

exposure 19:1



# John Divola: Facts of the Imagination

Mark Johnstone

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In 1974 John Divola started his *Vandalism* series, a body of black and white electronically flashed photographs of the interiors of abandoned houses—houses which in some cases he entered illegally. These images are of spray paint markings which Divola made on the interior surfaces (floors, walls, ceilings). The marks vacillate between arbitrary graffiti and systematic conceptual gestures. They function simultaneously as the flat surface of the photographic print, and as planes existing within the rendered space of the image. They have a quality of ‘floating’ while in actuality existing within a dimensional space. They question perceptual concepts of reality, and the rendering abilities of the photographic medium. Formally, they entertain questions of space, structure, and the nature of the rendered marks within the photographically produced image. As the spray paint vandalizes the houses, the photographs ‘vandalize’ a tradition of straight photography by having the photographer actively participate and change the landscape that he photographs. When painting an entered space, Divola refers to media outside of photography (performance, painting, and sculpture). Although his act of painting may express an idea developed in and of itself, Divola chose to place the painting in the context of a straight photograph. This makes the painting a means toward a further expressive end, not a phenomenon to be considered only on its own terms. The acts of painted ‘vandalism’ might also raise moral or legal questions, but their primary value remains in signifying Divola’s involvement with the place he chose to photograph.

Divola sought these spaces out as a neutral ground. By returning to the same place several times, or similar places over an extended period of time, he effectively mapped out the various forms his images could take.

Walker Percy, in an essay entitled “The Symbolic Structure of Interpersonal Process”<sup>1</sup> speaks of the psychiatrist in a dual role with his patient as both participant and observer. Divola is in an analogous position, engaging in the playful vandalism and acting as midwife, delivering the potential of the place as image. He has described the act of marking as a spontaneous interaction which is then re-explored through the camera.<sup>2</sup> He moved through various visual experiments in the black and white vandalism photographs—spray paintings of dotted grids, chaotic writhing fields of short curved strokes, objects frozen and floating (tossed into a scene and flashed). As the series progressed compositional changes also occurred such as the gradual combining of the exterior view seen through a window, with that of the interior.

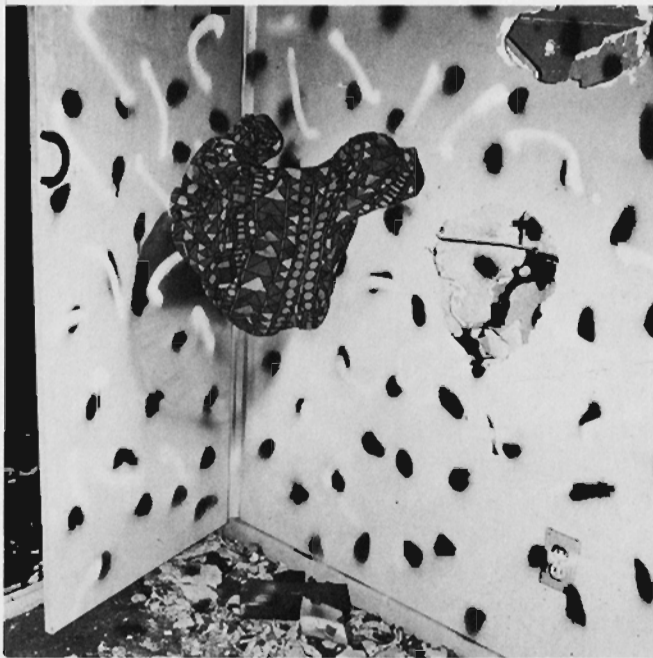
The hybridization of photography and painting has many times enlarged and expanded variables indigenous to one medium or another. Like any other photographer, Divola operates within the limitations and abilities of his equipment. There is a certain kind of displacement of the world by imaging it through a camera, one that is judged after exposure. By spray painting Divola reworked the image prior to exposure, and created before the photographic fact. He used paint, and painted patterns, to directly engage what had been previously left to interpretive characteristics of the equipment. He knows that the houses will probably be destroyed and that his photographs will be the only surviving records of his painting. This eliminates any constraints as a painter and he has been able to redefine this role as a photographer. He has not systematized a direct representation of ideas through painting, but has made a space which reflects a sense of physicality, a sense of the force and change which takes place. Not only is



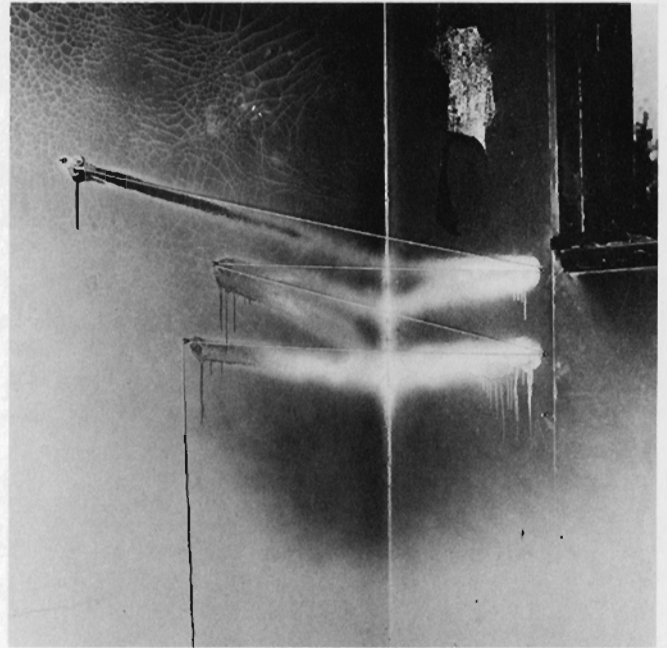
*While most documentary photographs simply subtract information from a scene, Divola adds to it before that subtraction takes place.*

there an interplay of surface (content) and paint (decoration), but the landscape is treated as an extended space through the painting, and as a flat space through the photographing. What remains problematic for the viewer is a question of what has been added by means of paint, and what has been subtracted by means of photography.<sup>3</sup>

While most documentary photographs simply subtract information from a scene, Divola adds to it before that subtraction takes place. It is thus documentation of a sort, but with special attention directed to formal properties. It is essentially urban wall painting—graffiti—that Divola draws upon, whether entirely self-generated or unintentionally derived from a secondary source. Historically, such activity has hardly ever employed perspective. Graffiti has been focused, rather, on layering and the compositional positioning of elements in a flat field, with special emphasis on the



**John Divola, From *Vandalism* series #2, 1974**



**John Divola, From *Vandalism* series #13, 1974**

content of the message. In Divola's pictures definitive content is missing, suggesting a kind of formalism at play. But as graffiti is the 'scratching out' of a figure or design, so Divola's markings operate through interaction with the physical characteristics, especially the perspective, of the place. The markings serve to contrast and play against the dimensional space, thus subverting and causing visual reassessment of the image by the viewer. By means of this ambiguity, playing against perspective as it is rendered by the medium, Divola has worked between formally rendering the scene, and documenting his own 'vandalism'.

Much of the graffiti suggest clandestine activities produced under a hood of darkness, or at least relative solitude. The *Vandalism* photographs are primarily flash images and as such exist in an indeterminate time. As this technique became limiting, Divola sought new activities and maneuvers within the images. As the phenomena occurring in these photographs multiplied and

became more complex, this particular set of photographs came to a close. The strategy most prominent in the concluding images is that of the interplay between marks Divola had made in the building, and the exterior as it could be seen through a window.

Divola's next body of work, by comparison, seems stiffly academic in nature. *Forced Entry* done during 1975-76, is a group of photographs which document the manner of break-in performed in a neighborhood of condemned and abandoned houses near the Los Angeles airport. Several distinctions between this group of images and the previous vandalism series are significant. Divola did not perform any of the acts he photographed, rather he photographed the territory and territorial markings of others; previously he had marked and established and worked within what became his own space. The playful aspect is not visually apparent in the *Forced Entry* pictures. Although he found it to be a

kind of game between the vandalizers and those who boarded up the houses or policed the area, he remained an observer rather than a participant. At the same time the acts photographed are much more violent in nature than any of the previous vandalism which Divola himself performed. Doors have been kicked in, windows wrenched open. Also, the images were all made during the daytime, many with existing light. The photographs are presented as combined pairs, one exterior view of an entry, the other an interior view of the same entry. The focus of the piece is initially the entry itself, its form and suggestive nature ('violent'). Then the interplay of elements within each image separately (patterns of light and shadow, forms) may be examined, and as a result of this, a reconciliation of content is established between the photographs. The *Forced Entry* images are operative pairs in which much of the significance exists as that between the photographs, rather than in the



John Divola, From *Forced Entry* series, Los Angeles, 1976

*They are formal investigations not only of the painting, or the physicality of an altered space, but of the public consideration of private actions.*

notation of either experience separately (the witnessing of the interior or the exterior side of the break-in). We experience an elusive emotive quality of entering a forbidden space in order to view and experience more completely this particular action. At the same time the two photographs provide us with much more information than a staid view concentrated in one image.

The *Vandalism* and *Forced Entry* series explore basic tenets of the medium. But besides being a consideration of qualities directly ascribed to the medium, they establish Divola's fascination with what is being photographed, as subject.<sup>4</sup> They are formal investigations not only of the painting, or the physicality of an altered space, but of the public consideration of private actions. The circumstances surrounding break-ins and spray painting established the context by which his imagination could manifest itself as a reality. But the exterior view needed an equally dramatic and meaningful reality. A reality which would act as counterpart to complement and contrast with Divola's painting.<sup>5</sup>

Divola's next body of work is the *Zuma* series, initiated in 1977 and concluded in early 1978. This work embodies characteristics of the previous work, yet introduces new elements sufficient to carry this imagery to a point far beyond that of the others. The *Zuma* photographs are in color, as are his spray paintings, and characteristically employ a wider view, achieved through either stepping back or using a lens accepting a wider view. A second distinction is that all the photographs were made within the arena of the same place, an abandoned beach house previously used by lifeguards. Third, a direct focus of the images is the interplay between the interior view and that of the exterior, either through the windows, or doorways, or the destruction of a wall.

Initially what strikes us is the naive, primitive freshness of the color. Color is a carefully added overlay—bold and garish. Divola has become, for a moment, an action painter manipulating the space of the image through the colors he uses.<sup>6</sup> He might coyly stripe a

wall, or boldly color in the sunbeam of light thrown by a broken window on a wall. Fire fighters had used this house as a practice site for training exercises. Thus the building was sporadically burned and reburned over a long period of time. In its successive stages of being burned the charred wood and walls provide a rich chiaroscuro for counterpoint. As the walls were burned Divola's marks were erased in a random, irregular way, allowing a change in the markings as the space was physically altered.

Observing the burning over a period of weeks, we are moved towards a visual climax which never occurs—the total disappearance of the house.

Divola had previously worked within the enclosed confines of a given kind of space. Those early black and white *Vandalism* photographs exemplified classical attitudes of picture taking, the images appearing as consciously made documents. The activities of the marking and recording processes are separated through strategies of framing. One considers the physical elements, what has been manipulated, and its relation to the imaging capabilities of the medium (perspective, format, tonal rendition, framed field). The *Zuma* photographs are opened up through the inclusion of what is past the confines of the interior walls, and the introduction of color variation. Lush colored clouds move across the sky at water's edge as the ocean and sky are introduced as elements within a new kind of spatial experience.<sup>7</sup>

Suddenly we find our gaze alternating between the familiar limits of a house, and that of a receding, indeterminate space. Surfaces and spatial depth are strangely intertwined in the experience of the photographs. Developmentally we are provided with a sense of the change that takes place in the opening up of the building through fire, its near disintegration, providing us with a sense of movement absent in the previous series. Divola becomes the coordinator of colored forms in a constantly shifting field of visual data. Rather than the specific acts he performs in this space, our interest lies in his way of perceiving it. The spray painted marks shift from a primary use, signifying 'vandalism,' to



becoming the residue of Divola's performance, a part within the photographic whole. The photographs are not only about the repetitive patterns he paints and images, nor only about his physical interaction with the place. The pictures frame the formal qualities of his marks and the place, and also suggest a physical and psychic experience. They are about the temporal patterns which may surface out of working with a subject, or a place, or an attitude, over a period of time. In this way the coloration and markings become about the changes in Divola's perceptions, without particularly signifying a linear sense of time.

This imagery is more expressive than the *Vandalism* series, and can be considered as a comparison between the space of the interior (painted, man-made shelter) and the space of the exterior (both constant and inconstant, malleable only through how we choose to look at it). The emotive qualities developed in the interior space are played against those of the exterior. The inclusion of what goes on and exists outside the house is the means by which the house may be understood.

The two rhythms which seek a visual reconciliation in the photographs exist in several states. First there is the house. It exists as a haven, a shelter on the edge of the ocean, a space in and of itself. Simultaneously it exists as a man-made space within a world space, separate from and counter to that world space. As its walls become wild, magical colorations which may angle in a crazy, confusing fashion, the ocean outside becomes a shelter simply as something most viewers know about, and in this sense is ordered. We 'know' what to expect visually from the ocean. It is predictable as a kind of constant, yet continually varies within that constancy, existing as a duality. The chronicle of the house as it is burned out and slowly destroyed is played in counterpoint to the opulence of spectacular sunsets and sunrises, as seen through the windows and doorways. Ironically, the disorder of the acts of burning (collapsed structures, charred irregular forms) serves to introduce more variety and complexity than Divola could hope to create with his painting on the walls. The presence of the

burned forms overshadows anything which could be considered purely surface intrigues. The irregular destruction becomes more bizarre and strange than any of Divola's markings. The markings accent the agony of the changing—almost dying—house.<sup>6</sup> As Divola interacted with the house it became the fabricated image (a created metaphor) while the outside remained the 'real' image. Considered a bit differently, perhaps the photograph represents the fabricated image, and the piece of paper in front of our eyes the real image? The game of illusion and reality is set, not only within the photographs, but between ourselves as viewers and the photographs. Our own perceptive abilities are challenged and sharpened as we encounter the increasingly complex elements delivered by the swift, easy action of the camera.

Consideration of the beach house, the building itself, inevitably involves an examination of the metaphorical content of the images. This distinguishes the work from the earlier black and white photographs where the emphasis of the images lay in the formal concerns of the photographic image. In the *Zuma* series there is no preoccupation with mechanical virtuosity, medium referents, or means of connection (structural, sculptural, or conceptual) outside the picture. If Divola has formulated a private code it is buried within the transactional experience of photographing the beach house. What becomes interesting is the consideration of the photographs as the transcription of experience, and the setting of it at a distance for contemplation. Not only do the pictures exist as a measured value for Divola, but also for the viewer, who may return to the images and rediscover new meanings in what had been previously seen in a different way.

And what is more, the imagination, by virtue of its freshness and its own peculiar activity, can make what is familiar into what is strange. With a single poetic detail, the imagination confronts us with a new world. From then on, the detail takes precedence over the panorama, and a simple image, if it is new, will open up an entire world.

Gaston Bachelard<sup>9</sup>

*We are magically offered different realities in the same space, encountering opportunities to see, to perceive, and to discover.*



**John Divola, From *Zuma* series #29, 1978 (original in color)**

One of Divola's photographs in the series summarizes the directional thrust of the body of work as the experience, and as what can be imagined. The photographer has moved to the doorway, the gist of the image existing outside the boundaries of the house. A post a few feet away on a porch is all that interrupts a landscape of water, bluish in the haze of a foggy mist. The post is yellowish a little less than half the way up, depicted at a level so that the coloration is visually even with the water in the landscape. A rod, alternately striped with light colored bands, has been leaned up against the post. Broken glass litters the doorway and trails up the base of the post. This image resolves the activity and concept of the painting, the dance with the

ocean, and the exploration in the broken house. The garish, brutal coloration is almost nonexistent, the evidence of any violent actions reduced to a minimum. We have seen the images as a horizontal, or more linear experience of information, an exploration of the variously active, visual elements. Now we may also fully perceive them as a layered, vertical awareness, a celebration of the imagination mutely held high to the rich, slightly changing, ever present existence of the most natural of earthly elements, the ocean. Thus exists the balance between the representative and symbolic components of the photographs.<sup>10</sup>

The house, a rigid form, a secretive box whose inner activities we are witness to, is an interface of corners

and complex markings. We imagine the house, an inflexible shell, to grow and become a picturesque showcase which then rapidly deteriorates. The immense ocean somberly pulses under a flowing sky, together they are always there, but always a little bit different. The spray painting could exist as a kind of adjective to the noun of the rooms, the coloration a value which almost becomes imaginary in its ultra-beauty. A coloring which almost obscures any opportunity to meditate upon certain images, yet in others recedes into the blackness of a dark, deep, space. We are offered visions of what we may be unable to see; we become guests to our own imaginations. We are magically offered different realities in the same place, encountering opportunities to see, to perceive, and to discover. A tension which is both imagined and real between the two realities, that of the house and that of the space outside it, is their reason for existence. These "facts of the imagination" exist in a "magic mode of identification".<sup>11</sup> As viewers, our knowledge of imagery functions to transcribe the continuum of the experience into something magical and mystical. Inextricably bound in the photographs are the mechanics and the imaginative powers of the interactive experience.

#### Notes

1. Walker Percy, "The Symbolic Structure of Interpersonal Process", in *The Message in the Bottle*, (New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977), pp. 189-214.

2. John Divola interviewed by Mark Johnstone (Venice, California), October 1978, "When I think of my photographs, I think of them as being involved with three elements: 1) Myself, my personality and my disposition at that particular place and time; 2) the nature of the medium and the way it translates information; 3) the nature of the place and the nature of the situation. And so all three of those elements interact—myself, the nature of the medium, and the nature of the situation and place. And that interaction is manifested out as a photograph. So I don't feel like I have total control, but that all those elements exert themselves and that I am simply directing, in a certain sense, that interlay of elements." From Dinah Portner, "Dialog with John Divola," *LACPS Newsletter*, 4:9 (September 1978), page 1.

3. In photography, John Pfahl differs in the nature of his manipulations. (see *Afterimage* 6:7 pp. 10-13) The difference exists in the nature of the directive which is placed in the landscape. By using Polaroid tests, Pfahl knows how his image will look, whereas Divola is dependent on the discovery and generation of values through his involvement with the place, and then in his contact sheets and consequent prints. As Divola has pushed perception in photography, similar motifs have appeared in painting. Cynthia Carlson's recent work is done on gallery walls, and effects a change of the space by means of patterned paint. Similar in conception, but not appearance, is the work of Lynton Wells. "Reality" as it is reported through the photograph is effectively confused and reinterpreted by his painting on photo sensitized linen. Wells plays the expressiveness of his painting against the impersonality of the photographic record, an awareness, it could be argued, opposite that of Divola.

4. Divola has expressed admiration for the work of Frederick Sommer and Walker Evans. But a consideration of the work of Vito Acconci and Lucas Samaras seems more relevant. Samaras, in *Photo-Transformations* (New York, E.P. Dutton & Co., 1975) overly manipulates the surface of a Polaroid print to effect the underlying structure of the image. Consequently a kind of sign relationship is developed between his personality and the look effected in his manipulations. Acconci's work is entirely self-dependent. There is private interplay, training, and an ongoing developed perceptual awareness crucial to the creation of a piece or performance. He too is in many cases making public certain private acts, but of a different nature than Divola.

5. "the characteristic of the strong image is that it derives from the spontaneous association of two very distant realities whose relationship is grasped solely by the mind" . . . "if the senses completely approve an image, they kill it in the mind." Pierre Reverdy, "Le Gând de Crin" quoted in *From Baudelaire to Surrealism*, Marcel Raymond, (New York, Wittenborn, Schultz, Inc., 1950) p. 288 (*Documents of Modern Art*, Volume 10).

6. Divola has stated that the two dimensional reproduction of art events, or art objects, is more interesting to him than experiencing the original.

7. Portner, *op. cit.*, page 3 "I'd always wished I had a building with the ocean outside the window, and I ended up going out to the desert because that was the closest place I could find that would have a similar type of space outside the window to work with."

8. Divola clarifies this by describing it as the linear type of change which takes place in the house, versus the cyclical change which is occurring outside. As he says, "When the house is gone, I am too."

9. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, (Boston, Beacon Press, 1969), p. 134. Hugh Dalziel Duncan in *Symbols in Society* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1968) says: "Interpretation of forces 'beyond' symbols might still be interpretations of symbols. Thus, even though we 'know' the manifest content of the dream is not its



'real' meaning, we must show how the 'real' meaning can be reached through symbols which are 'manifest' to us." (page 50).

10. "Such images as these must be taken, at the least, in their existence as a *reality of expression*. For they owe their entire being to poetic expression, and this being would be diminished if we tried to refer them to a reality, even to a psychological reality. Indeed, they dominate psychology and correspond to no psychological impulse, save the simple need for self expression, in one of those leisurely moments when we listen to everything in nature that is unable to speak." Bachelard, *op. cit.*, pp. 177-178.

11. "These are the *facts of the imagination*, the very positive facts of the imaginary world." Bachelard, *op. cit.*, page 116. "But the quasi identification events of symbolic behavior can be grasped only by a qualitative phenomenology. This qualitative scale must take account not only of true-or-false-or-nonsense statements (water is cold, water is dry, water is upside down), but also of various modes of magic identification." Percy, *op. cit.*, page 209.

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