

Conditions of Entry: Thoughts on Pilvi Takala's *Real Snow White*

"If you can dream it, you can do it" were the inspirational words of Walt Disney. The father of the multi-national media company spoke of the future with a fantastical sense of triumph, a quality that anyone would wish to possess; truly believing that freedom and opportunity were at one's fingertips. When looking at Disneyland, however, the physical space where all those fairy-tale stories are actualised, one may be alarmed to find that it is not a place of infinite possibility; it is infact a place of many conditions.

The title of our project 'Conditions of Entry' landed us onto a particular work by the Finnish artist Pilvi Takala, *Real Snow White*; a 9:19 minute video from 2009 shows the artist dressed in a handmade Snow White outfit, attempting to enter Disneyland Paris. After being asked by many eager families for her photograph and autograph, she is pulled aside by a guard refusing her entry due to the rule that adults cannot enter dressed as Disney characters. The slightly bewildered guard struggles to express his reasons, managing to point out her costume is worn by actors within the venue and the unpredictable behaviour suggested by her unorthodox clothes could be a potential danger. After witnessing this commotion, the crowd of eager families slowly disperse, muttering to themselves "Come on, she's not the real Snow White". The film ends with Takala walking away, escorted by a guard.

Pilvi Takala's practice deals with the unspoken boundaries and implicit rules which we inherently skirt along in daily life. Our project group has analysed what happens in this situation that Takala creates in which she strips bare the power dynamic between the institution and the individual, focusing on appearance and social behaviour. We have discovered that it is not just the institution that determines Takala's entry, there is also an interplay between collective and individual - the collective influences the individual and conditions how that individual enters an institution. Therefore, to enter this fantasy land there is a collective notion to obey and accept the rules in order to gain what it has to offer. People want to believe in and contribute to the illusion and the overarching narrative.

Disneyland can be viewed as an exaggerated version of our patriarchal real world and by taking this example as a model we ask the question: How can Disneyland be emblematic for other kinds of institutions?

'In order to integrate into society, many have had to give up their individual identities of dress to become more 'French' otherwise facing exclusion.'

Takala was refused entry due to what she was wearing, evoking the memory of similar immigration movements in France. In order to integrate into society, many have had to give up their individual identities of dress to become more 'French' otherwise facing exclusion. In 2008, a Moroccan woman known as Faiza M, was refused French citizenship for wearing a niqab. In France, these strict wardrobe regulations in regards to attitudes to integration date back decades. In reaction to the emergence of new expanded ethnicities in post-war Europe, France addressed the situation through

the implementation of secularity of peoples dress with the goal to achieve complete assimilation. Immigrants gave up their national identities, accepting the culture and religion of the French republic, to become real French citizens. Consequently, this escalated into severe conflicts as migrant numbers grew leading to disputes such as *L’Affaire du Foulard* (the scarf affair) that arose in 1989 in France. On 18 September, three female students were suspended for refusing to remove their hijab in class at a public school. The ban on hijabs was made the ‘condition of entry’ into schools and other institutions.

Unlike organisations, institutions provide a relatively predictable structure for everyday social, economic and political life. They shape people's motivations and behaviours, which is predictable, but not necessarily effective or uncontroversial. Human interactions structure these entities, leading to lasting patterns of behaviour. However, the institutionalized behaviour is not easy to change. Institutions own their own set of principles in order to enter them rather like a club, requiring you to meet the principles according to the membership. Or an immigrant, unable to enter another country without the review by the state. There is a manner of collective acceptance underlining this transition. Disneyland aims to build a dream world yet it is still a business, employing its own regulations for customers to enter and benefitting from these consumers, resulting in the consumer to bare an unthreatening stance towards the authority of the institution.

Using the writings of Judith Butler and Irit Rogoff on aesthetics and identity (particularly identity as a performance) as a starting point, wherein a person is really only what they are seen to be by others, and identity and character traits aren’t a real ‘part’ of a person. You are only what you act and look like. With this in mind, we think of the border-crossing as an aesthetical, phenomenological situation, wherein one’s ‘identity’ as it appears (3D into 1D) is judged against the atmosphere and aesthetic of the institution in question. If that ‘identity’ is judged to be supportive/constitutive of that atmosphere (institutional aesthetic is a collective aesthetic), then the person seeking entry is allowed in. If their identity doesn’t fit or could upset the institutional aesthetic, the person is rejected.

‘At the border, you are expected to prostrate yourself to the whims of the institution you are trying to enter.’

Takala, in her work *Real Snow White*, is, in the view of Disneyland, a sort of Trojan Horse. There is something about her performance in the film that is wrong and worthy of distrust. She upsets the positive feedback loop of the constituents of the institution by looking like the institution. She doesn’t fit into the overall aesthetic of Disneyland—people vacationing, queueing up peacefully, unthinking acceptance of the hyper-reality of the park. She isn’t a real Disney fan; she has failed to collapse her multi-faceted identity into the 1D identity desired by Disney; the one printed on her ticket. At the border, you are expected to prostrate yourself to the whims of the institution you are trying to enter. There is a one-sided economy of trust, wherein you aren’t at all trusted, but you must nonetheless trust the whims and requests of those with the power to let you in or turn you away. You are expected to, as said, trade in the many intersectional traits and personal histories and performances that make up what you consider to be your identity for the identity that is stamped on your ticket, or passport, or CV. You must take on the aesthetic of “Finnish Caucasian Female not trying to start trouble.” What gives *Real Snow White* its force, then, is Takala’s refusal to abide by

the “No Joking At The Border” rule, which essentially states that you can’t act in any way other than that of prostrated peon. Takala subverts this dynamic and this economy of trust by joking, by tooling, by playing around at the border. She defangs the institution by making her entry-refusal feel weird and ill-reasoned, and showing that entry and expulsion are determined by something we can’t quite put our fingers on.

Finally, others were allowed in because it was their job--their brief by the institution--to perform Snow White that day. This discrepancy between Takala’s Snow White and the other Snow Whites points to the ability of an institution to render two materially similar things different. Just as two Brillo Boxes, materially exactly the same, might be considered differently because of its situation within and acceptance by an institution (one is art and the other isn’t; it sits on a store shelf and not in MoMA), one Snow White is denied entry to the park because she isn’t the real Snow White, while on the other side of the gates, another moves freely around the park, looking almost exactly the same.

‘Ambiguity is not welcomed by the state. Inbetweenness is illegitimate.’

One facet of the institutional nature of Disneyland is found in its selectivity towards dress and gender norms. In Nav Haq’s article ‘The Invisible and the Visible: Identity Politics and the Economy of Reproduction in Art’, he describes a process of legitimation within the art world establishment, as passing through a mould of approval. This mould of legitimation can be found within other entry points of the wider world. In his text ‘My Body Doesn’t Exist’, the writer and philosopher, Paul B. Preciado describes his struggle with the impenetrable Spanish State from whom he desires to be officially recognised as a man after transitioning gender. Here the transitioning crosses the border line of gender within his own body and also crosses the exterior institutional borders of acceptance and recognition. He fights to keep his middle female name, Beatriz, which the judge deems to be gender ambiguous. Ambiguity is not welcomed by the state. Inbetweenness is illegitimate. He writes ‘The state is a machine to fabricate the truth and I am a beggar’. Here, the hetero-normative institution that Haq described as a mould can be seen as a machine, leading us to forget that it is a man-made entity.

In order to be part of society one has to follow the rules, sign the forms and make the choices. Preciado says freedom and happiness are not given lightly, by describing the ability to have one’s own name and gender as a debt that must be confirmed to the state in order to freely live his life. Infact, as Sara Ahmed, proposes in her book *The Promise of Happiness*, happiness throughout history has been masked as a freedom, when it is infact conditional. Happiness has been awarded particularly on women in the expectation, that they compromise their own happiness in order to preserve the happiness of others. She writes that happiness is used as a technology or instrument that re-orientates individual desire towards a common good, in this way one does not become a troublemaker, or a killjoy upsetting the stable status quo.

The *real* Snow White is regarded in the story to be the fairest beauty of them all. She is innocent, polite and a mother figure, who soon needs to be saved by a man after sinfully taking a bite of the red apple. In Takala’s film, this fictionalised character is retained by the institution of Disneyland and cannot be appropriated by others as they enter its gates. Pilvi Takala’s character is an individualised self-identified character that has not been trained and vetted in the same way that the actors within Disneyland have. The institution sees this individuality as a threat to its overall polished image of Snow White, a narrative that it has managed to preserve over the many generations.

The situation that Takala created is ironic, ambiguous, and very complex, in which it reflects the power dynamic relationship between the institution, the collective, and the individual. Although Snow White is a fictional character, in reality, Walt Disney's "the happiest place on earth" functions just like the real world. It follows a similar power structure, an atmosphere, as suggested by Arthur Danto, created and maintained by collective acceptance. What is unsettling here as we've pointed out in Nav Haq and Paul B Preciado's writings, is that these predetermined collective characteristics turn into a process of legitimization. In order to gain the entrance or to be a part of the collective, one has to pass through the mould of approval. Using the mould to verify an individual's veracity simply enables the mould to shape up, assimilate and control an individual's behaviour and appearance. The mould also flattens an individual from multi-faceted identity into one dimensioned identity. Wherein a person is really only what they are seen to be by others, and identity and character traits aren't a 'real' part of a person.

The real Snow White character's quality is her beautiful appearance and her innocent and obedient behaviour. The irony is, although Takala appears to be similar to the real Snow White, instead of being obedient, she confronts Disney and its social structure. What is real? How to examine realness? They perhaps remain undetermined for us, but what we do acknowledge is that the artist possesses more intelligence and complexity than that offered by the institution, at least in the act of *expressing* realness through individuality.

This was a collaborative research project between Royal College of Art students on the Curating Contemporary Art programme; Titus Nouwens, Miffy Shen, Jinghua Fan, Jordan Matthias, Charlotte dos Santos and Sha Li.

REFERENCES

Ahmed, Sara, *The Promise of Happiness*, 2010

Butler, Judith, Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory, *Theatre Journal*, *heatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (1988),

Danto, A. 1964, "The Artworld", *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 61.

Haq, Nav, 'The Invisible and the Visible: Identity Politics and the Economy of Reproduction in Art', *Thread*, [Decolonising Practices](#), 2015

Preciado, B, Paul. 'My Body Doesn't Exist', from *The Reader*, Document 14, 2017

Rogoff, Irit, 1998, "How to Dress for an Exhibition", in M. Hannula (ed.), *Stopping the Process? Contemporary Views on Art and Exhibitions*, The Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art.