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Baldessari's Beast

L.A. Expanded: Notes from the West Coast

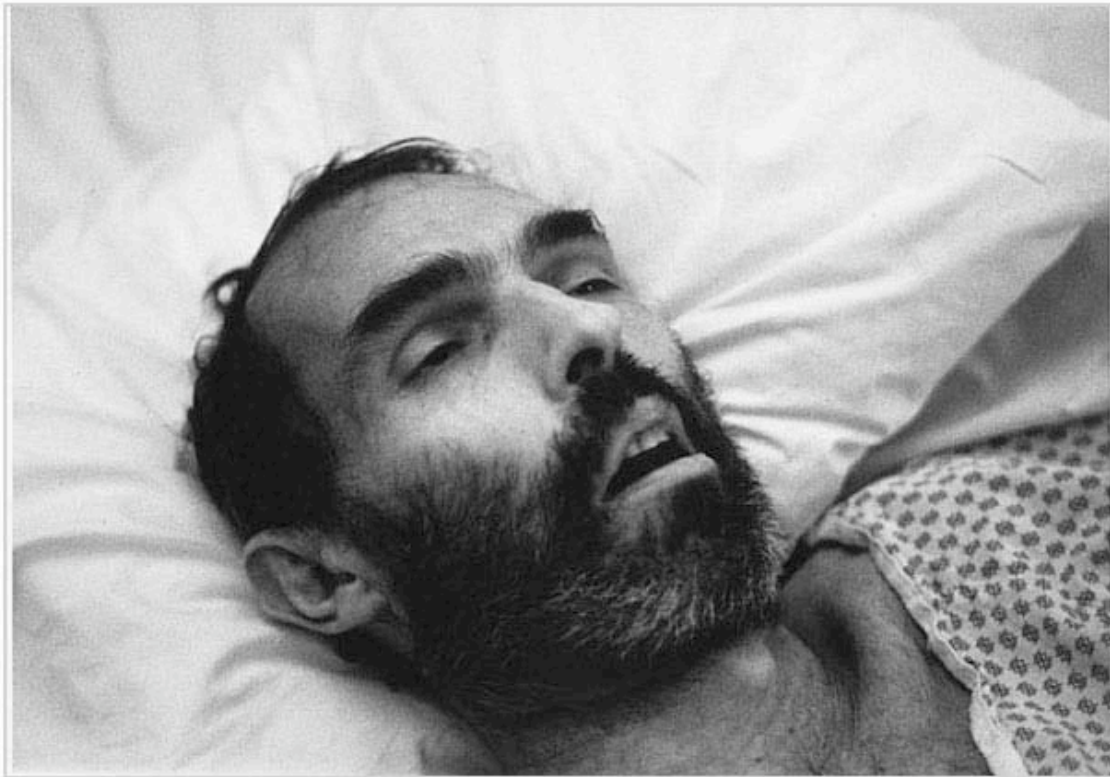
A weekly column by Catherine Wagley



Hans Holbein, 1521.

Hans Holbein painted *The Body of the Dead Christ Laid Out in His Tomb* in 1521. In it, Christ's harrowed face and tortured body don't actually look dead; they look comatose with pain and on the verge of dying, but not quite gone. The fact that most of his peers took a more lyrical approach to the crucifixion makes Holbein's grittiness all the more provoking. In Albrecht Durer's *Lamentation for Christ* (1500-1503), Christ is held upright, and though his face looks pained, he still seems capable of posthumously comforting the people around him. In Heironymous Bosch's *Crucifixion with a Donor*, Christ's body seems supernaturally lithe, despite its inhumane positioning. Only Holbein placed Christ all alone and flat on his back.

Holbein's relentlessly deathly *Christ* has captivated intellectuals and artists for centuries. One of them, Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky, mentions the painting more than once in his melodramatic 1869 social commentary, *The Idiot*. The character Ippolit, a young man dying of consumption, gives a long-winded speech the night before he fails to commit suicide. He's impressively incisive when he speaks of Holbein's work: "Looking at that picture, you get the impression of nature as some enormous, implacable, and dumb beast, or . . . as some huge engine of the latest design, which has senselessly seized, cut to pieces, and swallowed up—impassively and unfeelingly—a great and priceless Being."



David Wojnarowicz, "Untitled (Peter Hujar)," 1989. Courtesy of P.P.O.W. Gallery.

122 years later, [David Wojnarowicz](#), whose depiction of his dying friend [Peter Hujar](#) feels uncannily parallel to Holbein's *Christ*, tried to tear into that "dumb beast" Ippolit described. Wojnarowicz, like Ippolit, saw nature and man-made systems as weird collaborators. "After witnessing . . . Hujar's death . . . and after my recent diagnosis [with AIDS], I tend to dismantle and discard any and all kinds of spiritual and psychic and physical world or concepts designed to make sense of the external world," [wrote Wojnarowicz](#). He wanted to get to the raw core of a body's disintegration. "I'm a prisoner of language that doesn't have a letter or sign or gesture that approximates what I'm sensing," he continued. If his photograph of Hujar tried to make a prison break, it didn't succeed. It still spoke the language of portraits and image planes.

I thought of Wojnarowicz when I saw John Baldessari's *Blue Line (Holbein)* at [Margo Leavin Gallery](#), an exhibition that coolly and minimally rephrases Holbein's *Dead Christ*. Baldessari has always struck me as a savvy manipulator, an artist who reveals language's limitations through images and imagery's limitations through language, and doesn't seem too interested in any truth beyond that. But *Blue Line*, which confronts the gaping failure of signs and gestures to say anything honest, made me think I'd misread him. Baldessari has confined Holbein's Christ to an elongated, thinly pristine, blue-rimmed rectangle that angles up against the gallery wall. Taking in the whole image requires walking the length of the rectangle, maybe even multiple times.



John Baldessari, *Installation Shot*, 2010. Courtesy of Margo Leavin Gallery, Photo: Brian Forrest.

A clandestine camera records visitors as they navigate the rectangle and the recording's slightly delayed stream plays on the wall of the next gallery. When you enter that gallery, you are watching yourself watch *Dead Christ*, further distanced from something that was distancing to begin with. The clean lines of minimalism and the mediation of digital feeds are Baldessari's beast, the thing Ippolit described and Wojnarowicz fought: the engine that "impassively and unfeelingly" swallows bodily truth.