

Pilvi Takala

The Trainee

eva International

Limerick City Gallery of Art

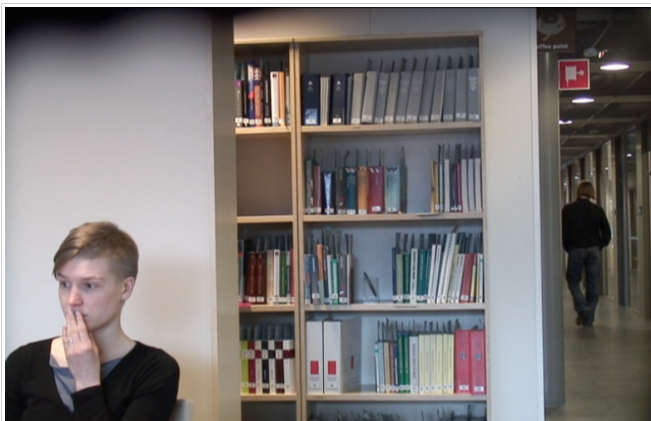
It is difficult to immunise oneself against expectation. My viewing of the Finnish artist Pilvi Takala's *The Trainee* (2008)¹ was much anticipated – her ideas preceding her like an overly candid movie trailer. Takala is – as Alfred Pacquement describes Sophie Calle² – a first-person artist, and while operational echoes of Calle's or Andrea Fraser's work are discernible,³ there is little of the emotional resonance of the former or the bombast of the latter. Takala's practice pits her against a world portrayed as desensitised, autocratic and contradictory. Inter-personal awkwardness is her stock and trade, with a reaction against Finnish demureness perhaps having a hand bringing this to the fore. Creating probing scenarios out of thoughtfully sought out public and social situations, she handles them with a detachment greater than that which they offer her, and these performances, interventions and videos dance around the line between what is acceptable and unsettling in such settings. A good example is the video *Wallflower* (2006)⁴ in which Takala is seen on the sidelines of a staid dance at a hotel function room in Finland. Couples come, whirl and leave together, with the artist, over-dressed in a meringue-style evening gown, patiently waiting all evening for dance offers, which fail to come.



Welcome to Deloitte_letter and keycard in vitrine

The Trainee, comprising videos, slideshow and sculptural elements, presents her longest intervention: a month posing as a marketing student intern – under the semi-pseudonym, Joanna Takala⁵ – at the international accountancy firm, Deloitte. There, while at first partially assimilating into the task and deadline structure of corporate work life, she gradually moves to spending her days and weeks leisurely contemplating matters, without tangibly dealing with any.⁶ As this transgression intensifies, those around her embarrassedly try to find her tasks, and in some instances gently call into question her modus operandi. She impassively tells them she is doing 'brain work'. By the end of the month,⁷ the mixture of frustration and bemusement around her has grown to the extent that one internal email complains that she clearly "has some sort of mental problem" as she toils away in her faux idleness.

Unlike most of her performances, which are undertaken surreptitiously, *The Trainee* was produced in collaboration with Deloitte and Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki. With management in on the game, the offices were being constantly filmed by multiple hidden cameras, showing those she interacts with daily becoming increasingly stupefied. Are her fellow employees being shamefacedly duped, or do they only believe her not to be pulling her weight judged by their own standards and their subjective interpretation of convention? In one video, *February 25, a day at Consulting*, a concerned worker visits her at her desk, and, perhaps eager to portray his finely tuned work ethic, holds an open laptop to his chest, the screen almost blocking his face from her. After a cursory exchange, he wanders away, seemingly exasperated, mid conversation. Takala tells her colleagues she's mulling over her marketing thesis on brand localisation,⁸ which, for the viewer is compellingly accurate, manipulating as she is the globalised office environment into a commodity for the art market. It is also an elegant analogy of the patient, reflective aspects of the artistic process, capturing an enormous number of contemplative hours, for approx 14 minutes of footage.



...in between and continued sitting until 15:30. Several tax-people went to this person who they didn't know to ask her who she is and what is she waiting for/doing. The answer had been that she is doing brain-work and/or is thinking about her own things. People at tax not only thought this is weird and funny, but also scary to some extent. What on earth is this and why is nobody missing a trainee all day?

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February 26 a day in Tax and Legal_video projection_2,06

Many companies have embraced the idea of reflective down time⁹, but for others the default mood in fast paced office environments is that excessive flexibility around business-hours activity is unnatural. In the video, *February 26, a day at Tax & Legal*, a split screen shows an expressionless Takala sitting in a hallway on one side, next to a series of internal emails between concerned staff and management. This reveals the frank admission that Tax & Legal staff find her behaviour “not only funny and weird”, but also “scary to some extent”. In a projection piece, installed as a corporate slideshow (complete with boardroom table and chairs), we are given an overview of the month through video stills. One image* shows Takala, at her desk, thoughtfully staring into space. In the back and middle-ground, workers move to and fro, all eyes on the static intern, sensitivities no sooner inflamed than they are quenched by a fear of confrontation, succinctly encapsulating the project as well as any of the videos. Unlike Adrian Piper – whose *Catalysis* performances Takala's might be compared to – she does not so much offer a formed critique of social relations, rather than expose unwritten structures and contracts, presumed to exist by groups, and discredit them. It is important to note that this does not seem to be a cynical exercise on the Takala's



still from *Working at Deloitte for a month_slideshow presentation_2,00*

behalf. Positive reactions can produce similarly satisfying narratives. In her video *Easy Rider* (2006), an actor convinces a businessman on a bus to let him use his laptop and eventually to lend him his suit jacket and tie. Here, in the video *February 28, a Day in the Elevator* we find amusingly supportive retorts amongst the more predictable indignation, as Takala explains that she is trying to channel the meditative properties that can be enjoyed “train style”, by continually riding up and down in the company elevator all day.

Takala’s prolific series of interventions – twenty projects between 2001 & 2011 – paints an insatiable compulsion to position herself in awkward’s way. Although heavily edited, endurance is key, at both micro and macro levels, to her work, which doesn’t rely on shock factor or quick and easy thrills, and even after a project has been played out, Takala allows a significant amount of time to elapse before contacting her unwitting participants for explanations and releases.¹⁰ Perhaps that is the inspiration for the title of a recent monograph on Takala was entitled *Just when I thought I was out...they pull me back in*,¹¹ as it’s hard to imagine having to entice such a compelled, and compelling artist back into the fray.

Davey Moor 2012



still from February 28 a day in the Elevator_video projection_7,18

- ¹ Samples of which can be viewed at: Pilvi Takala, <http://pilvitakala.com/thetrainee01.html>
- ² Alfred Pacquement, preface to *Sophie Calle: M'as-Tu Vue?* Christine Macel, Yve-Alain Bois et al. (London: Prestel, 2003), 15.
- ³ Such as Calle's *The Bronx* (1980), or Fraser's sensuously aroused audio guide user in *Little Frank & His Carp*, 2001.
- ⁴ Reminiscent of Ria Pacqu e's humorously tragic everywoman, 'Madame' (1981-90).
- ⁵ Joanna is her second name.
- ⁶ Pilvi Takala, *Ungovernable*, interview with James Westcott, pub April 18, 2012
<http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/799526/ungovernable-artist-pilvi-takala-explains-her-radical-artistic-program-do-nothing>
- ⁷ Which is the source of the video work here.
- ⁸ It is worth noting that the success of Deloitte, like other multi-national professional services companies, is dependent on tailoring their offerings to the systems of local markets intricacies and legal structures.
- ⁹ Such as 3M, Google and Hewlett-Packard.
- ¹⁰ Pilvi Takala, interview with Vincent Woods, http://www.rte.ie/podcasts/2012/pc/pod-v-280512artstonight-pid0-3299760_audio.mp3
- ¹¹ Silke Opitz, ed., *Pilvi Takala, Just when I thought I was out...they pull me back in* (Ostfildern : Hatje Cantz, 1951).