

Finnish artist Pilvi Takala: 'When there is perfection, one crack will create a total disaster'

From trying to enter Disneyland as Snow White to being Deloitte's least productive intern, the performance artist thrives on testing social norms

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Most of us are aware of the tacit rules that shape our behaviour in public. Look busy when you're at work. Don't be overly familiar with colleagues. Never flash your cash. Finnish artist Pilvi Takala — the star of Frieze New York's performance programme — stages elaborate encounters that expose and question these norms. "The boundaries are always there and they're not good or bad," she says. "But what they are, how they are negotiated, who decides, the process — this is all interesting."

We meet at her workspace in Berlin. Despite the discomfort her work provokes, Takala is funny and candid in person. Often assuming a character or costume, the artist has infiltrated offices, shopping malls and amusement parks, deliberately testing the boundaries of acceptable conduct. In "Bag Lady" (2006), she wandered through a shopping centre with a clear plastic bag full of cash. For "The Stroker" (2018),



Pilvi Takala in Berlin © Portrait by Chiara Bonetti for the FT



A still from Pilvi Takala's 2006 slideshow installation, 'Bag Lady' © Pilvi Takala

she posed as a wellness consultant hired to improve employee wellbeing by providing “touching services” at a trendy co-working space. And in “The Trainee” (2008), she worked as an intern at Deloitte, spending a month riding the elevators or staring into space — much to her colleagues’ confusion.

Captured on film, Takala’s works have evolved from using hidden camera footage to staged reenactments with actors. Often humorous, they are also excruciatingly awkward to watch. Does she ever feel uncomfortable creating them? “I feel it, but I have a different attitude towards it than in actual life,” she replies. “Those feelings are information about boundaries. It’s like, oh, this feels really awkward so it’s good. I look at those feelings as guidance, as something productive.”

Takala recalls first becoming intrigued by the concept of



Takala is questioned by security staff at Disneyland Paris in a still from 'Real Snow White' (2009) © Courtesy the artist; Carlos/Ishikawa, London; and Stigter van Doesburg, Amsterdam.

social pressure “at a very young age”, during visits to a cousin who lived in another part of Finland. Often accompanying her to school, she noticed how her status as a visiting student exempted her from the need to fit in. “I remember that being really fantastic,” she says. “I didn’t have that group pressure that comes when you’re stuck with the same class for many years.”

Social expectations would later become central to Takala’s disarming art, which often highlights their absurdity. In “The Trainee”, her inaction prompted colleagues to send concerned emails to managers about “a girl with a glazed look in her eyes”, or avoid her altogether — all because she didn’t disguise her lack of productivity with something more acceptable, like browsing Facebook. A similar sense of hypocrisy was laid bare in “Real Snow White” (2009), when Takala attempted to enter Disneyland Paris dressed as the princess, only to be blocked by



Still from 'Close Watch' (2022), Takala's film about working in security © Courtesy the artist; Carlos/Ishikawa, London; and Stigter van Doesburg, Amsterdam.

security guards who felt she too closely resembled the “real” character.

“If I show up [at Disneyland] and people think I’m Snow White, but I do something off-brand, then chaos is loose, almost like we are in some dark fantasy,” she says. “When there is perfection, one crack will create a total disaster.”

Finding those cracks isn’t always easy, but that’s how Takala prefers it. “If something is so forbidden that everybody knows we don’t want this, it’s not interesting,” she says. “But I choose to do something that provokes a variety of reactions and there’s some kind of negotiation. What I’m interested in is how this negotiation becomes more explicit. Sometimes, like in ‘The Stroker’, it’s not verbal.”

In the filmed reenactment, many employees physically distance themselves from her as she reaches out to gently tap them on the shoulder, squirming away or quickening their pace as they walk past. But their reactions also hint at uncertainty: was this something they should actually feel

comfortable with? Set against the backdrop of a plant-filled office with meditation rooms and transparent walls, their responses clash with the carefully curated image of wellness that corporate environments love to promote.

“What provoked me about that space is that it’s this created community,” says Takala. “Wellness is part of your performance of being productive. Seemingly everything’s open and there’s no hierarchy, but actually there’s a lot of hierarchy. There’s a lot of expectation.”

But Takala isn’t just interested in poking fun at everyday formalities. For “Close Watch”, her presentation for the Finnish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2022, the artist worked as a guard in a mall for a large Finnish private security company for six months. Whilst on the job she witnessed colleagues making racist jokes and using excessive force. The experience offered her an insight into the troubling consequences of a private company exerting control over public space — and granting authority to individuals with minimal training (Takala herself qualified for the job after completing a four-week course).

“In Finland the presence of private security has grown visibly in the past 15 years,” she says. “I always empathised with that job, because it’s not like you’re the police, but you’re kind of always the joke in between. But a single guard actually has a lot of agency and decision-making power over a member of the public, and if you do something wrong in their opinion, they have the right to use force. At the same time many of them feel they don’t have agency because they’re not respected or paid well.”

It was this tension between authority and powerlessness that Takala was interested in exploring. After leaving the job, she



Pilvi Takala in Berlin © Portrait by Chiara Bonetti for the FT

invited some of her ex-colleagues to take part in a filmed theatre workshop with actors where they rehearsed de-escalating tense scenarios, such as managing an intoxicated individual. Taking place across three days, these sessions also allowed the guards to open up about how they felt unable to intervene when witnessing discrimination or misconduct from other colleagues. The film resonated beyond the art world, motivating the security company to introduce anti-racism training. Still, Takala maintains that her work isn't about offering clear-cut solutions.

"I'm not saying: let's have this training for everyone and it's all going to be good," she explains. "It's more complex. What I want is to be constructive, not just say there are problems, because we all know that it's a hugely problematic industry. It was about asking what those problems were, how they affect the single person and what agency does the one guard have."

Recently Takala has shifted her focus from private to national

security. "The Pin", her new work commissioned by Frieze and High Line Art, is loosely inspired by her experience taking part in a Finnish national defence course. Towards the end of our conversation, she speaks passionately about her opposition to Finland's arms deal with Israel, citing the ongoing bombardment of Gaza. Military themes, she says, are something she hopes to engage with in future exhibitions. "Having taken part in that course, maybe I have a bit more of the language for it now," she reflects. "But it still feels like the job of a certain type of older man to talk about this. There's still all these boundaries and old hierarchies that pop up, even if you feel like society has changed."