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John Baldessari
Bird #1, 1962. Oil on paper on board, 64 x 48 in.

Noses & Ears, Etc.: Blood, Fist, and Head (with Nose and Ear), 2006. Three-dimensional digital print with acrylic paint, 43¼ x 52 in.

NEW YORK

John Baldessari

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EACH TIME I've gone through the Metropolitan Museum of Art's undeniably important and frequently delight-inducing John Baldessari retrospective, "Pure Beauty," I've left thinking, "Yes, but . . ." As organized—by Tate Modern curator of contemporary art Jessica Morgan, Los Angeles County Museum of Art associate curator Leslie Jones, and Met senior consultant Marla Prather—the show divides the artist's career into two broad periods plus a recent, late phase. Baldessari, now in his 80th year, has been excep-

tionally influential both as a teacher and through his pieces, especially those he made during the first 20 years or so of his working life. Indeed, for the artist, these two aspects are inextricably intertwined.

A recent *New Yorker* profile quotes Baldessari as saying, "I don't make a great deal of separation between communication by teaching and communication by the work I do." And right away at the Met, we find *Art Lesson*, 1964, a mixed-media work lampooning painting exercises, and *The Lesson #3*, 1967, a painting demonstrating 15 ways of depicting three-dimensional objects. Even when the references are less explicit, the works from the 1960s and '70s always instruct in one way or another. Influenced—like hordes of other self-consciously rebellious artists in the second half of the 20th century—by Marcel Duchamp, Baldessari set out on an antiexpressive path. He concocted pieces that were investigative, highly reflexive, and analytic—that is, he analyzed what we mean by the term *art* itself. What makes these admittedly pedantic efforts so successful is that they are genial, often funny, and, at their best, suffused with joy.



Who doesn't crack a smile at the black-and-white photo of a man awkwardly posed so that a palm tree seems to grow out of his head, with the word *wrong* painted below it? Or at the 41 humble color snapshots arranged on the wall according to where a red ball appears in each? Who isn't oddly transfixed by the film *Six Colorful Inside Jobs*, 1977, which records the artist painting a room a

different color on each of six days, beginning on Monday (and resting on Sunday)? Okay, perhaps some people aren't. Yet it seems to me that in almost every piece he made during this period, Baldessari managed to come up with a fun-filled teachable moment. In one project he had a life-drawing class try to recall his features for a police sketch artist—and in the process he taught the students, and us, something about the way artists employ memory. Which is similar to, and also importantly different from, the project of noticing that he undertook when he photographed *The Backs of All the Trucks Passed While Driving from Los Angeles to Santa Barbara, California, Sunday, 20 January 1963*.

From penning "I will not make boring art" over and over to the repeated photographs of a finger pointing to one of three carrots, the pieces from this period highlight the socially constructed nature of art, with each work parsing one aspect of the construction. The works do this by removing, to as great a degree as possible, any aesthetic choices. That's why Duchampian artists like to rely on chance: to demonstrate the fact that art entails no essential aesthetic; art is whatever we agree to call art, whatever we frame as art. It's an intention, and a means, announced at the outset of the exhibition in a text painting titled *A Painting That Is Its Own Documentation*, 1966-68, the first line of which reads: "June 19, 1968, idea conceived at 10:25 A.M." This is so-called idea-driven art.

These early works are undeniably important. You don't have to be especially attuned to the joy and humor in Baldessari's brand of Duchampian idea-driven art to acknowledge how fruitful it has been. Breaking art down, removing for a time the most conspicuously aesthetic aspects of it, has given artists enormous latitude. The process was like kicking someone who was falling asleep: it perked up a drooping corpus. Looking at Baldessari's pieces from his Duchampian period, I think, "Yes, they are good and fun and instructive and necessary." The irony is that although they are

built on a foundation of questioning what art is, they seem to work best when not interrogated too closely themselves.

Consider a statement of Baldessari's quoted in a wall text: "A word can't substitute for an image, but is equal to it." Sounds good—like a pithy little apothegm. It's also nonsense. In what sense is a word "equal to" an image? In what sense is his *Pure Beauty*, 1966-68—simply a painting of the title's words—equivalent to a beautiful image? Perhaps in only one sense: the amount of money it can fetch at auction. The problem, it seems to me, inheres in the very notion of idea-driven art. For instance, what's its opposite? Are, say, paintings or videos that don't hammer home a single idea—one that can be conceived at 10:25 A.M.—not also driven by ideas? Is the complex of ideas—about form and style, among other things—that goes into the

creation of a beautiful image equivalent to the one stated by the words *Pure Beauty*?

Or put another way, is art really just about communication, as Baldessari suggests both in his statements and in the pedantry of his idea-driven pieces? Is that all art does, transmit a message or idea? Doesn't art fundamentally hold ideals up to reality? Doesn't it also inspire, stimulate, and confound? Doesn't art stir us up and keep us thinking, in a way that a telegraphed idea never can?

Isn't mere communication setting the bar rather low?

Apparently Baldessari thought so, because sometime in the 1980s he ceased making "idea-driven" art and, with his photo-based pieces, opened the barn door wide to a stampede of aesthetic decisions. He began joining together found pictures, many of them stills from old

movies, in montagelike sequences. He began, in other words, to try to make beautiful images. When that happens in the show, the Met's wall text turns at once instructive and inane: "Meaning is inferred obliquely but never resolved in a singular, authoritative reading." (As if, for other artists, there's some authority handing out singular meanings like so many fortune cookies.)

Eventually, later in his career, Baldessari's aesthetic choices become more complex. He plays with framing devices, editing the sequences of images into pleasing forms and narratives. He adds tinting to some of the images; he blots out faces and figures with colored dots. But to my eye the photo-based works are not as successful as the earlier, more explicitly concept-based ones. In the end Baldessari is more exciting as a teacher than he is as an imagemaker. —**Daniel Kunitz**

