

**John Baldessari : e.g., grass, water
heater, mouths, & etc. (for John Graham)
: the Museum of Modern Art, New York,
March 17-May 10, 1994**

Author

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from our founding in 1929 to the present—is
available online. It includes exhibition catalogues,
primary documents, installation views, and an
index of participating artists.

ARTIST'S CHOICE
John Baldessari

e.g., Grass, Water Heater, Mouths, & etc. (for John Graham)



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FOREWORD

This is the fourth in an ongoing series of exhibitions; in each, an artist is invited to mount a small show drawn from the Museum's collection. The series was conceived with several goals in mind. Most simply, it allows our visitors a chance to see the works in the collection in a fresh way. The Museum's normal display reflects the curators' selections according to hierarchies of historical importance, and has been traditionally divided in terms of separate mediums (photography in one area, paintings in another, etc.), and presented in a linear, chronological order. The artist, freed from these constraints, can mix mediums, bring less familiar works to the fore, and show well-known masterpieces in surprising contexts. Such intentionally idiosyncratic selections both challenge us to see more, and to see differently.

Beyond expanding our sense of the depth and richness of the Museum's holdings, these personal groupings also underline the ongoing relationship between the Museum's role in preserving the past of modern art and its engagement in contemporary creativity. The Artist's Choice shows suggest how contemporary innovation may be joined to a personal vision of modern art's past. By seeing the collection through the eyes of artists who use it as a base for new departures, we appreciate more fully the ways in which the Museum is a living resource for the continued unfolding of modern art.

As few limits as possible are placed on what each artist may do, and each approaches the opportunity differently. John Baldessari is the first to make a new work as a part of his presentation, assembling a hybrid construction of details from paintings, prints, drawings, photographs, and film stills from various departments of the Museum. Working with reproductions on varying scales, he breaks works apart and reassembles

their fragments into a new form, in which the "meaningless" serendipity of odd formal or thematic similarities can spur unexpected new meanings. Baldessari's constant questioning of the standard logic of pictorial arrangements within individual works and among groups of images engages serious issues of language structure and meaning with a deft, light-hearted blend of playfulness and pedagogy. This tenor is, of course, personal, but it also exemplifies the ways in which Southern California has produced a distinctive variant style in Conceptual Art, as in Minimalism and Pop. Los Angeles, with its relatively unchanging climate, its scarcity of monuments of pre-modern history, and its culture—which includes long, contemplative stretches in automobiles and a special relation to the illusions of movies—seems to have nurtured a special kind of sly, deadpan humor and detached irony. Baldessari is a master of that sensibility.

From the particularity of Baldessari's selections, we might draw at least two general lessons. First, Baldessari shows how photographic reproduction can enlarge the descendancy of works of art, encouraging individual parts to migrate and spawn separately in rogue fashion. Second, his collage is a particularly vivid demonstration of a crucial way in which modern art has evolved and continues to evolve—not as a linear relay race of movements and isms, but through hybrids, mutations, and unpredictable recombinations that are first produced by individual sensibilities and then attract—as Baldessari's work clearly has—new "schools" around them.

Kirk Varnedoe
Chief Curator
Department of Painting and Sculpture

DATING BARS AND MONTAIGNE

John Baldessari

I love to go to a museum and play games and think of all the paintings on the wall as if connected like frames in a strip of movie film. Or think of, say, a van Gogh near a Cézanne. If a blank canvas were inserted between, what kind of painting upon it would convert the three into a seamless whole?

Or looking at a Picasso, if it were placed in the middle of a much larger canvas, and the painting continued to the new borders, what would it look like?

Or a reassembled Greek vase with missing shards replaced with plaster—how I am able to fantasize upon that tabula rasa. The power of vacancy, of nothingness. How interesting a void can be! And if the original shards were replaced one by one with plaster shards, when would the vase become a part rather than a whole? What is the difference between a part and a whole? (It is a matter of intent; of what I want it to be.) If a Richard Long rock piece were substituted rock by rock, at what point (if any) would it be stolen?

Art musing. But then, that is how art is made—by play.

Of several ideas for this project what I decided to do was to go about it as if I were doing art of my own. Often I rummage through boxes of unsorted photos. I would do the same at MoMA.

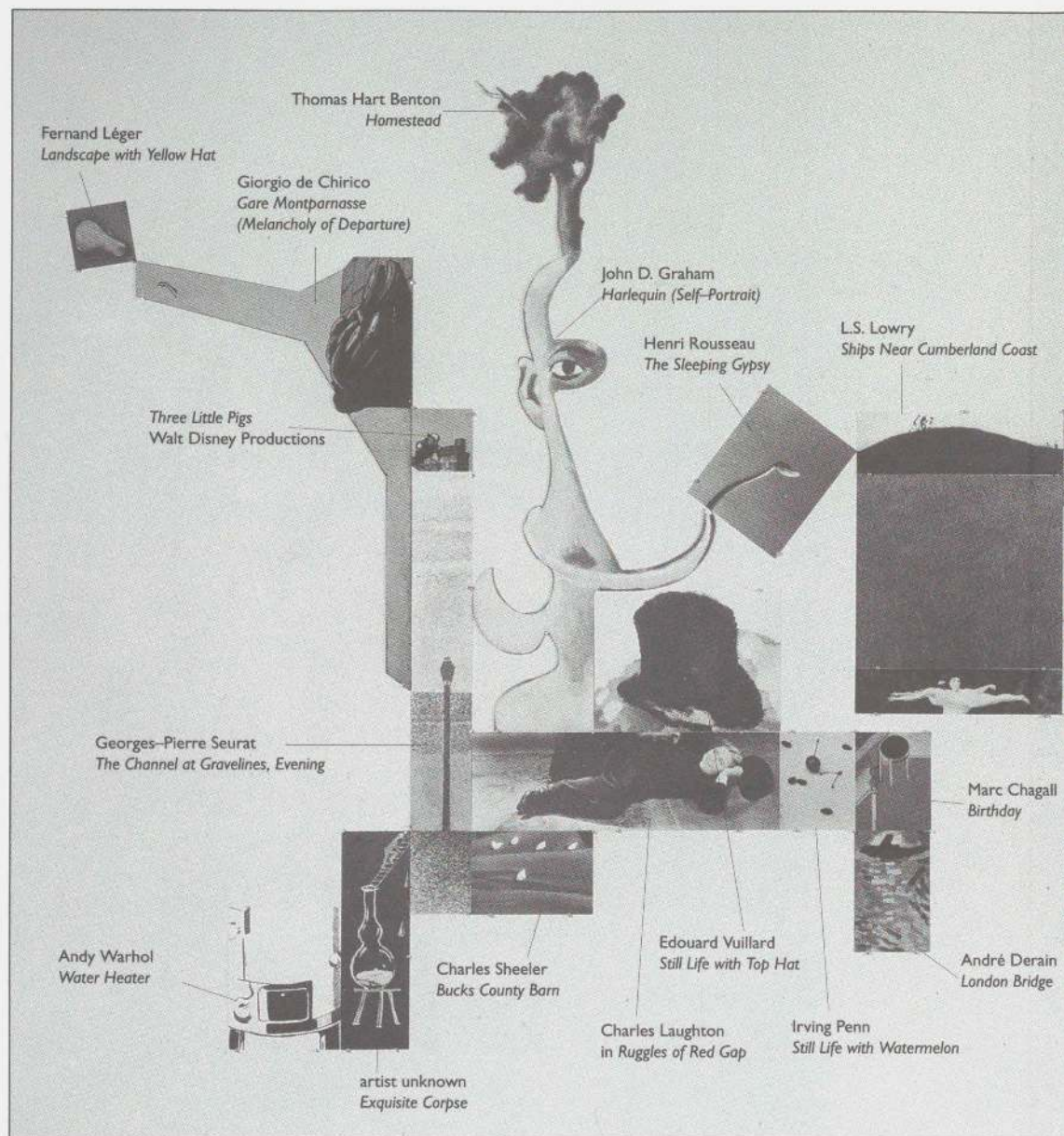
I went through notebooks of photo documentation looking for some element or detail that would jump out at me. In going to galleries, I'm happy if at the end of the day I find at least one square inch of good painting. I'd prefer to like an entire paint-

ing, but less will suffice. It may be a line, a shape, or even a subject (a cup or a shoe). Little paintings within paintings maybe, like those Russian dolls. I seldom see an image that I do not want to crop. Usually the image will have too much fat, too much baggage. I think I can make it better, more essential, tighter in what I feel it might accomplish.

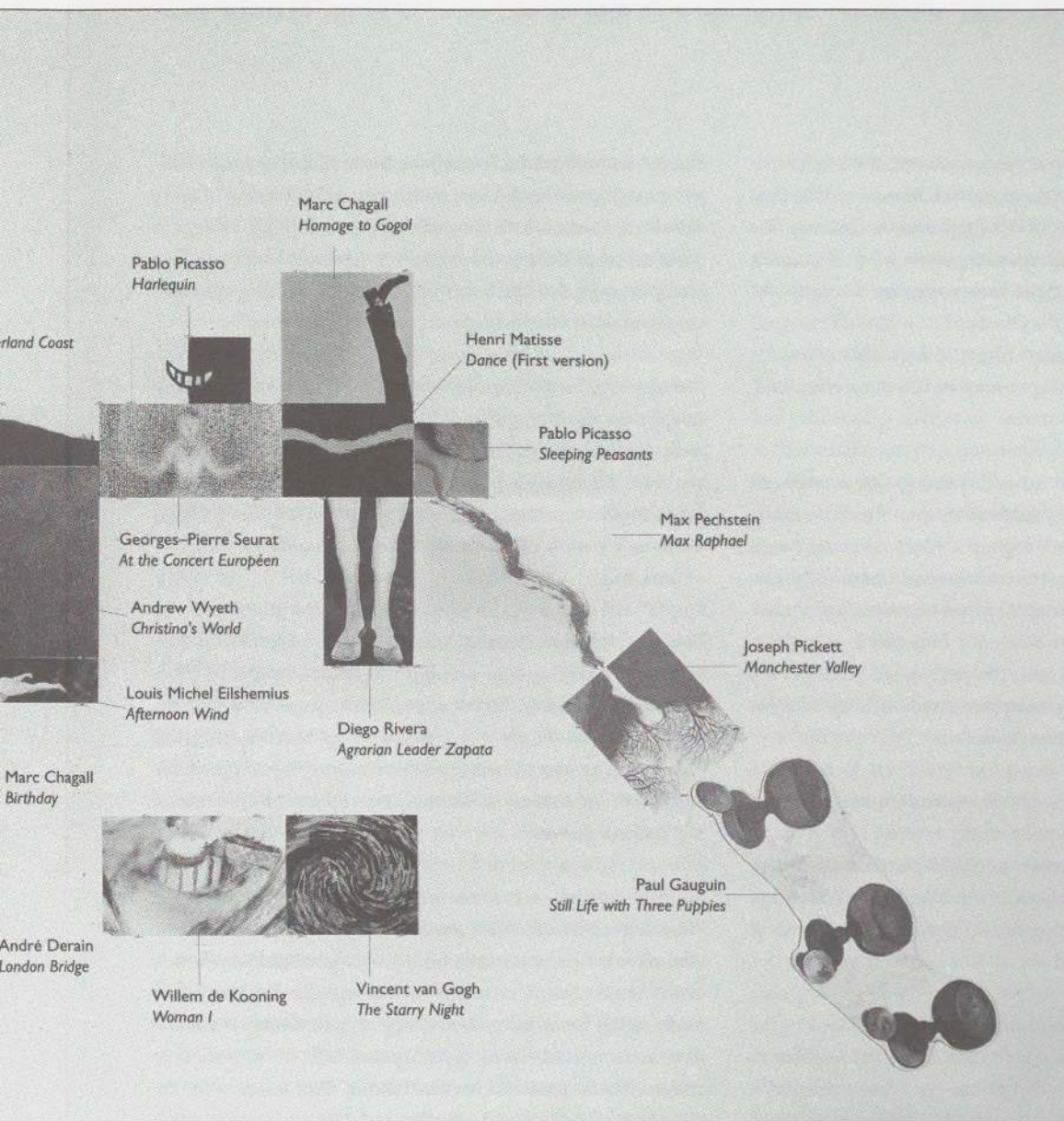
Perhaps it is the tyranny of the frame. By playing these games I can prevent the frame from closing in, from dominating. I select and I crop and I have all these details of works. As a result, icons are made manageable and less important works become better. A democratization. Like Elvis in the army. Yet each cropped element is a work of art for me and each lovable (as in a litter of little dogs).

The next job is to assemble these diverse parts into a new whole, to build them like words in a sentence or phrase. They are like words that jump out at me from a page. Why, in scanning a page, be it a page in a dictionary or a novel, do some words defy gravity—levitate before my eyes? *Fey* or *jejune*, for example. That an essay could be written about each gives proof of dormant power.

So trial pairings are attempted, with the artist as cupid. Wouldn't it be a windfall if words could seek the word of their dreams in the personal columns? Sparks fly; magnetisms occur. In the singles bar of words, awkward attempts at pairings are made. What word will go home with another word? Perhaps a threesome occurs. Or a couple appears to bond with another couple. There are divorces, separations. The words unite for diverse reasons—they look alike or they don't, they share



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different values or they don't, and so on. But if the connection is to be right, it must not be too much the same, or too little. A certain tautness is necessary. The goal is to establish a community with as few excluded as possible. The perfect dinner party or stew where there is connectedness because certain adjustments have been made. Some made larger, some smaller; color added or subtracted; maybe not the outfits they normally wear. Cut off from their old family to form a new one. Perhaps akin to leaving home for college.

But what about the original families? Emily (or Joey) was never noticed—just a cog. The spotlight shines on Emily and she is a star. The others will have their day another time. What about Joey's family? Let us show him as Joey-as-missing. An absence but powerful in this new guise. Joey as the plaster shard.

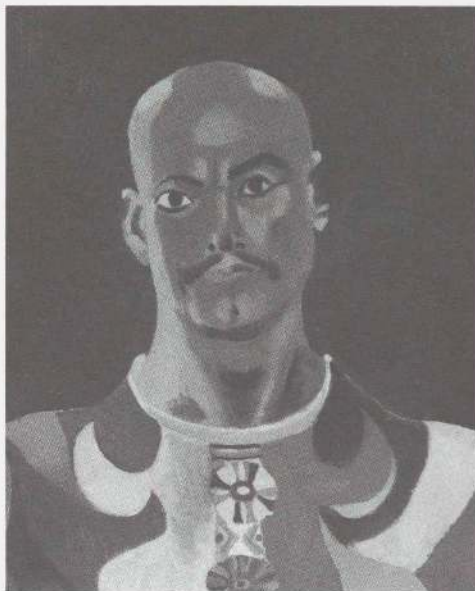
Let us return to the new community.

Will it last, this utopia?

Did these parts unite on their own or was there a master builder? What would an archaeologist or anthropologist find? Were some principles discovered from a bird's-eye view? Yes. A meandering baroque configuration with grid-like indications. A bit like a constellation—hovering between a collection of parts and an entity ready to explode into further new parts.

Will the center hold? And if so, for how long?

Artists carry around their own museums in their minds. A lexicon of images to select from and form essays later. From Montaigne's focusing upon certain topics we feel we know him. In knowing Montaigne, we arrive to look at dog-eared truths anew. Until someone spots a sentence in Montaigne that levitates, and then the process starts afresh.



Above: John D. Graham. *Harlequin (Self-Portrait)*. c. 1944.
Oil and pencil on canvas, 24 1/8 x 20 1/4". The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Margery and Harry Kahn, 1973.
Cover: John D. Graham. *Harlequin (Self-Portrait)* with shape excised by John Baldessari

John Baldessari

Born 1931, National City, California
Attended San Diego State College, California, 1949–53;
received B.A., 1953
Attended University of California at Berkeley, 1954–55
Attended University of California at Los Angeles, 1955

Attended San Diego State College, California, 1955–57;
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Attended Otis Art Institute, Los Angeles; Chouinard Art Institute,
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Lives in Santa Monica, California, and New York City