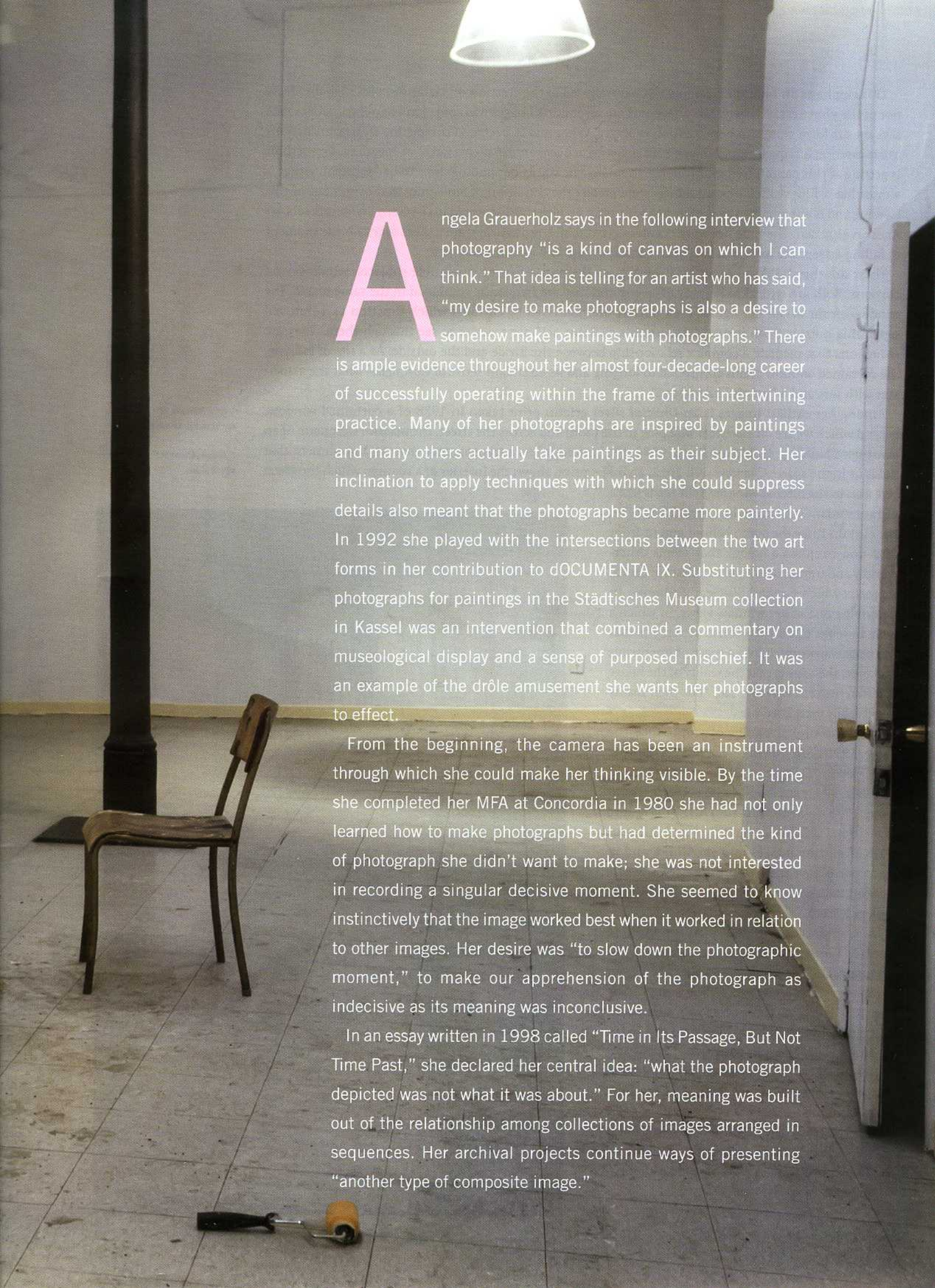


THE CANVAS OF PHOTOGRAPHY AN INTERVIEW WITH ANGELA GRAUERHOLZ

by Robert Enright





Angela Grauerholz says in the following interview that photography “is a kind of canvas on which I can think.” That idea is telling for an artist who has said, “my desire to make photographs is also a desire to somehow make paintings with photographs.” There is ample evidence throughout her almost four-decade-long career of successfully operating within the frame of this intertwining practice. Many of her photographs are inspired by paintings and many others actually take paintings as their subject. Her inclination to apply techniques with which she could suppress details also meant that the photographs became more painterly. In 1992 she played with the intersections between the two art forms in her contribution to dOCUMENTA IX. Substituting her photographs for paintings in the Städtisches Museum collection in Kassel was an intervention that combined a commentary on museological display and a sense of purposed mischief. It was an example of the drôle amusement she wants her photographs to effect.

From the beginning, the camera has been an instrument through which she could make her thinking visible. By the time she completed her MFA at Concordia in 1980 she had not only learned how to make photographs but had determined the kind of photograph she didn’t want to make; she was not interested in recording a singular decisive moment. She seemed to know instinctively that the image worked best when it worked in relation to other images. Her desire was “to slow down the photographic moment,” to make our apprehension of the photograph as indecisive as its meaning was inconclusive.

In an essay written in 1998 called “Time in Its Passage, But Not Time Past,” she declared her central idea: “what the photograph depicted was not what it was about.” For her, meaning was built out of the relationship among collections of images arranged in sequences. Her archival projects continue ways of presenting “another type of composite image.”

This emphasis on multiple relationships naturally led to the creation of narratives, although decidedly not of the photo essay variety. The effect of these resonating images was some kind of photo-poetics. She says the art form closest to her intention is poetry. What makes poetry so compelling is that it functions as an essence; a reduction of language intended to achieve an expansive range of meaning. Grauerholz is getting at this compressed multivalence in saying she wants her photographs to be “something that is almost like a film stuffed into an image.” She prefers the condition of ambiguity that comes out of this layering and is attracted to states of in-between-ness, an idea she discovered in the German literary scholar Andreas Huysen. The time her work occupies is twilight; the physical state it gives over to is the moment of falling asleep, the inter-zone between consciousness and unconsciousness.

These are threshold moments and she locates them in a pair of irresistible subjects: windows and curtains. Both are critical to her way of seeing and they are frequently combined in the same image. The windows from which her figures look out are often covered by curtains which function as a thin veil separating outside from inside. Grauerholz’s curtains activate a desire to see through them. They are seductions that mediate a complex relationship between the inside and the outside. As a site of looking, the curtained window seems connected to longing and its attendant sense of nostalgia—what she associates with loss and a “painful happiness.”

Among her earliest images is an *Untitled* silver gelatin print taken in 1978 of a curtained window, behind which we see an electrical wall plug in the room and across the street, the massive silhouette of an apartment building. In *Mozart Room*, 1993, the curtain is less a transparency than an impediment that holds us in the space; *Chambre vert*, 2012, an inkjet print, shows the interior of a room in which the green bed seen in the filtered window light reads like a distant verdant landscape. In *Cinema bleu*, 2014, the curtain fuses the space behind and in front of it and conjures a colour that seems otherworldly and transcendent. It is a palette of unreal intensity which Grauerholz clearly admires. In describing one of her window views, in which a woman looks out onto a construction site that has been transformed into a space of impossible radiance, she admits that the reality of the image is different from what we see, “but then reality never really interested me.”

All Grauerholz’s bodies of work since the early 1990s—including “Secrets, a Gothic Tale,” 1993; “Eclogue or Filling the Landscape” and her 324-page book called *Aporia* (both from 1995); “Sententia I - LXII,” 1998; and “Privation,” 2001-02—have explored different ways of putting images into the world, and in the process have insisted on the necessity of a careful reading of what we look at and where we look at it from.

In transferring to her medium Roland Barthes’s idea that the reader completes the text, Angela Grauerholz posits that the viewer completes the photograph. What is manifestly apparent is her pictures offer so much possibility for completion that there is no end to the looking we give them in return.

This interview was recorded on January 16th of this year by phone to Montreal. Angela Grauerholz is the winner of the 2015 Scotiabank Photography Prize. Her exhibition will open at the Ryerson Image Centre on May 3, 2016 and will run until August 21. The extensive catalogue accompanying the exhibition is published by Steidl.

1. *Spiral Staircase*, 2011, inkjet print, 40 x 60 inches. Edition of 3.

2. *Éblouie (Alison)*, 2011, inkjet print, 40 x 60 inches.



