

CONSTRUCTED REALITIES

Eleven Minus One

By Amir Zaki

The Green of This Notebook

By John Divola

LA><ART

Los Angeles

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At LA><ART, two Los Angeles artists, John Divola and Amir Zaki, created projects that took as their point of departure the works of others. Divola based his series of photographs and accompanying book on Jean-Paul Sartre's classic existentialist work, *Being and Nothingness* (1943). In his artist statement Divola stresses his goal is not to illustrate the text, but to comment on the indexical nature of photography:

For me as an artist using photography this relationship between the specific (indexical) nature of an individual photograph and its abstract reception as an image is central to my interest in the medium. I make photographic imprints from specific circumstances and I hope to bring these images into a dialogue with abstract notions of iconography, social history, and individual expectations.¹

Zaki, like Divola, pushes to expand the boundaries of traditional photographic practice. He “question[s] the conventions and limitations of photography by exploring depictions of ‘real’ space, but without the restraints of actual physics or forces such as gravity.”²

Zaki's practice has been invested in using digital technologies to subtly augment reality. In this project he does not use a camera to isolate and frame the world around him, but instead to generate objects and place them in interior locations using 3D modeling software. “Eleven Minus One” includes a book and a series of ten short, looping videos based on a suite of photographs made in the 1980s by the artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss, who are best known for their video *The Way Things Go* (1987). Zaki bases his work on Fischli and Weiss's “Equilibres,” a series of photographs and a book (2007) in which household objects were used to create Rube Goldberg-like sculptures that were photographed while perfectly balanced, just before collapsing. Zaki is interested in visualizing these objects in all dimensions. The resulting work (stills, videos, and a book) displays mesmerizing studies of the impossible.

At LA><ART Zaki's ten videos were presented on modestly sized flat screens positioned toward the back of a small black room. A copy of the book sits on a metal table near the entrance. The formal presentation of the videos was not quite symmetrical, with three



on the left wall, five in the middle, and two on the right (eleven minus one). In one video (a 42-second loop), five high heel shoes are intertwined. The heel of one shoe is inserted inside the toe of another, creating a three-dimensional pentagon. This construction of linked shoes propels itself forward, the toe of each shoe hitting the ground in turn. It culminates in a fast rotation, like a dancer's final twirl. The viewpoint pans and hovers above the shoes as they indulge in their spot-lit dance.

In another, a carrot, a zucchini, and a vegetable grater are viewed from the side as well as from above as the three objects spin. In some animations, Zaki builds in shadows, while in others he allows the objects to float in ambiguous space. The remarkable thing about these works is that they are completely fabricated. The objects, textures, lighting, and movement are pure speculation based on Zaki's interpretation of the original photographs by Fischli and Weiss.

Zaki's prior digital manipulations have always been carefully crafted to mimic the forms and textures of the observable world. Yet upon close examination, the impossibilities of these scenarios are often revealed. In earlier works he reconfigured buildings, added signage, and tweaked nature in order to create photographic works that captured some aspect of the southern California landscape, while purposefully reaching beyond the bounds of possibility. The tension between what *is* and what is *imagined* imbues his work with mystery and mastery. Zaki's new work follows this methodology in that it carefully conjures something out of nothing, yet is a drastic departure because the referents are Fischli and Weiss' photographs rather than the California landscape. Moreover, Zaki invents the entire scenario using 3D modeling software rather than making a photograph of the real world.

Zaki's artist statement asserts his interest in “the perversion of using Fischli and Weiss photographs of quickly made, throw-away sculptures as a source to create an incredibly laborious photorealistic virtual 3D scene that can be explored from all angles, both through photographic and orthographic projections.”³ While Zaki's project goes beyond the task of recreation, what, if anything, does it add to the appropriationist's dialogue with digital technologies? The relationship between photography and sculpture has always been a complex one, as the photograph flattens space, changes scale, and

Above

Still from *Eleven Minus One* (2010) by Amir Zaki

records the moment after the fact. In their work, Fischli and Weiss constructed ad hoc sculptures casually photographed before they fell apart. Their images presented only one perspective, whereas Zaki depicts a rotating object from all angles. In addition to imagining how they move in time and space, Zaki exports photographs of the objects from all sides and creates an elaborate foldout book whose pages readers can assemble into cubes in order to view each of the ten objects from all possible vantage points. The project's title, "Eleven Minus One," succinctly encapsulates that the ten objects can be seen eleven different ways.

Where Zaki imagines, Divola alludes. Like that of Zaki, Divola's work over the years has been concerned with the California landscape, including photographs of houses in the desert, street expanses, mini-malls, and abandoned structures on Zuma Beach. Divola has shown no inhibitions about altering the scene or even inserting himself into the picture, as he did in the series "As Far As I Could Get" (1996–97), in which he photographed himself running away from the camera. While Zaki plays with the power of invention, Divola pushes the limits of interpreting what is seen and implied. Being driven to explore the bounds of interpretation, Divola uses Sartre's book about this very subject as a point of departure.

In the 1940s, Sartre sat in Parisian cafés and contemplated existence. While observing his surroundings and their impact on his consciousness, he penned *Being and Nothingness*. In the 1990s in Southern California, Divola created a body of work (which includes a new book published by Nazraeli Press in 2010), by photographing pages of Sartre's text and highlighting passages that reference visual experience; he then juxtaposed each passage with his own photographic interpretation. The title of the series, "The Green of this Notebook," takes its name from one such text-image juxtaposition. The right half of the image shows a closed green notebook resting on a table. There is no pen or pencil but one assumes the notebook will be, or has been, written in. The left half of the image displays a photograph of an entire page from Sartre's book accented by a small passage of highlighted text: "One will admit that I apprehend only the green of this notebook . . ." By concretely referencing this highlighted passage, the photograph of the notebook limits the viewer's ability to imagine anything, which was infinite while reading. The photograph depicts a specific green that is forever planted in our memory. Sartre's text also extends beyond the highlighted portion, just as the world extends beyond the frame of the image. It continues, ". . . of this foliage and never the sensation of green nor even the 'quasi-green' [that] Husserl posits as the hyletic material which the intention animates into green-as-object." Sartre proceeds to question the relationship between sense and sensation. Divola is insistent that while photographs, as inanimate objects, do not possess senses, sensations, thoughts, or feelings, they constitute referents and memories that point toward those human traits. By fusing Sartre's texts with photographic images, he references that which exists beyond both.

In another passage Sartre states, "My shirt rubs against my skin, and I feel it." This is coupled with a black-and-white image of a man's hand resting on the side of his open shirt. Divola elaborates on his images as being expressive in a manner more poetic than

analytical; an assumed difference between writing and photography. Is photography more poetic than the written word? Divola is interested in the relationships between what is stated and imagined, what is specific and abstract, and uses Sartre's text to highlight this argument. This is an investigation into the complex and often slippery relationship between words and pictures.

Like *Being and Nothingness*, both artists' projects hinge on questions of possibility and its limits. Zaki's animations are precariously balanced, constantly spinning and tottering, yet never falling over. They are caught between possibility and impossibility, the suggestion of an end that never comes as they continuously loop. Moreover, due to the process of 3D animation and the somewhat generic quality of the objects, they are not anchored in reality or specificity; they seem forever mutable. Divola, on the other hand, is firmly anchored in the specific, almost so heavily that a viewer might miss his point. While the common mistake would be to see his photos as illustrations of the text, the text in fact becomes a mirror of the photographic process. While both text and image are definitive, the relationship paradoxically foregrounds the arbitrariness of each.

The coupling of Zaki and Divola, like the coupling of Divola and Sartre or Zaki and Fischli and Weiss, was not arbitrary. The relationship between the two artists is both formal and academic. While they are now colleagues at the University of California Riverside, Zaki was once a student there and studied with Divola. Both are committed to a photographic practice that pushes the conceptual as well as material limits of the medium. What linked them at LA><ART was the fact that books are integral aspects of both their projects. Divola's images are framed diptychs (essentially page spreads), evenly spaced on the wall. On the left of each is a scan of the book page, on the right a photographic image; the two are separated by a band of gray that slowly darkens as one moves from left to right, from the first to the last image. This device disappears in the printed book where Sartre's pages are tipped in, a practice usually reserved for photographs. Divola is consciously inverting this relationship between text and image. The book's first page reproduces the frontispiece from Sartre's book; Divola's name and the title appear only on the cloth cover. This is no ordinary book of photography but clearly an artist's book, one that is alluding to the original and also building upon it. Although Divola's book follows a traditional format, it plays with content. In contrast, Zaki's book is, in essence, a straight picture book, but one that unfolds to become a sculpture. Divola and Zaki are thoughtful artists who not only make evocative images, but also invest their practices with historical, philosophical, and conceptual references.

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NOTES 1. Quotation from the artist's statement for the exhibition "The Green of This Notebook." 2. Quotation from the curatorial statement for the exhibition "Eleven Minus One." 3. Quotation from the artist's statement for the exhibition "Eleven Minus One."