

Bibliophile takes a leaf from Russian Reading Room

GALLERY GOING
GARY MICHAEL DAULT

Angela Grauerholz
at Olga Korper Gallery
\$2,000-\$115,000. Until Dec. 23, 17
Morrow Ave., Toronto;
416-538-8220.

Montreal-based photographer-sculptor-designer-poet-historian Angela Grauerholz is clearly a passionate reader. Her principal work of three years ago, a moving and deeply poignant installation called *Privation*, mourned and memorialized, in a suite of very large photographs, the loss of individual books from her personal library, all of which had been grievously burned in a house fire.

The remnant books, their colours burnished into gentle pastels by the flames, their pages charred like overtoasted bread, became the ruins of reading, the horrifyingly violent withdrawal of the grace and wisdom that books bestow.

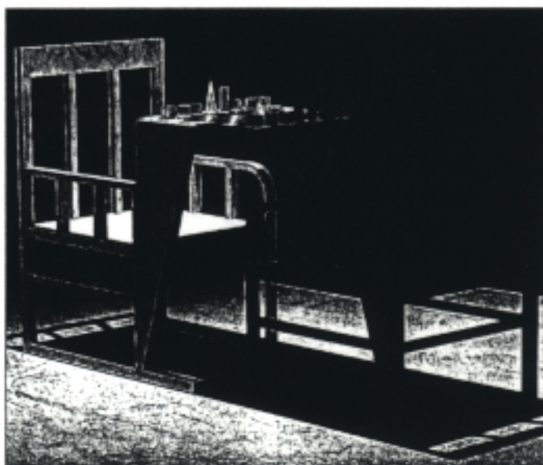
Grauerholz's current exhibition, now at Toronto's Olga Korper Gallery, replenishes and renews the centrality of the book in the artist's life — and the viewer's. It also continues and amplifies the artist's abiding interest in the archive, the collection, the library; her interest, in short, in the shape and texture and possible meanings of stored knowledge.

Central to the exhibition is her *Reading Room for the Working Artist*, both a kind of homage to and a semi-recreation of the Russian Constructivist artist, photographer and designer Alexandr Rodchenko's Reading Room of the USSR's Worker's Club. Rodchenko's contribution to the famous *L'exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* in Paris in 1925 (the exhibition whose title yielded us the phrase Art Deco).

Here, resting against a long, handsomely designed, blond-wood, library-type table, lean 12 unique, carefully designed and hand-bound books: Grauerholz's own scrapbook-like compendia of thespian photos, articles, writings and musings. The volume titled *Il neige au soleil*, for example, is about writing. *Fidneuse* (the female form of *fidneur*) is about exploring the city. *Washed Water* (my favourite of her titles) is about, well, water.

Adding to Grauerholz's desire to "create an environment of contemplation" is the addition, over to one side of the gallery, of her recreation of the Rodchenko chess chairs and table that originally graced the Worker's Club reading room: two sleek modernist wooden chairs and a two-legged table — which cleverly lifts to admit the players to their seats.

So "thoughtful" is this table, in fact, that because the chess pieces are magnetized, they all stay right where they are when the table is lifted. Nothing is too good for those idealistic Russian Workers — or for



Angela Grauerholz's recreation of the chess chairs and table that graced Russian Constructivist Alexandr Rodchenko's Reading Room.

The Reading Room is ringed round by a number of large-scale photographs, the purpose of which is not entirely clear. A couple of them are of other reading rooms in time and space: the arid chamber that emperor Frederick the Great provided in Potsdam for what he hoped would be a long visit from Voltaire (but which Voltaire apparently hated) and a truly hideous staff reading room from some Japanese factory or other (or so I was told; there's no info in the installation).

There's also a gruesomely unpleasant middle-class living room, which could, I guess, be construed in a deeply ironic, rather mean-spirited way, as a sort of reading room. And there's a *Pool Hall*. Plus, for some reason, a handsome abstract photo of the tarmac at some anonymous airport. And a looped collection of film snippets Grauerholz apparently likes, projected on the wall.

These photos and films really seem to add very little to the undeniable power of the central installation, though. Indeed they feel just a tad self-indulgent in their willed superfluity, and in fact begin to compromise the almost transcendental beauty and calm of what one might call the installation proper.