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Photography Here and Now

*With Catherine Opie, Brendan Fowler, Torbjørn Rødland, Aaron Sandnes, Robert Mapplethorpe,
John Divola & Marius Engh, Marlène Marino, and Hanna Liden*

Out There

John Divola and Marius Engh in conversation with Dorothee Perret



John Divola, from *Zuma Series*, 1977–1978. Courtesy of the artist. Photos ©John Divola

As Far As I Could Get, a career-spanning series of exhibitions of the work of John Divola, is now on view at three Southern California institutions —the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, the Pomona College Museum of Art, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. His *Zuma Series* was also featured in the landmark 2011 survey *Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974–1981* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in downtown L.A. These images of abandoned beach shacks remain among the most influential—and appropriated—works of 20th Century photography.

Marius Engh, an artist from Norway who shows in galleries across Europe, is enjoying his first extended stay in Los Angeles. How objects tell us stories through layers of space and time is the focus of his work.

Current practice, form, history, and the importance of ambiguity in art were the topics of discussion when these two artists met in L.A.

Dorothee Perret: Thank you for receiving us, John. Marius and I were actually together at your talk at LACMA.

John Divola: Okay, then you know everything I have to say. [laughs] We don't know what you have to say, so you can do all the talking, Marius.

Dorothee: Marius is a Norwegian artist who is now doing a residency in L.A. You arrived, what, two months ago?

Marius Engh: Yeah.

John: Where's your residency?

Marius: At the 18th Street Arts Center in Santa Monica.

John: Okay, not too far from here.

Dorothee: This issue of the magazine is on photography. We'd like to talk about where photography is these days. We live in a society over-saturated by images. Marius uses photography in his work to document historical places. He calls himself an artist. John, you started your recent talk at LACMA by stating that you were a photographer.

John: I don't see the distinctions as mutually exclusive. I think I can be both a photographer and an artist, if possible.

Marius: Can we talk about the studio practice? With a camera in hand, you have a studio anywhere.

John: Once you come to the conclusion that everything ends up as a photograph—whether it's made in a studio or observed outside—then that distinction becomes flexible, as far as what constitutes a studio practice and what constitutes another kind of practice.

Dorothee: It's the idea that you can have a studio "out there," and also have a studio where you can close yourself in and work.

John: It's a really complicated question because I don't really make that distinction. I don't see it as a studio practice or a post-studio practice. It's not relevant to me because I didn't start out as a studio artist. It's something I had access to later that I integrated into what I do, but it's not something that I was making work in relation to or counter to.

Marius: The first work that I saw by you, the *Zuma Series*, is where I saw the studio practice coming in. You have a space available where you can do whatever you want—because it's a ruin—and there you can perform whatever work you want to do, and document it in that way. Take that space with you and, possibly, show it somewhere else.

John: Yes, except there's a distinction, which is that Zuma was not a studio in a "blank" sense. With the Zuma house—and I did a body of work prior to that called *Vandalism*, black and white photographs in a number of abandoned buildings—I'm no more interested in the gestures that I'm making, the painting that I'm doing there, the moving things around, than I am in what is there intrinsically. I'm doing something in relation to pre-existing content. I'm not completely responsible for all of the attributes in material nature of what's being described. I'm simply interacting with it.

Marius: You merge all of these things to make a composition. You use spray paint, for example, to break the space or flatten it, and it interacts with the background, like the sunset on the horizon. And all these flattening things—the materials, the flash—provide a frame. It's very interesting to think about how all these parts come together to make this composition.

John: I am not marking in the space because I'm interested in the space. When I said that I was a photographer, I've internalized the vocabulary and the attributes of the medium, and I'm picking spaces to photograph that I think will translate into the medium that I'm using. If I wasn't a photographer, I

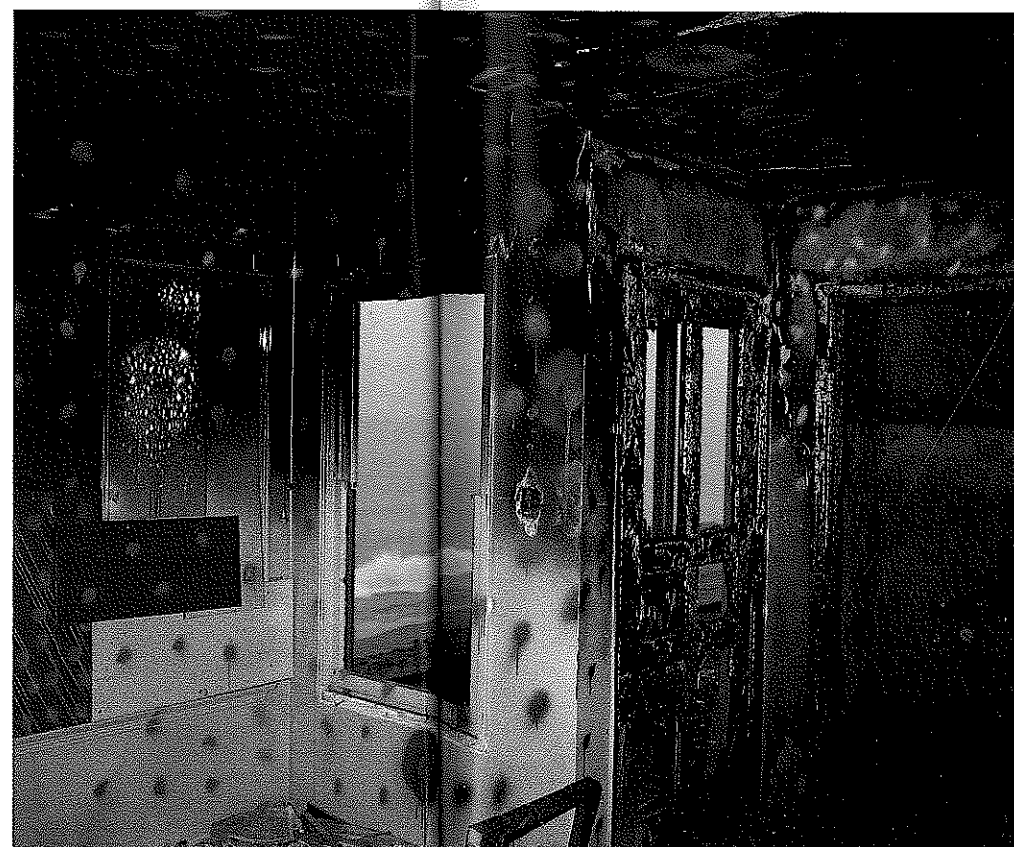
wouldn't be in that house at all, right? And I know that an electronic flash is going to do something to the intensity of light on the inside relative to the outside, and that's going to do something as it flattens out into a photograph.

Dorothee: There is something about space and time that you both use a lot in your practice. Marius, in a very different, more historical way, also uses time.

Marius: Right now I'm working in Rustic Canyon in the Santa Monica Mountains. It's interesting because now there's a kind of a "beautification" process going on there. Vegetation is totally overgrowing in the canyon, and it's kind of

Marius Engh, *Exit /John 3:16*, 2013. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Emanuel Layr. Photo ©Galerie Emanuel Layr

John Divola, from *Zuma Series*, 1977–1978. Courtesy of the artist. Photos ©John Divola



erasing the traces of a former history. There are these layers of history and this attempt to try and make it valuable again by erasing history through this overgrowth. How to depict these things with a camera? It's a beautiful place because there are no houses there, and when artists were there during the time of Huntington Hartford's artists' colony, they painted the trees and the landscape. It opens up a way to talk about nature, entropy, the anarchistic force of nature. It makes me think about your work, with its ideas of entropy.

John: It sounds like we are equally interested in pre-existing narratives, which is what histories are. We know the history of what has happened to have been formalized into one form of narrative or another. So, it seems that just as I'm interested in the broken glass on the floor of the abandoned houses, you're interested in these pre-existing narratives, and folding these narratives into what you're doing. I would see that as a similarity: looking for something that culturally already exists.

Marius: Back to my idea of the studio. My studio is out there. In my practice, using a camera always takes me on a trip. I become adventurous with a camera. It's a way to see things and situations.

Dorothee: Marius, you always put yourself in between. In that lapse of time and distance, you somehow get yourself into it—whether we recognize it or not. That's something you do too, John, which comes out in the printed photograph. Marius is removing artifacts, and showing an "aftermath."

John: For me, very early in my career, I recognized that the process of "doing it" was what interested me. Marius, you talk about going up to Rustic Canyon, you've got the camera in your hand, you're in a certain kind of mental state in terms of observation. Or you've studied the history of the place and you go there and experience the place. And anytime you take a photograph, it's always implied that you are there. But you're generally not in any way part of the content. But, for me, even back before I started painting in houses, and I was making photographs that were fairly conventional—people watering lawns and things like that—I was always interested in the fact that I was moving through the landscape and coming back with these remnants of an engagement. I was always looking for some way to manifest that in the work, where that was some kind of undeniable attribute or content of the work. So I ended up painting in those houses, where I'm literally in front, so that it's undeniable that there's an activity or process.

John Divola, from *The Theodore Street project*, 2013. Courtesy of the artist. Photo © John Divola



And these photographs are merely remnants or artifacts of a process.

Marius: John, in your work I like this idea of flatness, and the picture plane—how you push in and out. I think I document the same kind of things in the spaces I'm moving through. There is a discourse with art. The idea of an object that has a flatness or blankness to it, but still is in a space and comes back into the picture plane. With photography, this is how I'm documenting the objects I'm interested in.

John: One of the subtexts of art has always had to do with "skill and labor." If you make a sculpture there's a certain amount of indexed labor to it. A certain amount of technical virtuosity in terms of painting. That's where we've gone through a real transition with photography. It was always interesting to me that it was an industrial medium.

Marius: You started out doing spray-painting—which, of course, is a very different imprint on things. Photography and graffiti art are now part of the art scene. Why did spray paint become important to you?

John: Because it was easy and cheap. [laughs] I never thought of myself as a graffiti artist. I never would paint on anything

that I thought anyone cared about, or that belonged to somebody. I never wanted to be transgressive in that way. But it was just the easiest.

I started doing the early *Vandalism* stuff for a really stupid reason. I'd been out photographing silver butane tanks. And I was making these black and white photographs, which are literally silver on paper. When you photograph something that's silver, it has a really interesting look. It's not quite gray, it's something else. And I thought, well, that's interesting. Maybe I should photograph things that are silver. So I started painting things silver, and I looked at those photographs and I thought, maybe I should add black and white. So really, it's not like I said to myself, "Oh, I know, I'm going to do such-and-such." For me, it's more recognizing the potential and then incrementally moving the work around.

Marius: And now it seems you've come full circle with *The Theodore Street Project*—abandoned houses, spray paint. I don't know how it was in the 70s when you started spray-painting these houses, but it seems like you were the only one.

John: Yeah.

Marius: Now you have competition. [laughs]

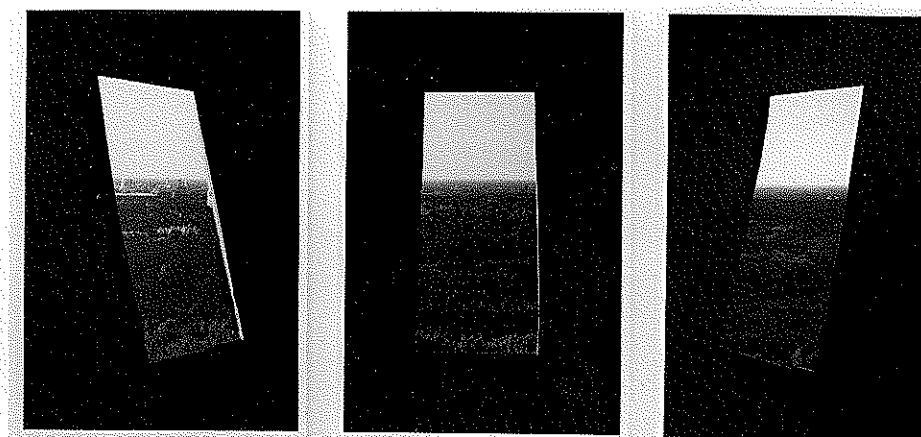
John: Right. Several people painting in there.

Marius: So it's a place where a lot of people go and practice their skills.

John: Right, and that interests me.

Marius: As you said, you're not interested in the space per se. You can add to it with your painting, or erase something from it. Now it's a bit harder to see what's actually yours.

Marius Engh, *Lead, Follow or Get the Hell Out of the Way*, 1-3/1-14, 2008. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Emanuel Layr. Photo © Ralf Klem

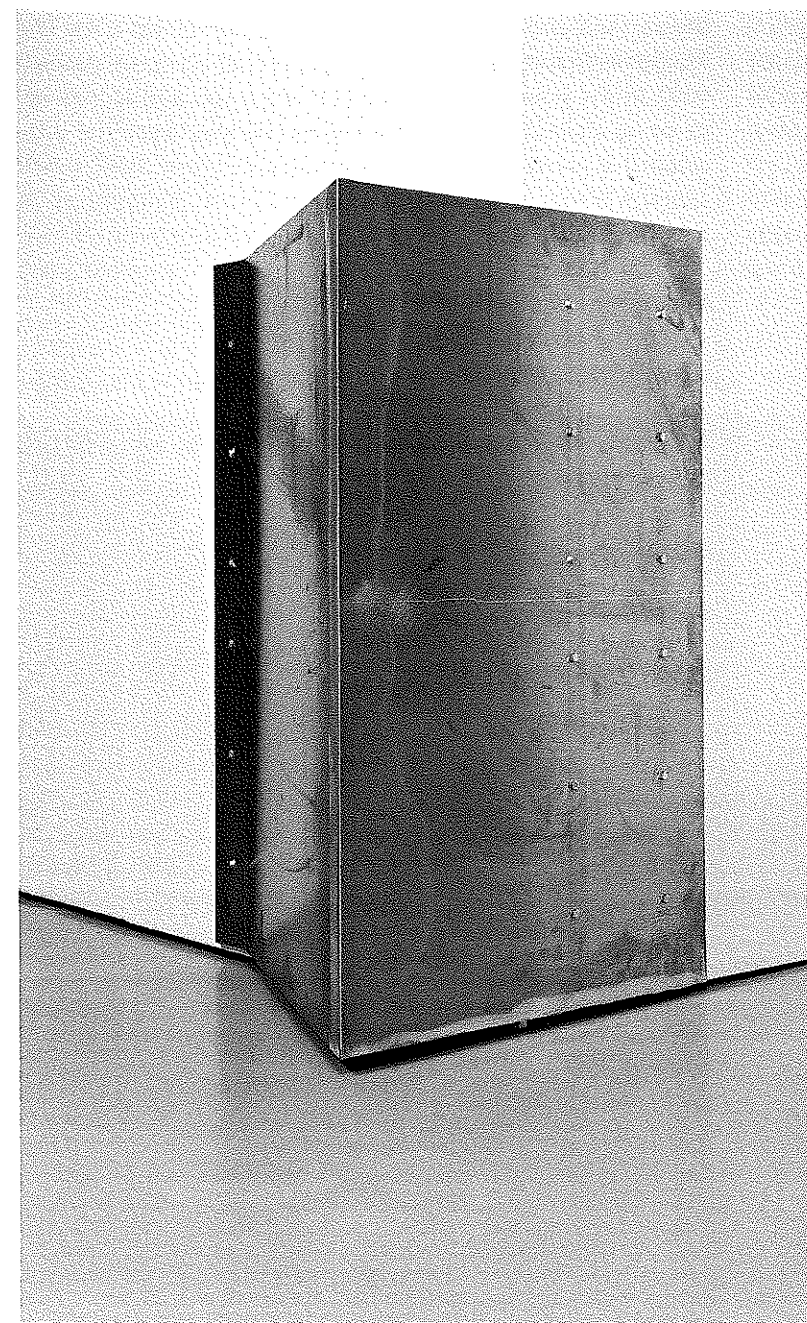


John: Sure. But in the show, there are single photographs that I did earlier. And in those bigger ones they've been painted over. So you can look at the original and go back and see what was there before. But then, I added on top of their stuff, too. It's not always clear, what's mine and what's theirs.

Marius: I also really like these images where you're running. Time and speed, trying to move away, trying to blend in and erase yourself. I was thinking again about entropy in that sense. Do you remember Robert Smithson's sculpture *Pointless Vanishing Point*?

John: No, I don't, actually.

Marius Engh, *A Dog's Name*, 2010. Courtesy of the artist and STANDARD (OSLO). Photo ©Vegard Kleven



Marius: It's a sculpture that has a step kind of form that shows an idea of perspective that gets narrower, but comes to no point. It is a piece about time and space, and I thought that it is like a model of your work—from your camera to the point where you are captured.

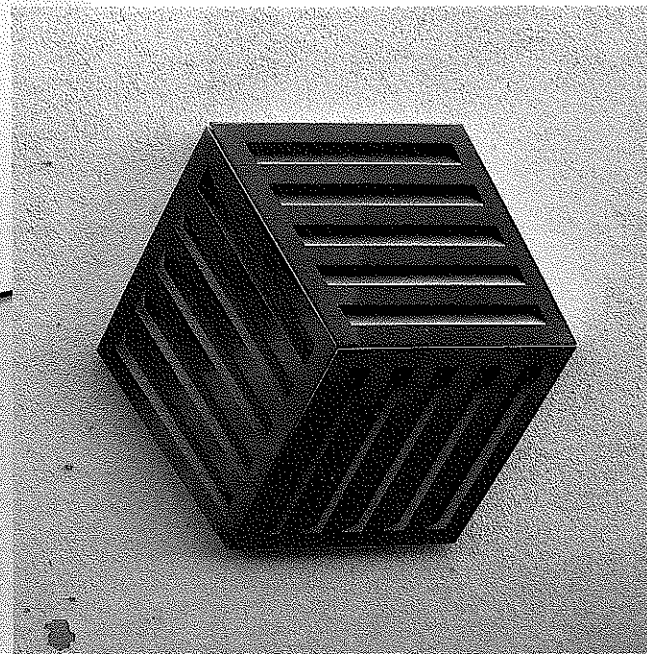
John: One of the running-from-the-camera photographs was shot in an alley right here. A lot of them were shot in the desert. At the time, I had a studio in Marina del Rey which was on the old Hughes Airport property, which was like a marsh. When I shot the *As Far As I Could Get* series, I was interested in what you just mentioned. But I was also interested in the fact that I had just turned 50, and I was physically interested in running as fast as I could. Because, again, you're never going to get any faster than that. Remember, as a kid, you could run really fast.

Marius: Now you do it like a daily exercise?

John: Well, no. [laughs] But I thought, damn, I haven't tried to run as fast as I could in twenty years. And then you try and do it and you have these limitations, you can only get so far. And I like the idea of it kind of penetrating the scene. You're insignificant—this little, tiny thing on film—and the longer you run, the less you are.

Marius: Yes, it's kind of a pure, conceptual work. It's very simple to depict that. Just the idea of space and speed.

Marius Engh, *Miracle Mile*, 2013. Welded stainless steel. Courtesy of the artist and STANDARD (OSLO) Photo ©Marius Engh



Dorothee: Do you think a place can shape the work? I'm thinking particularly of the city of Los Angeles.

John: Well, Marius would be a better person to speak to that, because how do I know? I've been here my entire life.

Marius: Anywhere I go that is new to me is interesting. That's when I open my mind to a lot of new culture, and it's very easy then to go into something that is historical: why does it look like this, what is its history?

John: One thing that I think shaped my work a bit is that when I started making art in the late 1960s, early 1970s, Los Angeles was certainly not an art center. No museums of contemporary art, very few galleries of contemporary art. We saw art primarily in magazines, or in school, projected on the wall. So, up to that period of time, serious art-making was urban. Just a few centers—New York, London, Paris, Berlin, Tokyo—and people in the provinces had a more distant reception. I think it became very natural for me to look at photography as this primary arena for this discourse for art. I'm wondering if that's sort of the same experience being in Norway. You see art primarily in re-representation, as opposed to the painting itself or the sculpture itself.

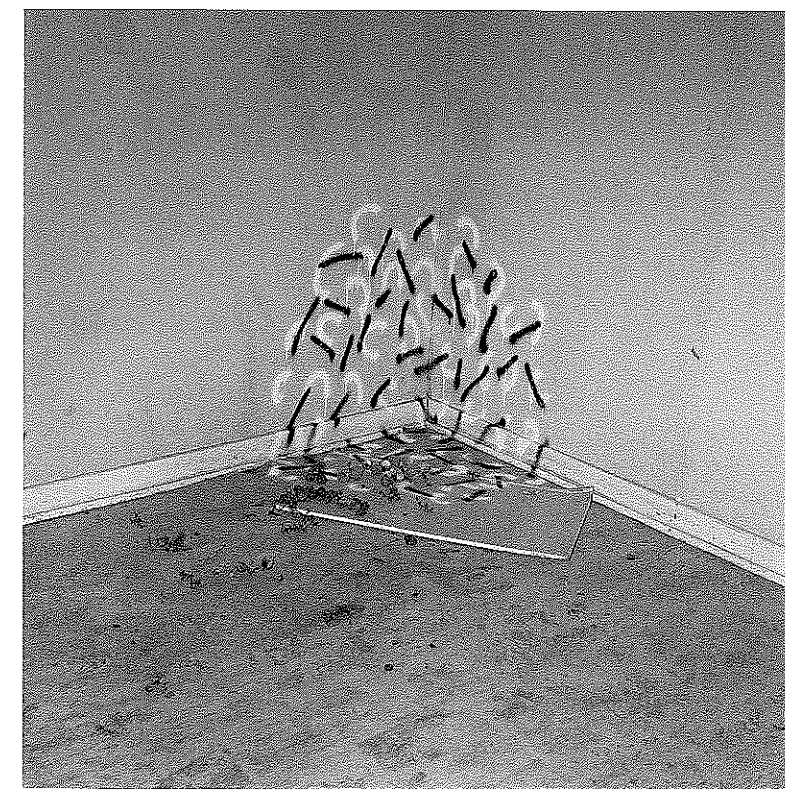
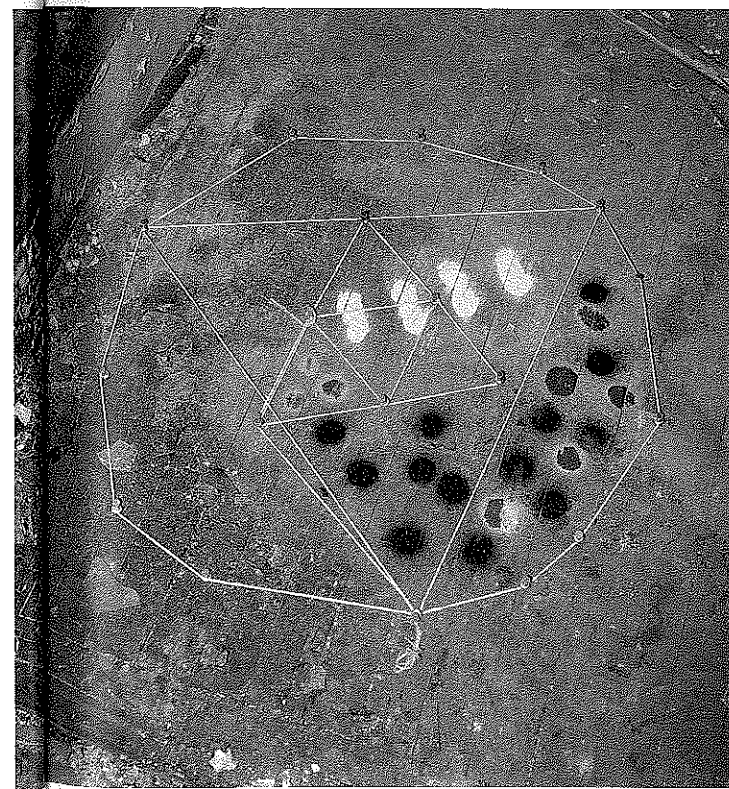
Marius: That's true. Yeah, we are outside of the hub. We've always been a bit behind. It's catching up, but for a long time it's been a remote place. You're a photographer who is also

interested in all of the other art forms. Has photography's emergence and equality to the other arts kept you calling yourself a photographer, because that was your path and struggle? Robert Smithson had a huge body of work based on photography, but it was never acknowledged as anything significant until maybe the mid-90s. Until then his photographs could still be bought really cheap. I wonder if you can talk about this way of being parallel to the art world, and then merging in, and how that changed. The possibilities opened for you to be acknowledged as an artist.

John: Another thing that was interesting about growing up in Los Angeles is that, in the 1970s and 1980s, there was always a very vibrant and interesting academic discourse about art. We had really good institutions. We had CalArts, we had UCLA, USC, Art Center College of Design. What we didn't have was a very viable, institutional culture of galleries and museums. So if you were in New York, you were talking to gallerists and museum curators, whereas here it was a bunch of academics teaching art and talking to one another. These were the people I was talking to, and it was a very separate dialog, and not as much oriented to the commodification of art as it might have been elsewhere. Actually, I think one of the reasons a lot of really interesting art came out of California in the 1970s and 80s is precisely because of that more rarified academic context that privileged...

Dorothee: ...outside the market?

John Divola, from *Vandalism*, 1973-1975. Courtesy of the artist. Photo ©John Divola



John: Outside the market. Then, like all things in capitalism, it gets embraced.

Dorothee: Do you still think that California is a good place to be for an artist?

John: I think it's a great place to be a photographic artist. I think the landscape is extraordinarily rich. All the things that people don't like about California—the irrational relationship with different kinds of architectural languages, the dynamic changes and the fact that nothing's permanent, the sense of flux—are really interesting to me, for what I do. And the car culture.

Dorothee: Though you don't see photography as a way to document the world.

John: No. It's all about process for me. What I want is a place I can go to, and make observations, and go back and look, and go back there again. I need to have this kind of ongoing relationship to the process of doing and being there. And, ultimately, my aspiration is that that becomes manifest in the work in some way. I'm not interested in "documenting" something. But Marius, what do you think the relationship is between the physical nature of the installation of your work, and the locale?

Marius: I'm very interested in the physical nature of objects, of sculptures. So, I'm dealing with forms and space. In the photographic works, found objects appear isolated, or in situations with other objects and backgrounds. Part of my practice is to experience and activate objects in real space. In several ways, I want to address these things for what they are, and at the same time take them somewhere else. And by making ideas of space, or making ideas of flatness, I want to bring these objects that I found into a discourse of art.

John Divola, from *Dogs Chasing My Car in the Desert*, 1996–1998. Courtesy of the artist. Photos ©John Divola



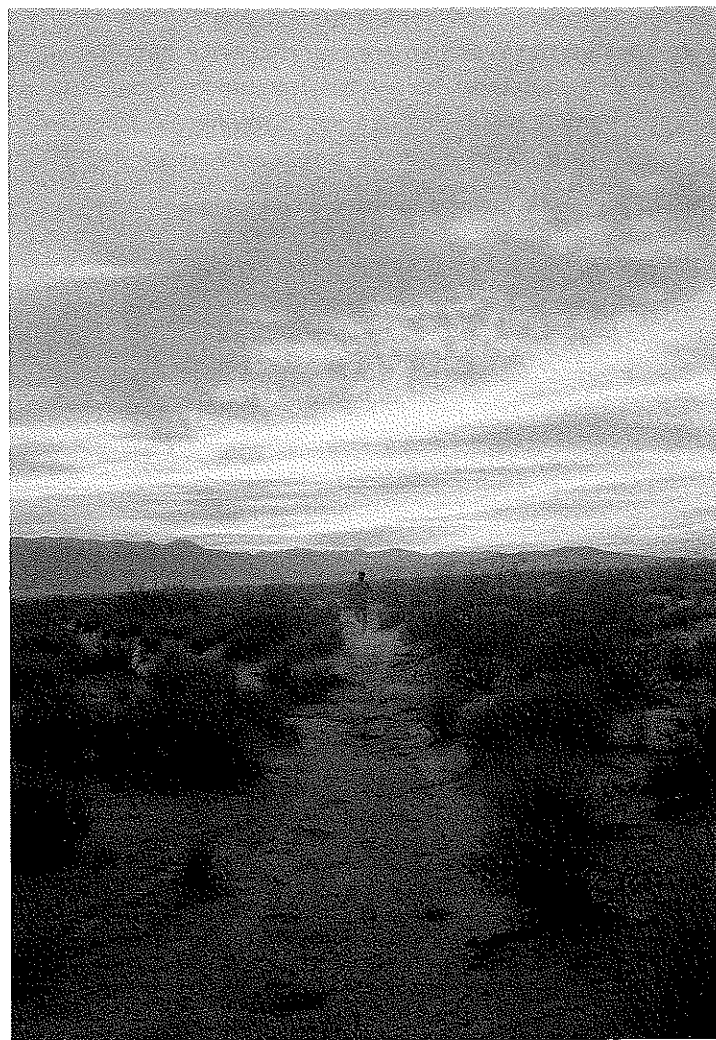
John: What do you mean, "a discourse of art"?

Marius: The objects don't come from art, but could be everyday objects that might communicate something that I have chosen to give form to in my work. These forms can be said to inherit some sort of language. I place these objects "in dialog" when I bring them into my practice of making art.

John: Are you saying, "look at this thing, it looks like art"?

Marius: No... It's a method for me to work. These objects have a background that doesn't come from art. But I see the potentiality of it, as a way to speak through them in an art context. By remaking them in simpler forms, they become a "layer" of the work. They also can become vessels, filled with new possible content.

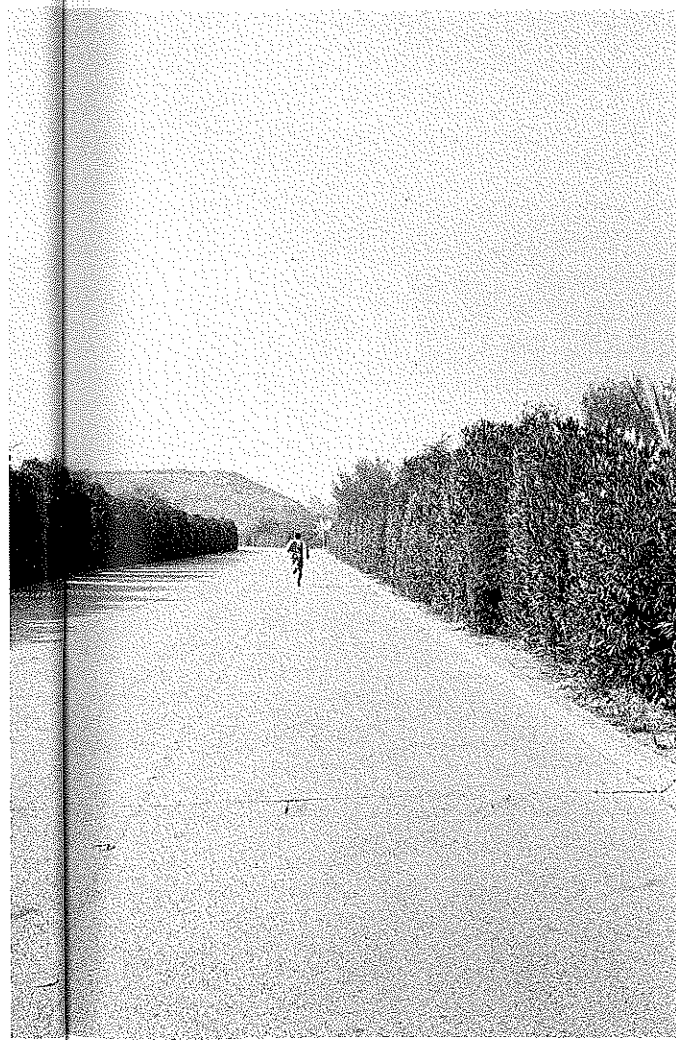
John: Marius, there's an aesthetic to your catalogue *An Aggregation of Adversary*—the use of colored pages, the images that are installation shots, the images that are informational shots. There's a kind of aggregate, aesthetic enterprise, and what interests me is the relationship of that to the content.



Marius: It's a book on the topic of a Cold War-era listening station—now in ruins—which was built on a Berlin hilltop out of ruins from WW II. So, it's an artist's book which takes the form of a guide book or manual. It goes in and out of ideas about form and history, to the heap of rubble the listening station is today. It was about being there and trying to make sense of it by making objects or photos or composing something. It's trying to represent ideas in the world. The different use of paper for different parts of the book is based on this idea of accumulated layers, like the ground we are walking on. I wanted to make something that was open enough for people to interact with, without putting too many ideas in their faces.

John: They don't have to experience it if they know exactly what it's about. You want a little ambiguity, because ambiguity allows for a cognitive engagement with the work. It forces you to try to interpret it in some way.

John Divola, from *As Far As I Could Get*, 1996–2010. Courtesy of the artist. Photos ©John Divola



Marius Engh, *Ghost Station (#01-03)*, 2012. Courtesy of the artist and STANDARD (OSLO). Photo ©Vegard Kleven

