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JOHN BALDESSARI

STARTING WITH EXISTING THINGS

Gary Simmons

GARY SIMMONS: *ONE of the things that interested me about this interview with you is that we are both based in Los Angeles. How much does the idea of location affect your work?*

John Baldessari: I was born in National City which is south of San Diego and went to school there and studied for my degrees there. I was there until about 1970, I studied for some time at Berkeley and in Los Angeles, but I came back there, and was a painter at the time. I went every week or every other week to look at art, because there was really nothing to see in San Diego, the only place where you could really see contemporary art was LaJolla. They did very well but that just wasn't enough. So that was the way I educated myself, and subscribing to every art periodical I could get my hands on. In one way, being there was good, and in one way it was bad. It was good in the sense that I didn't feel the pressure of being in Los Angeles or in New York with a lot of galleries around me and a lot of art going on, that may have otherwise paralyzed me or made me follow the available models. I had a studio that had no windows in it, in back of a Laundromat and I spent as much time there painting and painting and painting and I always likened that to running a faucet until the water gets clear. Trying to get all that accumulated stuff out of my system and trying to figure out what I really thought art was... and I don't really think that I could've personally done that in New York. I would talk to a few people who were also artists and we showed each other our work and that was about it. At the time I had met only one real artist. So teaching at the University, people were coming through, like John Coplans, the early editor of *Artforum*, and they all saw the work that I was doing. And then I began to show the work more.

GS: *So, you were still painting at this time?*

JB: No, about that time I had started doing these texts and photoimage pieces.

GS: *Is that when the "National City" series started?*

JB: Yeah, it was all done then, and I couldn't get them shown at all, and David Antin, who was hired with me at U.C. San Diego, he really liked what I was doing (he really would have been a great promoter). He contacted Molly Barnes in Los Angeles.

GS: *So, did you think you were making work? Making art in the larger sense?*

JB: I would've never done those works if I hadn't given up hope. I thought: I'm just going to keep teaching high school, it doesn't

matter what I do, so I'm just going to keep on making these text and phototext pieces. I don't need to impress anybody.

GS: *Were you aware of the current trends at the time?*

JB: Didn't have a clue, I knew things were changing. I knew abstract expressionism was gone and pop was starting. Kosuth saw me as a pop artist, not a conceptual artist.

GS: *In which works?*

JB: The text and phototext works. It's one of these things where synchronicity happens. There's a paradigm shift.

GS: *So, were you accepted by those guys, like Kosuth in New York?*

JB: (Laughs) Now that's a tough question. New York's gotten a little bit friendlier but it wasn't that friendly then. However, I did make a lot of good friends at that time. The first artists from California I can remember showing in New York... just got blasted, and I don't think they got blasted because of the work. Somebody explained to me once, a New York artist, "you guys just come in here and show and then you leave." So that was the reason... you come in and do the show and then leave, you don't, you know, have to live through all the shit.

GS: *Well that's very interesting. I've always found it to be that way. In New York, people*

are very much about their own situation, whereas in Los Angeles, I've always found that there's more of a group dynamic, in the sense that people have always been interested in ideas together.

JB: I've noticed that in Europe, as you probably have too, artists don't go out and look at each other's shows. I noticed that in Cologne, you know, people never go see shows. It's just that artists in general don't do that.

GS: *The only place where I think it could be different is perhaps London, this new London scene, where somebody like Damien*

Hirst with an attitude that's more in line with a collective approach, starting a scene. He's almost like a new Warhol and everybody around him gets in the mix.

JB: He is!

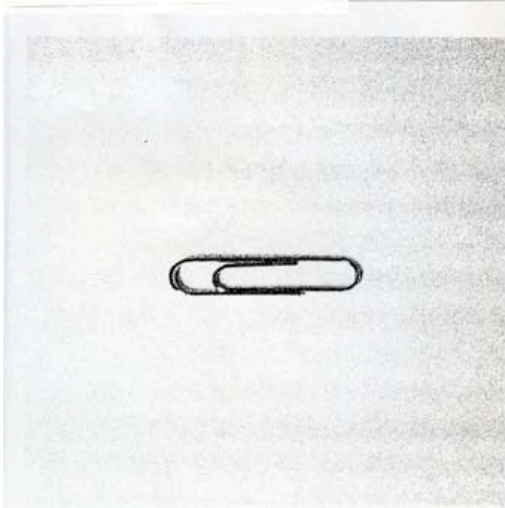
GS: *But I've never really seen that before, so it interests me. But, I'm really more interested in this idea of Kosuth, LeWitt, and those guys, since I think right now there's a certain romance about them. It's almost like now, it's turned into a style...*

JB: It looks like real art now! Mark Rosenthal wrote about my early work in the mid-80s, and he said to me, "these things look like art." In the 60s I couldn't get anybody to look. They said, "what the hell is this?"

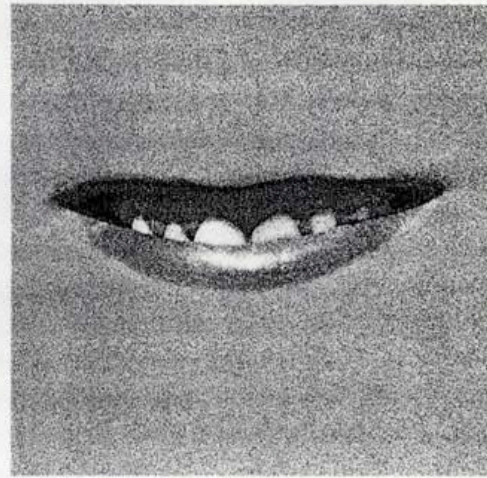
GS: *You mean, their work is now automatically understandable as art?*

JB: Yes. In New York, I went to three or four galleries a day, knocking cold at gallery doors for over a week, I didn't know how to go about it. I had these names and I would look them up. Somebody recommended me to Feigen gallery and the director was Michael Findlay who oddly enough now is head of Christie's Impressionist Department, and he

Opposite: clockwise from top left: *And; It couldn't be helped; Right; This is bad.* All images: from the "Goya Series," 1997. Ink jet print and hand lettering on canvas, 75 x 60". Courtesy Sonnabend, New York.



AND

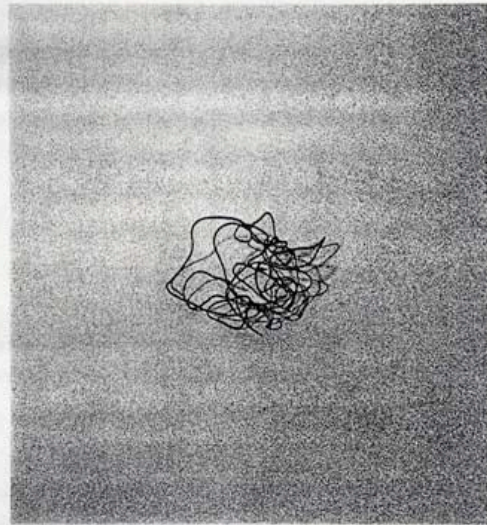


IT COULDN'T BE HELPED

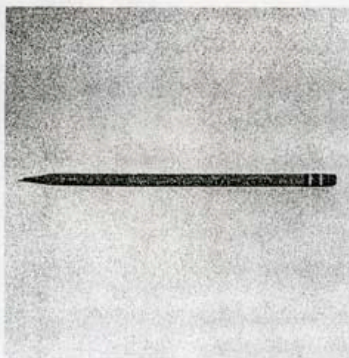
The idea that the world is just great is pretty absurd.



THIS IS BAD



RIGHT



SO MUCH AND MORE

two pieces that he could show to clients, which I did, and then he said, "we're thinking about doing a small three or four-person show in the storage space, it's downtown New York in an area called SoHo," this was the second gallery down there after Paula Cooper's space. Later, they gave me a one-person show and then sometime later they closed down the gallery and that was it. But, that was my first one-person show.

GS: *I have to ask, is "National City" really an extended form of a self portrait?*

JB: Honestly, I really was thinking I was just going to teach high school the rest of my life and that was it. I did these text and image pieces because I felt like, before this, I was trying to paint like the current mode. I became more irate about this alienation between the public and art and I was just thinking... what would really happen if you gave people what they want, instead of "fuck the bourgeoisie." You know, people read newspapers and magazines in the dentist's office and they look at

JB: I don't know what I would have done in a town where there were more cultural opportunities.

GS: *So how important is a sense of humor to the work? Because a lot of these pictures seem very funny to me.*

JB: Well, yeah, I think, especially the ones about art... Just read the newspaper, I just read it and laugh, say, what the hell is going on? Because you know, the idea that the world is just great is pretty absurd. I do think I have a skewed idea about the world, and you just have to frame it, you know what I mean. Because if you think too much about it, you could get really deranged. So, all you can do, and it sounds almost like an existential stance, is notice this absurd world that we live in. I don't go around with any angst, but actually, I do have this feeling that... having seen all those pictures as a kid, of the Holocaust and... I didn't ever understand it then and I don't now. I had no reason to think that it was going to stop. So, calmness, tranquillity is tempo-

All you can do is notice this absurd world we live in. Calmness, tranquillity is temporary. Boredom and ordinariness really does interest me a lot, but I have always had the feeling that there's something bubbling underneath the boredom.



AN ARM AND A LEG

Top: *So Much And More*; above: *An Arm and a Leg*. Both images from the "Goya Series," 1997. Ink jet print and hand lettering on canvas, 75 x 60". Courtesy Sonnabend, New York.

said, "Too bad, I just did this show of artists using text and art," and I said, "that's the first positive thing I've gotten" and then he said, "I'd like to hold on to your slides." He said "you should go meet a friend of mine at the Jewish Museum," who was Kynaston McShine. About a year later I got a letter from Michael, asking if I could send him one or

pictures and take photographs, so that seems like a common language, so I thought, I'll just do things with text and photographs.

GS: *So, the language is more general. But what about particular images?*

JB: Well there were two different kinds of imagery Gary, some of which dealt with art issues... texts that were about, or lifted statements from art criticism, or made reference to art issues. Then there were those that were just photographs of places around the area and my attitude there was like, listen, I live in this ugly place, why should I try and make this beautiful art as a facade... and not deal with it at all, you know, just show it warts and all... not try and make it ugly, not try and make it pretty, it is what it is. It's like real estate photographs... I would just drive around with a 35mm camera just shooting out of the window of my VW van and write down the location of the shot and that would be it. It was composed and I didn't hone it, and then I had a sign painter who would letter the location... and so I guess that's the reason I got the reaction I did, I would show them to people and they would say, "well that's not art."

GS: *That's what I find interesting with regards to the idea of location in your work... On the one hand, these places are in and around where you lived — they were general. On the other hand, they look like almost Anytown, USA. It's like a kind of slip between the intimate and anonymous.*

rary, why wouldn't it happen again? It wasn't supposed to happen then... I have this idea that on the one hand, boredom and ordinariness really does interest me a lot, but I have always had the feeling that there's something bubbling underneath the boredom. And I think that's the kind of tension that seeps in to what I do. It's like two poles on a spark plug — somehow something happens between the two.

GS: *So it's the product of the interaction?*

JB: All I can say is obviously things exist, I can start with the things that exist.

Gary Simmons is an artist based in Los Angeles.

John Baldessari was born in National City (CA), in 1931. He lives and works in Santa Monica (Ca). Selected solo shows: 1990: MoCA Los Angeles; SFMoMA, San Francisco; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Whitney Museum, New York; Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montreal; 1994: MoMA, New York; 1995: Blancpain Stepczynski, Geneva; Margo Leavin, Los Angeles; Monika Spruth, Cologne; 1996: Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, LaJolla (CA); Pedro Oliveira, Oporto; 1997: Theoretical Events, Naples; Philomene Magers, Cologne; 1998: Mai 36, Zurich; Sonnabend, New York. Selected group shows: 1992: "American Art: 1930-1979," Lingotto, Turin; 1993: "Moving," De Appel, Amsterdam; "Kunstler Bucher I," Museen Haus Lange und Haus Ester, Krefeld (Germany); 1995: "The Reflected Image," Centro Luigi Pecci, Prato (Italy); 1996: "Sex & Crime," Sprengel Museum, Hannover; "Faith, Hope, Charity, Death," Kunsthalle, Vienna; "Hall of Mirrors," MoCA, Los Angeles; The Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus (Ohio); Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome; MoCA, Chicago; 1997: Venice Biennale; 1998: "Artificial Contemporary Figures," Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona.