suddenly she found she was accepted by the pupils and ignored by her fellow art students. "I had the wrong dress code, I was invisible," she explains. Her ruse was discovered when a teacher told her off for wearing the wrong scarf. The Glasgow School of Art was furious and failed her paper, but Takala remained adamant that the strong response to her action proved its success.

Since then Takala has put numerous social groupings under the microscope: she has played an overdressed wallflower at a traditional dance event in Estonia; carried a transparent bag full of cash around a shopping mall – to the consternation of shoppers and shopkeepers alike – and wandered around the European parliament in T-shirts printed with texts highlighting the institution's inconsistent dress policy.

Does she ever get embarrassed? "I have those same feelings as anybody would in those situations, but they're actually information for me that it's working," Takala says. Her social experiments involve intense emotional labour – "I get a lot of rejection," she notes. But it's exhilarating when she senses that something is working: "I feel like it's very awkward. These people don't like what I'm doing now. Great!"

On Discomfort is at Goldsmiths CCA, London, until 4 June.