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Notes on Jokes

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JOHN BALDESSARI, RADICAL PHILOSOPHER? You'd be forgiven for laughing out loud at the question, since the generally affable septuagenarian artist who some thirty-five years ago could be found humbly waving goodbye to sailboats (as they came into port) is not usually the first person authorities cite as an unruly element. And yet when looking at the current issue of *Artforum*—and, more specifically, at Paolo Virno's 2005 treatise *Jokes and Innovative Action: For a Logic of Change*, a selection of which appears here for the first time in English—one inevitably gravitates toward Baldessari's practice as a potentially provocative model, particularly as it is steeped in both philosophies of language and, more pertinently, of pedagogy. Certainly, that such a hard-nosed theorist as Virno turns, in his latest book, to humor as a political conduit—seeking to create a sense of *possibility* today—suggests that the Los Angeles–based artist's corpus may have timely implications, hitherto underappreciated. After all, in Baldessari, Virno's endeavor finds a plain enough match. To quote the artist, writing in these pages just last month: "Jokes (unfortunately?) explain the world to me. Jokes are usually illogical, but to me the reverse is true—they support my view of existence."

The generative character of this perplexing proposition, put into action within the field of art, has been obvious throughout Baldessari's career. One merely has to point back at canvases featuring deadpan quotations of critics Clement Greenberg and Barbara Rose advocating for specific modes of art-making, such that the artist places their ideas at a critical distance even while, somewhat paradoxically, making of them the very substance of his work. In surmising the effect, it hardly seems a stretch to take up Wittgenstein's example, recounted by Virno in *Jokes*, of pausing before a street sign and considering the possibility of taking a different path: "It is," Virno says, "precisely this disturbing option, perfectly exemplified by jokes, which reveals that even the automatic continuing down the road was, for all intents and purposes, a *decision*." For decades,

Baldessari has clearly been wary of unthinking conformity to any such set parameters (in art, in life), and it is this kind of deep-seated, imaginative hesitation lights the desire for play—that has in his work consistently formed the basis of a humor that lasts. The consequences are not to be ignored. In one of the finest texts to date on Baldessari, written a decade ago, art historian Abigail Solo mon-Godeau wonders why she still bursts out laughing whenever she sees his canvas *Wrong*, 1967–68—for which the artist photographed himself standing directly in front of a palm tree, so that its trunk appears to sprout from his head—and she attributes her merriment to the work's ability to unsettle as it reveals unspoken ideas of composition (and of the aesthetic) that still hold sway over us. "*Wrong* offers a different range of pleasures," she concludes, "the *jouissance* of anarchic subversion, the libertarian joy of upsetting rules, hierarchies, and conventions."

Put another way, such work renders the silent, even supposedly disavowed abstractions that guide most art-making and everyday life more concrete—and, in so doing, creates a sense of agency for the individual, viewer and artist alike. From this distinctly political perspective, and in our own historical context—when the terms for debate within art are perhaps not so clearly drawn or immediately evident as they were in the days of Greenberg and Rose, even while the powers of convention remain strong—Baldessari's enterprise harbors unique potential. Indeed, it seems of no small interest today that a particularly important aspect of the artist's practice should be his role as a teacher of art. For here again Baldessari is a figure of paradox: One may reasonably argue that he is by now among the most influential voices of art education during the past century, but only while also acknowledging that he questions its very premise—and thereby reinvents it. As he observes in *Kunst lehren* (Teaching Art), a compendium of essays and interviews published last year by Frankfurt's Städelschule, "I don't think art can be taught. I really don't. But I do think that one of the advantages of an art school is that the student gets to meet artists. The value of that is that they see that artists are humans; art isn't something esoteric that's in books and magazines and museums, it's done by real people."

No doubt, Baldessari would be willing to turn even that assertion on its head: Art might be made by people, but if a certain 1972 video by the artist is any indication, pedagogy is for the plants. Yet this idea of not taking any rules for granted—of relocating them in life, of making them more concrete in order to show their manipulability, of rearranging their various

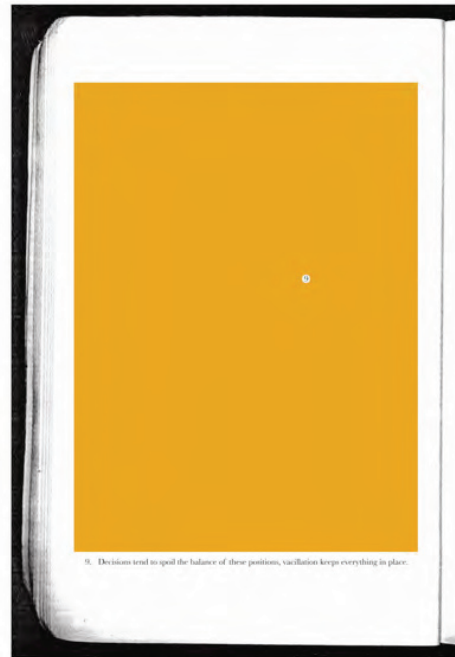
elements in disjunctive combinations to reveal the ultimate incommensurability of the rule and its application and thus create a space for innovation—still gives us some sense of what we can reasonably take away in an art context from a reading of Virno's *Jokes*. (I say this advisedly since, as Gerald Raunig cautions in this issue, any application of cultural theory in art is bound to lose certain properties; though here I might add that art's significance in relation to culture stands to gain some resonance in return.)

Indeed, to see the productive potential of wit one need look no further than an exhibition last month at Murray Guy in New York, for which Baldessari collaborated with Alejandro Cesarco, a young artist who has himself garnered much attention of late for his language-based work (and for his editing of A.R.T. Press's series of published conversations between artists). Discussing the joint project in a recent interview, Baldessari called it a "diagram of teaching"; but it offers the kind of altered grammar necessary for art-making more generally as well. After meeting with one another over the course of a year as part of an artists' mentorship program, the duo produced twelve panels, each featuring the scanned image of a book whose text is replaced by a solid block of color. Cesarco then captioned the panels with texts pertaining to the idea of retrospective looks, which he either wrote himself or found. Some of the latter are difficult to place, others less so: "The work of memory (reading oneself backward, he called it) somehow collapses time," comes from Susan Sontag's writings on Walter Benjamin, for instance. In turn, the elder artist offers a reply in the margins—holding up cracked mirrors of a sort that, with gentle irony, unfold Cesarco's logic, goading it on while bringing it back to earth. ("Time wounds all heels," he says in one; "Amis is as good as a style," he comments in another.) Whatever his jesting tone, Baldessari asks for some response in turn (even if there are no answers): To paraphrase another radical philosopher, a one-liner is never just a one-liner. And that goes some distance toward explaining how this artist's practice has remained viable for four decades, demonstrating critical promise, even as the cultural context in which he worked—and continues to work—has altered beyond recognition. His reply to Sontag's paraphrase of Benjamin: "If 'esprit de escalier' means what one would have liked to have said, what is the wit of the escalator?"

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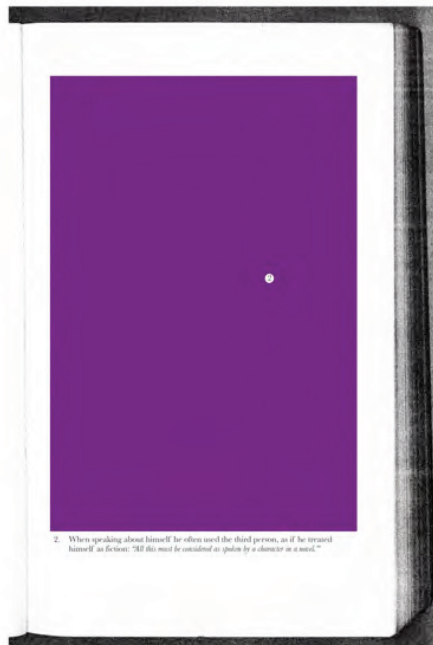
That's the truth.



On the other hand ...



The space between things is more important than those things.



Clockwise from top left: **John Baldessari and Alejandro Cesarco, Retrospective #10, 2007**, silkscreen on aluminum, 48" x 36". **John Baldessari and Alejandro Cesarco, Retrospective #9, 2007**, silkscreen on aluminum, 48" x 36". **John Baldessari and Alejandro Cesarco, Retrospective #2, 2007**, silkscreen on aluminum, 48" x 36". **John Baldessari and Alejandro Cesarco, Retrospective #5, 2007**, silkscreen on aluminum, 48" x 36".