

John Divola's Perpetual Curiosity

Beyond Duality in LAX NAZ - Forced Entries



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John Divola. LAX NAZ, SITE 5

October, 2023.

(If you would like to watch and listen to me narrate this essay, scroll to the bottom of the page)

Let's get the disclaimers out of the way. [John Divola](#) was my first photography teacher when I was a wee undergraduate student in the early 1990s. During that time, John Divola hired me to organize his entire 35mm slide archive and make small frames at his studio at the [Hughes Airport](#), where I also slept on the minimal plywood floor loft alone and listened to his Tom Waits CD, [Rain Dogs](#), while I tried and failed to fall asleep. John Divola suggested I listen to that particular CD because the percussion was interesting (I think he said post-modern, which I didn't understand,) and he knew that I was a novice drummer. The smell of the particular [Dial soap](#) that was in his studio bathroom formed a permanent associative memory, and every time I have come across it since, for thirty years, I am transported back in time to those few days working at his studio, illustrating the well-known idea that our sense of smell (not vision!) is so [powerfully connected to memory](#). I printed type-c photographs for John Divola, particularly his [Isolated Houses](#) series. John Divola and I have been colleagues teaching photography at [UC Riverside](#) since the year 2000. John Divola is one of my closest friends, and at the risk of sounding overly self-confident, I'm probably one of

the very few people who know both his photographic archive and him as a person so well.

Digression #1

I am writing this essay shortly after being diagnosed with a highly treatable but also serious brain tumor. I am in a period of limbo after I've had a biopsy, a rad 4-inch incision through my skull, and before I begin a year-long period of radiation and chemotherapy treatments. I have regular but not uncontrollable seizures that often and frustratingly interrupt this writing, the ability to keep making my own photographic work, and are fucking up many aspects of my life. I've never felt so unsettled. It should go without saying that I want this to be a good essay, so editing will take me extra time. But I also feel a sense of urgency to write this at this time for what I hope are obvious reasons. Additionally, I'm feeling generally weirder than I normally feel, and a bit less inhibited than I generally would be. Digression #1 over.

John and I have argued and disagreed about philosophical ideas (some about art but more about existential matters and hot-topic cultural issues) many, many times during our thirty-year relationship. But we like it. It draws us closer, a fact we both know. We also see eye-to-eye about many things, obviously. He posts often on [Instagram](#), and recently I used the comment section to threaten to write about one of my favorite bodies of work of his. A large part of my motivation was because I knew he would disagree with me about at least some of my ideas. I have not told him that I'm actually writing this piece, and I have not fact-checked anything with him. This is way more fun. So, here we are, and here we go. The work I will be addressing is called [LAX NAZ](#), [Forced Entries](#) from the mid-1970s, which happens to be precisely when I was born. The series title needs a little explanation. It's best to start with John's words.

LAX NAZ stands for "The Los Angeles International Airport Noise Abatement Zone." This was a neighborhood immediately adjacent to LAX that the airport bought out as a noise buffer for new runways in the early & mid 1970's. The houses stood vacant for a couple of years with the windows boarded up. Initially, I simply photographed the details of the neighborhood (these images can be viewed in the LAX NAZ section of the [site](#)). I soon became interested in evidence of forced entries. These photographs are labeled by site and there are often several images from a single site, both interior and exterior. These images are found in the LAX NAZ Forced Entry section of the site. The "House Removals" are simple before and after images of the final home removals. In some cases, these are the same homes represented in the "Forced Entries." ~John Divola

In other words, the Los Angeles International Airport Noise Abatement Zone (LAX NAZ) was an area of Los Angeles where homes were deemed by the city to be unlivable

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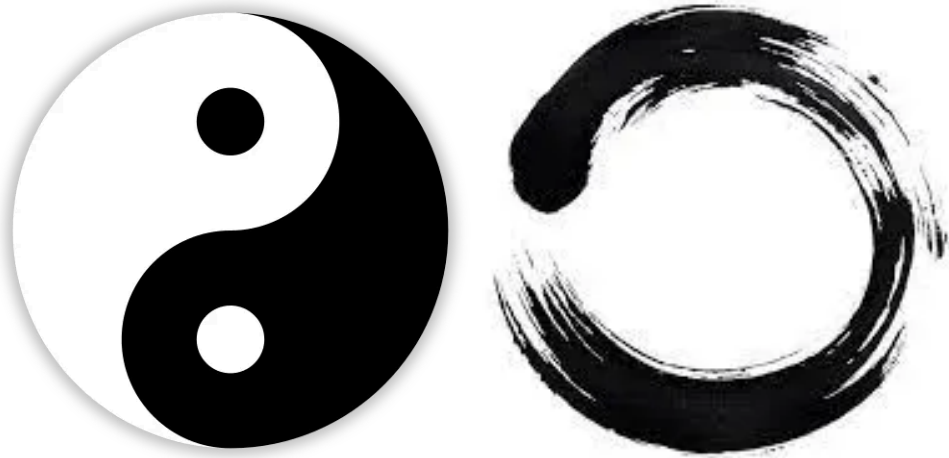
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due to the noise pollution of overhead aircraft and, I would hope, the associated fuel pollution. It was essentially an abandoned neighborhood. Many of the homes had been broken into and damaged (Forced Entry) over time by unknown *vandals*. John's involvement in the *documentation* and his participation in the *forced* part of the *entry* is but one of many of the ideas I wish to discuss.

The photographs in this series that I am most interested in consist of at least two views of the same home, but they aren't formally diptychs, inconveniently for me and perfectly fitting for John. In fact, John makes a mess of my tidy analysis by often including multiple views of either interior, exterior, or both. I think it's fair to say that he and I have some similar editing challenges but different formal neuroses. Despite all that, at least one of his images is often an exterior view pointing the camera toward a dilapidated home showing some kind of exposed opening, like a broken door or window. Another view is often a loosely framed inverse of the exterior, an interior view looking through the same busted openings toward the outside world. Like the vast majority of John's work, and one that marks a significant difference between his and mine, is that strict, geometric composition or consistency is not his thing. However, and this is a big however, there are always enough clues in these images for a viewer to know without a doubt that they are seeing, *and meant to compare*, at least two views of the same architecture made at the same time of day, likely minutes apart of the exterior and interior. The activity of comparison functions like a *hook* or a game of engagement for the viewer. I believe most of the photographs are taken during daylight hours, with plenty of natural sunlight, and many of the interior views are naturally darker or use a single-point, harsh flash to both illuminate and further flatten the space, as flashes do.

I always tend to make this *writer's mistake*. I take forever to get to my thesis. Do I have one? What's wrong with foreplay? Many years ago, my taiji chuan teacher, Bing Liu, made a passing comment during class about an important difference between [Taoism](#) and [Zen \(in Chinese Ch'an\)](#). Taoism, in which [taiji chuan](#) is heavily based, relies on dualities as a foundation to understand, conceptually and in praxis, *nearly* everything about the practice. The [yin-yang](#) symbolizes these multiple dualities. Just look at it for a while. It's not rocket science. The [Zen ensō](#), on the other hand, is tougher to deconstruct. It's an incomplete circle. I have always interpreted the ensō as the best way to describe non-duality without inevitably failing by using language.



Taoist yin-yang and zen ensō

After Bing made this somewhat obvious point, he said, “Zen,” and then he stopped speaking and made a gesture with his hands that didn’t have an easy translation into language (part of the point) but that anyone would interpret as “dismisses,” or “transcends,” or “moves past,” or “doesn’t bother itself with.” You get my drift. Sometimes language is insufficient, which is one of the things that photography exploits so effectively and beautifully. Zen both invokes but transcends the dualities *apparent* in Taoism. One of the crucial complications here is that in order to transcend something, you really have to not simply understand but embody it. The actual practice of taiji chuan is one in which one must learn to embody, practice, and move through all the layers of apparent dualism and master those *first*, which takes years, in order to eventually let those fade away naturally to experience what [lies on the other shore without a raft](#). John Divola’s *LAX NAZ, Forced Entry* exterior and interior views can be experienced, slowly and over time, and in the aggregate, as oozing with useful, fun, and quite satiating dualism. However, and also, eventually, this dualism can and does break down, fracture, get messy, become exhausted, and...I just made the same gesture with my hands that Bing made. This eventual experience of [not-two](#) in the presence of an excessive amount of apparent dualities is why I am such a big fan of this work.



SITE 38

Let's begin with one particular pair above, titled SITE 38. For the purposes of my analysis, I will err on being overly and exhaustively descriptive, so bear with me. The left image is clearly an exterior view, while the right is an interior view of the same home. How do we know this? The most obvious indicators are the bottom half of the open door and the distinctive triple windowpanes, which look so similar, but inverted, as what happens when we view things from one perspective and then from the opposite. There is also a reflective, smashed metal object on the ground. What is that? A dog bowl? A nice touch. But the way we almost immediately *understand* the relationship between these images comes from deconstructing them in a seemingly effortless and almost instantaneous way. How we know the way light works provides a great deal of information we take for granted. Looking into a building from the illuminated outside is experienced as a kind of curiosity. We think we know what we can see outside. We don't think we know what we can see inside. So, we go inside to see. Being inside a darkened interior as your eyes adjust is like being in a cave. It's a primordial experience to look outside, toward the light, the way we stare at a fire or to see if the sun has risen. It could be safer inside, but all the potential wonder, hope, danger, and sustenance lies somewhere outside. All of this activity is also a metaphor for photography itself, the [camera obscura](#) being the literal box that lets light pass from outside to the inside. It gets better. The image that gets projected by a camera obscura, or any lens, is literally upside down and flipped horizontally. Further, it is significant to mention that there is always a chronological order for whoever experiences these exterior/interior spaces. John must have approached the exteriors first and wondered what treasures or dangers may lie inside. The act of entering, like the inverse of birth, follows. Curiosity, albeit with different intentions, drew the initial *forced entries* by the *bad guys* as well as the *good guy*, John's, subsequent curiosity-compelled entries.

So, is John really a *good guy* or a *bad guy*? What is the difference between his entries, which chronologically follow the primary *forced entries*? Is it as simple as who damaged the already abandoned property? Is it significant if there was theft involved? Or, is it more complex to consider who is exploiting the property for personal and monetary gain? Perhaps moralizing the behavior of any or all parties leads us nowhere interesting.



SITE 19

This pair, SITE 19, is strange in a few ways. There appear to be some messy incongruities between the exterior and interior that take some time to figure out. The most obvious connection between the two is the shark-fin-shaped hole in the glass slider. It's almost so unique and unusual that it is easy to stop one's comparison there. But there are several other oddities about this pair. First off, it is strange that from the exterior, we only see one pane of glass, while the interior clearly shows a dual-pane slider. If you look more closely at the exterior, you can see that someone erected a makeshift wall, probably out of wood (but why is it painted to match the house?) to the left of the slider to possibly discourage someone from breaking in but failed miserably. But, the fact that this asymmetry between what is seen from the outside and inside exists is like a hiccup in the comparison, a small but important fracture in the idea of duality. In this interior photograph, John uses a single-point flash to illuminate the room but also to make his presence and activity visible by allowing the flash to reflect off the sharp edge of the broken glass and back at himself, and of course, as in all photographs, the viewer. One can't help but imagine John carefully, or since I know him so well, not so carefully contorting his body and camera gear through that precarious opening, at least twice. The pairs of photographs *feel* like they could be simultaneously captured, but we *know* that time passes between them. The actual time that passes seems absent in the work but wondering what John was experiencing during that time is present in the work.



SITE 13

SITE 13, above, is overflowing with dualities. Aside from the kinds of architectural details and tropes I've already elucidated in other sites, like the fact that things that are dark in one image are light in the other and vice versa, this pair contains another tension between the *natural* and the *artificial* themes that both John and I have mined often in our work.

Digression #2

I must digress again because this is a notion in which I know John and I disagree. I consider *nature* to ultimately encompass everything we can name, and the distinction between the *natural* and the *artificial* is a distinction without a real difference. In other words, it is a convenient but ultimately false dichotomy and phantom duality. John, I believe, considers the *natural* to encompass the world that has not been constructed by humans. This digression is important because our disagreement is a philosophical one, and it affects how we approach the making of our work, the conception of how our work functions and is interpreted, how we approach the medium and technology of photography, how we *are* and *are not* willing to intervene in our photographs (pre vs. post image capture), and ultimately our values about *truth* as it pertains to photography. Digression #2 over.

The exterior view shows a desperate vine attempting to stay alive and grow despite never receiving water, except for the rare rain that we get in Southern California. It's in the process of dying and always has been, even in the process of growing. The interior image, on the other hand, is full of life! Just look at those thriving flowers completely covering the wall. Of course, this life is superficial, printed on a flat plastic surface, like a photograph is, in the form of wallpaper which has been flattened even

further by the use of a flash. This kind of *dualism*, when ideas and notions about appearances and reality begin to collapse, is the beginning of the end of seeing things as separate and disconnected.



SITE 26

This pair, SITE 26, offers yet more dualities to notice and then to forget. The first and most obvious one to me is that the door is both open and closed. It's both functional and dysfunctional. Again, with a little imagination, one must consider the time in between the making of each of these photographs as being the absent but implied presence of the maker. John would have had to move the broken door to gain access to the interior and then half-carefully put it back in a different yet similar cattywampus position. I find this pretty funny. It's absurd in one sense and also makes perfect sense in another because John is maintaining the ruse of duality. So, are these documentary photographs? You can probably guess that I'd say yes and not yes. Also, what the hell is stuck to the bottom of the door in the exterior view? A paper bag?



SITE 43

SITE 43 is shown for the sole purpose of my last digression.

Digression #3

For the morbid satisfaction of another digression, I will simply mention that John has been photographing inside and outside abandoned domestic homes on and off for almost fifty, that's right, *fifty* years. His most recent project takes place at [George Airforce Base in Victorville, CA](#), at an abandoned military housing complex. He has been driving about 90 minutes one-way, sometimes multiple times per week, since 2015 to explore these buildings. One thing that is hard to miss about the interior of SITE 43 is the painting of an owl hung perfectly level on the wall. In John's recent work at George Airforce Base, he sometimes hangs photographic prints that *he makes* on the walls and includes them in his pseudodocumentary photographs. Oftentimes he returns to the same homes he'd photographed before to find layers of *interventions* like graffiti, spray paint tags, and hung artworks that the unknown people who stumble upon these strange places have interacted with. John's relentless curiosity to not only *document*, in his words, the "specific time, place, and circumstance" of these locations but to also coax and record a visual and ongoing dialog between himself and these phantom strangers is both deeply unusual and perhaps neurotic. Digression #3 over.



John Divola. GAFB F5409 (9_21_2023). The print of the bird was generated by AI.

Dualities are useful. They are also a crucial and necessary part of being human. We couldn't navigate the world without them. [Photography](#) is particularly suited to explore and reflect on them because of the dualistic language and processes embedded in the medium and technology itself. This body of work, *LAX NAZ, Forced Entries*, is so overflowing with self-reflective dualities about photography that at some point, a viewer might be compelled to look past them and ask themselves, "What is this world that is *two* and *not-two*?" John, I am exceptionally grateful for your work and our friendship, which are *not-two*.

Below you can watch and listen to me narrate this essay. I **highly recommend turning on the captions**. The sound quality is hit-and-miss because my voice is competing with the rest of the world around me.

John Divola's Perpetual Curiosity: Beyond Duality in LAX NAX - Force
Amir Zaki



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Alia Malley Oct 18, 2023

Liked by Amir Zaki

Love this slow, close, personal reading of photographs I've looked at so many times and yet now with another, additional perspective. There's always something more to see if you allow it. Also the idea of John putting that door back askew just-so is hilarious.

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J on the block Oct 6, 2023

Liked by Amir Zaki

Lovely piece. Sorry to hear about your recent personal tragedies and wishing you the very best.

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