

## Godly Small Things by Nicholas Gamso



John Divola, *Hats* (detail), 2016, 12 8×10 inch vintage gelatin silver prints. Unique edition. © John Divola  
“Hats.” Courtesy of Gallery Luisotti, Los Angeles.

Last year, Gallery Luisotti in Los Angeles featured the latest installment in John Divola’s multi-decade study of continuity photographs—unsigned 8×10 contact prints shot on studio film sets. ❶ Divola began collecting these beautiful and evocative objects when he found dozens of them at Back Lot Books, a weekly bazaar on Hollywood Boulevard—“inside a three-car garage,” he remembers—in the late 1970s. He’s exhibited the prints several times since, grouping them under simple descriptive titles. ❷ *Several Kinetic Events* (assembled in 2024) names a suite of four pictures showing blasts and trails of destruction, ❸ while the comparatively subdued *Hats* (2016) comprises ten shots of men’s derbies and porkpies in odd settings, ❹ like under a phony Velasquez or beside a cockatoo—the latter is from *Lady No. 6142*, renamed *Ladies They Talk About* (1933), starring Barbara Stanwyck. ❺



Another series, *Arrangements* (2016), presents a succession of table settings: turkey dinners, tea services, sundries on a picnic blanket. ⑥ In close-up, we see a white-clothed table littered with sherry glasses and half-eaten parfaits, cups of after-dinner coffee, a package of Sunshine shortbread cookies (the “Nobility Assortment”), and, in the middle of it all, a sterling cigar box standing open. You can almost hear the din of the party, Lester Young on the wireless, and every surface is gleaming, even the swags of the silk napkins, tossed on the table as the guests retired. Or so I assume, for there’s no one in sight and no identifying film slate—John tells me he couldn’t possibly guess the photo’s origins—though in the background I notice the base of a stage lamp, confirming that, yes, the tableau is a fake.



John Divola, *Arrangements* (detail), 2016, 12 8×10 inch vintage gelatin silver prints. Unique edition. © John Divola “Arrangements.” Courtesy of Gallery Luisotti, Los Angeles.

What Divola likes best about these pictures are precisely their falsehoods. As he notes in his 1997 photo book *Continuity*, the images’ stock scenography, with its waxed fruit and empty window casings, stands out for being “pre-visualized, constructed, and completely artificial.” ⑦ Yet, like all photographs, the continuity shots also reveal certain truths. They are documents, records of chance, and godly small things—ash fallen from a cigarette, a bottle turned just so. Looking at these details, you sense what Janet Malcolm describes as the camera’s “formidable capacity for imposing disorder on reality.” ⑧ The photos exhibit



variations, accidents (Malcom writes of photography’s “accident proneness”) that will have to be recreated on set the next morning to sustain the greater illusions of style and narrative coherence.

Continuity photographs are essential tools in cinematic storytelling, but never are they consciously created as authored works. They’re not fine art, not promotional. They have nothing in common with, say, George Hurrell’s publicity headshots (see his famous glossies of Jean Harlow), though clearly the prints in question are masterfully made and evoke the warm, velvety grays of the metonymic “silver screen.” ⑨ While the images have a rhetoric about them, in other words, in no way do they make statements. Their impact draws on something more diffuse—what Divola calls a “collective visual consciousness” induced by the clichés of old Hollywood (most of his prints are from pre-Code Warner Bros. productions), along with advertising and early television. If you’re old enough, you’ve spent much of your life looking at checkered linoleum, bankers chairs, and sugar cubes, and in the continuity shots, all that uncanny, cluttered historicism is presented anew, clarified to an almost surreal degree. The photos have a longer exposure, lending them more precision and fidelity than anything shot on the era’s ubiquitous cine-motion celluloid film cameras. There is a stillness you’ll of course never see in motion pictures, and also an absence of figure or focus—another reason John likes them so much. ⑩



Divola grew up around the deserted 20th Century Fox Ranch in Calabasas, and later near the MGM lots in Culver City, and credits his exposure to these strange, unpeopled environments—he describes roaming through old sets as a child—with a lifelong interest in artifice and negation. <sup>11</sup> An acclaimed photographer in his own right, Divola is probably best known for his *Zuma* series (1979), which depicts trashed apartments in Malibu, the walls blown open to lurid, pink skies. Among his later works are pictures of bodies in flight and withdrawal, some which appear in *The Green of this Notebook* (2009), a handsome editioned volume that pairs the ghostly photos with pages from Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* ("I am on a narrow path without a guardrail.") <sup>12</sup> There is something spectral about the continuity photographs, too. <sup>13</sup> You sense the sitter who ought to be there, and also the hand that dressed the set but which, withdrawn, renders the whole scene more visible and communicative. The photographs were after all made to be looked at—never by the public, but by studio artisans and technicians, from cinematographers to seamstresses to the "continuity girls" who scrutinized the prints for misplaced goblets and doors left ajar.

Good continuity work makes a film convincing and can also create a more peaceable, less wasteful working environment for cast and crew. The continuity girls of yore—the vast majority of "golden age" continuity and script supervisors were indeed women—worked closely with directors and screenwriters, reviewing the dailies, recommending rewrites, and consulting with editors (the girls were apparently dubbed "the cutter's fifth column"). <sup>14</sup> Because film audiences of the 1930s were overwhelmingly female, many a project's success depended on a feminine sensibility, and the continuity girls came to wield considerable power over individual film projects, despite the position's low pay and lack of recognition—uncredited until the 1960s—with all the predations you'd expect, at least according to industry genre fiction like *Continuity Girl* (1937), by British script supervisor Martha Robinson, and *I Lost My Girlish Laughter* (1938), a *roman à clef* by Jane Allen, former personal secretary to the boorish David O. Selznick ("The moment I am with him I am thinking why did I bother.") <sup>15</sup>





John Divola, *Arrangements* (detail), 2016, 12 8×10 inch vintage gelatin silver prints. Unique edition. © John Divola "Arrangements." Courtesy of Gallery Luisotti, Los Angeles.

Film historians estimate that nearly half of early Hollywood workers were women, and even into the 1950s, as red-baiting studio chiefs filled the lots with men, the continuity girls proved indispensable. <sup>16</sup> Sometimes they were kept by specific directors, as Melanie Williams notes in her study of David Lean's "right-hand woman" Maggie Unsworth, who assisted the director from 1942 to 1985, and spent her working hours "discreetly taking Polaroids to record the precise details of the *mise-en-scène*"—a contrast from Barbara Cole, the continuity girl who became Lean's mistress on the set of *Lawrence of Arabia* (1961) and made the director "happy, very happy," though he would eventually urge her to quit, telling her "I hate the idea of you working." <sup>17</sup> No matter how assiduous, how savvy, how logistically indomitable the continuity girls were, their talents were devoted to supporting—serving—the industry's fragile, temperamental "great" men. And what thanks they got, effectively written out of memory, consigned to the non-space of clerical recordkeeping (*New York Times* columnist Bosley Crowther's canonical history of MGM, for one, omitted the many women staffers, assistants, cutters, and writers who, in fact, made the movies.) <sup>18</sup>

From a certain point of view, the industry's pattern of sapping female workers before altogether forgetting them makes perfect sense. According to film theorists John David Rhodes and Elena Gorfinkel, cinema is, at heart, a tool for appropriating existing settings, gestures, faces, and objects ("props" short for "property"),



and melding them onto the visual surface of the screen. 19 A fundamental logic of possession and ownership is what connects a movie camera to a film studio to an industry town, and in Hollywood this *raison d'être* is hardly a secret. The 2023 Writers Guild of America strike was authorized in response to the triumph of AI-generated “synthetic media” over the labors of production, for a film’s script and scenography, its music and editing, can now be totally automated.

The traffic in uncredited female labor that characterized old Hollywood did, in its way, anticipate the present crisis. A continuity girl’s work was never meant to be noticed—to the contrary, the point was exactly *not* to intercede in studio life, but to perfect its operations by keeping films on schedule, under budget, and marketable to a mass audience. She could certainly shape a film, or refine its shape—so could she head a union, or strike for better wages. But it is harder to say that an anonymous industry worker could assume creative control, or direct a film’s political message. While the most celebrated women artists of 1930s Hollywood, the *émigré* screenwriter Salka Viertel, for example, did create ennobling portraits of powerful, intelligent women, present and past, most of the anonymous continuity girls spent their long days and nights toiling over boilerplates with salacious titles like *They Call it Sin* (1932), *Massacre* (1934), and *Red Meat* (undated), and many of these films are forgotten or lost or were killed before the shooting wrapped.





The continuity shots illustrate an industry conceived, above all, to make money. Yet when they are studied as artworks, independent of the films for which they were made, they come to evince the sort of accidental perfection that AI can only imitate. In some cases, the pictures surpass the completed feature films as objects worth looking at, not least for demonstrating a degree of care which one can barely glimpse in the finished work. A still from the Busby Berkeley-Al Jolson collaboration *Wonder Bar* (1934) calls for attention in part because to actually sit down and watch the film is a mortifying experience. With an 11-minute blackface sequence and the first gay joke in an American motion picture (“Boys will be boys,” Jolson lisp as two men cavort on the dance floor), *Wonder Bar* is all dreck and decadence. <sup>20</sup> <sup>21</sup> The chosen photo, by contrast, is pleasingly sedate: an empty nightclub dressing room, an actor’s sombrero set on a narrow table. One imagines a stagehand placing the garments, adjusting the lamps with quiet diligence. But who was she?



John Divola, *Hats* (detail), 2016, 12 8×10 inch vintage gelatin silver prints. Unique edition. © John Divola  
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The continuity shots, despite being so emphatically visible, remain elusive in every sense. They can never be accessed through critical language, just as they fail to register as elements in a finished film—just try looking



for them. <sup>22</sup> Any further meaning or significance has to be projected later, and this includes recuperative feminist film history as well as the irrefutable if somewhat dispiriting Marxist argument. It is perhaps why Divola resists making any claims whatsoever about the photographs, preferring to indulge what is mute and dreamlike about them and dropping the prints, a few at a time, into the flood of impressions we call Hollywood.



John Divola, *Several Kinetic Events* (detail), 2016, 12 8×10 inch vintage gelatin silver prints. Unique edition. © John Divola "Several Kinetic Events." Courtesy of Gallery Luisotti, Los Angeles.

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Nicholas Gamso has published widely on cinema, photography, and performance. In 2024, he won the Wattis Institute's open call with a short film on the legacy of Hervé Guibert.



## Notes

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1. The show also included photographs by the conceptual artist Robert Cumming, taken during a visit to Universal Studios in 1976. These photos differ in their specific attention to artifice. See Chris Wiley, "The Pioneering Wizard of West Coast Photo-Conceptualism," *New Yorker*, February 8, 2024.

2. Divola exhibited continuity photographs at Blue Sky Gallery in Portland in 1999 and LACMA in 2014; he also published a monograph, *Continuity*, with Smart Art Press and RAM Publications in 1997.



3. John Divola, *Several Kinetic Events*, 2016, 12 8x10 inch vintage gelatin silver prints. Unique edition. © John Divola "Several Kinetic Events." Courtesy of Gallery Luisotti, Los Angeles.



4. John Divola, *Hats*, 2016, 12 8x10 inch vintage gelatin silver prints. Unique edition. © John Divola "Hats." Courtesy of Gallery Luisotti, Los Angeles.



5. John Divola, *Hats*, 2016, 12 8x10 inch vintage gelatin silver prints. Unique edition. © John Divola "Hats." Courtesy of Gallery Luisotti, Los Angeles.



6. John Divola, *Arrangements*, 2016, 12 8x10 inch vintage gelatin silver prints. Unique edition. © John Divola "Arrangements." Courtesy of Gallery Luisotti, Los Angeles.

7. Divola, "Elephants on Ice," *Continuity*, p. 7.



8. Janet Malcolm, *Diana and Nikon* (New York: Aperture, 1976), p. 61.

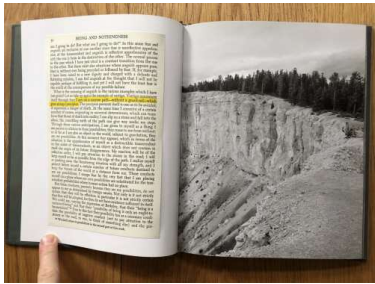


9. George Hurrell (1904-1992), *Jean Harlow*, 1936. Gelatin silver print, printed later. Courtesy of Christie's Images Ltd. 2025.

10. Ed Dimendberg makes this observation in the catalog to *Continuity*, turning around Diane Arbus' famous quip, "What you see is the flaw" (*Continuity*, p. 49).



11. Divola discussed his childhood in a conversation with curator Nicholas Barlow at Gallery Luisotti on April 6, 2024.



12. *The Green of this Notebook* (Portland: Nazraeli Press, 2009). Image via [Setanta Books](#).

13. Lucy Sante has compared continuity shots to forensic photographs: "Hollywood dailies show what appear to be potential crime scenes, platonically and artistically conceived, striking in their randomness, their ordinariness, their carefully groomed unintendedness." See "Ghosts" in *Maybe the People Would be the Times* (Portland: Verse Chorus Press, 2020), p. 208-209.

14. See Melanie Williams, "The Continuity Girl: Ice in the Middle of Fire," *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 10, no. 3 (July 2013).

15. Allen was a pseudonym for Silvia Schulman; *I Lost My Girlish Laughter* (New York: Vintage, [1938] 2019).

16. See J.E. Smyth, *Nobody's Girl Friday: The Women Who Ran Hollywood* (New York: Oxford UP, 2018), p. 14-16. The dearth of records on women in early Hollywood led Smyth to read through archived studio phonebooks.

17. Williams, "The Continuity Girl," p. 610-614.



**18.** See Bosley Crowther, *Hollywood Rajah: The Life and Times of Louis B. Mayer* (New York: Holt, 1960).

**19.** Elena Gorfinkel and John David Rhodes, *The Prop* (New York: Fordham UP, 2025), p. 24: “In order to assert its own individuation as a medium—its ‘personality,’ its specificity, its claim on uniqueness—the cinema must lay claim to the world and its objects. It must turn the world into its prop, or, in other, less innocuously abbreviated terms, its property.”



**20.** Excerpt from Lloyd Bacon and Busby Berkeley, *Wonder Bar*, 1934. 0:14 min.

**21.** Jolson's gag appears in the opening passage of Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman's now-classic documentary *The Celluloid Closet* (1995).

**22.** On the subject of “lost” films, see Ryan Linkof's 2014 essay on Divola's *Artificial Nature* series, “Searching for Continuity,” for LACMA: <https://unframed.lacma.org/2014/06/30/searching-for-continuity>.