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In 1978, Los Angeles photographer John Divola completed the series *Zuma* (1977–78), a sequence of photographs shot inside an abandoned beachfront property on Zuma Beach, Malibu (Fig. 1). To document his intervention, Divola visited the site, periodically, either in the early morning or late at night with his 6×7 Pentax camera and his camera’s flash synced at a thirtieth of a second. Divola was unable to photograph at midday because the combination of camera’s flash and midday sun would bleach the image.<sup>1</sup> *Zuma* reworked two earlier photographic projects completed by the artist in the mid-1970s: *Vandalism* (1973–75) and *Forced Entries* (1975). For *Vandalism*, Divola spray-painted and later photographed a collection of swirls, dots, and lines within a group of abandoned Los Angeles interiors. Whereas for *Forced Entries*, he staged a sequence of forensically framed photographs inside and outside a series of vacated houses within a recently condemned neighbourhood adjacent to Los Angeles International Airport (LAX). In *Zuma*, the axial light of the camera’s flash is placed in contrast to the low angled, petrochemical light of a California sunrise and sunset. Formally, the pictorial effect is peculiar, akin to Henri Matisse’s *Open Window* (1905), where the view through a window is flattened, placed on an equivalent plane to the room’s interior. In a counterintuitive move to the operations of photography, perspective is cancelled out, or voided, by Divola’s technical and formal manoeuvres. And yet, on an architectural level, the house appears as if it were afloat, as though the structure itself was cast adrift on the sea (Fig. 2).

The use of colour in *Zuma*, in contrast to Divola’s earlier series *Vandalism*, allowed the artist to work through a polymorphic conception of colour. The soft blues and cyan of the morning light are differentiated from images shot at twilight, photographs distinguished by their dark reds and blues. Throughout the series, the warm crepuscular light of the sea and sky is placed in contrast to the artificial and deteriorated light of the interior. At times, the two scenes jar visually as an arresting mix of nature and artifice, and yet, at other moments, the two forms of light complement one another as though they were extensions of the same landscape. At distinct moments throughout the series, Divola’s marks appear to mimic the changeable light of the horizon in its own wave-like movement. A strong connection can be made, here, between the artificiality of the interior as image – interior as self-fashioning – and the photographic device associated with objectivity and truth. On this particular aspect, Divola’s use of colour appears to heighten the confusion between truth and illusion, deception and authenticity.<sup>2</sup> To push this analogy further, the artist exploits this screen-like character of the image to suggest that the interior was filtered through its opposite, confusing interiority with exteriority.

1. John Divola, ‘Dialogue with John Divola by Dinah Portner’, *Journal of Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies* (September 1978), <https://www.americansuburbx.com/2014/04/interview-interview-with-john-divola.html> (accessed 12 November 2018).

2. This confusion is doubled in representations of Zuma Beach in popular culture. In Franklin J. Schaffner’s science fiction film, *Planet of the Apes* (1968), Schaffner filmed the last scene on Zuma Beach where the astronaut George Taylor (Charlton Heston) encounters the ruin of the Statue of Liberty on its wild shores. This encounter forces Heston to realize that this ‘alien’ planet is, in fact, our own.

3. These remarks on the photographic frame echo Rosalind E. Krauss's observations in the exhibition catalogue *L'Amour Fou*. See: Rosalind E. Krauss, 'Photography in the Service of Surrealism', in *L'Amour Fou* (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1985), p. 35.



Fig. 1. John Divola, *Zuma* (1977–78) photograph 24 × 30 on rag paper, courtesy of the artist.

Divola's formal troubling of interiority and exteriority is foregrounded in the artist's persistent attentiveness to the frame as an organising principle of the series. To accentuate this effect, Divola often places one frame within another, intensifying this compositional fiction (Fig. 3). The frame is doubled in the series in order to transform the image into something to be looked at: nature pictured as representation, as illusion.<sup>3</sup> The frame is pictured here as a device situated between a natural state and a representational one, allowing us to consider the issues of naturalism and artifice in a more refined way. Aligned to the discourse of the picturesque, Divola's series continually frames part of the landscape to construct a picture, but the frame also takes the natural and turns it into a fiction, a manipulated fragment of the real (Fig. 4). And although Divola's photographs are the product of technical skill and precise lighting, the landscape almost always appears as a catastrophic fiction – a floating image drifting anchorless on a smog-filtered sea. Situating my analysis on this floating image, in what follows I interrogate how this image of disaster – configured as site, atmosphere, and allegory – permeates Divola's photographic work throughout the 1970s.

#### 'The future is but the obsolete in the reverse'

A year after completing *Zuma*, Divola continued his exploration of the catastrophic, the picturesque, and the fictive, but shifted geographic terrains from the sandy beaches of Malibu to New York City. Between 1979 and 1980 the artist photographed the urban streets of New York from the perspective of the near-future (Fig. 5). Divola pictured the city as a farcical ruin. His *MGM Lot* (1979–80) shows New York as abandoned, as though all of its inhabitants for some unknown reason had suddenly picked up and left. Bright patches of midday light bleach the series, while long shadows sweep across the rubble ground. Divola's camera lingers on shattered windows, blown-out interiors,





Fig. 2. John Divola, *Zuma* (1977–78) photograph 24 × 30 on rag paper, courtesy of the artist.

and other scenes of social conflict. Surveying the wreckage, one can only speculate on the violence that has befallen the city: nuclear fall-out? plague? riot? machines out of control? It is altogether unclear what has caused this particular disaster.

Divola's New York is a New York constructed, imagined, and fabricated on the backlot of MGM Studios in Culver City, Los Angeles. This 'New York' is a fiction, a Californian New York of desert, sunshine, and sand. Throughout the series, Divola often pictured the backlot obliquely so as to emphasise the site's scaffolding. This oblique perspective references Ed Ruscha's numerous studies of the Hollywood sign sketched at an angle, often pictured in different states of decay, and almost always emphasising its unstable scaffolding – what Ruscha called the sign's 'sticks' – signs that were rendered in such a way that they appeared 'sort of apocalyptic'.<sup>4</sup> Ruscha's emphasis on the sign's sticks, like Divola's emphasis on the scaffolding of the backlot, pictures Hollywood as a physically rickety structure. This particular image complicates Ruscha's other renderings of the sign without any support at all, as though the sign (and the

4. Susan Stamberg, 'Profile: The Paintings of Ed Ruscha', transcript in *Leave Any Information at the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages*, ed. Alexandra Schwartz (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), p. 319.



**Fig. 3.** John Divola, *Zuma* (1977–78) photograph 24 × 30 on rag paper, courtesy of the artist.



**Fig. 4.** John Divola, *Zuma* (1977–78) photograph 24 × 30 on rag paper, courtesy of the artist.



concept) materialised like an apparition, magically erected without any support whatsoever.

The MGM backlot was partially demolished when Divola began the project in 1979 and completely demolished when he finished the series in 1980. The set had significantly deteriorated by 1979, a product of the dynamic interplay between the demands of culture and economics. During the 1970s, and the rise of the realism of 'New Hollywood' – also called the 'American New Wave' as exemplified by films such as *Easy Rider* (1969), *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), and *Chinatown* (1974) – sets like the MGM Lot were too expensive to maintain in the midst of a recession and appeared to audiences at the time as dated and obsolete. New Hollywood countered the largely overblown blockbusters of the 1950s and 1960s, which imagined cinema as a historical dreamspace distinct from social reality.

In Divola's series, the ruin stands on its head as a clichéd image. In one photograph, a large rock, perhaps a meteor, has fallen from the sky and now sits on a flatbed truck awaiting its removal (Fig. 6). Hypersensitive to detail, Divola focuses on these bent and collapsed, cardboard exteriors. Here, Divola cites the conventions of the historical ruin – wrecked exteriors, abandoned buildings, strewn rubble and detritus – if only to turn the logic, structure, and conventions of the ruin, absurdly, on its head. It is suggestive that when Divola started photographing the MGM backlot, a local developer began construction on a section of the backlot sold to fend off MGM's bankruptcy. The local developer, Goldrich and Keist, named the site 'Studio Estates' and divided its blocks, tragically, with the names of the studio's former glory: Garland Drive, Astaire Avenue, Hepburn Circle, and Lamarr Avenue.<sup>5</sup> This development still stands today and can also be seen in the background of some of Divola's photographs from the series (Fig. 7).

In their framing and composition, Divola's photographs of the MGM backlot resemble the empty and dilapidated storefronts of Martha Rosler's photo-and-text series, *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* (1974–75). Rosler's series, photographed and arranged in the winter months, isolates the Bowery, a deprived neighbourhood on Lower East Side of New York, in the midst of a crippling fiscal crisis. Dilapidated storefronts, peeled poster-plastered walls, and shuttered doors are partnered with accompanying texts describing subjective states of drunkenness. Read from the perspective of the 1970s, Rosler's *Bowery* is interpreted as a profile of disinvestment: a direct representation of empty storefronts along the Bowery. At the same time, her work acts as critique of the dominant and historical approaches to social documentary within this neighbourhood, a site that Rosler recognises as 'magnetic' for 'victim photography'.<sup>6</sup> What Rosler sought to picture was a different position altogether: not a 'defiant antihumanism' as she called it, but a work of criticism that took aim at the 'impoverished' strategies of photographic and textual representation.<sup>7</sup>

Despite some obvious similarities between Rosler and Divola, the comparison between the two photographers is perhaps unhelpful. The two terrains are obviously cut from a different piece of cloth, or cardboard, so to speak (Fig. 8). Divola's 'ruin' speaks not only of the just-past of 'New York' but also the obsolete just-past of the MGM backlot. It is in this frame that Divola's image of the future reads as historically sedimented: a vestige of a crumbling world projected both backwards and forwards in time. The city is envisioned by the photographer as fiction: a ruin continuously made and unmade, built and destroyed, recurring again and again, as a farcical image.<sup>8</sup> The urban fiction of Hollywood, in Divola's iteration, amounts to almost nothing except perhaps the



**Fig. 5.** John Divola, *MGM Lot* (1979–80) photograph 16 × 20 on gelatin silver paper, courtesy of the artist.



**Fig. 6.** John Divola, *MGM Lot* (1979–80) photograph 16 × 20 on gelatin silver paper, courtesy of the artist.

5. Steven Bingen, *MGM: Hollywood's Greatest Backlot* (Santa Monica: Santa Monica Press, 2011), p. 285.

6. Martha Rosler, 'In Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)', in *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, (1975–2001)* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 175–206. A comprehensive analysis of Rosler's work is found in Steve Edwards' 'Afterall 'One Work' study. See: Steve Edwards, *Martha Rosler: The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* (London: Afterall Books, 2012).

7. Martha Rosler, 'In Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)', pp. 191–5.

8. Norman M. Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 6.

9. 'The work of art when it is late, when it repeats, when it hesitates, when it remembers, but also when it projects a future or an ideal is "anachronic"'. See: Christopher S. Wood and Alexander Nagel, *Anachronic Renaissance* (Cambridge: Zone Books, 2010), p. 13.

10. Robert Smithson, 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic New Jersey,' in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 73–4.

11. Robert Smithson, 'Entropy and the New Monuments,' in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 11.

12. Christopher S. Wood and Alexander Nagel, *Anachronic Renaissance* (Cambridge: Zone Books, 2010), p. 74.



**Fig. 7.** John Divola, *MGM Lot* (1979–80) photograph 16 x 20 on gelatin silver paper, courtesy of the artist.

obsolete accumulation of images, objects, and facades that a corporation merely demolishes and casts away. These dream-images of the city appear to materialise, but just as quickly also appear to crumble and disappear.<sup>9</sup>

On this idea of clichéd ruins, one can recall Robert Smithson's famous travelogue of the 'ruins' at Passaic, New Jersey in 1967, where Smithson spoke of a kind of 'clichéd idea of infinity' when looking at a row of cars in a suburban parking lot.<sup>10</sup> 'If the future is "out of date" and "old fashioned," Smithson states in regard to his walk in Passaic, 'then I had been in the future'. Smithson often quoted a line by Vladimir Nabokov, who once wrote that 'the future is but the obsolete in the reverse'.<sup>11</sup> Although Smithson was never tired of quoting this, its meaning still evades historians of his work. Perhaps Divola's series is the most prescient envisioning of this reversal, where the future's obsolescence is actively being demolished right before our eyes.<sup>12</sup> The one who glimpses into the future, then, sees the obsolete but in reverse.

Divola's photographs mark time as situated along a narrow interval between the just-past and the near-future. This 'New York' was modelled after contemporary New York during the fiscal crisis of 1974–75, and yet the set was also used for a number of post-apocalyptic films situated in the near-future. These films included *Soylent Green* (1973), *Omega Man* (1972), and *The Ultimate Warrior* (1975). Two of the films, *Soylent Green* and *The Ultimate Warrior*, envision New York through the lens of crisis and scarcity: a future where the entire city and all of its resources have been exhausted. This confusion between past and future, California and New York, was later echoed in Ridley Scott's construction





**Fig. 8.** John Divola, *MGM Lot* (1979–80) photograph 16× 20 on gelatin silver paper, courtesy of the artist.

of a near-future Los Angeles in the film *Blade Runner* (1982), a film that retrofitted Burbank Studios' 'Old New York Street', used previously for the noirs *The Big Sleep* and *The Maltese Falcon*.

Informed by the genre of science fiction, I have titled this essay, 'You speak of things that haven't happened yet in the past-tense' – a misquote of phrase uttered by Sarah Connor in the first *Terminator* (1984) film.<sup>13</sup> In the film, the Terminator, played by Arnold Schwarzenegger, is sent from the future to kill Sarah Connor, the saviour of the human race. In the future, her son, John Connor, who is leading the resistance against the machines, sends a soldier, Kyle Reese, into the past to protect his mother from the Terminator. When Sarah Connor learns about the fateful war with the machines and her central role in this resistance from Kyle Reese, she utters the line: 'You speak of things that I haven't done yet in the past-tense'. Connor's disorientated statement encapsulates the transformative temporal grammar that propels this essay – a speculative syntax founded on the 'as if' of fiction – a syntax that troubles the coordinates of the past, present, and future. At the suggestions of the work itself, I have adopted this 'as if' structure as a means to trouble the work's relation to time, history, and the conventions of the documentary image. What makes Connor's statement so strange is that memory is traditionally understood as orientated towards the past. In a very real sense, one cannot have memories of the future. Connor's statement instead provides a model of time and memory that incorporates this speculative future. Understanding Divola's

13. Kodwo Eshun uses this line as a model of anachronism in his study *More Brilliant Than The Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet Books, 1998), pp. 10, 47.

14. J.G. Ballard, 'What I believe', *Uncollected Works*: [http://www.jgballard.ca/uncollected\\_work/what\\_i\\_believe.html](http://www.jgballard.ca/uncollected_work/what_i_believe.html) (accessed 15 October 2018).
15. Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (London: Picador, 1999), p. 280.
16. *Ibid.*, 280.

images as memories of a kind forces us to develop a new historical model of time and memory.

Working through the films that were shot on the MGM backlot – *Omega Man*, *Soylent Green*, *Earthquake*, and *The Ultimate Warrior* – I want to argue that this temporal sequence mobilised by Divola's series closely mimics the temporal shifts that occur in science fiction. These four post-apocalyptic films MGM Studios produced during the 1970s all imagine the near-future through the lens of apocalypse, collapse, and catastrophe. Notoriously, in *Soylent Green* (1973), overpopulation, pollution, and crime are symptomatic of the slow death of the planet. Water is rationed and most of New York is surviving on a processed ration called 'soylent green' – a high-energy food source, advertised as plankton but which is, in fact, made from the dead bodies of processed humans. In this sense, Divola's scene is literally a ruin of science fiction, where a past-future is projected onto the present, only to face the fate of the wrecking ball of a demolition team in the near-future. His series pictures a fragile contrast between the collapsed intricacy of the urban form and the ambiguity of its violence.

In this iteration, Divola's work resembles a type of a science fiction of the present, in a similar way that J.G. Ballard argued for a science fiction of the next five minutes.<sup>14</sup> This is not a science fiction of the far future – of other planets, other galaxies, and other times – but of the speculative present. In a short 1984 manifesto, 'What I believe', Ballard claims that the modern world in which we live produces new myths and new fantasies. Ballard's speculative temporality estranges time from its accepted historical chronology. In his science fiction, the exterior world we inhabit assumes a strange and alien form that resembles the psychic space of his characters; a subtle change to an exterior world reverberates within their inner space.

Taking my cue from Ballard's model of science fiction and Connor's disorientated statement, the present essay attempts to make sense of Divola's anachronistic temporality: one internally riven, folded between the just-past and near-future. Implicit in this idea of anachronism is the artwork's belatedness as well as its anticipatory structure. The striking quality of Divola's photographs is the duplication of historiographical registers. These three terms – past, present, and future – are linked syntactically by a dash that figures the past as a 'past-future' and the present as a 'present-future'. In Divola's photographs of the MGM backlot, the photographic images spurn the linear progression of past, present, and future in order to introduce a sense of delay, hesitation, and instability.

### End of Days

In his study on the literary and cinematic destruction of Los Angeles, historian Mike Davis has remarked that the presence of disaster as allegory, allusion, and atmosphere saturates almost everything written about Southern California.<sup>15</sup> In the literary world of Los Angeles, disaster and catastrophe has become routine, intricately woven and patterned through the literary texture of the region. Instead of dismissing these apocalyptic premonitions as mere regional cliché, the thematic of disaster reads as a valuable historical model for Davis, one that comes to track national discontents, map local histories, and mobilise deep-seated cultural predispositions.<sup>16</sup> From well-known texts such as Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* (1939) and Joan Didion's *Play it as it Lays* (1970), to lesser-known works such as Myron Brinig's *Flutter of an Eyelid* (1933) or Kim Stanley Robinson's *Orange County Trilogy* (1984, 1988, 1990), disaster has been repeatedly marshalled in the context of California to reflect upon the

unravelling of American exceptionalism, Manifest Destiny, and the imperial aspirations of the American Century.<sup>17</sup>

Andreas Huyssen once remarked that the most critical works of modernity are those that interrogate and work over, formally and objectively, the ruins of the present historical condition. Coincidentally, for Huyssen, the ruin is figured, critically, as a 'screen' through which modernity, in his words, 'projects' its 'asynchronous temporalities and its fear of and obsession with the passing of time'.<sup>18</sup> Although Huyssen, writing in 2009, is speaking of the persistence of catastrophe from the modern to the postmodern, Huyssen's 'projective' claim appears particularly prescient when looking at Divola's photographs of *MGM Lot* and thinking through Mike Davis's own symptomatic reading of Los Angeles.

Looking at Divola's photographs of the MGM backlot, I want to ask a similar question of the material addressed in this essay: Might disaster and catastrophe structure the visual work of the period in a way that is symptomatic of the political and economic moment it faced? Catastrophe, understood as a single, homogenous disaster, became the byword for California in the 1970s as a place marked by economic recession, oil shortages, smog, overpopulation, drought, and inner-city rebellion. Though the subsumption of these phenomena under the single concept of catastrophe, or disaster, might fail to see the political or social differences between them, this is nevertheless how California came to understand itself.

In Davis's epochal urban history of Los Angeles, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, the author charts the extreme polarisation of the representation of Los Angeles as a double articulation split between utopian and dystopian extremes.<sup>19</sup> The economy, Davis remarks, splits the city into two extremes: as fabricated by city boosters, imagined as an idyllic Eden of oranges, sunshine, and entrepreneurial opportunity; and its counter-image, the city figured as 'apocalyptic ground zero'. Before Davis, Michael Sorkin in his 1982 essay, 'Explaining Los Angeles', argued that a city like Los Angeles has 'a rhetoric but not an epistemology'<sup>20</sup> – which is another way of saying that, in its representational form, the city is often understood through the rhetoric of hyperbole and exaggeration. Los Angeles, Sorkin writes, is 'nearly unviewable save through the fictive scrim of its mythologizers'.<sup>21</sup>

Davis's exceptional history of Los Angeles pulsates with these dystopian anecdotes of disaster, catastrophe, and apocalypse. His essay begins with the author visiting the ruin of Llano del Rio, a former utopian socialist colony located in the Antelope Valley of Southern California. In the short preface, Davis reflects on the bizarre juxtaposition of an Air Force Plant where Stealth Bombers ('hot rods of the apocalypse') are assembled in the midst of a forest of Joshua trees ('older than the Doomsday book'). In a later study, *Ecology of Fear*, Davis is more specific with his prognosis of ruin and disaster. Surveying the periodic manifestations of disaster in Hollywood, Davis remarks how the 1970s were a period marked by the invention of a form of 'Cinematic' disaster – a type of fiction placed in contrast to the 'Ecocatastrophe' which characterised the 1960s (*Crack in the World* (1965), *Planet of the Apes* (1968)), or 'Alien Invasions' of the 1980s and 1990s (*E.T.* (1982) and *Independence Day* (1995)).<sup>22</sup>

'The decay of the city's old glamor', Davis remarks, '[had] been inverted by the entertainment industry into a new glamor of decay'.<sup>23</sup> A quintessential film of the decade, *Earthquake* depicts the annihilation of Los Angeles by an off-the-scales earthquake. Produced by MGM Studios, the film combined a new theory of plate tectonics filtered through the genre of disaster cinematography.

17. On the history of the geography of the American Century see: Neil Smith, *American Empire: Roosevelt's Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

18. For a discussion of 'authentic ruins' see Andreas Huyssen, 'Authentic Ruins', in *Ruins of Modernity*, ed. Julia Hell (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), pp. 19–22.

19. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 19–20.

20. Michael Sorkin, 'Explaining Los Angeles', in *California Counterpoint: New West Coast Architecture 1982* (New York: Rizzoli, 1982), pp. 8–14.

21. Sorkin, 'Explaining Los Angeles', p. 8.

22. Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, pp. 323–6.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 278.

24. *Earthquake* starred Charlton Heston and Ava Gardner, two characters, who, to quote Davis again, 'were depicted at the edge of a personal abyss'.

25. Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, p. 325.

26. *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, directed by Thom Andersen, Los Angeles, CA, 2003.

27. Andersen states in the film's voiceover: 'Los Angeles is not Paris or New York. In New York, everything is sharp and in-focus, as if seen through a wide-angle lens.' See: Thom Andersen, *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, Hollywood CA, 2003.

28. *Ibid.*, n.p.

29. 'Lies are annoying', Andersen declares. 'To someone who knows Los Angeles only from the movies, it might appear that everyone who has a job lives in the hills or at the beach. The dismal flatland between is the province exclusively of the lumpen proletariat. And most of them live next to an oil refinery. And in death they will rest next to an oil derrick.' *Ibid.*, n.p.

30. To cite one critic of West's work, West's literary method is modernist in its bent: 'the unique collocation of fragments, curious juxtapositions, ellipses, shifts in points of view and time which are cinematic in effect'. See: Alistair Wisker, *The Writings of Nathanael West* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, Macmillan, 1990), p. 111.

At the apex of the film, the city shakes, buildings crumble, freeways collapse, and entire houses explode into innumerable pieces. The film depicts the annihilation of Los Angeles into a dark and fiery hell. Just before Los Angeles is destroyed and Mulholland Dam buckles under the pressure of the earthquake, Charlton Heston and Ava Gardner, the two stars of the film, drown within the city sewer system attempting to save the city's residents trapped in an underground garage in Wilson Plaza. Curiously, the sewer system miraculously withstands the violent convulsions of the earthquake, while above ground Los Angeles is reduced to a ruin of burning embers and rubble.<sup>24</sup> For Davis, *Earthquake* reads as a landmark film – a film that was copied incessantly from the 1970s through to the present – so that from then on the cinematic premonitions of doom deviated only by degree to include 'comet impacts, tsunamis, landslides, firestorms, blizzards, and even giant alligators'.<sup>25</sup>

In the destructive entanglement of Hollywood with Los Angeles, this essay would be remiss not to mention Thom Andersen's 2003 film-essay *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2003)<sup>26</sup> and the countless films that continually restage the destruction of LA. Andersen's film is propelled by a unique documentary ethos: treating fiction films shot in Los Angeles for their documentary revelations about the city, in the same way as one reads documentaries for their dramatic qualities. In a sense, what his film enacts is a shift in perspective: from involuntary reception of the city's built form and the social relations it encourages, to voluntary perception of these landscapes and relations. Similar to the work of Divola, Andersen places the background into the foreground. Although Los Angeles appears as one of the most photographed cities in the world, Andersen notes, the city also emerges in the history of cinema as one of the 'least photogenic' and 'elusive'.<sup>27</sup> 'In smoggy cities like Los Angeles', he claims, 'everything dissolves into the distance, and even stuff that's close-up seems far off'.<sup>28</sup> And yet, as an image, the landscape of Los Angeles is hard to get right. From the perspective of the automobile, the city is pictured as devoid of any public space whatsoever overdetermined, as many have claimed, by the private enclosure of the car, the studio backlot, the air-conditioned office, and the gated community. For these reasons, the city appears 'just beyond the reach of an image'.<sup>29</sup> Although Hollywood takes 'special pleasure' in destroying Los Angeles, Andersen states (citing Davis), disaster movies also serve as one means through which the city emerges from the background as a 'character, if not yet as a subject.'

### The Day of the Locust

In the context of literary history, the most influential text on Hollywood and the region, cited over and over again in the cultural histories of Los Angeles, is Nathanael West's satirical novel, *The Day of the Locust* (1939). West's story centres around Tod Hackett, a former graduate of the Yale School of Fine Art, recruited from the East Coast by a Hollywood scout to work as a set painter on the studio backlot. Pivotaly, West's novel is told through the eyes of Hackett as though reality itself were filtered through a mediated lens. In the painter's spare time, the Yale graduate plans a fictional painting titled *The Burning of Los Angeles*.<sup>30</sup> Throughout the novel, Hackett makes studies, sketches, and other plans for his painting. West tells us that in Hackett's composition the flames of the mob compete with the desert sun. Curiously, the people who transform the city into embers and ash in Hackett's painting are out-of-towners – 'a holiday crowd' in West's words.

In preparation for *The Burning of Los Angeles*, Hackett models his work after an arcane set of references from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries:





**Fig. 9.** John Divola, *MGM Lot* (1979–80) photograph 16× 20 on gelatin silver paper, courtesy of the artist.

Alessandro Magnasco, Salvator Rosa, Francesco Guardi, and Monsu Desiderio – painters, in West’s words, of ‘mystery and decay’. Hackett sees himself as the progeny of these four artists. Even though West depicts Hackett and his friends as a farce, Hackett, we are told, does not satirise his characters (as Hogarth, Goya, or Daumier might), instead, he paints them with respect.<sup>31</sup>

In his move from New Haven to Los Angeles, Hackett’s set of visual references alter dramatically: ‘[Hackett] knew he would never again paint a fat old Nantucket barn old stone wall, or sturdy Nantucket fisherman’.<sup>32</sup> Hackett’s painting, *The Burning of Los Angeles*, as it develops throughout the novel has a unique Hollywood ambience and atmosphere. His work tends to confuse reality and illusion, a confusion that is at once ironically comical as it is entirely catastrophic. As a character, too, Hackett is described as very complicated – ‘with a whole set of personalities one inside the other like a nest of Chinese boxes’<sup>33</sup> – a description that could work for West’s novel and Divola’s photographs alike.

*Day of the Locust*, similar to Divola’s project, interweaves dream with reality. One scene in West’s novel tells of a dizzying trip through a studio backlot. Before Hackett comes across the filming of the ‘Battle of Waterloo’, he seamlessly moves past a Parisian street and an ancient temple erected to the Greek Goddess Eros himself who is shown lying ‘face downward in a pile of old newspapers and bottles’.<sup>34</sup> As Hackett travels through the landscape, he

31. Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust* (New York: New Directions, 1969), p. 86.

32. In a sense, the same could be re-arranged for ‘social documentarians’ in Los Angeles (contra Strand or Evans): ‘They knew they would never again photograph a fat old Nantucket barn, old stone wall, or sturdy Nantucket fisherman.’ West, *The Day of the Locust*, p. 4.

33. West, *The Day of the Locust*, p. 4.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

36. This perspective is also present in F. Scott Fitzgerald's unfinished novel *The Last Tycoon* (1941). See: Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966) and Thomas A. Janvier, *In the Sargasso Sea* (New York: Simon Schuster, 2012).

37. Wisker, *The Writings of Nathanael West*, p. 175.

38. Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' in *Illuminations* trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), p. 257.

proceeds from one fiction to another, into an elaborate scene of fictions-within-fictions.

During this dizzying scene, in which Hackett witnesses the storming of Mount Saint Jean by Napoleon's troops (played by a group of extras), he observes that the set is haphazardly thrown together with canvas and wood. When it buckles under the collective weight of the actors, the entire group is sent tumbling to the ground below. Ambulances arrive, and many are sent to the hospital. West describes the collapse in a curious cacophony of anthropomorphised sounds and noises: 'Nails screamed with agony as they pulled out of joints. The sound of ripping canvas was like that of little children whimpering. Lath and scantling snapped as though they were brittle bones.'<sup>35</sup> The screen, now personified, literally collapses under the collective weight of life. In a strange and comical way, the fiction of the Hollywood backlot actualises history in the most accidental manner.

A page later, Hackett encounters the studio's garbage dump. The dumping ground is used by the studio to trash its sets, and props. With every new production, more and more objects are added to pile: a medieval castle, fragments from the Old West, and lots of other bits and pieces collapse onto one another as one large, unending pile. As Hackett arrives to the dumping ground, a ten-tonne truck adds another load to the heap. The Yale graduate, always quick to make a literary comparison, refers to Thomas Allibone Janvier's children's novel *In the Sargasso Sea* (1898) of a ship's graveyard. The narrator remarks: 'Just as that imaginary body of water was a history of civilization in the form of a marine junkyard, the studio lot was one in the form of a dream dump.' With the production of every film, the pile continues to grow. Nothing, it seems, will stop the onrush of this history.<sup>36</sup>

West famously described his literary method as a juxtaposition of Hollywood cliché and detritus, calling it 'The apocalypse of the Second Hand' – 'second hand' being another word for the outmoded, the obsolete, and the excluded.<sup>37</sup> In a curious sense, the ruin of the Hollywood backlot reads here as the absurd ruin of history, the inverse of Walter Benjamin's angel of history, where history is imagined as a vast an unremitting pile of debris.

Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1940), written a year after West completed *The Day of the Locust*, could be rewritten, thus, to apply to the Hollywood backlot: *Where we perceive a chain of events, the Hollywood set painter sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The set painter would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from the Hollywood hills; it has got caught in his designs with such violence that he can no longer ignore them. The storm irresistibly propels the set painter into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.*<sup>38</sup>

### Vandalism: A Psycho-Geometry

Divola's early experiments with the politics and aesthetics of disaster came in the form of his 1973–75 series, *Vandalism*. The project is a series of black-and-white photographs of interiors photographed within a collection of abandoned houses situated throughout Los Angeles. Each house Divola entered illegally and would sometimes revisit over a two-year period. For the project, Divola spray-painted a series of patterned grids, spirals, and dots on the walls of the houses.

To realise the project, Divola purchased black, white, and silver paint to conform to the vocabulary of the black-and-white silver-gelatin print. The

series began, in Divola's words, as a medium-specific interest in 'painting things silver' and then photographing these silver-painted objects.<sup>39</sup> Instead of advancing an idea of medium purity associated with medium specificity – 'the unique and proper area of competence'<sup>40</sup> – Divola's gestures contaminate the medium within the terrains of painting and sculpture, all the while keeping to the medium's basic conditions. But in many respects, Divola's black-and-white-and-silver marks printed on black-and-white silver-gelatin prints come to undermine the series' autonomy. Ultimately, the translation of a three-dimensional surface – black, white, and silver marks – onto two-dimensional plane acts to contradict the photographic plane of the image, as though each mark was composed of a polymorphic substance (Fig. 10).

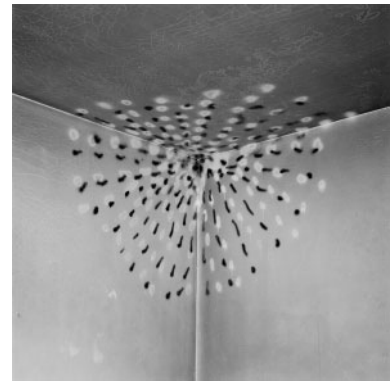
The use of silver, furthermore, operated as a means to accentuate the materiality of the photograph, all the while negating the photograph's conception as a window onto the world. In addition, the photographs produced in *Vandalism* can be read as 'protocolor' images – photographs that are not merely a black-and-white, but images that activate the properties of silver, a material that demonstrates the energy of colour within the image (Fig. 11).<sup>41</sup> Formally, light operates in an analogous fashion to how light interacts within a Daguerreotype: Divola's silver marks project out onto the viewer's space.

Divola's experiments with abstraction can be partially attributed to his education at UCLA under the tutelage of mixed-media artist and photographer Robert Heinecken. In 1970, Heinecken's work was included in the Peter Bunnell-curated exhibition, *Photography into Sculpture*, held at the Museum of Modern Art. Memorably, the exhibition was held alongside two other significant exhibitions that challenged the contours of medium specificity: *Frank Stella: Paintings and Drawings* (1970) and Kynaston McShine's influential *Information* (1970).<sup>42</sup> It is notable that many of the photographers included in Bunnell's *Photography into Sculpture* were students of Heinecken at UCLA in the 1960s.<sup>43</sup>

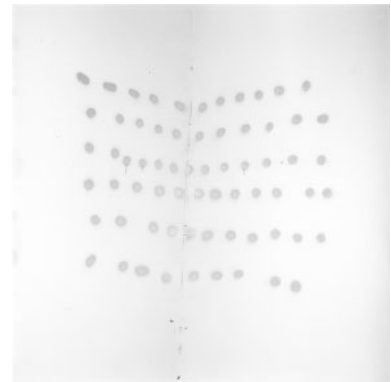
Although Heinecken advanced an expanded conception of photography, known for enlarging the medium with sculpture and installation, he also emphasised how the practice of photography operated as both an abstraction as well as a form of mark-making.<sup>44</sup> Heinecken insisted that the photograph acted as a form of abstraction precisely when the shutter of the camera was released, recording an impression of the social world fundamentally distanced from reality itself. And yet, as an indexical procedure, Heinecken reminded his students, photography also operated as a form of mark-making, transforming light into a graphic substance. In many respects, Divola's *Vandalism* can be understood as a synthesis of these two teachings.

One of the most compelling qualities of Divola's photographs from this period is that his work deals with interior scenes – perhaps even an inner psychic space – and yet, his method always draws the viewer out from the interior towards the social world outside. A number of his photographs were staged to move through thresholds: a window, a door, and other broken apertures that act to trouble the dialectic between interiority and exteriority.

This strategy is the strongest in the series *Forced Entries* (1975–76). The work was part of a larger project, *Los Angeles Airport Noise Abatement Zone (LAX NAZ)* (1975–76), a series of photographs set within a condemned neighbourhood adjacent to Lost Angeles International Airport that had been expropriated by the city to serve as a noise buffer for a new runway. For a number of years in the early to mid-1970s, many houses were abandoned and stood vacant for a number of years. *LAX NAZ* comprised three sub-projects: *Forced Entries* (1975–76), forensically posed photographs of evidence of forced entries (Fig. 12); a series of photographs of interior and exterior scenes detailing the houses and the



**Fig. 10.** John Divola, *Vandalism* (1973–75) photograph 20 × 16 on gelatin silver paper, courtesy of the artist.



**Fig. 11.** John Divola, *Vandalism* (1973–75) photograph 20 × 16 on gelatin silver paper, courtesy of the artist.



**Fig. 12.** John Divola, *LAX NAZ, Forced Entries* (1975–76) photograph 16 × 20 on gelatin silver paper, courtesy of the artist.

39. John Divola, 'John Divola: On the *Vandalism*, *Forced Entry* and *Zuma* series', <http://www.faculty.ucr.edu/~divola/Statements&Reviews/Three%20Acts/Interview.html> (accessed 15 October 2018).

40. Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting' in John O'Brian ed. *The Collected Essays and Criticism*,

Volume 4 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. 86.

41. Michael Taussig, *What Colour is the Sacred?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 55.

42. On the history of the exhibition *Photography into Sculpture* (1970) and Heinecken's role in it, see: Mary Statzer, 'Peter Bunnell's *Photography as Printmaking and Photography into Sculpture: Photography and Medium Specificity at MoMA circa 1970*', in *The Photographic Object 1970* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), pp. 33–58.

43. See: Charles Demarais, *Proof: Los Angeles Art and the Photograph 1960–1980* (Los Angeles: Fellows of Contemporary Art, 1992), p. 26.

44. Ellen Brooks, a student of Heinecken in the late 1960s, stressed this point in a recent interview. See: Mary Statzer, 'Ellen Brooks', in *The Photographic Object 1970* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), pp. 117–25.

45. Thomas Pynchon, *Inherent Vice* (New York: Penguin, 2009), pp. 142–3.

46. Jason E. Hill, "'Noise Abatement Zone: John Divola's Photographic Fulcrum,'" in Jordan Bear and Kate Palmer Albers ed. *Before-and-After Photography: Histories and Contexts* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), pp. 59–79.

47. Divola's penchant for performance can be extended to the series, *As Far As I Could Get* (1996–2010), where Divola is shown, often at the margins of Los Angeles, running away from his camera before the timed shutter goes off.

neighbourhood; and finally, *House Removals* (1976), twenty-four before-and-after colour photographs of twelve houses' demolition and removal. A number of the houses photographed in the *Forced Entries* series were included in the *House Removals* series too.

Although the neighbourhood was condemned and abandoned, the houses were far from deserted, as Divola's series shows. In fact, the site was subject to short paragraph in Thomas Pynchon's *Inherent Vice* (2009), where the neighbourhood was described as teeming with activity:

Close to the office, within walking distance in fact, was a small ex-neighbourhood, its houses all condemned for an airport extension which may have existed only as some bureaucratic fantasy. Empty but not deserted exactly. Questionable movies were being shot inside. Drug and weapons drops were being made. Chicano bikers were having furtive noontime trysts with young Anglo executives in tax-deductible toupees that retained in their Dynel thatchwork the smell of bars downtown at lunchtime. Dopers were getting off on the airplanes a couple inches over their heads, and particularly unhappy area residents from PV to Point Dume were scouting potential suicides.<sup>45</sup>

'Empty but not deserted exactly'; Divola's project began with a series of forensic images of forced entries. Given that most of the forced entries involved windows and doors, Divola's camera focused on broken windows, kicked-down doors, and other traces of illegal activity. He would often photograph the door from the outside, and then again photograph the door from the perspective of the interior. When the exterior scene beyond the threshold is itself registered, it is in the shape of another abandoned house or a few tropical palms and wildlife around the area. Surveying Divola's photographs, the window confuses the viewer's relation to the experience of interior and exterior: the window is neither interior nor landscape. Rather, it could be said that the window reads as a permeable threshold – one that contaminates the difference between the two spaces (Figs 13 and 14).

If in *Vandalism* Divola documented his own interventions within the site, for the *LAX NAZ* project, in contrast, the photographer catalogued a series of intrusions enacted by someone else.<sup>46</sup> Similar to the stance he had adopted in *Vandalism*, Divola's camera mimicked the look of a police photographer, documenting the evidence of break-ins and other illegal activity. His camera zeroes-in on the traces of forced entry: sometimes documenting a brick or a rock sitting on the ground amidst glass and other debris. In one photograph, the broken window resembles a half moon, as though the door were a large aperture letting in the California air; in another, the glass door is shattered into innumerable pieces to resemble an impressive pile of debris. In Divola's series, the most minute detail and most expansive interior collapse into a confusing constellation. The camera registers the slight shifts in perspective that occur through these apertures and across these broken thresholds, disrupting the spatial and temporal order that these thresholds typically afford.

Alongside the gestural marks found in *Vandalism*, the artist would often nail holes into the wall and trace these holes with lines of thread. In some cases, Divola would toss a piece of fabric or a bowl in the air and photograph the object's flight (Fig. 15).<sup>47</sup> Other moments show Divola constructing small sculptures from found cardboard and other cast-off materials. A parallel can be struck between Divola's work and that of Frank Stella in its desire to collapse the mediums of painting and sculpture; in Divola's case, however, the artist has added a third term, photography. One can read Divola's mark-making along a double register: photography contaminated by a range of media (sculpture, performance, painting), but also as a vandalised encounter with the city's political





**Fig. 13.** John Divola, *LAX NAZ, Forced Entries* (1975–76) photograph 16 × 20 on gelatin silver paper, courtesy of the artist.

geography (breaking-and-entering). The vandalism implicit in Divola's media resonates with his encounters with the region's geography. The ground of Divola's marks are almost always the deteriorated surface of a ruined Los Angeles interior. And like the cardboard facades that Divola photographed in the series *MGM Lot*, the houses seem as flimsy as cardboard.

Read as a series, *Vandalism* generates a disorienting texture when the depictive space of the photograph is situated on a parallel plane to the photographic lens. In a number of photographs, there is little-to-no depth to the image, registering a shallow and disorientating sense of perspective. At times, the wall at once recedes and thickens, projecting out from the plane of the image. In various corner reliefs, for instance, the artist deploys a series of gestures – dots, spirals, and whorls – to register the confusing play of perspective. The grid is a central motif for Divola, for it is the grid that collapses the opposition between line and colour, figure, and ground. Any sense of depth is generated by Divola's marks, and not by any spatial hierarchy registered by a distinctive figure–ground relationship. At times, Divola's photographs undermine the representational capacities of the image by underscoring a series of overlapping planes of marks and mark-making. The spatial hierarchy that is often produced by the plane of focus of the photograph is put in question when a flat space is rendered parallel to the picture plane with little or no depth of field. In many respects, Divola's photographs appear to index different states of time, resembling something like a porous growth (Fig. 16).

48. I deploy this term ‘polymorphic substance’ to echo the concept ‘polymorphous magical substance’ as developed by Michael Taussig in his study *What Colour is the Sacred?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 40.

49. Speaking on capitalism’s crises, Jameson writes on the spiral: ‘with each crisis, it mutates into a larger sphere of activity and wider field of penetration, of control, investment, and transformation’. See: Fredric Jameson, ‘Culture and Finance Capital’, *Critical Inquiry* (Autumn 1997), p. 248.



**Fig. 14.** John Divola, *LAX NAZ, Forced Entries* (1975–76) photograph 16x20 on gelatin silver paper, courtesy of the artist.

Divola’s marks in *Vandalism* and *Zuma* are reminiscent of a type of postwar geometric abstraction akin to the work of Niele Toroni, Frank Stella, or Fred Sandback. And yet, this very term ‘geometric abstraction’ belies the complexity of Divola’s marks. Following a term coined by Michael Taussig, it might be better to describe Divola’s work as propelled by a distinctive polymorphous geometry – marks that appear to constantly shift and unravel. In this iteration, colour is imagined as a fluid medium imbued with movement, magic, and intensity.<sup>48</sup> For instance, in Divola’s spiral reliefs the artist incorporates the movement of the spiral into the viewer’s encounter. Each mark propels the eye both backwards and forwards into space, registering an alternating surface of depth. Notably, the spiral enacts a centrifugal movement that collapses multiple spatio-temporalities at once: a unique perspective on time and space that seems to both expand and contract, increase and diminish, around a fixed point of focus (Fig. 17). The spiral in Divola’s series can be read as both a progressive movement and a counter-movement – a kind of ‘vicious spiral’ (or equally, a ‘vicious circle’) of regressive and irreversible movement downwards characterised by a sense of entropic collapse.<sup>49</sup>

In Divola’s *Vandalism*, the mark on the wall is sometimes as subtle as a patch of light cast across its surface. Throughout the series Divola paints over these marks, furtively, as the light itself sweeps across the barren surface. This motif recurs in *Zuma*, where Divola paints his mark over the real light that falls through the broken aperture of the room’s window. To push this point further,



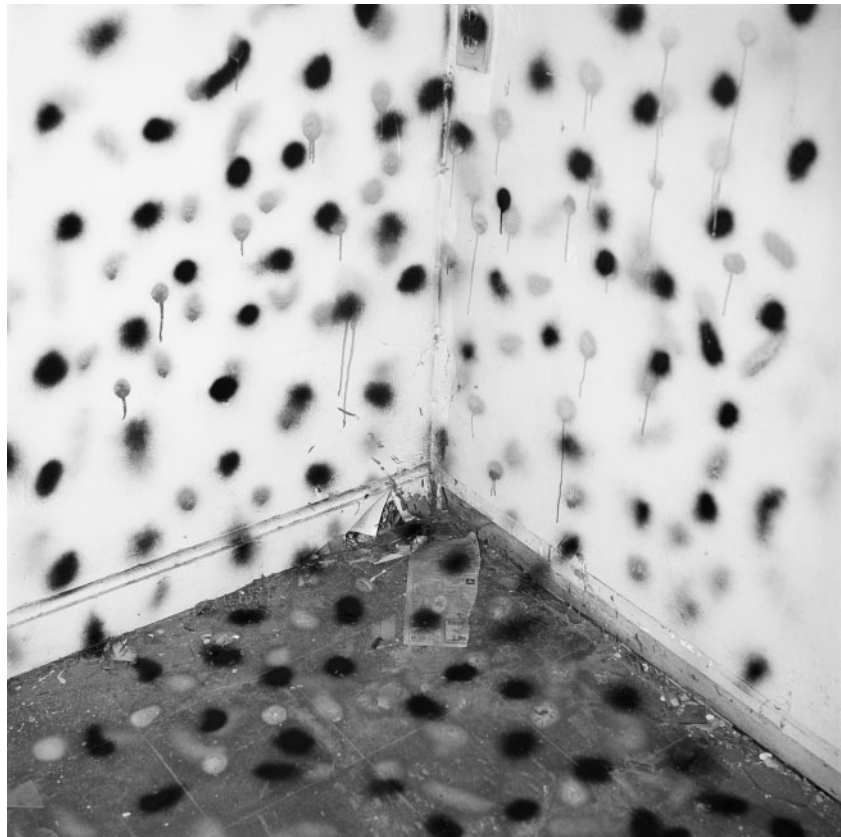
**Fig. 15.** John Divola, *Vandalism* (1973–75) photograph 20 × 16 on gelatin silver paper, courtesy of the artist.

one scene in *Vandalism* reads in alternating overlaid script as if the mind were writing and rewriting, inscribing and re-inscribing the artist's encounter with the site: 'I'm here/It's there/I'm not here/It's not there'. The graphic mark is both the 'Here' and 'There' from which a particular (subjective) perspective is declared and received. Divola works with the dialectical play of writing and overwriting (photographing and re-photographing) the graphic site. Roland Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida*: 'Show your photographs to someone – he will immediately show you his: "Look, this is my brother; this is me as a child", and so forth; the photograph is never anything but an antiphon of "Look", "See", "Here it is"; it points a finger at certain vis-à-vis, and cannot escape this pure deictic language.'<sup>50</sup> As Divola revisits the site, the artist is drawn to his own gesture and adds another to the sequence. So too is the viewer called to attend to the marks and in some way respond to their spatial and temporal specificity in each frame and then elaborate the 'will have been' of the photograph through which the sequence operates within.

Elsewhere, Barthes argues that the photograph is structured by a future-anterior tense – the 'this-will-have-been'. Barthes' anticipatory tense is mirrored, too, in Sarah Connor's own disorientated perspective: 'You speak of things that I haven't done yet in the past-tense.' Barthes writes: 'What the photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially.'<sup>51</sup> The graphic mark is where such perspectives – 'Here' and 'There' – are received and are set in motion. *Vandalism* and *Zuma*, in other words, are both premised on a type of

50. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 5.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 4.



**Fig. 16.** John Divola, *Vandalism* (1973–75) photograph 20 × 16 on gelatin silver paper, courtesy of the artist.

writing and overwriting of the image (Fig. 18). Divola's marks read as incomprehensible hieroglyphs: signs that bespeak a world caught in the circuits of collapse, catastrophe, and disaster. It is my argument that the work of the historian is the writing of this very collapse.

### The Burning of Los Angeles

When *Zuma* was shown in Japan in 1988, many audience members saw the work as apocalyptic, perhaps recalling the destruction and flash in the skies over Hiroshima and Nagasaki more than 70 years earlier. Perhaps all of this is cliché if not read in the context of the popular imagery of the California Coast and nuclear apocalypse. In many respects, when read in the regional context of California, these references to 'neutron bombs' and nihilist apocalyptic scenarios fail to grasp, perhaps, the formal and political complexity of *Zuma*. Divola's sequence strongly resembles the effects of more specific cyclical, natural disasters of California: flood, fire, or earthquake – three types of natural disasters that frequent the state.

In an essay, 'Quiet Days in Malibu', Joan Didion remembers visiting Zuma Beach after an incendiary fire along the hills of Malibu in 1978 – the same year that Divola began his project there. Didion recalls how the fire raced at 100 miles per hour and temperatures reached up to 2500 degrees Fahrenheit. Propelled by seasonal Santa Ana winds (the same wind that Raymond Chandler claimed caused your nerves to jump and skin to itch, a wind that makes 'meek





**Fig. 17.** John Divola, *Vandalism* (1973–75) photograph 20 × 16 on gelatin silver paper, courtesy of the artist.

little wives feel the edge of the carving knife and study their husbands' necks')<sup>52</sup> the fire, in Didion's account, was so catastrophic that 'horses caught fire and were shot on the beach, birds exploded in the air. Houses did not explode but imploded, as in a nuclear strike'.<sup>53</sup> By the time the fire had terminated at the water's edge, 197 houses had vanished into ash.<sup>54</sup> It is the particular incendiary image of urban form and fire, to quote the words of Didion, that serves as 'Los Angeles' deepest image of itself'.<sup>55</sup> Written in the midst and aftermath of the Watts riots, Didion remembers viewing Los Angeles from the city's Harbour Freeway, looking down on a metropolis engulfed in flames and covered in smoke. 'Los Angeles weather', Didion was inclined to claim, 'is the weather of catastrophe, of apocalypse'.<sup>56</sup>

What is distinctive about such catastrophic images of Los Angeles rushing 'house-first' towards apocalypse is not simply the image of disaster, per se, but rather, as Mike Davis remarks in *Ecology of Fear*, the unique incendiary mixture of the city's catastrophic imaginary with its social and urban contradictions. The best example of this 'incendiary mixture' of catastrophic forces comes from noir author Ross MacDonal's observation in *The Moving Target* (1949) that the smog in California was in fact a product of the slow burning of money.

Recall, too, Bas Jan Ader's night-time walk through the streets of Los Angeles for the series *In Search of the Miraculous (One Night in Los Angeles)* (1973). Ader began his walk at dusk, along the side of a highway in the Hollywood Hills, and ended it at dawn, on the edge of the Pacific Ocean. Accompanying the photographs of his performance, Ader inscribed the lyrics from the

52. Raymond Chandler, 'Red Wind,' (1938) [http://www.ae-lib.org.ua/texts-c/chandler\\_red\\_wind\\_\\_en.htm](http://www.ae-lib.org.ua/texts-c/chandler_red_wind__en.htm) (accessed 15 October 2018).

53. Joan Didion, 'Quiet Days in Malibu', *The White Album* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), p. 223.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 223.

55. Joan Didion, 'Los Angeles Notebook', *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, (New York: Noonday Press, 1990), p. 220.

56. And yet, as some critics have shown in relation to Watts, Didion's fire in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* is placed at a distance from the street-level activity. Didion's description of social conflict, to quote Norman M. Klein, is 'roped off, like a museum display, or like ashes blown from the fire'. See: Norman M. Klein, 'Inside the Consumer-Built City: Sixty Years of Apocalyptic Imagery,' in *Helter Skelter: LA Art in the 1990s* (Los Angeles: L.A. Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992), p. 29.



Fig. 18. John Divola, *Zuma* (1977–78) photograph 24 × 30 on rag paper, courtesy of the artist.

57. Thomas Crow, 'The Art of the Fugitive in 1970s Los Angeles: Runaway Self-Consciousness', in *Under The Big Black Sun* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2011), p. 46.

58. Crow, 'The Art of the Fugitive in 1970s Los Angeles: Runaway Self-Consciousness', p. 47.

59. This heady mix of urban apocalypse with ecological devastation is continued by novelist John Rechy, who, in his 1984 novel *Numbers*, describes the urban apocalypse as one of smog that enshrouding the city as an post-apocalyptic. See: John Rechy, *Numbers* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), p. 19.

Coasters' 1957 song 'Searchin' in white cursive – a song that, as art historian Thomas Crow notes, shares humorous references to B-movies and pulp fiction of the region.<sup>57</sup> Ader's romantic journey from the Hollywood Hills to the Pacific Ocean in *One Night in Los Angeles*, as Crow posits, brings to mind not only the 'crepuscular cinematography' that typified Los Angeles noir, but also the serio-comic underside of the hard-boiled style mobilised through the Coasters' lyrics. Against this image of impending dissolution, Crow writes suggestively on Ader's work that Los Angeles artists from this period sought to develop an alliance with other pockets of creative life, such as popular music, so as to navigate the inhospitable distances of the California landscape.<sup>58</sup> In the case of Ader, it was the Coasters' doo-wop lyrics, for an artist such as Divola, it was the region's B-movies.

This image of the subject mingling with ash (or smog) seems an apt place to end this essay.<sup>59</sup> For it is at Zuma beach, one extreme of Los Angeles, that Divola charts the gradual incineration of the interior at moments of twilight. In the series, the emphasis on twilight is not coincidental. 'Twilight', as Andreas Huyssen has written, 'is that moment in the day that foreshadows the night of





Fig. 19. John Divola, *Zuma* (1977–78) photograph 24 × 30 on rag paper, courtesy of the artist.

forgetting, but that seems to slow time itself, an in-between state in which the last light of the day may still play out its ultimate marvels. It is memory's privileged time.<sup>60</sup> In *Zuma*, the shifting particulars of twilight are counterposed to the more concrete particulars of Malibu beach, which are counterposed to another extreme of Los Angeles: the desert (a central motif in Divola's *MGM Lot* and Divola's *Vandalism* series). These two extremes – the beach and the desert – I want to argue, function like the atmosphere of twilight: as two sites for speculative fiction, two sites dialectically related to one another. In the literature on Los Angeles, the beach and the desert are held as two speculative terrains of the region.<sup>61</sup>

When looking at the sea in *Zuma* it might be possible to shut out the desert and just peer at the beach's expansive horizon, but, in fact, it is more the case that we come to terms with the fact that the desert is ever present, always on the other side of this idyllic image of Southern California. 'Facing the ocean', Carey McWilliams writes in *Southern California County*, 'Southern California is inclined to forget the desert, but the desert is always there and it haunts the imagination of the region'.<sup>62</sup> Following McWilliams, one could say that the

60. On the 'twilight' qualities of memory, see: Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 3.

61. Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 38.

62. Carey McWilliams, *Southern California County: An Island on the Land*. (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1973), p. 200.

63. Pynchon, *Inherent Vice*, p. 6

64. McWilliams, *Southern California County*, p. 8.

65. A Terra Foundation Summer Travel Grant was invaluable in the early days of research. In addition, many friends and colleagues were helpful in the writing of this essay, including: Larne Abse Gogarty, Marta Burnay, Nathan Crompton, Thomas Crow, John Divola, Sam Dolbear, Steve Edwards, Briony Fer, Graeme Fisher, Alexandra Fraser, Sarah James, Teresa Kittler, Léa Kuhn, Byron Peters, Sarah Pettitt, Hannah Proctor, John David Rhodes, Stephanie Schwartz, Olivia Tait, and Daniela Tanner-Hernandez.

desert is always lurking on the horizon, or, like in the photographer's first series, *Vandalism*, we catch a glimpse of a desert landscape through a small aperture in one of his abandoned buildings' window. The beach and the desert, then, two extremes of the region, are pictured as two psychically charged terrains: two sites of occupation for the subject and psyche. Thomas Pynchon says it best in *Inherent Vice* where he describes the landscape as situated on the edge of twilight's sublimity, 'as if the contrast knob of Creation had been messed with just enough to give everything an underglow, a luminous edge, and promise that the night was about to turn epic somehow' (Fig. 19).<sup>63</sup>

In Divola's *Zuma* the beachfront property appears to move and float, suspended between a shifting ocean and an unreal horizon. In the series, form appears to undo itself at that very point where the structuring threshold of the Western frontier is meant to be located. Carey McWilliams has remarked how the early fiction of the region imagined the city in this anchorless vein: 'it is the sky that is solid and real and that land that seems to float'.<sup>64</sup> Again, the paradoxes of the region are at play: on land, you feel as though you are far away – like at sea. It is from these fugitive scenes that Los Angeles confronts itself at the extremes of meaning. Viewing the end sequence in *Zuma*, then, nothing remains but charred interiors as the Los Angeles sunset slowly fades into a darkened and obscure background.<sup>65</sup>