

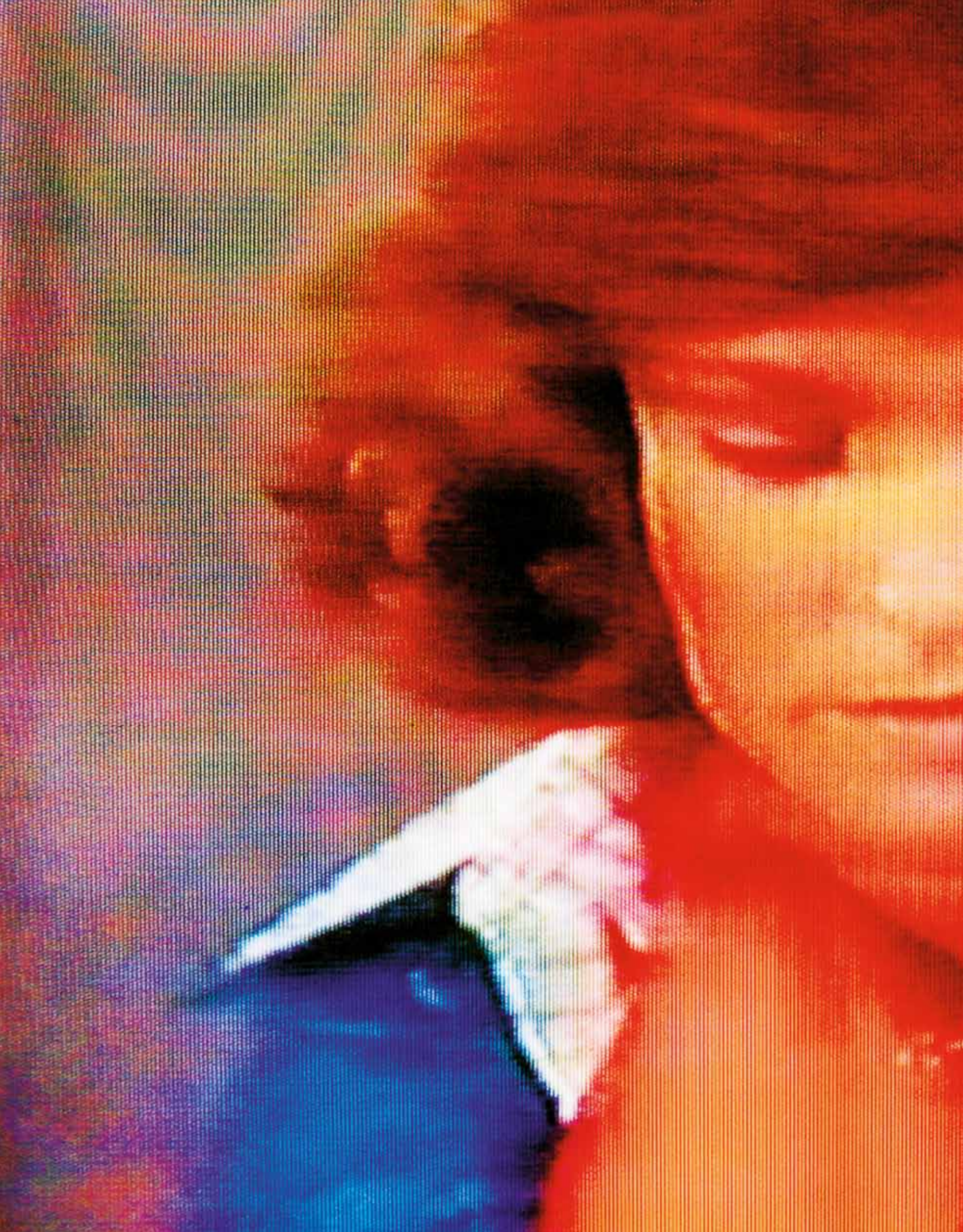
Mika Taanila

La Haine (Hate)
from the series Black and White Movies (2013)



ARS
FENNICA
2015

Blackout



Mika Taanila
Blackout

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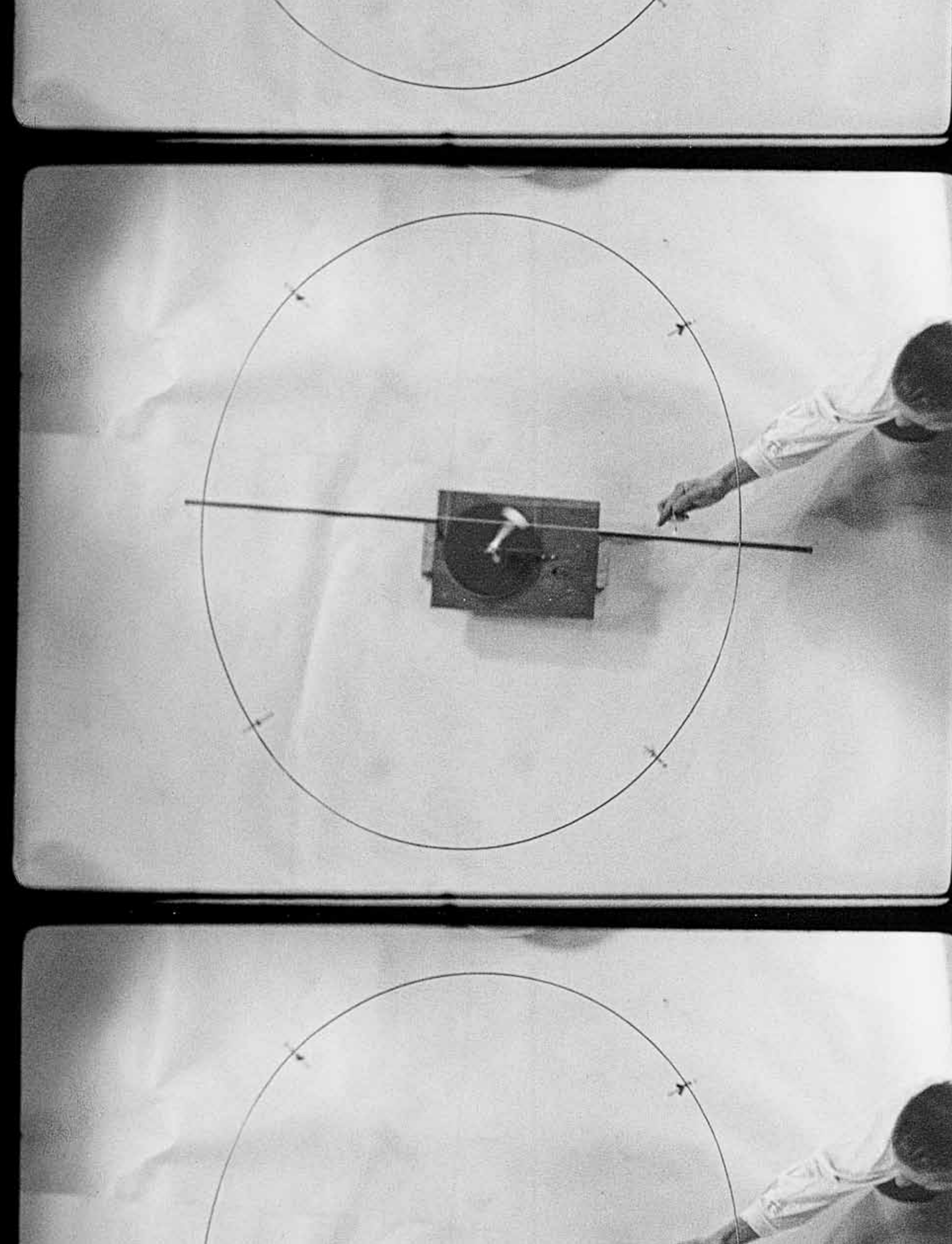
Charles Esche

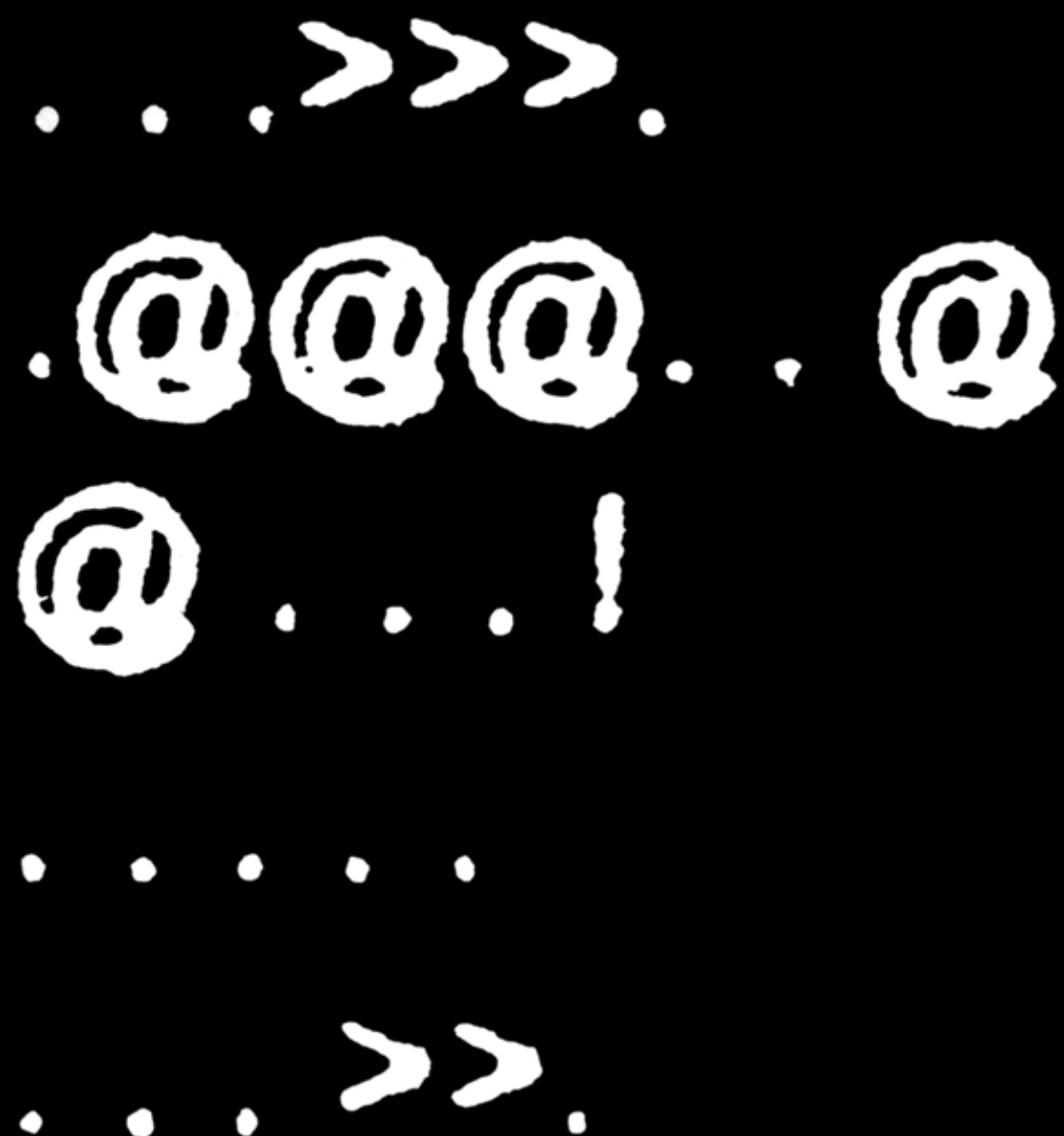
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Leena Niemistö
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Foreword

The Henna and Pertti Niemistö Art Foundation Ars Fennica takes great pleasure in presenting *Blackout*, an exhibition showcasing the work of 2015 Ars Fennica prizewinner Mika Taanila at the Hämeenlinna Art Museum from October 30, 2015 to March 6, 2016.

Mika Taanila is a Finnish filmmaker and contemporary artist whose wide-ranging oeuvre falls in a zone between documentary, experimental film and visual art. His art skirts the boundaries between reality and fiction, delving into topics such as utopian visions, the role of technology in modern society and the relationship between humans and machines. Memory and misremembering emerge as new focal themes in *Blackout*.

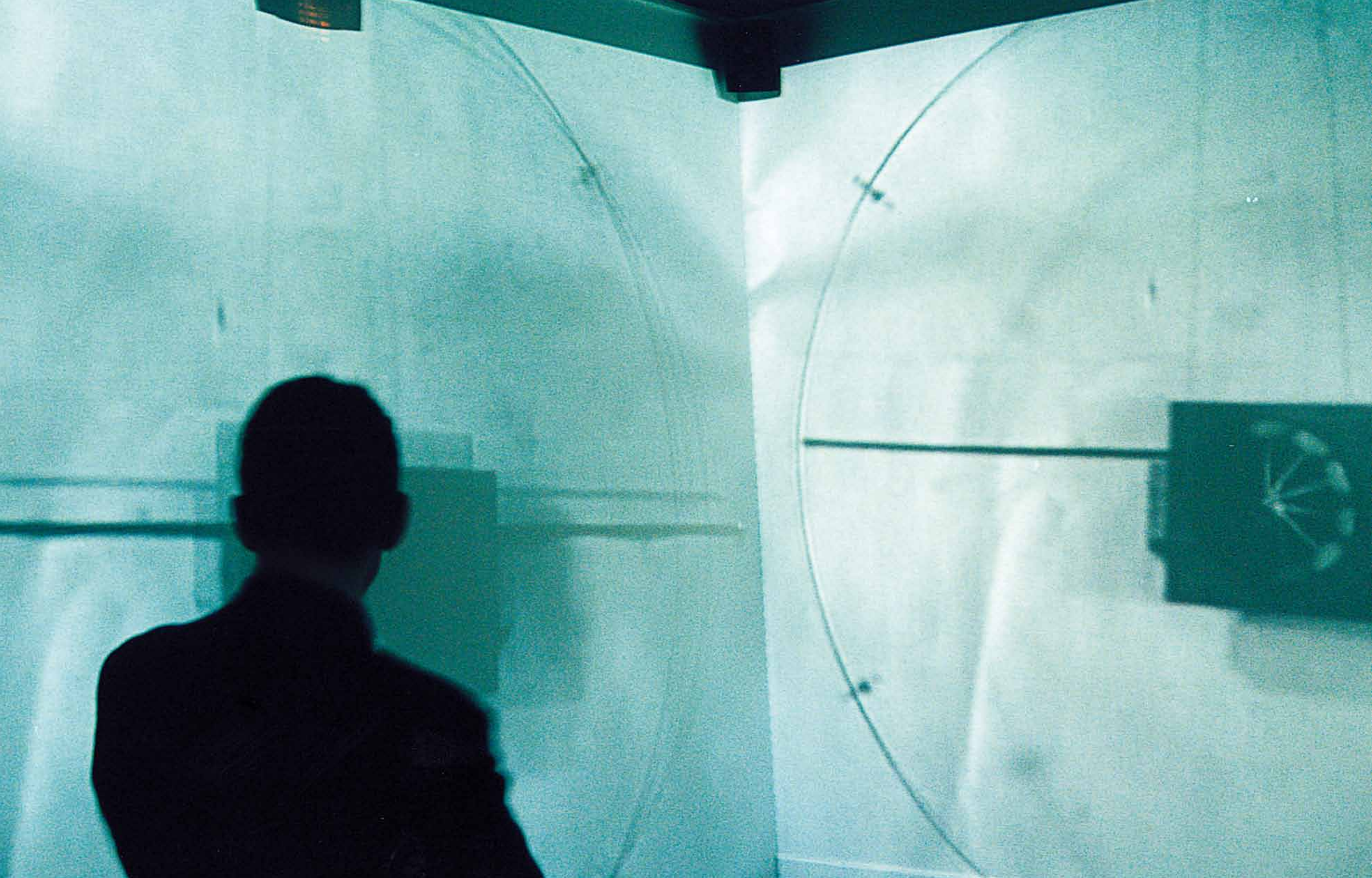
The Ars Fennica Award granted by the Henna and Pertti Niemistö Art Foundation is the richest art award in the Nordic countries.

The Foundation's mission is to increase the visibility of the visual arts, provide incentive to art practitioners and offer them opportunities to expand their international contacts. As part of this work, the Foundation grants the annual Ars Fennica Award, hosts an exhibition featuring the winning artist's and publishes an accompanying catalogue. The award is conferred in recognition of high standards of creative originality and artistic excellence.

Candidates for the Ars Fennica Award are nominated by an appointed Award Panel, but the winner is selected by a recognized international expert. This year's winner was chosen by museum director and curator Charles Esche, who announced his decision after an in-depth review of each candidate and their work.

I would like to extend my personal thanks to all those involved in producing the Ars Fennica 2015 exhibition and its accompanying publications. A special word of thanks is deserved by Professor Erkki Huhtamo for the expansive insights and expert article he contributed to the catalogue.

My warmest thanks naturally go to the artist. We cordially invite everyone to come and enjoy the unique art of Mika Taanila!



Erkki Huhtamo

Poetics of the Concrete: About Mika Taanila's Art

In a recent issue of the *London Review of Books* Hal Foster reflected on curatorial practice, pointing out the inflation of the concept.¹ “Maybe the best we can say today is that everyone who compiles is a curator,” he stated, somewhat contemptuously, adding: “We curate our favorite photographs, songs and restaurants, or use numerous websites and applications to do it for us.” In the art world there are still curators who delve into serious concepts, associating their ideas with intellectual and non-conformist traditions, but there is also a growing number of “flashy exhibition-makers,” who have made a pact with the forces of post-industrial capitalism, offering appealing spectacles aligned with the interests of global business and marketing elites. This has resulted in mega-events, commercial art fairs and biennales that offer shallow art entertainment, while associating art-making with the financial self-interests of the “one per cent.”

On being asked to write about Mika Taanila's art for this publication, Foster's words popped up in my mind.² Why?, I wondered. What did they have to do with Taanila's achievements? Frankly, at first I did not know, but – as often is the case – I followed my intuition. After a few days I found the answer: a kind of positive inversion. For if the art world today is increasingly governed by profit-making, calculation, and spectacular but empty “special effects,” Taanila is among those who have achieved success by doing exactly the opposite. The sizeable body of work he has produced during the past few decades has emerged from a set of very different values: personal enthusiasm, social awareness, honesty, concentration on the essential, and years of painstaking labor. I cannot imagine an example further from the “made-to-sell art” of the likes of Jeff Koons and the morally bankrupt Damien Hirst. This has also proven true when Taanila has applied his skills to curating, as the uncompromising *Memories Can't Wait – Film Without Film* project at the 60th Oberhausen Short Film Festival (2014) demonstrated.

Rootedness versus rootlessness has become a central issue. In the postmodern world data floats freely in information networks, is picked up, passed on and rapidly forgotten. Flows replace nodes, fixed platforms and signposts, especially those associated with history and tangible reality. As Zygmunt Bauman has demonstrated in one book after another, everything has become “fluid.” Taanila's work functions as a counterforce to this tendency, for it is rooted in something concrete, whether in history, design, popular culture, human agents, or the ‘lives’ – and ‘deaths’, as in *Black & White Movies* – of media apparatus. Documentary forays into material culture may seem the guiding idea behind Taanila's art, but such a conclusion would be overly limiting and misleading, for he has created other things as well and developed a poetics all his own, one that transcends the sum total of the ingredients of his works. Although they are *about* something, they are also about something *else*. Their success is at least partly due to the dynamic they create between their highly concentrated forms and the expansive cultural spaces they unleash within the observers' minds.

1 Hal Foster, “Exhibitionists,” *London Review of Books*, Vol. 37, No. 11 (June 4, 2015), 13–14.

2 I first met Taanila and saw his works when he was still a student at the Lahti Art Academy in Finland. In the early 1990s we collaborated in the framework of the MuuMediaFestival (Helsinki), for which I served as curator. *RoboCup99* premiered at *Alien Intelligence*, a large exhibition I curated for the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, 2000. We have stayed in touch after I became a professor at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Page 2
A Physical Ring
(2002)

Page 4
Optical Sound
(2005)

Pages 6–7
A Physical Ring (2001)
on show at Franken-
steiner Hof, Manifesta 4,
Frankfurt-am-Main,
2015

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The trajectories of meaning in Taanila's works run from the singular toward the plural, yet in ways that deliberately disperse them rather than collect them under "preferred" readings. Even when the topic is something as concrete as the design and marketing of a futuristic house (*Futuro – A New Stance for Tomorrow*) or the construction of an enormous nuclear power station (*The Most Electrified Town in Finland*), Taanila refrains from positing single "truths" or passing moral judgments. In that sense his is an observer's art, but one that refuses to peek at the subject matter through a keyhole. Taanila does not hesitate to penetrate into the worlds he depicts by mediatic means, complicating rather than simplifying the processes of perception and interpretation. Observation glides almost imperceptibly into participation. The observer's point-of-view does not overlap seamlessly with that of the creator, nor is it meant to – there is space in-between. Documentary "objectivity" voluntarily yields some of its matter-of-factness to idiosyncratic visual poetics, inherited from the rich reservoirs of avant-garde art and cinema.

One might suggest that a filmmaker like Stan Brakhage (1933–2003) was a kindred soul, even though he may not qualify as a documentarist at all. His classic independent films such as *Window Water Baby Moving* or *Dog Star Man* began with concrete facts of life registered by his fervently agitated handheld camera. What happened next was a kind of "second look", a process of layering, analyzing, repeating, and reflecting on the footage, including its material signifiers like defects and grain. Film could be buried or left outside to be shaped by natural elements. When an aesthetic profile gradually emerged, it was at multiple removes from "reality." The poet's and the painter's stance – Brakhage admired the spontaneity of abstract expressionism – became superimposed on that of the documentarist. The outcome was a "mythopoetic" creation vacillating between the self and the world, the material and the immaterial. For anyone familiar with Taanila's works it is immediately clear that this is not exactly what happens in them, and yet there are affinities. Taanila stays closer to the footage he is working on, but he also practices the art of the second look, both highlighting and surpassing his raw material.

Taanila once characterized his process in a typically understated manner: "All my films are based on an extant phenomenon, person, atmosphere or musical work. To me, the most stimulating time begins when I have stirring material on the editing table and a long and intimate working spell with it ahead."³ One might glimpse the mighty ghost of Sergei Eisenstein, who claimed that the meaning of a film was created in the editing room. The footage recorded by the camera was only raw material, to be organized and provided with signification in the post-production stage. Although Taanila avoids going to such extremes, there is some truth in this comparison as well. Editing is a kind of bricolage – the creation of meaning from discrete, pre-existing things. This is particularly true of creators who use as much 'found footage' as Taanila does. Bricolage is closely associated with the idea of the "logic of the concrete," propagated by the social anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss in the 1960s.⁴

For Lévi-Strauss the logic of the concrete characterized the creation of meaning in pre-literate societies, underlying both mythological thinking and ritual behavior. Pre-existing elements, whether mythological motifs or objects and even food items, were combined to create statements that gave answers to fundamental questions about the universe, the past and the future, and the prevailing social order. Bricolage was the 'method' of achieving this. A 'bricoleur' was a kind of tinkerer who used whatever was at hand to produce statements, or complexes of signs. According to Lévi-Strauss, the bricoleur "builds up structures by fitting together events, or rather the remains of events ..." He "'speaks' not only *with* things... but also through the medium of things: giving an account of his personality and life by the choices he makes between the limited possibilities."⁶ Lévi-Strauss suggested that the logic of the concrete was an alternative to the abstract reasoning underlying modern science.

³ Taanila in the booklet accompanying *Aika & Aine (Time & Matter)*. *A Compilation of Short Films and Documentaries Directed by Mika Taanila* (Helsinki: Kinotar, 2005).

⁴ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* [La pensée sauvage] (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966). In this book Lévi-Strauss talks about the "science of the concrete" (ch. 1, pp. 1–33), while "logic of the concrete" appears just once. In subsequent books the latter notion was adopted.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 22

⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.



Le peau douce (The Soft Skin), from the series *Black and White Movies* (2013)

Its existence was therefore not limited to pre-literate societies: bricolage as a means of signification and communication was practiced here and now.

As examples of contemporary practices of bricolage Lévi-Strauss mentioned outsider art or art brut, the stage sets of the early silent films of Georges Méliès, and a famous scene in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* describing a detailed miniature world constructed by a Mr. Wemmick.⁷ He also discussed art, claiming that it "lies half-way between scientific knowledge and mythical or magical thought." The artist was both "something of a scientist" and a bricoleur, who "[b]y his craftsmanship ... constructs a material object which is also an object of knowledge."⁸ As he wrote these words – *La pensée sauvage* was published in 1962 – Lévi-Strauss could not foresee the surge of bricolage that was forthcoming, not only in contemporary art, but also in subcultural practices, including hip-hop, hackerism, and culture jamming. Robert Rauschenberg's assemblages were created by mixing things that already had meaning-traces such as newspaper cuttings, photographs, found objects, etc., but so that the outcome did not form cohesive abstract "statements." The huge tradition of found footage film that began in the early twentieth century and has inspired related forms like scratch video, game hacks, mash-ups, etc. is carried forward by Christian Marclay, Craig Baldwin, Gustav Deutsch, Taanila, and others.

It may not be misleading to characterize Taanila's art practice as a kind of "poetics of the concrete." Aspects of the external world, received in different "containers," formats and sensory modes, are worked on, assembled and made to speak with modified voices – not in a monologue, but rather as a reverberating chorus. This happens in *Black & White Movies* (2013), a recent work that marks a shift from the screen to the gallery walls. Its starting point was a cache of obsolete VHS videotapes on which Taanila had recorded his favorite film classics, many of which contained violent scenes. Taanila selected some of them, and proceeded to destroy the video cassettes using methods similar to those used in the selected scenes. The "corpses" were then taken to a photographic studio to be used as material for photograms, or photographs taken without a camera by exposing the objects against photo-sensitive paper. Taanila named each of the photograms by the film's title and instructed exhibitors not to mention the method by which the video cassette had been destroyed: shooting, burning, fireworks, stoning, etc..

The poetics of the concrete operates here in a number of ways. The process of transformation that led from the videotapes to the framed photograms unfolded in stages, each of them further from the referent. The photogram titled *Kiss Me Deadly* has little in common with Robert Aldrich's hysteric Cold War era masterpiece, even less than the low resolution video copy had with the original high resolution film print, which was meant for the cinema screen, not for the television monitor. However, it is a trace of a "crime scene" like the original film scene was, although it may be closer to WeeGee's famous shots of murder victims lying on city streets, because the violence they depict had been actual rather than staged. Taanila's ritual re-enactments of screen violence were both real and abstract – only the methods of destruction, not the scenes themselves, were evoked. Their theatricality was cooled down by exhibiting the photograms without information about their making. Not only were movements frozen; the sounds – both from the videotape and from Taanila's re-enactment events – were reduced to silence as well.

How do exhibition visitors respond to *Black & White Movies*? The answer depends on each viewer's identity, encapsulated in the semiotic codes acquired through one's social group, education, interests, etc., contingent factors such as the number of visitors, distractions, hunger, etc., as well as on the configuration of the situation: exhibition design, access to background information, etc. Someone may regard the works as purely aesthetic objects,

⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.
⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

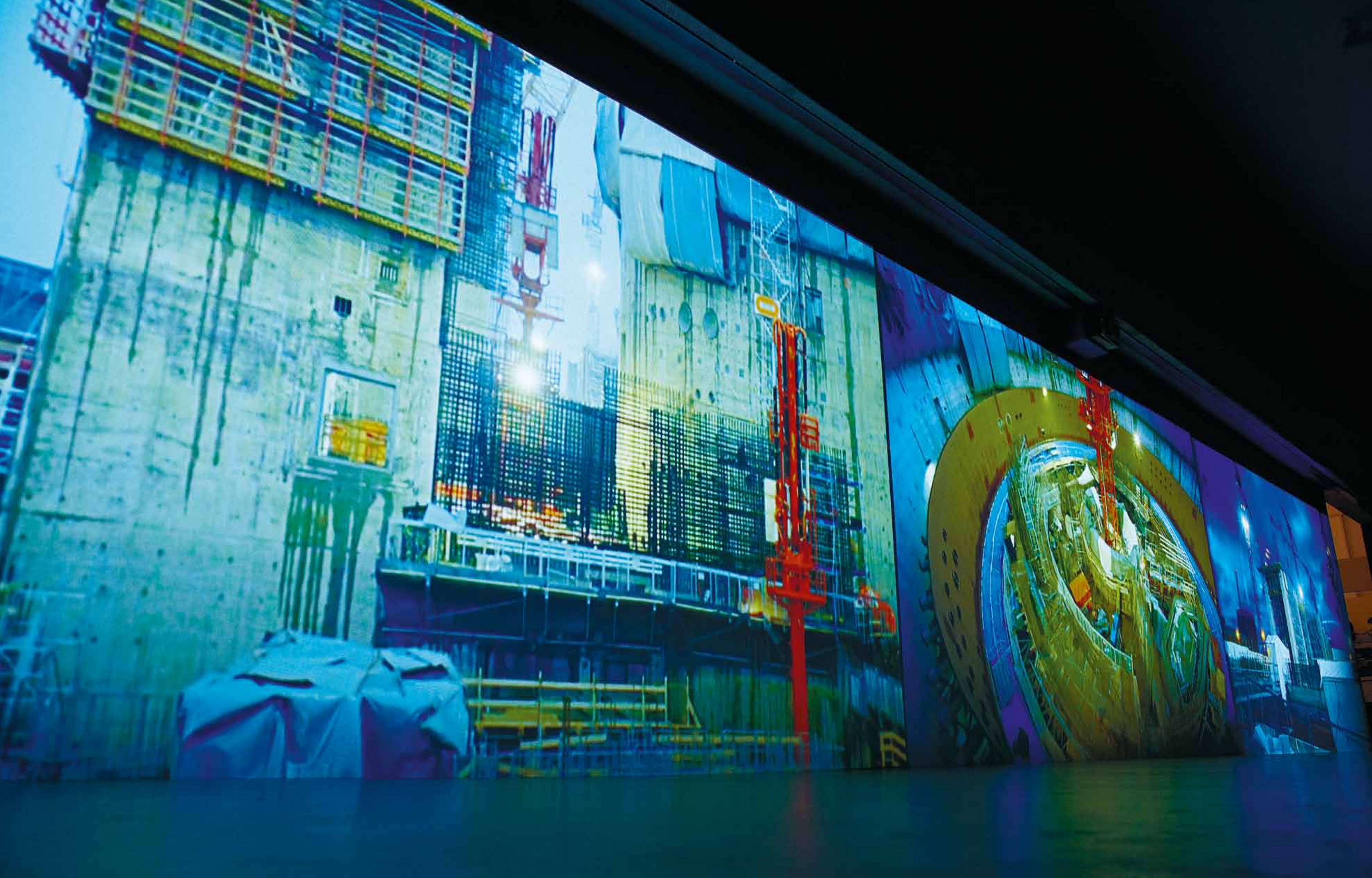


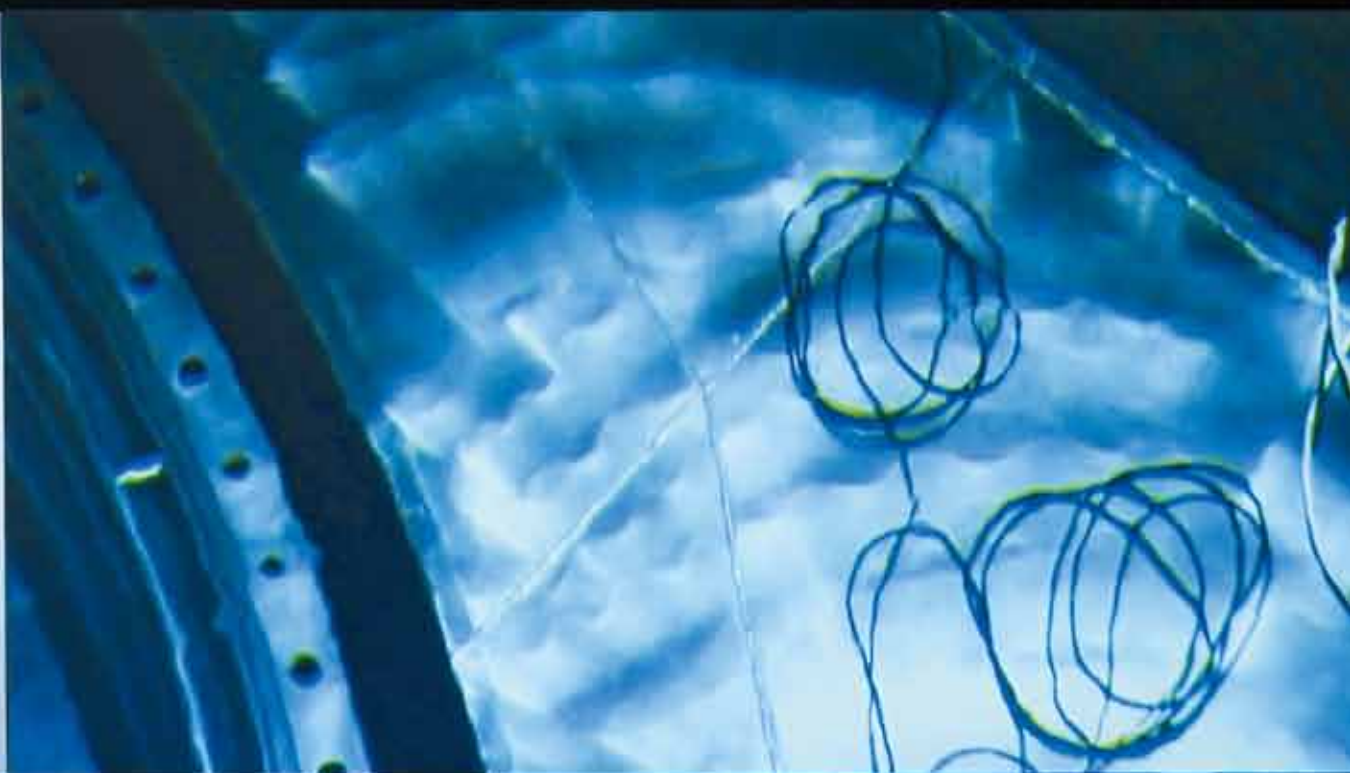
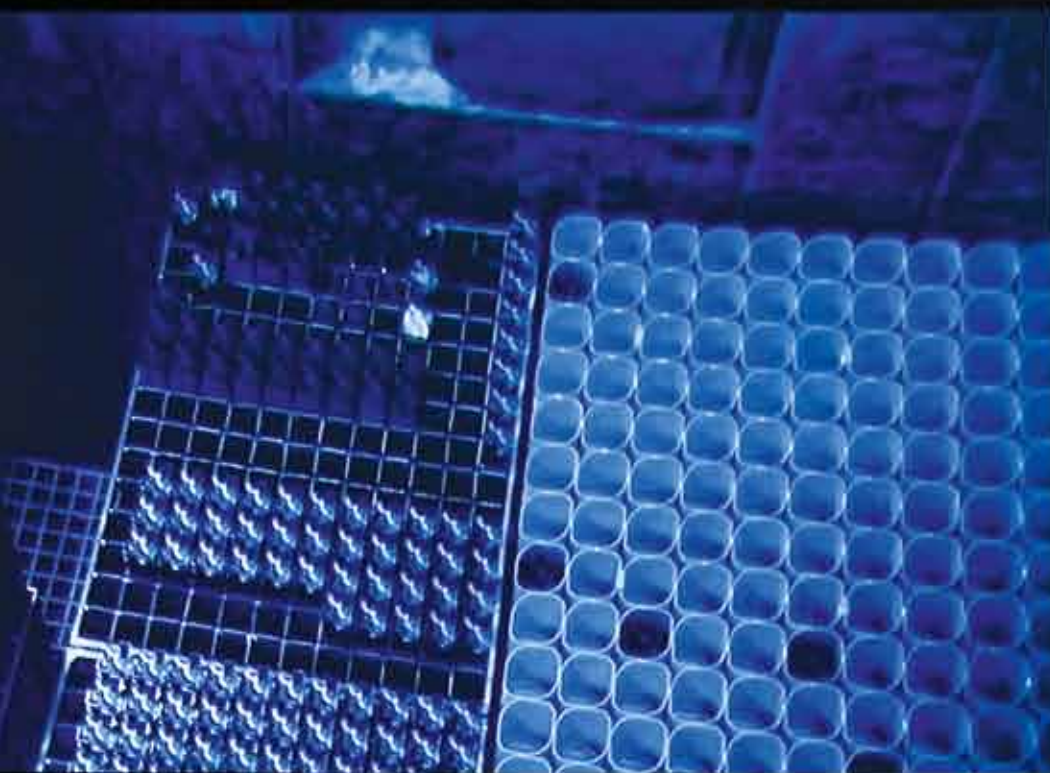
Top left
Strait-Jacket, from the series
Black and White Movies (2013).

Top right
**Kid Speed a.k.a.
Four-Wheeled Terror**,
from the series *Black and White
Movies* (2013).

Bottom left
Sommerlek (Summer Interlude),
from the series *Black and White
Movies* (2013).

Bottom right
Faster Pussycat, Kill! Kill!,
from the series *Black and
White Movies* (2013).





The “un-production”
of an unusually
talkative film fits to
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is at stake here.
The video “de-make”
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the “chopping.”

Pages 14–15
**The Most Electrified Town
in Finland** (2012), on show at
Contemporary Art Museum
St. Louis.

Pages 16–17
**The Most Electrified Town
in Finland** (2012), on show
at Kiasma Museum of
Contemporary Art in Helsinki.

or be drawn to the contrast between the traces of destruction and the silence emanating from them in the manner of *post mortem* photographs. Some may be able to draw links with works by kindred artists from Man Ray's dadaist rayograms and Gusztav Metzger's self-destructive art to the art of Roman Signer, Christian Marclay and others, who have molded acts of destruction into acts of creation. Whether the viewer grasps the link with screen violence or not – the titles provide clues – the signs of decay and entropy that characterize both the works and the contemporary world likely stand out. The *Black & White Movies* are effigies for the postmodern media world that has lost its grip on the idea of progress and fallen into the abyss of self-destruction.

Associations with Taanila's other works come to mind. A particularly relevant point of comparison is *My Silence*, which was created in the same period as *Black & White Movies*. It exists in two versions, a single-channel video installation (2013) and as text-based wall-mounted panels (2015). The starting point is Louis Malle's conversation film *My Dinner with André* (1981). Taanila edited out every bit of dialogue, as well as the long monologues that began and ended the film, reducing the length from 110 minutes to merely 12 minutes and 37 seconds. In the text-based version the reduction was taken even further by eliminating both images and sounds: using the film's published script, Taanila cut out the dialogue, leaving only the two protagonists' names and the directions for the action. The result, 97 mostly blank pages, are exhibited as a series pinned on the wall in a “grid.” The title makes one wonder: whose “silence” is it? Malle's (who died in 1995), Taanila's, or perhaps the medium's? The “un-production” of an unusually talkative film fits the reclusive Finnish mentality, but more is at stake here. The video “de-make” focuses attention on the non-verbal body language, as well as on the jump cuts and aleatory sound bites produced by the “chopping.” The textual version, another “film without film,” hearkens back to the serial strategies of classic conceptual art.



My Silence (2013)
on show at Carroll /
Fletcher in London.

For those who know Taanila mostly from his celebrated documentaries, these recent works may seem a reorientation, perhaps an effort to make his work more gallery- and collector-friendly. One might also ponder the implication of the silence (Taanila's silence?), because many of his earlier works have been quite loud, or at least provided with elaborate soundtracks. This reminds us of the fact that Taanila's earliest inspiration was not the moving image, but rather the realm of sound. As he explained in an interview: "Music was my first love. I was very young when the punk rock movement started. It was the trigger for me for basically everything ... So yes, I use a lot of music in my works all the time. I guess it is only natural, since music came to me first in life. I enjoy collaborating with musicians and the collision of ideas that takes place during the process." It is logical that Taanila – after playing music himself – entered the Finnish audiovisual culture scene as a maker of music videos for energetic independent musicians and groups like Kauko Röyhkä, Maritta Kuula and 22-Pistepirkko.

Working outside the mainstream gave the young Taanila opportunities to experiment with ideas and formats without pressure from the industry moguls to produce surefire hits. His early works not only evoke punk aesthetics but hearken back to the experimental film culture of the 1960s and 1970s. The use of found footage and amateur film-like handheld cameras, as well as an infatuation with formats that were already on their way to obsolescence in the commercial media world became features of an approach which anchored Taanila outside the profit-driven media industry. With his love of grainy black & white Super 8 film, he represented the Other, making a plea for "thinking differently" amidst an increasingly calculated, uniform, and commercial media culture. It is no wonder, then, that Taanila's oeuvre frequently revisits such influences. Alternative and experimental, in particular ambient music became staples of his art as we can witness by *listening* to the soundtracks of his works. And Taanila contributes to loud live stage acts, as his collaborations with Circle demonstrate (*SSENNSSSESS*, 2013).

9 Kelly Shindler, "Temporal Shifts. Conversation with Mika Taanila," in: *Mika Taanila: Aikakoneita / Time Machines*, ed. Leevi Haapala and Kati T. Kivinen (Helsinki: Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, 2013), 45–46.

“Music was my first love. I was very young when the punk rock movement started. It was the trigger for me for basically everything.”



Approximately 50% of all the teaching done by the instructors is on the beginners level and it becomes readily apparent that some new method or device is needed for teaching the poor swimmer.

The Assembly Line Method may be the answer and most assuredly deserves serious consideration.

EXPECTANCY OR "SET"
THE ASSEMBLY LINE



However, the relationship between sound and silence is anything but clear-cut. Taanila's work has for a long time developed along parallel tracks that frequently cross or overlap. Besides documentaries, which have been adapted for presentation in different kinds of spaces from cinemas to museums, there has been a line of work conceived mainly as gallery installations. The core in most cases is found film or video footage. In *Verbranntes Land* (2002), the earliest, representations of soundtracks and archaic-looking early 1980s instructional VHS video footage were set to music by the Finnish independent band Kiila, while *A Physical Ring* (2002) was based on a recycled scientific film where a mysterious rotating and oscillating metal ring was spun by a motor. It was accompanied by a hypnotic soundtrack by Ø, a.k.a. Mika Vainio. Although the work can be exhibited as a single-channel version on the cinema screen, its effect has been enhanced in the installation version which is site-specific, normally involving multiple projections. There is also *Stimulus Progression* (2005), an ambient sound installation with video in a tiny surveillance monitor, inspired by Taanila's early documentary on Muzak, *Thank You For the Music – A Film About Muzak* (1997).

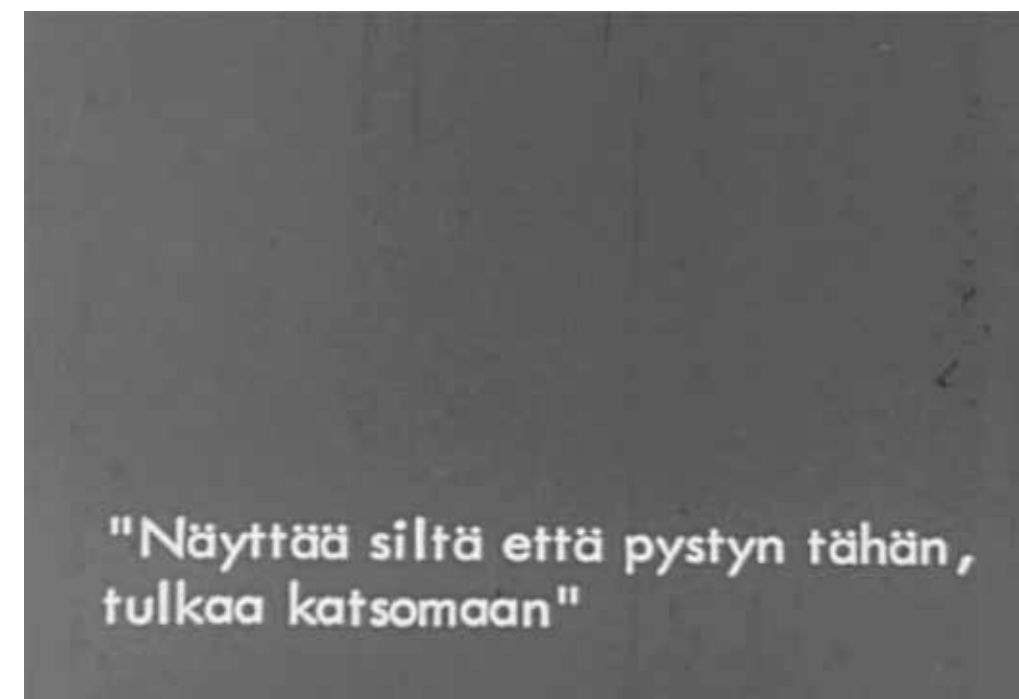
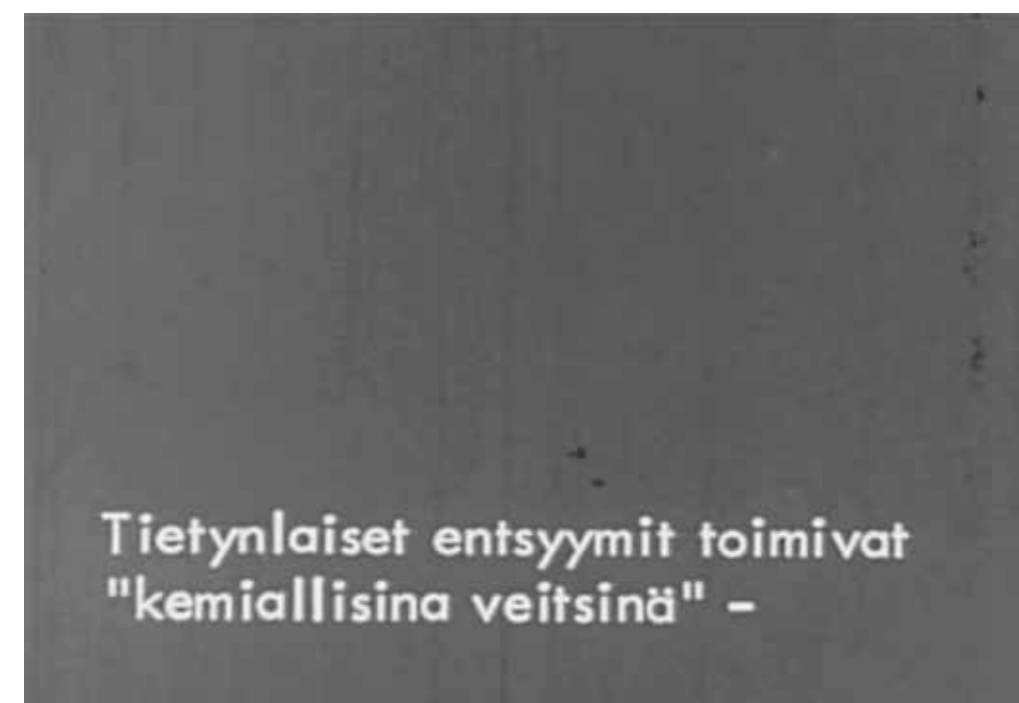
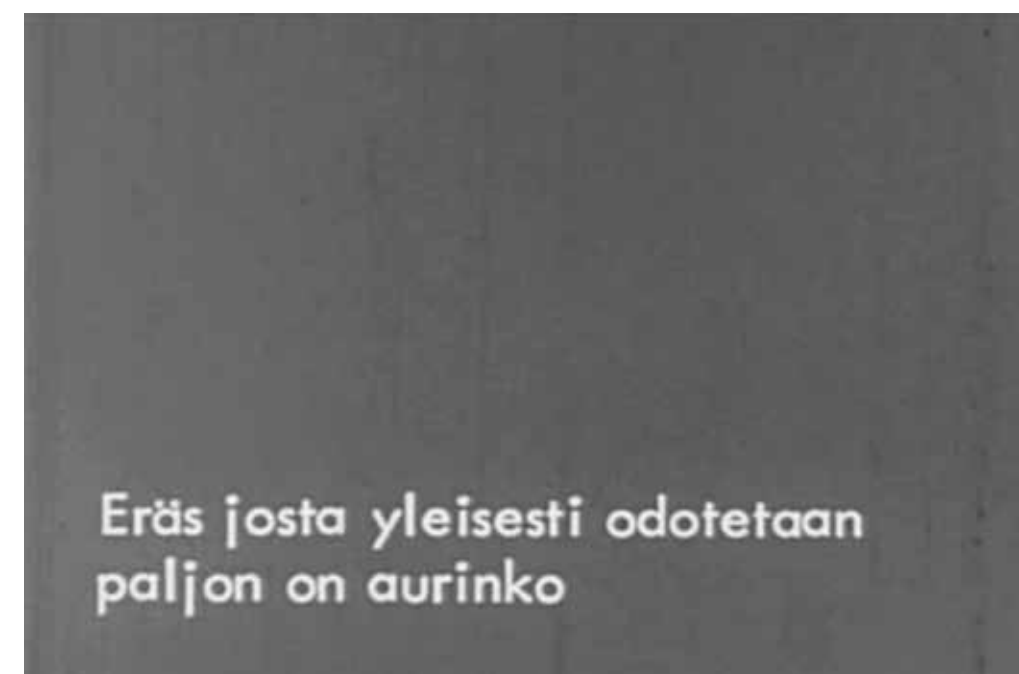
The Zone of Total Eclipse (2006) was configured either as a film performance or a gallery installation. Positive and negative prints of the same astronomy film, the result of a failed effort to film a total eclipse of the sun, were projected simultaneously with two 16 mm film projectors so that the frames overlapped, while *Twilight* (2010) used two video projectors moving slowly along metal tracks while projecting a curious scientific film of toads trying to catch rubber "worms," filmed in a laboratory setting. *Man and Science* (2011) was a film installation, a "lettrist" projection. The source was a true "readymade" – a 16 mm film reel found in a trash can and consisting solely of Finnish subtitles against black background. It had been used to translate a television program showing a group of Nobel prize winners discussing scientific issues. During the broadcast the text slides were manually superimposed on the program one by one. By projecting the entire reel at normal speed, Taanila made the texts flicker on the screen. The work lasts 27 seconds; the film is 493 cm long and contains 648 frames. Shown in this way the texts are practically impossible to read, "emulating the effect of a Tibetan prayer wheel."¹⁰ The return to silence encountered in later works can already be discovered here.¹¹



10 Taanila in: *Mika Taanila: Aikakoneita / Time Machines*, ed. Leevi Haapala and Kati T. Kivinen (Helsinki: Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, 2013), 130.

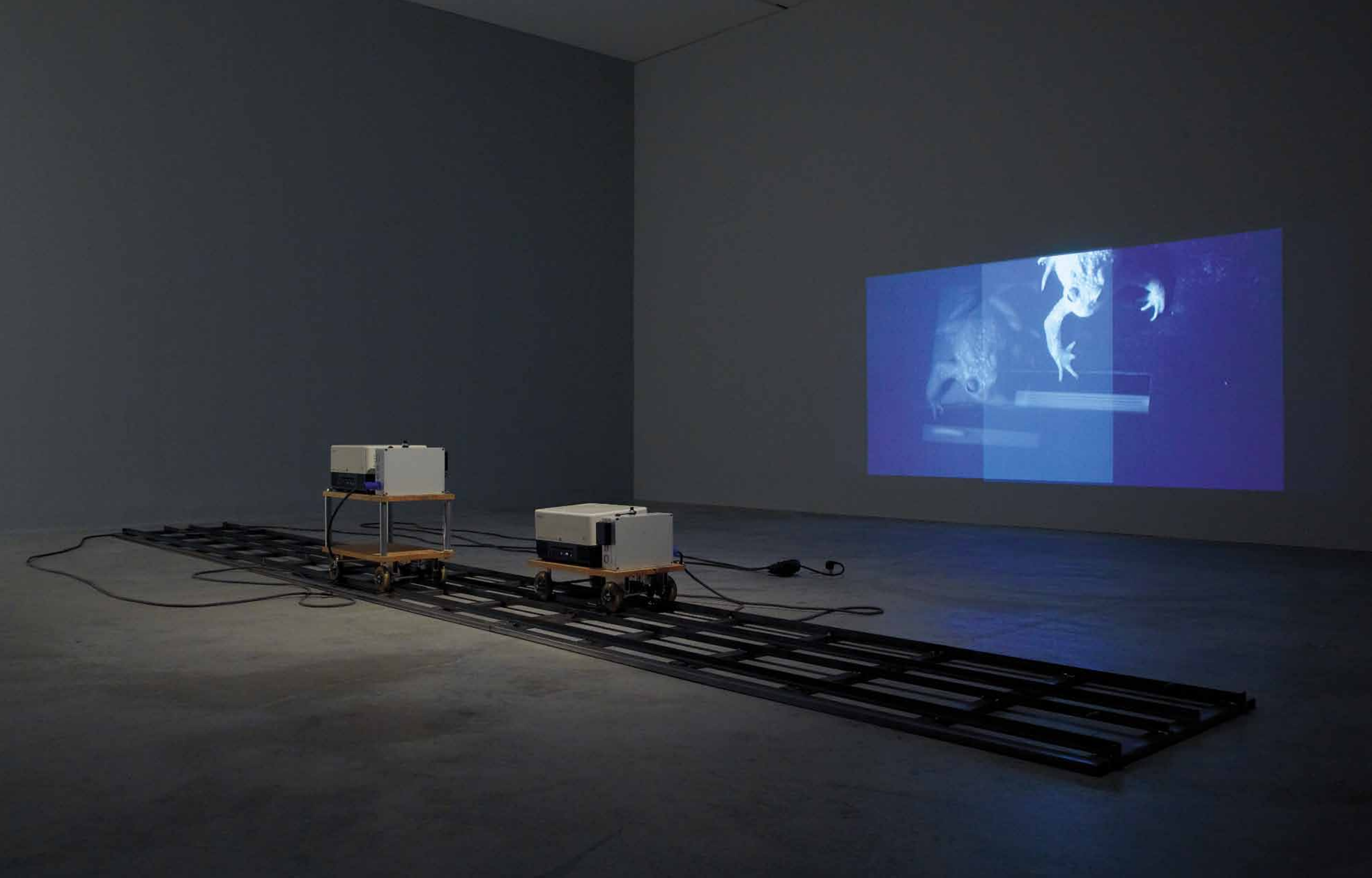
11 Demonstrating the consistency of Taanila's work, the motif of silence already appeared in the early Super-8 short film *Pidän tästä hiljaisuudesta* (I Like This Silence, 1983–86), although the film has a collage soundtrack that includes a female voice-over appropriated from Jörn Donner's feature film *Anna* (1970).

The Zone of Total Eclipse (2006) on show at Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki.



Man and Science (2011).

Page 26–27
Twilight (2010)
on show at
Contemporary Art
Museum St. Louis.



While all these works were informed by the traditions of conceptual art and experimental film, the explorations were not purely formal. The works raised issues about scientific (in) certitude, the validity of semiotic representations of reality, and the ambiguous roles of technology in contemporary society. A media archaeological layer can also be detected. The pulsating motion in *A Physical Ring* evokes the rhythmically repeated imagery of machine movements in Dudley Murphy's and Fernand Léger's classic constructivist film *Ballet mécanique* (1924) as well as Eugene Deslav's *La marche des machines* (1927). These resonate curiously with *Six Day Run* (2013), an intense short film which treats the body itself as a machine, strained to its utmost limits. Taanila's works are dotted with technological devices, including 1960s office computers (*The Future Is Not What It Used to Be*), tape recorders (*Thank You for the Music*), dot matrix printers (*Optical Sound*), robots (*RoboCup99*), and video recorders (*Verbranntes Land*). Even the house of the future in *Futuro* is a kind of "machine for living," a cross-pollination of scientific research on synthetic materials, alternative lifestyles, futuristic expectations, and corporate dreams of global markets.¹²

Similar influences are evident in Taanila's acclaimed "documentaries" (the word is too restrictive to be used here without quotation marks), *Thank You for the Music* (1997), *Futuro – A New Stance for Tomorrow* (1998), *RoboCup99* (2000), *The Future Is Not What It Used to Be* (2002), and *Six Day Run* (2013). Whether dealing with Muzak, the history of a UFO-shaped plastic house, the prospects of autonomous robot sports, the life of a techno-utopian visionary, or extreme running trials, Taanila attacks documentary normalcy with variations of speed, color, and layering, and by emphasizing the materiality of the film stock. Far from being homages to past masters or reckless play with signifiers, the formal explorations carry structures of meaning. In *Futuro*, collages of newspaper headlines, newsreels, archival photographs, and contemporary interviews create a dense reflection on the cultural environment that gave rise to "tomorrow's house from yesterday," highlighting the fact that *Futuro's* promise was disseminated and eventually squandered through media culture.¹³

RoboCup99, a work about a soccer tournament between autonomous robots, is slightly more conventional in form. However, the clichés of sports broadcasting are cleverly played with as metatext. *The Future Is Not What It Used to Be* uses the heterogeneity of its materials to the fullest. Home movies, industrial films, advertisements, sound diaries from cassettes, and snippets from television broadcasts all have their place within the composition, guiding the viewer through the chaotic but ordered, perpetually unfinished world of the polymath Erkki Kurenniemi (born 1941) – a scientist, technologist, composer, artist, exhibition designer, deep thinker, and living data bank. Kurenniemi himself expressed his ideas and documented his life in many media including amateur film, video, and sound recordings. This suits Taanila perfectly; an extraordinary resonance is created between the two creators. Kurenniemi's films and videos provide glimpses into the subjective impulses underlying his artistic, scientific, and commercial endeavors, while testifying to his relentless experimentation. The extraordinary layering of Kurenniemi's home movies was realized by exposing the same film multiple times; such random combinations appeal to Taanila, a kindred spirit.

12 The idea of houses as "machines for living" goes back to Le Corbusier and Buckminster Fuller in the 1920s and 1930s. See Brian Horrigan, "The Home of Tomorrow," in *Imagining Tomorrow. History, Technology, and the American Future*, ed. Joseph J. Corn (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1986), 136–163.

13 *Futuro: Tomorrow's House from Yesterday/ Tulevaisuuden talo menneisyydestä*, ed. Marko Home and Mika Taanila (Helsinki: Desura Ltd., 2002).

14 Kurenniemi reveals this in the audio commentary he provided (in conversation with Taanila) to *Futuro is Not What It Used To Be*. It is included as an extra on the DVD *Aika & Aine (Time & Matter)*.



Futuro – A New Stance for Tomorrow (1998).

Pages 30–31 & 32–33
Verbranntes Land (2002).

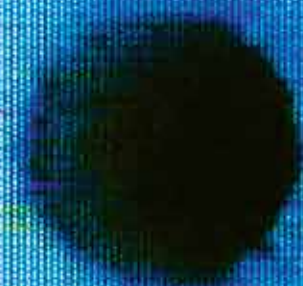


Video Signal to Noise

GOOD

POOR

Video Frequency Response



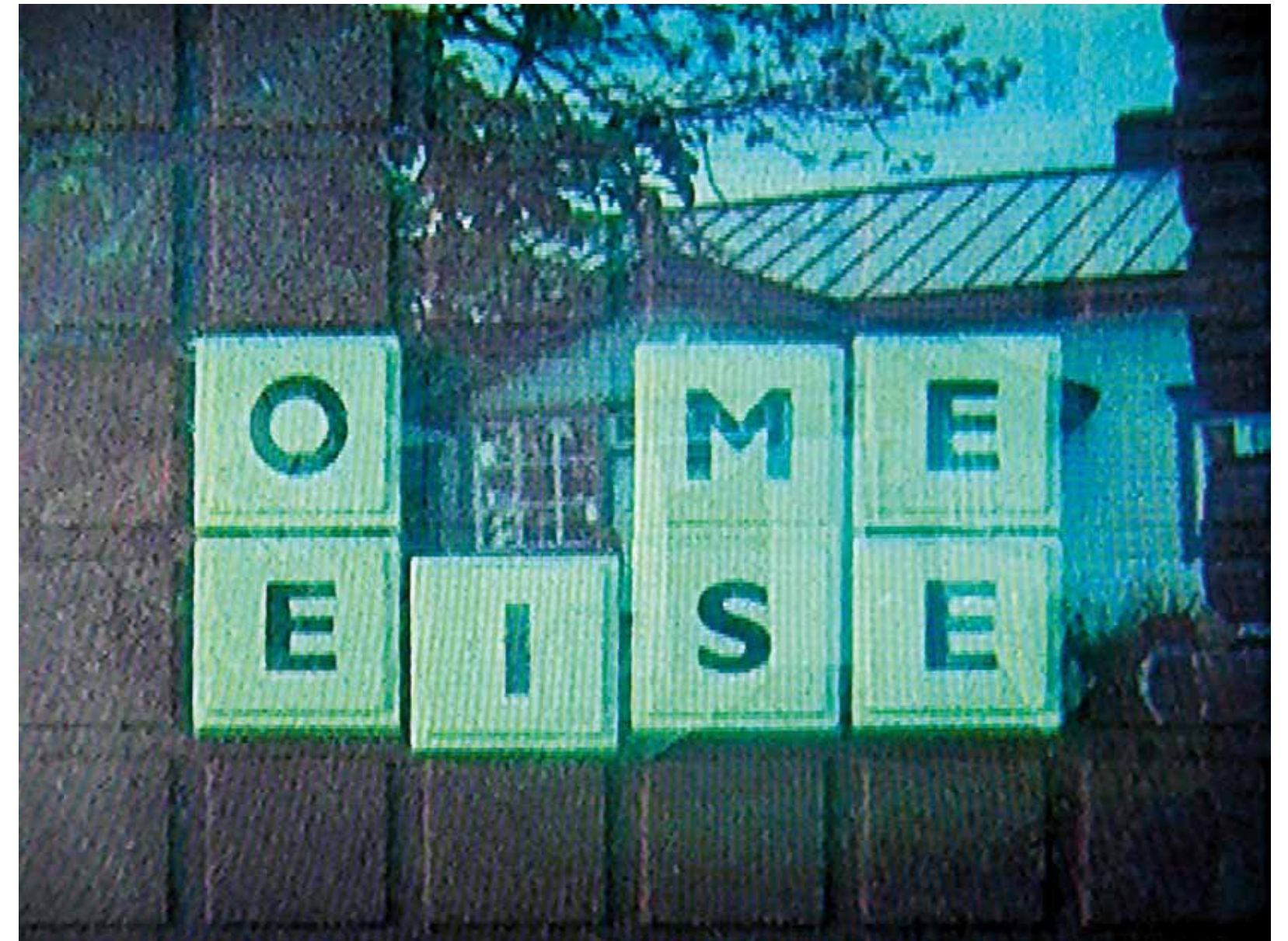


RoboCup99, a work about a soccer tournament between autonomous robots, is slightly more conventional in form. However, the clichés of sports broadcasting are cleverly played with as a metatext.

...However,
one motif rises
above the others:
the human being's
intense, difficult
and sometimes
paradoxical lot in
an increasingly
technologized,
mediated, and
designed world.

Although Taanila normally hides his persona behind his images and sounds, at times it can be detected. The silent 16 mm film *Sommerreise (A Summer Trip)*, 2006) represents a particularly laden moment. It evokes Kurenniemi's experimental short film *Winterreise* (1963) by "documenting", in a manner Brakhage might have done it, Taanila's visit to Kurenniemi's summer house. In one of those ironies that plague human existence, the latter – an endless talker – has lost his ability to speak due to an apoplexy. His frantic efforts to make himself understood are futile; Taanila responds by making his film silent. The sunny promise of the title sinks into the ominous darkness of Schubert's *Winterreise*. As we can see, the motif of silence we have been discussing in connection with later works, already surfaced here. It has multiple sources and interpretations within Taanila's oeuvre, warning us not to draw simple evolutionary trajectories through a career as complex as his. It is safer to treat Taanila's output as a field that keeps on transforming; one where motifs are stored and retrieved when needed; modified and combined.

What are Taanila's works all about? Giving an all-embracing answer may be impossible and perhaps not even needed. However, one motif rises above the others: the human being's intense, difficult and sometimes paradoxical lot in an increasingly technologized, mediated, and designed world. Human beings continue creating and Taanila himself is a perfect example, but these days human activities are coupled with machines and systems of their own making that threaten to take over and cause irreversible catastrophes, possibly even extinguishing life from planet Earth. How can we foretell where humankind is headed? Can we enhance our bodies (and minds) to cope with the challenges ahead? How can we eliminate the dark shadows cast over our lives by our own actions? Such issues were summarized in one of Taanila's crowning achievements to date, the magnificent three-channel video installation *The Most Electrified Town in Finland*, which was shown at Documenta 13 in Kassel (2013). A by-product of *Return of the Atom*, an on-going feature documentary project by Taanila and his regular cinematographer Jussi Eerola, it centers on the many long years spent building the controversial Olkiluoto 3 nuclear power plant in Eurajoki, Finland.





Optical Sound
(2005).

Pages 42–43
SSEENSSSEESS (2013)
on show at Kiasma
Museum of Contemporary Art
in Helsinki.

Eerola's magnificent camerawork of the construction site and its surroundings merges the everyday with the surreal, including scenes of nature and local life under the aegis of enforced nuclear-powered normalcy. The installation presents a vision that defies simple explanation; words would not be able to capture the experience. Unlike most works about nuclear power, there are no clear winners, villains or victims. The local town of 6,000 people advertises itself as the "most electrified town in Finland," possibly mixing humor and pride with anxiety. In Taanila's installation, there are no anti-nuclear demonstrations, but many small hints imply the looming danger. His beloved raw material, deteriorating film, makes its appearance, representing the creeping effects of nuclear radiation. No matter what happens, life must continue; the surface is calm.

We should also mention *Optical Sound* (2005), a short film shot in 35 mm Cinemascope by Taanila's regular collaborator Jussi Eerola. It is a hypnotic "symphony" for autonomous machines, performed by an array of antiquated dot matrix printers, orchestrated by [The User]. The new emerges from the old, perhaps for a brief instant before lapsing back into obsolescence. For a few fleeting moments the dominating close-ups of the performing printers give way to shots depicting a wall of lit windows. We see humans – still there – silently working in their office cubicles, while machinic structures permeate their daily lives. Although Taanila often deals with technological dreams – moments when future vistas seem wide open – they are shown to become entangled within the complexities of social, economic and cultural realities. The future is revealed as little more than a projection – a slanted mirror image of the present, one that may be already cracked, or about to be shattered. The title Taanila has given one of his film series, *Science Noir*, says much. Even Erkki Kurenniemi's fantasies about uploading the contents of his mind and the accumulated knowledge of humankind onto quantum computers as a gateway to post-human existence have their discontents.

As a wise and thoughtful creator, Taanila does not purport to give or even pretend to know all the answers – in all the works he has realized so far, he probes, proposes and speculates. It is a significant feature of his poetics of the concrete that he does not use authoritative "voice of god" narrators or deterministic storylines; the only exception is *RoboCup99*, where clunky computerized voice synthesis is used in this role. Taanila's works are remarkably free of moralizing or accusatory tones. They create juxtapositions, comparisons and overlays; they hint and suggest; they wonder about the complexities and absurdities of life, but they don't laugh out loud. Much like Michel de Montaigne's classic essays, or Chris Marker's cinematic essays, Taanila's works expose human wisdom and folly, but refrain from drawing conclusions. Open-endedness is the answer. Taanila has managed to create a world with flexible confines; a realm that by turns attracts viewers and repels them; one that provides sensory stimuli and even overload, but also reveals the immeasurable, the hidden and the silent – the reverse of images and sounds.

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Erkki Huhtamo is a media archaeologist, writer and exhibition curator. He was born in Helsinki, Finland in 1958, and holds a Ph.D. in Cultural History from the University of Turku, Finland. He is a Professor at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) working in the departments of Design | Media Arts, and Film, Television, and Digital Media. Huhtamo has published extensively on media archaeology and media arts, lectured worldwide, created television programs, and curated exhibitions. His most recent books are *Illusions in Motion: Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles* (The MIT Press, 2013), *Elementi di schermologia. Verso un'archeologia dello schermo*, trans. Roberto Terrosi (Kaiak Edizioni, 2015) and *Media Kokogaku - Kako Genzai Mirai no Taiwa no Tameni* ("Media Archaeology: Dialogues Between the Past, Present, and Future,") trans. Yoshitaka Ota (Tokyo: NTT Publishing, 2015).



MIKKA TAKIM
AIKAKAINEITA
TIME MACHINES
CHINESE



Charles Esche

Statement

Mika Taanila's works are the most convincing of all the candidates for their full realization of his ideas. He has worked with extraordinary commitment, as well as political and social awareness, to produce video works that are both documents of a time and place and expressive vehicles for ideas about 'good' and 'bad' society. Mika tackles some of the fundamental questions in a social democratic European society in terms of conformism, tolerance and the power of the state. He does so in ways that are never rhetorical or abstract but concrete and particular. Through his work, viewers have the opportunity to observe how society comes to its collective opinions and why that matters.

It has been a hard choice to make as all the candidates have particular qualities and reasons why it would make sense to ward them the prize. In the end, however, I have chosen to award the ARS FENNICA to the artist who in my opinion has the most fully developed body of work in which the intentions of the works have been brought closest to realization. For that ultimately overriding reason, I would like to award the prize to Mika Taanila.



Ars Fennica

What is the Henna and Pertti Niemistö Art Foundation?

The Henna and Pertti Niemistö Art Foundation was established in 1990. The Foundation promotes the visual arts and opens up new avenues for Finnish art in the international arena. The Foundation awards the ARS FENNICA prize to artists in recognition of distinctive creative work of exceptional quality.

The prizewinner is chosen in two phases. An award panel appointed by the Foundation selects the candidates, after which an international art expert invited by the award panel chooses the winner from among the candidates. The award is worth €40,000 and includes an exhibition and an e-book.

How is the prizewinner chosen?

The artist's production and overall achievements are both taken into account when the winner is chosen. Both well-known artists and younger up-and-coming talent are eligible for the prize.

Candidates

Who are the candidates for the 2015 ARS FENNICA prize?

The candidates for the 2015 ARS FENNICA prize were by an award panel comprising managing director and Doctor of Medicine Leena Niemistö, sculptor Markus Kähre, painter Elina Merenmies and museum director Pirkko Siitari. The winner was chosen by the Netherlands-based independent British curator and museum director Charles Esche.

The candidates are usually nominated from among Finnish artists, but artists from the other Nordic countries, the Baltic States and the St Petersburg area have also been included. The candidates for 2015 were: sculptor Laura Könönen, visual artist Outi Pieski, visual artist Hans Rosenström, visual artist Mika Taanila and the Pink Twins, Juha Vehviläinen & Vesa Vehviläinen.

Who are the members of the award panel?

The award panel for 2015 consists of Leena Niemistö, Pirkko Siitari, Markus Kähre, Elina Merenmies and Charles Esche.

Award Panel And Expert

Who are the members of the award panel?

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Art Experts

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Mika Taanila Blackout

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Verbranntes Land
(2002).



Kahdeksan surmanluotia (Eight Deadly Shots)
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