John Baldessari, Archiving and Creating

John Baldessari is a conceptual artist that decontextualizes stills by conceiving new combinations of images, mostly through collages. Over the years, John Baldessari has created an archive, an ongoing collection of photographs, objects and advertisements, which he uses as a fundamental element of his work. Featuring over two hundred file classifications, the selection stands as an archive of the 20th century American culture. The images connect the routine, the traumas and the vanities of a time in history, not only because of their content, but also because of the popular medium that is photography. Thomas Weski, chief curator at the Haus der Kunst in Munich, says: “The enriched, recoded parts and fragments of images not only enter a completely different context of meaning but also become, through the way they are montaged, completely new images, images which refuse to give any fast answers and even deny analysis in the generally valid sense.” In that manner, a new form of archive is created, one built on the collective memory induced by the pictures but individualized by each viewer’s interpretation.

A simple photograph of an everyday silver, metal paperclip on a grey background, framed in a white Polaroid frame, a hint on Baldessari’s use of archive, with one word written in bold, simple letters underneath it. “And”. Unrelated at first, yet meant for each other. Random and little information given, yet immediately our mind starts stacking together bricks around it, pulling threads of connections.

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building up a house of stories. Baldessari, famous for promising to himself that he will not make any boring art, created “And” from the Goya series in 1997 with synthetic polymer paint on canvas with an ink jet. With it he comments on his fascination of how people immediately can conceptually fill up an empty space between small amounts of information given. Less interested in the logical relationship between an image and text bonded to it, Baldessari pushes and plays with his interests of peoples imagination, by challenging the viewers mind with the at first random image and text combination found in “And”. “It is precisely by hiding things that he reveals them.” Comments Rainer Fuchs, the deputy of the MoMA, on Baldessari’s work, something one recalls when thinking of “And”. Belonging to the MoMa Collection, the piece shows what Fuchs comments, as “And” reveals our immediate intent of pulling a connection between image and text, which was only triggered because Baldessari hid the first obvious conceptual connection between the image and the word, compelling the viewer to think.

The first reaction by a viewer is that a paperclip, which is used to attach sheets of paper together, carries the same attributes as the word “and”, used to attach sentences with each other. Quickly explaining the relationship between the image of the paperclip and the word “And” written underneath it. The viewer naturally pulls these connections between image and word, sprouting a concept. This process of how people build up a conceptual connection when looking at “And”, plays homage to the Spanish painter Francisco Goya, who is famous for his depictions of brutal war scenes. Goya believed that the scenes he saw couldn’t be described by words. He described words being the weakness of a language, filling the pale emptiness of language with his artworks instead. The idea of an image telling more than a thousand words could ever do: that is what Francisco Goya believed in when depicting brutal war scenes within his famous etchings. This thought is what Baldessari borrows from Goya,

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4 It carries the dimensions 190.5 x 152.3cm.


6 http://www.artnet.com/magazine_pre2000/features/schjeldahl/schjeldahl2-4-98.asp
carrying him to the outcome of the Goya Series including “And”. Baldessari plays with the archive of Francisco Goya’s conceptual thoughts, less with his actual artworks. He stores, explores, continues and develops within “And” Goya’s concepts and beliefs of an image and imagination being more powerful than language itself, transforming it into a Goya à la Baldessari. Raising questions. Being playful. And always keeping it very Baldessari. This minimalistic thinking follows a long series of works where the absence of text is nonetheless evened by thoughtfully collaged and altered images that build a strong narrative.

“I believe in the simplest way I can get to something, absolutely. I believe in simplicity.” 7 John Baldessari’s statement represents the success that he has achieved in the piece “Beach Scene/ Nuns/ Nurse (with Choices)” by using relatable and simple photographs taken out of his archive in a modified and unexpected context. 8 The work of art features five vintage looking photographs that have been placed next to or on top of each other. Two photographs arranged on the left and right side of the largest picture show a nun in a white robe. The left nun’s face is covered by a dark green dot while the right one has an orange dot on her face. Both seem to be praying towards the large middle picture, which shows three muscular men holding a well-shaped woman at the beach. Each face is covered by a dot; the colors are red, yellow, royal blue and white (from left to right). On top of this, one can see a nurse. She is holding a cart and her face is covered by a dark blue dot. The only picture without a dot is the one to the right of the nurse picture, showing a hand behind a series of pieces of jewelry. It is the only one that is not aligned with the others as it is dangling on the top right corner of the central picture. The triangular shape that the photographs create is similar to the structure of an altar, clarified by the nuns on the base of the composition. Contradicting to this is the oddly placed picture in the top right corner. While the red cross nurse in the hospital complements the nuns’ devotion, the most eye catching and largest photograph gives a profane directive.


8 The collection of modified photographs was created in 1991 and it’s overall dimensions measure 92 x 144.25 in. (233.7x367.7cm). The piece has been exhibited in galleries like Sonnenabend Gallery in New York, Galeria Weber Alexander y Cobo in Madrid and Marian Goodman Gallery in New York and is now part of the Refco Collection of Contemporary Photographs with an estimated worth of up to $200,000.
As the title indicates, the viewer is left to decide between the topics of selflessness or narcissism, abnegation or greed or asceticism or indulgence. This thought provoking construction of photographs shows that Baldessari carefully selected these images out of his archive and were not randomly picked. The images used are public and accessible. On one hand, this accessibility attracts the viewer, and on the other, the simplicity and familiarity invite the observer into a comfort zone in which he or she expects to find qualities of honesty within the photos. Entering that zone, the onlooker is confronted with very posed pictures out of the media, contradicting the expectation of truthfulness. Instead of honest, the pictures now seem staged and underline the theme of opposite sides, letting the viewer pick which one to chose. Once used for demonstrative purposes or found in bright joyful magazines and billboards, the photographs have been taken out of their natural context and placed on a white background to start a thinking process within the viewer. The universal language that photographs usually acquire has been used to send the message of disagreement. The disconcerting vibe of dots on the human’s faces take that thought process even further. In an article about Baldessari, the author and designer David Salle claims that “his [Baldessari] art is about many things— it’s intellectual and emotional, witty, acerbic even, at times also melancholic, poignant, and self-revealing.” The quantitative qualities to his work surely play a big part in why Baldessari is able to reach so many people with it. Baldessari doesn’t use his “putting dots on people’s faces” technique as a signature for himself. Instead, according to David Salle’s interview with him, it is important to him to “go back and forth between wanting to be abundantly simple and maddeningly complex.”. His goal is to try to make his point as simple as possible.10 Like the interview on David Salle’s website suggests, John Baldessari literally “punches holes through modernism, turns conceptualism on its head and creates a body of work that is part comedic, part tragic, utterly semiotic, and absolutely all his own - just as seen in “Beach

9 Allan Sekula, “Photography Between Labour and Capital: Reading into an Archive” (New York: Reutledge, 2003), 448

Scene/ Nuns/ Nurse (with Choices).”[11] “[…] art history has turned out to be on John’s side. He initiated the use of pictures—photographs mainly, often with words in counterpoint—which has influenced generations. A life in art is full of contradictions: an art borne out of a desire to sidestep personal taste has become a universally recognized style—one that signifies a high level of taste.” Salle’s statement sums up which role archives have played in making his work so appealing.[12] The use of archives, Baldessari’s most distinctive feature, raises many questions. Where does truth rely? To what extent can someone alter an existing document? When does the reality of this altered document materialize?

One of Baldessari’s most disputed works is Inventory (1987).[13] "It was a very difficult piece to do," Baldessari said. "I didn't want to appear maudlin, but pictures of concentration camps so affected me. I feel that civilization is a thin veneer and could collapse any moment. I don't consider myself an overtly political artist, but I try to get between the cracks of people's psyches.”[14] In this manner, he uses historical archives in a very controversial way by juxtaposing two images of people shopping in supermarkets where products pile up in several shelves with an image of holocaust victims stacked in a train car. On the top left picture one of the supermarket clients is shown as a yellow silhouette turning its back on the black silhouette of the picture next to it. The rest of the pictures remain intact as a way to reflect on the reality of his denunciation. The artwork shows two different kinds of pictures: one referring to the world of mass media and advertising and another referring to trauma in History. The viewer is confronted to a dramatic experience forgotten or ignored on a daily basis. The spectator is overwhelmed by quantity as the accumulation of bodies contrasts the accumulation of products. Baldessari creates a new memory: one where

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consumption is put at the same level as the traumatic experience of the war, or one where
guilt is being sorted out and replaced by compulsive consumerism. The artist uses an amount
of carefully picked archives of his collection to transform the existing document’s context,
therefore creating a whole new situation. In consequence, the whole of his work can be seen
as a new archive of a stereotyped culture, one “which conveys a moralist's concern for the
state of the world.”15. Indeed, one can consider the absurdity of the historic progression
inferred by the artist. Consumerism follows the Holocaust. Is that the right direction to
follow? The artwork suggests that for improvements in the future one must be aware of the
past, hence underlining the importance of archives.

The majority of Baldessari’s work rests on the simple idea of creating a
language out of images. Whether text is added or not, the goal remains the same: relating
elements between each other, no matter how much they differ from one another. The intention
is achieved through a carefully thought composition as well as deliberated alterations of
existing photographs, as seen in “And”, “Inventory” and “Beach Scene/ Nuns/ Nurse (with
Choices).” These pieces are also related by their use of archive. In fact, Baldessari gathered
an impressive amount of material out of mass media, generating a gigantic archive of files.
His art is the outcome of consciously picked and appropriated documents that brought
together question the veracity of photographic evidence as a component of a historical,
empiric truth. How difficult can it be to write History? If confronted to his work as the only
archive of the America of 20th century, future historians would hardly be able to access the
actual facts. As a consequence, one could consider Baldessari’s greatest contribution to Art as
the conception of an imaginary archive of today’s society.

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