



**Title**

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**Author(s)**

Rachel Withers

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**About the author(s)**

is a writer and educator. She has been researching and writing on contemporary art since the mid-1980s, with an emphasis on installation, photography, live art and film and video.

Cover image:

# Pilvi Takala: On Discomfort

by Rachel Withers • 31.05.2023

The presentation of the performance and video-based practice of Pilvi Takala (b.1981) at Goldsmiths CCA, London, is a compressed one, featuring just six projects from the thirty-four documented on her website. In the selected works the artist features as protagonist, infiltrating a variety of social spaces without declaring her identity or her intentions.<sup>1</sup> In *Real Snow White* [FIG.1](#) she attempts to gain entry to Disneyland Paris while dressed as Snow White; in *The Trainee* [FIG.2](#) she haunts the offices of Deloitte in Helsinki sporting a genuine staff pass but conspicuously engaging only in contemplation; and in the earliest of the six works, *Wallflower* [FIG.3](#), she lurks alone by the dancefloor at a number of old-time dance events in an Estonian resort, conspicuously overdressed in full-length peach satin.

In *The Stroker* [FIG.4](#), Takala roams the East London co-working space Second Home in the guise of a 'wellness worker', imposing her assistance by patting people's arms and inquiring after their welfare. *Workers' Forum* [FIG.5](#) presents edited extracts from a message-based staff meeting run by an e-business that supplies its clients with texts from fictional partners; Takala has temporarily joined the underpaid group who collectively script the texts. For *Close Watch* [FIG.6](#), she spent six months working as a security guard at a leading Finnish shopping mall and concluded the project by organising and videoing a series of training workshops for her fellow guards.

*Real Snow White*, *Workers' Forum* and *Wallflower* consist of single-screen edited videos; to understand their contexts, viewers must consult the gallery notes. The other three works incorporate contextual data, such as extracts from emails or text exchanges relating to each project's planning and delivery. The most complex installation is *Close Watch*, which Takala presented at the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022 in the Finnish pavilion. This uses a one-way-mirror partition [FIG.7](#) [FIG.8](#) to separate a video showing text messages relating to the planning of the project and a two-screen video presentation of footage from the guards' workshops.

Uniquely among the six works, and in her practice generally, *The Stroker* reconstructs Takala's interactions with her original subjects using actors, as opposed to including documentation of the actual events. One assumes issues of confidentiality compelled this approach, but little explanation is provided either in the exhibition literature or in the artist's texts more widely. This procedural inconsistency skews one's attention in a slightly

unhelpful direction, as Takala's work is not necessarily about reflexive questions of documentary authenticity or the mediation of data. Moreover, the other five works in the show make a strong claim to documentary transparency.



**Fig. 1** Still from *Real Snow White*, by Pilvi Takala. 2009. Video, duration 9 minutes 19 seconds. (© Pilvi Takala; courtesy the artist, Carlos/Ishikawa, London, and Stigter van Doesburg, Amsterdam; exh. Goldsmiths CCA, London).

Taken together, the six works provoke a wide variety of affects, from amusement and fascination to admiration at the artist's commitment and sangfroid. However, the exhibition title proffers 'discomfort' as its framing device, which begs the question: whose discomfort? This can be seen to play out on various levels: firstly, there is the discomfort evidenced by some of the subjects involved in her experiments. At Deloitte, for instance, Takala's extended occupancy of the company lift – in order, she explains, to 'think' productively – triggers a staff complaint **FIG. 9** and a request that she be removed, while at Second Home, her unsolicited 'touching services' lead to annoyance and, ironically, mild social anxiety among those whom she touches. Secondly, the viewer intuits the stresses that Takala herself has to manage while acting as a decoy. This is most evident in *Close Watch*, where the role she has assumed places her at risk of physical harm, and also means that she is witness to the racist attitudes of her fellow guards and their abusive use of force. It is these issues that are at the heart of the workshops that she convened with the security firm, Securitas, when her covert residency had come to an end and her identity as an artist had been revealed.

A sense of discomfort also resides in a form that is initially difficult to pinpoint. It concerns the rule-breaking devices – the incongruous behaviours or unexpected costumes – that are used by the artist in four of the exhibition's six works: *Real Snow White*, *Wallflower*, *The Trainee* and *The Stroker*. The exhibition text aligns these tactics, and indeed all of Takala's actions, with socio-

psychological ‘breaching experiments’ in which ‘a rule is broken to see how important it is’. However, do breaching experiments truly reveal the importance of social rules with particular clarity, or do they merely reiterate social knowledge that subjects are already, consciously, in possession of and reflective about? It is too generalising to deride psychology with the suggestion that at times its experimental findings do no more than reveal the blindingly obvious – that most people try to ‘fit in’ socially, for example, or that when one is strongly focused on one thing, others will go unnoticed – but breaching experiments are maybe particularly vulnerable to this critique.<sup>2</sup>

In *Real Snow White*, for instance, the fact that Takala-as-Snow-White will not make it through the gates of Disneyland is a given. The viewer knows this not just because the park’s guard – or ‘functionary [...] tasked with the dirty work of protecting a brand image’ in Kim Schoen’s account of the work – evidently wants to keep his job, but also because he is understandably intent on stopping a stranger whose costume has been magnetically winning children’s trust from sailing unsupervised into the park.<sup>3</sup> One feels for him as he tries, in a second language, to explain the situation while tactfully avoiding words such as ‘pervert’ or ‘abuse’ **FIG.10**. In *The Trainee*, the irritation provoked by Takala’s seemingly ‘unproductive’ behaviour can also be presupposed. If one accepts the statistics in David Graeber’s book *Bullshit Jobs* (2018), an unhealthy proportion of the workforce Takala mingles with might well consciously believe themselves to be doing pointless work, and therefore resent her overt enactment of their own covert sense of unproductivity. An additional level of discomfort in these works, then, is the viewer’s anxiety that the artist’s ‘breaching experiments’ might not carry a revelatory yield that justifies her act of self-exposure: one wishes to admire rather than feel embarrassed for her.

In *Workers’ Forum* and *Close Watch*, however, Takala apparently breaks no rules. In both, she combines her status as artist with the performance of another job, but this can hardly constitute ‘rule breaking’; if it did, most artists would be in permanent breach of social rules. Instead, she joins the workforce and puts in the hours. Taking viewers into the intricacies of specific workplace scenarios, for example staff meetings and training sessions, these works have more power to trigger the ambivalences and anxieties the viewer might feel about their own labour as much as the labour represented. At six minutes and twenty-three seconds, *Workers’ Forum* is the shortest work in the show – almost an epigram and Takala’s presence in it a footnote. Nevertheless, the piece invites open-ended thinking about precarity, solidarity, ethical and legal responsibilities and care – towards employees, colleagues, customers and strangers – while depicting a deeply bizarre virtual social space in which people pay unknown actors to impersonate a lover via text message.





**Fig. 2** Still from *The Trainee*, by Pilvi Takala. 2008. Three-channel video installation, duration 13 minutes 52 seconds. (© Pilvi Takala; courtesy the artist, Carlos/Ishikawa, London, and Stigter van Doesburg, Amsterdam; exh. Goldsmiths CCA, London).

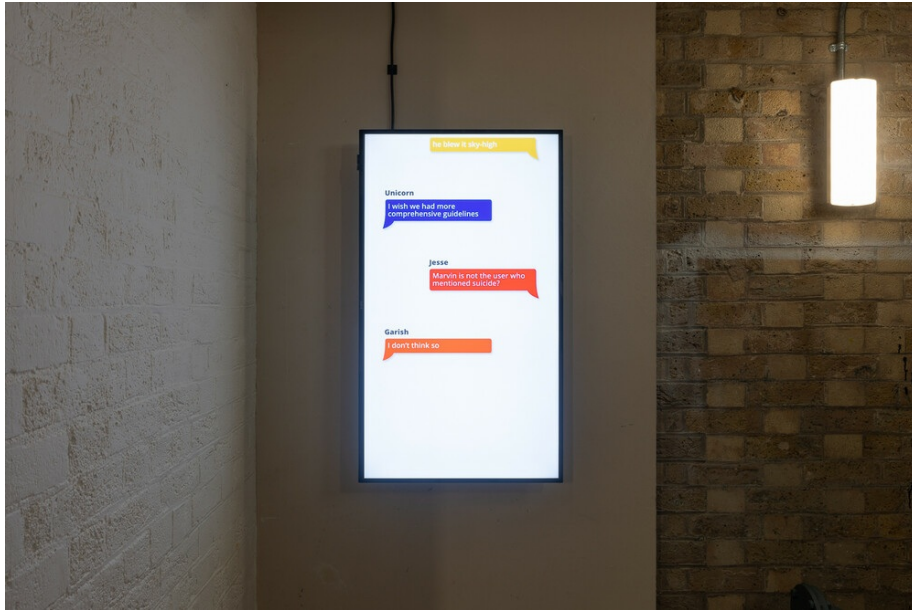
*Close Watch* is over an hour in length and takes viewers much deeper into similar issues, but significantly, Takala features here as poacher turned gamekeeper. The viewer watches the artist and her fellow guards as they review their own behaviours and attitudes in relation to racism and bullying, under the camera's gaze. On the one hand, the workshop's agenda is evidently righteous, but on the other, the scenario piques the viewer's awareness of peer critique as a potentially potent repressive tool, inevitably triggering a strong sense of ambivalence. Takala's project rightly calls both her host company and colleagues to account and its videoed exchanges invite viewers themselves to engage in some serious self-examination. However, the exercise also involves the artist in the use of 'the master's tools', and this generates a powerful crisis within the work: it is where the real discomfort starts.<sup>4</sup>



**Fig. 3** Still from *Wallflower*, by Pilvi Takala. 2006. Video, duration 10 minutes 35 seconds. (© Pilvi Takala; courtesy the artist, Carlos/Ishikawa, London, and Stigter van Doesburg, Amsterdam; exh. Goldsmiths CCA, London).



**Fig. 4** Still from *The Stroker*, by Pilvi Takala. 2018. Two-channel video installation, duration 15 minutes 16 seconds. (© Pilvi Takala; courtesy the artist, Carlos/Ishikawa, London, and Stigter van Doesburg, Amsterdam; exh. Goldsmiths CCA, London).



**Fig. 5** *Workers' Forum*, by Pilvi Takala. 2015. Video, duration 6 minutes 23 seconds. (© Pilvi Takala; courtesy the artist, Carlos/Ishikawa, London, and Stigter van Doesburg, Amsterdam; exh. Goldsmiths CCA, London).



**Fig. 6** Still from *Close Watch*, by Pilvi Takala. 2022. Three-channel video installation, duration 67 minutes 7 seconds. (© Pilvi Takala; courtesy the artist, Carlos/Ishikawa, London, and Stigter van Doesburg, Amsterdam; exh. Goldsmiths CCA, London).

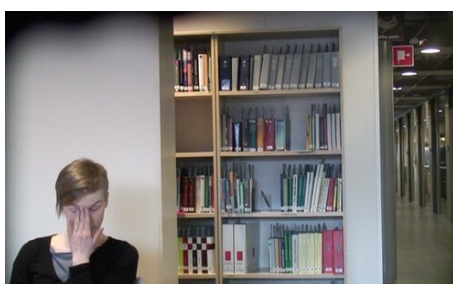




**Fig. 7** *Close Watch*, by Pilvi Takala. 2022. Three-channel video installation, duration 67 minutes 7 seconds. (© Pilvi Takala; courtesy the artist, Carlos/Ishikawa, London, and Stigter van Doesburg, Amsterdam; exh. Goldsmiths CCA, London).



**Fig. 8** *Close Watch*, by Pilvi Takala. 2022. Three-channel video installation, duration 67 minutes 7 seconds. (© Pilvi Takala; courtesy the artist, Carlos/Ishikawa, London, and Stigter van Doesburg, Amsterdam; exh. Goldsmiths CCA, London).



From: X  
Sent: 27. helmikuuta 2008 00:16  
To: Z, Y  
Subject: markkinointi- trainee  
Importance: High

Moi

Kuten Y:lle jo mainitsinkin, veron kirjastotilassa istui tänään lähes koko päivän henkilö tuijottaen lasittunutta katse silmissään ulos ikkunasta... naispuolinen, erittäin lyhyet hiukset, oli kertonut kysyttäessä olevansa markkinoinnin trainee. Hän oli istunut tyhjän pöydän äärellä n. 10.30 alkaen...

From: X  
Sent: February 27 2008 00:16  
To: Z, Y  
Subject: marketing-trainee  
Importance: High

Hi

As I already mentioned to Z, there has been a person sitting in the Tax library space and staring out of the window with a glazed look in her eyes... Female, very short hair, she said when asked that she's a trainee in Marketing. She sat in front of an empty desk from 10:30 on, went for lunch...

**Fig. 9** Still from *The Trainee*, by Pilvi Takala. 2008. Three-channel video installation, duration 13 minutes 52 seconds. (© Pilvi Takala; courtesy the artist, Carlos/Ishikawa, London, and Stigter van Doesburg, Amsterdam; exh. Goldsmiths CCA, London).



**Fig. 10** Still from *Real Snow White*, by Pilvi Takala. 2009. Video, duration 9 minutes 19 seconds. (© Pilvi Takala; courtesy the artist, Carlos/Ishikawa, London, and Stigter van Doesburg, Amsterdam; exh. Goldsmiths CCA, London).

**Exhibition details**     **Pilvi Takala: On Discomfort**  
Goldsmiths CCA, London  
19th March–4th June 2023

## Footnotes

- 1** Takala's embodied presence as provocateur is not a constant across her practice: in a number of other pieces, collaborators are deployed as the artist's agents.
- 2** See C. Chabris and D. Simons: *The Invisible Gorilla: And Other Ways Our Intuition Deceives Us*, London 2010, which is based on their study in which volunteers were asked to watch a sixty-second film of a group of students playing basketball and count the number of passes made. About halfway through, a person dressed in a gorilla outfit entered and moved across the screen. Almost half of the volunteers failed to notice the gorilla.
- 3** K. Schoen: 'Cracking walnuts: nonsense and repetition in video art', *X-TRA* 23, no.2 (Spring/Summer 2021), pp.70–72.

- 4** See A. Lorde: 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' [1984], in *idem: Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Berkley 2007, pp.110–14. In this essay Lorde argues that using the tools of a racist patriarchy 'to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy' makes 'only the most narrow parameters of change [...] possible and allowable', p.110.

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