



Eija-Liisa Ahtila/MATRIX 212

Intention to Fail

July 11 – September 5, 2004

University of California
Berkeley Art Museum

MATRIX

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What parameters define your life? The amount of time since smoking a cigarette, having sex, snapping at your partner? The number of children you have, loads of laundry you fold, hours of television you watch? Finnish film and video artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila explores the mundane aspects of personal relationships, the small affronts that become monumental injustices and lead to irreversible splits of husband from wife, citizen from country, and individual from sanity. Ordinary tales of ordinary people suffering ordinary lives—depending on what is meant by ordinary.¹ Playing with the presence of character and actor at the same time and posing provocative existential questions, Ahtila speculates about reality's appeal. Existentialism posits that human beings are thrown into a world dominated by pain, frustration, sickness, contempt, malaise, and death.² The repression of feelings and experiences, the role of guilt as a central building unit of Western society, the fragility of the human psyche, and the veracity of reality itself are key subjects in Ahtila's work.

The characters in Ahtila's human dramas, as she calls them, are fictional, loosely drawn from extended research (including interviews with psychiatric patients), true stories, her imagination, and works of literature. She employs the "personal" in her work solely as a formal structure by which to set rhythm, light, and edits.³ Non-autobiographical, her films are an impeccable blend of realism and fantasy, investigating a penetrable border between "self" and "other." It is from this finely tuned subtlety that much of the disquieting power in Ahtila's work is derived.

Ahtila's characters, the majority of them women, are busy; each is actively doing something, whether seemingly sane or not. The protagonist in *TUULI / THE WIND* (2002), one of two works that comprise Ahtila's MATRIX show, is unable to express anger and instead rearranges everything in her environment. Obsessing about her weight, grades, and the relocation of garbage to the third world, Susanna clearly lives in a separate and altered reality, ultimately resigned to her unconsummated rage.⁴ A male acquaintance, himself hiding out from society, shuns her attempts at intimacy. The film ends with Susanna climbing a wall, poised like a bird of prey.

There is in Ahtila's film and video works a quasi-surrealism that curator Elizabeth Armstrong referred to as staged or performative realism.⁵ Every detail manifests myriad associations. In her installations, multiple screens allow a dramatic flow between fractured space, past and present. Highly stylized sets and costume design make physical the mental state of characters, thereby revealing their rapidly unraveling psyches. The use of bright, bold colors serves to provoke comparable emotions and empathy in the viewers. Féré, a French physiologist, demonstrated the stimulating effect of color and suggested that it extends to the muscular and circulatory systems.⁶ This stimulation is palpable in the installation space of *THE WIND*, as art critic Adrian Searle noted: "One feels a little unhinged oneself, after watching

Cover: *TUULI / THE WIND*, 2002 (still); 3-screen DVD installation with sound; courtesy Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunert Inc., New York. © Crystal Eye Ltd, Helsinki.



THE WIND. You can feel the crackle of psychosis in the room—not just up on the screen, but where we sit, surrounded by red walls, the soundtrack throbbing in the air."⁷

In the tradition of Northern European art, the emotional states of Ahtila's subjects are made startlingly apparent and keenly real. The artist has asked, "How can sadness be expressed in images?"⁸ In *The Frieze of Life*, a series of twenty-two paintings, Edvard Munch employed the obsessive nature of his subjects to create universal symbols of emotional states. In fact, "[An] anxiety haunts the work of Munch, [that] is expressed with a formal inventiveness that impinges upon the emotions before we are even aware of the subject."⁹ Like Munch, Ahtila knows how images tell a story and that deeper regions of the psyche are accessible through the potent agency of rhythm and color, light and dark, silence and sound.¹⁰ In her room-sized installations, the artist creates a "container for the emotional intensity that is expressed."¹¹

The influence of the German film director Rainer Werner Fassbinder also can be seen in Ahtila's work. Fassbinder and Ahtila both find their subject matter in the twisted and tortured perplexities of domestic despair and effectively combine blithe humor with genuine empathy.¹² Fassbinder's characters "play a sucker's game, with only a director's love to lend them dignity...and yet [he] was able to infuse tenderness into the most perverse situation."¹³ Ahtila invokes empathy for her characters by refusing to romanticize them and granting the viewer special access to the unfolding narratives and resulting emotions.¹⁴ Simultaneously employing and subverting traditional cinematic strategies, such as having the actors directly address the camera, Ahtila's work represents an ongoing analysis of the constructed image and a revelation of the filmmaking process itself. We witness the how as well as the why.

In rethinking the conventions of cinematic and televisual forms, Ahtila explores the possibilities of narration in multi-screen installations and split-

TUULI / THE WIND, 2002 (still); 3-screen DVD installation with sound; courtesy Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunert Inc., New York. © Crystal Eye Ltd, Helsinki.



screen projection. In *THE PRESENT*, a five-channel video installation composed of episodes excerpted from an hour-long film called *Love Is a Treasure*, each brief scenario is followed by the words, "Give yourself a present, forgive yourself." The thought deconstructs narrative and temporality by directly addressing the viewer. While the episodes borrow from case studies, Ahtila mixes fantasy and reality to create worlds that exemplify her characters' particular fixations.

THE WIND (2002) and *ME/WE; OKAY; GRAY* (1993), the other work in Ahtila's MATRIX exhibition, bracket her career and comprise many intriguing associations among them. The artist explains that *ME/WE; OKAY; GRAY* "came out of a desire to experiment with ways of creating a different kind of story in advertising space."¹⁵ The work is a short film in three episodes, each about ninety seconds long, shown on separate monitors installed on and around furniture in the gallery. *ME/WE* focuses on a bizarre incident involving a family of four. The father's voice speaks his own and the other characters' lines as their mouths move. The narrative ultimately asks, "What is an individual, and where are the boundaries of the self?" as the father sees himself at intervals when both similarities and differences with his family can be recognized. Referring to his daughter he explains, "Everything has gone well except for one or two odd impulses." Here is a referential precursor of Ahtila's interest in psychology that manifests later in *The Wind* and other works of the same period.

OKAY uses a physically intimate relationship to explore evolving definitions of sexuality, self, and symbiosis. While only one person appears on screen, the voices are both male and female, thereby rendering gender questionable. A line of dialogue in *OKAY* provides the overall title for the MATRIX exhibition, *Intention to Fail*. It reads, "...yes, but this time I intend to fail," reiterating themes found within the show and the artist's overall oeuvre: time, failure, intentionality, and self-awareness. It continues, "...it has the sadness of an apology. It's okay...it's okay, it's okay." The subject of *GRAY* is a catastrophe

TUULI / THE WIND, 2002 (still); 3-screen DVD installation with sound; courtesy Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunert Inc., New York. © Crystal Eye Ltd, Helsinki.



that permanently prohibits the three characters from going home. Here, the “other” is in the very air they breathe, but it could just as easily be mental illness, something that can forever alter reality.

THE WIND is an engrossing film installation with three simultaneously presented mural-size projections, edited to unfold in and out of synch, each showing a different view of the same apartment space. A hurricane-like wind blows into an apartment through an open window and wreaks havoc. The slow onset of psychosis, with its altered interaction with and connection to the “real” world, is depicted. The logic of the narrative is upset through repetition. It begins: “Shut the door please!” “It is shut.” “Where is the draft coming from then?” “Your imagination.” Fantasy and hallucination, social analysis and political commentary, humor and confusion, *THE WIND* is a panoply of visually arresting details and radically frank content. Susanna’s self-assertions ultimately result in the conflation of herself and her emotions. She states, “I don’t feel anger and melancholy ...I am anger and melancholy.” These are the parameters that define her life. As viewers we stand, literally and metaphorically, making choices about what to watch when. Ahtila provides room in the distance between the idea and the finished work, where we realize we have found not life, but art.

Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson
Phyllis Wattis MATRIX Curator

¹ Adrian Searle, “The never-ending story,” *The Guardian*, April 30, 2002, quoted at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/story/0,3604,707453,00.html>. ² Tanweer Akram, “Essays on Existentialism,” *The New Nation*, March 7 and 21, 1986, quoted at <http://www.columbia.edu/fta63/exist.htm>. ³ Eija-Liisa Ahtila, in conversation with Chrissie Iles, Curator of Film and Video, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, May 20, 2003, quoted from “Thinking in Film,” *Parkett* 68, 2003, 63. ⁴ Holly Willis, “Short Sighted, Eija-Liisa Ahtila’s Love Is a Treasure,” quoted at http://www.res.com/magazine/articles/eijaliisaahtilasloveisatreasure_2003-05-28.html. ⁵ Elizabeth Armstrong, *Girls Night Out* (Newport Beach: Orange County Museum of Art, 2004), 20. ⁶ Charles Wilfred Valentine, *The Experimental Psychology of Beauty* (London: Methuen, 1962), 32, quoted at <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a-o&d=70162484>. ⁷ Searle, op. cit. ⁸ Eija-Liisa Ahtila, *The Cinematic Works* (Helsinki: Crystal Eye, 2003), 11. ⁹ Michael Gibson, *Symbolism* (Taschen, 1995), quoted at <http://www.artchive.com/artchive/M/munch.html>. ¹⁰ Ibid. ¹¹ Chrissie Iles, op. cit., 62. ¹² Willis, op. cit. ¹³ Judy Bloch, *BAM/PFA Art & Film Notes*, September/October 2003, Film Notes 4. ¹⁴ Iles, op. cit. ¹⁵ Ahtila, *The Cinematic Works*, 11.



Eija-Liisa Ahtila was born in Hameenlinna, Finland, in 1959. She studied film and video at the School of Media and Management at the London College of Printing from 1990 to 1991, and at UCLA and the American Film Institute in Los Angeles from 1994 to 1995. She lives and works in Helsinki, Finland.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

2004
Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunert, Inc., New York, NY
2003
De Appel, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
2002
“Fantasized Persons and Taped Conversations,” Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Finland; Tate Modern, London, UK; Zürich Kunststhal, Zürich, Switzerland
Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunert, Inc., New York, NY
Dundee Contemporary Arts, Dundee, Scotland
2001
Art Gallery of Windsor, Windsor, Canada
2000
Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, Germany
1999
Salzburger Kunstverein, Salzburg, Austria
Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL
Kunstwerke Berlin, Berlin, Germany

Selected Group Exhibitions

2003
“Girls’ Night Out,” Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, CA; Contemporary Art Museum, Saint Louis, MO; Blaffer Gallery, the Art Museum of the University of Houston, Houston, TX
“Micropolitics Art and the Quotidian: 2001–1968 [Part 1],” EACC, Castellon, Spain
“Away from Home,” Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH
“Home Sweet Home,” Århus Kunstmuseum, Århus, Denmark
2002
Documenta 11, Kassel, Germany
“[The World May Be] Fantastic,” Biennial of Sydney 2002, Sydney, Australia
“Never Ending Stories,” Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany
“Beyond Paradise,” Bangkok National Gallery, Bangkok, Thailand

ABOVE LEFT: *TUULI / THE WIND*, 2002 [still]; 3-screen DVD installation with sound; courtesy Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunert Inc., New York. © Crystal Eye Ltd, Helsinki. ABOVE: *ME/WE, OKAY, GRAY*, 1993; 35mm film and DVD installation for 3 monitors with sound, two tables, and two chairs; installation view; courtesy Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunert Inc., New York. © Crystal Eye Ltd, Helsinki.



2001
“The Beauty of Intimacy,” Kunstraum Innsbruck, Innsbruck, Austria
“Screens and Projectors,” Fundació La Caixa, Barcelona, Spain
“...troubler l’écho du temps,” Musée d’art contemporain, Lyon, France
2000
“Eija-Liisa Ahtila and Ann-Sofi Sidén,” Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, TX
Kwangju Biennale, Kwangju, South Korea
“Video Via Venice,” Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA
“Organizing Freedom,” Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Charlottenburg, Copenhagen, Denmark
1999
Melbourne International Biennale, Melbourne, Australia
“Seeing Time: Selections from the Pamela and Richard Kramlich Collection of Media Art,” San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA
“End of Story,” Nordic Pavilion, Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy
“Cinema Cinema: Contemporary Art and the Cinematic Experience,” Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, the Netherlands

Selected Film Screenings

Berlin International Film Festival, Berlin, Germany
Edinburgh International Film Festival, Edinburgh, UK
Impakt, Utrecht, the Netherlands
Kunsthalle Basel, Basel, Switzerland
New York Film Festival, New York, NY

Selected Books and Catalogs

Art Now. Cologne: Taschen Verlag, 2001.
The Beauty of Intimacy. Kunstraum Innsbruck, Innsbruck, Austria, 2002.
Cinema, Cinema: Contemporary Art and the Cinematic Experience. Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, the Netherlands, 1999.
Eija-Liisa Ahtila: Fantasized Persons and Taped Conversations. Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Finland, and Tate Modern, London, UK, 2002.
Fresh Cream: Contemporary Art in Culture. London & New York: Phaidon Press, 2000.
Girls’ Night Out. Orange County Museum of Art, Newport, CA, 2003.
Man + Space. Kwangju Biennale 2000, Kwangju, Korea, 2000.
Organising Freedom. Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden, 2000.
Rewind to the Future. Bonner Kunstverein, Bonn, Germany, 2000.

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Birnbaum, Daniel. “Eija-Liisa Ahtila.” from “Best of the 90’s: 10 Top Tens.” *Artforum*, December 1999.
Gellatly, Andrew, and Jörg Heiser. “Just Add Water.” *Frieze*, No. 48, 1999.
Iles, Chrissie. “Thinking in Film.” *Parkett*, No. 68, 2003.

ME/WE, OKAY, GRAY, 1993; 35mm film and DVD installation for 3 monitors with sound, two tables, and two chairs; installation view; courtesy Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunert Inc., New York. © Crystal Eye Ltd, Helsinki.



Koch, Gertrud. “Home Movies or The Hardship of Living in Houses.” *Parkett*, No. 68, 2003.
Myers, Terry R. “Eija-Liisa Ahtila. Time Wounds All Heals.” *art/text*, August–October 1999.
Rush, Michael. “Eija-Liisa Ahtila at Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunert.” *Art In America*, September 2000.
Schjeldahl, Peter. “Festivalism.” *The New Yorker*, July 1999.
Smith, Roberta. “Eija-Liisa Ahtila.” *The New York Times*, May 26, 2000.
Stjernstedt, Mats. “Eija-Liisa Ahtila. The Way Things Are. The Way Things Might Be.” *Flash Art*, Summer 2000.
Vetrocq, Marcia E. “Eija-Liisa Ahtila Is Not Going Crazy.” *Art in America*, October 2002.
Withers, Rachel. “Allied Forces.” *Artforum*, May 1999.

Work in MATRIX

TUULI / THE WIND, 2002
3-screen DVD installation with sound
14 minutes, 20 seconds
Goetz Collection, München, Germany
Courtesy Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunert Inc., New York
© Crystal Eye Ltd, Helsinki

ME/WE, OKAY, GRAY, 1993
35mm film and DVD installation for 3 monitors with sound, two tables, and two chairs
5 minutes
Collection Ringier, Zürich, Switzerland
Courtesy Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunert Inc., New York
© Crystal Eye Ltd, Helsinki

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LAHJA/THE PRESENT, 2001 [still]; 5-monitor DVD installation with sound; courtesy Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunert Inc., New York. © Crystal Eye Ltd, Helsinki.