

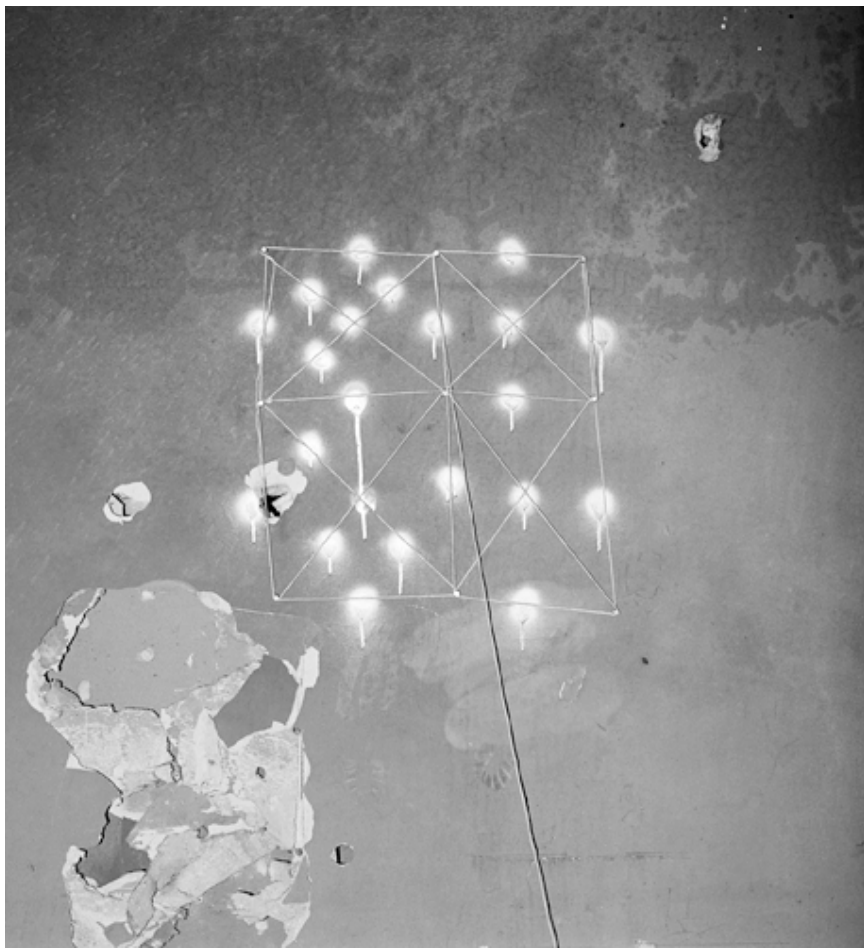
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Who, What, Where, With What, Why, How and When? The Forensic Rituals of John Divola

Written for the book *John Divola: Three Acts*, Aperture, 2006

Once seen, 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. The first one that I came across was from his extensive *Vandalism* series. It was a square, frontal, black-and-white image of a light grey wall, from which plaster was flaking off in the lower left corner. In the middle was an array of white aerosol spray dots. They looked like vandalism, only prettier. Over the dots was a long white string hooked around pins to make a grid. Halfway between deadpan fact and elusive narrative the scenario looked playful and sinister. The photography was precise and controlled but its intention was mysterious, defying all categories. It was a mixture of police forensics, trophy snapshot of the kind a graffiti artist might take of their work, and a totem from some kind of secular ritual.



Divola, from the *Vandalism* series, 1973-75

In its oddity the image resonated with other experiences. Around the same time I had chanced upon an old book about police detection. *PhotoCrimes* presented the reader with the evidence of twenty-six assorted misdemeanors. They were not real incidents but reconstructions.

The reader was supposed to examine the evidence and solve each crime, but what really fascinated was the process of staging. How had these images been made? How could you make a photo look like an image of a crime scene? Divola's photograph also recalled a travelling police display that once came to my town. A flatbed truck



10. A search disclosed sign of forced entry. wardrobe by the Fur Dept. entrance were cigar stubs and some

Illustration from *PhotoCrimes*
Miles Horton & Thomas Penn
1937

arrived with a big, rectangular box on the back. Inside was a set built to resemble a domestic bedroom. We citizens filed in, stood along one wall and stared at a sea of broken furniture, scattered clothes, and graffiti. Dotted around the room were handwritten signs, all facing us: *Did the villains get in through this window? Was this jewellery box left in a visible place? Was this door locked?* It was civic crime prevention: we were to imagine this was *our* home. It didn't really work. The message was lost in the bizarre spectacle. There were too many other questions: Did the police vandalise the room themselves? Did they enjoy it? Did they feel destructive or creative? How carefully were things arranged? Did they improvise? Did they base it on a real room? On photographs? Did they have to reinstall it when it moved to the next town? If so, did they get better at it over time?

These kinds of association may seem to have little to do with advanced art, but they are not unusual. The visceral quality of Divola's *Vandalism* photographs connects readily to a world of property, transgression, and ritual — and out of this flows their artistic complexity.

John Divola occupies a unique place in the art of the last few decades. The series collected here [in Divola's book *Three Acts*] were made in the 1970s, a period of redefinition when the very terms of visual art and photography were transformed. At the centre of the change was a widespread shift in art from what we might call the *pictorial*, or picture making, towards the *performative* or event making. At an extreme some artists gave up making traditional objects altogether to perform instead with their bodies. Others turned toward using photography because it seemed not to be an object at all, certainly not an object with the heavy baggage of painting or sculpture. Mainly, it

meant artists leaning toward ways of working that emphasised process. Art took the form of outcomes resulting from open-ended experimentation, improvisation, and hypothesis. And it often assumed the look of collected data – marks, remnants, results, traces.

Being the preeminent medium for documents, photography was pivotal to this, but its role was fraught with contradiction. On one level all art was reliant upon photography to reproduce and publicize it. This was especially the case for the new art forms that broke out to explore the possibilities of installation art, Land art, and performance art. Work could be made anywhere, anytime, in any form and audiences could come to know it via images appearing in magazines, journals, and catalogues. Art was free to move into an “expanded field” with an expanded art press to follow it. Yet, at the very same time, the idea of the photograph as a neutral transmitter was being teased apart. Artists were fabricating things to be photographed; or undermining the image with contradictory captions; or seeing the photograph as no more automatically realist than words or paintings.

Divola took his own intuitive line through the tangle. In producing these series he was certainly involved in doing things and making things in places outside the studio, which he then photographed, engaging with key aspects of installation, Land art, and performance art. However, while those forms relied on the supposed transparency of photography, Divola also made a comprehensive inquiry into its nature and conventions.

There was no better mode in which to test the limits of the document than the forensic photograph. This after all is a type of image backed by the full institutional force of the state. It is invested with unparalleled authority and often seen as proof. The archetypal forensic image is a photograph of a floor or ground taken from eye level. A downward tilt of vision turns incidental details on a receding plane into signs for our attention. The lowered angle also emphasises the body of the photographer or viewer as a present witness. It places us at a threshold between the closure of an event that has taken place and the opening of its investigation. Divola made a number photographs that take this form. At times his camera stares down at surfaces covered with scattered debris and arranged patterns.

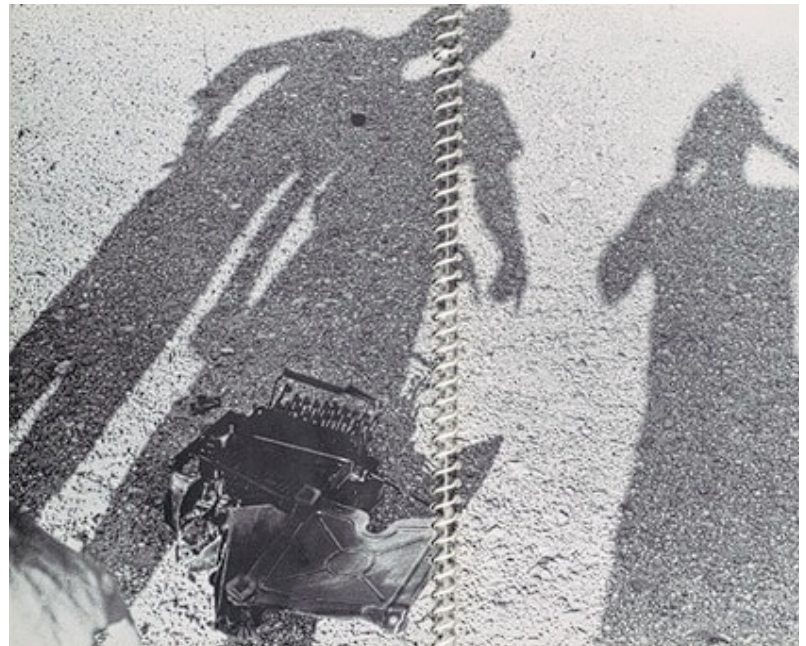
Looking back it is surprising just how often this visual trope recurred across the art of the late 1960s and 1970s. We see it for example in Bruce Nauman’s documentation of temporary sculptural forms such as *Flour Arrangements* (1966). It is in Edward Ruscha’s *Royal Road Test* (1971), his parodic investigation of the wreck of a typewriter hurled from his moving car. Lewis Baltz made use of it in his series of cool topographic photographs of suburban building sites such as *Nevada* (1977). It opens Mike Mandel and Larry Sultan’s *Evidence* (1977), their book of puzzling photos gathered from scientific archives. Ana Mendieta’s *Silhueta* series (1978) of her own bodily outline adopts this gaze as do Mac Adams’ extensive *Mysteries* of the late 1970s and 1980s, his enigmatic photo stories set in motion by apparently incidental traces. This was a period of art that is thought to have had no unifying style. The widespread anti-formalism of the time almost went out of its way to *refute* style. So the prevalence of this sort of “paraforensic” image is all the more telling. Its look is so artless that it lends itself to all kinds of art interested in the idea of the trace.



Divola, from the *Vandalism* series, 1973-75

Making art out of ruins has been a part of culture at least since the Dadaists worked the flotsam of modern life into their collages. And photographing ruins is as old as the medium itself. Cameras seem drawn to them. Divola's engagement with detritus is altogether more complicated. To begin with he erases the boundary between making and breaking. His interventions in vacant spaces complement and extend what we know and expect of vandalism. He works with the vandal's tools and his simple language (if we can call it a language), refining what constitutes the sprayed mark, the daub, the tear, and the cut. Mindless or repetitive destruction gives way to artful fabrication but slips back again. Objects and surfaces appear to move between intention and carelessness. Between action and entropy. Between destructive creativity and creative destruction. Divola reveals and revels in the hidden craft of ruination. His photos turn damage into an object of aesthetic contemplation without ever letting us forget its destructive character in the social world.

In typical forensics, the "event" has already happened and the photograph follows. The photographer arrives at the scene late, so to speak. Divola's series *Los Angeles International Airport Noise Abatement Zone (LAX NAZ)* just about obeys this rule. The zone in question was a swathe of houses bought by the airport to meet noise pollution targets. Decommissioned as homes they stood empty. Divola began to photograph them, documenting the evidence of the inevitable break-ins. His photography is cool, formal, and conventional. By contrast in the *Vandalism* and *Zuma* series many of the actions recorded are of Divola's own making. In these, he commits what for forensics is the cardinal sin. Where the police photographer responds dispassionately to what is there, recording without touching, Divola acts as mark maker, arranger and orchestrator, as well as recorder. He responds as a photographer to his own actions as a painter and sculptor.



Spread from Edward Ruscha, *Royal Road Test*, 1967

Divola works in half-abandoned spaces with the intense play and experimentation we associate with the studio-based artist—but we are reminded that the buildings are not his private domain. His presence and his means are fugitive, just as the spaces themselves are in transition from one social use to another. His images are records of past events, documents of things done before the photograph was taken. However, each one is also an event in itself. This comes across in different ways. Firstly, there is the use of series. Each image is a pause in an improvised situation, coming after what has been done and before what is to come. The image is not a final report but provisional marker. Secondly, Divola frequently welcomes the way the camera image transforms three-dimensional space into graphic flatness. The classical forensic image is careful not to draw too much attention to itself but Divola shoots in ways that allow his marks to belong both to the real space and to the flatness of the photograph. The grids, dots, and curves can often appear to hover between the space depicted and the surface of the image. The effect is often estranging, leaving photography itself hovering, somewhere between fact and fiction. We are lured by the promise of forensic objectivity but reminded that photography is always a transformative act. Lastly, the photographs may become events through another kind of hovering: some of Divola's strangest images include found magazines or bits of fabric hurled into the air and caught by electronic flash.

Forensic photography emphasises the camera's lens through which passes the stilled world. It tells us the event is over and can be gazed upon at a remove. But nothing signals an event like an instantaneous exposure or a flash strobe that freezes movement. Here the burst of light and the shutter are emphasised along with the lens. The coolness of a lens gives us a slice of space, while a shutter or flash cuts a slice of time. Divola's imagery rarely settles for one or the other. He is not interested in anything clear-cut.



John Divola, from the Zuma series, 1977



Jeff Wall, *The Destroyed Room*, 1978. Transparency in lightbox.



John Divola, from the *Zuma* series, 1977

With its heightened use of color and modern epic sensibility, the final *Zuma* series brought together all of Divola's experiments while adding new ones. He photographed one deserted beach house over several months. The images record his own presence mingled with the ongoing vandalism by other anonymous visitors. In its technical virtuosity it can be compared with Jeff Wall's early lightbox tableau *The Destroyed Room* (1978). Both are carefully staged and equally ostentatious scenes of break-ins. For both, the effects of light and color are central. In Wall's back-lit transparency the image is illuminated from within, lending artistic intention to every bit of the planned chaos recorded by the camera. In the *Zuma* pictures, the scenes are given to be recorded through the artifice of

direct flash. The photographic equipment emits the light and then records its consequences. Light is thrown out to the scene and bounces back off its surfaces to be caught by the camera. The effect in Divola's hands is quite visionary, almost as if we are projecting as much as receiving what we see. Wall offers us his scene while pointing to its artifice by showing his studio space beyond the three walls of his set. Divola conjures something similar through the use of light. The flash is balanced with the saturated sunrises and sunsets we see through the windows of the beach house. Where Wall's studio acts as the real space, Divola's ambiguous skies resemble artificial backdrops.

We can approach this hybrid blending of signs in another way. Consider how photographic realism seems to hinge on incidental detail. What often guarantees the authenticity of a photograph is the way that the camera automatically records all that is before it, indifferent to what is significant or insignificant. It presents a world in which there is a background of information beyond the photographer's intention. For example, you might photograph your lover on a beach but it will be the additional presence of the infinitesimal sand and the fine chaos of the clouds that will help render it factual. The secondary information guarantees the primary. If for some reason we sense that the unintentional information might actually be arranged for the image then its realism begins to crumble. We are not sure how to take it. Everything in the image is equalised and no hierarchy can be made between things. Many of Divola's photographs dramatise this. What in his frames is casual vandalism and what is artful construct? What is natural dilapidation and what is intervention? What is decay and what is creation? What is captured automatically by the camera and what is artfully displayed for it? Nothing can be taken for granted. Every square millimetre of the picture surface is charged, oscillating wildly between passive and active.

So making sense of these photographs we have to move between different kinds of creativity, just as the artist did when making them. Divola the impromptu sculptor vies with Divola the abstract graffitist. Divola the performance artist vies with Divola the photographer. And even Divola the photographer swings between dispassionate observer and formalist innovator. I scratch my head and wonder to which artists the Divola of these series might be compared. Perhaps, Fischli & Weiss crossed with Jean-Michel Basquiat crossed with Vito Acconci crossed with Weegee crossed with Lee Friedlander. There are few bodies of photography as hybrid or restless. Moreover, in their tireless attention to the conditional status of photographic meaning, they show us that the medium itself is fundamentally hybrid and restless.

All photographs are on some level caught between static fact and mobile drama. This may explain why forensics, with its inherent mix of theatre and cold observation often strikes us as the medium's "truest" calling. We can discern this very clearly in other works by Divola in which the forensic has taken a highly theatrical detour into cinema. In 1979 he made an extended series of photographs on MGM Studio's New York City back-lot in Culver City, California. Like Edward Weston's shots of MGM lots made in 1939, Divola used the still camera to show us the fine line in cinema between actuality and artifice. He documented flimsy facades, derelict cars and fake boulders. The Hollywood "dream factory" arrested and denuded. Moreover, the back-lot itself was falling into ruin and was demolished shortly after Divola photographed it. We cannot tell the difference between ruin and imitation ruin.



John Divola, MGM #12 5X ,1979-80



John Divola, Evidence of Aggression #10, from Continuity, 1995



John Divola, Evidence of Aggression #1, from Continuity, 1995

In 1995, the forensic became more explicit for Divola. Rather than taking photographs he became a researcher, gathering together archival stills from Warner Brother's movie productions of the 1930s. Not film stills as such, these were continuity stills – high quality shots taken of sets between takes to document the place of objects and décor. Divola grouped his finds according to type rather than movie title. Along with Hallways and Mirrors there is a series titled Evidence of Aggression. Here the remnants of pretend fights or fits of fictional rage are seen scattered around the room sets. Once again the line between accident and intention is obscured.

Throughout his career, Divola has had a long-standing commitment to photography, but it is photography defined expansively and socially rather than narrowly and formally. His imagery has not been shaped by the anti-formalism that characterised much of the work by “artists using photography” in the 1960s and 1970s with its embrace of the deskilled snapping of the amateur. In these series, Divola meditates on ruins but not through the ruination of photographic craft. There is a technical mastery at work here that is fundamental to the meaning of the photographs. By the same token, he is not seduced by precious formalism of the entrenched “art photographer.” For him, photography is first a social sign, not a private one, and his technical grasp is not a matter of personalised “style.” He is neither an artist using photography nor an art photographer. Perhaps now, as the last traces of that once very real distinction begin to disappear, we can begin to see this work for what it was and what it is.

The profile of photography in contemporary art is now higher than it has ever been. But the rise has not been without a certain cost. Much of the photography that was made in the years just before the art market really began to take hold has been overlooked, if not forgotten. However, the sheer experimental will and the radical impulses that fuelled so much photographic work of the 1970s in North America and Europe is making itself felt once again. While Divola continues to unfold his interests in new projects, his older work is being discovered by new audiences for the first time. And like many others whose photography was first formed in that decade, Divola finds himself in a double position—as a contemporary artist and as a “figure from the recent past.” For someone whose work has always played with cause and effect, expectation and construction, this has a satisfying irony.

This essay originally appeared in *Aperture*

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