I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art, 1971

Single-channel video
13 min., 6 sec. (excerpt from 32 min., 21 sec. video)
Orange County Museum of Art, Museum purchase with funds provided through prior gift of Lois Outerbridge

John Baldessari is a key member of the Conceptual art movement that began exploring the relationship between language and art through various media in the late 1960s, often with the aim of critiquing contemporary art.

Baldessari’s trademark humor is exemplified by his video I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art (1971), in which he repeatedly writes the sentence “I will not make any more boring art” on a sheet of paper, as if he were a schoolboy forced to copy a sentence on the classroom blackboard as punishment. At its most literal level, the video may be an exercise in self-punishment to atone for Baldessari’s other text and image-based works that some might consider “boring art.” Yet this punishment is also a self-parody, as the video, with its fixed camera angle, lack of editing, excruciating length, and droning soundtrack, is ironically a work of “boring art.”

Baldessari Sings Lewitt, 1972

Video
4 min.
Orange County Museum of Art, Museum purchase with funds provided through prior gift of Lois Outerbridge

In an ironic intersection of two seemingly disparate systems—mysterious theoretical discourse and popular music—this video features John Baldessari singing text written by minimalist and conceptual artist Sol Lewitt. Introducing this performance by noting that “these sentences have been hidden too long in exhibition catalogues,” Baldessari sings Lewitt’s forty-five points on Conceptual art to the tunes of The Star-Spangled Banner and Heaven, among other songs, creating a humorous but provocative sing-along.
JOHN BALDESSARI  
(b. 17 June 1931, National City, California; lives in Santa Monica, California)  
In his paintings, photographs, films, videotapes, books, and texts, John Baldessari has, since the mid-1960s, challenged the conventions of these media to address the construction of meaning through the interactions of words and images. Having initially studied art history at Berkeley, Baldessari turned to painting, studying in San Diego and, briefly, in Los Angeles at Chouinard and Otis Art Institutes in the late 1950s. While living and working in National City, California, Baldessari began to make paintings that drew from photographic source materials and incorporated fragments of discarded billboards. After the mid-1960s Baldessari broke with the traditional trajectory and conception of painting with a series of text and photo-text canvases produced by means of sign painters and photomechanical processes—in which the canvas became the sole conventional painting or art signifier. As he wrote in 1968,  

By late 65 I was finished with painting and by early 66 had begun these pieces. I was weary of doing relational painting and began wondering if straight information would serve. I sought to use language not as a visual element but as something to read. That is, a notebook entry about painting could replace the painting. And visual data less as pleasing artistically than as documentation, as in a store catalogue or police photograph.  

For the most part, these pieces are on a standard size canvas. Most are white or grey, though a few were done in pastel colors (stock wall color). Many of the photos used were originally taken for non-art use, some were taken to violate then current photographic norms, and others were taken pointing the camera out the window while driving. I was attempting to make something that didn’t emanate art signals. The only art signal I wanted was the canvas.  

Important was that I was the strategist. Someone else built and pinned the canvases and took them to the sign painter, the texts are quotations from art books and the sign painter was instructed not to attempt to make attractive artistic lettering but to let the information in the most simple way.  

The first of these works, completed in 1967 and 1968, is dated 26 April 1967—the day Baldessari paid the sign painter for the production of texts. The photographic sources of these works include snapshots by Baldessari and others, as well as reproductions of existing images from art magazines, children’s books, and instructional manuals. As Baldessari has stated, Rauschenberg had done overlaps of paint and screened photographic images, one over the other onto the canvas in a transfer method he had invented himself. But I wanted to be less artful than Rauschenberg and Warhol: this is a photograph, here’s a text. That’s it. And I thought, because they’re done on canvas, they might be equated with art.”  

Among Baldessari’s photo-text works are the spectator is compelled. (1967–68) and this is not to be looked at (1968). Coosje van Bruggen has described the structure of the former as follows:  

Baldessari is seen from the back looking down the street in a pose that illustrates the pictorial convention of establishing an eye level. In fact, the composition of the picture is taken from a manual by Ernest R. Narling, Perspective Made Easy, which illustrates eye level by showing an artist seen from behind standing on train tracks. The title of Baldessari’s work, however, intimates that he or she should ignore any didactic purpose why not just stare directly down the road into the middle of the picture for no reason at all.  

In the latter, the title, a translation of no se puede mirar, the title of a work from Francisco Goya’s series of etchings, los desastres de la guerra (The Disasters of War, 1808–1810), is paired with an image of the cover of the November 1966 issue of Artforum, which features Frank Stella’s painting Union III (1966). This pairing constructs a critique of the formalism and literalism of high modernist painting, including reference to the statements of Frank Stella, which include the oft-quoted phrase, ‘What you see is what you see.’  

The texts for Baldessari’s text-only canvases are derived from a variety of sources. Those for a Work with Only One Property (1967–68), Composing on a Canvas (1967–68), and Painting for Kubler (1967–68) are drawn from such sources as art history books and manuals on making art and photography. In a series of three canvases he used the major contemporary painting critics of that moment—Clement Greenberg, Barbara Rose, and Max Kozloff. The representational aspect of painting is also critiqued in a Painting That Is Its Own Documentation (1968), which literally incorporates into its form its exhibition history from its first public presentation in the artist’s first one-person exhibition in Los Angeles at Molly Barnes Gallery in 1968, to the present.  

In addition to the photo-text and text canvases in this exhibition, Baldessari included two illuminated moving message works that eliminate the canvas altogether by using commercial
THE SPECTATOR IS COMPELLED TO LOOK DIRECTLY DOWN THE ROAD AND INTO THE MIDDLE OF THE PICTURE.

advertising technology to display definitions of perception, isoccephaly, and viewpoint. For example, the text for LIGHTED MOVING MESSAGE: ISOCCEPHALY (1968) reads "isoccephaly—a style of composition characteristic of the classical period—especially in relation to Greek in which the figures in a composition are so arranged that they are all of the same height, as for instance in a frieze."

In the summer of 1970, Baldessari joined the faculty at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia and moved from National City to Santa Monica, California. Just prior to the move, he completed CREMATION PROJECT (1970), in which, in a desire to perform a ritual "house-cleaning" of his studio (a former movie theater owned by his father), he cremated the paintings he had produced before the photo-text and text canvases. He publicly registered this act on 10 August 1970 in the San Diego Union. Notice is hereby given that all works of art done by the undersigned between May 1953 and March 1966 in his possession as of July 24, 1970 were cremated on July 24, 1970 in San Diego, California."

That September the ashes and other documentation of the project were included in the historic group exhibition, "Software Information Technology: Its Meaning for Art," organized by Jack Burnham for The Jewish Museum in New York. — AG

Notes
4. Ibid., 37.
5. ibid., 13, which is in the permanent collection of The Museum of Contemporary Art, will be included in "Images of an Era: an exhibition of the collection at the Temporary Contemporary that will be on view simultaneously with "Porcelain Art: Reconsidering the Object of Art." When this work was reproduced on this cover of Ambition it accompanied Michael Fried's seminal essay, "Shane at Home: Frank Stella, New Paintings," which along with Clement Greenberg's "Modernist Painting" served to consolidate the formalist interpretation of high modernism.

6. Yield van Bruggen, John Baldessari, 98.
JOHN BALDESSARI
*I WILL NOT MAKE ANY MORE BORING ART*, 1971
Black-and-white video
32 minutes, 21 seconds (excerpt shown: 13 minutes 6 seconds)
Collection of Orange County Museum of Art
Museum purchase with funds provided through prior gift of Lois Outerbridge

Southern California native John Baldessari is a key member of the conceptual art movement that began exploring the relationship between language and art through various media in the late 1960s, often with the aim of critiquing contemporary art theory. Baldessari’s trademark humor is exemplified by his video *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art* (1971), in which he mechanically copies the sentence “I will not make any more boring art” down a sheet of paper, as if he was a schoolboy forced to copy a sentence on the classroom blackboard as punishment.

At its most literal level, the video may be an exercise in self-punishment to atone for Baldessari’s other work, which is vacant of any conventional aesthetic content and might be considered “boring art.” Yet this punishment takes the form of self-parody, as the video—with its fixed camera angle, lack of editing, excruciating length, and droning soundtrack—is, ironically, a work of “boring art.” The video humorously tackles a concept hotly contested in the art theory of the time: Baldessari has said that the video was his reaction to the “fallout of minimalism,” a 1960s art movement that was also derided as boring art. Baldessari’s willingness to work within the epithet of “boring” reflects his investment in confronting the critical language that structures the very definition and evaluation of art.
b. 1931, National City, California
1953 - San Diego State College, B.A.
1957 - UC Berkeley, M.A.
Various teaching positions from 1957 to present at
Otis, UC San Diego, Cal Arts, UCLA.

Voluble Luminist Painting for Max Kozloff, 1968
acrylic on canvas, 59x59"

Ordered Thought (Silver & Gold), 1986
Black and white photos, tinted photos on paper, 72x93 3/4"

Before John Baldessari became what one critic calls, "the dean of West Coast conceptualism," he was a painter. In 1971, he produced, "I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art," in response to his exasperation with Minimalism, and then promptly performed a Dada-esque ritual cremation of all his paintings of an earlier period. Films, videotapes, prints, photographs, texts, drawings and "found objects" followed in the artist's exploration of language.

Baldessari's work addresses issues about art, language, information, games and the world at large on many complex levels. He uses verbal and visual puns, double entendres, pairings, opposites and chance orderings. Beneath the seeming simplicity of his use of images, words and gestures lurk provocative ideas informed by the artist's extensive interest in art, literature, philosophy and art history. "I really care about meaning in art. I want things to look simple, but to raise issues and to have more than one level of comprehension."

In the artist's various word paintings, hand-lettered by professional sign painters, the use of canvas was his only bow to conventional notions of painting. "I wanted to be less artful than Rauschenberg and Warhol... Here's a text. That's it. And I thought, because they're done on canvas, they might be equated with art."

Aside from symbols of the English language, the words in Voluble Luminist Painting for Max Kozloff can be viewed as patterns or designs. Baldessari's well-known wit and humor are evident as he reverses the traditional roles of artist and critic (Max Kozloff). Words often used by critics to judge works of art are used as the subject of the work. Baldessari has, in effect, used the tools of the critic to make a painting.

In the 1980s Baldessari purchased still photos, many from "B" movies, for 25 cents each, altered them by cropping, etc. in order to change their focus, and juxtaposed fragments to form works. He often painted over them, as well, to obscure them partially. Re-photographed pictures from magazines and books were also used. Baldessari referred to them as "found" imagery and preferred them to his own photos because they had "an experience all their own." These stills explored the continuity of signs and symbols in the history of art. (Baldessari has stated, "I just like looking at images," in response to why he enjoys watching television without sound.)

In Ordered Thought (Silver & Gold) still snapshots are juxtaposed to play on the standard cliche that art makes order out of chaos. Two images of men, who appear deep in thought, are depicted in the top corners; one is tinted silver, the other gold. Sandwiched between them are three images of dead animals and one robed young man standing at attention. The white stripes provide order, while the skewed picture in the central bottom panel suggests chaos. Baldessari has remarked, "I just don't believe that life can be explained solely by right angles."

-- Phyllis Kleinberg
ARTIST: ‘Maybe It Is Time for a Show About Miracles’

Continued from F1
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 percent 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 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. I think the chances for art are better if we start out stating clearly what we believe—what 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 tosheshakes around, is that because people really want to do them? I'm not so sure.

Oh, 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.
John Baldessari  
b.1931

VOLUBLE LUMINIST PAINTING, 1968

Acrylic on canvas

Collection of the Orange County Museum of Art
Gift of the Betty and Monte Factor Family Collection

“I really care about meaning in art. I want things to look simple, but to raise issues and to have more than one level of comprehension,” explains John Baldessari. One of America’s premier Conceptualists, he is among a group of artists who stress the primacy of the idea behind the art as the reason for art-making, rather than the creation of an end product.

*The Voluble Luminist Painting for Max Kozloff* can be understood and enjoyed on many levels. Max Kozloff is a New York art critic who served as an editor of *Artforum*, a leading contemporary art magazine, in the mid-1970s. In this work, Baldessari isolated the verbiage of Kozloff’s art criticism and presented it to the viewer head-on without context or accompanying image, forcing us to think about the words themselves, as well as looking at them as visual elements of design. Reversing the traditional roles of artist and art critic, he took words used to describe or judge art as the subject of the work, using the critic’s own tools to make a painting. He further confounded usual art practice by hiring a professional sign painter to apply the words to the canvas, thereby totally eliminating the artist’s hand and emphasizing the role of the artist as Conceptualist.