

Art in America

Connecting the Dots of John Baldessari

By Alex Gartenfeld (November 18, 2009)



Visitors to the John Baldessari retrospective at Tate Modern will be surprised by the artist's variegated output. While Baldessari is as household of a name as one gets for an artist with a conceptual practice, he's primarily known for his colorful sequences of film stills, and found photographs in which the figures' faces are blotted out with painted dots. The retrospective evidences the diversity of Baldessari's work, beginning with his experimentation with land art, text works, and installation.

All of which goes to say that a catalogue raisonné for an artist as prolific is a task worthy of some great respect. Weighing in at just 600 pages, *John Baldessari: A Catalogue Raisonné of Prints and Multiples, 1971–2007* is a study in clever distillation of otherwise infinitely editioned works (consider that the catalogue raisonné for Cy Twombly, who until recently made all his work by hand, is in four volumes, and twice that many pages). New York-based art advisor Sharon Coplan Hurowitz, who previously worked as a specialist at Sotheby's in the print department and then at Christie's, initiated the project ten years ago, a timespan she describes as, "an average amount of time for a catalogue raisonné project—but as a project in general, it's a lifetime commitment." (LEFT: CHILD WITH KITTEN)

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Tonight's launch of the catalogue comes at the peak of an upswelling of interest embodied by the Tate show—a happy coincidence for a catalogue a decade in the making. Here Hurowitz explains the complicated role of the art adviser in the business of catalogue raisonnées, and why she couldn't started a project of this magnitude in today's art world:

ALEX GARTENFELD: How did you begin work on the catalogue? Where does one begin with a project of this scope, for an artist who is still active?

SHARON COPLAN HUROWITZ: Ten years ago it was certainly a sleeping moment in the art world, and I can't believe that I'm telling you this, but the truth is that I just gave him a call. After my research I know John's studios so well: they're too busy, and he's so well-protected, and I don't even know that he would have ever answered that call now. But that's what the art world was ten years ago.

GARTENFELD: Baldessari is quite well-known for his dot paintings, and his film stills. What bodies of work emerged from your research?

HUROWITZ: You're right that Baldessari does enjoy a great reputation, but that understanding of his work is limited. I think that's especially true in America, I don't think it's true internationally. When I started the project, he already had a very strong European following. I do believe that the recent Pictures Generation show at the Metropolitan is a love letter to John. And I think it took this past ten years of a sustained, scholarly interest in photography for people to realize and recognize that John made that moment happen.

In terms of bodies of work, Baldessari, like his contemporary Ed Ruscha—who of course has the other huge solo presence in London right now—is a prolific creator of artist books. He's been involved with some really wonderful monographs, but artist books have really been a part of his production, spanning his career.

GARTENFELD: And he had a strong involvement with this catalogue, as I understand...

HUROWITZ: Oh, yes! He has to do everything! [LAUGHS] For a man who is so busy he has time for everything. I think of him as the West Coast Chuck Close in the sense that he's so tied to younger generations of artists; he supports them; he is always seeing their shows; he's always on a plane. And he designed the cover, which is very simple and minimal and that was very intentional, and surprising to me. (LEFT: HUROWITZ AND BALDESSARI)

GARTENFELD: How do you incorporate material like books, which are so synthetic in their use of media, into a catalogue raisonné?

HUROWITZ: That was a challenge. This could've been seven volumes, and the years of production included could have gone on and on. The publisher stopped us at the year 2007. In general, editing was a huge part of this book and took a lot of time, because John doesn't work within categories. Everything is a hybrid for him, and everything overlaps in terms of the use of material. For any work you can ask, "Is it print, is it unique—what is it?"

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The artist books that you mentioned are only listed in the back of the catalogue raisonné, There was not a complete section dedicated to it. That was just by virtue of space. John is also unique because most artists who work with printmaking and multiples focus on one or two publishers their whole career. John has been able to navigate so many publishers, and there were so many projects that I had no way of knowing about until I got on the phone with Germany—or Rejkavik, as it were.

GARTENFELD: For you, what is the importance of the multiple in John's career and his method? In watching him work or being in correspondence with him, what place do they hold, if any, as a special section in his process?

HUROWITZ: It's the most collaborative part of his art-making. In being so diversified, he knows how to extract the best from each—the best silk-screener, or the best three-dimensional multiple maker. I've never seen anyone who can navigate micro-industries like that, it's incredible.

GARTENFELD: You come at catalogue production from a specific position, in that you have worked at the same time as an art adviser, rather than a scholar working out from an academic context. How has your background informed the production of this book?

HUROWITZ: At the end of the day this is a tool. Yes, I would love it to be on coffee tables, and it will serve that purpose because of the scale and generosity of the imagery, but it is also a working tool, so if it doesn't work then I failed. So I spent a lot of time making sure that the layout and the presentation was clear and accurate. I didn't want appendices, I didn't want subsections—I wanted real clarity.

GARTENFELD: One of the difficulties of making a catalogue raisonné for a living, very active artist is the fact that he keeps making work. How did Baldessari's continuous output affect your process as you were organizing and editing from an already-large number of works?

HUROWITZ: I've been keeping a record. To be honest, the publisher put their foot down in terms of the end date—the artist and I wanted to include in this volume work from 2008, but we couldn't. I've been keeping files on everything he's been making since; in hopes to one day revise it! (RIGHT: OVERLAP SERIES: PALM TREE)

Fendi Launches John Baldessari: A Catalogue Raisonné of Prints and Multiples, 1971–2007,
November 17, 7–9 PM. Fendi is located at 655 Fifth Avenue