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# Indexes of Engagement: A Q&A with Divola

BY TAYLOR DAFOE | MAY 16, 2017



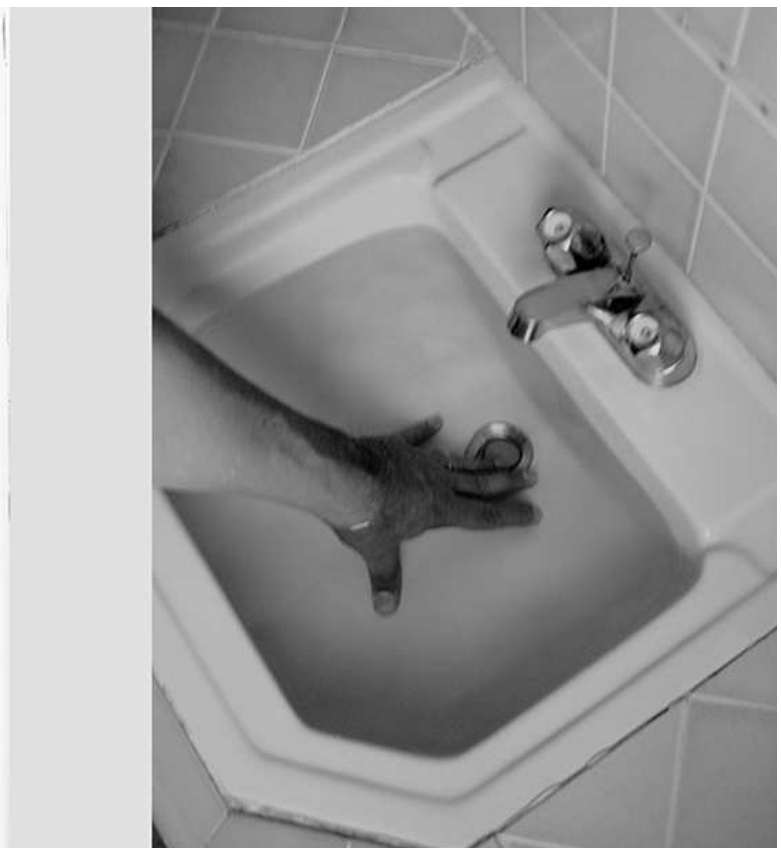
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## BEING AND NOTHINGNESS

two worlds; under no circumstances could it be a table of correlation between the subjective and the objective.

Why indeed should we use the term "subjectivity" for the ensemble of luminous or heavy or odorous objects such as they appeared to me in this laboratory at Paris on a day in February, etc. And if despite all we are to consider this ensemble as subjective, then why should we recognize objectivity in the system of objects which were revealed simultaneously to the experimenter, in this laboratory, this same day in February? We do not have two weights or two measures here; we do not encounter anywhere anything which is given as purely felt, as experienced for me without objectivation. Here as always I am conscious of the world, and on the ground of the world I am conscious of certain transcendent objects. As always I surpass what is revealed to me toward the possibility which I have to be—for example, toward that of replying correctly to the experimenter and of enabling the experiment to succeed. Of course these comparisons can give certain objective results: for example, I can establish that the warm water appears cold to me when I put my hand in it after having first plunged my hand in hot water. But this establishment which we pompously call "the law of relativity of sensations" has nothing to do with sensations. Actually we are dealing with a quality of the object which is revealed to me: the warm water is cold when I submerge my heated hand in it. A comparison of this objective quality of the water to equally objective information which the thermometer gives me simply reveals to me a contradiction. This contradiction motivates on my part a free choice of true objectivity. I shall give the name subjectivity to the objectivity which I have not chosen. As for the reasons for the "relativity of sensations," a further examination will reveal them to me in certain objective, synthetic structures which I shall call forms (Gestalt). The Müller-Lyers illusion, the relativity of the senses, etc., are so many names given to objective laws concerning the structures of these forms. These laws teach us nothing about appearances, but they concern synthetic structures. I intervene here only to the extent that my upsurge into the world gives birth to this putting into relation of objects with each other. As such they are revealed as forms. Scientific objectivity consists in considering the structures separately by isolating them from the whole; it appears in the application of these laws. But in no case do we get out of the existing world. In the same way we might show that what is called the "threshold of sensation" or the specificity of the senses is referred back to pure determinations of objects as such.

Yet some have claimed that this objective relation of the stimulant to the sense organ and a relation of the objective (stimulant-sense organ) to the subjective (pure sensation) and that this subjective is defined by the action exercised on us by the stimulant through the intermediary of the sense organ. The sense organ appears to us to be



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Unlike many photographers, John Divola is not a passive observer of the world. Over the course of his 40-year career, he consistently used the camera as an agent of engagement, especially in places forgotten or deserted by others. For him, the existential, in a way—it's as if he is trying to reconcile his reality with the one abstracted from others' own accounts.

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ARTISTS

John Divola (</artist/359791/overview>)

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This is evident in two of the artist's series currently on view in New York. For example, "The Green of the Notebook," up at MACYS through July 28, engages with Jean-Paul Sartre's late existentialist discourse, "Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology." In it, Divola pairs sections of Sartre's text describing specific phenomenological experiences with his photographic interpretations. The result is an affecting reflection of the distances—temporal and ontological—between the two thinkers; between word and image; and ultimately, between our own reality and the rest of the world.

In "Abandoned Paintings," on view in this year's Whitney Biennial, Divola further explores the difficulty of communicating real life in art. For the work, he took a handful of paintings left behind by art students, hung them in abandoned homes in the California desert, and photographed them. By doing so he recontextualizes both the paintings and the houses, giving them a new life that, if nothing else, will live on in pictures.

Divola recently spoke with ARTINFO about these two bodies of work, and the tenets of his photographic practice overall.

### **Where did your interest in Sartre come from?**

This work does not evolve directly out of an interest in Sartre. Rather, I have a general interest in the existential. At some point I came to realize that a central set of concerns that I was dealing with in my photographic work involved the relationship between specificity and abstraction. To illustrate this idea, let's say that you paint a goat. Unless you paint the goat photo-realistically, it's going to be a kind of emblem of "goatness." It'll be imbued with whatever association you have with it: evilness, or the pastoral, or cheese. If you photograph a goat, the photograph will also be an emblem, but it's always resistant to being fully in service of the abstract, or synthetic, because it's anchored in the specificity of a particular goat—the time, place, atmosphere, and physical circumstances of the situation in which it was photographed. I was thinking about those ideas, and about "Being and Nothingness"—that text is the poster child for this exercise in taking the specifics of experience and interpreting them as a set of abstract assertions.

“being.”

Additionally, I was always drawn to quotes from the text which are surprisingly poetic illustrations. While the intention of the book is objective and academic, Sartre often includes these illustrations that bubble up from the subconscious. I hope that there might be some parallel in my selection of imagery.

**We tend to think that images are somehow a more efficient means of communication—“a picture is worth a thousand words.” But in the “Green Notebook” series, with the texts and their corresponding photos hung next to each other, the viewer is aware that photographic representation is no more efficient than texts—each has clear limits.**

It all depends what you’re trying to be efficient about. If what you’re trying to achieve is a reference to an abstract idea, then language is clearly more efficient. But if you’re trying to describe what’s in front of you, without differentiation, then a photograph is always more efficient. For instance, in one highlighted passage, Sartre’s talking about the relative temperature, and putting his hand in water. Then there’s my black and white picture of a hand in a sink. That’s my hand stuck in my generic sink in my old house in Venice. It’s from a particular house built in a particular era. I think of imagining his hand, or what the sink would be like in his café or apartment in Paris. So even though the abstract idea is identical—he’s talking about his hand in water and I’m describing my hand in water—the specifics are entirely different. The tension between those receptions of the images is what interests me.

**Do you think photography as a medium is particularly equipped to address the issue of translating experience into abstraction?**

That’s a really complicated question. Photographs are unique in that they’re not so much descriptions *of* experience as they are artifacts *from* experience. You go out and make literal imprints of the world. They might be pictures of a person that you’ve lived with, or something that you decided was beautiful or ugly, etc.—they invite speculation about all kinds of decisions. It’s always in relationship to your conceptions of reality. When you

back about your personal history, for instance, how much of that is established by looking at family photographs? You can't really identify the source of your sense of reality. What part came from direct experience, and what part of it came from seeing millions—literally millions—of photographic representations of reality. We no longer even exhibit a desire to differentiate. I think that's an existential circumstance; it's central to the nature of contemporary consciousness.

**The original installation of the “Green of the Notebook” series, installed at the Hammer Museum in 2000, featured two groups of images, with the texts together in one cluster, and their matching pictures in another. In the second iteration of the series, such as the one currently up at Maccarone, corresponding text and images are installed together in individual panels. Why did you decide to reformat the work that way?**

Because I watched people looking at the installation at the Hammer Museum and they weren't going back and forth the way I wanted them to. I wanted them to read the text and then look at the image associated with the text. I just think it works better in its current form because you're forced to deal with the one quote and the one image, and then move on to the next. It just seemed like a more efficient and reasonable way to work.

**While the majority of the photos in the series are black and white, three of them are in color—they correspond to lines in which Sartre specifically refers to color. Do you think that, had you rendered those three images in black and white, it would have complicated that relationship of specificity and abstraction, or would it have diluted it?**

It's an interesting question. That's one of those choices you just have to make. I thought about the experiential variation in looking at the pictures. I think it's nice, amongst a series of black and white photos, to all of a sudden be confronted with a color photograph. It invites a speculation as to why. But you're right, it would have invited an alternate speculation of difference.

**Let's switch to the “Abandoned Paintings” series, which are included in this y**

## **Whitney Biennial. Can you tell me about that body of work?**

I had been out in the desert working on a series called “Interventions.” I was doing some which I’ve done on and off throughout my career, which is intervene in front of the camera. One day at the University of California Riverside, where I teach, I was out at the dumpster and full of paintings. Someone had cleaned out the room upstairs where people store their paintings. Every year there’s a certain amount of paintings that students just don’t come and retrieve. They sit there literally for years and years. Finally somebody just decided to clean it out, and they took them and threw them in the dumpster. So I just reached in and took out a number of paintings that I thought looked interesting for one reason or another. I started taking them when I’d go out to the desert to do the “Intervention” photographs, and was hanging them in these abandoned houses.

The beauty of photography is that I can have a certain amount of distance from a subject. Theoretically, I can make an interesting photograph of an awkward painting gesture. That’s one that I really like. It’s a woman, and her hand is just terrible. The person has struggled to depict this hand, and obviously just gave up at some point. There’s just something so evocative about the desire to represent the difficulty and struggle of that. There’s also something so compelling to me about the idea of giving up on the painting—not even picking it up—an act in relation to walking away from a house. Those two things in relationship to one another interested me.

**There’s a recurring theme of abandonment and destruction in a great deal of your photographs, from the “Abandoned Paintings,” and “Intervention” series, to other bodies of work such as “Zuma,” “Los Angeles International Airport 1 Abatement Zone (LAX NAZ),” “Collapsed Structures,” and so on. What is it about those themes that interest you?**

To some degree, I’m interested in the social reality of it. You walk around any given street and everything is in its place and has a function; it’s preordained what you can and cannot do. These spaces are abandoned; they exist outside of those concerns. However, what primarily interests me is that they’re sites of different levels of engagement. Thinking about MoCA

painting, for example—much of it is about gesture and abstraction. At some point photography usurped the representational mandate of painting, and so painting largely became more about gesture and abstraction. While I am interested in description, I am also interested in those forms of expression. And abandoned houses are just layered with gestures. If someone kicks a hole in the wall, that's a gesture. If I paint a mark on the wall, that's a gesture. That's the gesture of the architectural choices, in constructing it to start with. There's the gesture of the people that lived there—the wallpaper they chose, the things they left behind, etc. There's the gestures of the people who have come in afterwards and kicked holes in the wall, maybe looking for copper wire. It's coated with these indexes of engagement and history that are exceedingly rich to me.

**Is documentary an important function of this work? You're creating an artifact of your experience in these abandoned spaces, but you're also recording existence in a way.**

It's not so much that I'm interested in documenting them. I'm looking for an area of engagement—a place that I can be involved in some level of both observation, and participation. I acknowledge that to some degree every photograph has a documentary function, but that's not my primary motivation.

**Nonetheless, I think the photos are compelling for that reason—they're documenting spaces which have otherwise been forgotten, and will presumably be destroyed eventually.**

Well, it's all relative, right? You could say that about absolutely everything on Earth.



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