

The Sublime Iconoclasm of John Divola

Essay by Afonso Dias Ramos

INTRO

John Divola was born in 1949, in Los Angeles. He studied at California State University, Northridge, and completed an MFA at UCLA under Robert Heinecken, a major figure in the Californian artistic scene which, alongside John Baldessari and Ed Ruscha, called for the use of the photographic camera as a way to subvert artistic discourse. In the mid-1970s, and without a studio of his own, Divola began walking the streets looking for vacant houses. Breaking into them, he vandalized the inside with spray, paint and matches, registering photographically the result of this plastic intervention. Such conceptual sabotage of the distinction between the documentary and artistic practice earned him critical acclaim from the beginning, and launched fifty years of one of the most distinctive works in contemporary art, aligning photography in a very particular way with painting, sculpture, performance and installation. Divola teaches photography at University of California, Riverside, since 1988. He has held over two hundred collective shows and eighty solo shows internationally, with works among the most important art collections, such as MoMA, MET and Whitney Museum in New York, Centre Pompidou in Paris, Getty Museum and LACMA in Los Angeles, Smithsonian in Washington, Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, or the V&A in London. He published seven books: *Continuity* (1997), *Isolated Houses* (2000), *Dogs Chasing My Car In The Desert* (2004), *Three Acts* (2006), *Vandalism* (2018), *Chroma* (2020), *Terminus* (2021). In this scoop, Divola reveals to *Electra* unrealized material of a series in progress, under the title *Blue With Exceptions*, made in the last two years in a deactivated military base on the California desert.

ESSAY

“What are those blue remembered hills
[...] That is the land of lost content,
I see it shining plain,
The happy highways where I went
And cannot come again.”

A. E. Housman, “A Shropshire Lad” (1896)

John Divola’s latest book, *Terminus* (2021), collects a series of black-and-white photographs made since 2015 inside a closed military installation in California, George Air Force Base, seventy miles from Los Angeles, on the southwestern edges of the inhospitable Mojave Desert. Initially benefitting from an official permit to photograph the outside areas, most of this project would result from his clandestine explorations of the interiors of 600 habitation units, abandoned ever since the military base was shut in 1992, due to the toxic contamination of the water and soil. The artistic intervention in these derelict buildings, with the subsequent record of the modified scenes, constitutes a long circle within Divola’s work – and by extension in the history of photography and contemporary art –, picking up on his early strategies, after half a century of a work in Los Angeles that would go on to explore different practices, insisting on a sharp contrast between projects, from the series on isolated houses to sequences of dogs chasing his car through the desert, from the use of robotic cameras for landscapes to the use of timers to create self-portraits on the run. A rare case in the artistic panorama of our time, this dialogue with the early work was not meant to rehash old formulas, but rather to emulate the experimental impetus that set him apart as one of the first conceptual

artists to question the limits of photography, refusing the then dominant patterns of neutrality, and using color exuberantly at a time when black-and-white was still considered the most serious form of art. Dating back to the 1970s, this procedure has found new possibilities in this air base, in a work that, now as before, fundamentally rests on the negation of a distinction between witness and participant, between document and intervention, intersecting the photographic practice with other visual arts as part of an exploration of perception, space, and surface. This time travel, however, was no accident. Such a prolonged field work in the military installation, according to the documentary tradition, occurred in parallel with a return to the private archive in the studio – John Divola turned back to old negatives because of the book *Chroma* (2018), developing new experiences with the saturated and artificial pigments of obsolete Cibachromes; and he refamiliarized himself with his own legendary series in which he intervened in abandoned houses, *Vandalism* (1974-75) or *Zuma* (1977-78), as these underwent a process of digitization and republication.

“Once seen,” wrote the critic David Company, “the work of John Divola is not easily forgotten, particularly his photographs made in disused buildings. There is nothing quite like them in the history of the medium.”ⁱ Divola is one of the contemporary artists which, intuitively, has better realized that iconoclasm is far from a merely destructive phenomenon. It does not necessarily determine a terminal stage of the image, but it can rather constitute a creative act par excellence, as a potential springboard for an infinite proliferation of new images, entailing a process of perpetual transformation. Divola documents the intervention, and intervenes in the document, in a sort of multiplication without end, a continuous movement whereby the initial minimalist gesture frequently ends up in a baroque excess, and restraint leads to sabotage. He does not simply photograph the decadence, but actively cultivates the ruin, rearranging, painting and destroying, and transforming walls, floors, and ceilings. When, in the course of the pandemic, Divola returned to the ramshackle military base on the edge of the desert, he managed to cover more than 5.000 acres of that veritable city in ruins, without military supervision due to the confinement, and a new series in color would soon come into being, *Blue With Exceptions*. The title intends a literal description of the images, referring to their dominant hue, which stems from the application of a colored flash against the golden and orange light of the early morning, whose rays break into the empty spaces. The artist usually dismisses metaphorical readings, and distances himself from the intellectual discourse surrounding his work, stating that the “emphasis is more in what the space presents to me literally than what it might represent symbolically [...] an arena of observational engagement and not primarily a source for didactic political assertions or metaphors.”ⁱⁱ Yet, it is surely no coincidence that the entire series is marshaled around blue: the most suggestive and mysterious of colors, not only the rarest pigment in the natural world but also the one most preferred by humans; the word that defines a tone, a philosophy, a music, and became associated to melancholy in the West, alluding both to cosmic depths and the most intimate interiority. Either in Greek or Latin, there was no direct equivalent for the color blue. Blue, for Romans, was connoted with barbarism. These are all the contrasting impulses at play here, destruction and construction, decadence and expansion, inside and outside, domestic and untamed, discipline and delinquency, awe and foreboding, meditation and brutality, as part of a vision whose contradictory aspects point towards the sublime, but a sublime that is no longer that of transcendence or metaphysics, but is rather immanent, or immediate, to be found among industrial technology and the suburban landscape. “You can’t photograph the sublime”, Divola has claimed, “You can only traffic in the specific and its relationship to the symbolic.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The works that have been chosen for *Electra* cover all the different modalities of image from Divola's ongoing project, as a sample and summation of the most recent visual experiences. Working from vacant and semidestroyed houses, with the signs of an ongoing annihilation evident everywhere, chronicling its own collapse through holes, detritus or cracks, the artist transfigures this space through a colored flash and a physical intervention, covering the surfaces with marks and arabesques, painting small abstract forms or spontaneous gestures. In certain cases, artistic images are even called upon, as the blurred one right at the center, a frame appropriated from Jimmy Stewart's film *Harvey* (1950),^{iv} in which one can glean the shape of a conventional portrait of the leading star next to a giant bunny, the pooka of Celtic folklore, a mythical creature that can assume human or animal form, and poisons harvests and fruits – perhaps not unrelated to the fact that this base was built during the Second World War, served as location for several military themed films, and in the last decade became a focal point for protests, due to the number of pathologies caused by the excessive chemicals found on site. There is also a self-portrait of the artist, reticently among the retouched ruins, contemplating the vandalism of which he was an agent and a witness, trespassing the border between the document and the original, fabricating the scenes he depicts. The images manifest the idea that the photographer is never external to what is represented, taking photography as a process, the residue of an activity rather than standing alone on its own.

Divola's interest in how the past gets inscribed into the materiality of abandoned spaces turns into a push-pull between observation of the specific and the possibility of abstraction, between history and speculation. "I have always had an interest", Divola claims, "in the relationship between the literal specificity of a photographic reference and the abstract, or symbolic, nature of its reception by a viewer."^v Such a gaze from the inside of the shattered infrastructure of a military base is not impervious to metaphors regarding the decline of American imperial power, or a military-industrial complex that has become too powerful to serve the interests of the republic. Such a turn towards these war sites is therefore not without relevance in Divola's work, since it runs counter to the very traditions reclaimed by the plastic interventions being staged. The scenes are in absolute contrast to the tropicalization of Los Angeles as sunny beaches, palm trees or swimming pools. They overturn the situation in the 1960s, when the American neo-avant-garde, from John Cage to Robert Rauschenberg, collaborated with the military-industrial complex, with experiences in technology and in art which signaled not only a new aesthetic, but a utopian social order. Despite the melancholic pitch, Divola's work has nothing to do with twilights. As the sun rises over these ruins, there is more at play than a visual effect, more than the sublime as a shadow of the beautiful. It is an entire utopian dimension that is upended, as a "living amid the ruins". It was precisely this mode that Mikes Davis stressed in relation to southern California as the most extreme instance of the façade of an American metropolis that masks a history of disaster, real and imaginary, and in face of which there is but one gesture that becomes possible, the same one that John Divola carries out experimentally over all these cement skeletons, "excavating the future."^{vi}

ⁱ David Company, “Who, What, Where, With What, Why, How and When? The Forensic Rituals of John Divola”, *John Divola: Three Acts*, New York: Aperture, 2006, p. 121.

ⁱⁱ Brad Feuerhelm, “In Conversation with John Divola”, *American Suburbx*, Outubro 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jeffrey Fleishman, “In John Divola’s photographs, an elusive presence”, *Los Angeles Times*, 14 Dezembro 2013.

^{iv} Conversa telefónica com John Divola, 22 de Novembro de 2021.

^v Brad Feuerhelm, op. cit.

^{vi} Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, London: Verso, 1990.