

# EIJA-LIISA AHTILA: *WHERE IS WHERE?*

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California Institute of the Arts

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# EIJA-LIISA AHTILA: *WHERE IS WHERE?*

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Monday, April 18 | 8:30pm

Jack H. Skirball Series

Los Angeles premiere | Finland, 2009, 55 min., 35mm

In her critically lauded experimental narrative ***Where is Where?*** (*Missä on missä?*), Finnish multimedia artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila has designed a visually mesmerizing four-image split-screen to evoke and deconstruct the murder of a young French boy by two Algerian playmates during the Algerian War of Independence in the 1950s. Ahtila's fragmented mise en scène interweaves the elements of the tragedy originally recounted in Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*—moribund colonialism, the arid seduction of the Algerian landscape—with a post-modern sense of moral ambiguity as it comes to haunt a European poet, embodied with mystery and flair by Aki Kaurismäki's muse, actress Kati Outinen. The evening also includes another multiple-image piece, ***The Hour of Prayer*** (*Rukhoushetki*, 2009). Ahtila's installations and film works have been presented internationally in venues such as the Museum of Modern Art, Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume in Paris, the Sundance Film Festival and the Marian Goodman Gallery.

**Due to personal reasons, Eija-Liisa Ahtila will not be able to attend the screening.**

"Truly pushes forward the possibilities of split-screen cinema." —*Time Out New York*

"Densely conceived and ingeniously interwoven narratives." —*Cinema Scope*

"...an ambitious and operatic tale [that] deftly draws on a batch of techniques familiar to Ahtila—split screen, digital effects, episodic storytelling—along with newer methods, to sketch an incisive, dreamlike expanse. The [split-screen] device allows Ahtila to show multiple perspectives at once while infusing her sumptuous imagery and poetic language with unmistakable anxiety." —*Artforum*

***The Hour of Prayer*** (*Rukhoushetki*)

2009, 35mm, 3-image split screen, 16 min.

*The Hour of Prayer* is a short tale of attachment and death. It is my only autobiographical work to date. Through the events surrounding the demise of a dog, it tells the story of death entering a house and the process of dealing with grief. These events begin in New York during a winter storm in January and end in Benin, West Africa, eleven months later. The split-image screen allowed me to disrupt the traditional causal logic as well as the conventional perception of structure and space, while producing a narrative that the spectator could follow. In the narrator's speech,

there is an emphasis on words used to designate time; visuals and sounds record the changes of seasons in various landscapes. I used video images shot at the time of the events in addition to footage of reconstructed situations. An actor/narrator (Laura Malmivaara) addresses the camera from a dark expanse of sand which, as the story progresses, is revealed to be a set.  
– Eija-Liisa Ahtila

***Where is Where?*** (*Missä on missä?*)

2009, 35mm, 4-image split screen, 54 min.

The theme of *Where is Where?* is colonialism and the clash of two cultures. In the late 1950s, Algeria, still under French rule, was involved in a long struggle for independence from the mother country. The situation was extremely violent because of recurrent assassination attempts by the resistance movement and the harsh countermeasures taken by the French government. In reaction to the barbarous acts committed by the French, two Algerian boys kill their friend, a French boy of the same age.

The narrative starts in the present, and is gradually interwoven with the events that happened in Algeria. Thus, the murder committed by the boys is seen from a dual viewpoint: in the context of the current global situation, and from a historical perspective on the way Arab culture has been represented in the West.

The story has three main characters: Adel and Ismael, the Arab boys who committed the murder, and a European poet, a woman in her forties. It opens with Death entering her house – an experience that is compared to finding oneself in a new country or questioning one's existence and identity. Gradually the focus shifts from the woman's world to the boys' reality. The poet is pushed into the background, and what the boys say and the inevitability of what they did – with its causes and consequences – take centre stage. – Eija-Liisa Ahtila

*“He was a good friend of ours. One day we decided to kill him, because the Europeans want to kill all the Arabs. We can't kill big people. But we could kill one like him, because he was the same age as us.”*

*“Two of my family were killed then. At home they said that the French had sworn to kill us all, one after the other. And did they arrest a single Frenchman for all those Algerians who were killed?”*  
(excerpts from: Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove Press, 1968, 271-2)

Born in 1959 in Hämeenlinna, Finland, **Eija-Liisa Ahtila** is a visual artist and filmmaker. Her films and multi-screen installations explore and experiment with narrative storytelling, creating extraordinary tales out of ordinary human experiences.

Her works deal with separation, loss, sexuality, relationships among family members, mental disintegration, and death. They investigate the processes of perception and the attribution of meaning, by breaking down the story on several screens. Making installations and films has

become for her a process of identifying the links between images, sounds, rhythms, light, characters and words, and using them to approach and construct the story.

Eija-Liisa Ahtila was the recipient of the Artes Mundi of Cardiff, Wales in 2006, the Vincent Van Gogh Biannual Award for Contemporary Art in Europe, Maastricht, The Netherlands, as well as the Coutts Contemporary Art Foundation Award, Switzerland, both in 2000, and the Edstrand Art Prize, Sweden in 1998.

Ahtila attended Helsinki University, Faculty of Law (1980-85); Independent Art School, 1981-84; and London College of Printing, School of Media and Management, Film and Video (1990-91). She received a Certificate from U.C.L.A. in Film, TV, Theater and Multimedia Studies, Los Angeles (1994-95) and attended special courses at the America Film Institute, Advanced Technology Program, Los Angeles (1994-95).

Ahtila has exhibited extensively at numerous museums and film festivals around the world and her films have received distinctive film awards and prizes over the years. Her work has also been widely seen on television in Europe. British Film Institute has published a home DVD box of her films titled *The Cinematic Works of Eija-Liisa Ahtila*, that includes *Love is a Treasure* (2002), *Consolation Service* (1999), *Today* (1996-97), *If 6 was 9* (1995) and *Me/We; Okay; Gray* (1993). She currently lives and works in Helsinki

Curated by Steve Anker and Bérénice Reynaud.

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