

Art in America

May 2000

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Cover: H.C. Westermann, *Untitled (Sharks and Setting Sun)*, ca. 1977, ink and watercolor on paper, 12 by 9 inches. Photo courtesy Lennon, Weinberg Gallery, New York. © Estate of H.C. Westermann/VAGA, New York. See article beginning on page 140.

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An Esthetic of Anticipation

Angela Grauerholz's elusive photographs, currently on view in Chicago, exploit the ambiguity of transitional spaces, the cumulative impact of multiple images and various strategies of framing.

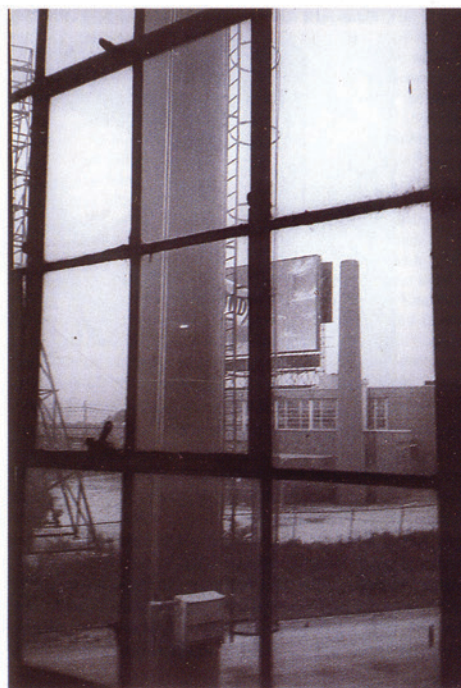
BY TERRIE SULTAN

Angela Grauerholz's photographs linger in our consciousness like remembered dreams. In the thousands of images she has captured over two decades, the German-born, Montreal-based artist instills glimpsed gestures and disconnected locales with a surprising depth of meaning. Her pictures maintain the casual distance of documentary street photography but withhold the identity of place, person and event. Grainy and slightly blurred, these black-and-white depictions of landscapes, windows, doors and incidental human encounters offer a view of life as seen from the edges of awareness.

Grauerholz is highly conscious of how viewers experience images, and she precisely frames her public presentations to affect their responses. This is especially true in her most recent project, "Sententia I to LXII" (1998), which I saw at the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery in Toronto. Previously shown at the Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo and currently on view at the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago (through June 10), it is one of her most nuanced sculptural installations.

"Sententia" houses a selection of Grauerholz's typological excerpts of the everyday. These images function as her personal archive, one that she approaches from the point of view of a cultural anthropologist. "It took me 10 years to realize that photography for me is about collecting experiences and feelings," she told me.¹ Inspired by cultural historian Walter Benjamin, she treats "Sententia" as an encyclopedic exploration of the intersection between the utopia of remembered places and events and the reality of the material world. Passages and incidental architectural spaces have long figured prominently in her work as symbols of transition, and they form the overarching metaphor of the project.

At first encounter, "Sententia" (from the Latin for "adage" or "aphorism") appears to be nothing more than a rigorously architectural, finely crafted 19th-century library cabinet. But in size and scale it also recalls a vault or tomb, suggesting that it is a vessel designed to house precious contents. This American cherry-wood cabinet, some 6 feet high, 8 feet long and 3 feet wide, also relates to museum storage furniture for prints or photographs, which protects them from light when not in use but allows for research access. This type of cabinet, beautiful enough for public display but rarely on view, primarily occupies the in-between spaces of





Installation view of Angela Grauerholz's "Sententia I to LXII," 1998, 62 silver prints, each 37 1/2 by 24 1/4 inches, housed in a custom-made wooden cabinet, shown with the artist's "Schriftbilder," 1999, black-and-white photo series (on wall); at the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery at Harbourfront Centre, Toronto. Photo Cheryl O'Brien. Below, No. 30 from the "Sententia" project. Opposite, No. 19 (top) and No. 61 (bottom). Photos, unless otherwise noted, courtesy the artist and Power Plant.



restricted museum study-and-storage rooms. As a museum professional, I am accustomed to opening the drawers and sliding panels as dictated by my curiosity or research needs, but this is not a privilege enjoyed by the general public. Grauerholz is fully aware of this distinction between public and private, accessibility and inaccessibility. She deftly manipulates this duality by inviting viewers to approach, touch and randomly view the photographs housed in the pullout slots of her cabinet.

The divide between public and private is a territory she has visited before, in "Eglogue or Filling the Landscape," an installation created for the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal in 1995. There, a transparent Plexiglas six-drawer cabinet housed 27 portfolio cases containing a substantial collection of her landscape photographs. Visitors could not open the drawers to view the portfolios; museum staff facilitated viewing of selected images only at certain times of day, and only upon request. Grauerholz was unprepared for the public response: visitors were angry to be denied complete access and demanded more.²

As a consequence, the photographs in "Sententia" are easily seen by simply pulling out the cabinet's sliding panels. This can be done randomly or systematically, by one person or many. Grauerholz asserts that she had no real narrative in mind, and if she did, the personal experiences and expectations that viewers bring to the piece would undermine her construct anyway. But during a conversation at the Power Plant she told me, "If I were the viewer, I would look at all one side and then go all the way around on the other side." She then started at *Sententia* No. 1, opening and closing each panel, moving in a straight line to the end of the row, systematically revealing each of the 62 37-by-25-inch silver prints housed in the cabinet. One side of each panel, the odd numbers in the series, represents a passageway of some sort. *Sententia* No. 1, for example, looks



Grauerholz manipulates the dualities of public and private, accessible and inaccessible, by inviting viewers to handle photographs housed in the pullout slots of a finely crafted 6-by-8-foot cabinet.

through a window at the overlapping grids of an opposing series of exterior windows. The verso of each panel, the even numbers in the series, presents a more static scene without a framing device. *Sententia* No. 2 is a haunting image of a fairground devoid of people.

Regardless of the subject matter or the method of inspection, the multiple pictures have a cumulative effect. Grauerholz is not asking us to engage in a process of comparison but simply to rely on our short-term memory as we slide one image after another from the solid architecture of her cabinet. "Essentially," she told me, "what I want to do in all my photographs is make an entire film and stuff it into one picture."

The overall structure of "*Sententia*" deftly calls forth from the viewer the receptive observational behavior of the flâneur, for whom "far-off times and places interpenetrate the landscape and the present moment."³ Grauerholz uses the ambiguity of passageways and transitional spaces to construct an esthetic of anticipation. The immaterial, allusive details of her images offer the merest framework of associations, signifying states of change. The meanings that Benjamin saw embodied in common architectural elements such as thresholds, mirrors and lighting fixtures clearly inform her decision to contextualize her photographic "no places" within the context of a sculptural installation. "I meant to make a monument to passage in '*Sententia*,'" Grauerholz told me. "But I also find that to be an oxymoron."

In a series of recent works presented at the Olga Korper Gallery in Toronto concurrently with the Power Plant show, Grauerholz introduced a different, more socialized mood. In contrast to the allover, flattened perspectives of the "*Sententia*" pictures, works from 1999 such as *Two Glasses* and *The Europeans* (both black-and-white) or *Venice* and *Remnants* (the artist's first photographs in color) show varied effects, among them centered compositions, crisp depths of field and implied situational narratives. The use of color is surprising, since it departs from the distanced, romanticized atmospheres that have become her signature, toward more immediacy and action.

People rarely appear in Grauerholz's photographs, and when they do, they tend to hover on the edges. "What would I do if I were a documentary photographer? To shoot someone is such an invasion of privacy," she says. "Street documentary photography is distant and disconnected from the self. I want to talk about absence in a different way." □



Above, Venice, 1999, C-print, 37 by 54 inches.

Opposite, from "Sententia," clockwise from top left, No. 51, No. 4, No. 48, No. 2.

Below, Two Glasses, 1999, Type-R print, 34 by 49 inches.
Photos this page courtesy Olga Korper Gallery, Toronto.



1. All quotes, unless otherwise noted, are from conversations with the artist in Toronto, Dec. 10, 1999.

2. A photograph of "Eglogue" is contained in "*Sententia*" as number LXII. The piece is now in the permanent collection of the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal.

3. Walter Benjamin, "The Flâneur," in *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, Mass., and London, Belknap Press, 1999, p. 419.

Organized by the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery at Harbourfront Centre in Toronto, where it was shown Dec. 10, 1999-Feb. 20, 2000, "Sententia I-LXII" was presented earlier at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo [June 10-Sept. 12, 1999] and is currently on view at the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago [Apr. 8-June 10]. Other North American venues are currently under discussion. Photos by Angela Grauerholz were shown at Olga Korper Gallery, Toronto [Dec. 11, 1999-Jan. 19, 2000].

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