

EN

# EIJA-LIISA AHTILA

18.05.18 × 16.09.18



M VAN  
MUSEUM  
LEUVEN

Eija-Liisa Ahtila (°1959, Finland) is a contemporary visual artist and filmmaker. She has long been considered a master of the cinematic installation form. Her work is conceptually organized around the construction of image, language, narrative, and space, and she has frequently probed individual identity and the boundaries of the subject in relation to the external world. Using the visual language of cinema, Ahtila presents large-scale installations with multiple channel projections on multiple screen constructions. These viewing conditions, with their simultaneously charged vantage points, break the tradition of cinematic perspective and construct an experience of several co-existing times and spaces for being.

Eija-Liisa Ahtila experiments with narrative storytelling in her cinematic installations and films. In her earlier works, she dealt with the unsettling human dramas at the centre of personal relationships – teenage sexuality, family relations, mental disintegration and death. Her later works deal with profound and basic artistic questions, in which she investigates the processes of perception and attribution of meaning – at times in the light of larger cultural and existential themes like colonialism, faith and posthumanism. The artist encourages us to explore how the anthropocentric medium of film might enable us to narrate the life of the planet itself as well as our own. The starting point for many of her recent works and research has, for instance, been the eco-cinematic question of how and with what kind of technology, drama and expressive devices can we build the image of our world in this present moment of ecological crisis?

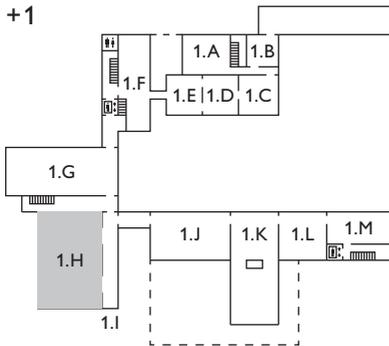
This exhibition offers a survey of Ahtila's practice through seven film installations made between 2001 and 2018 and a series of drawings. Each of the works has been redesigned for its specific presentation at M.

*Curator: Eva Wittcox*

*With the support of the Finnish embassy in Belgium*

# ROOM 1.H: POTENTIALITY FOR LOVE — 2018

7 min 54 sec



*Moving image sculpture in three silent parts*

*Potentiality for Love* is a hybrid piece that combines sculpture with moving image. It deals with the potential for empathy and love towards other living beings. The piece turns attention to those human emotions that could serve as a foundation for dismantling the hierarchical structures between living things, thereby engendering a turn towards non-humans and the recognition of others. The work reflects the origins of these emotions, how we define them and how we conceive of their function as part of a larger continuum of living beings. *Potentiality for Love* consists of three parts, each approaching the theme from a different angle and medium.

## POTENTIALITY FOR LOVE MEMORY OF MOTHER

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#1 – Angular video sculpture of 22 DIP LED modules (4K/HD; 7 min 54 sec loop; sculpture size 614 x 384 x 15 cm)

The first element of the installation is a hybrid work that combines sculpture with moving image technology to focus attention on the point where love is born. Using outdated LED modules, it recreates an image of a distant memory, of mother and the primal unity. It also touches upon the memory of loss and distance, the moment when the possibility for love that exists as potentiality, first emerges.

## POTENTIALITY FOR LOVE TABLES ONE AND TWO

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#2 – 2 research tables with attached 'monitor mirrors' (4K/HD; 2 min 8 sec and 3 min 6 sec loop; size 100 x 72 x 54)

The second element asks whether our love and empathy is reserved only for our own kind, or whether we are capable of holding them towards other living beings as well. This question is approached by addressing the historical divide between humans and non-humans. It is achieved by creating a situation that questions what it is to be a human being and how the other, the stranger, is constructed in our culture. The medium for this is a modified situation featuring a setup

similar to that used to treat phantom limb aches. In these ‘research tables’, however, the mirror is replaced by a thin monitor showing the arm(s) of another primate.

**POTENTIALITY FOR LOVE  
ON THE THRESHOLD (THE  
CHIMPANZEE’S SPACE)**

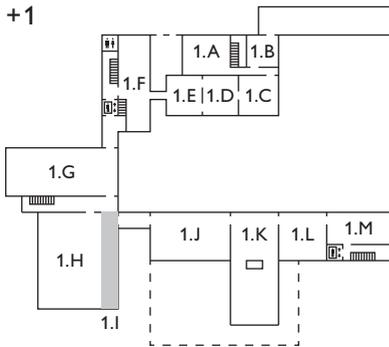
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*#3 – Vertical single channel projection (4K/HD; 2 min 35 sec loop; image size approx. 400 x 225 cm)*

The third element approaches the theme by a vertical projection of a primate facing the opposite way. The chimpanzee is looking towards another space in front of her which the viewer sees only partially. From time to time, the chimp turns towards the camera/ the viewer.

*Written and directed by Eija-Liisa Ahtila. Cast: Jenny and Matleena Kuusniemi. Cinematography Jussi Eerola. Edited by Heikki Kotsalo. Wire FX Reijo Kontio. 3d VFX Jari Hakala. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, Paris, London. Thanks to Frame Finland. Production support by Biennale of Sydney, M-Museum Leuven together with AVEK, Finnish Film Foundation, Kordelin Foundation, SKR. Commissioned by Serlachius Museums, Mänttä. Production: Ilppo Pohjola / Crystal Eye*

# ROOM 1.I: ANTHROPOMORPHIC EXERCISES ON FILM — 2011



*Series of drawings*  
*Green pastel on Parisian paper*

ANTHROPOMORPHIC EXERCISES  
ON FILM: ASPECT RATIO / KNEELING  
SPRUCE

ANTHROPOMORPHIC EXERCISES  
ON FILM: SPECIAL EFFECT

ANTHROPOMORPHIC EXERCISES  
ON FILM: ACTION / STUMBLE  
ANTHROPOMORPHIC EXERCISES

ANTHROPOMORPHIC EXERCISES  
ON FILM: CONVERSATION EDIT 1  
(Two-shot, Medium-shot, Over-the-shoulder, Close-up)

ANTHROPOMORPHIC EXERCISES  
ON FILM: POINT-OF-VIEW / WITH  
A HUMAN

ANTHROPOMORPHIC EXERCISES  
ON FILM: CONVERSATION EDIT 2  
(Medium-shot, Two-shot, Close-up, Over-the-shoulder)

ON FILM: CREATING CHARACTER /  
WITH SNOW

ANTHROPOMORPHIC EXERCISES  
ON FILM: CREATING CHARACTER /  
WITH RAIN

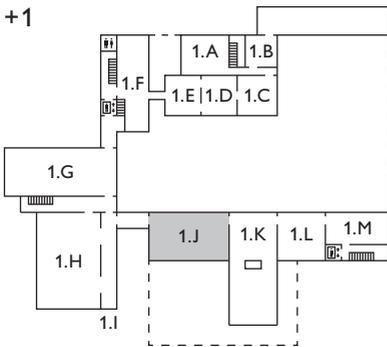
*Anthropomorphic Exercises on Film* is a series of drawings in which the protagonist is a spruce tree. The drawings aim to present the principles of the moving image by altering the viewpoint by exchanging the human protagonist for another living organism. The drawings show in a simple way the limitations of human-centred representation, or perhaps just offer an opportunity to investigate the edges of this constructed medium for perceiving and presenting the world.

For example, take the set of drawings entitled *Aspect Ratio*: the first picture shows the top of a spruce, the next one the bottom part of the tree. The third drawing shows the same tree kneeling – but with its top out of the frame. In the fourth picture, the tree is kneeling and has bowed down its top, allowing the entire tree to be shown in one horizontal frame.

*Courtesy of Gösta Serlachius Fine Arts Foundation,  
Mänttä, Finland*

# ROOM 1.J: HORIZONTAL — 2011

6 min



*6-channel projected installation*  
16:9/1:1.78  
DD5.1, no dialogue

*Horizontal* is a portrait of a 30-metre-high spruce tree. The work is presented horizontally via six separate projections so that it can fit into an interior. In preparing this work, the artist looked for ways to capture a gigantic tree on film: not using a distorting wide-angle lens or as an element within a larger landscape, but the tree itself, autonomous and free-standing. Ahtila was confronted here with the limitations of the moving image as a medium for representing the world. The quest to capture a gigantic spruce tree on film arose during the shooting of *The Annunciation*, which you can see in the next room.

The film shows the wind in the foliage and gives the spruce tree a presence of its own. From left to right, we see the trunk rooted in the ground, with a human figure standing next to it to

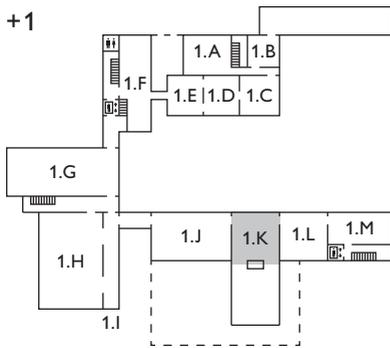
give the scale, the crown of branches and the top of the tree, surrounded by blue sky. The branches move slowly in the wind, we hear birds singing and the rustling of the pine-needles. The work is simultaneously a gigantic and intimate portrait of the tree and its existence as a living organism.

This piece is a reflection of Ahtila's work, in which the focus has shifted since the mid-2000s from human beings towards the world and nature around us. The centre of this world is not occupied solely by humans, but also by other living beings and the overarching ecological system in which we live. *Horizontal* is a space-filling work with moving images, through which Ahtila speaks to our senses and creates a physical experience.

*Written and directed by Eija-Liisa Ahtila.*  
*Cinematography: Antti Ruusuvaara. Editing: Heikki Kotsalo. Sound design: Peter Nordström. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, Paris, London.*  
*Production: Ilppo Pohjola / Crystal Eye*

# ROOM 1.Ka: THE PRESENT — 2001

Five works, each between 1 min 12 sec and 2 min



*Five-channel monitor installation with furniture  
16:9/ 1:1.78*

*DDS. 1, original language Finnish, English subtitles*

## UNDERWORLD

A paranoid woman hides under her hospital bed from the murderers she believes are lurking in the corridor.

## GROUND CONTROL

A teenage girl hesitates about entering her house and lies in a muddy puddle instead.

## THE BRIDGE

A woman crawls across a bridge.

## THE WIND

Anger takes the form of a hurricane raging through a woman's apartment. This short film was later developed into an autonomous multiple-screen installation that can be seen on the top floor at M.

## THE HOUSE

A woman darkens all the rooms in her house in an attempt to keep out the voices in her head.

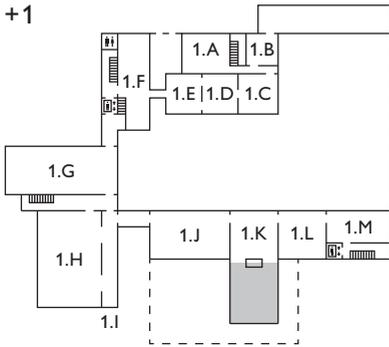
Human dramas and the personal world of young woman are central to Eija-Liisa Ahtila's early works. How do these women deal with tensions, desires, fears and memories? She made a series of five short films in 2001, adapted versions of which were also shown as 30-second TV advertisements that provided an unconventional break between programmes.

Each one focuses on a different person, a woman who finds herself in an emotionally extreme situation. Simultaneously with the advert versions, Ahtila presents the work together on five different monitors in a museum space, giving rise to a more intimate, one-on-one viewing experience for the visitor. The five stories are fictitious, but are based on interviews that Eija-Liisa Ahtila had with women suffering a mental breakdown. The psychosis takes a different form in each film, with a specific event and experience in the life of one of the women taking centre stage. The main theme of *The Present* is forgiveness – forgiving yourself – and is embodied in the closing statement of each film: *Give Yourself a Present; Forgive Yourself*.

*Written and directed by Eija-Liisa Ahtila.  
Cinematography: Antti Ruusuvuori. Editing: Heikki Kotsalo. Sound design: Peter Nordström. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, Paris, London.  
Production: Ilppo Pohjola / Crystal Eye*

# ROOM 1.Kb: STUDIES ON THE ECOLOGY OF DRAMA — 2014

27 min 40 sec



3-channel projected installation  
16:9/1:1.78  
DD5.1, original language Finnish with English subtitles

*Studies on the Ecology of drama* focuses on presentation, imaging and the role of imagination, animation and empathy specifically within the film medium. Eija-Liisa Ahtila explores the way in which other living beings are represented, building on her earlier experiments in works like *The Annunciation* and *Horizontal*.

The work is a filmed, fragmentary lecture that begins with a person walking in a wood, during which she introduces certain themes by performing a number of exercises. It is a kind of free association to liberate us from our anthropocentric thinking. Other characters include a bush, a juniper tree, a horse, a swift, a brimstone butterfly and a group of acrobats.

Ahtila seeks perspectives beyond the anthropocentric. Each film we make takes us as its starting point: the time

is ours, the space is ours, it is our composition and our framing. Science has recently demonstrated, however, that the perception of time, amongst other things, is not universal. The ability of organisms to perceive time depends on the speed of their metabolic processes. The experience of time, its resolution and the amount of details we perceive differ from one species to another. There is no ordered system with human beings supposedly at the top. There are many different, parallel worlds on our planet, each formed by the body of the observer and his or her capacity to perceive, only one of which is the human reality.

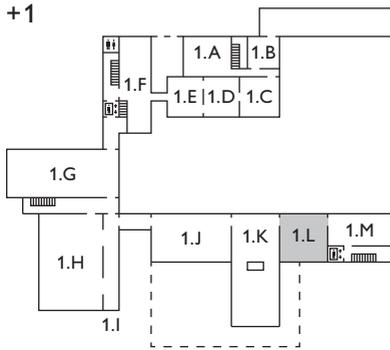
If our perception is limited by our senses, how far can our understanding extend? Can we view our world from a different perspective? From the way it is perceived by a different species?

Eija-Liisa Ahtila deploys the human body and the associated mimetic capacity in this work as a tool with which to present the experiences and perceptions of different organisms. Imitating, looking like and becoming like are instruments that help in the representation of a living creature. We can use our imagination to understand the strangeness of the other, while imitation allows us to represent and visualize its essence, postures and gestures. It is our imagination that enables us to enter the world of other species.

Written and directed by Eija-Liisa Ahtila. Actors: Kati Outinen, Hugo Husky, Myrsky Rönkä, Annamari Kuitinen, Hedda Liukkala, Nora Luoto, Jilka Repo, Tapio Laakkonen. Cinematography: Arto Kaivanto. Editing: Heikki Kotsalo. Sound design: Peter Nordström. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, Paris, London. Production: Eija-Liisa Ahtila ja Ilppo Pohjola / Crystal Eye

# ROOM 1.L: THE ANNUNCIATION — 2010

28 min 25 sec



*3-channel projected installation*

*16:9/1:1.78*

*DD5.1, original language Finnish with English subtitles*

*Eija-Liisa Ahtila has chosen two historical paintings depicting the theme of the Annunciation from the M-collection storage.*

*The Annunciation* is an installation with three film projections, in which one of the central motifs of Christian iconography – the annunciation – is reconstructed and re-enacted. The work is based on the story of the Archangel Gabriel who, according to Luke's Gospel (1:26–38), visits Mary to tell her that God has chosen her to bear his son. In this work, Ahtila also refers to several famous paintings in which artists have depicted the story throughout the history of art. In this annunciation the events are set in the present. The work consists of material produced during the preparations for shooting and an actual reconstruction of the Annunciation as an event. The footage

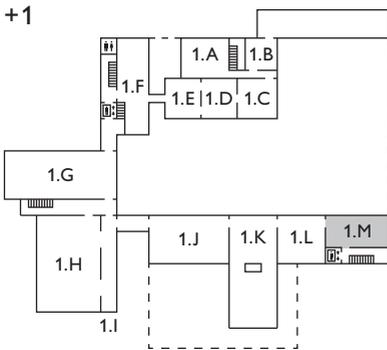
was shot mainly during the frosty winter season of 2010 in the snowy Aulanko nature reserve in southern Finland and on a set depicting an artist's studio and the scene of the annunciation. All human actors except for two are non-professionals. Most of them are clients of the Helsinki Deaconess Institute's women's support services. The animal actors are a trained raven, two ordinary donkeys and a group of carrier pigeons from a bird farm. Although based on an existing script, the events, roles and dialogue were adapted during the filming process to the actors' individual presence.

The underlying viewpoint in *The Annunciation* is Jacob von Uexküll's idea that the different worlds of living beings all exist simultaneously. The idea is used as the approach for an exploration of the nature of miracles and the possibilities of perception and knowledge. In the work, the actors are engaged in a process of reconstructing the sacred and redefining the human through the divine and the animal.

*Written and directed by Eija-Liisa Ahtila. Actors: Kati Outinen, Elina Hurme, Anastasia Iivonen, Elise Laaksonen, Riina Myyryläinen, Satu Mäkinen, Taru Ollila, Seppo Salminen. Cinematography: Arto Kaivanto. Editing: Heikki Kotsalo. Sound design: Peter Nordström. Set design: Sattva-Hanna Toivainen. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, Paris, London. Production: Ilppo Pohjola / Crystal*

# ROOM 1.M: FISHERMEN / ÉTUDES N°1 — 2007

5 min 34 sec



*Single-channel projected installation*

*4:3/1:1.33*

*stereo surround, no dialogue*

*Fishermen* shows a group of fishermen in the surf, attempting to launch their boats. The gusting wind and powerful waves keep capsizing them and tipping their gear into the water. Try as they might, the fishermen can't get their boats out to sea. The work was filmed in West Africa and implicitly evokes associations with themes like the fraught relationship between humans and nature or of refugees at sea.

*Fishermen* consists of a single project, which simultaneously visualizes the power of the natural elements and the determination and tribulations of human beings, all on a monumental scale. The piece is one of a series of short *Études* that the artist is planning to make, in which a single film projection is presented as a kind of solo. Ahtila views the work as a study focusing on a specific technique, which is then repeated

with variations in the manner of a musical composition. Each part of the planned *Études* series will explore a narrative element in a short form, while presenting a specific approach to the moving image.

*Written and directed by Eija-Liisa Ahtila.*

*Cinematography: Ilppo Pohjola. Editing: Heikki Kotsalo.*

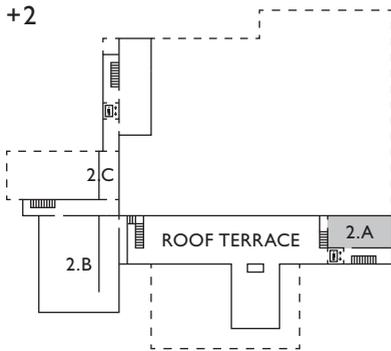
*Sound design: Peter Nordström. Courtesy of Marian*

*Goodman Gallery, New York, Paris, London. Production:*

*Ilppo Pohjola/Crystal Eye*

# ROOM 2.A: THE WIND — 2002

14 min



*3-channel projected installation*

*16:9/1:1.78*

*DDS.1, original language Finnish with English subtitles*

*The Wind* ties in with Ahtila's interest in portraying female characters who are struggling emotionally and are traumatized. *The Wind* forms part of the series *The Present* and was subsequently developed as an autonomous installation for three projection screens.

It centres on the story of a woman who is no longer able to scream. Instead, she gnaws at her hands until they bleed. A violent wind enters her apartment from an open window, forcing her to sort out her stuff, both literally and figuratively. The woman rearranges everything in her room, giving her things a new purpose and structure, until she controls every detail in her own empire of reason.

This piece is based on interviews with a woman who suffered from

depression and went through occasional psychotic periods. Ahtila wants us to understand how the psychosis gradually emerges and how the woman's communication with the outside world changes.

The video material in *The Wind* is split into three parts and the story has been adapted so it can be shown simultaneously on three screens. The narrative time is disrupted by repetition and the deliberate desynchronization of events. This structure and form reflect the process unfolding in the woman's mind.

*Written and directed by Eija-Liisa Ahtila. Actors: Marjaana Kuusniemi, Sesa Lehto, Vuokko Halkola, Julia Kelonen, Sini Väättänen. Cinematography: Arto Kaivanto. Editing: Tuuli Kuittinen. Sound design: Peter Nordström. Set design: Tiina Paavilainen. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, Paris, London. Production: Ilppo Pohjola / Crystal Eye*

## BIOGRAPHY

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Eija-Liisa Ahtila studied at the University of California, Los Angeles; the American Film Institute, Los Angeles; the London College of Printing and the University of Helsinki. Her works have been exhibited widely in solo shows at venues including Tate Modern, London, UK; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden; Jeu de Paume, Paris, France; and Neu National Gallery, Berlin, Germany. Eija-Liisa Ahtila has also participated in numerous international art exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale (2005 and 1999); Documenta 11 (2002) and the Sydney Biennial (2018 and 2002). Her films and retrospectives have been screened at many major festivals including Berlin, Sundance, Venice and Rotterdam. In Belgium her works have been exhibited at Contour (2009) en at S.M.A.K. (2010). This exhibition in M is her first solo exhibition in Belgium.