

*‘Luckily  
I got into  
it when  
there  
wasn't any  
money’*



## JOHN BALDESSARI

Welcome to the world of one of art's most  
subtle yet innovative practitioners

---

words JONATHAN T.D. NEIL

**WHEN JOHN BALDESSARI WAS INVITED** by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Olafur Eliasson to join a large cast of brave souls who would take part in the Serpentine Gallery's Experiment Marathon (a follow-up to last year's Obrist-run Interview Marathon), which entertained and enlightened audiences over the course of 24 hours during the final weekend of the Frieze Art Fair this past October, he had to think up something to do. Competition was stiff, what with the likes of Steven Pinker discussing the links between language and consciousness, and figures such as Neil Turok describing the inflationary model of our universe. Not to be outdone, Baldessari let it be known to the organisers that he simply planned to turn water into wine...

And so he did. Very little would seem impossible for Baldessari at this point. Now in his seventies, the elder statesman of the LA artworld can add a little commercial success to his otherwise dedicated career as an immensely respected artist and highly influential educator. *ArtReview* caught up with the gentle giant just as he was preparing for his biblical act at the Serpentine.

#### **ArtReview:**

Water into wine?

#### **John Baldessari:**

I did a little short film of it years ago [1972–3] for a show at Sonnabend in New York. I had these little projectors of Super 8 film loops that they use in porno shops, and I just had it running continuously. But I never did it in person.

Do you think much about these kinds of crossovers between art and science?

Well, I'll tell you a story. I just got this Smithsonian Medal. There was a big dinner, photos, conversation, that kind of thing. I said hello to this one guy, and we were talking a little more than hello and goodbye. He said he was a biologist, and I asked him to tell me a little bit more and he said, "Well, I'm the codiscoverer of the double helix." It was [James] Watson [who with Francis Crick uncovered the structure of DNA]! And I'm thinking, like, what have I done in my life? But you know, he talked about how he started collecting art. He said at first he had a cap of \$1,000, but that was also when he only had a \$10,000 a year salary. That's a commitment.

As far as actual crossovers between art and science, years ago there was this show of art and technology at the LA County Museum. There was that E.A.T. [Experiments in Art and Technology] activity of Bob Rauschenberg's and Billy Klüver's too. But you know, it doesn't work. It didn't work back then. I think the only person that was successful was Bob Irwin. He had a good kind of marriage of the two, for a guy dealing with perception. You can't force it. All you can do is play Cupid and see what happens.

For someone who has taught nearly his entire career, do you see art schools changing in the future? Have they become too institutionalised, too professionalised? And do art schools serve to 'brand' their artists?

There is this foundation begun by Craig Robins. I'm on his board, and we're starting this new art school and trying to bypass all of the problems of art schools and bring forward all of the good things, to see how it would work... It's essentially an idea that you can't teach art, but if you're around artists you might pick up something. It shouldn't be about

real estate at all. It's pretty simple. With what we're doing, there will be no restrictions, but essentially it will be some sort of postgraduate thing, only ten students a year, and everything is free, with a good rotating faculty, and we'll see.

Do you think there is a commercial pressure on students to produce saleable work immediately? Is this the world within which artists have to work?



I hope not. One way you can look at it is to go back, to look back at New York in the 1950s and 60s, maybe. Everybody is struggling. If there were the money around that there is now, you think it would be any different? I think it would be the same... I mean, the money, if it's there, how many artists can be pure? If they are eking it out and somebody is waving money in front of them, the pressure and the competitiveness would be right there. I don't know how to get around it. It's just part of the equation. Like cancer. It's part of life. I don't think you should not know about cancer. You should know what's operative. I think the real mistake – and of course any student will say they know the difference, but you gotta know the difference between art and money – the amount of money does not mean quality. I think they still secretly believe that – that if nobody wants to show them, there must be something wrong with their art. And I say, "Listen, first of all, never call a gallerist a gallerist, call them a merchant. Then it's very clear. They have to pay the rent. It doesn't matter whether they like your work or not – if they think they can sell it, they're going to show you. It's that simple." But people still think it's all over if someone doesn't pick them up in a gallery.



***“Never call a gallerist a gallerist,  
call them a merchant”***

But it's always better to have someone who wants to show and sell your work than not.

Of course! Here's a case in point. Luckily I got into it when there wasn't any money. So if that money evaporates, then I still know what I'm going to do. But with a lot of artists, you don't know if they're going to continue if the money evaporates. Maybe yes, maybe no. A lot of MFAs – you know, I've taught most of my life – if they don't have anything going after two or three years, they say, "You know, why don't I just have a good life, where I can go out to dinner and get married and have a family." And they just stop. Well, the point I was going to make is, some of my early pieces, well, I couldn't give them away! – well, I did; I gave them to friends – but I think the highest price I ever sold one of those pieces for was \$200. One of those pieces I now have up at Marian Goodman's, for the anniversary show, and she called me up before I left and she said, "Somebody wants to buy it", and I said it wasn't for sale, and she said, "Will you take \$6 million?" And I'm thinking, I couldn't give it away!?! You see what I'm getting at? It's the same work. I'm the same person. I haven't changed. I still do the same thing I do.

That's a little disingenuous. You're still doing the same thing you do, but you've had this career, and your work and personality have been ascendant in the last decade.

But what I'm saying is that whoever is buying it now is buying it for *those* reasons, not because they knew the work then, because they could have bought it then!

But this becomes a question of the market, for which there's this death watch. There are those who are rooting for it, that the bubble will burst and there will be this cleansing of the artistic soul...

Well that's what they said in the 1990s, and because of that there was going to be this whole rash of unsaleable art, but I didn't see it.

Is it wrong for an artist to want to have a family and a place to live and economic stability? Those can't be mutually exclusive, can they?



No. Not at all. I think you can probably navigate it. But it's hard. And then if you're a woman artist, it's even harder, you've got a biological clock ticking. It's not easy. I think it's probably less than one percent – I'll be generous and say there are probably ten percent – of artists that can live off their work. Of course there are teaching jobs, so maybe you can get a teaching job in Wyoming, but, you know, then you're dead.

As it regards the market, and the kind of money and the kind of exposure that the artworld has seen over the past five years, do you think that this just is our reality now and not simply some temporary inflation as so many think?

About a year ago I was with my dealer Marian Goodman and we were talking about the same subject, and she said she thought there might be a paradigm shift because, all of a sudden, there's money from other parts of the world: China and India and the Emirates, and that it might continue, that this is going to be our world.

But that allows for a different 'future', different from the one that supposes that after some 'correction' we'll be back 30 years...





I just envisioned a great *New Yorker* cartoon with a guy on a street corner wearing a sign that reads, 'The artworld is going to end tomorrow! Repent!'

Do you feel that LA has this burgeoning scene the way London seems to?

Probably yes. I've been in Los Angeles since 1970, and metaphorically I've always seen the art scene there like a roller coaster – you know, ups and downs, ups and downs – but with this last ride, it's staying up there, and it may continue; there's every reason for it to continue. There's this curator at the Pompidou, Catherine Grenier. She did this LA show [*Los Angeles 1955–1985: The Birth of an Artistic Capital*], and she literally said to me – so I assume she's saying it to other people – "Art's over in New York, it's only in LA." That's a pretty dramatic statement! But there is a lot of cachet now to that name, 'Los Angeles'. If you get a young artist from Los Angeles, it has some kind of cachet; it seems to mean something, and that's unfortunate, because it means you're not looking at the work.

But this seems to have more to do with wanting to be a part of a community of artists. You could see in the 1960s and 70s that someone would want to live in New York...

Which is bad in LA – because of the geography, artists don't get together. You have to play phone tag. Maybe you see each other at openings. But in New York, because it's New York, you're jammed together, and you'll walk down the street and probably meet another artist and go get coffee or a drink.

It's funny, one of the first things new collectors often ask is, "How do you find artists?" As if you could throw a stone in Chelsea or Williamsburg without hitting one. But I get the same question from artists: "How do you find collectors?" It's amazing that these two groups can't find one another (even though we know that they do).

There should be collector/artist mixers! I've got to tell you a great story. I think you wouldn't mind. An old friend of mine is Lawrence Weiner, and years ago we're walking down in SoHo on a Saturday, and at the time Lawrence had a bad leg, and he was going around with a cane. So there are a couple people maybe half a block ahead, and he says to me, "Who is that guy? Isn't he an LA collector?" And I said, "Yeah, I think so." And with that Lawrence picks up his cane and starts running after him.

That story should get told more often. It would beat back some of the ideas that the artists working at the time had no interest in selling their work.

That's what I'm saying: if there was money back then, do you think it would be any different? I don't think so. You know that was my milieu. But now Mel [Bochner] is doing paintings. And with Lawrence it used to be "anybody could do it", and now only he can do it.

But at a certain age it's OK to trade on your reputation in the artworld.

Yes, but that brings up the idea of having a trademark or signature kind of work. You know my friend Lawrence, he always used to be on my back about teaching. He'd say, "You shouldn't teach. You should live off

your work.” And finally I said, “Lawrence, you know, I can change what I’m doing any time I want. You can’t.” That shut him up.

But you have a signature?

Well, I think any artist has, because it’s who that person is. Yes, I hope I do. But on the other hand, I feel I can do whatever I want to do. I just did sculpture. And the guy I was working with on these sculptures tried to give it a look that would be identified with me, and I said no, I’m sorry, but that would be adding something to the idea. So he went along with it. But I don’t think you can look at these things and know that I did them. I’ll tell you what they are. They’re six-foot ears, they’re on the wall and they have a replica of one of Beethoven’s ear trumpets coming out of them. You can talk into it and say, “*Wie geht’s, Ludwig?*” or whatever you want to say, and each one is programmed with one of his last quartets, which he composed when he was deaf, and it will play back segments of the music. I don’t think if anyone saw those they would know. But something of my sensibility I hope comes through.

So much of your work has challenged certain conventions of art-making, or ontology of art, between what is and what’s not legible as art...

I think this comes from teaching, because that’s essentially what I do teach, which is to question conventional wisdom.

So to put the question bluntly, how does this new work question conventional wisdom?

Well, on my own level, that’s always been something I figure I couldn’t do: sculpture. I don’t think that way. But then I thought, at my age, what the hell, I can do whatever I want to do. If I fall on my ass, so what? Whereas before I may have been a bit more cautious in my work, I’ve been getting more and more three-dimensional, using low relief, and so I thought: why not? But if I say “sculpture”, I still get scared. If I think about it as an object, or a thing, it’s a little bit easier. Sculpture still just terrorises me.

Because then you have to deal with sculptors. [Laughter]

Yes, and then I had this crazy idea in my mind, which of course you’re going to laugh at, which is that I really will not have gotten there until



I get off the wall. Which is stupid, of course; it’s just a convention. But it’s there. I just saw this adherence to the wall as about the marketplace; it just takes up less room.

This sounds like the 1960s creeping back in. Much minimalist art wanted to ‘get off the wall’, so to speak, though now a lot of it looks quaint in comparison to what’s being made today.

That’s because art has become more entertainment, and those things just aren’t entertaining. I’m on the board of trustees at MOCA – not that I go, but I do go to a few meetings – and you realise when you get in there, in the midst of it, that these museums are about ticket sales, and they have to have blockbusters. So what are we doing at MOCA? – Murakami. Man, that is going to bring them in. Now do you think if you had an Ad Reinhardt show that that would bring them in? I don’t think so. Could you see a Reinhardt on a billboard? But it’s more and more like that. And it’s perfect. Because there’s a huge Asian community: that’s going to bring them in. Murakami is like Warhol: that’s going to bring them in. And then this argument – I had to laugh – but Paul Schimmel said, “We’re going to have this Vuitton shop, and it’s going to be functional, because that’s part of his practice”, and I said, “Well wait a minute, part of your practice, alright, so you have the same show – but one of [Adolf] Wölfli, are you going to have a mental institution inside?” No, you wouldn’t have to, it is a mental institution!

The inmates are running the asylum.

Really. •

*John Baldessari is mentoring Alejandro Cesarco as part of the Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative. See Listings for further details*

IMAGES  
(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

*John Baldessari* at the Serpentine Gallery Experiment Marathon, London, 13–14 October 2007  
photo: © Alastair Fyfe

***Blockage (Blue):***  
***With Three Persons (One with Tie Orange)***, 2004  
three-dimensional digital archival print with acrylic paint on Sintra, Dibond and Gatorfoam panels, 229 x 180 cm

***Arms & Legs (Specif. Elbows & Knees), etc:***  
***Three Arms (Two with Flowers) and Statue***, 2007  
three-dimensional archival print laminated with Lexan and mounted on Sintra with acrylic paint, 152 x 156 cm

***Beethoven’s Trumpet: In One Ear & Out the Same Ear***, 2007  
(installation view). Photo: Ben Gill. Courtesy Arts Club of Chicago

***Arms & Legs (Specif. Elbows & Knees), etc:***  
***Three Elbows (One Blue)***, 2007  
three-dimensional archival print laminated with Lexan and mounted on Sintra with acrylic paint, 152 x 391 cm

***Noses & Ears, etc. (Part Two):***  
***Two (Red) Faces with Noses and Ear and (Blue) Hand and Foodstuffs***, 2006  
three-dimensional archival digital photographic prints with acrylic paint, 182 x 269 x 10 cm

***Arms & Legs (Specif. Elbows & Knees), etc:***  
***Arm and Plaid Jacket (Green)***, 2007  
three-dimensional archival print laminated with Lexan and mounted on Sintra with acrylic paint, 152 x 229 cm

***All works***  
Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York and Paris