

# CIEL VARIABLE

ART PHOTO MÉDIAS CULTURE

The magazine aims to identify and examine photographic practices that share the ground with contemporary art processes, new image technologies and matters related to global culture.

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FRANÇAIS



## Angela Grauerholz, Reading Room for the Working Artist – James D. Campbell

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VOX image contemporaine, Montreal  
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There are two fantasmatic limits of the book to come, two extreme, final, eschatic figures of the end of the book, the end as death, or the end as telos and achievement.

– Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine*<sup>1</sup>

The archive unfolds in a lush, moving and deliriously stratified suite of meditations on artistic influence, remembrance, taxonomy, redemption and the temporal by Montreal-based artist Angela Grauerholz at VOX. The artist’s litany of some of her favourite things was meant for spirited cerebral and affective perusal on the part of the viewer, who was invited into her archive to savour inscriptions of rare intimacy there. They spoke tellingly of this gifted photographer’s several associated thought-worlds.

Grauerholz placed in the foreground of her exhibition the names and works of a host of artists who have significantly influenced her thinking and her demarche as a visual artist these last many years. *Reading Room for the Working Artist* was a remarkable and challenging archive constituted for VOX out of the full, coruscating array of her artistic practice(s).

### Artist as Pre-emptive Curator

In the exhibition, which covered a vast acreage of work and was truly at the level of a museum exhibition, Grauerholz

deftly curated her own collections of materials pertaining to the visual arts. She used her own taxonomy, a fidelity to her own ordering, collecting, and mnemonics, to defeat another, darker, still more dangerous order of taxonomy. The cumulative influences of other creative expressions on her work over time – or say, rather, their progressive impingement on her psychic processes – was evident from the outset, and spoke eloquently of who she is.

Installed in four consecutive, laterally tiered spaces, with the last space containing three of the haunting photo-works for which Grauerholz is perhaps best known, the work addressed the notion of the “archival” and, specifically the archive as treated by the late great French thinker Jacques Derrida.

As we entered the gallery space, the wall on the left was a screen on which a continuous loop of clips from sundry films was projected, a sort of experimental home movie. As we stood before it, recognition meant epiphany, for discrete fragments soon morphed into an edgy, staccato, if discontinuous narrative; here was a teaching story about the archive and desire. The montage of Kubrick, Bergman, Man Ray, Mallick, Van Sant and Truffaut (and even her partner, Tim Clark, performing some very exotic dance moves), to name a few, followed its own quirky logic. Obviously, the artist had culled the clips from her favourite films and home videos, but they constituted a narrative that was very oblique. The erratic sequencing pointed to both sanity and possible madness, supplementarity and surfeit, alterity and transcendence.

Moving beyond the projection, we entered a space in which there was a reconstruction of the reading table and chairs from Aleksander Rodchenko's *Worker's Club*, which he designed for the International Exposition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts, held in Paris in 1925. Around it were arrayed twelve heady and fully packed tomes on art, literature, and philosophy for our perusal. In the second room, there was a display case of relatable artworks from the 1920s, a reconstruction of Rodchenko's chess table – also part of the *Worker's Club* – and some of the artist's signature photo-works. Two upstairs spaces contained more of these works. Grauerholz has said that the image of the chess table is symbolic for the relationship between the viewer and the artist, the archivist and those perusing her archive. We were enjoined to sit and move the first white pawn. Then, we were bound definitively to the archive. We became its willing pawns, as it were, even to what was *unrepresentable* there but always complicit in the making of meaning. There was no turning back.

As for the remarkable documents on the reading table, they constituted Grauerholz's private (now public) printed archive. Nietzsche, Picasso, Barthes, Duchamps, Calvino, da Vinci, and many other luminaries join ranks in these books and the artist's archive fever burns brightest there. Here is the mnemonic core of the archive, lustrous and replete with significations, every passage of which has come under her purview – and now ours – and which instigates something like covetousness and lust. Grauerholz opens the parentheses on her own sources, and every phrase and sentence there enjoys a pristine connectedness with our own archive fever – however dissimilar in its ends and means – and our desire to figure out how all the dots connect in her thought-worlds.

Apparently, there was a fire in Grauerholz's Montreal home a few years ago, and her archive fever thus also reads as catharsis and commemorative fervour, nostalgia, hope, avowal and overcoming. We are driven to speculate, as Derrida did, on what may have been lost forever.<sup>2</sup> But the record of what remains not only resulted in a rare vision of beauty at VOX, but had other consequences – not only for her own aesthetics and aesthetic canon, but for ours.

### Archive Fever

Derrida had identified in Freud, after all, “the desire to recover moments of inception: to find and possess all sorts of beginnings.”<sup>3</sup> In his *Archive Fever*, desire for the archive is identified as being integral to the desire to locate or possess the beginning of things. But *contra* Freud, Grauerholz here reaches back into the past to seize upon all the points of fulcrum on which her work has turned and evolved in its spiralling ascent toward ever-greater profundity and vertical depth. But to suggest that an overreaching logic is revealed here would be false. All the discontinuities, the false starts, the hits, misses, blips, ruptures and stellar lodes chosen as documentation from the past but also representing wilful fragmentation and loss, wind up in an archive that may seem extensive yet closed, but is really porous and open-ended.

Grauerholz's archive is also the space of reverie, reconciliation, relief – and contemplation. Her own past lives on, as she demonstrates with uncanny precision the nature of her inspiration – her philosophical, literary and cinematic first loves – and the mnemonic register of all that she has known and been as a creative being. She has said that these prior moments can be put into a structure to give them meaning. This structure can be a place. This place we found at VOX. This is true, but make no mistake: over against the vision of pristine orderliness and methodical “bookkeeping” there was poised the pervasive logic of the artist's own unconscious, and it held sway here.<sup>4</sup>

Her works, as she avers, may all be individual moments, singular entities not necessarily related to one another, but her archive fever makes them all relatable and unites them into a palimpsest that transcends fragmentation and diasporas,

and that speaks to the future, not the past. Derrida said, "The archivist produces more archive, and that is why the archive is never closed. It opens out of the future."<sup>5</sup> And opens out upon it.

### Darkness Visible

But all is not sweetness and light in the archive. Derrida notes that the death drive (according to Freud himself) is an aggressive and destructive force and "not only incites forgetfulness, amnesia, the annihilation of memory, as *mnemé* or *anamnesis*, but also commands the radical effacement, in truth the eradication, of that which can never be reduced to *mnemé* or to *anamnesis* – that is, the archive, consignment, the documentary or monumental apparatus as *hypomnema*, *mnemotechnical* supplement or representative, auxiliary or memorandum."<sup>6</sup>

Derrida argues that there is no archive without consignment, repetition, exteriority. "No archive without outside."<sup>7</sup> Derrida's finding perhaps explains our infatuation with Grauerholz's work and her own inveterate need to put it out there. It is not validation that she seeks; she is interested in the promise of shared and shareable intersubjective meaning projected into an infinite future tense, the prospect of which she freely offers us. Her archive is *hypomnetic*. But if, further and as Derrida points out, it works against itself, it simultaneously subverts the very taxonomies that seemingly empower it, and which have spelt much cultural suffering and doom elsewhere. And within the limits of this paradox lies the importance of Grauerholz's work, indelibly etched with its own radiant promise.

As Derrida so brilliantly argued, and as is so true of Grauerholz's work, we have a fitting *coda* for our examination here of *Reading Room for the Working Artist*:

In an enigmatic sense, which will clarify itself perhaps (perhaps, because nothing can be sure here, for essential reasons), the question of the archive is not, we repeat, a question of the past. It is not the question of a concept dealing with the past that might already be at our disposal or not at our disposal, an archivable concept of the archive. It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow. The archive: if we want to know what this will have meant, we will only know in times to come. Perhaps. Not tomorrow but in times to come, later on or perhaps never. A spectral messianicity is at work in the concept of the archive and ties it, like religion, like history, like science itself, to a very singular experience of the promise.<sup>8</sup>

It is well said, for the spectral messianicity of which Derrida speaks (and which, after all, has nothing whatsoever to do with messianism) and the "singular experience of the promise" are what Grauerholz holds out as an achievement on her part and as a reward for us, her archive's longstanding devotees, tomorrow and for unforeseeable days to come.

1. Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p.15.
2. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), p. 101.
3. Carolyn Steedman, "Something She Called a Fever: Michelet, Derrida, and Dust" *American Historical Review*, Vol. 106, No. 4, (October 2001): 4.
4. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 67.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

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5445, Av. de Gaspé, bureau 334, Montréal, Qc, Canada H2T 3B2 – 514/390-1193 – info [arobas] cielvariable.ca