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EIJA-LIISA AHTILA
Kunsthalle Zurich
Zurich

In the video works of Eija-Liisa Ahtila, the artist's native Finland is never distant. Their emotional topography is almost arctic, marked by the famous Finnish reserve. Insanity is a recurrent theme, in part because many of her videos are based upon conversations with recovering psychotics. Ahtila's moody masterpieces accentuate the harried thinking by a process of editing that mixes rapid cutting with long, languorous shots.

Despite their spartan style, these are not actually cold works, because Ahtila draws out the maelstroms that rage behind the stark facades of her creamy-skinned heroines. The teenage girl at the nexus of *Today* (1997) simply tosses a ball against a wall as she describes the husk of a man her father has become after a road tragedy. Yet in her stem eyes and erect posture we can see an electric intensity.

Two works were spotlighted with full-scale projection spaces. In *The Wind* (2002), a female shut-in describes her life bluntly and perceptively, while trashing her apartment at an unhurried pace. *Consolation Service* (1999) centers on a couple as their relationship splinters apart. At one point, their therapist asks them to communicate nonverbally. Both begin barking at each other like dogs. The patients in the waiting room file into the session and quietly sit against the wall, seemingly invisible to the couple. Their presence does not shift the dynamics of the scene, but it is clear that no matter can ever be truly private.

Ahtila's narratives often completely break with reality, usually at the end of a piece. Yet by then the viewer is so engaged that these sudden slips go down smoothly. In that sense, Ahtila achieves something that David Lynch can only attempt, creating a closely parallel dimension onscreen that is distinctly bizarre yet still rings true.

Marc Spiegler