



BALDESSARI ALS ERZIEHER

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I.

Although we can sense, despite our relative lack of knowledge in the field of contemporary art, that what is coolest to like about John Baldessari is his series entitled *Hitting Various Objects with a Golf Club so that They Are in the Center of the Photograph* (and we certainly do not want to deny that it is fun to hit things with golf clubs, particularly if they are not supposed to be hit that way), this text is nonetheless about the *easier and most famous* part of Baldessari's oeuvre: the works displaying white cuts and yellow-and-red dots on black-and-white movie stills. It is precisely the easy-going quality of this part of Baldessari's art that we consider relevant as a starting point for contemporary urbanism, for Baldessari is our Virgil: he guides us through the infinite mediocrity of the field and he teaches us how easy it is to find beauty – “pure beauty” – in it. In fact, Baldessari is an educator (he started teaching at high schools during his art studies, and later went on to teach at juvenile correctional facilities, art schools and universities), and more precisely an educator in *contextualism*.

II.

Baldessari started to produce collages out of black-and-white movie stills in 1976. Even if his work is decidedly anti-dogmatic, over time the production of these images seems to follow a recurring pattern. The process is simple: The artist goes to a shop and buys second-rate movie stills, files them away using a provisional classification system, then selects some and cuts parts of them, sometimes adding touches of colour to certain areas, sometimes adding coloured dots and sometimes combining various images together. Baldessari



selects the most generic images, the ones with no identity – the “stuff nobody wants”:

At one place I go to for movie stills, I look where the photographs are randomly thrown in boxes. It's stuff nobody wants. Photographs they can classify or identify go upward in price . . . The stuff I get is twenty-five cents a shot. But I like that because I don't want stills from movies that I've seen or when I'm familiar with the stars. It has to be really obscure because I don't want any baggage to come with it.¹

The starting point for Baldessari's work is as mediocre as the field: it is the relics, the background, the “stuff nobody wants”, the almost-trash (not the pure trash – Baldessari does not want to shock anybody – but the *almost*-trash). The ugliness of these raw materials is as mild as the ambition of his artworks. The tone is quiet (and realistic). Baldessari's art is accessible and tolerant. No particular skills are necessary for doing this. Everything in the process is obvious – the kind of movie stills, the categories for classification, the artistic means . . . What kind

Stares Making A Point But Blocked By A Plane (For Malevich), 1976, black and white photograph with collage, 61.2 x 91.4 cm
Courtesy of John Baldessari

of art could be more obvious than this in contemporary society? Even kids could do what Baldessari does (in fact, making a fake Baldessari would be a perfect kindergarten exercise, provided you remember to have the kids use safety scissors).

III.

Baldessari works on found images in which he refuses to recognize a figure or a background. He understands the pictures as perfectly flat; the entire surface is equally interesting, and all of it lends itself equally to artistic intervention. Baldessari teaches us that everything in the field is equally capable of becoming the centre of attention (just like in *Hitting Various Objects with a Golf Club so that They Are in the Center of the Photograph*).

Baldessari's interventions modify their contexts, but never erase them: only what is already part of the field can be a subject for formal modifications. The collages are episodes of a larger, endless landscape with no differentiation between figure and ground, subject and context, nature and artifice. The flatness of Baldessari's collages is the flatness of the field: there is no centre, no hierarchy, just atomic splinters scattered all around – *California ist alles, was der Fall ist*.

This flatness is surprisingly similar to the inherent (metaphysical?) flatness that Aldo Rossi attributes to the city in a fundamental passage of his *L'architettura della città* (The Architecture of the City):

Accepting the spatial continuity of the city means accepting all of the elements that we encounter in a given territory – or better, in a given urban area – as being homogeneous without supposing that there is a divide separating each element from the next. This proposition can be very controversial, and we will have to return frequently to its implications. (For example, this proposition is not accepted when one maintains that there is a qualitative jump between the historic city and the one that takes shape after the industrial revolution, or when one talks about an open cities and closed cities as being of different natures, etc.).²

Rossi talks about the “spatial continuity of the city”, but it is easy to adapt his argument to *the field*.

As soon as something happens in the field, as soon as new matter organized in some way is introduced into it, it immediately becomes one more element among the others. It does not matter what the goals, the causes, the ambitions and the fears related to such a transformation were. As soon as a transformation is *material*, as soon

as it moves soil, piles up stones or establishes borders, it immediately becomes *mass within the field* that confronts and reacts with all other masses distributed in the field on the same *abstract and material* plane. The continuity of the field is simply the continuity of things that are placed next to one another, and this banal proximity is enough to establish positional (i.e. architectural) relationships within the field. The field is messy, dirty, perfectly indifferent and yet organized according to space. As such, the field is a *context*, even if there is hardly any *place* within it, and even if there is definitely no *genius loci*. The field is obviously natural (in the way that a nuclear plant is *as natural as* a mountain creek) and obviously urban (in the way that a parking lot in the middle of the fog is *as urban as* Piazza del Campo). Baldessari's begins with this (desperate and liberating) indifference/equality. Everything in the field has some sort of right to exist, and everything in the field has some kind of legitimate desire for beauty. At this point, a biographical detail about Baldessari might help to explain the artist's omnivorous attitude towards the field: his father was in the “salvage business”. As Baldessari recalls, “He would contract to tear down buildings . . . either buy them for very little or just get them for nothing . . . and then salvage all of the material.”³ Baldessari recycles the field in the same way, with the same combination of cruelty and dedication of his father's “salvage business”.

IV.

The ways in which Baldessari works on his found images are not overly numerous. Here we will try to provide a provisional list of them, despite our relatively limited knowledge. The list is surely incomplete, and by no means corresponds to any kind of predetermined plan on the Baldessari's part:

1. the erasure or cutting out of a polygonal shape within the picture (e.g. *Violent Space Series: Two Stares Making a Point but Blocked by a Plane [for Malevich]*, 1976)
2. the juxtaposition of images with a regular polygonal shape and the same size arranged orthogonally (e.g. *Concerning Diachronic/Synchronic Time: Above, On, Under [with Mermaid]*, 1976)
3. the juxtaposition of images with a regular polygonal shape and different sizes that are variously rotated to leave empty space in between them (e.g. *Violent Space Series: Six Situations with Guns Aligned [Guns Sequenced Small to Large]*, 1976)

4. the geometric cutting out of details from the same image (e.g. *Violent Space Series: Nine Feet [of Victim and Crowd] Arranged by Position in Scene*, 1976)
5. the composition of fragments with polygonal borders derived from different original source material within the same picture (e.g. *The Soul Returns to the Body*, 1986)
6. the insertion of coloured dots on found imagery (as in *Yellow [with onlookers]*, 1986)
7. the displacement of an irregular, sort of figurative shape into a new context and the filling of it with a solid colour (as in *Pelican in Desert*, 1984)
8. a combination of the above (as, for example, in *Bloody Sundae*, 1987)

Unlike other artists producing classic modernist collages like Karel Teige, Baldessari does not cut out neat figures in order to bring them together on a neutral background and produce surreal marriages. For Baldessari, it is impossible to separate the figure from the ground. The original context never disappears; traces of it always remain attached to the figures, which are never precisely cut along their borders, but usually enclosed in roughly geometric shapes. Baldessari allows empty space within the picture or between the pictures, but he does not use the empty canvas as his starting point. He does not add figures to a *tabula rasa*; instead, he erases parts of an already crowded image. If Teige's images are entirely constructed on the canvas, Baldessari's begin with a picture that is already created and can only be modified. In his work, form means subtraction, modification, commenting – marginalia on boredom.

V.

Under all circumstances, Baldessari's formal interventions are negative and contextual (and therefore dialectic). The pure negative of the cuts he makes and the almost negative quality of the dots he adds reverberate within the original pictures. Form produces consequences *around* it by suspending the given order. The negatives of the cuts and the dots enjoy their lack of precision, expanding possible relations. This deliberate imprecision has a liberating (maieutic) potential. By suspending consent here and there, Baldessari's instinctive scepticism activates a microlandscape of new possibilities. Still, his artistic actions need a context in which to react.

In *Violent Space Series: Two Stares Making a Point but Blocked by a Plane (for Malevich)* (1976), a white figure appears in front of two men

in dark suits. Baldessari's contextualism is proved by the (generally overlooked) fact that this figure is a rectangle and not a square. In fact, the line of the parapet on the lower left corner defines one side of the rectangle while the perpendicular running from the point where this line meets the left border of the picture to the upper border of the image defines the other. The ratio among the sides is 1 to 1.1. The figure is *almost* a square. Geometry gives place to context.

In *Violent Space Series: Nine Feet (of Victim and Crowd) Arranged by Position in Scene* (1976), traces of context survive in the seven circles containing the nine feet cited in the title. Shoes, pavement, socks and trousers provide several pieces of unnecessary information about a murder we do not see. The serene boredom of the context tames the tragedy. A constellation of quiet, everyday elements emerges from the suppression of the tragedy in the foreground. A pacified landscape appears. Baldessari usually works with Hollywood debris, mainly kisses, killings and the like, systematically depriving these scenes of any trace of drama. Faces are obscured with dots; feelings disappear; psychology ceases. His dots are generalizing devices: the figures they obscure can thus “be seen as types – *the mayor, the police chief, the student, whatever*”.⁴ Tragedy is removed from the scene. In fact, tragedy is not allowed into the field. Given that there is only global tragedy, local tragedies have to disappear. Tragedy is, in the face of the field, just a form of impoliteness. Within the field, form achieves the beautiful indifference of Handel's music. Baldessari's consistent amateurism is as impeccable as Handel's professionalism.

VI.

The field lacks more than a *genius loci*: it also lacks an aura.

Baldessari's work shows that, even under these conditions, form can still exist, a new kind of form, one that is humble, comic and weak, with an ambition as limited as that of producing a straight line by throwing balls in the air (e.g. *Throwing Three Calls in the Air to Get a Straight Line*, 1973).

Form does not seem to need particular justifications within the field. According to Baldessari, the situation is incredibly simple: as long as there are movie stills and yellow dots, there can be art. (What about this, Theodor W. Adorno?) The means are modest, as are the goals, but there is still an ambition to form. “Pure beauty” is deliberately the aim, and “pure” beauty is “artificial” beauty; the field is definitely not natural or picturesque. “Pure beauty” is not that

of “nature”. Baldessari activates abstract microlandscapes that are flat, logical, labyrinthine, baffling, erudite, artificial and funny like Italian gardens.

VII.

Baldessari takes on the risk of form – the risk of making better and worse compositions, of being successful and of becoming commercial (which is inherent in form, at a certain point). Sometimes a Baldessari is good, and sometimes it’s not (and that is art, with all its risks).

Baldessari also teaches that making art is fun. He has been faithful to his 1971 oath *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art*. There is pleasure in making art, and Baldessari’s work is thoroughly consistent with this assumption. Dealing with the boredom of the field can be fun.

All of Baldessari’s work, from the conceptual works of the late 1960s onward, is a sort of training for painting, an escape from painting and a preparation for painting – a detour on the path that returns to painting. His pieces of advice to painters from 1966–68 (such as “Composing on a Canvas”, “Exhibiting Paintings”, “What This Painting Aims to Do”, “Quality material . . .”, “Tips for Artists Who Want to Sell” and “An Artist Is Not Merely the Slavish Announcer”) need to be taken seriously. They are bits of advice that Baldessari addressed first of all to himself.

Just one last thing seems to be missing: why did Baldessari not go back to painting?

Maybe because he is an educator, somebody who waits someone else to continue what he did start.