Eija-Liisa Ahtila & Athanasía Aarniosuo

Seeing through the Eyes of Others

*Artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila on contemporary visual art and filmmaking*

Eija-Liisa Ahtila is one of the internationally most recognized visual artists in Finland. When Ahtila started her career back in the 1980s, video art was a relevant term, distinguishing fine art from film. Nowadays, the term video art seems outdated, but one thing remains: the ambitions to create powerful cinematic experiences. This article features a discussion on moving image installations, eco-cinema and post-humanism.

**Eija-Liisa Ahtila** has long been considered a master of the cinematic installation form. Her work is conceptually organized around the construction of image, language, narrative and space, and she has often probed individual identity and the boundaries of the subject in relation to the external world.

Using the visual language of cinema, Ahtila presents large-scale installations with projections on multiple screens. These viewing conditions, with their simultaneously charged vantage points, break the tradition of cinematic perspective and construct an experience of several co-existing times and spaces for being.

The starting point of Ahtila’s research and recent works – for example, *The Annunciation* (2010), *Horizontal* (2011) and *Studies on the Ecology of Drama* (2014) – has been the eco-cinematic questions: how and with what kind of technology, drama and expressive devices can we build the image of our world in the present moment of ecological crisis?

**Narratives, perspectives and the moving image**

**AA:** Eija-Liisa Ahtila, we are here to discuss video culture or, in your case, video in culture and art. When you first started working in film and media, back in the 1980s, talking about video art was relevant. There was a much clearer distinction between film and fine-art moving image, on so many levels. There were differences in distribution, as films were seen at cinemas and film festivals, and fine-art moving images were exhibited and viewed in museum and gallery settings.

**E-LA:** Video art was mostly a means to record fine-art performances and experiment with layered images. Storytelling was left for short films. Of course, back then, the technical differences were also important: film was analogue, and video art was seen as a way for everyone to indulge in the new material possibilities.

**AA:** These days, when the gap between film and video art has become less substantial, talking about video art seems dated. How would you describe your work?

**E-LA:** I mostly work in moving image installations. I attended film school at the begin-
ning of my career, but my approach is one of a visual artist, not a filmmaker as such. When I work, I become immersed in my medium, in what can be done with moving image and in what moving image can do.

When I was a child, still in school, my favourite topics weren’t really the subjects that had to do with visuals, but essay writing in Finnish class. My grandfather was a great storyteller. He must have passed his passion for stories on to me. I’m able to write fast, but it’s preceded by a profound research and thinking period. As an artist I discovered film because, as a medium, it responds to the human senses. It also allows the combination of writing and storytelling with visuals as well as sound, rhythm, location, acting, and so on. Moving image also presents itself as the language of our global communication.

In a way, I view myself as a storyteller who is increasingly concerned with what can be achieved by using moving image as a means of telling the story.

AA: You mentioned learning to break ideas apart. How do you specifically plan your multiscreen installations? What work is involved in breaking down a story and spreading it across several screens?

E-LA: Well, it involves thorough visual planning to create a situation where the viewer in the centre of the installation space feels a sense of being in the centre of the space created on the screens and among the events.

After scripting, I create a storyboard which involves all screens, and times the events on them. The challenge there is to coordinate the flow of events and how they are visually presented on the respective screens. In some works, for example in Where Is Where, a six-screen installation from 2008, there are scenes where several people are in the same room talking to each other. In the installation, this means that actors are talking to each other across the space on different screens. This also involves the direction of the look, meaning that it needs to correspond to the position of the actor on the other screen. Each individual take for every screen has to be choreographed to create simultaneous action and continuity among the screens.

AA: Your work seems to revolve around different perspectives while the stories are being presented on multiple screens. Are these aspects connected?
E-LA: My intention is to play with the linear perspective and the order it implies – and the viewers’ omnipotence. I’m aiming at creating a cinematic space in which screens interact with each other, making use of the space between the screens, in which the viewers are situated. The viewer enters a state in which she or he is never able to see everything at the same time as things occur in the room. It changes their position as privileged viewers. There are several ways of seeing, not one defined path or angle from which to look at the action. The setting denies a singular perspective of things, or a specific order of how knowledge is acquired. It also emphasizes the fact that we have to make choices about how we want to look at certain things, what is left out and how we construct the whole.

AA: What kind of environment do you find yourself working best in: urban, rural or something in between?

E-LA: I do most of my writing in a small studio near my home. I also have a larger studio space in Herttoniemi. This is where I do the scale models for exhibitions and all kinds of other models and where I also do the drawings for the production. I have a large wall with a varnished chalkboard there, where I can write the structure of the script. This larger studio is also where I hold meetings with members of my team and with external visitors such as people from museums and institutions. And there is a third place that is very important to me, which is the forest. The forest is the place where I do much of the thinking work.
AA: What intrigues you about the moving image as a medium? What aspects of our environment can moving image represent?

E-LA: The whole mechanism of the moving image has become very powerful. The moving image has taken the position of being the most popular means of representing our surroundings and society. It has become our central medium of presenting the world. But to the same degree that the medium shows the world to us, it hides other parts. A specific perspective and a particular version of looking at the world are imposed. It is inevitable to ask questions like: Who should be allowed to perform in this image of our world that we create? Who can be a protagonist? To whom or what do we grant the status of a representative?

Non-human protagonists and the other perspective

AA: In your more recent work, you have been trying to give a voice to the "other", the non-human – for example swallows, butterflies and a spruce tree. It must be difficult to portray, say, a spruce tree without giving it human attributes. How can we ever really get away from refracting everything through human knowledge, sensory capacities, language?

E-LA: Studies on the Ecology of Drama approaches the question of the other’s perspective with different hypotheses and exercises. What role will the other living creatures propose when included in the moving image piece? And what kind of an impact can it have on the ways moving images work and communicate things? It is very interesting and exciting, for example, how an altered perception of time can hugely change the idea of a dramatic event. Animals with a metabolic system experience their environment differently to humans – a short length of time holds a great amount of information. For example, from a swallow’s viewpoint an acrobat on a trampoline moves much slower than through human eyes.

I aim to introduce a relevant way of viewing the world – one that shakes the human-centeredness, one that shows us as one amongst the living. I feel it is important that we reconsider our place and role on this planet as human beings – as members of the larger community. A debate about the post-humanist situation and about bio-political issues has started, and it is crucial that these topics enter our awareness permanently and have an impact on our actions. As an artist, I tackle these issues by using the moving image.

AA: You consider the non-human actors as equal contributors to the films. How have they shaped their own roles?

E-LA: This depends on the approach of the piece. But they often script their own space on set and bring a lot of unexpected fun to the scenes. When we were shooting a scene for The Annunciation in front of the donkey’s box during the first take, the donkey started to chew the actress Mary’s dreadlocks, and then it neighed as if laughing at us. There was no need for another take! However, what probably matters more is the effect on the atmosphere of the film the other beings create – on so many levels. It happens subtly, for example through the pace of movement, which again affects the rhythm of editing a scene, or through conscious planning on how to portray living beings and translate their condition into the language of moving image. For example, how to make a portrait of a spruce tree?

AA: How do you do it? In Horizontal you succeeded.

E-LA: The work originated in the shooting of The Annunciation, from 2010. In its production we needed to shoot first landscapes and then trees. When we confronted the task of shooting a tall tree, we were faced with many restrictions – first with the camera, and then with the idea of a picture of a tree. With the film camera and its aspect ratio one can only capture a part of a tree. When moving back, it becomes no longer a portrait of a single spruce, but the picture of a landscape. Using a wide-angle lens produces a distortion effect, which no longer results in an image of the spruce, but in an account of the mechanism of optics.
In 2011, I made a drawing series titled *Anthropomorphic Exercises on Film* based on this observation and the limitations the camera mechanism poses for visual recording of our surroundings. Then I thought, I might as well take the challenge seriously and make a moving image piece of the attempt to make a portrait of a tree. It’s a long story, but to make it short, we shot a 30-meter-tall spruce in six parts and presented it in a human space, horizontally, since otherwise it would not have fit inside. That’s how the name *Horizon-tal* originated. The more we got immersed in this task, working with technical equipment that has been made as an extension to human perception, the more we ended up seeing ourselves and the mechanisms of both the machine and the idea.

**AA:** Your interest in ecology doesn’t seem to stem from a desire to save the world but rather from a desire to see a different way of human life – a life that doesn’t regard everything around it recklessly and selfishly as resources to exploit until they run out.

**E-LA:** Somebody once said, behind every economy there is an ecology. We are facing global warming and its consequences, overpopulation and growing economic inequality. We are watching many species disappear forever. We simply need to focus on the current situation on our planet. *Studies on the Ecology of Drama* is a lecture-performance that looks at ecological issues using the methods of presentation as a path to approach other living beings. Performers include a bush, a juniper tree, a common swift, a horse, a brimstone butterfly and a group of human acrobats in settings such as a field, a forest, the air. The work approaches questions such as: What could an ecological drama in moving image mean, and what does it involve? From there, further questions arise: How to depict living things? How to approach them? How to convey a different way of being, another being’s world? And again: Where do our empathy and ethics lie?

**AA:** In your older work you have explored human issues, too. You have told stories of mental illness, family dramas, broken hearts and death. Which of your older installations would you consider the most representative of these human problems?
E-LA: Yes, I created works which I at some point called short “human dramas”.

I suppose The House from 2002 is the best-known work of that time. It is a three-channel video installation, which tells the story of a woman who begins to imagine that she is hearing voices in her head.

Her awareness of her environment begins to disintegrate, eventually creating a complete rupture of spatial and temporal boundaries. The story is fictional, but it is based on interviews and discussions with women who had experienced psychosis.

Further explorations

AA: In 2018 you have solo exhibitions coming up at the Serlachius Museum in Mänttä, Finland, and at Museum M in Leuven, Belgium. You will also be part of the upcoming Sydney Biennial. What else do you wish to accomplish in the nearest future?

E-LA: Oh, there are many things I would like to explore. Especially continue working with the above-mentioned experiments with narratives. This means, first of all, a need for time, concentration and privacy – being in a forest or other such place. Probably to make a feature film. And smaller, more targeted experiments.

In addition, I would like to have a show in LA, where I lived during the 1990s. And I would love to explore how my multiple-screen thinking and dramaturgy would play out in the context of virtual reality.

Eija-Liisa Ahtila

Born 1959 in Hämeenlinna, Finland. She has studied at University of California, Los Angeles; American Film Institute, Los Angeles; London College of Printing and University of Helsinki.

Her works have been exhibited in solo shows throughout all continents e.g. at: Guggenheim, Bilbao; Tate Modern, London; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Kiasma, Helsinki; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Jeu de Paume Paris; K21 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Dusseldorf; Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; Neu National Gallery, Berlin; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Melbourne; Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, A Coruña; Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery, Tokyo; Musee Carre d’Art, Nimes; Serlachius Museum, Finland; Oi Futura, Rio de Janeiro; Bellas Artes, Mexico City; Albright Knox Art Gallery; Buffalo; The Israel Museum, Jerusalem; Parasol Unit, London; DHC/Art Foundation for Contemporary Art, Montreal.

Her works have been presented at many art festivals, including the Venice Biennale (2005 and 1999); Documenta 11, Kassel (2002), Manifesta (1998), São Paulo (2008) and the Sydney Biennial (2018 and 2002). Her works have also been included in numerous international group exhibitions, e.g. at SFMoMA; San Francisco; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Hirshorn Museum, Washington; National Center for Contemporary Arts, Moscow; National Museum of Art, Osaka; La Caixa Forum, Barcelona; Garage, Moscow; SMAK; Gent; MIT, Cambridge; Stedelijk, Amsterdam; Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin; MOCA, Los Angeles; Italian Pavillion, Venice; Mori Art Museum, Tokyo; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; ZKM; Karlsruhe.
Her films and retrospectives have been included in many major festivals including Berlin, Sundance, Venice, London, Rotterdam, Oberhausen, etc., and they have also been a part of the film programmes of MoMA, Tate Modern and Centre Pompidou. In 2011, Eija-Liisa Ahtila was appointed to the main jury of the Venice Film Festival and in 2013 she was the chairwoman of the jury in FID Marseille.

Eija-Liisa Ahtila has been honored with numerous art and film prizes over the past three decades that include, most recently, becoming an Academician of Arts in Finland (2009); Honorary Mention at Venice Biennale, Venice (1999); the Vincent van Gogh Award for Contemporary Art in Europe, The Netherlands (2000); Artes Mundi, Wales International Visual Arts Prize, Cardiff, Wales (2006); The Prince Eugen Medal for Outstanding Artistic Achievement, Sweden (2009).

Her works are included in major public and private contemporary art collections throughout the world. In the Nordic countries, Ahtila’s works are included, for example, in Moderna Museet’s collections in Stockholm, Sweden, and in the collections of Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki, Finland.