Pilvi Takala

Shared Secrets

A group of girls runs out of a minibus and they take up their positions in a wintry little city square. Spotlights are lit. Some people pass by while others form an impromptu audience for a surprise performance by a group of young cheerleaders. The title of Pilvi Takala's video work, *With Spirit There's No Limit* (2004), borrows the beginning of the girls' rhyme that gives wings to their act. When the brief spectacle ends with the girls catching one of their members in flight, they all rush back to the bus and head to the next location.

Cheerleading has become one of the most popular sports among girls in Finland, says the artist. For the performances held in public sites around Helsinki, she collaborated with the champion team Golden Spirit Cheerleaders. In the performances, cheerleading is freed from its original confines as a supporting act for boys' games, and aims to detach itself from the associated gendered hierarchy and conservative role models. What remains of the tradition is cheesy slogans and outfits familiar from numerous American high school dramas. But what function do they now serve, divorced from their traditional context? The slogans appear almost meaningless, but maybe that is unimportant. What seems to matter is the collective voice, manifested in the chanting and the uniforms framing the joint effort of the acrobatic, demanding and even dangerous acts. Everyone has their place in the carefully orchestrated structures as irreplaceable parts of a group. The produced identity is dependent on and made possible by a sense of belonging. Yet for us, the audience, only the face of the collective identity is visible. Behind it, in the privacy of the minibus, we get a glimpse of the buzzing dynamics and drive that the girls share. In the end, however, we are left puzzled about the motives and meanings of their performances. Stereotypes of girl culture are here revealed as an inadequate means of definition.

In her previous video work Pilvi Takala also focused on the social interaction of girls, or young women. In *Celebration* (2001) the carefully calculated and competitive nature of a brief exchange between two girls is unveiled. Instead of the girl's speech we hear their thoughts, like translations of hidden messages behind their words. In *Anna* (2002), whose title refers both to a female name and the imperative of the Finnish verb 'to give', a girl preaches about the need to be open and generous in a dialogue. Meanwhile, the over-enthusiastic monologue hardly allows her friend to get a word in. These girls perform excessively defensive individual roles towards others. The cheerleaders, on the other hand, present themselves as a seamless group, while their internal engagements escape us in their complexity. Communication appears, thus, to be a battleground. Masks and detachment hide underlying vulnerabilities as well as strengths. The conflicting pressures of individual and collective identities surface. The points of contact are simultaneously those of division and distance – a constant negotiation of borders.

The artist's recent project in Glasgow, *Event on Garnethill* (2004), was a further exploration of the boundaries of collective identities. While visiting an art school in Glasgow, she found herself sharing a neighbourhood with pupils of a public school, for whom she seemed to be invisible. In order to test the chances of making contact with her curiously distant neighbours, she acquired their uniform. Hanging around in the neutral area of streets and shops, the previously impenetrable barrier separating her from the pupils began to blur. Then, however, she was caught trespassing as she broke her own rule of staying outside the school's gates. Her attempt to infiltrate the others' territory, to become part of them, went too far. Or, maybe it did not go far enough, as she failed to mimic the uniform perfectly. This seemingly harmless undercover operation raised alarm at the school. Whether aimed at gaining insight into another world or simply hoping for dialogue, she posed a threat of some kind to the guarded identity of the privileged ones at the school whose motto is "born for the better".

This desire to reach across borders that keep people apart led Takala to hand out leaflets in Belgrade that invited locals to request something from Finland. The artist promised to fulfil the wishes as far as possible, substituting big or expensive things for photos of them. The project *Wish* (2003) disturbed in subtle ways set limits and the various ways they are policed. As a thank you for the hospitality she received in Serbia, this symbolic gesture in its generosity by-passed official avenues of exchange. It also raised questions about the unequal relationship between different parts of Europe maintained by these very avenues and the boundaries they reinforce.

In collaboration with other artists, Takala has also explored the structures and paths of communication. These interventions appropriated various sign systems, using strategic mimicry to disrupt their operations and challenge the codes that direct our engagements. In *De-Signer state* (2002) social signs recommending suitable distances and modes of detachment from others were placed in pedestrian areas and public elevators in Gothenburg. In *Unioninkatu/Vannetie* (2002) Finnish translations of street names were added to a street corner in San Francisco. *Kuvasto* (2004) imitated a mail order catalogue promoting a cosy sense of togetherness with those dressed alike, but without sales information the readers were denied the opportunity to literally buy into this dream. The video *Trip* (2002), screened in the Underground in Helsinki, proposed a different take on commuting by substituting the usual expressionless detachment with a happy journeying together towards the shared fantasy of a holiday on the beach. *The Others* (2004) was a board game that tapped the built-in contradictions of communication by encouraging the public to playfully take sides in order to spend a moment together and rest amongst the exhausting spectacle of the Venice Biennale.

These works suggest not only curiosity towards the other, but also alternative routes towards a shared ground. As the video installation *0 (zero)* (2003) seemed to hint, one could reach for other means, draw one's head out of the clouds of idealism and convention, and feel one's way below the surface. Here the viewers found themselves surrounded by balloons at shoulder level with a video of the dreamlike calming waves of the sea beyond their adult upright view. What would the experience of the installation be, could one only crouch down and imagine, shedding one's fear of participation?

In their wealth of approaches and nuances, Takala's works could thus be loosely characterised as investigations of different modes of connection, of the possibilities as well as stakes in communication and belonging. The markers and meanings that connect and divide, the more and less tangible borders of inside and outside, the surfaces and what lies beneath. These are all negotiated by Pilvi Takala, playing with our desires and failures to take part. With her we get a glimpse into the private world of young cheerleaders and a hint of the mysteries behind the gates of a elite public school, yet their collective languages remain out of bounds. These inaccessible and unfamiliar realms behind the public face awaken wonder as well as unease. As in *Amusement Park* (2002), the rituals of bonding seem to entwine with clandestine communication and crossed boundaries of some kind. As the two little girls go hiding and make contact, the tip of a tongue touching the other, innocence holds hands with deviance. Initiation to social interaction can no longer be clearly distinguished from disruption of its norms. A shared language may always also be a secret one.

Taru Elfving 24.3.2005