

PALMS WON'T GROW HERE



AND OTHER MYTHS

John Divola Cyprien Gaillard

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and Other Myths**

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Cyprien Gaillard**

LAURA BARTLETT GALLERY



John Divola, *Zuma #70*, 1977

Necromantic — Jan Tumlir



Cyprien Gaillard, *Not Yet Titled*, 2010

Ruins exert a powerful influence on ‘men in dark times,’ to quote the title of a book by Hannah Arendt. When structures built for purposes of dwelling, storing and preserving begin to disintegrate, or else are actively demolished, something once hidden inside them is revealed. The ruination of what we had filled with ourselves, our things, our past, announces the inevitable approach of total memory-loss. Broken architecture becomes an emblem of negative history, its historical aura paradoxically concentrated in the course of its eclipse. These are archives that have surrendered their contents to the elements; all that once comprised their interior now devolves into mulch, grist for the mill of Romantic speculation on the futility of our most idealistic aspirations. In the long run, no sign of our earthly occupation will remain; every human footprint will eventually be erased – this is what the ruin promises, even as it continues to hold our place, here and there, for the time being.

The ruin is a place-holder, no longer place-keeper. In holding our place for just a while longer, it is a reminder of what was once held by us and had – that is to say, the extent of an ownership once thought inalienable – while at the same time releasing it all from our grasp. The force of its attraction originates from this halfway point between possession and repossession, which is where the artist tends to be already, since here as well what is made ‘for self’ is not made to be kept. The threat of loss is inscribed into the genetic code of the work of art no less than the promise of preservation. If art is essentially a form of externalized interiority, where the isolated experience of individual being opens into the communicative commonwealth, then it only endures as a record of experience collectively shared.

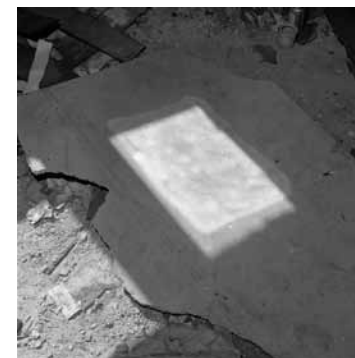
According to Baudelaire, the artwork is a ‘mnemotechnology,’ a means of memory storage and recall, designed to communicate across time how we lived at one time. No matter how up to date, or even ahead of the curve, art may appear, as ‘mnemotechnology’ it lives on historical time, a time that will outlast us, while always running out. From the first moment, then, the artwork is a ruin; this much is true across the board, but especially in the case of John Divola and Cyprien Gaillard. The pairing of these two artists is fortuitous, since both make works that are of and about ruination. Moreover, they do so from the opposed poles of the ‘Old World’ and the ‘New,’ to meet somewhere between memory overload and amnesia. The Romantic currents that drive their individual practices join within the space of this exhibition into a circuit of eternal recurrence where ‘everything that’s old is new again,’ and vice-versa.

Staking out the limit points of American expansionism, the ex-urban hinterlands of Southern California, Divola observes the attenuation of the frontier spirit in an architecture undergoing a process of rapid aging. That

he has remained in this place – Divola is that rare example of an LA local, born and bred – gains a certain emphasis in the light of Gaillard’s relentless mobilization. The first principle of the latter’s production is to ‘only connect,’ as E. M. Forster famously put it, which is what Gaillard does across great distances. In its global outreach the work underscores what appears as Divola’s deliberate regionalism. Likewise Divola’s enduring commitment to photography and to the reflexive logic of medium specificity in general, these being precisely what Gaillard’s post-medium practice refutes. Here instead it is the image as informational currency freely circulating through a range of frameworks – still and moving, analog and digital, virtual and objective – that is the basis of all connection making. As such, the image tends to pre-exist the artwork, which only provides it with another form of housing, no less provisional than that in which it was found. Conversely, Divola’s images are wholly made by him, and one must always consider his peripheral presence within them. The photographer was actually there; whatever the image shows us, we see through his eyes.

Here we may think of the relation of place-keeping to place-holding. For the one who stands in the place that he photographs, the result will last as a record of being there. The print keeps his place on the ground where he stood for only an instant by outlasting that instant as a frozen chemical pattern. In the time that it takes for the camera’s shutter to open and close, perception is drained of its peripatetic and fleeting aspects; a view is registered, and with it, the position of the viewer. In Divola’s pictures, that instant is always openly acknowledged as past. The lag between the time of their taking and the time of their viewing is the source of a pervasive melancholia that is perhaps the most characteristic affect of his work overall. Aside from the fact that a photograph is implicitly a fragment, a partial view of a world that exceeds its borders ad infinitum, it is this quality of irreversible distancing that lends it a ruinous aspect. Emphasizing the grain of the image, which sometimes begins to subsume its contents, Divola reiterates the understanding of the frame as a broken edge within its referential substance. This is especially evident in *The Four Landscapes* suite from 1992, where a succession of isolated, faraway subjects – houses, boats, cars and hikers – are observed flickering on the threshold of disappearance into the vast, indifferent landscapes that enfold them. Caught in the crosshairs of the lens, at the dead center of each composition, these various signs of human occupation are granted pride of place in the pictorial scheme of things, and their place is kept there. By dint of repetition we know that these are our focal points, but their focus is blurring, their contours breaking apart, and their mass dissolving into loose clusters of grain that we can already imagine swirling down the funnel of perspectival vanishing.

The pictures featured in this exhibition are among the earliest of Divola’s career, started while still in graduate school and then continued through the mid- to late-seventies, and although they are all relatively sharp, a specter of corruption intrudes nevertheless. During this time, the artist completed three bodies of work, the black and white *Vandalism* and *LAX NAZ Forced Entries* series and the breakthrough color *Zuma* series. All involve an assault on domestic architecture, the first perpetrated largely by the artist himself, the second by anonymous vandals, and the third in a kind of deferred collaboration between them. All three evolved out of



an indecisive period of pendulum swinging between the sort of freeform Pop-Surrealist collage championed at the time by Robert Rauschenberg and a relatively straight documentary take on the suburban landscape of the San Fernando Valley that Divola called home. As the artist tells it, he gained a first glimpse of his future course while reproducing a still somewhat arbitrarily chosen object, some silver propane tanks, onto a gelatin silver ground. It is significant that the formal rhyme between the thing photographed and the photograph itself was only noted once the photographer had left the site. Like the interior of the camera, only more so, the darkroom is a space where the world reappears as an image seemingly detached from its source, yet here the two became photogenically reconnected. The silver nexus, not so much a hue as a tonality that can span the spectrum from dark to bright depending on how it is angled to the light, was perfectly suited to black and white printing. Divola went off in search of other silver things, and then began to paint things silver himself.

It is obvious from the *Vandalism* photographs that the mark-making tool is an aerosol spray can, which straightaway links Divola’s aesthetic activity to an illicit underworld. The series title spells it out in no uncertain terms: artistic production is aligned with the destruction of the built landscape and its privileged emblem of well-grounded normalcy, the single-family home. Graffiti and tagging are a means of claiming space by those who are, or feel, dispossessed. What cannot be kept can at least be held for a moment by way of the mark that tags it with a new identity. On the one hand, such gestures speak to the fantasy of ownership, whereas on the other they negate it, as if foretelling a time when nothing can any longer be owned by anyone. Such utopian currents run through Divola’s works as well, and without at any point obscuring their causal disaster.

To attribute all this to a latently anti-social eschatology would miss the point, however, for here as well all aggressive action undergoes a measured delay that tempers its violence. One thinks first of the logic that brought the artist into this space in order to fuse those elements of fiction and fact, the made-up and the already-made, previously opposed in his work. Moreover, one thinks of the house not only as a home, but as a worldly stand-in for the darkroom, and by extension the camera itself, and this now is a black box in which the appearance of the image can no longer be put down to a pre-programmed function. In charge of both the gestural event and its forensic recording, Divola gets his hand into the workings of an apparatus that is more generally assumed to be hands-off.

It is certainly an obscure message that Divola inscribes on the deteriorating walls of the house, if it is a message at all. When language is employed, as in the overlain statements ‘I’m here / It’s here / I’m not here / It’s not here,’ it is not to reinforce the ownership relation of subject to object, but to further undermine it. Elsewhere, he challenges the status of language itself as a common property by reducing it to an utterly inscrutable code. More generally, though, Divola’s marks are applied so straightforwardly as to decline the question of meaning altogether in favor of a more strictly phenomenal experience. In his formal repertoire of straight and curved lines, squiggles and dots, our reading is limited to ‘just the facts’: the velocity of the artist’s gesture, the can’s distance from or proximity to the surface, the duration of the application, and so on. As the evidentiary tracings of actions always already performed, these ‘facts’ disclose an inherently

photographic aspect, which Divola goes on to heighten in the play between their composition in actual space and in the frame of the camera. In corners where lines of perspective converge, for instance, clusters of paint dots appears to pull away from the shadows as if clinging to the surface of the print. This is of course a simple illusion caused by inverting the pictorial law of recession, enlarging the marks and spacing them farther apart where they should instead be coming together and shrinking.

Drawn back and forth between depth and flatness, Divola shows us how easily the factual contents of the real world are compromised in the process of their photographic reproduction, and yet they remain there for all to see. In the real world no less than the print, the spray-painted mark on the wall is a sign of plunging property values, and when there is nobody left inside to paint it over, then we have clearly hit bottom. The tone of economic malaise is steadily exacerbated as we move from the *Vandalism* series to the *LAX NAZ Forced Entries*, in which Divola pulls back again to assume a more objective stance on a social process already well underway. Here we are presented with a wider range of destructive actions that seem to be aimed against architecture as such. Moving back and forth between clinical details of doors kicked in and smashed windows, and a more picturesque overview of the ruined home, the artist again forges an uneasy alliance between matters of sociological interest and self-circling aestheticism. In the piecemeal dismantling of sheltering structure, any former dialectic of inside and outside begins to incline toward phenomenological synthesis, but one that remains psychologically fraught. That Divola here limits his role to that of a stand-by witness does not necessarily diminish the extent of his implication; by documenting these scenes of crime for purposes other than crime fighting, he sanctions them aesthetically. Ultimately, then, this is a formal enterprise, and one might go further to claim that what these works propose to us is a certain kind of beauty that can be reduced neither to the 'facts on the ground,' the decomposition of built structure, nor to its pictorial re-composition. Again, Divola occupies a literally intermediate point between these two events, both of them equally arbitrary and thereby also open to improvisation.

This bottom-line architecture that has been raised under the LAX airport flight-path as a hedge against noise – NAZ standing for Noise Abatement Zone – seems to invite its destruction from the first moment. Like Robert Smithson's 'ruins in reverse,' this is precisely the source of its photogenic appeal. In this place where the inner and outer worlds momentarily intersect, the black box apparatus of photography again locates a real-world analog, but one that is dysfunctional, flooded with light. The sinister obscurity of the *Vandalism* pictures accordingly gives way to ethereal overexposure. Occasionally, an almost beatific quality is imparted to these forlorn spaces opened up to the sun, their every corner illuminated. In the course of ruination, the private home becomes publicly available, no longer a fortress of solitude, but rather a monument, however degraded, to the collective. This point is clinched in the *Zuma* series where a beachfront property undergoes a series of aesthetic / destructive permutations, all of which are recorded in dramatic flash-enhanced color. Although the pictures are made to stand alone, together they may also be seen as a sequential narrative of sorts, with the camera consistently pulled back to take in the totality of the building's eroding interior. The entire formal lexicon



that Divola devised in the *Vandalism* pictures is here redeployed in a spontaneous play of call and response with the more impulsive aggression of others. Partying teenagers, homeless drifters, disgruntled neighbors – we will never know who these are, but working in blind concert with the artist, we may assume that they are many, not one.

In what might be considered *Zuma*'s climactic scene, silver spray paint is applied to charred walls, just barely standing around a postcard window view onto the unchanging Pacific. The influence of Walker Evans' picture-within-picture conceit is undeniable here, but one thinks not only of art photography, or what Jeff Wall has termed 'the art concept of photography,' for this work already bears incipient signs of photography as art. In Cyprien Gaillard's work, this second order of reference to the more prosaic use of the photo-document in the practices of Post-Minimalism and Conceptual Art is rendered explicit. Ed Ruscha's snapshot take on underdeveloped urban vernaculars, Dan Graham's *Homes for America*, Robert Smithson's *Hotel Palenque*, the evidentiary remains of Gordon Matta-Clarke's forays into an-architecture – all of these models and more are openly cited. Above all, it is that archetypal genre of seventies art, the travelogue, that returns – I want to say, with a vengeance – at the start of the next century.

Gaillard may have already covered more ground than any of his precursors, thereby fulfilling the promise of a New World Order of wholesale global interconnection only just emerging in the sixties and seventies. However, as is by now obvious to everyone, we have come no closer to constituting an authentic family of man in the wake of the collapsing nation-state. All across borders eroded by the ceaseless circulation of capital, goods, services and information, ethnic tensions have only been exacerbated, and this too is explicitly acknowledged here. Gaillard shares Divola's fascination for the ruin as a flashpoint of civil unrest as well as utopian promise, only now the stakes have been raised exponentially as to which side will gain the advantage.

From the single-family homes of Los Angeles and its environs, we move to the tower block, raised from the rubble of postwar Europe in answer to what was once called the 'housing problem,' only to become a problem in its own right. These literally massive structures that were built in the normative image of an uprooted urban-industrial public dominate Gaillard's work, having already endured their period of decline and now rapidly approaching extinction. We are not yet there, but rather caught in an unstable penultimate stage, and this certainly fuels the propulsive mood-swings of the film *Desniansky Raion*, 2007, which vacillates freely between over-agitation and exhaustion. The Belgrade high-rise that fills its opening frame instantly recalls the latter-day Piranesian nightmares conjured up by films like *A Clockwork Orange*, with its pessimistic equation of welfare-state well-meaning and rampant, anarchic sadism. The 'bummer ending' of the late-modern program is by now encoded into the structure of such buildings, and it is therefore all the more striking that this one was constructed in the post-modern period of the eighties.

That the appeal of this architecture presently derives as much from its ties to a progressive ideal of equity as to the history of civil strife that subtends it is confirmed in the following segment which cuts to an epic confrontation on the grounds of another apartment complex in Saint





John Divola, LAX NAZ, *Forced Entry*, Site X (Exterior View X), 1975





Petersburg. This now is shaky, hand-footage, shot from high above the action and zooming excitedly in and out of it, as two rival groups of young men charge each other across a stretch of worn lawn. The ensuing melee is brutal, to be sure, yet here as well a certain ambivalence sets in over time. Just barely distinguishable by their mode of dress – red shirts versus white gloves – these ostensible enemies appear to be just as eager for human contact as to pound each other to a pulp.

In so much of Gaillard's work, one gets the impression that it is the stasis of architecture itself – and he is drawn to some of its most bottom-heavy and grounded forms – that stirs the Brownian motions of those who gather outside. From the Russian fight club, his film cuts abruptly to yet another housing block, this one on the outskirts of Paris, just moments before its demolition. Here instead one imagines the inhabitants coming together in rapt stillness as searchlights, fireworks and computer projections transfigure their building's façade, rendering it ghost-like, unreal, as if to soften the blow of the sequenced explosions that proceed to lay it out flat.

Mostly comprised of found footage, *Desniansky Raion* speaks to a democracy of imaging that nevertheless carries unmistakable intimations of fascism. All revolutionary action breeds a counter-revolutionary reaction to leave us, finally, turning in place. Appropriately, then, the film's closing segment is shot by Gaillard himself from a helicopter slowly circling a circular building complex in the district of Kiev, much as Smithson had done while documenting his *Spiral Jetty*. The conjunction of Land Art and new media was clinched at that point where the spiraling form of an earthwork was captured by a camera itself spiraling above it, to be repeatedly unwound and rewound as film passed through a projector that gradually wears away every image. A closely related logic of dysmorphic, because entropic, mirroring informs Gaillard's *Geographical Analogies* series, 2006–2010. Here as well we are shown a variety of architectonic structures, shot on Polaroid by the artist in his ceaseless nomadic drift between all parts of the world, and then arranged into diamond-shaped grids of nine. Typically these structures are undergoing a process of destruction, but sometimes also construction, reconstruction or restoration. Often it is impossible to tell the one from the other, and that is obviously the point, for now, as always, they are caught somewhere in-between.

Although their titles inform of the time and the place of their taking, the pictures themselves remain resolutely obscure on both counts. Whether we are in Giza or Las Vegas, on this or that date, standing before an original pyramid or its themed-hotel remake, the organizing principle of this work inherently undermines its documentary status. Whatever distinctions one might want to draw between a temple and an office-tower, or a crypt and a cave, are quickly dismissed when the emphasis is instead placed on similitude. The 'Geographic' part of the series' title refers to the wide-ranging paths that Gaillard has traveled in search of his 'Analogies,' which mark their points of convergence. The pictures that comprise *Geographical Analogies* are all taken by the artist, but in a way that is at once off-handed and clinical, to serve more transparently as a means of information gathering and deferred scrutiny. Whatever interest each individual unit accrues is determined by what it is of, its subject matter, as well as its placement within a larger ensemble.

Gaillard indulges a distanced formal mode of association that is



implicitly corroborated by his chosen medium, which likewise attends only to the external appearance of things as opposed to their inner substance, their history or present-day purpose. And if this holds true for photography overall, then all the more so for Polaroid, which remains to this day perhaps its flattest, most standardizing and indifferent iteration. It is telling that work on this series began just three years before the company would cease manufacture, for no doubt some sense of its impending obsolescence could already be felt. The current recirculation of this emblematically amateur brand within a somewhat more elite and highly discerning secondary market is worth noting, but only insofar as it explains how its most highly prized asset is now its transience. No less than the structures it holds in its raised frame, the picture itself is a readymade ruin, prone to degrading the instant it exits the camera and appears to the light. The entropic law is born out in substance and form: things will only become more and more the same. However, for Gaillard, even more than for Smithson, this is not a smooth process, and as we approach the flat-line, the more turbulent it grows.

The mounting hostility of people, places and things brought too close together by the information technology of the world-wide web, multi-national capital and global tourism gains an appropriately vexed form in Gaillard's collage works on found paintings. These are for the most part European landscape studies from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, executed in an already academic Romantic style, upon which the artist has silk-screened the famously insensitive Cleveland Indians baseball team logo. This *merger* – because, after all, it amounts to a kind of corporate takeover and re-branding – makes iconographical sense: the figure of the 'noble savage' is reintroduced onto a familiar ground of unspoiled nature. However, in this case, both are represented by their most dismal clichés, utterly anodyne for the landscape and offensive for the hovering figure.

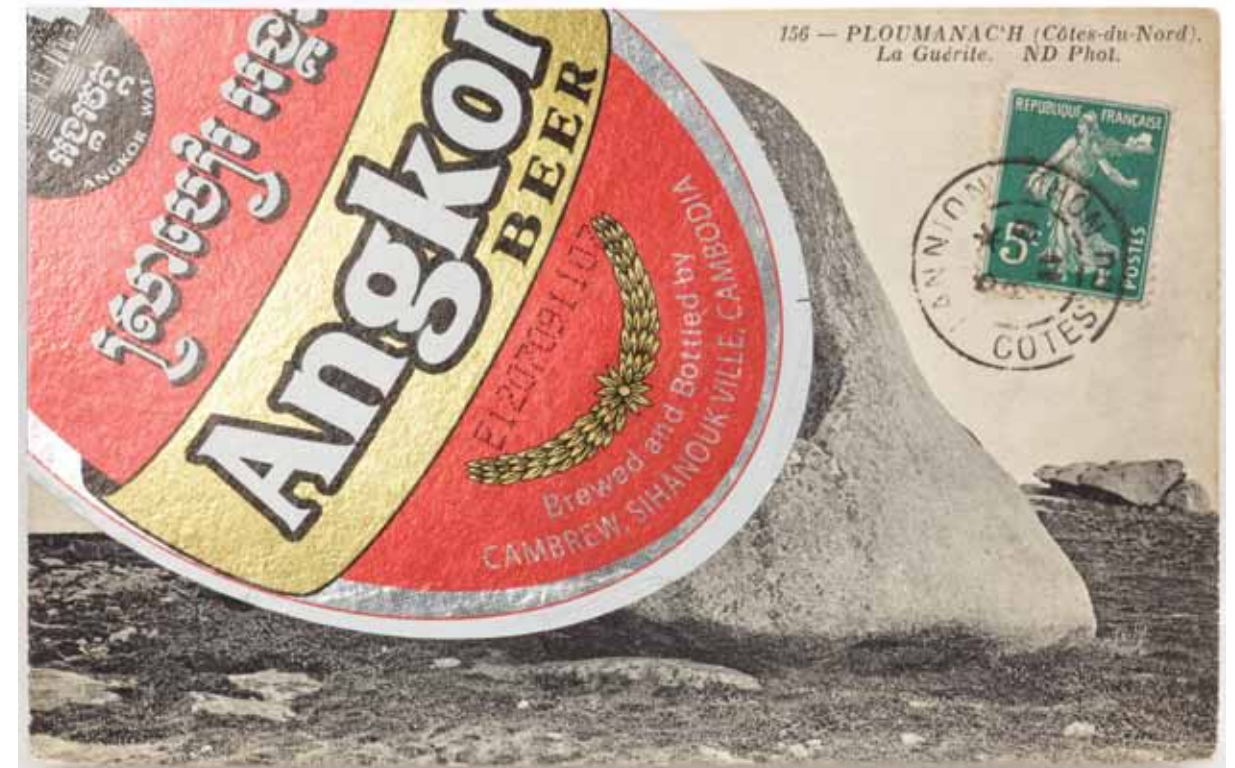
The wide grin of the Indian is caught somewhere between embarrassment and frenzied enthusiasm, an 'appetite for destruction.' 'I just can't help myself,' is what it is meant to communicate to anyone on the opposite side, 'you're going down!' first introduced in the film *Cities of Gold and Mirrors* (2009) where the motif was flown by plane over a beach in Cancun, Mexico, overrun by young Americans determined to party themselves into oblivion, it gains a curious power. As though circulated through the culture of the oppressor to emerge, at the other end, with redoubled force, some degree of embattled autonomy is restored to it. Obviously, we are no longer dealing with a clear-cut opposition here, for both in the film and the paintings, the Indian reappears as an already corrupted image on a scene that is no less corrupted. The overdeveloped beaches of Cancun are in this sense the present-day equivalent of the already stylized vistas depicted on canvas: complex accretions of memory and imagination projected outward as objective works at once stunted and, for that very reason, endlessly recombinant. The superimposed cartoon face of the Indian enacts the defacement of the polite, wan realism of its painterly ground. Both what lies above and below has already been coded and recoded with meanings, mostly forgotten yet still distantly available in the uncanny aura generated between them. Here, the ruin no longer requires any authenticating historical foundation, as it inheres rather to the process of ideological degradation that deforms the things that we see, even when these are delivered to us brand-new.

What we see in the collection of Victorian postcards that comprise Gaillard's series *New Picturesque* is not innocent nature, but a particular concept of it that has taken shape under the negative sign of an encroaching urban-industrial culture only just thrown into hyper-drive. For us, then, these are steam-punk dream-images from the outset, and Gaillard once more cinches the point by defacing its archival record with another supremely a-historical logo, the Cambodian Angkor Beer bottle label. No doubt, some trace of national origin is retained in its design, its colors and fonts, as well as in the schematic rendering of the ancient architecture of Angkor Wat, its crowning ruin. The ruinous character of the gradually fading postcard is highlighted by the short, sharp assault of the 'ruin in reverse' that defaces it, so that the spatio-temporal distance between them narrows to a faint line. But even, or especially, as we near the point of perfect reflection and symmetry, this remains a line of division, bristling with psychic tensions and prone to erupting between periods of détente. For the time being, at least, it is precisely in those things that come closest to the condition crystalline stasis that we recover our momentum.

What all of this work suggests is that our desire for ecstatic experience is often underestimated. The more it is stifled by design decisions that only seek to maintain and reinforce the status quo as if this were somehow inherent in the nature of our environment, the more it becomes agitated and given to explosive release. From their respective global and local perspectives, both Cyprien Gaillard and John Divola scan the built landscape for signs of trouble: the first cracks in a newly raised edifice and then the rubble left behind once it has fallen. Between the ramp-up and the aftermath, the crisis is on, and every piece in this exhibition points to this delirious event, not only as witness, but also participant, an aesthetic enabler. For both of these artists, that is, the aesthetic moment cannot be aligned with those Classical ideals of balance and harmony, as it is not about setting right the existing order of things, so much surrendering to its always ongoing dissipation.

To put it all down to nihilism, however, would be to miss this essential distinction between what is taken from us in life and what is returned to us by art. Of course, the two are related, and here the relation is made explicit by way of works that do not impose upon, but rather yield to what is already there in the world, and in the process enhance it.

In the way they are approached by Gaillard, for instance, the themed hotels erected on the shores of Cancun and the Nevada desert remain monuments to a violent history, however docile they might at first seem. And this violence is not just symbolic; it is ceaselessly reenacted by those who gather in and around them. On this point, the artist notes the drinking rituals that attend the completion of such building projects. When a new structure is *christened* in this way by its builders, it is delivered into the world, into its function, but the term also implies a sacrificial dysfunction. Workers smash bottles of alcohol against walls as if to infuse them with the same volatile spirit that has already entered their bodies. Between the built structure and its builders, something archaic and turbulent is passed that exceeds every economic calculation that brought them together, and that will not be quelled when they come apart.





When the workers leave their construction and are replaced on this site by paying customers, Gaillard suggests, some share of this violence will in turn be passed on to them. As to its origin, we can only guess, while following those vague indications that occasionally appear to us in the present. The beer bottle motif of Angkor Wat foregrounding an upward flight of bubbles would have to be one such sign, and when the stylized ruin disappears behind a downpour of foam, its revelatory potential is greatly augmented. The architect Hans Poelzig's metaphorical designation of a yeast-like agency within architecture – that which drives its ongoing development, or as he puts it 'fermentation' – gains a somewhat more literal dimension in this exchange between logo and product. Yet here it no longer serves to only endow our static works with a vital life force, but also a death-drive. Drinking helps, however paradoxically, to sharpen our sense of this embedded antagonist to the 'will to form.' With the consumption of alcohol, as with any toxic substance, one also consumes a part of oneself, purposefully impairing the integrity of body and mind, which may in turn compel a greater sympathy on our parts for what else remains unintegrated within our environment. To fully appreciate what the ruin has to offer, that is, one might prepare by slightly ruining oneself.

Returning a 'third world' motif to the 'first,' as Gaillard tends to do, would be to simply reiterate a standard colonial practice, were it not for the fact that these spoils are already spoiled and in danger of spoiling whatever they touch. In his deliberately cavalier application of an utterly disposable beer bottle label to a postcard that has been saved as an artifact from an earlier age, there is some lingering trace of the great avant-garde paradox of the 'assisted ready-made.' Here, as well, an industrial copy is rendered unique by way of a vandalizing gesture, and thereby displaced into the context of art, while also placing that context in question. That said, it no longer a generic question that this artist wants us to consider, but a specific one, as the bounding edges of a once insular art-world have already been broached, to leave the consensual space of every 'white cube' susceptible to the contentious influence of the culture at large. From the holistic One is derived an increasingly fragmented system of parts, a dispersed collection of galleries that are finally no less ruined than the works shown within them. The very idea of their mutually reinforced autonomy is revealed as a toxic delusion in the harsh light of 'the morning after.'

The liquor served up at art gallery openings might now be seen in this light as well, as a means of historical commemoration and forgetting at once. Whatever destructive currents pass between ourselves and our architecture cannot be reduced to alcohol, however; the drink only serves as a catalyst. In the works of John Divola, where the figure tends to go missing, these chaotic forces will be assigned to the natural landscape, which appears to be inherently hostile to our desire for permanent occupation. This precarious condition is felt all the more acutely in LA, the artist suggests, where the whole infrastructure rests too lightly on earth 'like a crust that you have no expectation of lasting.' But this is not necessarily to sanction the troubling Romantic cliché of an art that takes up the side of nature against the culture of man, as nature is seen from the outset as a cultural construction, and not in itself the source of a 'will to deform.' Here again, a distinction is drawn between the virtual picture and its actual referent, which, though not exactly transformed by the artist, is never carried over 'as is.' Between the endlessly

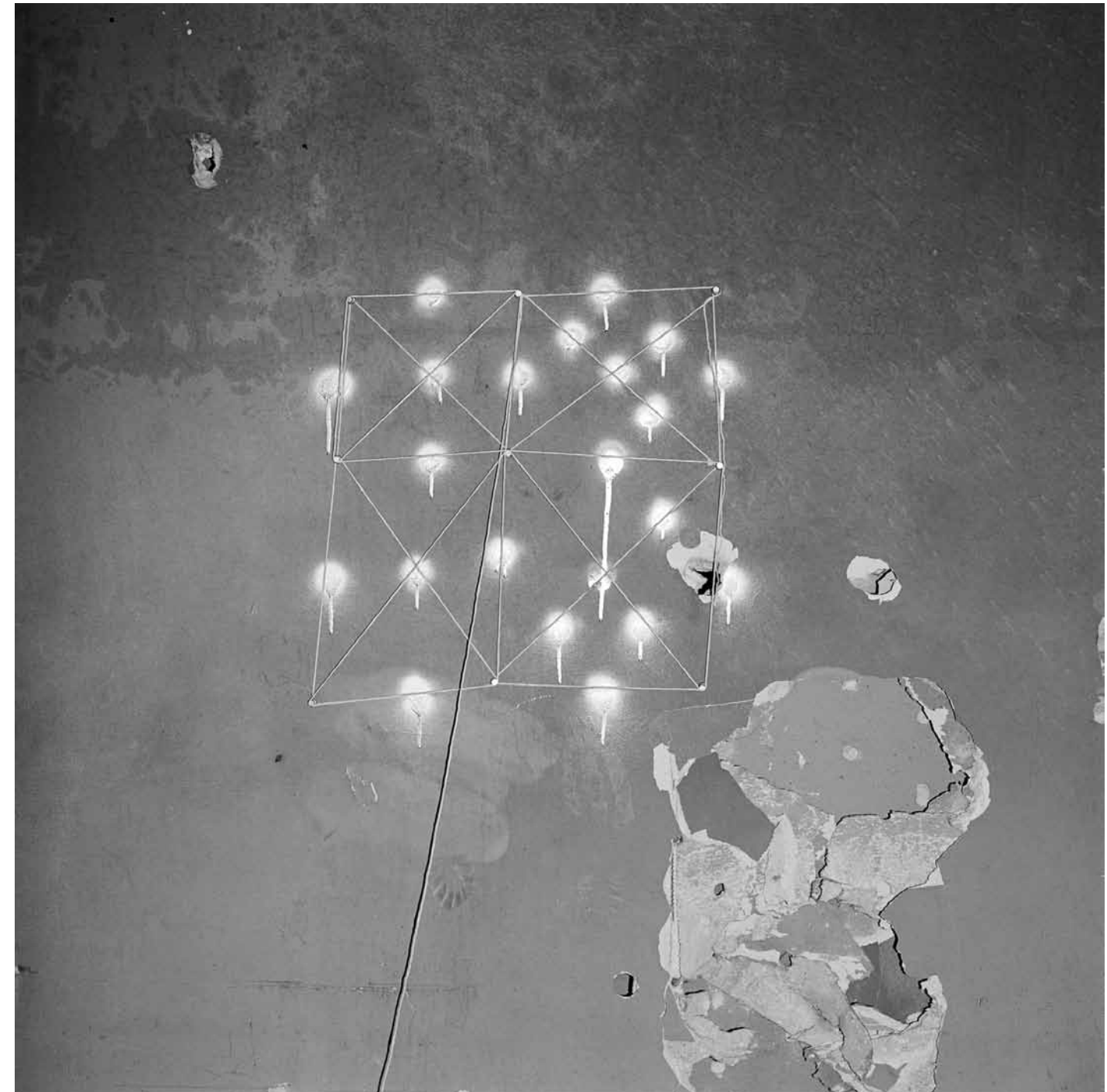
mutable imagination and the hard facts on the ground, an apparatus intrudes. Divola employs his camera as a sort of guide through the world, subordinating his own view to that of the view-finder.

That the requirements of the picture do not exactly conform to either those of the depicting subject or the object depicted becomes increasingly evident from one body of work to the next. In the series *Dogs Chasing My Car in the Desert* (1995–98), for instance, Divola's intrusive impact on the environment is straightforwardly expressed in the bared fang aggression of the chasing animal. Clearly, it is the artist who is the cause of this turmoil, and the resulting print thereby stands to prove that he does not belong in the place that he photographs. But there is also another way to approach it where the photographer becomes secondary to his apparatus, which registers the dog not as a threatening other, but rather a likeness of itself. Caught, like Muybridge's horses, with all four paws extended, this animal is literally suspended in air, just like the camera at which it stares. This, then, is a record of that moment when nature turns cultural (rather than the other way around), and insinuates itself into the pictorial order.

The Romantic pleasure that would be derived from observing the process of natural reclamation is undermined already in the particular choice of this emblematically domesticated creature. Even when glimpsed outside, it is that part of the natural world that we have let into our homes, and here as well the photographic analogy would seem to hold, as it is also a means of domestication. By selecting, framing, cropping, etc., we reduce the visual field in its expansive totality to a more manageable scale, and this is certainly an aspect of the medium that Divola accounts for, even if it is not his primary focus. In this general equation of mastery, that is, the dog operates as a variable; somewhat like Gaillard's spirits, it is what also escapes enclosure, to bubble over and evaporate. In that moment of sheer reciprocity when the eye of the animal meets the lens, both of them passing through the landscape at equal speed, the ground in the image and the ground of the image are fused in grainy blur. This comes close to describing, in explicitly aesthetic terms, what cannot be seen or shown, had or held, but is nevertheless treasured – that is to say, the experience of ecstatic loss.

In a time of economic crisis, when the uncertainties of ownership are felt across the board, albeit in a dispersed, subliminal way, they are more likely to gain explicit articulation in the work of art. The anxious thought of losing one's income, and by extension one's property – that which literally holds one's place in society, which is thereby surrendered as well – is at worst intermittent for most. In art this condition would come closer to a constant. The anxious, ungrounded condition that is experienced by society at large lends a greater relevance to the experience of the artist. A point of convergence finally appears between these two orders of experience that are more typically isolated.

When times of economic crisis are compounded by war the resulting sense of un-grounding is even more acute. Here, the threatened consciousness of the artist becomes status quo. The work of art, like the artist who makes it, has always shuttled freely between contexts – economic, social, political, national, historical, and so on. In the existing world, the artist is always at



least partly homeless and seeking her/his homeland. The destination is never reached, but along the way our attention is redirected to whatever is left for the taking. In 'dark times,' the question of what one really has is shared by those who feel 'at a loss.' If it is not these things, then the house; if not the house, then the land; if not the land, then the country; if not the country, then the world. At every step in the questioning process, the grip of ownership is further loosened on the particulars of place-holding property, until one is left grasping at air. What could be more remote from our hold than the world in its entirety? When it can longer be subdivided into regions of occupation, whatever sense of having remains is due to a dawning awareness that it is rather the world that holds us.



Published on the occasion of

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John Divola | Cyprien Gaillard

at LAURA BARTLETT GALLERY
10 December 2010 – 5 February, 2011

Essay: Jan Tumlir
Design: Arnoud Verhaeghe
Editor: Laura Bartlett
Print: Aldgate Press
Published by Laura Bartlett Gallery,
London
All images courtesy the artists
ISBN 978 0 9557540 4 3



John Divola, *Zuma #72*, 1977

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