

THE UNKNOWN (Gustav Jensen's radio cabinet and the death of John Baldessari)

I found an image of a radio cabinet designed by Gustav Jensen. It is this rounded futuristic orb-looking thing which folds open. I found a patent drawing for it filed on December 18, 1935. I tried to track one down. I searched everywhere. eBay, antique auctions, museum collections and eclectic modernist design archives, and I haven't found one in existence. I managed to find some photos, a drawing and some advertising pictures. I thought it would be nice to attempt to make this thing. A funny project considering I am not a maker. I do make stuff, but not well. Never well. Honestly, this thing would be impossible for me to replicate.

I began listing possibilities of how I could fabricate this thing. Maybe it was just the Autumnal season, but its roundness got me thinking straight away of carving a pumpkin or watermelon, perhaps. Fucking idiot. Not a great first idea. Maybe I could shape this thing from wood or foam. It certainly would not be pretty, and my carving skills are considerably limited. That is being very polite to myself. I thought about doing one of those three-dimensional printings of it. I thought about it very briefly. I have very little spare cash for such ventures—the starving artist's plight.

In my art, there is no real reason to make something other than to get to the other side of the making. To see what comes next. The research always leads somewhere. The making always leads somewhere. It is a way to learn. It's a way to think. I'm not the kind of artist that perfects some technique over many years, and then it becomes my claim to fame. I'm no craftsman or artisan. I follow ideas that interest me. Explorations. Busy time. Failed projects. I've been painting for ten years and I still can't paint. I just started painting and haven't stopped yet. It was making sense for a little while. I'm not sure it does anymore... It doesn't.

I was just thinking of how I saw this really tall, bearded guy, cross the road in front of my car the other day. It was early morning. He had just stepped out of a South London convenience store and was carrying a plastic shopping bag with bread and milk. I could see through the cheap, thin, white plastic bag. Just bread and milk. He looked like John Baldessari. I mean really, really like John Baldessari. I hesitated and wanted to stop the car just to tell him. I should have. I think Baldessari would have liked that. Damn, I hate living with regrets. I started to think of Baldessari's dots and his career-long dabbling with the absurdity of art and existence. There is this picture of me in my underwear, standing on a plinth-like box in my studio atop an art history book. Early on, I was a performance artist. Occasionally I still enjoy the freedom of stripping off and standing atop things. Only in the privacy of my studio these days. In the photo, I am wearing a black motorcycle helmet. The previous studio tenant had left it behind. I made a series of photographs in front of my art, wearing the helmet. I inserted a Baldessari bright orange dot covering my privates.

I found this text the other day discussing the concept of rebus or allusory artistic writing with objects. A kind of imitative hieroglyphic text style popular for heraldic expression of the Middle

Ages. Symbols and images stand in for words and meaning. The article mentioned the Altar of Good Fortune, built by Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe. A large stone sphere resting atop a large stone cube. A symbolic gesture made to express gratitude and love but also symbolic of restless desires coming to rest on solid virtue and apparently symbolic of opposing forces striving for balance and strength in unity. Things standing in for things. The physical and metaphysical. Making meaning the long way around. Making art.

I Am Making Art by John Baldessari, 1971 is a video work where Baldessari stands in front of the camera, moving his limbs into various poses and repeating the phrase “I am making art”. It is a work in jest and a work in complete sincerity. It is absurd, and it is poignant.

Every time I paint, there is a Baldessari-like voice. A voice that encourages me to do it, threatens and mocks me for doing it, understands why I am doing it and pushes me to do it again and then mocks me yet again.

In 2012 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Artist Mark Bradford created an Open Studio project where artists were invited to submit classroom activities as a resource for high school art teachers. John Baldessari’s inclusion was a list of Assignments drawn from preparatory materials for his Cal Arts Post Studio Art: *Class Assignments*, 1970.

List of Ideas (If they had no ideas of their own from which to make a piece)

Examples included –

Assignment 11. Describe the visual verbally and the verbal visually.

Assignment 13. Repaired or patched art. Recycled. Find something broken and discarded.

Perhaps in a thrift store. Mend it.

Just directions to follow. A task to prompt thought and promote action/reaction/production. To reach somewhere unknown. A starting point to get the ball rolling.

“There is a story about Thelonius Monk going around his apartment, tilting all the pictures hanging on the wall. It was his idea of teaching his wife a different kind of order. When she saw the pictures askew on the wall, she would straighten them. And when Monk saw them straightened on the wall, he would tilt them. Until one day his wife left them hanging on the wall tilted” (Baldessari, J. 1979)

I have been trying to finish this text for a few years. Baldessari died a few days ago. (There is an emphasis here on the full stop)

David Turley
January 2020