

INTERVIEW

with Maximiliane Leuschner

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Let's begin with the exhibition's title *Holding Places*: are you holding space for each other, or are you making space for each other?

Carla Åhlander: I have really come to love our title. My associations right now lean more towards holding together, to support and care for the spaces, like an awareness of their fragility. But also towards holding as in to contain, to hold more than one aspect of a place. This is the strength of our title, that it can be interpreted in many different ways, and they all seem to work somehow.

Aaron Amar Bhamra: Perhaps it is more a matter of thinking about what can frame a place, or to some extent hold it together.

Both of your artistic practices often rely on set(ing)s for activation. If you could set the scene for *Holding Places*, what would the show feel like?

Aaron Amar Bhamra: Active during the day — but with a distance. A never-ending set-up (*untitled*, 2024), a moment of assembly: Is it done? Has it happened? Am I too early? Too early for what? Alive at night when the exhibition space is closed, but feels close, with no distance to the outside, a line of light that appears on your torso when you look inside the gallery, a light that shines on the street 24/7 even when you are not there.

* (*occasions*, 2023): A moment similar to when a door has been left open for too long, and the moving air has swept fallen leaves into the room. A decision to break a shell in order to reach the space within — a decision, an act with an irreversible state.

...and what would it sound like?

Carla Åhlander: Maybe like the sound of somebody breathing calmly?

Aaron Amar Bhamra: The sound of cars passing by, or of people talking; the sound of people talking outside while you are inside with the door left ajar, the silence of the after-hours when the gallery is closed. Again — the sound of cars driving by — but with closed doors.

Could you expand on the material sensibility in *Holding Places*?

Carla Åhlander: By working with photography, I only ever deal with materiality as a suggestion. I can only show pictures of materiality, which means I need to trust the viewer's fantasy, memory, and ability to recall to be able to experience the places that occur in the images — e.g., an old school gym with a rubber mat, or the leather sofa of a conference room.

Could you tell me about your work(s) in the show?

Carla Åhlander: The series *Ascending a Staircase* (2024) shows a person walking up a staircase. Based on a vague memory, this image thematises the concept of time (as linked to Aaron's time-stopper objects). Rather than describing a movement, the series retells a moment in time broken up into fragments. By taking the fragments out of their chronological order and into a new constellation, the person appears trapped in the the never-ending loop of forever ascending the staircase. Instead of creating a flow of movement, the images attempt to disrupt time, and, in a sense, to contradict it. Perhaps the work is about time as a phenomenon, as a condition of life that defines us rather than the other way around. Of course, this photo series of someone walking up a flight of stairs remains forever tied to its art- historical references. In his famous futuristic painting *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912), Marcel Duchamp described a movement — of somebody (nude) walking down a staircase — inspired by the chronophotographic technique of that era, not least by the works of Eadweard Muybridge. Unlike Gerhard Richter's painting *Emma (Nude on a Staircase, 1966)* of a woman walking down the stairs, towards us, naked, my "somebody" is walking up, not down, fully dressed.

That my subject is walking in the opposite direction is not a coincidence: it was important to me not to repeat the absurd gestures of the old masters, nor to objectify. Hence, I'm showing an independent individual, a subject. That they are turning their back on us renders them less exposed or sensitive to our gaze, maybe even uninterested or unaware of us.

If the staircase series represents the disruption of time, then *Construction of a Memory* (2024) is about personal memory: it is an image of a woman cutting gnocchi dough into pieces echoing the fragmentation of time in the staircase series while simultaneously adding another memory. We look at the woman's hands while she is standing at the kitchen table, but we cannot see her face. Recently, the concept of memory has become increasingly important to my work – memory as history, as our personal and collective identities, and what happens with memories over time. I'm interested in the intersection of private memories meeting the public ones, or when the private touches on the collective, taking my personal experience and my own family's life and history, but also the "inheritance" of memories as a starting point in my research.

The last image belongs to a larger body of work titled *My Retrotopia* (2022). The title refers to Zygmunt Bauman's concept of Retrotopia, which describes our habit of romanticising the past in a reality where all utopias have disappeared. With no positive visions left to project onto the future, we look to imagined aspects of the past, whether genuine or putative, while we strive for an imaginary better past, to restore an order that never existed.

In my own nostalgic ideal world, I return to my childhood and the public libraries in 1970's Sweden. In *Untitled (curtain)* (from *My Retrotopia*, 2022), I reflect on the closing of public libraries during the pandemic, but also on the idea of the public library — not only to share knowledge and culture in a democratic way which, one could argue, the internet could do just as well, or even better — but also as a metaphor for societal responsibility and a form of community. But, in the end, what you see here is a curtain with light shining through from the bottom of the curtain, and what you make of this is, of course, a very individual response. We don't know what is behind the curtain, but we see the light peering through, creating a shape that can connect formally and associatively to other pieces in the *Holding Places*. Just as my own process was and is associative, I would like the work to be as well.

Aaron Amar Bhamra: The work *occasions* (2023) is an ongoing piece that I started in 2020. It consists of walnuts that I collect once a year. The material itself has two states: the first one being its shape from the outside — a shell. The second state comes from the decision to break said shell into a fragile state that will not maintain its composure unless you hold it together very tightly. The work *untitled* (2024) presents, or pretends to present, the setting of an ongoing, unfinished exhibition. By freezing this setting, it creates a static moment in time which, at any moment, offers the possibility of someone entering the space. Perhaps just like walking into an image, or the exhibition documentation that someone could walk into.

What were you thinking about (in terms of your practice) while making the work(s)? Were there questions that you tried to solve?

Carla Åhlander: The online conversation with Aaron and our bouncing around of ideas: attempts to define what we found in common in our respective practices opened up new angles to themes that have long been important to me, and offered me with a different approach. The concept of time is, I think, central to the show — how we are all defined by it and, at the same time, powerless to it, but also the act of letting go of the now.

Similarly, the fabric of memories as an expression of time past and felt. All the pieces in the show can find links to each other on formal, contextual, or emotional levels, which is what I like so much about it — that our dialogue continues in the show now, between the works themselves.

Aaron Amar Bhamra: I try to think of the works as specifically as possible, but sometimes they only fully unfold once they have been placed and materialised in a certain context. I think a lot about the chronology of what unfolds first and what should come next. Maybe like chapters in a book. It helps me to hold some kind of system or order in place that I can refer to. Most of the time, I try to organise these chapters and find out if I am still in the same book.

Could you tell me about the meaning of 'space' in your practice?

Carla Åhlander: One of the most fundamental / significant aspects of photography is the decision of what part of reality you want to include and exclude in your picture. How do you confine it? While releasing the shutter, you decide what section of the world you choose as your arena, and this is where the relevant scene is going to play out. My background is as much in photography as it has been, early on, in theatre and performance, and this particular understanding of reality, the performativity of life, probably shines through in my pictures. Often, I have been told that my images seem like they have been set on a stage — the people in them are not portrayed as individuals but rather take on roles or symbols for humans, perhaps like a projection of objects for the viewer. I think it might also have to do with a certain way of looking at the world, which appears, to an extent, like a spectacle, or a performance of sorts, and sometimes even like a first impression. Most of the time, the scenes remain unexplained: they have no beginning or end and have not been 'resolved'. I used to quote Thomas Bernhard, who said something in the lines of "If I catch sight of even a hint of a story, rising somewhere in the distance behind a mound of prose, I shoot it down." But, of course, my work has developed since, and I do not always shoot them down anymore. Usually, I find myself drawn to situations that describe significant structures or systems in our society and everyday life that we tend to overlook and, in a sense, I want to make them visible. For this show, however, I abandoned this trusted method and chose to work from my own memory instead, as well as in a careful / sensitive dialogue with Aaron — so, these works have emerged from a completely new process. And for the first time, I have arranged a scene from memory (or an image I had in mind).

Aaron Amar Bhamra: It probably started with trying to understand architecture, learning architecture, and compromising on finding a form for it.

Could you tell me about the meaning of 'time' in your respective practices?

Carla Åhlander: You could of course say that time is an integral part of the photo medium, so it is automatically present in several ways. Many of my works describe a certain amount of time in a series of images (e.g., *5 Variations of a Woman Being Interrupted from Crossing a Street* (2001); *Cigarette Seller* (2006); *Afternoon on the Village Square (with Boy)* (2004)). These works show a slow and hopeless process, or the complete absence of it. Others have dealt more with past or 'lost' moments and the inevitable act of letting go. So, on the one hand, the pain of letting go of moments in time and trying to hold on to them. On the other, the state of being caught in a situation, to the point of becoming inseparable from it.

Aaron Amar Bhamra: One aspect of 'time' in *occasions* (2023) is the conversation while walking with someone and picking up fallen walnuts along the way. 'time' in *untitled* (2024) can be seen as the duration of the exhibition: the install, the opening, the opening hours, the closing, the de-install.

Could you expand on the literary and/or historical sources feeding into the exhibition?

Aaron Amar Bhamra: literary (historical) source — Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, 1962; art-historical source — Gabriel Orozco, *Breath on the Piano* (1993).

Together with Luz Broto, I recently worked on an exhibition called *Handshake* at Kunstverein Kevin Space in Vienna, Austria. The space was open 24/7, and the exhibition worked from several perspectives. The things and/or people that would fill the space would be different every day. We framed a specific context and space, placed and displaced the objects inside that would fill the space or, in this case, indicate an absence while leaving it accessible 24/7. One day I entered the space and I found all the works that were placed in the exhibition - stacked in the kitchen. In the front room, I found a text under a glass, referring to *THE POETICS OF THE OPEN WORK* by Umberto Eco. I loved the dialogue with the public in this exhibition. I still don't know who put the text there. Another work that I will always adore is Gabriel Orozco's *Breath on the Piano* (1993). The picture shows breath on a piano. The person is not there, but their presence is.