

Modestly checked boundaries

By Rael Artel

If you want to try to tell something very essential and generalising about the work of the Finnish artist Pilvi Takala, it might be that her work is about testing social structures or self-formed “men-machines”. Pilvi is working with machines in the sense of efficient and self-organized groups of people who have something special in common. She deals with apparatuses which consist of people and which are tied up with a set of rules agreed by the members of the particular apparatus. Pilvi observes them, she analyses them, she tests them, she tries to jam them. Her work could be seen as a continuous process that involves specific communities in specific places.

Pilvi’s artwork is mostly about events, which are an important part in the toolbox of her investigation methodology. Every single one of her pieces is constructed around an event, a planned public occasion that gains its significance from the context it takes place. These are usually well-staged and carefully tempered acts that the artist documents and arranges into the format of an art piece. Most of her pieces are single- or multichannel-video or slide projections. One of her first major pieces realised in 2004 during her studies as an exchange student at Glasgow School of Art called *Event on Garnethill*, found its final form as a green hard-cover book distributed to public libraries throughout Scotland and the UK as a whole. *Event on Garnethill* was about appearing on the streets of Garnethill (one of the neighbourhoods of Glasgow) in the official uniform of a private Catholic School, St. Aloysius’ College. The book tells a story of squatting the uniform as a status symbol and becoming an illegal member of a restricted community. It is a comment on an old-fashioned school system, a modest act that examined this controlled environment with its strong traditions of identity. *Event on Garnethill* could be seen as hacking the system with the expected end result of getting the attention of a responsible teacher and small-scale local scandal as a consequence: the system is functioning and protecting itself.

Pilvi’s artwork is also a lot about communities. Most of her pieces twist around groups of people who share common attitudes, interests, hobbies, values and duties. Usually she works with people who spend their spare time together forming temporary voluntary groups gathered around some leisure activity (1). During developing her work, Pilvi infiltrates into the community and tries to examine it, sometimes to interfere in it. She does not care about feeling uncomfortable or unpleasant. With almost invisible interventions, notable only for insiders of a particular community, she lifts the cover from unwritten rules of a particular place or community.

Produced during her residency in Istanbul in summer 2005 for 9th International Istanbul Biennial, a two-channel video work *The Switch* is about examining coffee-houses, their regular clients and their main leisure time activity – playing table games (2). The video itself is an exciting flow of stories told by gambling-addicted old fellows while Pilvi is trying to arrange their switch from one coffee-house to another for one evening. The switch fails (it did take place, but the participants did not like it), but the fellows’ stories about subtle secrets of table games never end. Besides *The Switch*, Pilvi also designed an experimental situation of entering a coffeehouse in the company of three local girls and then starting to play games. Of course, it attracted attention like a red rag to a bull. Multiscreen video work *Women in Kahves* is even more intriguing than unbelievable gambling stories of mad, fanatic old fellows. The piece shot by candid camera examines gender issue in such a traditional society, where women should be in the kitchen cooking dinner for their husbands coming back home hungry from gambling and chatting. This a bit of a cliché case, which borrows the irritating tactics from old-school feminist performance vocabulary, but is still

very talkative. Pilvi just puts the emphasise on equal rights of men and women, social relations and norms, and tolerance, which is richly illustrated with the men's comments in the background showing clearly their attitude towards it.

As much as Pilvi's work is about events and communities, it is about boundaries. The issue of borders in Pilvi's work is discussed in an interview with Lucy McKenzie (3) while talking about **Event on Garnethill**. The most border-touching piece of Pilvi's is definitely the **Bag Lady** project. Realised in the framework of a workshop in Berlin and designed to be exhibited as a multiscreen slide projection as well as hard-cover luxury book, a performative research, **Bag Lady** was realised in Arkaden Shopping Mall in Potsdamer Platz. The story is very simple: a girl is walking around the mall, shops for some everyday commodities and drinks a cup of coffee in the dining area while carrying her cash in a transparent plastic bag. The spectacular piece refers to the most important commodity that one might have in consumer society – security. During the cash performance the artist is warned several times by security guards and shopkeepers to hide her money, not to speak of constant staring and surprised looks. This slight intervention sheds controversial light on the fragility of the social order, where private property in the form of money or product is such a holy cow, that it is under constant intuitive public control.

Before talking about **Wallflower**, commissioned by Rael Artel Gallery: Non-Profit Project Space and realised in summer 2006 in Pärnu, one should explain the background of it and talk about Pärnu. The town with about 60,000 inhabitants is historically a popular health resort. While in the first half of 20th century the main crowd of international visitors were of German origin, in the second half of the century Soviet jews, and the past years Pärnu is a growing tourist destination among retired Finnish people. This group of holiday enjoyers bring their own traditions of having fun and ways of spending their leisure time. In summer, some neighbourhoods of Pärnu turn out to be a Little-Finland type of land, to where no local is entering.

The video work **Wallflower** is based on a simple performative event in a dance-evening, a version of the traditional Finnish summer pavilion dance. Mostly elderly couples enjoy themselves dancing to old-fashioned music while the artist, a younger woman, is sitting in a shiny dress alone the whole evening waiting for somebody to ask her to dance. But everybody is dancing only with their partners and never ask the stranger to dance, as it would be appropriate in the proper dance-events in Finland. So the girl is sitting, the hours are passing, the band finishes and everybody is about to leave. What a unpleasant situation! What a foolish situation! On the one hand, the piece evokes embarrassment and sweet-bitter discomfort as well as raising the question, what is the artist looking for from the territory that is clearly not hers? The territory she tries to "fish" is shared by a particular community with a clear set of rules shared among them. This inbetween contradictory feeling seems to be shared among the dancers in the some kind of spa in Pärnu as well as among viewer in front of the screen. **Wallflower** is a smart interference, which points to the characteristics and value system of one generation as well as unwritten rules shared on national bases. The performative experiment comes to an end with the same result as several of Pilvi's works before: the social structure is functioning and protecting itself.

(1) A videowork of Pilvi's called **With Spirit There's No Limit** also focused on a bit of ridiculous spare-time activity, cheer leading, which has become a popular sport among Finnish teenage girls.

(2) Pilvi has also been working with table games for a student exhibition in the Venice Biennale 2003, where she developed with Hans

Rosenström a table game **The Others** for public use.

(3) http://www.variant.org.uk/23texts/pilvi_lucy.html