

the PARIS REVIEW

ARTS & CULTURE

Questions Without Answers for John Baldessari

December 13, 2010 | by [David Salle](#)



John Baldessari, *Portrait: (Self) #1 as Control + 11 Alterations by Retouching and Airbrushing*, 1974.

A major exhibition devoted to the mercurial conceptual work of John Baldessari is currently on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Here, on the occasion of that retrospective, the master painter David Salle puts some probing questions to Baldessari, his friend and former teacher.

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I have always felt a deeply humanistic undertone in your work, despite its use of irony and obliqueness. But I am hard pressed to account for why I feel it and sometimes think it's because I have known you for a long time. Where do you think it resides?

Is a Conceptual artist different from any other kind of artist?

A lot of ink has been spilled about art as the new religion, with the museum as its church. Do you agree with that view? Do you crave a spiritual dimension to art, or are you a pure materialist? Conceptualism is closest to: a) rationalism, b) romanticism, or c) symbolism? Where do you place yourself on that scale? (Hint: Romanticism insists on the primacy of the individual.)

Here's a fan question: How did you come up with the idea of singing LeWitt? I understand the desire to tweak the seriousness of Conceptual art, but how did you arrive at the idea of the singing? And did you rehearse?

What's the one thing an artist must never do? And, apart from questions like these, what is your definition of a bad art idea?

Harold Brodkey once said that people don't like to be outshone—they'll kill you if it bothers them enough. How have you managed to avoid this in your work?



John Baldessari, *Noses & Ears, Etc.: Blood, Fist, and Head (with Nose and Ear)*, 2006.

What is it that you most persistently and coherently think about in your work? What place do aesthetic effects have in your work? What's the most tenacious misconception about your work?

How important is intention in art? What did you do that was new?

Do you agree that you brought a new poetics to art? If so, how would you describe it? (Hints: the metonym, or synecdoche effect; the part for the whole, the fragment.)



John Baldessari, *Prima Facie (Fifth State): Warm Brownie / American Cheese / Carrot Stick / Black Bean Soup / Perky Peach / Leek*, 2006.

In what way is your work American—does it have any strains of puritanism, transcendentalism, evangelism? Do you have any sense of nationalism in art?

Bruce Nauman once told me that the most useful piece of advice he ever got was from Bob Irwin. Irwin told him to always slip the head carpenter a \$20 bill when showing in group shows—to insure that his piece would get built in time. Did you get any useful advice from an older artist?

You have always been a very responsible guy—an immensely productive artist, generous teacher, devoted father, art-world citizen. Does it ever make you a little wistful not to have been more of a screwup?



John Baldessari, *The Duress Series: Person Climbing Exterior Wall of Tall Building / Person on Ledge of Tall Building / Person on Girders of Unfinished Tall Building*, 2003.

George Trow once wrote that every language has a secret moral history. Do you think it is also true for visual languages, and, if so, what is the moral history of the visual language you have done so much to bring into common usage?

Who is smarter: a painter of average intelligence or a really smart dog?

You have courted obscurity in your work from the beginning—especially in the seventies—and you have also made works of striking literalness. What is the relationship between the two?



John Baldessari, *Kissing Series: Simone Palm Trees (Near)*, 1975.

Do you feel you have left obscurity behind? If so, is that one of the benefits of working over a long time?

Are you nostalgic about anything? Do you ever feel like Dr. Frankenstein, having had such a role in creating the monster of "conceptual art" that has so taken hold of art education and academia?

What do you feel when you hear an art adviser say, "I'm interested in work with a strong conceptual bias"? This is an overheard conversation, verbatim.

Andre Gide famously said he did not want to be understood too quickly. Care to associate to that? What quality in your work do you wish you had more of? Less of? George Trow again: "The writer has to have a machine gun in his heart." Any thoughts?



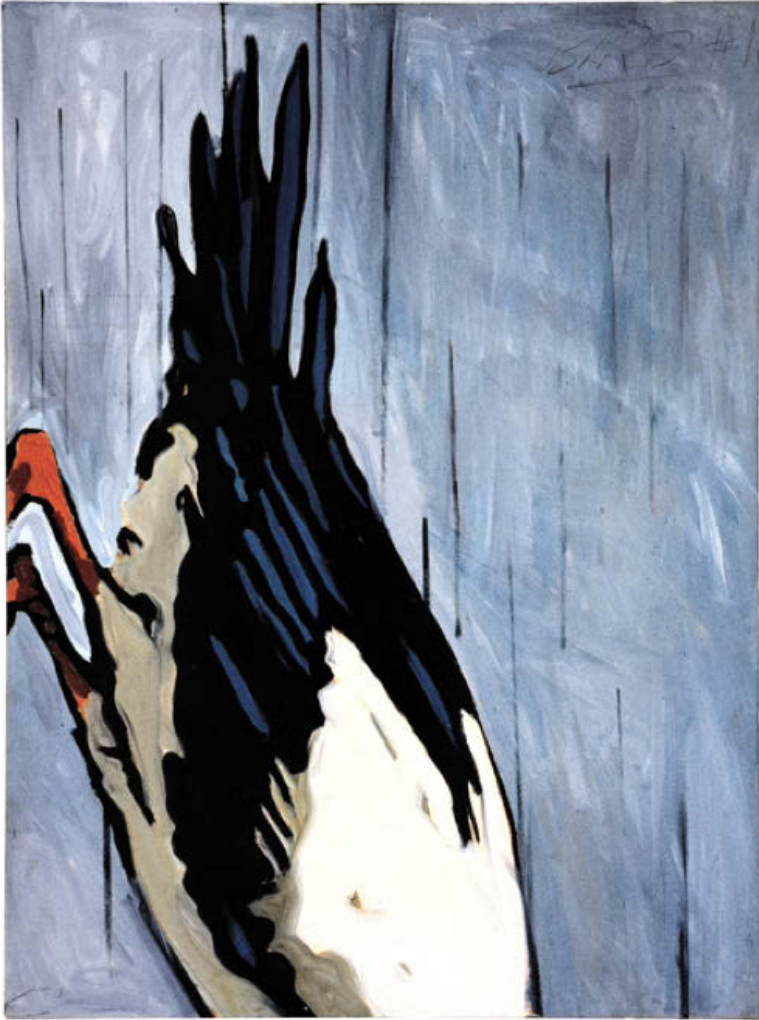
John Baldessari, *Prima Facie (Third State): From Aghast to Upset*, 2005.

Why do you think people insist on adding the word *practice* after the word *art*?

This question has been sent from the beyond by André Breton, the leader of the Surrealist movement: “Could you ever make love to a woman who does not speak French?”

And the follow-up: How would you explain the continued, pervasive influence of Surrealism even as the legacy of Freud himself seems to be fading?

Psychoanalytically speaking, what are you trying to recover or replace in your work?



John Baldessari, *Bird #1*, 1962.

Apollinaire wrote, "When a man wanted to imitate walking, he invented the wheel which does not look like the leg. Without knowing it, he was a Surrealist." I'm not sure why, but this kind of reminded me of your work.

If you were a songwriter/lyricist, would you consider it a crime to sacrifice meaning to rhyme?



John Baldessari, *Man and Woman with Bridge*, 1984.

Do you still claim to not know what art is? What if your family was being held captive, and you had to come up with a convincing definition to gain their release? Edmund Wilson wrote that Flaubert had more in common with Dante than with Balzac—someone who was his contemporary and who was using the same form, the social novel. Who is an artist you think you have something in common with who may not be the obvious one? Who would you like to be shown next to?

What are the sweetest four words in the English language? (Hint: better late than never.)

What is the difference between wit and humor?

Apart from yourself, name two or three funny artists.

You once said something to me about a fellow student's self-loathing as the engine of their art—an idea that surprised me at the time. Is that something that you think about often?

What if anything did you learn from Ileana Sonnabend?



THE SPECTATOR IS COMPELLED
TO LOOK DIRECTLY DOWN THE
ROAD AND INTO THE MIDDLE OF
THE PICTURE.

John Baldessari, *The Spectator Is Compelled...*, 1966–68.

If a law were passed that artists were only allowed to work in pairs or groups of three—that is, if art could continue but the individual artist was outlawed—with whom would you want to form a team?

What, if anything, makes a work safe from "rust and larvae"? (Hint: not its social importance but its art, and only art, says Nabokov.) If continuing to make art meant that someone you didn't know would be physically hurt, would you stop? Or would you just find a way to make something that didn't look like art? What do you think you represent to the people who admire your work?



John Baldessari, *Structure by Color Series: Simone with Fruit*, 1975.

Do cultures go through fallow and fertile periods?

When you find your inspiration flagging, are there things you do to revive it?

Have you shown a feminine side in your work?

How would you describe Duchamp's genius, and why do you think you found it so congenial?



John Baldessari, *Pelicans Staring at Woman with Nose Bleeding*, 1984.

Do you believe in the idea of a masterpiece, and what qualities must a work have to qualify as one?

What aspect of your personality has created the most problems for you in life, or in art? Do you think of yourself as brave? And if so, in what way?

Do you think it's possible for art to lie—and remain art?

Sanford Schwartz described the persona in Philip Guston's work as "Am I a genius, am I a fraud, I'm dying." Where is the angst in your work?

How would you describe your work to an ET who had just come to Earth from another planet, one where they don't make art?

Which is better for an artist: to be loved or feared?



John Baldessari, *Falling Cloud*, 1965.

TAGS David Salle, John Baldessari

1 Comments

Robert Ayers | December 14, 2010 at 10:00 am

Quite a delightful read.

Doesn't Cezanne say something somewhere about the artist seeing the world as a dog does? I think so, yes. I think I read it in an Iris Murdoch book. I could be wrong.