In Focus: Pilvi Takala

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.
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 Woolflower (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.

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 Kunsthalle Bremen, Germany, opens 1 June.

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