

No beginning, no end

by Solvej Helweg Ovesen

What I'm looking for is an expression where you are not quite sure of the situation, the story is not fully told, and there is suspense. I'm fascinated by the unspectacular everyday, the trivial.

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Carla Åhlander mainly works with photography and uses the media to point at and question profane acts and settings. The immediate situations Ahlander is attracted to and documents in her photographs are rather subtle appearances of power relations – in all shades and from the vocabulary of everyday life. Feminism is a point of recourse for her, however this awareness of gender specific issues is sediment in her gaze rather than an explicit theme in her work.

Carla Åhlander's often captures situations that function on a metaphorical level reflecting gender roles, consume and power relations on a micro-scale. Situations where something is about to happen or could happen, taken from a multiple of contexts, often with no beginning or end in narrative terms: a coffee table with cups and cans are “lined up” for a meeting, firemen testing their water canons, football goals at the foot of a mountain, men about to train their dogs in a public square, a horde of pregnant goats on grass and a male goat on its own, chairs in deserted waiting rooms. Åhlanders gaze turns “normalised”, rigid conventions and structures into evidence of the systems of organisation that influence our lives.

I would say that the analysis, elaboration, and bringing into question of power relations and the “agonism” between power relations and the intransitivity of freedom is a permanent political task inherent in all social existence...¹

Michel Foucault

By presenting the bi-products and surface appearance of societal power relations Åhlander in a humorous way distances herself from them. She strips down her subject to minimal scenarios often framed by a vast landscape or architectural space that make mechanisms of organisation appear small and helpless. Åhlander seem to question the

¹ Michel Foucault, the Subject and Power (1982), “Michel Foucault, Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics”, University of Chicago, p.208

necessity of these structures for our being – whereas there is no question that we are necessary for their existence!

Åhlander avoids seductive elements or effects in her images and thereby she redirects the eye to situations and moments usually eliminated from our visual memory. We never see a close up of persons or objects in her photographs, but must accept a slightly withdrawn glance of the daunting ‘order of things’. Most of her photographs are devoid of humans and if persons appear, they are captured from afar as little figures, which makes them and their acts look stereotypical and absurd. Details are purposely hidden when seen in the context of a wide-reaching landscape, giving the impression of the human world as miniature. Put in different way, Ahlander distances the viewer from the settings on her photographs: we are in a position of the “voyeur”.

“Five Variations of a Woman being interrupted...”

..from crossing a street”, 2001, is a photo series of five images. A female figure is about to cross the street. She stands on the side anticipating. However there is no progression within the five images – she stands, waits, looks and stands while cars pass. Whichever way one interprets the situation, the title twists the obvious understanding of the situation: the woman’s desire to cross the street becomes the main concern of the situation. However the female figure is in a static situation: hesitant, awaiting, and powerless. It looks as if nothing happens in these five similar images. Meanwhile however, and in a broader perspective, identifying the feeling of anticipation, one may wonder whether the constraints women experience in daily life are imposed by existing systems, others or by their own limiting interpretations of how it is possible to reach their goals?

Powerlessness is also the theme in her series of photographs portraying empty waiting rooms in registry offices in Berlin, Untitled 1-13, 2003. A “Meldestelle” is the site, where a person moving to a German city makes his or her first bureaucratic encounter.

When I went to a ‘Meldestelle’ for the first time, I immediately wanted to take photos in there. It felt like a place that you do not quite believe you will ever be able to leave. It was partly a culture chock. I had never experienced authority as it is performed in such places before.

The waiting rooms in official offices of registry in Berlin fulfil all the characteristics of modern architecture in terms of transparency, functionality and monumentality. They are settings of disciplining and anticipation, which is why Ahlander in this series decided to portray the chairs in a selection of offices. The seats are often bolted to the floor, placed symmetrically in serial position. While Ahlander presents the scenery of such waiting rooms in a sterile manner, the images have an inherent ambivalence as the slightly sadistic, functional anti-design of bureaucratic interior reveals its photogenic qualities.

The theme of disciplining structures takes another format in “Untitled, Malmö”, 2000, which is a picture of 6 men with their dogs sitting next to them. The men are positioned in a circle on central on a square in Malmö, Sweden. They all watch each other. This image captures a situation of power ‘innocently’ exercised through supervision and training. Again Ahlander purely points her finger at a mode of behaviour, perhaps even a ritual for these beings – but viewed from a distance the setting seems theatrical in front of the prominent houses defining a central site in Malmö.

I'm interested in the systems of organisation, which we live in; by the creation of power structures and how we become part of them, yet I'm also fascinated by the fact that they only exist if we participate in them.

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Structures, repetition and regulatory settings become focal points in this body of work – not in a direct way, but more like if someone was constantly pointing their finger at oblivion structures of government and order. Like the photo of export cars parked in a steam at a port with the sea in the background, Untitled, year?, or the small football field with two tiny goals next to a high-rising mountain. On an image, probably taken the same day as that of the parked cars, we see a girl glancing over the sea from the ferry deck (Untitled, year?). The geographical or national context of Ahlanders images seems less important than the context produced through the constellations she makes of her images and the vast landscape surrounding most venues.

In yet another couple of situations/photographs men in orange uniforms are sweeping the street – their outfit match orange garbage cans on the other image. The orange colour appears with such persistence that the domain of public cleaning takes a clear visual form in the urban landscape. This couple of images again plays with the economy of attention and importance devoted to certain forms and gestures – the orange colour detach the figures and the garbage cans

from their context to a degree where it is not about cleaning, but about the division of things from their surroundings. In another piece, three women vacuum clean while a man looks at them – an image that alone reifies traditional gender roles. But if we look at it in the context of the two above-mentioned images there is a balance of men and women, who perform the same kind of acts with an identical purpose – only the purpose is detached from the act.

The latter is one of the artist's *tactics* of interrogation: bribing the acts of ordering and organizing their immediate purpose by re-contextualising them in a way that attributes absurd analogies to them. I call it a tactic, because the way Ahlander deals with mechanisms of power and organisation is from a powerless position. However Ahlander turns the gaze on these structures around in a way that makes them appear powerless and that is a tactic depending on shooting at the moment and from a perspective that triggers ridicule:

*(...) a tactic depends on time – it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized “on the wing”. What ever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into “opportunities.” The weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them.*²

Michel De Certeau

Ahlander has found a tactic that by way of a distanced gaze gives her a tool present everyday life as miniature events and structures in panoramic land- or cityscapes. In this way Ahlander gives the viewer an overview of the structures that we normally find ourselves living under in.

^{2 2} De Certeau, Michel: *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) (French orig. 1980) p. xix.