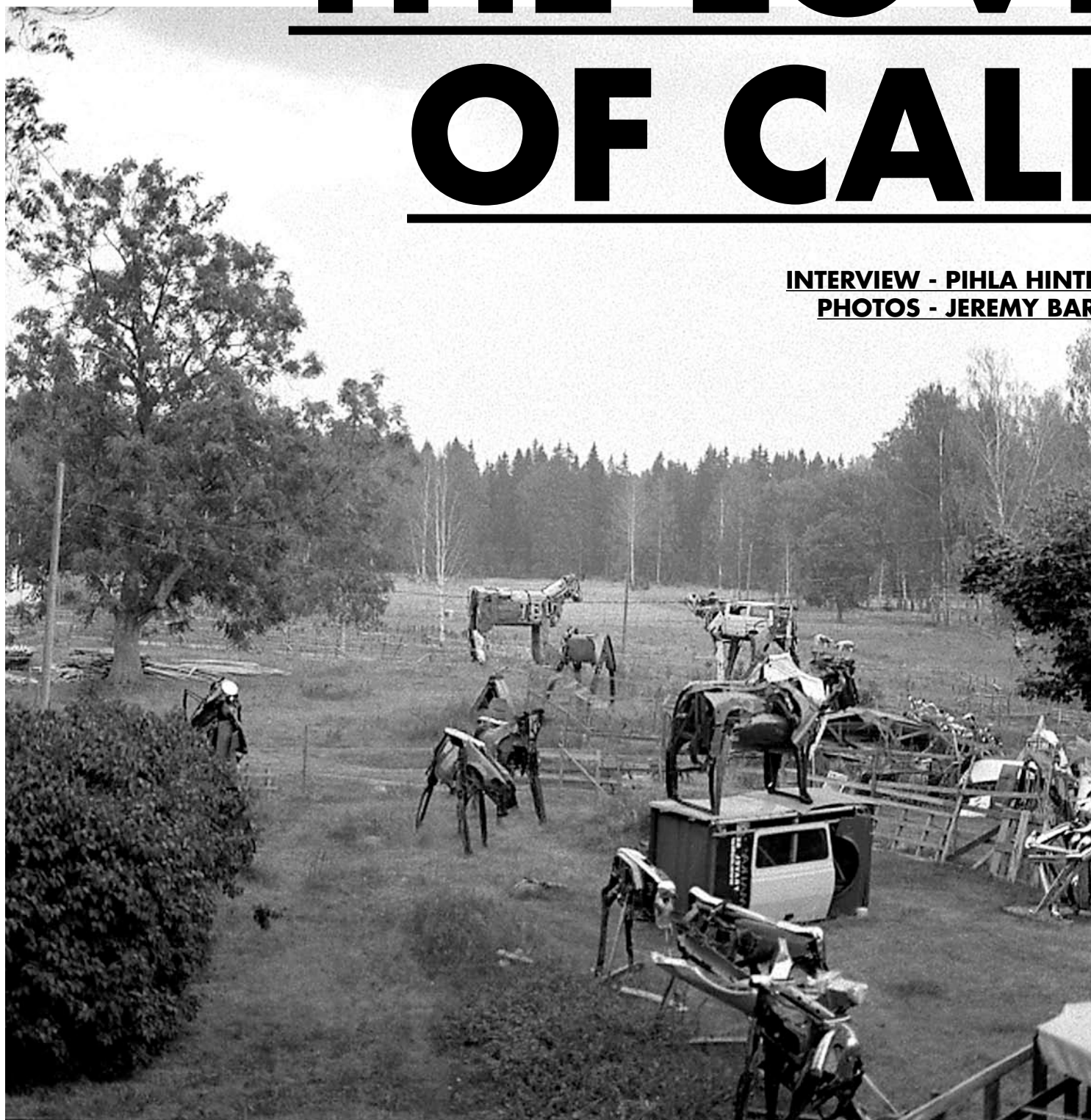


FOR THE LOVE OF CALF

INTERVIEW - PIHLA HINTIKKA
PHOTOS - JEREMY BARROIS



Miina Äkkijyrkkä is no stranger to controversy. The Finnish sculptor has never followed the mainstream, nor given up on anything she believed in. She says what she thinks and she says it loud. In 2002, the uncompromising artist received a State Art Award for her talent of using contradictory elements in her art. The sculptures of cows are combinations of agriculture and "high" culture. She is famous for connecting the passion for cattle-raising and the visual arts as well as gluing together performance art and respect of traditions. Today, in addition to creating performance and sculptural works, she is involved in a rich collaboration as a textile designer with Marimekko. Still, for some, and especially for officers of Helsinki, she is still only a crazy cow woman who doesn't obey the rules, uses too much space, creates too much noise and damages the town's property. For the past 44 years she has been an important advocate for the protection of Finncattle, the native Finnish dairy breed. Äkkijyrkkä currently resides in Helsinki, «On the 6th of November, the court announced that Äkkijyrkkä has to leave her home by the end of the year - and probably say good bye to her cattle too. This interview was made only a couple of weeks before the verdict.»

Why cow?

The first steps of a calf are untouched, they are moments of Sisu (Finnish strength) and coming to life. Calves are careless, I'm inspired by their braveness and their power, they fill me with a fanatic joy and drive. A calf bursting into life is more abstract than an elegant gazelle, it breaks all the rules of finesse and that is why it's at the heart of all my art. I can infinitely use its abstract form. Also, the cow's status has changed over the years. The cow used to be a part of the family, but nowadays it's only a number code. We have lost the real contact to the animal. I've been researching all the instances in the world where cows have had a direct relationship or impact on a human being. I'm particularly interested in the cow's ability to learn, I find it unbelievable how little people actually know about it.

You've been called Äkkijyrkkä (Abrupt) and Lång (Long). What do these names stand for?

Liina Lång (Long Rag) is a signature name because I received a State Art Award and lost everything. I wanted to have an anonymous name. I didn't use it for a long time because it didn't work for anyone, it was too soft. I am, and I'll always remain Miina Äkkijyrkkä (Mine Abrupt). I came up with this name because it's funny, like a fence made of brushwood, visually too with all its consonants. My family has always been all about name-games. A name is never just a name; it expresses the essence of a person. I would never want to have a common name. I'm already indignant that there are two other Äkkijyrkkäs in Finland, and that I'm receiving their mail. Äkkijyrkkä is a big name and it shouldn't belong to just anyone.

What is your normal day like?

Either a normal day doesn't exist, or every day is normal. It depends on the season. In spring, when the overwhelming steely Scandinavian light spreads everywhere, I draw as much as possible. It's the time for calving and I run to the cow house all the time to check if new calves have been born. It's hard, I sleep too little, but I want to be awake. During the summer, I'm welding or preparing my exhibitions. This summer was different since I was trying to find myself a new place to live. I realized that none of the countryside villages attract me anymore because of the fear of darkness and the lack of stimulus that surrounds the spirit there. It's not my life. I'm in a hurry. I have a burning desire to fulfill myself, to satisfy the intuition I have with cows.

How is it to live in Finland as an artist?

I'm almost 60 years old now and I have no place to live. Helsinki is trying to evict me and my cows, and to make sure that I won't find any kind of home in my own hometown. Cows and my work as a sculptor go so obviously together that it's hard for me to think that they would ever be strewed in different directions. My ideas will probably change if I have to travel 100 kilometers to the source of my inspiration. 'Operation Eviction' wouldn't be excruciating if I was really depressed and slouched in bed all day. In that case it could be good to move for a change. My kids have flown the nest and it would be the perfect opportunity to create art. I've recently had exhibitions from New York to Tokyo, and suddenly I have no place where to unpack my bags, think things through and continue to work. I want to live 45 minutes away from the centre, or else in another country or planet. I often visit Paris but I couldn't bring my cows there either. I'd love to find a place somewhere in France with pastures, not too far away from Paris. I just want to be somewhere with my cows. People don't seem to understand that success is always a result of hard work. It doesn't happen easily or by chance, like a seagull pooping on your head. You have to say no to so many things in order to walk on the right path that will lead you to success. If an athlete wins a golden medal, the town treats him like a hero. As a sculptor I use a lot of space, which is inconvenient, and the town wants to get rid of me. If the police attempt to shoot my cows, it will be a very big deal.

Is art a battle?

How to keep the artistic spark alive is a personal battle. An artist needs to express himself but he has to be able to reject all the impulses from his surroundings in order to stay focused on the substance. If a creative person becomes famous in a small country he gets approached continuously and in many different ways. This takes a great deal of energy, and may shape the personality. It's not good. There are always admirers and haters, but every artist should have a safe place to be calm and alone. Sometimes I feel like I'm carrying a vulnerable artistic spark in my arms and I would like to take it home to all my colors and papers, but then somebody interrupts me by asking how many cows I own. They usually get pissed off because I don't grant them enough time or a proper answer. Unfortunately, I don't have five secretaries and ten doors like the officers of Helsinki. I can't sneak out from a back door, I work outside and anyone can grab my arm without any respect for my privacy. It's no wonder that in Helsinki some people think I'm a "horrible bitch" because I don't have the energy to explain the simplest things to everyone who asks. I often yearn for the kind of peacefulness that Paris could offer, millions of people around and nobody who knows me. The mass is like a forest, filled with different stimulus, glamorous colors and all in life that strikes me. I can close my eyes and listen to all the noises like a billowing race, a storm. I love metropolitans. If I'm really depressed, I fly to New York.

Where do you get your inspiration?

Cows, light and colors inspire me. The Northern light is cold, shadeless, silvery and aversive as it bounces everywhere. Then again you can see the stars in the frost or in snowdrifts. The light in Asia is the opposite: rich, soft and warm. You can't underestimate all the different kinds of light in different places; people should have the patience to observe it more. Wind and high places inspire me too. The mysterious sea is the love of my life. It feels like a God's lap, but then again it's so cruel I'm forced to be afraid of it. Though I come from inland, I'm born under the sign of Cancer. Finding balance and harmony in the background when my mind is a scattered mess gives me inspiration.

What does your cooperation with Marimekko mean to you?

I dreamed of working for Marimekko since the age of 20, when Armi Ratia was still part of it. When Kirsti Paakkanen, the managing director of Marimekko, called me in 2007 to let me know that I was chosen to be the head designer of Marimekko for 2008, it was huge, a dream come true. Since then working for Marimekko has been important, rewarding, surprising and wonderful. The company has an atmosphere of creativity and cooperation. The colorful cows I created for Marimekko are different. The only sad thing is that Marimekko is only 10 minutes away from my home and it will all seem so contradictory if I am forced to move away.

How does the idea of Finnishness appear in your art work?

I don't think of Finnishness too much. I have often wondered if Finland is really something important. The language, especially the eastern Finland's dialect, is significant to me. In Lappetelä where I come from people used to have voluntary spirits and magnificent spruce forests. Today, people are rotten. They have lost the real close contact to nature because of all the technology. People don't play anymore, they're just in a hurry to gain power.

What and whom do you admire?

When I was young I admired Brigitte Bardot and our President Urho Kekkonen. I also liked the style of Bill Clinton. The Marshal Mannerheim was a difficult kid but found his way as a soldier, a collector and a leader of Finland's battle for independence. He knew how to handle horses and went to Switzerland to become old – classy. He's like a father figure to me. As for other sculptors, I admire Louise Bourgeois for her marvelous work. When I saw her art for the first time, my whole body began to tremble. But I wouldn't want to be like her. Admiration is a very particular way of being in contact with a person. Many times I've met someone I admire, and the admiration stopped there. Perhaps admiring remains only a sort of distant dreaming, a bubble. I've also noticed from my admirers that they're not really interested in the real me.

What do you dream of?

When I get older, I'd love to have lots of cows here and there, in Asia too. I dream of having a manager, who would take care of organizing my exhibitions, and of a team that would travel abroad with me and create wonderful things together. I hope my children will be brave and make their lives as meaningful as possible, and that my artwork will be recognized globally before I die. I don't believe everything will turn out just fine, but there will be a lot of instructive experiences along the way and I have faith in God. I dream of a little house by the sea where I can be peaceful and quiet with some cows, horses, cats and a dog, perhaps even two. A place where my friends could come over, cook a lovely dinner together, watch the sun go down and of course, talk about cows.



