

PILVI TAKALA INTERVIEWED BY CATHERINE SPENCER

The Finnish artist's interests are close to those of sociologists but the tools and protocols she adopts to gain access to her subject, whether it is inside Disneyland, the European Parliament or an all-male Turkish tearoom, are very, very different.

Real Snow White 2009 video



**Catherine Spencer:** In 2004 you created *Event* on Garnethill while you were studying at Glasgow School of Art. You have described this event as the 'birthplace' of your practice – what was catalytic about it, and what does it mean to return to it for your current show at the CCA?

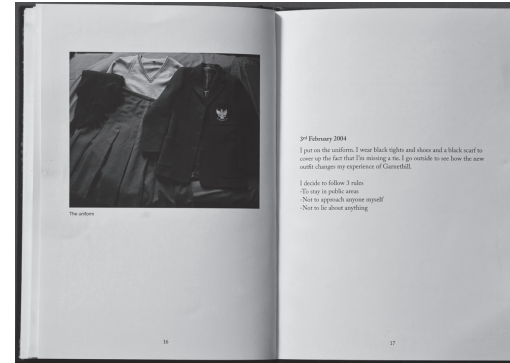
**Pilvi Takala:** I studied in Helsinki but came to Glasgow on an exchange for about six months because of the Environmental Art Department – I felt there was a tradition here of teaching how to create work outside the studio and gallery space. I already had a strong interest in behaviour, but the experience of displacing yourself from your hometown, from the country where you were born – where you take things for granted – was very important. I lived on Garnethill, and every day I saw the school kids in their uniforms and observed this glass wall between us, even though there wasn't such an age difference. The uniform was this very simple visual code, which meant they weren't interested in me. That grew into a need to see what would happen if I wore their school uniform. There wasn't an idea for an art piece at that stage, but I wondered: what would change for me on this hill? And everything did, obviously.

I didn't have time to discuss the idea with the professors at the art school, luckily, because they would have told me not to do it. What happened was very minimal, but it shifted

the whole social world on the street. When the art school students saw me wearing the uniform, they wouldn't recognise me. If I greeted them they were horrified and told me I'd go to jail. There was this fear and suspicion that there must be something wrong with it. Instead, the people who looked at me were the school kids. My being an outsider made it possible: I didn't grow up with the idea of the school uniform and what it might mean. I knew about its implications, but hadn't embodied them, so I could choose to ignore them. It was horrifyingly scary. I couldn't sleep the whole week I was doing it. But the urge was there to see what would happen – with the rationale that it wasn't illegal – even if it made me want to throw up. And that is a skill I still use in my practice: my ability to resist social pressures and codes. Some people know how to draw, but that's the tool I use. That was the first time I followed this intuition, and used that ability to do something that feels so wrong in one way but so necessary in another.

*At what point did you decide to present the piece in book format?*

When I was making it, I didn't know which bit was the art. I had this strong response from the art school that you just couldn't do this, and that I should do something else with the school uniform. So I tried everything I could, but then returned to the diary I kept while I was wearing the uniform. I chose not to show myself dressed in the uniform or photograph any children – I didn't want to touch any controversial area other than the one I had chosen. I focused on what was important about the piece for me, which was the narrative of how I experienced what happened. The book, in which the diary is printed, seemed like a public format, which is also humble. The art school didn't recognise the project as public art and I failed my class.



*Event* on Garnethill 2005

*Easy Rider* 2006 video

*The Committee* 2014 video

*So the resulting work troubled the social norms governing two institutions.*

It wasn't public art because I didn't ask permission – it didn't qualify! I didn't care, really, as I didn't have to get a degree from Glasgow. I made a prototype of the book and later printed around 250 copies, funded by my school in Finland. More than half are in libraries, so it went somewhere public where the story can be accessed. It's the opposite of showing the work in a big installation, and to an extent it is hidden in the archive, but the book is available to anyone who wants to get it. The copies at the CCA are all from libraries. They are public property, and should be treated as books that you feel you could take in your hand and read.

*How close do you see your work as being to sociological experiments?*

Very close. It is a different field of tools and protocols, but the interests I have are definitely ones I share with sociologists. They develop more structured research that can produce scientific results, but the method I have used a lot actually has a name in sociology: it is called the 'breaching experiment', where you break a social rule to see how important it is. Instead of conducting research where I repeat the same experiment, there is often just a singular event, which I edit into a narrative that I feel speaks to something larger. There is very little editing, or changing of chronological order, to make the works more readable, but there is some. I construct narrative fiction, whereas sociologists produce scientific research.

*A key work in this respect is Real Snow White from 2009, where you dressed up in character as Snow White and tried to enter the park at Disneyland Paris but were prevented from doing so by security guards who were worried that you posed a threat, while parents and children excitedly asked if you were the 'real' Snow White. You expose the park's rigid control mechanisms, but also how intensely invested people are in the fiction you represent.*

That for me was key – our desire to buy into the fantasy. Disney's fantasy is extremely well produced and the park is tightly controlled to create a specific image. But your fantasy has to be in line with Disney's, which might be completely different from your relationship to the character in an animated film. I picked Snow White because her look in the original film is so recognisable and exists in so many variations that she seems to be in the public domain. I was interested in how we transform into consumers at the gates of Disneyland. How adults, who wouldn't mind anyone dressing as Snow White elsewhere, can claim that there is a 'real' Snow White in the park.

*The reactions of those around you become an integral part of the resulting work. Do you plan for those responses, or negotiate them as each piece unfolds?*

My interventions are a way of learning, and I choose to do them precisely because I don't know what the reactions will be. Some things can be predicted and I do prepare for the scenarios that I can imagine beforehand. I knew that for *Event* on Garnethill the school kids would be interested in me once I was wearing their uniform, but I didn't know how interested. The character provides a guideline – what is the logic of my being there, dressed like that? I didn't actually have a character in that piece, but I did have a set of rules. That is what I develop for all these works – a loose set of guidelines, the logic for doing a particular thing, and then I improvise based on that. I'm not actually into Snow White, for example, but my character for *Real Snow White* is a fan.

*In Real Snow White, but also in Bag Lady of 2006, where you walked*

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*around a Berlin shopping mall with a transparent bag containing a large amount of cash, and Broad Sense from 2011 in which you infiltrated the European Parliament, the character you play is someone who seems both threatening and disarming, even potentially in need of help or protection. How does this duality function in your work?*

We accept control because we want to be safe, but what it means to be 'safe' should always be reconsidered. The feeling of being afraid doesn't necessarily mean that the situation is dangerous. Fear of some unknown threat, and of other people, is very high now – but what are we afraid of? I try to disrupt points where I see that there is a lot of fear grounded in places where we could afford to reconsider. For example, when I am wearing the school uniform, the first assumption is that it is some kind of predatory disguise, but then what else is there about that uniform? There are a lot of ideas I consider and discard because the reactions would be too strong, and fear would shut down the possibility for anything new to emerge. Usually the effect of my activities is something that grows in time rather than being shocking all at once. *Bag Lady* was harmless enough that security didn't kick me out of the shopping mall immediately, but they were worried and didn't know how to behave. So the door is still open, but there is discomfort – that's my space.

*You often use your own body as a tool, but simultaneously evacuate yourself of subjectivity, becoming a blank slate for the projections of others. Does identity nonetheless continue to be a factor?*

I can't very easily get rid of my whiteness, my gender. Those are the things I carry with me in my work. In terms of the places and situations I work in, I always have to consider what it means when a white, female subject enters. I focus on situations where it makes sense for the intervention to look like I look, so mainly western contexts. There are some works where I use actors because of language, gender or age, or when I need more people. Those are not my favourite pieces because I'm not inside the experience, although they felt urgent enough to make anyway.

I struggled with this in 2005 when making *Women in Kahves* in Istanbul. The piece is based on a series of interventions where three Turkish women and I enter teahouses, which are sort of living rooms for men in the neighbourhood, to play games and drink tea like the men do. This was filmed with a hidden camera. During my research for *The Switch* the same year, which documented two men changing teahouses for one evening, I had already experienced how disruptive my presence was in these spaces – because I was female and a foreigner – but I was also accepted into them precisely because I was an exception. From the start of my research I was curious to see what would happen if local women entered these male-dominated spaces, and I found women who were equally curious and liked the idea. I really hesitated to go with them because they could have done it without me and avoided having this weird character that didn't speak Turkish around, but I also wanted to be inside the experience. Even though they were in charge and my learning was in large part filtered through them, I still didn't want to be left out. My joining the local women might have supported a reading of the work that sees it as a Nordic feminist intruding in a cultural space that she doesn't understand, and announcing that women should be able to hang out in teahouses as well. Not to deny that I'm feminist or Nordic, or that I support everyone's access to teahouses, but the work was much more about routine in general than an attempt to point out how gender grants access, which is quite obvious in this case.

*You had to relinquish control in a way that automatically subverted the sociological participant-observer model, and thus exposed its complex power dynamics.*

I haven't shown that piece much, partly because it is an old piece, but also because I'm not sure it always translates. It was shown in the Istanbul Biennial, next to *The Switch*, where it was received well by the

local audience and seemed to work the way I intended. It didn't appear intrusive or hostile, and the humour and playfulness seemed to come across. There is always something invasive about using hidden cameras and you always miss a lot in the recording. I try to balance this out in the editing. After the first round of visiting teahouses I had a lot of material with men getting very uncomfortable with us entering, and showing only that reaction didn't feel right. So we did another day of visits and got on tape different reactions – men welcoming us as special guests or even noticing that we were filming.

*You have included several costumes in the CCA display: they are clearly transformative, yet here they are presented pell-mell, as if they have just been taken off and discarded.*

The first step of behaviour is how you appear. My practice began with *Event on Garnethill*, where I simply wanted to experience changing my appearance. Costume is also at the centre of pieces like *Real Snow White* and *Broad Sense*, which addresses the different ways EU member states interpret the non-existent rules regarding clothes inside the European Parliament, but it is an important aspect of all of my work. In my practice I am not particularly sensitive to how my work is installed. The aim is to be flexible and to not require the gallery. Here the videos are presented on small, standardised screens in order to underline this, while the costumes provide access from another angle. They are not art objects and the way the costumes are shown points to where the art is: it is not about producing that costume, but the wearing of it there, at that time, like that.

*You are using the gallery to show that your work is not just here.*

Yes, the gallery is one of the places to encounter it, to access my practice and to respond to it. Whether I share my work in exhibitions, film festivals or on Vimeo, I still have a need to produce it, to make narratives. It is a need to archive. All of these works involve a lengthy process, so there is always a choice about what goes in and stays out of the narrative, the archive. I also enjoy the fact that my work can lead to meaningful discussions and feedback even if people don't see it first-hand. Important aspects of what I am trying to communicate often survive retelling. There is more there if you see it, but you don't have to see it – the other layers where it is retold are interesting to me.

*Allan Kaprow liked the idea of his activities continuing as 'gossip'.*

There is a long tradition of this and it means that the piece is not an art object that is a saleable commodity but something that the viewers can take and own.

*This aspect is particularly apparent in two projects where you use institutions, diverting their labour and money: The Trainee of 2008 and The Committee from 2014. In The Trainee you perform the role of an intern at Deloitte but gradually disrupt the environment by appearing not to work, although you are still creating work – an artwork – for the corporation.*

*The Trainee* is a really important piece for me, for many reasons. First of all, the duration and intensity of the intervention were way beyond what I had done before. Also, the social situation was much more intimate and the stakes were higher. Before, I had made everything in spaces I could access without permission, and I had never asked for it. When I was offered the possibility of creating a work with Deloitte, it was an access point to a new place of research: a corporate workplace. It was also an opportunity to move from being an outsider in a marginal position closer to the centre of power and to see what might be possible there, running the risk of being completely consumed by the power. I was expecting Deloitte to prevent me doing what I wanted, and worried that I would have to resort to making work about how the corporation was afraid of artistic freedom and thereby confirm my position in the margin. However, they accepted the proposal we prepared with curators

## CARLOS/ISHIKAWA



installation view at CCA Glasgow

*The Trainee* 2008 video

*Women in Kahves* 2005 video

at the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, which was for me to go undercover as a trainee in their marketing department for a month and film with hidden cameras. Just to get access to this kind of environment was interesting enough for me to go ahead. Eventually, they also accepted me making the kind of work I wanted to make – they saw how it also benefited them to let me.

But of course their takeaway was that they were showing clients my work. They knew that risk-taking and the ability to be critical of your own patterns of operation is cool. I didn't shake the corporation in any way. I focused on the social rules and interpersonal relationships of their workplace, not their global marketplace. I might have helped them to make more money. But I also kept the integrity of my piece: I believe it has hidden power and can operate completely outside the corporation in unpredictable ways. It is out in the world, on the internet, and Deloitte doesn't control how *The Trainee* can be used as a tool for thinking which might shake the structure where they are in power. It's a trade and it's messy, but it is true to the impossibility of staying completely out of these power structures. I believe it is messy both ways and this is visible in the piece. Many things can be true at once.

*You don't simply offer a critical discourse but show how criticality itself can be easily co-opted. In The Committee, you transferred £7,000 of prize money from the Frieze Emdash award to a youth group in east London and let them decide how to spend it.*

The context of the Emdash Award is that you create work for Frieze. Initially I didn't find an art fair an interesting site for production, but then again I thought of this as an opportunity for access and a new site of research. Frieze is clearly a commercial context that needs critical stuff on the side to enhance the sales. They are not trying to disguise what they are doing. I wanted to use my position as the 'critical' artist, and my access to this budget, to move some of the power literally outside the fair. This would create meaning beyond the fair, even if it provided the fair with what it needed. For me it was a very playful approach. Like Deloitte, they could see that what interested me was valuable, and then we could negotiate around that, even if it wasn't always easy. So Frieze sold some art and I helped them to do that, but, at the same time, the kids got their *Five Star Bouncy House* – a bouncy castle in the shape of a house – and I got to see how they decided on that.

I still don't know what the art piece is. It is not the video, even if that is a good access point to the project and something I wanted to make and archive afterwards. The project was specific to Frieze and it was important that there was no art piece produced for the fair, just the conceptual gesture of handing the money to the children and an announcement of how they decided to spend it. Frieze got entangled in the mess, having to oversee the design and production of the bouncy house and help maintain it until recently. My making a work was a by-product of the children getting to do what they wanted with the money. ■

**Pilvi Takala** was at the Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow as part of Glasgow International. Forthcoming exhibitions include Bucharest Biennale 7, Manifesta 11 and the solo show 'My Invisible Friend' at the Kunsthall Aarhus from 22 June to 21 August.

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