# Pilvi Takala challenges social boundaries from shopping centres to national defence



Finnish artist Pilvi Takala, known for her provocative performance art that interrogates social norms and boundaries, is the star of Frieze New York’s performance programme this year. Takala, who now works primarily out of Berlin, employs elaborate staged encounters to reveal and question the often unspoken rules governing public behaviour.

Takala’s body of work spans more than a decade and includes projects in varied environments such as office spaces, shopping centres, amusement parks, and co-working hubs. One of her early notable works, "Bag Lady" (2006), saw her walking through a shopping centre carrying a transparent plastic bag filled with cash, challenging conventional attitudes towards conspicuous wealth in public. In "The Stroker" (2018), she played the role of a wellness consultant offering “touching services” in a trendy co-working environment, provoking a spectrum of reactions from ice-cold avoidance to subtle discomfort, as captured on film. Notably, these interactions highlighted the contrast between corporate wellness rhetoric and the staff’s visible unease with physical boundaries.

Her performance "The Trainee" (2008), conducted during a month-long internship at Deloitte, involved Takala largely refraining from work activities and instead riding elevators or staring blankly, which unsettled her colleagues and raised concerns about workplace productivity norms. “I provoke a variety of reactions and there’s some kind of negotiation. What I’m interested in is how this negotiation becomes more explicit,” Takala said during an interview at her Berlin studio, as reported by the Financial Times. She explained that the awkwardness her work evokes serves as useful information about where social boundaries lie.

Takala also scrutinises the absurdity of social expectations through her 2009 project "Real Snow White," where she was prevented by Disneyland Paris security from entering the park dressed as the princess, as she too closely resembled the official character. “If I show up [at Disneyland] and people think I’m Snow White, but I do something off-brand, then chaos is loose,” she observed, highlighting the rigid enforcement of perfectly maintained images in such spaces.

In a marked shift from private to national security themes, Takala’s recent work includes “Close Watch” (2022), created after six months working as a private security guard for a large Finnish company. During this period, she witnessed incidents of racism and the use of excessive force, providing her with insight into the expanding role and troubling power dynamics of private security in public spaces. Her qualification required just a brief four-week course, underscoring the minimal training guards receive despite their authority. Takala reflected on the complex agency of these guards: “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.”

Following her time as a guard, Takala facilitated a filmed theatre workshop with former colleagues and actors aimed at rehearsing ways to de-escalate tense situations, such as managing intoxicated individuals, while providing a rare space for guards to express frustrations about witnessing misconduct they felt powerless to challenge. This initiative has had real-world impact, reportedly spurring the security firm to implement anti-racism training. However, Takala emphasises she does not present her work as offering simple solutions, but rather as an exploration of complex systemic issues.

Currently, Takala’s latest piece, “The Pin,” commissioned by Frieze and High Line Art, draws on her experience participating in a Finnish national defence course. She has expressed a growing interest in exploring military themes, including her opposition to Finland’s arms deal with Israel amid ongoing conflict in Gaza. Reflecting on the entrenched hierarchies surrounding military discourse, she commented, “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.”

Pilvi Takala’s work, characterised by its mixture of discomfort, humour and social investigation, continues to challenge the invisible codes that shape behaviour in diverse societal contexts. Through careful observation and staged performance, she exposes the negotiation of boundaries that govern interactions at work, in public spaces, and within systems of security and defence.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.ft.com/content/3348bc42-070d-4e24-a936-20e221d6cb0b> - This article discusses Pilvi Takala's provocative performance art that examines social norms and boundaries, highlighting her participation in Frieze New York's performance programme.
* <https://thecitylife.org/2025/04/03/high-line-announces-new-pilvi-takala-performance-a-co-commission-with-frieze/> - This announcement details Takala's new performance, 'The Pin,' co-commissioned by High Line Art and Frieze, taking place during Frieze Week 2025.
* <https://pilvitakala.com/bait/> - This page provides information about Takala's 2015 performance 'Bait,' where she posed as a guest to explore social interactions at an exhibition opening.
* <https://www.frieze.com/article/focus-pilvi-takala> - This article offers an in-depth look at Takala's work, including her performances that challenge social codes in various settings.
* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pilvi_Takala> - This Wikipedia page provides a comprehensive overview of Takala's career and notable works, including 'The Trainee' and 'The Stroker.'
* <https://fciny.org/residency/pilvi-takala> - This page details Takala's residency at the International Studio & Curatorial Program in New York, supported by the Finnish Cultural Institute in New York.
* <https://www.ft.com/content/3348bc42-070d-4e24-a936-20e221d6cb0b> - Please view link - unable to able to access data