

## **Heidi Kilpeläinen: Land of Dreams**

By

Neal Brown

*Sitting with Ms. Abramovic has been the hot event of the spring art season. Celebrities – Björk, Marisa Tomei, Isabella Rossellini, Lou Reed, Rufus Wainwright – did a stint.*

Holland Cotter, New York Times. May 30, 2010

Unlike the performance artist Marina Abramovic, sitting with Ms. Heidi Kilpeläinen has not yet been the hot event of anyone's art season, if hot events are defined by celebrities being in attendance. But if you are a refugee or asylum seeker, war invalid, or widow from Iraq, Yemen, Finland, Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia or Eritrea, or elsewhere, your definition of the value of Kilpeläinen's work may be informed by criteria that differ from those of the heated media consumerism of the art world.

Kilpeläinen, a Finn who lives in London, devised and instigated a participatory performance entitled 'Tango Therapy' between 2015 and 2018, as one outcome of her 2015 residency with Beaconsfield, London. She has since shared Tango Therapy with many asylum seekers and Finnish war invalids and widows, during which a second work, 'Land of Dreams', evolved. This three-channel screen work not only documents Kilpeläinen's and her participants' performances, but also creates something new: both the performance and its documentation are a fusion of highly authored artifice and reality. Rich in expressive emotion, Tango Therapy and Land of Dreams are contextualised in the complexities of socio-economic inequality, nationalism, migrancy, race, identity, illness, trauma, and loss, and point to the nature of art's aesthetic engagement with complex themes.

Kilpeläinen's performance involved a participant joining her at one of two chairs. This is an established format in art and theatre, given fame in the work of Marina Abramovic. When seated, Kilpeläinen sang Finnish Tangos to them, and invited the participant to sing a song of their choice in return. As the sitters were residents of invalid or refugee centres in Finland this meant that they were far away from what had been their homes. The invalids and widows, although geographically not as far away as the refugees, still suffered the pain of

separation. Most of these displaced participants sung back, in a multitude of languages, melodies, and expressive emotional ranges.

One of the tangos we hear is entitled 'Satumaa', loosely translated as Land of Dreams, and known as the most popular Finnish Tango. Tango originated in port areas of Argentina and Uruguay, from a mixture of impoverished Native American, European, and African, populations, including slaves. It is a form that became immensely popular in Finland, where it evolved in a distinctive way, the music usually written in minor keys – keys which are thought (depending on cultural expectation), to make people emotional. Satumaa was written by Unto Mononen in 1955 (he committed suicide in 1968), and includes the lines:

*There is somewhere a country beyond the wide sea  
Where waves wash on shores of happiness  
Where beautiful flowers always blossom  
Over worries of tomorrow, that can be forgotten*

The sentiments expressed are those of reflective poignancy. The song is a wish for a better future, in an unspecified place – a place other than where one actually is. It is the simple dream of a child, as well as the conviction of the religious, the lost soul, or the ironic pose of the cynic. It is the hope of the fascist, the communist, the torture victim, and the sentimental drunkard. In the context of the social, economic and political events that lead to human asylum seeking and migrancy – refugees, immigrants, political exiles – or the situations of people who are invalided, aged, or widowed, it is about both collective and individual human loss and pain.

Land of Dreams is an epic tragi-comedy, its three channels nearing four and a half hours of screen time. In this way, it is Kilpeläinen's homage to the Kalevala, the 19th-century work of creation myths compiled by Elias Lönnrot from the oral folklore, poetry and mythology of Finland, and which is the national epic. Kilpeläinen's ancestor Johannes Cajanus (1655-1681) was an early collector of such material, from whom Lönnrot sourced the title and some of main characters of his work. Prior to the Kalevala, Finnish poetry and folklore largely remained in the oral tradition. Lönnrot's field trips not only helped him to compile the Kalevala but would also give pleasure to the people he visited, as he would reciprocate stories with them. Kilpeläinen's exchanges are somewhat similar, with some elements of shamanic ritual – shamanism being a theme in the Kalevala. The poetry in the Kalevala was often sung to music performed by two persons, in an antiphonal singing match in which each person sang alternate verses.

Kilpeläinen's previous video, installation art, and performance works have indicated an interest in different forms of authoritarianism, or mass control, whether institutionalised, commercial, or cultural, in response to

which Kilpeläinen has summoned ideas of anger, and emotional violence. This theme was most apparent in a musical identity Kilpeläinen devised, whose authorial persona – HKI 19 – manifested directive anger in a critique of media power, inequality, and justice issues. The HKI 19 project was an exercise in perversity and paradox and a negation of usual musical pleasantries. (Three albums of HKI 19's work are available on the record label that represents Björk.) Land of Dreams is also a musical project, more welcoming than HKI 19, although its context remains deeply troubled, despite historical and geographical distance and Kilpeläinen's remedial energies. It includes the distressful circumstances, often war, or persecution, that caused Kilpeläinen's participants to flee their countries, and the universality of blood and bullets, in different times and places: Iraq, Yemen, Finland, and elsewhere. In the background is the complicated relationship with Nazi fascism that Finland exposed itself to in response to Soviet invasion during the Second World War, and the nature of Finland's collective memory – there were Finnish refugees arising from multiple causes; Finnish, Nazi, and Soviet political and military actions.

Kilpeläinen's work includes a great variety of detail that reflects these and other enmeshments: women, although enjoying relative autonomy in Finland – an autonomy not necessarily given to them in their own countries – are, along with their children, either banned or choose not to turn up at a party given by the Red Cross; Kilpeläinen's father worked at Konnunsuo prison as a guard when Kilpeläinen was born (Konnunsuo became Joutseno Refugee Centre), and was chair of the Fellowship of War Invalids in Sotkamo between 2004 and 2017; South American Tango was welcomed by the Finnish people and could be seen as an example of the conciliations of cultural difference; two male participants, who do not share a language, are made articulate by playing their national music to each other using the international patois of smartphone screens; the lyrics that Kilpeläinen's participants sing, in their multiple languages, are not comprehensible without translation, but the music may be known within listeners' hearts, as it is without borders.

Kilpeläinen's Tango Therapy and Land of Dreams projects are more urgent, more desperate, than the apparently happy ameliorations of their viewing pleasure may lead us to believe. The tears that we see fall from Kilpeläinen, and her subjects, and which may also fall from us, her viewers, relate not just to perceptions of romanticism in her project, but have a hardcore, ethical basis originating in human suffering, pain, and experience. Whether comic or tragic, Kilpeläinen uses the pleasure of art to explore the connections between the individual and the collective. The participants, the artist herself, the three screens – and we ourselves – are engaged in a discourse that brings art into a close relationship with complex matters of real importance.

*Oh, how I wish I could visit a Wonderland once  
I would never leave, like the birds do  
But without wings I cannot fly  
I'm held captive in the earth  
Only my thoughts which reach far  
I can be there*

Neal Brown is an artist and writer. He is the author of a number of books about art, including for Tate, and has written for most UK and many international art magazines. He first wrote about Heidi Kilpeläinen's work for Frieze magazine, in 2001

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