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John Baldessari  
Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get a Straight Line (Best of Thirty-Six Attempts)  
1973

**ARTIST**

John Baldessari (1931-2020)

**TITLE**

Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get a  
Straight Line (Best of Thirty-Six Attempts)

**MEDIUM**

A full framed set of 12 colour  
photo-lithographs on coated stock paper

**DATE**

1973

**SIZE**

Each 9 1/2 x 12 5/8 in : 24.1 x 32.0 cm

**EDITION**

From the unsigned edition of 2000,  
subsequently signed for a friend of the artist

**INSCRIPTIONS**

This set SIGNED by the artist on the  
justification sheet. EXTREMELY RARE

**PRINTER**

Printed by Piera Crovetti, Milan

**PUBLISHER**

Published by Giampaolo Prearo  
& Galleria Toselli, Milan

**LITERATURE**

Sharon, Coplan and Hurowitz 471

**PROVENANCE**

Acquired directly from the artist;  
Private Collection, Los Angeles

**REFERENCE**

A21-71 / C16-49





Ever since the onset of photography, the roles of the hand and the arm in making art have been subject to doubt. Once the definitive means of bringing an idea into form, these human appendages could seem feeble or quaint in an age of science and industry. Allowing gravity to participate in marking became a vital way to give art a deeper or more objective structure. Marcel Duchamp dropped threads to make the lines of his pivotal 1913–14 work *3 Standard Stoppages*, and Jackson Pollock later dripped paint to push the limits of his control over line. These tactics called attention to art making as a performative grappling with chance and indifference.

In his 1973 series *Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get a Straight Line (Best of Thirty-Six Attempts)*, John Baldessari brought his impish wit to this modernist turn. He threw three balls in the air in hopes that a snapshot might catch them aloft and aligned. Through the magic of photography, gravity was defeated, and the balls never had to come down. Although he playfully inserted his arm or his finger in other works, in *Throwing Three Balls* he kept himself out of the frame. Well, not quite: his

balls were in the frame, and the playful reference they make both to his surname and to masculine anatomy is crucial. Throwing *Three Balls* spoofs the swagger of the Pollock myth of a man laying himself bare through his struggle with the elements. Whereas Pollock orbited his canvases on the floor with all the gravitas of a seminal creator, Baldessari sent his tiny planets skyward with a playful toss.

We should remember, however, that *Throwing Three Balls* was a game for two players. While Baldessari threw, his then-wife Carol Wixom operated the camera. Chance became the intersection of their performances, where the scattershot and the snapshot met. Each resulting image depicted a hanging sculpture made from dime-store materials that invoked, in the deadpan innocence of pop, both the lofty aspirations of the moon-shot era and the absurd randomness of the atomic age. As the catalyst of such images, Baldessari's arm became one of the most disarming of his generation.

Text by Robert Kelsey, Burden Professor of Photography at Harvard University.

## John Baldessari

John Baldessari (1931-2020) was an American conceptual artist known for his work featuring found photography and appropriated images. He lived and worked in Santa Monica and Venice, California.

Initially a painter, Baldessari began to incorporate texts and photography into his canvases in the mid-1960s. In 1970 he began working in printmaking, film, video, installation, sculpture and photography. He created works which demonstrate, or combine, the narrative potential of images and the associative power of language within the boundaries of the work of art. His work influenced that of Cindy Sherman, David Salle, Annette Lemieux, and Barbara Kruger.

By 1966, and a teacher at CalArts, Baldessari was using photographs and text, or simply text, on canvas. His early major works were canvas paintings that were empty but for painted statements derived from contemporary art theory. In 1970, Baldessari and five friends burnt all of the paintings he had created between 1953 and 1966 as part of a new piece, titled *The Cremation Project*. The ashes from these paintings were baked into cookies and placed into an urn, and the resulting art installation consists of a bronze commemorative plaque with the destroyed paintings' birth and death dates, as well as the recipe for making the cookies. Through the ritual of cremation Baldessari draws a connection between artistic practice and the human life cycle.

Baldessari is best known for works that blend photographic materials (such as film stills), take them out of their original context and rearrange their form, often including the addition of words or sentences. Related to his early text paintings were his *Wrong* series (1966–1968), which paired photographic images with lines of text from an amateur photography book, aiming at the violation of a set of basic “rules” on snapshot composition. In one of the works, Baldessari had himself photographed in front of a palm precisely so that it would appear that the tree were growing out of his head.

Baldessari has expressed that his interest in language comes from its similarities in structure to games, as both operate by an arbitrary and mandatory system of rules. In this spirit, many of his works are sequences showing attempts at accomplishing an arbitrary goal, such as *Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get a Straight Line* (1973), in which the artist attempted to do just that, photographing the results, and eventually selecting the “best out of 36 tries”, with 36 being the determining number just because that is the standard number of shots on a roll of 35mm film. The writer Eldritch Priest ties John Baldessari's piece *Throwing four balls in the air to get a square* (best of 36 tries) as an early example of post-conceptual art. This work was published in 1973 by a young Italian publisher: Giampaolo Prearo

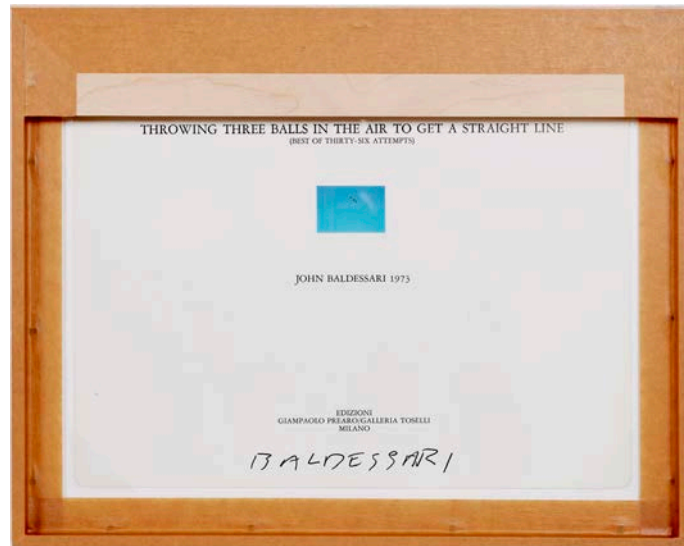


who was one of the first to believe and invest in the work of Baldessari. He printed two series one in 2000 copies and a second in 500 copies. Following Baldessari's seminal statement "I will not make any more boring Art", he conceived the work *The Artist Hitting Various Objects with a Golf Club* (1972–73), composed of 30 photographs of the artist swinging and hitting with a golf club objects excavated from a dump, as a parody of cataloguing rather than a thorough straight classification.

Baldessari began making prints in the early 1970s and continued to produce editions. He created his first print – *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art* (1971) - as an edition to raise funds for the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax. The lithograph was created in conjunction with the now renowned exhibition for which – at Baldessari's request – students endlessly wrote the phrase "I will not make any more boring art" on the gallery walls.

Baldessari has been in over 200 solo shows and 1,000 group shows in his six-decade career. His works are part of major public and private collections, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim Museum, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and the Broad Collection.

BALDESSARI



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