

Pivotal: Highlights from the Collection
Orange County Museum of Art
October 7 – December 31, 2017
ARTIST INFORMATION

John Baldessari

Born 1931 (National City, CA), works in Santa Monica, CA

John Baldessari is one of the most influential conceptual artists in the U.S. He received an MFA from San Diego State College in 1957 and began his artistic career as a painter, later moving into photography. Baldessari's work addresses issues surrounding art, language, and information. In *Ordered Thought (Silver and Gold)*, still snapshots are juxtaposed to play on the standard cliché 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 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."

b. 1931, National City, California "I currently derive most of my imagery from movie
 1953 - San Diego State College, B.A. stills. I intend them as sort of archetypal images
 1957 - UC Berkeley, M.A. ...not connected to any particular period of time.
 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 Dadaesque 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 cliché 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

Summer 1989
Baldessari, John

not, in and of themselves, particularly revealing. It deserves to be mentioned, however, that the museum did amass several situationist texts which were republished and available for purchase at a reasonable price.

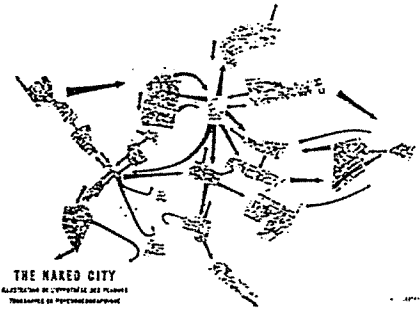
Coupled with this rather sterile introduction are signs of an excessively creative curatorial hand. The vitrines stand amid the likes of a pinball machine and quasi-constructivist graphics of situationist-sounding slogans stenciled on things like free-hanging sheets of Plexiglas. A peculiar mixture of mute objects preciously presented and gimmicky superfluity greets the viewer. That such discordant signals stand at the end of an area of the museum currently devoted to three large installation pieces by Bruce Nauman (all recently acquired by the Beaubourg) is unfortunate. The proximity of purposely disorienting artworks like Nauman's heightened the situationist exhibition's own confused character. If the Nauman pieces are at once destabilizing and impressive, the situationist exhibition, instead, is simply sophomoric.

Part of the problem with the situationist show is the absence of any effort to contextualize the movement historically. Were we to believe that the public is so knowledgeable about the situationists as to obviate the necessity for a certain generosity of analytical framework, we would be confounded as to the *raison d'être* of the show. Yet this is more than a mere sentimental commemoration since, after all, the show does, for instance, seek to outline the influence situationism has had on later cultural practices.

One way in which the influence is traced is through artworks, and to this a considerable portion of the exhibition space is devoted. The artistic production around the movement was not exceptional, let it be said right away. The most emblematic work is perhaps that of Pinot Gallizio. But even here, his simple "industrial painting"—a long strip of canvas painted in a manner meant to mimic assembly-line production—is a more succinct statement than the more involved *Caverne de l'anti-matière* which the museum recreated and which just looks like a cave made of bad painting. In fact, the situationist art itself is the dullest part of the show.

Artists not directly associated with the situationists are presented in a separate room. They include Mario Merz, Art and Language, Marcel Broodthaers, and Jamie Reid. The choice of artists is certainly idiosyncratic, but the connection is an interesting one to raise and one which cries out for further investigation. The situationist kernel of this art, if one wishes to call it such, is that art creation happens in everyday life. Unfortunately, this gets obscured by the casual placement of the artworks, which are lined up in a row, close together, like so many pigeons—an unthinking installation for work which tends to be highly porous toward its surrounding.

It is therefore provocative that across the room is a self-contained stretch of Jamie Reid's oeuvre. The creator of the Sex Pistols' album covers is thus



Guy Ernest Debord, *The naked city*, May 1957, illustration des plaques tournantes en psychogéographie, sheet printed only recto, 13¼" x 19¾". Courtesy Centre Georges Pompidou.

sumptuously represented. Connecting situationism to punk is not facetious, and punk *per se* may be a phenomenon worth coming to terms with since in some quarters it is even being interpreted as the linchpin between "modernism" and "postmodernism." One only wishes as much energy were devoted to the other artists mentioned above.

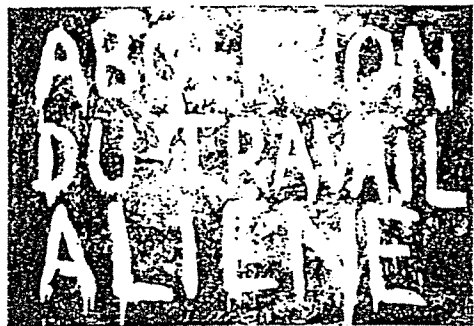
Punk raises the issue of cultural politics, which is a central criterion of the situationist movement. Curiously, the transition the situationist movement underwent, from a belief in the transformative capacities of art to a disillusionment with this view and an emphasis on more narrowly conceived political action, is not fleshed out in the museum show. Also ignored is the paradoxical absence of the situationists themselves from May '68, which was to no small degree inspired by, or at least in harmony with, their very own theories. Both the issues of cultural politics and of activism are compelling questions which reach into the gut of the situationist movement. By presenting situationism in a historical vacuum, by gliding over its glaring failure to assess adequately the events themselves as they were happening, the movement becomes the stuff of aesthetic *flâneurs*, making this exhibition a missed opportunity.

Far more rewarding is the John Baldessari retrospective at the CAPC museum in Bordeaux. This traveling exhibition began in the Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid, and after Bordeaux will make its way back to Spain, to IVAM in Valencia. The exhibition consists of a medium-size retrospective of approximately forty works. Although not composed expressly for the Bordeaux space, an exciting dialogue is generated between the works and the site—the top floor of a centuries-old ex-warehouse for spices whose newly painted glossy white pavement amply reflects the glossy Baldessari tableaux.

The conception of the retrospective is not particularly daring as it follows the standard chronological layout. Nevertheless, it is perhaps most illuminating because of this. Baldessari's early

The heatedly anticipated show on situationism—*Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps*—mounted by the Centre Georges Pompidou in conjunction with the ICA of Boston, did not live up to expectations. True, a museum exhibition of a movement whose salient feature is theoretical rather than visual is, by virtue of this, not easy to do. In fact, one of the central problems of this show was making the difficult transition from something as nebulous as a movement to that which can be appreciated visually. Nevertheless, the show fell short even where it could have made an incisive contribution.

A typical strategy employed in Europe for "theme" shows is to rely on historical photographic material, perhaps blown up to museum-scale proportions—in this case, say, of situationist "events." Instead, we are introduced to the subject of situationism through an extensive display of original situationist texts set in vitrines. While this may seem more serious than a photo-history, it is actually rather silly: clearly, in these conditions the books cannot actually be read, and their covers are



Guy Ernest Debord and G. Pinot Gallizio, *Abolition du Travail Alléné*, 1963, Oil on canvas, 30 3/4" x 43 3/4". Courtesy Centre Georges Pompidou.

works are an especially welcome component of the show, since one has had so few opportunities in which to see them. Indeed, what this show demonstrates is the extent to which the U.S. Baldessari retrospective, scheduled for 1991, is already overdue.

Baldessari's work stands out in two interconnected ways. The evolution of his work since the 1960s is interesting and significant on its own terms. Then there is the nodal point where he departed from other conceptual artists, and eventually this leads to what will become his own particular contribution to American art and, not least, to the singular influence he has had on younger generations of artists. Though these are trajectories that are already understood, I sense that they are not yet appreciated nearly enough. Moreover, with this show, they are connections which are conveyed by the works themselves.

It is evident that at a certain point Baldessari realized that he did not have to depend on words to maintain a conceptual program. Indeed, as he has said, for him behind every image there is a word, or a cluster of words. The earliest piece in the show is called *Pure Beauty* and it is a painting of those two words. From a few years later, there are works such as *Pathetic Fallacy Series: Tremulous Pink and Yearning Yellow*—consisting of a photograph of the color pink and one of the color yellow; and *Car Color Series: by Color Wheel (First Instances Seen Walking from Studio)*—six photographs of different colors taken from cars. These are lesser-known forays into abstract imagery (color fields) which preserve linguistic meaning. We know that he eventually concentrated on images of people or events to compose "sentences." This constituted a move away from the simpler, though perhaps more ambiguous, units of meaning that are embedded in colors.

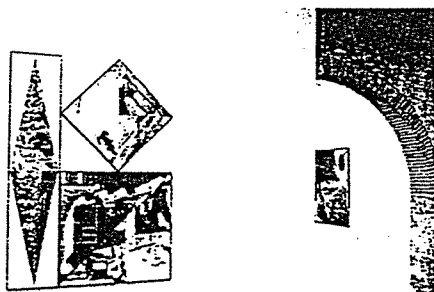
Another body of early work which deserves attention is the *Alignment Series*. . . : different photographs of palm trees aligned to make one long palm tree. As a result, the outer contour formed by the photographs so arranged depends on the content of the images. In *A Movie: Directional Place*

where *People are Walking*, photographs of people walking taken at different angles are arranged so as to trace a continuous track between them. The outcome is something resembling the shape of a G. This is an exploration of the outer physical shape imposed externally, that is, by the content of the imagery. Of course, this in turn depends on the criteria that the artist chooses for guidance—a point Baldessari addresses in early works also in the show, such as *Choosing: Carrots*.

Later, as we know, Baldessari will intervene more heavily into the content of the photograph itself (splicing; juxtaposing; cropping; making blank areas). And, finally, the outer shapes will also be determined by the doctored content of the images. What we see in this overview of his production is how Baldessari's work gets more rich and more complicated as he progressively layers new tactics and those borrowed from previous phases of his work into a single piece. In so doing he pronounces his own intervention ever more loudly.

The mid '70s are represented in this show by pieces based on violent and sexual imagery from *film noir*—something which the Spanish curator links to Goya. It is here that Baldessari's particular dissection of images is most transparent. This is amply the case with a work like *Violent Series: Story Outline that Ends Up Mostly in Bed*, in which photographs shot from movies shown on television are supplemented by a hand-written word which captures a crucial aspect of the scene. Other times it is the explicit title which makes for the transparency of the technique he employed in constructing the work. This is true, for instance, of *Violent Space Series: Nine Feet of Victim and Crowd (Arranged by Position in Scene)*.

Baldessari's '80s production is more complicated. This is true even of a relatively simple piece like *Light and Dark*, which consists of just two cropped images placed next to each other and together forming a standard rectangular frame. It becomes a visually dense piece, however, because of the way the cropping of the images intersects with the content of the respective images on the one



John Baldessari, Installation view, CapcMusée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, 1989. Courtesy CapcMusée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux.

hand, and the relations that are set up between the elements in each on the other. Baldessari's recent work is perhaps the most familiar to us, but, set within a historical overview, we have the tools with which to unpack it. For this reason, too, we can appreciate in just what way Baldessari influenced younger artists.

Concurrently at the CAPC is an exhibition of large group portraits by Clegg and Guttmann. Their work differs in many ways from that of Baldessari—it consists of generating staged scenes, as opposed to found images of situations; their images do not involve juxtaposing techniques but "superimposing" them, or techniques of stratification; they are action-oriented rather than linguistically oriented. On the other hand, the creation of fictions as well as the probing of the conditions of production and reception are clearly grounds these artists share. What emerges from these simultaneous shows, however, is especially something which signals both a similarity and a deviation, or a moving beyond. Simply put, the deconstructive practices outlined by Baldessari and others have been incorporated by subsequent generations of artists. The difference is that these last no longer feel the need to publicize the fact of said practices while employing them. In his writing on Clegg and Guttmann, Regis Durand detects this distinction: ". . . these are images with very fine cracks in them. They are not laboriously deconstructed or split open—a rather feeble form of critique, where negativity appears to show itself in the open, as if it were already accomplished . . ."

Stepping back from the shows themselves, one cannot help but value the more straightforward—albeit not daring—exhibitions of Bordeaux than the peculiar curatorial extravaganza at Beaubourg. One simply comes away with more. This is hardly meant as a critique of the strong presence of a curatorial hand which, I think, is more an "honest" than a self-effacing intervention—it being, after all, still an intervention, no matter how veiled. But the curatorial involvement must somehow interact with the full weight of the subject at hand. The situationist show is an example of the failure to do this; amid all the fanfare, it barely scratches the surface of the issues it raises. In Bordeaux, perhaps unwittingly, we have a gently thought-provoking constellation of initiatives, calling attention to themselves in a way that supports the primary purpose of the shows—to contribute to our understanding of certain art practices.

Daniela Salvioni

CORRECTIONS

Because of an editorial error, the reproduction of the painting *Aleph Series V* by Morris Louis on page 64 of our April issue was positioned incorrectly. The painting is actually vertical. Also, on page 46 of the May issue, an untitled painting by Gary Stephan was reproduced upside down. Our apologies to all those affected by these mistakes.