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Filling a Canvas With Ideas

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT
TIMES ART CRITIC

In the late 1960s and 1970s, after destroying all the abstract paintings he had made since the 1950s, John Baldessari began using words, photographs, charts, maps, film and video to question American culture's established expectations about art. His work was pivotal to the international emergence of Conceptualism, the movement in which an emphasis on art as a language of ideas replaced the traditional importance of art as a material object.

By the 1980s, that inquiry led Baldessari to make large, multi-panel works from carefully cropped and enlarged news and publicity photographs he found in souvenir stores and other archives. A quirky equivalent to traditional paintings, they possess none of painting's traditional materials or appearance.

Baldessari, 65, was the subject of a widely acclaimed traveling retrospective organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art in 1990. Affable, gregarious and witty, he was interviewed in his Santa Monica studio about the state of art and the art world today—including his reservations about the continuing dominance of Conceptual art.

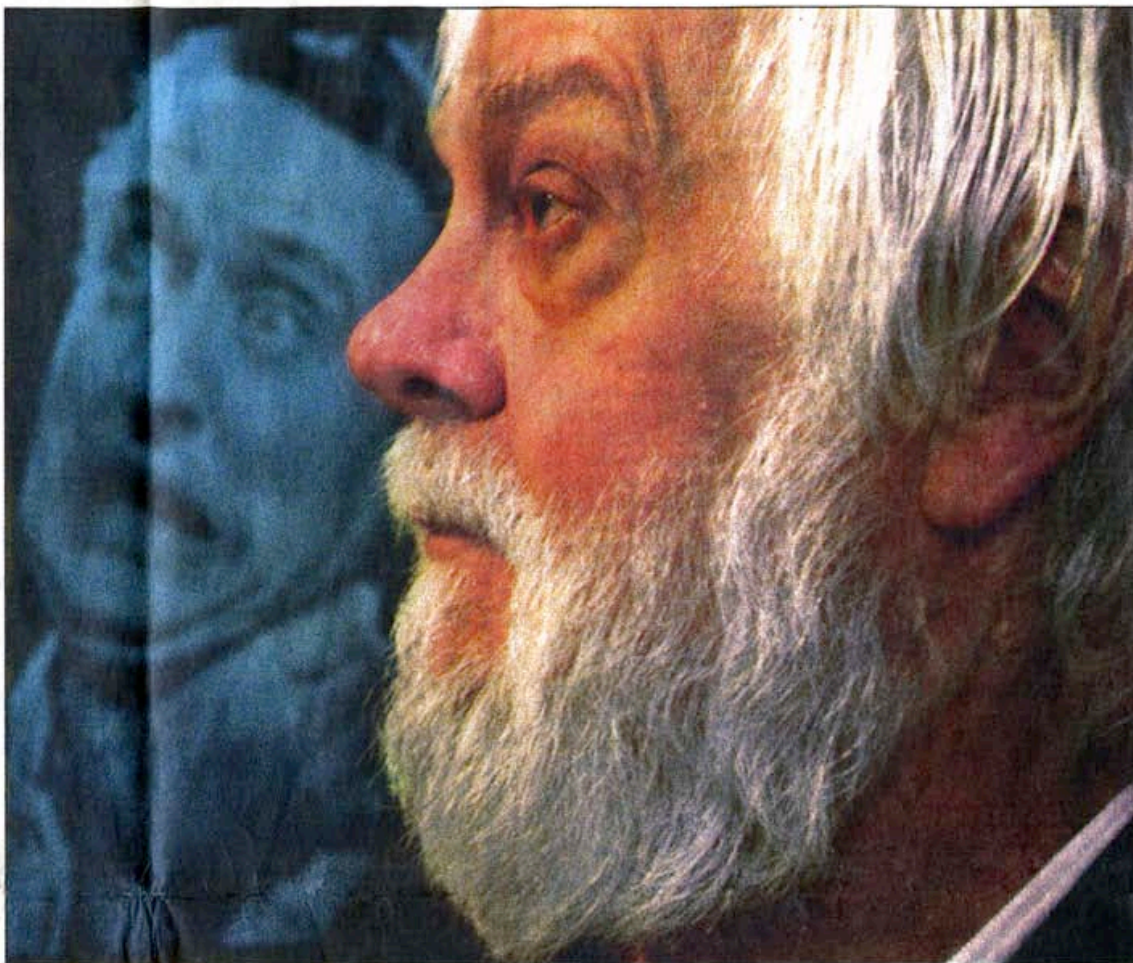
Question: What contemporary art exhibition that hasn't been done would you like to see?

Answer: I wouldn't mind seeing a show of works that, if you saw them outside a museum or a gallery, you would still know it was art. It wouldn't need the [Marcel] Duchamp idea that the immediate gallery or museum context makes the art. I suppose it would be a show with a lot of painting.

I'd really like to see a survey that says, "Where is painting right now?" Because I don't have a good idea . . . especially in L.A. Painting has never really grabbed hold here. There's so much of this "Isn't it interesting how the kitchen door looks like a painting?" school of art. Rather than that, I'd just like to see a painting.

My girlfriend asked me the other night if there had ever been a show done on the

Please see BALDESSARI, F8



LAWRENCE K. HO / Los Angeles Times

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The NEA has become a joke. We might as well . . . say [the nation] doesn't support art, so let's not have this lip service that we do. Let's make it very clear that we don't support art and see if anything starts up again.

BALDESSARI: Reflections About Art

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idea of "miracles." I didn't know. Could anyone even treat that subject without being ironic? Could you do corny subjects without them being tongue-in-cheek? Could a contemporary artist do a painting of Doubting Thomas with his finger in Christ's wound—and take it seriously?

Q: Conceptual art has been one of the most influential movements of the past 25 years. Now there are multiple generations of Conceptualists and Neo-Conceptualists. Has Conceptualism become like Abstract Expressionism or formalist painting in the late 1950s and early 1960s: an aging, enervated empire ready to be overthrown?

A: Maybe that's what I'm getting at. That's the way it was when I started making art: I felt I was locked into second- or third-generation Abstract Expressionism. I remember people feverishly looking around for something to happen.

What we have now is also rampant pluralism, in which everyone breathes a huge sigh of relief that we can do whatever we want. But that's getting boring too. Maybe we need a bouncer to winnow things a bit.

Q: L.A. is home to four prominent art schools: UCLA, Art Center, Otis and CalArts. Today it's highly unusual for an artist not to have gone to art school. Is art too academic?

A: The start of that was the era of [Robert] Rauschenberg and [Jasper] Johns. There was a jump from the image of the Abstract Expressionist, stripped to the waist with a paintbrush in one hand and a Jack Daniels bottle in the other, to somebody in a tuxedo with a martini. That was the beginning of

the university-bred artist.

Conceptual art is something that can be taught, because it deals with ideas. Ideas are something you can read about and discuss. You don't need easels and all that stuff.

It made it a lot easier for art departments to be in the university, because there had always been the conflict that artists really are not academics. So now we could have people that have degrees in philosophy teaching art. Schools love that.

Q: What's your sense of the contemporary art market, which fell apart in 1990 and has been slowly rebuilding?

A: I'm told that the way it usually works is that first, after a recession, things begin to pick up on the million-dollar end. Then, the next that picks up is on the low end. You buy things for \$1,000, \$2,000—which seems to be happening now. And then, slowly, it begins to close in toward the middle [price range]. That seems to be what's slowly happening. God knows the money is out there. The stock market is going crazy. High-end goods are coming back. So the problem is just believing again.

Maybe it is time for a show about miracles!

Q: After last year's 40% budget cut, the National Endowment for the Arts is barely alive. Is a severely crippled NEA better than no NEA at all?

A: No. I really believe it should go down in flames. [NEA Chairman Jane Alexander] should make a stand and say: Listen, this is the line, you push me past it and that's it. Just let it collapse.

The NEA has become a joke. We might as well call a spade a spade and say [the nation] doesn't sup-

port art, so let's not have this lip service that we do. Let's make it very clear that we don't support art and see if anything starts up again. I think the chances for art are better if we start out stating clearly what we believe—which is that we *don't* believe in supporting the arts. Then we'll see if there's any grass-roots movement toward getting it going again.

And if there's no public clamor then it's true: The business of America is business.

Q: What other primary issues face art today?

A: Is there a reason for doing art other than money? Which is an issue that didn't exist before the 1980s. Now it lingers—like some kind of stain that won't vanish.

Prior to the '80s, it was assumed you did it because you wanted to do it. When you see paintings getting smaller and smaller and a lot of gallery tchotchkes around, is that because people really want to do them? I'm not so sure.

Or, is it just because, listen, I've got to pay my rent? [Artist and Newsweek art critic] Peter Plagens had this idea that the NEA should pay some artists *not* to do art.

Q: Like paying farmers not to grow certain crops. . . .

A: On the other hand, I don't think it's as bad as in the '80s, when being an artist was just a little less than being a rock 'n' roll star, so you picked up a brush and paint rather than a guitar. Thank God that's gone.

Maybe I am talking about moral purposes. I'd like to feel when I looked at work that it came out of a real sense of need. That's something you just feel—a kind of urgency that it had to be done.