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PROFILES

PILVI TAKALA AND THE ART OF AWKWARDNESS

The Finnish artist is quietly taking notes as the people around her lose their shit.

By Lauren Collins

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There's a "Jackass" element to Takala's approach, but instead of shooting herself out of a cannon she's inserting herself into social lacunae, filling up the negative space of subtexts and taboos. Photograph by Billy & Hells for The New Yorker

At the height of summer, a young woman arrives at the gates of Disneyland Paris. It's hot. Water-bottle season. Most of the visitors are in groups. The woman has come alone. She's in a basque-waisted gown with a corn-silk-colored skirt, a midnight-blue bodice, puffed sleeves with Vatican Swiss Guard-style stripes, and an apple-red cloak. She has black curls, tied up in a satin bow. She's even wearing some kind of ruff, as stiff as a dog's cone. People take her to be Snow White and start asking her to sign autographs and pose for pictures.

This lasts for less than two and a half minutes. A security guard charges over and pulls the Snow White look-alike to the side.

"It's not possible to enter in this kind of clothes," he says.

"Really?" she replies.

"You will have to change and put something else on."

The Snow White look-alike is polite, demure even, but she doesn't capitulate easily.

"It's Disneyland, right?"

The guard has trouble articulating exactly what provision of amusement-park law the woman has violated. He is obviously acting on orders from superiors, but his confusion is ontological more than administrative. We are worried that you might do bad things, he says. People might think you're the real character, you know?

He speaks into a walkie-talkie. It's unclear what code he might be using to signal the problem, where the invisible line lies between an innocent bit of flair and a public threat. If Mickey Mouse ears are allowed, why not a Snow White dress? A little girl in a nearly identical outfit is standing nearby, but the guard pays her no mind.

Another guard has joined the negotiations. The problem, apparently, is that the Snow White look-alike resembles too closely the "real" Snow White.

"I thought the real Snow White is a drawing," the Snow White look-alike replies.

A crowd gathers. Unfazed by the fuss she's causing, the Snow White look-alike continues posing for photos and autographing books. Soon, a higher-up arrives. She states firmly that no disguises are allowed on the premises, and that the Snow White look-alike must change her clothes in the bathroom if she wishes to remain at the park.

"She's no Snow White," someone in the crowd mutters. "Let's go."

Scarlet cape rippling in the summer breeze, the too-real fake Snow White trudges off toward the toilets.

The woman in the costume is Pilvi Takala, who used the encounter as the basis for a 2009 video piece called "Real Snow White." She is Finnish. She is an artist. But precisely what kind of Finnish artist she is remains as debatable as a theme park's rule book. When I asked Vanessa Carlos, Takala's London gallerist, how she would categorize her client's art, she replied, "To be honest, I think she's kind of off on her own-ish."

Last year, Takala, who lives in Helsinki and Berlin, represented her home country at the Venice Biennale, where a curatorial statement noted that her work explores "how the neoliberal conflation of civic spaces and commerce has created a nebulous boundary that privileges consumer over citizen." According to Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art, in London, which staged a show of Takala's pieces earlier this year, her art seeks "to stress test the conventions and codes that govern our daily interactions." Takala sometimes describes her practice as "intervention." One might simply say that she does things she's not supposed to do in places where she's not supposed to be.

The Snow White piece relies on a brilliantly simple conceit. The look-alike's real transgression is that she's taken a system's assumptions to their logical conclusion. "The Disney slogan 'Dreams Come True' of course means dreams produced exclusively by Disney," Takala writes, in an accompanying text. "Anything even slightly out of control immediately evokes fear of these real, possibly dark and perverse dreams coming true." Like a churchgoer, the Disney visitor is meant to believe, but only within rigid yet unarticulated parameters. Takala told me, "What interests me is, What are norms: how are they upheld or undone, changed, and negotiated?"

Takala's work involves an unusual combination of earnestness and humor. "It's like the Yes Men, but softer and weirder," the artist Stine Marie Jacobsen, who has collaborated with Takala, told me, referring to the American prankster-activist duo. In a 2015 video piece called "Give a Little Bit," Takala explores the rules of exchange. The Supertramp song of the same name plays in the background as a young woman makes the rounds at a career fair, breezily collecting corporate freebies. At one booth, she silently pockets some pens. At another, she palpates the free apples before slipping a few into her bag. Soon, she's laden with swag, attracting whispers

and side-eyes. “The fear of someone possibly exploiting the system and a requirement that we follow the rules is often greater than that of common sense,” Takala writes. “We easily fail to assess the real losses or benefits of someone just taking a free apple because they want to eat it, and prefer to offer it to a person who presents their commitment to our arbitrary system of rules.” There’s a “Jackass” element to Takala’s approach, but instead of shooting herself out of a cannon she’s inserting herself into social lacunae, filling up the negative space of subtexts and taboos.

Her most powerful tool is awkwardness. Excruciating silences and cringeworthy conversations act as magnifying glasses on the social contract, inviting us to pore over its fine print. This almost legalistic talent for identifying vulnerabilities in institutional protocol is evident in “The Announcer” (2007), for which Takala hired an actor, an older woman, to insist that an employee at a posh Helsinki department store use the intercom to summon “interesting-looking” men to the information desk. In “Wallflower” (2006), Takala showed up at a dance for vacationing pensioners in a poufy pink prom dress and just sat there, tragically. For “Broad Sense” (2011), she e-mailed questions about the dress code at the European Parliament to representatives of all the member states. Then she visited the building in a T-shirt printed with their wildly varying responses, wandering the halls and maintaining an epic poker face when security stepped in.

In January, I went to see Takala in Helsinki. We met for lunch at a cozy Korean place in an artsy neighborhood called Punavuori. “I get super excited when things get awkward,” Takala, who is forty-two, admitted. I braced myself for a persnickety order or a feigned sneezing fit, but nothing untoward happened. We ate vegetarian dolsot bibimbap and cupped our hands around little bowls of ginger tea. In person, Takala is low-key and easy to talk to. I asked how she developed her tolerance for embarrassment and humiliation, whether she’d had to build it up, the way an athlete trains a muscle. “I think I have an unhealthy sense of safety,” she said. She noted, however, that she is able to summon this fearlessness only in professional situations. In regular life, she can’t even muster the nerve to interject during a drunken argument between friends. She added, “It’s embarrassing to me that I live in Berlin and speak no German, and perhaps if I were less embarrassed to speak it wrong I would already be speaking.”

“The Trainee” (2008) is probably Takala’s best-known work. To create it, she spent a month in the Helsinki office of Deloitte, the multinational consulting firm. Only a few higher-ups knew her real identity. (Deloitte was a partner of the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, in Helsinki, and Takala thinks that the executives agreed to take her on “because they wanted to seem cool/fresh in comparison to other companies.”) To her co-workers, she was Johanna Takala, a twentysomething intern in the marketing department. At first, she seemed unremarkable enough. Soon, however, they realized that she wasn’t contributing much to the team. It wasn’t that she was taking too many smoke breaks or browsing Facebook on company time. Far worse: she just sat there all day, staring into the distance. Anyone who dared inquire what she was up to was met with unnerving diffidence: “Brain work.”

One day, she rode the elevator up and down for hours. A few of her co-workers were amused (“Well, at least you’re cheering up our day!” one man said), but others simply could not take the strangeness. In an e-mail to a manager, one wrote:

> Hi
>
> Now the trainee has placed herself in the elevator closest to the cantine. She’s standing in the back corner drifting from floor to floor with the other users. People spend sensless amount of time speculating this issue. Couldn’t we now get her out of here? Obviously she has some kind of mental problem.
>
> I also informed Y about this.

Doing nothing, when it provokes social censure, can actually be draining. Takala told me that after enacting the piece she spent a month in bed, “getting out only to do nice things with people who like me and give me the opposite of rejection.”

The most nonconformist thing about Takala may be her talent for refusal. Sarah McCrory, the director of Goldsmiths, recalls appearing on television with her for an art festival: “They put this terrible makeup on me, and then Pilvi turned up, and I was, like, ‘How come you don’t have to?’ And she was, like, ‘Well, because I said no.’ ”

“I’m not somebody who’s not aware of what the norm is, or what the pressure is,” Takala told me. “It’s not that I don’t get it. It’s that I get it, and I just keep repeating my instruction to myself.” She knows that she “could make flower paintings, and it would all be super-great, and everyone would love them.” She would rather provoke a conversation. Another way to think of her is as a late-capitalist Bartleby, preferring not to uphold certain expectations, and quietly taking notes as the people around her lose their shit.

Antti Kurvinen, then the Finnish Minister of Science and Culture, was standing on a riser in the garden of the Finnish Pavilion at the Venice

Biennale's prestigious Giardini venue. The fair, known as "the Olympics of art," seems to bring out the competitive instincts of guests as much as of entrants. On opening day, art people hustled around the site's twenty-nine pavilions, swathed in new-season coats and instant opinions. A Frieze critic had named Takala's project, entitled "Close Watch," one of the pieces he was most looking forward to seeing, praising her talent for "playfully probing sometimes unspoken social and economic conventions" and her "uneasy engagement with questions about consent and privilege."

Kurvinen cleared his throat and welcomed the fifty or so people who had gathered for the kickoff.

"Pilvi's art raises questions about what we consider normal and why we consider it normal," he said. "We can see our everyday life through a different lens."

He spoke for a few minutes and then scanned the crowd for an aide.

"We need some bubbles," he said. "This is my favorite part of toasts!"

Duly furnished with a flute of prosecco, he raised it and proclaimed, "And now I have officially declared 'Close Watch' open!"

Takala receives a stipend of two thousand dollars a month from the Finnish government. Mingling with well-wishers, she resembled a Republican senator's worst nightmare of a state-subsidized Scandinavian performance artist: complicated haircut (mostly shaved, with a saucer of hair on top of her skull), wacky clothes (black boots with silver squiggles, black jumpsuit with purple squiggles, plush jacket the color of a tennis ball). Her works can take years to make, and she often flings herself into activity before even beginning to contemplate the final form a piece might take. "As an artist, I'm quite little worried about how things look," she confessed. The Venice piece, a multichannel video installation, was available for fifty thousand dollars, but she doubted that anyone would buy it at the fair.

"Close Watch" came about after Takala's long-standing curiosity about malls and about security coalesced into a curiosity about mall security. "I'm interested in how public space is controlled by private security companies, and in how it really is to do this work as a guard," she told the Venice crowd. "Because the pay is very low and the education is very short, yet you have a lot of agency and a lot of responsibility." To make the piece, she had completed a hundred-and-sixty-hour training course that Finland mandates for private-security employees. (She declined to undergo the five additional hours of training that would have earned her the right to carry pepper spray and an expandable baton.) She had called one of the country's major firms, Securitas, asking to "make a work of art about the security sector." Securitas agreed to allow her to go undercover as a guard at one of the Helsinki area's biggest malls.

Otto Tiuri, a cousin of Takala's, works for Securitas as a field manager. For a long time, he was skeptical that being an artist was a job. "I remember teasing her: 'I'll shoot some eggs at a wall and shoot a video and call it modern art. You can take five thousand and I'll take five thousand,' " he told me. Takala, however, suspected that his work might be more complex than the stereotype of filmdom's bumbling Paul Blart. She was curious about the vast gray area between the rule book and the food court, particularly as the state, in Finland as elsewhere, outsources more and more authority to private enterprise. "I've been the target of security interventions myself while doing my work," Takala told me. "The guards define what's disturbing and what's not, so I wanted to see the other side of things."

Calling herself Johanna again (her middle name), she told her mall co-workers that she had gone to art school and worked as a guard in an art museum, a common part-time job for students and artists. "I made it as minimal as possible," she recalled. "And I didn't talk to them much about my personal life—I can't talk to them about living in Berlin. I was, like, 'I wish I had a dog!' " On a break with colleagues one day, Takala feared that her beverage order might be a tell. "I'm feeling self-conscious, wondering if I should put oat milk in my coffee or if that's not 'guard-like,' but then both of my colleagues put oat milk in theirs," she wrote in her field notes, excerpts from which she included in a publication that accompanied the exhibition.

Methodologically, "Close Watch" was a departure from much of Takala's previous work. She was trying to follow the rules, to fit in rather than stand out. Instead of inserting herself into situations to immediately change their dynamics, she allowed the situations to work on her. Patrolling the mall for around fourteen hours a week, Takala often found herself ill at ease. Sometimes her discomfort was structural. She was aware that she was working with people, not paintbrushes, and had tried to design the intervention in an ethical way. But the inescapable fact was that, as in most of her projects, she was using the lives of others—and, typically, not their finest moments—as material for her art. One day at the mall, guards put a teen-ager in a holding cell for selling snus, an illegal tobacco product. Takala asked a colleague so many questions about the kid, who was often in trouble, that the colleague told her she ought to talk to him herself. "I feel conflicted; it is intrusive and patronising to go and 'study' this person while he is being detained," Takala wrote. "I have a strong urge to give him privacy. But as an undercover artist it's also 'good guard work' and

useful for my research to know the regulars. In the end I guess I wasn't comfortable enough in my guard role to do it."

Other times, her discomfort was more situational. One day, she and a colleague watched a "suspicious customer" on CCTV as he circled a car in the mall's parking lot. "I start to feel excited about following him and speculating about what he is planning, and being in such a position of power," Takala wrote. (It turned out that he was waiting for his friends, who had themselves been stopped by mall security, to let him into the car.) Five months into her tenure, she witnessed someone steal a phone. "I tell H and he radios the patrol guards, who have to run after the thief far past the mall doors," she wrote. "I really feel the rush of the chase!" Takala told me that she was alarmed by the ease with which she assumed a harsh mentality: "I sometimes found myself being very authoritarian, and I was, like, 'Why did I do that?' "

The tension in "Close Watch" comes in part from the conflicting incentives of workplace solidarity, personal politics, and the continued viability of Takala's project. She recounts in her field notes that, on the security cameras one day, a white colleague spotted some Black teen-agers play-fighting. He announced that he was going to shut them down, using a Finnish racist slur. (Takala's text translates it as "N-word.") Then he suggested that Takala practice reporting the incident on the radio, instructing her to use the numerical code for "Black person," rather than the one for "young person." Takala writes:

> I want to ask why race is important here, but not age, as play-fighting is quite standard behaviour for youngsters. I hesitate because I'm not sure I can deal with what his answer might be. I'm not sure I would know how to respond.

One can't help but think that this would have been an appropriate moment for Takala to summon her talent for saying no. "I did the thing he asked," Takala said. "In retrospect, I shouldn't have."

One of Takala's colleagues became suspicious, and found out that she was an artist by Googling her. ("I did wonder what's up with that haircut when you first started," another guard told her.) After being unmasked, Takala left the mall job. Back in the studio, she had no idea what to do with the raw material she'd gathered. Christina Li, the curator of "Close Watch," recalled, "She had a Google Drive, and she'd just dump everything in there every day after work, just, like, vomit everything out."

In its engagement with such issues as police violence, racism, and surveillance, the project was far more ambitious than anything Takala had attempted before. "I don't think that Pilvi imagines that her work will change the whole industry," Li said. "But it's kind of throwing a pebble in the water, and thinking that maybe she can influence things in some way."

Takala had been struck by how theoretical best practices yielded to peer pressure on the ground. "I was interested in the internal policing that happens in the workplace," she said. "I wanted to know, could that second colleague somehow change the course of events?" She decided to ask ex-colleagues if she could interview them about their decision-making processes during incidents she had witnessed, particularly those which related to "excessive use of force, racist humor, and toxic masculinity." (Excerpts from seven of the interviews appear in the publication that accompanies the exhibition.) Many of the guards who accepted her invitation shared her discomfort with their peers' attitudes, yet felt that they had little influence over behavior that was unsavory but not illegal. "If a colleague does something really wrong I would intervene, but it would really take a lot," one guard told her.

Takala decided to revisit some of the thorniest scenarios using the forum-theatre technique. Developed in the nineteen-seventies by the Brazilian director Augusto Boal, forum theatre uses "simultaneous dramaturgy"—actors and audience members collectively create a play in real time—to examine social problems. Takala found a performance space in Helsinki and invited five guards (three white Finnish men, a white Finnish woman, and a Finnish man of Moroccan descent), a forum-theatre facilitator, and a trio of hired actors to join her for a three-day filmed workshop. (She also hired an anti-racism consultant.) Portions of the workshop form the basis of "Close Watch," which Takala presented at the Biennale in a stark space divided by a one-way police mirror. (This summer, the piece is on view at the Migros Museum of Contemporary Art, in Zurich.) The forum-theatre sessions combined elements of group therapy and role-play, with participants trying to construct different outcomes to the troubling incidents. In one scenario, a guard roughly removes an inebriated woman from the shopping center.

"My friends went someplace and I don't know where," the woman, played by an actor, tells the guard.

"Pretty shitty," he replies. "Want to step outside and talk for a while?"

"Whatever," she says.

"Let's go smoke a cigarette."

"Are you offering?"

Takala's work involves an unusual combination of earnestness and humor. In a piece from 2009, she is barred from Disneyland Paris for too closely resembling the "real" Snow White. Artwork courtesy the artist.

"Why the hell not!"

The reconciled pair step into the wings, as the rest of the workshop participants break into applause.

As comforting as these resolutions were, they were somewhat unsatisfying. The stakes were low, given that the guards were only playacting, just as Takala's concerns about her job performance had seemed somewhat contrived, given that she knew she could leave at any time. But the tameness was, in part, by design. "In not choosing the 'Man Bites Dog' moments, we were looking for something more complex and less obvious, so it's not clear where the problem stems from," Stine Marie Jacobsen said. "Pilvi and I had a lot of discussions around 'Are we pointing fingers here, or are we trying to learn from each other,' and it's definitely the second one."

That night in Venice, Takala and a large group of friends and family members gathered for dinner. She had invited the guards who appeared in the video to the Biennale, and three of them—Teppo Koskinen, Taha Sabbane, and Jonna Haapalainen—had made the trip. They were thrilled to be there, and amused at the random turn of events: who would have guessed that their colleague with the odd haircut would be a world-renowned artist who, in turn, would invite them to appear in a work of art, the world première of which they'd be celebrating in a Venice restaurant over platters of bacalao and squid? I asked Koskinen whether he'd ever suspected that something was up with Takala.

"We have young people, we have old people, so nothing was too weird," he said. "The only weird thing was maybe her enthusiasm about certain subjects."

"Like what?"

"She told me she was interested in human psychology—that sounded maybe a bit too deep for a security guard, or something?"

Sabbane cut in: "She wanted to see the good things about everyone. She didn't expect that someone might want to hurt her on the job."

After Takala's identity was revealed, "some people were worried what her agenda was," Koskinen said. Explaining why he'd accepted her invitation to sit for an interview, he added, "I trust my instincts on people."

At first, the guards hadn't realized that they would appear in the final work. "Pilvi told me the film would be just for her to remember things, and then the actors would redo what we'd done," Sabbane recalled.

"After that, the plan changed!" Takala called from the other end of the table. "You guys were so good!"

As grilled sardines circulated, I asked Haapalainen whether the experience had changed the way she does her job.

"No," she said.

Her next shift was Monday.

Pilvi Kalhama, the executive director of the EMMA-Espoo Museum of Modern Art, Finland's largest museum, detects a quintessential Finnishness in Takala's "calmness, conciseness, and directness," and in her ability to let a silence endure. The artist Minna Henriksson, a friend of Takala's, sees her fascination with rule-making and rule-breaking as a critique of Finnish conformity. Speaking about "The Announcer," she explained, "It's sort of a petit-bourgeois atmosphere, and everybody reads the same newspaper, and goes to the same department stores and exhibitions. It can be such a monoculture."

Takala grew up in Helsinki in what she calls "a very safe and non-problematic family." Her mother was an architect; her father was a

criminology researcher. She has a brother, who deploys the Takala game face to capitalist ends as a professional poker player. (Takala explored the microcommunity that he and his roommates, fellow expat online gamers, established in a Bangkok hotel in a piece called “Players.”) When Pilvi was a teen-ager, she stopped traffic as part of an effort by ecological activists to “reclaim the streets” and had “an animal-rights heavy moment.” She may have started developing her signature mix of sincerity and irony then. She recalled, “Some of the harder-core activists would release the animals . . . and then they’d die.”

In the Finnish education system, art is treated as a career as much as a calling. Figuring that it could be fun, Takala went to a high school that specialized in the arts, then earned a bachelor’s degree and a master’s from the Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki. Her early work was wide-ranging—she once sculpted a huge black Doberman with glowing halogen-lamp eyes—but, inspired by artists such as Bruce Nauman and Eija-Liisa Ahtila, she soon started experimenting with video.

In her twenties, Takala married Ahmet Öğüt, a Kurdish conceptual artist. (They are now divorced.) I can’t say much more about Takala’s personal life. “I have a long-term stalker,” she explained, the first time we talked, asking that I leave her family out of my story. She was concerned for their safety, so I agreed.

The stalker appeared in December of 2015, after Takala staged an intervention called Invisible Friend—a free text-messaging service. “Send an SMS to 04573963166,” posters that Takala stuck on lampposts around Helsinki read. “Invisible Friend will text you right back.” In the course of two months, more than a thousand users initiated anonymous, sometimes deeply personal exchanges with a team of writers Takala had assembled. The writers were instructed to remain nonjudgmental and to let users dictate the terms of the discussion: where it went, when it ended. Takala wrote, “Invisible Friend fosters an intuitive form of thinking that doesn’t require an ultimate goal, a problem that must be solved, or a specific structure.”

The stalker had been a user of Invisible Friend. Once the project ended, Takala began receiving a barrage of messages from him via e-mail and social media. (They were sent from more than twenty different accounts, and finally comprised more than a hundred and seventy-five thousand characters.) The messages varied in tone—hectoring, aggressive, snide, pathetic, lovesick. For months, Takala tried to ignore them, but they increased in intensity as she prepared for a 2018 solo show at Helsinki’s Kiasma Museum. The stalker wrote:

> OK, I’ve had enough, I will tell the museum about you, about your sociopathy. . . . This will mean that your show will be cancelled. Until now I have not met anyone I cannot convince, what ever the issue.
>
> Men are victims of women, that is all Edvard Munch’s art is about.
>
> LAST OFFER. You can accuse me of harassment or groping or what was the term again, and I won’t defend myself. We will meet in real life and will first just be together and we won’t talk about us at all, just about everything else and it is really nice. Then in the end you will hit me and make a report that I harassed you. Then I admit to it. If this offer is not good enough for you then nothing is, and you can spend the rest of your life lonely.

Faced with this kind of abuse, many people would cower. Takala, however, felt that the e-mails presented an opportunity to delve into, as she later wrote, “a certain kind of gendered, online behaviour, one in which the risk of reprisal is minimal.” She decided to make art about it.

“Admirer” (2018) chronicles Takala’s attempts to negotiate a legally binding contract with the stalker (known as Anonymous). The document, she explains to him over e-mail, will both form the basis of an art work and serve as an agreement for cutting off all contact. They go back and forth for weeks. The stalker says that the museum has chosen the opening date to coincide with his birthday; Takala says that’s not true. He wants museum staff to undergo friendliness training; fake smiles never work, Takala counters. She is intransigent on one point: control over the resulting piece will belong to her and to her only. “Why do you insist that my identity must not be found out?” the stalker writes, even though he has previously insisted that he remain anonymous, and that visitors sign a contract promising that they won’t attempt to identify him. “And why would you not offer me real help for instance by asking your viewers to be friends with me?”

Takala replies that he is welcome to include some personal information if he wants to. “I don’t think however that an artwork is the best way to get friends or that there would be many people that would like an anonymous friend,” she writes. “Like I said before, that structure where the other person is anonymous does not build trust and is not a good starting point.” In the end, they agreed to post instructions at the entrance to the exhibit, asking visitors not to attempt to identify Anonymous. The contract specified, however, that “the Work shall include instructions as to where and how Anonymous’ contact details may be acquired, and the viewers requesting them shall be given an email address chosen by Anonymous.”

For “Close Watch,” Takala went undercover as a security guard at one of the Helsinki area’s biggest malls. Methodologically, this was a departure for Takala. She was trying to follow the rules rather than break them, to fit in rather than stand out. Artwork courtesy the artist.

After two months of negotiations, Takala and Anonymous signed the five-page contract. It stated that after September 16, 2018, “the Parties shall agree to end all communications.” The proviso wasn’t upheld, exactly. In recent years, the stalker has been less persistent, but he surfaces occasionally. Still, Takala is glad that she brought the situation into the open. “Everyone says that, if someone’s after you like this, the best response is not to do anything and hope it goes away,” she told me. “But I was trying to see, like, how I can use my position. He has this power of being anonymous and not having to be responsible for what he’s saying. But then I’m, like, ‘I can speak publicly, and I can control the narrative.’ ”

After Venice, “Close Watch” travelled to the Espoo Museum, which is situated in a former printing house in an industrial neighborhood outside Helsinki. On opening night, in mid-January, a considerable crowd turned out for a discussion with Takala, followed by a reception. Executives from Securitas had been invited, but, up until the last minute, Takala wasn’t sure whether they’d come. In the end, they showed. Jarmo Mikkonen, the company’s national head, stood next to a drinks table in a dark suit, earphones dangling around his neck. I asked why he’d given the go-ahead for Takala to work undercover at the mall.

“In Finland, there was quite a discussion concerning multiculturalism,” he said. “After I heard that Pilvi was interested in this kind of performance, I’m saying, ‘O.K., go ahead,’ because we should be as transparent as possible.” He continued, “And, also, we should support—I’m sorry, I forgot the word.” He paused a minute. “Diversity!” he said, over the din, recovering the word. “DIVERSITY!”

Takala’s piece, he said, had shown the company some areas where it needed to improve, and since its début Securitas Finland has changed the radio security codes so that they no longer indicate race or ethnicity.

During my time in Finland, multiculturalism and diversity were, indeed, major topics of conversation, but they were being debated in a specific context. A few weeks earlier, police had arrested several security guards—employees of a company called Avarn Security—for allegedly beating people, some of them from racial and ethnic minorities, near train stations around Helsinki. “Police say they have evidence the guards went well beyond their powers as security guards, and humiliated their victims,” Yle, Finland’s national broadcaster, reported. “They suspect the guards moved the victims to secluded areas and then kicked them and attacked them with expandable batons, while filming some of the incidents.” (Avarn has since fired the guards, saying, “We condemn all unprofessional behaviour, and we have a clear zero-tolerance policy for illegalities.” The guards have denied that they committed any crime.)

Then, in early January, at the mall where Takala worked, a woman died after Securitas guards removed her from a store. Witnesses said that the woman was not behaving aggressively, and that she was “pressed to the ground and handcuffed” by four guards, one of whom reportedly “lay on top” of her. (Mikkonen expressed his condolences and called it a “very unfortunate incident.”) Finnish police are investigating the incident as suspected negligent manslaughter.

According to one study, security guards in Finland commonly engage in ethnic profiling. This practice occurs with special frequency in public spaces such as shopping centers, where, in Finland, retail often intermingles with public services. (The mall where Takala worked, for instance, hosts a Zara, a Marimekko, a social-services office, a children’s-health clinic, and an enormous library where you can play the piano, use a 3-D printer, and check out everything from books to ice skates.) Still, as the Media Monitoring Group of Finland has noted, hardly any stories about the security-guards scandal mentioned ethnic profiling.

Ali Akbar Mehta, an Indian-born artist and curator in Helsinki, has denounced the “skewed constellation of power” that he sees operating in “Close Watch,” particularly in Takala’s choice to center it on the experiences of security guards, effectively excluding those of the people who are subject to their policing. “Why are these voices missing from the dialogue in ‘Close Watch’?” he wrote, in No Niin magazine.

Takala is politely dismissive of Mehta's criticisms. I asked if she ever considered bringing a wider variety of voices into the piece. She replied, "I think that's so cheesy. To me, it's like when you have those TV things that bring together a racist and a person of color to have a beer." She continued, "When I'm not that demographic, I'm, like, 'What is my position?' And the thing about being sympathetic to the guards, or humanizing them? I think if we don't humanize everybody, we're not going to get anywhere good."

As if Takala's body of work didn't offer ample enough proof of the social construction of awkwardness, there are always saunas. In Helsinki, Takala suggested that we spend an afternoon at the Yrjönkatu swimming hall, the oldest public pool in Finland. Helsinki's Web site calls it "a true gem of the city," noting that it "is unique in that bathing suits are not required."

We each paid around fifteen euros for entry and the use of a personal changing cabin. Our first stop was a blazing wood-burning sauna, where we shovelled kindling into a hissing furnace. We swam laps in an Art Deco pool, all arches and ferns, and, in an overlooking gallery, ate blini with chopped gherkins, sour cream, and honey. There were butts and boobs everywhere.

Takala was disconcerted by an aspect of our visit. In the pool regulations, posted near the entrance to the baths, she saw a flaw, a silence begging to be spoken. Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, it said, were reserved for men. Wednesdays, Fridays, and Sundays were for women. Children over the age of seven "must use the hall during the times reserved for their own sex."

A few weeks later, Takala sent me an article from the Finnish press, reporting that Yrjönkatu had instituted a new set of "safe space" rules just after our visit. These included a prohibition on racist or discriminatory talk and a ban on taking photographs, but the issue of gender was left unaddressed. "We'll see what more they will do for nonbinary & trans inclusivity," Takala wrote. I wondered if she wouldn't find a way to press the issue.

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