

Chennai Photo Biennale 2019
February 22—March 24

an installation by Angela Grauerholz
at the Madras Literary Society, Chennai

book 1
Privation (2001)

book 2
The Empty Shelf (2018)

shelves + brochure
The book is the Book

*Not reproduced here
is a series of images
of books destroyed by
fire, entitled *Privation*
(2001), making up
a second book on
display within the
same installation
at the Madras Literary
Society in the context
of the Chennai Photo
Biennale 2019.

The images of empty shelves reproduced here are souvenirs of what the visitor of the exhibition at the Madras Literary Society (Chennai Photo Biennale 2019) encounters in the form of a large book.* This booklet is meant to help the visitor to connect the various elements and divine what is not said. I am of the mind that not everything in an artwork needs to be fully understood, and that some works should keep their secrets. In looking at a photograph, we cannot know everything about it. As a photograph does not tell everything, and sometimes one can only sense that there is more to it than “meets the eye.”

In addition to the series of photographs of empty bookshelves, this booklet contains a number of phrases that introduce the range of conceptual possibilities the book as a cultural object offers, and an equal number of quotations taken from a text by Maurice Blanchot entitled *The Absence of the Book*.

Over the years, Blanchot’s writings have had a profound influence on my understanding of the relationship between literature and art making, and by the same token, the art of bookmaking. The association of art making and bookmaking is not accidental, as I have come to realize that these are two forms of articulating thought that represent

the same kind of process to me, in the way that I think about creating, conceptualizing, and also spatializing an ‘integrated whole,’ in art making, in bookmaking, as well as in exhibition design. Text and image are often one and the same for me—especially poetic texts—in that they do not immediately reveal themselves completely to their readers and viewers. As it happens, Blanchot was deeply interested in a poet who has also inspired me, Stéphane Mallarmé, the French poet who gave us *A throw of the dice will never abolish chance*, the first modernist poem to introduce the possibility of text as visual language.

Two texts by Blanchot were of special interest. In *The Book to Come*, we are invited to experience the book as something in a continual state of becoming. While the second, mentioned above, *The Absence of the Book*, navigates similar ideas, by focusing mainly on the absent and yet omnipresent book. At the moment, where the object of the book as such has been under tremendous threat, as online publications and the digitalization of whole libraries seem to suggest the imminent demise of the book as we know it, we are unable to predict what is going to happen. At the same time, more and more printed books of all kinds appear on the market, so one prediction seems no more plausible than another.

My first photograph of an empty shelf was taken in a small defunct library in Nogent-sur-Marne near Paris. All the shelves were full, but one. I realized that this image of empty shelves was one possible vision of the future, in as much as the shelves stuffed with old magazines and crumbling books that would never be read again meant that they were in effect past their due date. There was a certain beauty in this realization, because the end of something is only natural, and I do believe that every photograph contains a memory of a past event, but also a memory of a future: the possibility for future images as we have imagined them many times before.

the book is the book

Culture is linked to the book. The book as a repository and a receptacle of knowledge is identified with knowledge. The book is not only the book that sits in libraries—that labyrinth in which all the combinations of forms, words, and letters are rolled up in volumes. The book is the Book.

the book as context

The absence of the book revokes all continuity of presence, just as it evades the questioning conveyed by the book.

the book as document

Writing passes through the book, completing itself there
even as it disappears in the book; ...

the book as **space**

The book is the work language performs on itself: as though the book were necessary in order for language to become aware of language, for it to know itself and complete itself in its incompleteness.

the book as performance

The book: a ruse by which the energy of writing, relying on discourse and allowing itself to be carried along by the vast continuity of discourse, separating itself from it at the limit, is also the use of discourse, restoring to culture the alteration which threatens it and opens it to the absence of the book.

the book as process

The absence of the book: reader, you would like to be its author, and then you would be nothing more than the plural reader of the Work.

the book as reciprocity

The book (the civilization of the book) declares: there is a memory that transmits things, there is a system of relations that arranges things; ...

the book as **construct**

The time of the book, determined by the beginning—
end (past—future) relation based on a presence.

the book as future

The space of the book determined by deployment from a center, itself conceived as the search for a source (origin).

the book as place

[...], when emptiness itself belongs to a structure and allows itself to be adjusted, then there is the book: the law of the book.

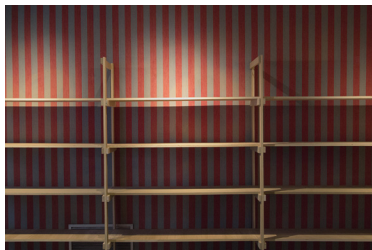
the book as **structure**

Reading would be reading in the book the absence of the book, and as a consequence producing this absence where there is no question of the book being absent or present (defined by an absence or a presence).

the book as circularity

The absence of the book: never contemporaneous with the book, not because it emerges from another time, but because it is the source of non-contemporaneity from which it, too, comes.

the book as passage



The absence of the book, always diverging, always lacking a present relationship with itself, so that it is never received in its fragmentary plurality by a single reader in the present of a reading, unless, at the limit, with the present torn apart, dissuaded—

the book as **manifestation**

The absence of the book: the prior deterioration of the book, the game of dissidence it plays with reference to the space in which it is inscribed; the preliminary dying of the book.

the book as **institution**

[...] what is written as necessity in the book is denounced as chance in the absence of the book. What one says, the other repeats, and this statement that reiterates, by virtue of this reiteration, encompasses death—the death of the self.

the book as **silence**

The anonymity of the book is such that in order to sustain the book it calls for the dignity of a name.

the book as *identity*

The “absence of the book,” which the written thing provokes as the future of writing, a future that has never come to pass—

the book as presence

[...] to name the Book, naming it as the thing that gives meaning to becoming by suggesting a place and a time for it: the first and last concept.

the book as **solution**

The absence of the book is not the book coming apart,
even though in some sense coming apart lies at the
origin of the book and is its opposing principle.

the book as **container**

The fact that the book is always coming apart (dis-ordering itself) still only leads to another book or to a possibility other than the book, but not to the absence of the book.

the book as **event**

Let us also admit the opposite, that the book encloses the absence of the book that excludes it, but that the absence of the book is never conceived only on the basis of the book and only as its negation.

the book as hypothesis

Let us admit that if the book carries meaning, the absence of the book is so alien to meaning that nonmeaning does not concern it either.

the book as perfection

Writing is absent from the Book, being the non-absent absence on the basis of which the Book, having absented itself from this absence [...], makes itself readable and comments on itself by enclosing history; the closing of the book, the severity of the letter, the authority of knowledge.

the book as paratext

What we can say about this writing, which is absent from the book and yet stands in a relationship of otherness with it, is that it remains alien to readability, that it is unreadable insofar as to read is necessarily to enter through one's gaze into a relation of meaning or nonmeaning with a presence.

the book as potential

The book is the Book. Still to be read, to be written, always already written, always already paralyzed by reading, the book constitutes the condition for every possibility of reading and writing.

the book as end

As this booklet is part of an installation conceived for the 2019 Chennai Photo Biennale, I would like to thank the the artictic director, Pushpamala N, as well as the organizers of the Biennale, in particular, Shuchi Kapoor, Varun Gupta, Babitha Lingraj, Shyam D Patel, for their invaluable input and tremendous support. My thanks also goes to Helmut Schippert, Director of the Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan Chennai and the Canadian Consulate, Chennai.

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Born in Hamburg, Germany, Angela Grauerholz has lived and worked in Montréal since 1976. Recipient of several awards, including the prestigious Scotiabank Photography Award in 2015, she has participated in many international events including the Biennale of Sydney (1990), DOCUMENTA IX in Kassel (1992), the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh (1995), the Biennale de Montréal (2004). Solo exhibitions include the Westfälischer Kunstverein (Münster), the MIT List Visual Arts Center (Cambridge), the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery (Buffalo), the Power Plant (Toronto), and the Museum of Contemporary Photography (Chicago), and a retrospective show in 2010 at the National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa). From 1989 to 2016 Grauerholz taught typography and photography as full professor at the École de design of the Université du Québec in Montréal.

