

Far from History

Caitlin Yardley in conversation with Katrina Schwarz

KS How do you begin a major project and how, in particular, did you start  
*Mobile Composition*?

CY I don't begin! I suppose everything I've done has been linked to what has happened before in my practice. I can more readily speak of a continuation. The work seems to circle back on itself.

For a few years, I have been working with the legacy of the Finnish architect and designer Alvar Aalto, so when I traveled to France in 2016 it seemed natural to seek out a connection to him. This led me to Maison Louis Carré, one of the most significant private homes designed by Aalto, and his only building in France. The house, which is located 40 kilometres outside of Paris, was commissioned by the French art dealer and gallery owner Louis Carré. It housed his collection of modern painting and sculpture. Following the death of his wife Olga in 2002, this collection was dispersed.

The significance of this site resides in its close relationship to theories of how an interior domestic space might be conceived and arranged with the intention of living with art. It was proposed that the house might appear small on the outside, but contain an interior of large volume.

Carré used the house as a space to both live with his own collection and to bring prospective buyers to view specific works, which were installed *in situ*. Today, the house is a museum and contains all the original furnishings and fittings as designed by Aalto, but the walls are empty. The collection included paintings and sculptures by Fernand Léger, Pierre Bonnard, Pablo Picasso, Alexander Calder, Henri Laurens, Edgar Degas, Robert Delaunay, Jacques Villon and Le Corbusier, all of which had been installed within, or moved through, Maison Louis Carré at some stage.

Although initially I didn't have a project in mind, with permission to record video, I was able to start looking at the house, encircling it and thinking about the interior/exterior divide. This became *Exterior A*, an early work in the project. The art collection, however, became the way in which I could access the house, through looking at Aalto, away from Aalto, and beyond him to something else. The collection linked me back to the art world, and suggested a way, through art, to think more directly about architecture and the biography of an architect.

KS What are the origins of your work with and through Aalto?

CY Prior to working with Aalto I had been making work around representations of women and, in particular, the iconography of hysteria associated with the nineteenth-century neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot. Sigmund Freud was a student of Charcot, and a lithograph of Charcot giving a clinical demonstration was prominently displayed in Freud's consulting room, now preserved in the Freud Museum in London. I wasn't particularly interested in working with that already fetishised site, nor with Freud himself. Freud is sort of untouchable and has been pulled open in a way that I didn't feel I could contribute to. So I began looking at Anna Freud, both as his daughter, and as a [child] psychoanalyst in her own right. Whilst researching in the photo archives of the Freud Museum I found early documentation of Anna's consulting room. It was conservatively furnished and seemed to set a disciplined tone. I was looking for a break in this through which to look back at it. The anomaly I found was Aalto's furniture, specifically his iconic *Stool 60*. To me, this modernist design object spoke of something quite abstract and out of context. From photographing Anna's own *Stool 60*, to researching Aalto's reception in the UK and the boom in architect-designed furniture, my inquiry moved from the Freud Museum to the Aalto Foundation in Helsinki. Thinking about how Anna Freud could be accessed from an investigation into, with and through Aalto led to my video *Studio A*, which uses the surface of a three legged *Stool 60* as a tripod from which to frame and view Aalto's architectural studio. The frame is restricted and is shot from a very low level, and perhaps this might remind us of a child's point of view.

KS You have described your process as one marked by 'hesitation'...

CY I'm quite conscious that the particular figures and histories with which I work are vast and rich and already subsumed by scholarly material. So my entry, or point of connection, comes with hesitation because I'm conscious of not acting without being informed by what has already been said. Also, Aalto is one of the fathers of Finland. There is a national desire to protect that reputation in constructing his identity and his biography.

KS So Aalto is sacrosanct, and earlier you described Freud as untouchable. Your hesitation, or perhaps let's call it a strategy, leads you to look sideways rather than to confront these monolithic figures straight on.

CY Exactly, I am really interested in the idea of a sideways gaze. It is an idea that takes material form in my work with goat leather. And that is why I think about goat as an abstraction through which to connect a lot of this. Goatskin has been a material that I've used across a number of the projects, from Anna Freud forward...

KS Ah yes goats have 320° vision.

CY Yes, goats have an extreme peripheral vision, and I took this on as a strategy to think about looking at something while at the same time acknowledging its connection to something else. That something else – that connection – is perhaps not real or obvious, but I am what connects it. I can see or think about both things at once – Anna Freud and Aalto. 'Chronology' is another key term. There is a particular chronology to what has happened and to the links between things, and it is the linear nature of that chronology that I am seeking to disrupt through drawing attention to anomalous moments and discursive objects.

KS Although I asked how you begin a project it seems that the greater challenge for you is how to end your inquiry, how to move on...

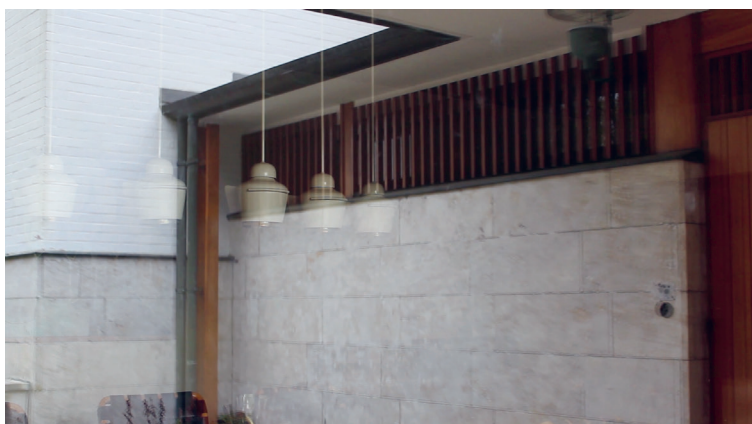
CY Yes. I think keeping this in mind is a really useful way to keep a lightness in the work. I am working with biography and with very specific, and very heavy, histories. These histories are far-reaching and bigger than me as an individual artist or researcher. I've found, therefore, that using the next link in the chain to look back on that initial thing can be interesting. This is what I have been establishing as a process, and this is possibly my way out of what has been my longer-term project with Aalto.

KS From Aalto then on to Carré and his collection, what were the origins of the relationship between architect and dealer? And what input did Aalto have into the artworks that were displayed in the house?

CY Carré and Aalto met in 1956 at the Venice Biennale, where Aalto had just designed the Finnish Pavilion. My research points to a very close relationship between Carré and Aalto and part of that bond was their shared interest in artists. For example, Aalto brought work by Léger and Calder to Finland, and would often exhibit art in amongst his furniture at Artek, his furniture distribution company.

So there was a shared appreciation of particular artists and particular works, and although this wasn't a house that was commissioned and designed for one particular set of works, or for works that correspond to particular spaces within the house, the design was responsive to the biography/history of the dealer and his enduring relationships with artists. The result of which is a really unexpected collection of Post-Impressionism, Cubism and Modernist sculpture.











KS So artworks found their way into the house, or perhaps I should say into and out of the house, because it was also used by Carré as a showroom, or a place from which work might be installed to be sold...

CY I think there was a conflation. There are works that are displayed in the house with the intention of being seen within the structure of Aalto's architecture. For example, there are two extremely horizontal paintings by André Lansky in the dining room, which were produced specifically for those walls. There is also a letter that shows Carré suggesting the commission, that Aalto vetoed, for another wall of a large tondo by Fritz Glarner. This is a rare glimpse at the discussion that occurred around the curation of the space. Carré has a history of this, having commissioned Bonnard to produce wall panels for his apartment in Paris. But there are other walls in the house that are suggestive of rotation, and designed with very particular hanging systems. There is an inbuilt sense of movement and temporality to the way some works are installed in the house, and an anchoring of other works.

KS The dealer's house had multiple functions. It was a home, it was a salon from which art works were sold, it was a social space with frequent parties, and, in an important instance, a state visit from Finland...

CY The house was very well designed for all of those functions. It is highly considered and highly functional in that sense. Because Carré understood the house as an artwork – he wrote about it as that – I'm sure he would not be surprised that it is now a museum, and I can imagine that this was also built into the initial vision: how the house might be used, how certain parts could be closed off, how you are moved through the spaces. There is a sense of opening out – of volume – when you enter the house, and then a compression down to some wide windows that push your view outside. As you walk outside an amphitheatre spills you down the lawn to the pool. There is a beautiful idea of circulation built into the house that seems in touch with its dual private / public role.

KS The house persists, but only in one sense. It survives as an artwork in its own right but, with empty walls, not as a container or keeper for the collection it was designed to house...

CY I don't think it is a negative aspect of the house's history that the artworks were dispersed. There is an absence of the original owners, and there is an absence now of the collection associated with them. But the house continues its relationship with art. Increasingly there are exhibitions in the house and I think that extends this idea of movement and mobility and mortality.

KS That movement chimes with the title of your project, *Mobile Composition*...

CY The project is named for a small sculpture by Calder. There was a small model for a standing mobile in the living room of the house. Much like the circulation through the house of Carré's collection, and also upon its dispersal, the model became a way for me to think about how something solid and constructed might also move through space.

The way that Calder's work orbits and moves through space suggests the possibility of composing and manipulating an environment that invokes a life's accumulation and chronology. In other words, it proposes that objects and architecture might collide and be conceived in a way that moves beyond established ideas of the domestic. Maison Louis Carré demonstrates this by relegating the domestic to less visible spaces. Almost operating as a gallery, there is an industrially-scaled kitchen and the staff quarters are upstairs and out of sight. There is this idea of demarcating public and private space as well. There are gates that can be closed so that you don't access the bedrooms when the house is being used for social and professional scenarios.



The interior was conceived by Aalto as a 'total work' and included furniture, fittings and textiles by Artek. Carré moved in bringing only books and art. The only exception to this was Olga's bedroom, which included a floral bedspread and trinkets. A photo in the house archives show that her room also contained a small pastoral painting by Raoul Dufy – *Les Moissons à Langres*. I initially presumed she selected this work as a conservative choice from the collection to further establish a personal environment. However this work appeared at auction in London five years after the photo was taken, suggesting the relationship of the collection to the personal/professional in this interior is quite fluid.

KS Can you describe your sources and your process for researching and 're-creating' the works in Carré's collection?

CY I used a specific set of black-and-white photographs of the house taken in 1962, at which time the house appeared to be curated at its best and was photographed in its entirety. These photos coincide with the state visit from the Finnish President, Urho Kekkonen, in 1962. The photographs provide evidence of which artworks were on display throughout the house at this time, and I began to focus specifically on the paintings that featured in these photos – eighteen in total.

I began to use whatever fragment or angled image of the painting that was available in the photos to identify and trace the original works. Without artist names or titles with which to work, and further challenged by the necessarily partial views, I began using the catalogues and books in Carré's library to identify the paintings. This soon escalated to an extended period of research, drawing on, and in dialogue with, museum and auction archives, catalogue raisonnés, artist estates and galleries.

Fritz Glarner's paintings, for instance, feature densely composed variations of a wedge shape. In trying to locate which exact Glarner painting was displayed on Carré's wall in 1962 means I have become uniquely intimate with the construction of his work. Unique because my intimate acquaintance is, primarily, with the right corner that was documented in the photographs. When I eventually located that work I found something that felt very familiar. It is like looking for ancestry or something where you focus on abstract details and connections. But going into the production of my works, which use blank, black leather pieces, there is then a pushing away of that content. What I've become used to, and intimate with, is no longer important to this project, except to verify scale and dimensions.

Taking the dimensions, and the titles from the original works, I've constructed new works that will go into the house and occupy the exact place the original paintings once hung. I could have inserted many things into those dimensions but in this instance the goat has come back. Thinking, moreover, about the fragment and the idea of assembling material both in a research sense and in a physical sense, I have drawn on two ongoing strategies: the use of goat leather and quilting, in particular crazy quilting.

KS It would seem that you move with ease between disciplines and material processes, seeking the best way to interact with specific histories and narratives. What of quilting?

CY In some senses, bringing quilting back into the work was a practical strategy. Although it was less practical for me as I didn't sew, but it was something that emerged in the process and that I had to carry through to speak to this particular body of research. It is very strange that I committed to this process because sewing is something I have always resisted. I come from a long line of seamstresses who all tried to teach me to sew for years. I wouldn't!

I think it is really important that I'm not making new paintings within the frame of works in the original collection. I'm more interested in acknowledging them as objects in the world; objects with a specific material surface.

Crazy quilts find their origin in Victorian America and folk art. This form of quilting was happening at roughly the same time as the very famous Amish quilts, but it's a very



Heikki Havas c.1960, Alvar Aalto Museum



different process and had an interesting relationship to class. The wealthier women were quilting with scraps of velvet and silk. For them it was about embellishment and display, and seams were embellished with beads and braiding. Concurrently, slaves were crazy quilting with scraps of clothing and bed linen, and these are the far more impressive designs, technically, and are aesthetically significant works.

In the past I have incorporated antique Amish quilts into installations and drew on their patterns for inclusion in paintings, but here I am physically engaging with a quilting process. I'm using the process as a conceptual strategy but I'm also really draining it of its decorative form and its practical function. Working with quilts seems more related to the history and surface arrangement of painting than sculpture to me. There is a flatness inherent in painting and quilting that communicates ideas of assembling, reconvening and engaging with history in a very particular way. They share pictorial and compositional problems and generally a sense of domestic scale.

KS Your choice of material as well as the colour, the deep black of goatskin, is deliberate. Can you describe the thinking behind these choices?

CY These particular goatskins are dyed black as part of an industrial process, probably on their way to entering the fashion world. The black leather provides quite a specific matt quality. It doesn't reflect light, and the material becomes almost a hole or an absence. I'm quite interested in the idea of contrast that these black pieces bring to the space. They change the spaces they inhabit, and by this I mean that white walls appear whiter, the material finish of the interior; the timbers that line the ceilings and the doors, the floors, the wool carpets, the furniture and the upholstery, appear richer. They bring a new formal clarity to our experience of the space.

KS You described this project as also catalysing a return to art – a movement back to art from a focus on design and architecture – which, as you have looked at Aalto, has been your subject of enquiry for some time...

CY I think my strategy for working with the house came from my personal history as a painter at quite a distance from these specific paintings and from these artists, a number of whom I was not aware of prior to this project. In the past I have worked quite extensively with the work of other artists, for example taking the dimensions of Willem de Kooning's *Woman* paintings, or paintings by Caravaggio and Titian, and inserting my own painting into their scale. As an Australian artist who felt at a distance from a lot of the art history that I was able to access, this was a way to admit myself very directly, to understand scale in a very literal sense and to attempt to flatten the distance between what I was being shown – mainly American and European white male painters – and my experience as a young female on the other side of the world. It therefore felt like a very natural strategy to apply to this project.

Working now on pieces that take their dimensions and title from historically significant works by Bonnard, Picasso etc. somehow flattens the original's individual power, and facilitates a means of reconvening them as a group. I am interested in how repeating the physical format of their works underlines their absence, and in doing so I also arrive at a space for my own work. This also plays into the modernist idea of removing the frame.

For example, Picasso's painting in the entrance of the house is *Figure* from 1939, which is a portrait of Dora Maar. Perhaps it is one of the works I have created that would seem to reflect quite directly back to ideas of Cubism. My work is also fragmented and might appear as an attempt to recreate Picasso's painting with the surface of mine. This might still be a portrait of Dora Maar. But probably not! Picasso was directly painting Dora Maar, whereas I am hinting at Picasso painting Dora Marr. I'm referencing that moment, or rather the object, that remains from that moment, as well as its absence now. Again, I'm looking sideways.

KS To look sideways is also to invite abstraction...

CY I think there is an important relationship between abstraction and history. At times, abstraction is a way to speak to things perhaps more directly than through figurative depiction because it doesn't immediately discount what you already know. It makes us confront things for what they are, conflating the simple with the complex or hard. It is a way of foregrounding and underlining the formal (material, surface and scale relationships), or possibly the lack of those things (the immaterial). It can then be incredibly generative if used alongside something far more fixed and lucid. I'm quite interested in this contrast, in colliding the abstract with something else – the very real aspects of something else.

KS There is a quality to your work that, once we begin to identify some of these connections, feels quite magical. There is serendipity, and I marvel that you weave this magic, ultimately and sincerely linking Aalto, Anna Freud, Cubism and quilting...

CY I think this circles back to that hesitation I experience on entering a new subject/undertaking a vast body of research. I knew that I wouldn't know many of the artists in Carré's collection, and that I was going to need to look deep to get to the point where I could take sideways glances and find the connections that move my work on. For example, on my return visit to the house, having decided to work with the goat leather to reproduce these paintings, suddenly details in the house, which were there before for me to notice, became evident. The bronze door handles are wrapped with leather thonging to Aalto's very specific design. Black leather demarcates the public spaces, and brown the private. Also, in the dining room, the chairs are upholstered in black leather, which is something that was not on my radar until I started working with the goatskin. So staying with the project, and staying with research for a certain amount of time, is generative and I've become aware of that as important to the work and that's how those links are revealed, connect and continue.

There is a sense that when you find something there is an extreme pressure to want to make it evident, and to use it in the best way. Sometimes that means staying with it, but at other times it means letting it recede, and moving on. Perhaps it will come back in later. For that reason I'm quite interested in the idea of repeating strategies across my practice and disrupting the chronology as a way to feed it back into the conversation.

A further example is that the house regularly played host to parties of more than two hundred people, including that high-profile visit by the Finnish president, which resulted in the particular set of photographs of the house that have been my chief source for this research. On this occasion, and I presume others, Carré, who is from Brittany, invited Breton bagpipe players. The instruments they blow through (*Biniou*) are made from the entire skin of a goat.

KS Amazing! So are you saying at the celebration, there are men blowing air through goats?

CY Yes! Perhaps I feel that in making the goatskin works I'm doing something really a bit mad and then finding that there is actually a link. This material has been on site before, and there is something meaningful in that.

KS Your practice suggests a keen interest and achievement in blurring the boundaries between design and art, display and installation, could you speak to this blurring and where this interest comes from?

CY I don't think I am so concerned with blurring the boundaries between art and design. I think they are very different things, but they can both be used with the intention of arriving at a similar endpoint. I became interested in the applied arts while looking at representations of women in art history, and how as a female artist I might respond to the predominantly male canon. I think I was always looking for gaps in that canon, somewhere I could find a more sincere and authentic relationship to what I might be able to do. But it's always driven by a personal connection too, and a personal understanding that perhaps makes me stop where someone else might not. I visited Amish country when I was seven, and I owned an Amish doll. That was in the back





Heikki Havas c.1960, Alvar Aalto Museum  
 Opposite top: Christian Leclerc 1963, Alvar Aalto Museum







of my mind. I worked in a boutique house paint store in Australia called Aalto Colour which has very little to do with Aalto, who had not much to do with colour! I have a foundation in design and I have a deep interest in objects in the world and specifically those objects or artworks that have endured. Why have we lifted out certain examples as iconic and made those speak to very broad complicated histories and how do they achieve that?

This project is encased in a house, and it is very much about the collision between Carré and Aalto, art and design. This happens in a material way, but it is also about the relationship between two biographies. It is a generative relationship that produces something historical and of significance.

KS What I think is interesting and helpful is to think about the mobility of the works. Mobility that is reinforced in their dispersal, but which is also there in the dealer's practice of bringing works into and out of the house. It makes sense therefore for your project to be shown both in and out of the house. It is not only the publication or videos that will travel, the whole presentation should be mobile and have a life beyond the house and the original context of display.

CY I think it's possibly a more interesting exhibition when the works are separated from the house and then become a very specific assemblage of references. When you remove the interior that once housed these works they leap forward in time and suddenly their movements begin to parallel that of the original collections.

I think the photos of this reconvening will hold a richer significance than the installation itself, which has become an exhibition, as the installation was originally staged to create these photographs. I suppose in creating the photographs I am evidencing that these new works also now share a sense of this particular mobility. They also now share a provenance with the originals to which they refer, which includes being hung on the same wall where the original paintings (Picasso, Léger, Bonnard) once hung, so there is a strange idea of both closing and pointing to a distance.

KS So from the original artworks you are taking the dimensions, the name, and now the provenance as well! Considering the primacy you place on the photographs that will document the exhibition, can you explain why it was important to actually physically make these works? You have described a process – sewing eighteen works – that is laborious and expensive...

CY I think it has something to do with inserting myself quite directly and quite physically within the research and it's about thinking about the surface of this history; about its materiality. By physically engaging with this, through taking something to that location, I think it's more than an attempt to touch it, perhaps. It's also an attempt to use it.

I made collages with goatskin on to the original photos to try to visualise what this work could do, but I think something else will be realised by physically intervening in the space. Some of these works will be hung directly onto fittings that remain on the walls from the original collection. This speaks to the proximity and distance between things, and closing those gaps as a way to think about how big those gaps actually are, and how far we are from history.