

A n g e l a G r a u e r h o l z

# MUNDANE RE-MEMBRANCES

*an interview by Beth Seaton*

Angela Grauerholz, *Sofa*, 1988, cibachrome, 48" x 64".





Angela Grauerholz,  
*Châteaux d'eau*, 1989,  
cibachrome, 48" x 64".

Angela Grauerholz,  
*Clouds*, 1988,  
cibachrome, 48" x 64".



Perhaps the most salient aspect of your work is its ephemeral quality; a blurred mark of indistinction which suggests a pictorialist style. Yet it's not laid over as simply a gesture, and neither do I want to render it to simple metaphor. For this ephemeral quality, coupled with the photographs' contents of everyday, banal occurrences, strongly evoke the "blurri-ness," or the fleeting, mundane moments which make up our everyday lives. Simultaneously, the work underscores the contingent and conjunctural nature of meaning. As viewers of these photographs, we are forever looking to concretely grasp something absolute, something knowable, but we are continuously deferred in this task; forever moving on. Our eyes cannot rest long upon one identification, or one truth in the image. While these photographs do tell stories, they are not discrete, self-contained creations. Rather, like the stories which we construct for ourselves, they are stories without resolution; timely stories tenuously built upon conjunctural relationships with people and things. Do you see such an interaction taking place?

I want these photographs to be as open as I can possibly make them, so that the viewer can reinvest what he or she feels into a particular scene, into a particular image. But I'm never quite sure how to deal with meaning. How do you begin to think about what something means to a particular person; what it means universally, collectively, indi-

vidually; what it means in relation to photographic imagery?

The painterly quality of these photos may be attributed to a notion of conceptual and visual continuity. And in much the same way, their mundane contents refer to a particular continuity as well. Yet, there are distinct differences in the blurry subject matter of these photographs, and in these differences, a type of tension arises. You see, I definitely want to create a universal space. By this I mean a universal imagery which is so recognizable that it becomes totally devoid of any affect, and yet in its application it starts to become reinvested with something. And I'm not really sure how that happens. It's sort of like a negation of any kind of interest in imagery, and at the same time trying to reinvest imagery with some sort of intrigue, even though it is obvious that it's a more or less common image. And so I work with contradictions constantly, and two poles of ideas. If we think of one being indifferent or docile, and the other distinct, I try to fluctuate between the two to try to construct a new sort of meaning. I don't want to be prescriptive in this construction, and yet ironically I find that keeping these photographs open to different interpretations can be a controlled process. And this accounts for another sort of tension as well.

For instance, those two pieces shown at Optica (*The Zone of Conventional Practice and Other Real Stories*) are not a set, not a diptych;



they are individual works. They are all individual pieces that can be made into particular combinations that will make specific or unspecific statements. So I guess this can be termed the conjunctural or contingent aspect of my work. All of these pieces can be put together or pulled apart, just as the meanings within any individual photograph can be strung together in many different ways. It all depends upon the moment and the given criteria for it.

Still, the question remains, whose construction is this? And is this something happening right now, or is it something that has always been that way? I deal a lot with archetype, or invest the work with a lot of symbolism, because that comes closest to the idea of a sudden recognition. I'm always concerned about that one moment where you suddenly recognize something. But this recognition is always different. Or rather, we're looking at something we've seen a hundred million times, but suddenly we're starting to look at it one more time. And every viewer looks at it with his or her own baggage, with everything that is in his or her memory. Everyone will look at it differently, and yet I have a suspicion that it is almost the same.

Somewhere in that, I think we can refer back to what you were saying about the construction of our selves. We always see it as separate from the other. But maybe it's not. We are just telling stories which are banal. There is an element of sameness, and yet for everyone it's different.

Just as certain statements which constituted photography as an integral entity (of truth, of authority, of originality), no longer hold true, neither does any stable definition of identity (of ourselves or others). Do you see your photographs working precisely against any sort of certainty, any sort of universal truths, in order to work "politically"? In other words, a politics that only emerges accidentally, momentarily, by default, at the margins of statements of certainty.

I have suspicion — that even while I'm doing the work I'm going along with the idea that there is no truth, authority, and so on — I don't believe it. I want to express some of the loss of those belief structures through the images. There is a strong sense of loss in them, which can be related to nostalgic sentimentality. But I don't like terming it nostalgia. I'm treading a fine line as to what this loss is all about. One of the things that it could be about is that the belief structures are not there. But I want them to be there. And I re-create them, I reconstruct them. And that's why these things are so familiar. They are the images that we have from our memory of what the

future used to look like.

And yet it's also about doubt, and a kind of ironic stance about that doubt at the same time. You can never be totally behind this, behind these truths; you have to constantly fluctuate with them, and so you go back into that flux. Again, the loss of truth is not the truth.

Do you see your work as pertaining to a gendered critical practice? In many aspects it seems to voice a particular feminist refusal of the fixed signs of subjectivity, and a recognition of the relations between representation and sexed subjectivity as always in process; unstable, unfixed, produced in contingent and momentary relations of signification.

I find myself being very close to this notion of construction; that I respond to it, and that it responds to something in me that is "woman." I think it has something to do with the voice of authority that we don't have, and we're trying to have. In order to get it, we have found ways of circumventing and constructing realities; situations that we can manipulate with our facilities of intuition, and so we make ourselves heard and known in that way. It's never a direct way, and so if you want to bring it back to the images — because they are not direct images, they don't assert anything in particular — they respond perfectly to that idea. They invite and yet simultaneously deny access. It's a resistance of some sort, which can be taken as a feminist stance — confounding interpretation.

This idea also strongly pertains to photography itself. If we think about it in terms of how most of us accumulate photographs — as memorabilia, keep-sakes — then perhaps we can talk about this dual and confounding activity. For while a photograph records a particularly meaningful moment, it simultaneously speaks of its own action; a mechanical activity which may annul meaning. A camera is a totally deadly instrument as far as I'm concerned. Still, it creates, or has the possibility of creating something which is very meaningful and lively. But we find it difficult to tenaciously cling to these meanings. For while the photograph offers up moments of recognition, it compels us to always move on. In this way, the instance it records is always turned in upon itself. It's a moment of magic that is out of control.

We have referred to subjectivity as the effect of the interaction of experience; an experience wrought from our own personal engagement with the discourses and institutions that lend meaning to the events of the world. Your own practices — as photographer, designer, teacher, and founding member of *Artexte* — allude to such a dynamic engagement. How does

this diversity affect your own construction of self, particularly as it relates to your photographic practice?

I've always felt that there is a particular difficulty involved in defining yourself as an artist. Perhaps this stems from a need to be validated as such by other people; unless this validation is forthcoming, it's difficult to believe that it's true. Still, our sense of self doesn't simply come from other's definitions. While it's always important to define ourselves in some way, we may feel uncomfortable with one stable explanation. We may need to do many different things to define ourselves. Or maybe leave it open-ended; to decide at a later date what it is we want to be. It's being different people.

For me, the photographic work is very much a kind of self definition. Since beginning this work in 1978, I've come to realize more and more what it is I'm doing. I started out doing much the same thing, but I didn't know why and how. As you learn over time what it is you're doing, it also becomes more important. And as your start constructing it, you start understanding how you're doing it and why you're doing it.

Just before I came here to meet you, I was thinking about this, and asked: "How do you begin talking about yourself other than just as a reflection of your interiority?" It is that, and yet I can talk about it in other ways. Basically, I do this work because it gives me pleasure, and that pleasure is also a part of dealing with certain things which are inside me. But it can also be talked about in terms of my cultural upbringing. I was a grown-up coming to Canada, and so I had a big, heavy bag. Much of my thinking is very much rooted in a kind of German romanticism. I studied German literature, specifically, Schiller and Goethe, because coming from Northern Germany, it already resided within me. It confirmed my cultural behavior. Two years ago I worked upon a series of photographs where I recreated a type of Northern German romantic landscape. Still, I don't know if art making is essentially a recreation of some earlier feelings. I'm not sure. I may not now be doing Northern German romantic landscapes, but I'm dealing with German romantic ideas. I don't know how far I've taken them out of what they were, or how far I've changed them but I do know that they are still there. I draw from memory. And I'm now very comfortable with this sense of displacement: of the necessity of being in constant flux in order to create the work; of drawing from fleeting images and fleeting ideas; I don't think I could do the work if I wasn't comfortable with it. Displacement used to be a very scary word, but it is no longer.