

Birnbaum, Daniel. "Best of 2009" (John Baldessari: Pure Beauty). *Artforum* (December 2009), p. 164.



# Daniel Birnbaum

DANIEL BIRNBAUM, DIRECTOR OF THIS YEAR'S VENICE BIENNALE, IS RECTOR OF THE STÄDELSCHULE IN FRANKFURT AND DIRECTOR OF ITS PORTIKUS GALLERY, WHERE SHOWS DEVOTED TO RACHEL HARRISON AND MATHIAS POLEDNA KICK OFF 2010. IN APRIL, BIRNBAUM AND ARTIST OLAFUR ELIASSON ARE COCURATING AN EXHIBITION AT THE MARTIN-GROPIUS-BAU IN BERLIN.

John Baldessari, *Kiss/Panic*, 1984, oil tint on black-and-white photographs, 80 x 72".

**1** "John Baldessari: Pure Beauty" (Tate Modern, London) No doubt the show of the year: visually overwhelming, wry, and, as always in Baldessari's case, mildly subversive. The artist says, "I think there's value in being under the radar, because you can develop better. And now I don't care about the spotlight because I am who I am, so it doesn't really matter." He may not care, but the fact that after all these years he's out there reaching a huge audience does matter.



Chris Burden, *Beam Drop Inhotim*, 2008, steel and concrete. Installation view, Inhotim, Brumadinho, Brazil.

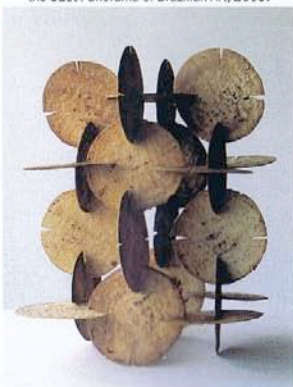
**2** Inhotim, Brumadinho, Brazil Nine ambitious new permanent projects by, among others, Chris Burden, Yayoi Kusama, and Rivane Neuenschwander convinced me that Inhotim must be the most significant art venue to emerge this century. The unique combination of botanical garden, ambitious educational program, purpose-built architecture, and novel sculpture garden puts paid to the old-European division of labor and makes every other institution seem a bit gray and average. Burden's gigantic *Beam Drop Inhotim*, 2008, here looks just the right size. I got



so used to the scale of ambition that not even new pavilions with work by Doug Aitken, Matthew Barney, and Janet Cardiff and Georges Bures Miller could ruffle me. I wouldn't have been surprised to find a laboratory hidden under an artificial lake, or Dr. No himself hiding in a clandestine grotto in one of the mountains. Add in the monkeys and the massive butterflies and you can see why I'm still not sure it wasn't all a hallucination. What was in those caipirinhas I had at the airport?

Damián Ortega, *Módulo de construcción con tortillas* (Tortillas Construction Module), 1998, baked corn tortillas, dimensions variable. From the 31st Panorama of Brazilian Art, 2009.

**3** 31st Panorama of Brazilian Art (São Paulo Museum of Modern Art) Curator Adriano Pedrosa's attempt to define a specifically Brazilian national sensibility by revealing its presence in work by artists from other countries is one of the subtlest and most elegant large group shows I've seen in many years. Impeccably installed and atmospherically convincing, it only made me admire Brazilian Neo-concrete poetics all the more. It is impossible, of course, to prove conclusively whether the interconnecting tortillas of Berlin-based Mexican artist Damián Ortega's baked sculpture *Módulo de construcción con tortillas* (Tortillas Construction Module), 1998, are really neo-Neo-concrete, but the work is an understated masterpiece.



**4** Zero An interest in perceptual processes, the phenomenology of light and vision, and the difficulty of drawing a line between the natural and the artificial is evident in much contemporary art, suggesting that the questions this Düsseldorf-based group raised in the late 1950s and early '60s have lost none of their urgency. This past year, in addition to a survey of Zero's work at Sperone Westwater gallery in New York, *Lichtraum* (Homage à Fontana) (Light Room [Homage to Fontana]), 1964, was presented in a new configuration at the Museum Kunst Palast in Düsseldorf. This key installation by Zero's core members Heinz Mack, Otto Piene, and Günther Uecker makes a whole swath of contemporary artists—among them Olafur Eliasson, Spencer Finch, and Carsten Höller—appear in a new light.

Heinz Mack, Otto Piene, and Günther Uecker, *Lichtraum* (Homage à Fontana) (Light Room [Homage to Fontana]), 1964, mixed media. Installation view, Museum Kunst Palast, Düsseldorf, 2009. Photo: Horst Kolberg.

