

Angela Grauerholz, McMaster Museum of Art, Hamilton

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By Sally Frater

At first glance it is difficult to decipher the photographs in Angela Grauerholz's solo exhibition in the McMaster Museum of Art's contemporary galleries. Some of the pieces appear as monuments to architecture that document the interiors of what seem to be museological institutions. However, if that is what their main purpose is, to highlight the architectural features of art museums, then they are oddly composed. One work, *Mirror* (2007-2008), features an image of a wall decorated with flocked wallpaper upon which an ornately fashioned oval mirror is hung. The mirror reflects a view of the backs of museum visitors. The viewers stand before blurred reversed images of classical paintings that are difficult to identify. The reflection in the mirror is reminiscent of Thomas Struth's images of museum visitors in prominent art institutions. Yet Grauerholz's image deviates from the seemingly straightforward character of Struth's large-scale photographs in that her work appears to be more of a meditation on the interior of the space itself.

Luftfeuchtigkeitmesser (Hygrothermograph) (2010) depicts a gallery space in which statues of female figures holding infants flank an elaborately carved mausoleum. The image appears sepia-toned which renders the photographed display indistinguishable from the architectural elements of the space itself. The columns, plinths, and sculptures all register within the same tonality. This attributes a feeling of languor to the work that is only disrupted by the presence of a hygrothermograph (an instrument used to measure the levels of humidity in museums and galleries) in the foreground.

The sequence of images of interior spaces is interrupted by images of burnt books. These photos, which stem from Grauerholz's *Privation* series (2001), document the remnants of what was left of the artist's personal library after a house fire. Placed alongside each other the two separate bodies of work seem disparate. But when made aware that the exhibition was meant to respond to the theme of the conference that was being held at McMaster University, *The Archive and Everyday Life* the images take on a different reading: they become documents that function as archival images of archives. The burnt book can no longer perform its original function as a tool of communication yet its photographic image signifies it as a repository of language and ideas. The images of the museums attest to other forms of preservation. The preservation of physical artefacts alluded to by the presence of the hygrothermograph in *Luftfeuchtigkeitmesser* and the museum visitors that view the Renaissance paintings who function as repositories of information in *Mirror*, all of which is underscored by the fact that the primary existence of the types of museums depicted within the works is predicated upon their function as archives.

In a space adjacent to the main gallery more images of Grauerholz's charred books from the *Privations* series hang on the wall while on the floor lies a photographic installation by Alfredo Jaar, *Benjamin*. The piece consists of rows of multiples of the same object, a navy linen box with white text imprinted on the lid. The text describes the contents of each box: "a photograph of Benjamin, a Tsutsi man who was photographed with the remains of family and friends in his village who were victims of the Rwandan genocide." Benjamin requested to be photographed with the remains of their bodies as proof to those who doubted the extent of the violence that was occurring in the country on a daily basis. The installation is an interesting foil to Grauerholz's "museum" pieces; her images of the spaces of galleries invite viewers to actively participate in the act of looking irrespective of the fact that one may initially be unsure as to what exactly it is that the artist wishes the viewer to be searching out in them. With *Benjamin*, we are told exactly what it is that we would see (were we able to view the contents of each box) yet the act of looking which is necessary to experiencing the work ultimately ends up being disrupted. As one is not allowed to gaze at the photograph which lies within each box one simply has to choose either to place faith in the belief that what is contained within each receptacle is what the text states is there or to remain uncertain and to doubt the sincerity of the artist's claims—and those of the subject Benjamin himself. In a more obvious manner *Benjamin* parallels Grauerholz's *Privations* in that both works address acts of violence and destruction that result in loss and the documentation of those acts (although the violence Grauerholz addresses is random and the violence that Jaar references is deliberate and intentional). The loss referenced by Grauerholz (she connects the burnt books from her personal collection to historical events such as the Nazi book burnings) occurred on a personal level, while the loss referenced in Jaar's *Benjamin* alludes to acts that have personal relevance for the subject, yet implications that are far reaching. The gesture of photographic documentation in both instances becomes an act of commemoration, one that privileges the act of remembrance over forgetting.