

# JAAKKO PALLASVUO

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# JAAKKO PALLASVUO: EU

By Elvia Wilk

## 1. The Inside

Talking about coolness is not a cool thing to do. Cool is a word for middle school, more specifically for middle school in the 90s. As an adult (or “adult”), admitting you still subscribe to such juvenile notions as cool simply marks you as someone who is not, and has never been, cool. It would only be with the heaviest of irony that an actually cool person would enunciate the fact of being cooler than everyone else. True cool eclipses knowledge of its own superiority.

But let’s be real. Cool people exist. Coolness is an actual thing, here and now. Just like it was in middle school in the 90s, it’s ineffable – and even worse than it was then, when there were identifiable jocks around, it’s no longer dependent on one particular set of social signifiers or artificial flavorings. You can’t pin it down; if it were that easy you could just go out and buy it. The only common denominator of adult cool people is that they won’t admit that they are winning due to coolness. “I got here on merit,” etc.

With the full awareness that we are circling a moving target, there are some qualifiers that we could assign to coolness for the sake of analysis. Cool is definitely not the same as trendy, though it usually coincides with trendy; it intersects with nonchalance; it has a penchant for arbitrary meanness; it contains traces of recklessness and a strong grounding in “being in the moment”; and it’s built on a foundation of not being desperate (which is easier for people with family money or inherited status since cool masquerades as a function of Randian individuality but at least in New York a lot of the time cool people have a famous dead parent and/or a trust fund; you can’t buy cool, but money, ahem, helps) as well as of youth.

Assuming we can agree that The Cool Is Out There (even if that makes us immediately less cool, a clutching, heart-slowng feeling like down-shifting gears in the manual car that you learned to drive in during middle school in the 90s), and assuming

we can agree that coolness, no matter how quickly contemporary culture cannibalizes itself and diddles itself with irony and dribbles trends down its T-shirt like ketchup, and assuming that therefore coolness is a product of hypercapitalism, and assuming that therefore, like capitalism, coolness is a relatively stable concept with at least a century of mileage left in it, we are presented with the very likely scenario that coolness will be present at the apocalypse.

At the end of this century, climate scientists say, human life may not be able to sustain itself anymore. The coolness of neoliberal capitalism is warming the planet and starving the uncool. If you are uncool you are (global) warm and you are dead. (Unlike penguins, humans do not collect in a rotating swarm to make sure everyone gets a turn to be safe in the middle.) Given our previous assumptions that coolness is real and will probably last until 2100, we can formulate the hypothesis that the only people left on earth at the end may be the coolest people.

Following are some hypothetical questions:

If cool people are the last people on earth, will they immediately become less cool because there will be no uncool people for them to compare themselves to?

If the in-crowd cannot expand and contract, algorithmically and organically expelling members and incorporating new ones, on what will it feed? Will it gain a new, glowing, radioactive core of aspirational energy directed inward, or fester with stale breath and moldy gossip until collapse? Will it develop a new inner circle, and then another and another and another until it's just one person at the center and then no person at all?

What is the inside without the outside?

## 2. The End

Finnish artist Jaakko Pallasvuori presents us with precisely this apocalyptic scenario in his video EU,



JAAKKO PALLASVUO, still images from **EU**, 2015, image courtesy of the artist.



*JAAKKO PALLASVUO, still images from EU, 2015, image courtesy of the artist.*

which, true to the feelings of manic acceleration that meditation on apocalypse provokes, takes place not in 2100 but in 2016. According to an ominous male narrator who explains the backstory and tells the tale throughout the video, a plague has wiped out everyone in the world but the coolest of the cool. The remaining in-crowd, now the only crowd, is holed up in a bunker in Finland, looking cool and not talking much. They smoke hookah pipes and listen to a soundtrack of vocal harmony from the 90s.<sup>[1]</sup> They don't use their handheld devices. Who is out there to favorite their tweets anyway? More importantly, as the narrator insinuates: could the infection have spread wirelessly? Don't touch that laptop.

The survivors' makeup and hairstyles and outfits are exaggerated DIY hippie-raver looks, as if their isolation has made social signifiers like fashion not irrelevant but hyper-relevant, leading to a new kind of uniformity (plus, what else do they have to occupy their time besides dressing up,

experimenting with eyeshadow? Is this what cool heaven looks like?).<sup>[2]</sup> Periodically, the EU logo, a perfect ring of 12 stars, appears on the screen. The narrator tells us: "The plague did not discriminate based on age, gender, profession or nationality." The plague is a politically correct, equal opportunity employer. Except, in a triumph of the social over the formal, cool cuts to the chase. The coolest adult gets hired to survive even though she or he is the least qualified.

Since they don't have anything to pursue, any forward motion, these cool kids turn fully inward towards themselves and each other, but in this scenario the result is not splintering into further factions; it's a physical togetherness, a fully functioning penguin rotation. The cool kids breathe in sync, they gain unity, a corporeal connection beyond words, moving in post-linguistic abstraction. They look pensive and somber, but they don't look bored or freaked out that they are the last people on earth. They look

like they've reached a new plane of existence...a new plane of cool.

A plot device fractures their unity: the plague enters the bunker. The oldest member of the group develops an oozing welt on her neck (only one lonely over-30-year-old has survived). Someone must have been uncool. Accusations fly: who has endangered this plague-less sanctuary? Who has committed the ultimate sin of posturing coolness without actually having it? Who is this despicable striver?

The perpetrator is identified when a delicate man erupts into mournful song.<sup>[3]</sup> His sentimentality gives him away. Perhaps he was unable to join, to fully be a joiner, a team player – perhaps he couldn't subsume himself to the collective cool and against all odds retained a bit of his "outsider" vibe. A blonde woman rises from the group huddled on the floor, announcing that this whole scenario was predicted in a dream she had – and that he is certainly the one...he is immediately shunned from the circle. No one will make eye contact with him; he has been silently but emphatically rejected from the ring of stars.<sup>[4]</sup>

The sickness spreads, and eventually blame becomes futile. The narrator laments: "Whether it was a question of one of them having low self-esteem... it was useless to speculate on who had brought the disease into this cool community... Nothing could change the fact that they had little time left and no more life to live." As terrible sores fester on the necks and arms of the tribe, a new ritual emerges: a protracted, orgiastic dance.<sup>[5]</sup> In one pulsating mass they move to the music, despite the disgusting disease erupting on their bodies, going and going until they all collapse in a pile.

The ultimate proof of cool is to go back to the club after your friend overdoses and gets taken away in an ambulance. To keep the dance going until your body collapses. "Fear is contagious, fear

eats away at coolness," the narrator confirms. We arrive at a new definition: coolness is the absence of the fear of death.

### 3. The EU

So why are the last and therefore coolest people on the planet in Finland of all places? Perhaps Finland, the resource-rich, northernmost member of the EU with a possible domination-complex after being owned by Sweden for centuries and then stolen by Russia in the 1800s, is experiencing a bit of a cool renaissance. Perhaps Finland has a moment of opportunity to cash in on its massive monetary capital for cultural capital.

Given the chance to finally grow up after a millennium-long adolescence with repressive parents, Finland is ready to leave the political playground. Constantly nagged by that tightly knit in-crowd of golden stars, a perpetual reminder of how coolness functions on the level of the nation-state, Finland is aware that it might be worse to be uncool than to be unrich, and that the downfalls of whole empires have begun with one singular uncool dissenter, the bringer of the plague.<sup>[6]</sup>

The main cast of EU is formed by the Finnish performance group Vibes, a revolving troupe of collaborators who make theater, dance, noises, words, video recordings and ephemeral actions that rarely wind up with commodifiable outcomes. There are also some "known" cool people who take part in the script – in this case cool can be measured as a direct correlative of fame: Kati Outinen, indie movie star best known for her roles in cult director Aki Kaurismäki films, Laura Birn, who belongs to Vibes but is also cast in big-budget movies,<sup>[7]</sup> and Ville Ahonen (who plays the plague-bringer), also a member of Vibes and a known musician.

However, these cool performers are famous mostly within the borders of Finland. Their cool quotient probably wouldn't register to a person



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watching this video on YouTube elsewhere in the EU. Shooting a cool movie in Finnish (which necessitates subtitling in English, the only cool language) is almost not cool at all. Coolness today is not a local phenomenon. To be cool you must be “known” and knowable through the internet.

Coolness on the micro scale may not be at all relevant in a globalized economic system, but Finland is working on it – trying to synchronize its internal social strata and coolness determinants with those of the globe. The periphery (including bodies much, much more peripheral than Finland) is moving inward, closing the gaps in the circle. As resources become increasingly scarce and apocalypse nears, does the whole planet become middle school in the 90s?

The hope is that cool can be transmitted via router, across borders, slaughtering cultural norms and normalizing hierarchies, allowing those stuck outside the EU to participate in structuring of a

uniform, unified planetary system, a worldwide cooling effect. If we are lucky, coolness will spread like a blessed plague, immunizing us all against the future.

[Elvia Wilk](#) is a writer and editor living in Berlin. She is currently an editor at *uncube* magazine and contributes to publications including *frieze d/e*, *Art in America*, *The Architectural Review*, *Spike Art Quarterly*, *Sleek*, and *Dazed*.



JAAKKO PALLASVUO , still images from *EU*, 2015, image courtesy of the artist.

## NOTES

1 Pallasvu: "the music is Adiemus, a nordic Enya clone."

2 Wilk: "you didn't read the decamerone did you? if you did, is it good?"

Pallasvu: "I didnt, just skimmed parts. Seems kinda exhausting altho i guess its supposed to b sexy and funny. An easier intertextual ref in the video is to this new zealand tv show called The Tribe. 90'S Dystopia YA fiktion. Whole episodes on youtube if u wanna see. The look of the video is based on that. Its basically a mix of like that show and 70's flicker experimental films like paul sharitz or smthng. Also a lot of people mentioned that it reminds them of a film from the 80's called Liquid sky which i downloaded but havent watched. Also umm i was thinking of derek jarman's jubilee a bit."

3 Pallasvu: "The song the guy + old woman are singing is a song called Maanantai from a finnish grunge band called Apulanta from mid 90's.

4 The uncool traitor does have one ally, or a lover, a woman with painted unibrow laced with pink

sequins, who pleads with him not to give into the accusations. With a plague pustule blossoming on her forehead, she offers to sacrifice herself instead in the event that he is forced to leave the bunker: "I'll be the uncool one," she offers, "I'll leave."

5 Pallasvu: "The [song] they dance to is Bolero by Ravel, which is a excercise Vibes has a collective (like they used it or danced it before and i just put it in the video)."

6 Wilk: "what was the current event you said inspired the whole EU reference?"

Pallasvu: "I think it was this thing about the Ukraine wanting to join the Eu despite Russia offering them 20 more money in oil and gas contracts or smthng. Or like in general the thirst of peripheral europan countries to join the west.. also how east germany kinda fell becuz they didnt have cool stuff."

7 Pallasvu: "laura has a agent in Hollywood."

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Jaakko Pallasvuori (b. 1987) is an artist based in Helsinki and Berlin. Pallasvuori's work takes various forms. At the moment he is working with texts, videos and ceramics, while also being engaged with the expanded field of theater. Pallasvuori thinks about what online encounters feel like and what kind of social media personae are shaped through them. In recent years his work has been exhibited at Kunsthalle St. Gallen, Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, The Goss-Michael Foundation, Kunstraum Kreuzberg/Bethanien, UCCA, Eyebeam and Future Gallery, among others.

more info:  
[www.svilova.org](http://www.svilova.org)  
[info@svilova.org](mailto:info@svilova.org)



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