

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ART: JOHN BALDESSARI, ED RUSCHA AND
HOLLYWOOD FILM

by

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Abstract

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In the past decade there has been an interest in contextualizing the loose group of practices and practitioners that comprise American Conceptual art both within a sociopolitical context and within strictly visual traditions, especially photography. Prior to this, Conceptual art was broadly defined as an inward-looking, self-contained semiotic circuit, in which ideas or concepts behind a work of art are more important than the resultant art object. Scholarship also gave more weight to East Coast art and to works with theoretical tendencies.

My project is an extension of this revisionist trend regarding Conceptual art. It investigates the affinities between the work of California Conceptual artists John Baldessari's (b. 1931) and Ed Ruscha's (b. 1937) art and another—commercial—art form: Hollywood films made from 1930 to 1960. I use film theory to expose the works' structural and sociological links to film. Narrative theory is used to discuss the artists' films and videos; semiotic theory is used to discuss

Baldessari's photcollages; and apparatus theory is used to discuss Ruscha's paintings.

A brief comparison of Hollywood and the art world in the 1960s reveal that both were transforming as a result of similar pressures. As Hollywood shifted away from studio-system dominance, the art world began to function more like the world of commerce. Baldessari and Ruscha successfully avoided the label of regionalists that was applied to previous generations of California artists and produced works tied to the Hollywood cinema.

This analysis demonstrates the value of film as a commercial enterprise for elucidating major themes in both artists' works. It prompts a reassessment of the work as commentary on the visual culture and commercial mechanisms of Hollywood. A by-product of this recontextualization is the identification of West Coast Conceptualism as more closely aligned with the increasingly commercial impulses of its East Coast counterpart.

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Introduction

In the 1960s and 1970s West Coast artists John Baldessari (b. 1931) and Ed Ruscha (b. 1937) produced art that was skeptical of the preciousness of the aesthetic object and explored questions of what constitutes art and how art conveys meaning. Both artists were associated with Conceptual art,¹ an antiformalist movement, in which ideas or concepts behind a work of art were given more importance than the resultant art object.

As recently as 1999, Conceptual art was described as a self-contained semiotic circuit, encompassing art object, art theory and art manifesto.² Previous discussions of Conceptual art also tended to give more weight to East Coast art and to works with theoretical tendencies. However, the discourse surrounding Conceptual art is broadening. More recent scholarship has looked differently at this loosely grouped set of practices and practitioners, some with competing definitions of Conceptual art, and has identified the movement's relationship to

¹ Ruscha's work has been categorized and recategorized over the years. The most balanced assessment of him as someone who has resisted the label of Pop art and is aligned with Conceptual art comes from texts by Neal Benezra, Kerry Brougher and Phyllis Rosenzweig in Neal Benezra and Kerry Brougher, eds., *Ed Ruscha* (Washington, D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2000), 6 and 152. Further, key texts on Conceptual art, such as Peter Osborne, ed., *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2002) and Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1998), identify both Baldessari and Ruscha as major players in the movement.

² Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver and Rachel Weiss, eds., *Global Conceptualism* (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), 76.

sociopolitical and cultural trends.³ There has also been an interest in a firmer placement of Conceptual art within a strictly visual tradition—its allegiance to photography, for example—a kind of analysis that had been previously considered antithetical to Conceptual art’s focus on philosophical inquiry.⁴

My project is an extension of this recent revisionist trend in the literature on Conceptual art. I provide a detailed analysis of the extensive affinities between Baldessari’s and Ruscha’s art and another—commercial—art form: Hollywood genre films made from 1930 to 1960. Prior to the last eight years, there were few precedents for discussing Conceptual art in conjunction with existing visual and commercial practices or cultural trends. In order to expose the structural and sociological links to film, I use film theory to perform my analysis, an approach previously not undertaken. I limit my exploration of this intersection of film and art to work by Baldessari and Ruscha. Although many Conceptual artists worked with film and incorporated filmic

³ Authors who have offered such reinterpretations include Osborne and Godfrey, both cited above, and Michael Corris, ed., *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth and Practice* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁴ Tony Godfrey devotes an entire chapter to the use of photography in Conceptual art in his book *Conceptual Art*, 301-302. He argues that Conceptual art has exerted a great influence over the way photography is used in art because it calls attention to the ideological implications of photographic representation. Godfrey further suggests that the essence of Conceptual art need not be thought of as solely linguistic, but as linguistic and visual, and that the combination of text and photography became increasingly its archetypal form in the late 1960s.

elements into other media, Baldessari and Ruscha did it the most extensively and in ways that overlapped and complemented one another.

The most relevant source on the relationship between art and film in the postwar period is Kerry Brougher's exhibition catalogue *Art and Film since 1945: Hall of Mirrors*.⁵ Brougher exposes art and film's similar responses to social and cultural pressures by identifying shared themes and approaches that have resulted in the emergence of new hybrid art forms. Art reveals an engagement with film through the use of film itself, through filmic imagery and content, and through cinematic techniques or emulation of the cinematic apparatus. This three-part construct provides the best model for my methodology, a typology of influence. Touching on parallels between film and Conceptual art, Brougher considers examples by Ed Ruscha. However, Ruscha is just one of numerous artists discussed. Although works by Baldessari are included in the exhibition, they are mentioned only briefly in the catalogue. To date, Brougher is the only author who has explored the relationship between Conceptual art and Hollywood films in any detail. Lawrence Alloway explores the cultural impact of the Hollywood cinema via an iconographical analysis. Alloway's *Violent America: The Movies*

⁵ Kerry Brougher and Russell Ferguson, eds., *Art and Film Since 1945: Hall of Mirrors* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art and Monacelli Press, 1996).

1946–1964⁶ presents the notion that genre films, with their groupings of cyclical narrative and visual conventions, articulate the iconography of Hollywood film. The term “genre film” refers to a kind of film distinguished by its use of a familiar set of narrative conventions (e.g., musical, gangster, Western, etc.). Genre films are commercial films that rely on proven formulas and treat the cinema primarily as a narrative medium. Genre theory has often been contrasted with and overshadowed by more “literary” approaches, such as auteur theory, which focus on authorship (the author is usually deemed the director) and treat movies as unique and individual texts.⁷ While *Violent America* demonstrates essential structural similarities between art and film, it does not focus on any particular art movements and does not mention Conceptual art at all.

John Baldessari by Coosje van Bruggen is the most comprehensive single text published to date on Baldessari.⁸ While van Bruggen gives numerous examples of the use of film in Baldessari’s work and discusses his films and videos, she does not offer a

⁶ Lawrence Alloway, *Violent America: The Movies 1946–1964* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1971).

⁷ Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking and the Studio System* (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1981), vii-viii. It should be remarked, however, that genre and auteur theory do share the common goal of upholding the integrity of the Hollywood film, even if they approach this objective differently.

⁸ Coosje van Bruggen, *John Baldessari* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990).

systematic analysis of these works alone, but rather incorporates them into a broader discussion.

Recent scholarship on Ruscha has certainly not ignored his extensive references to Hollywood film, but these references are often considered alongside other popular culture influences. Neal Benezra and Kerry Broucher's *Ed Ruscha* is an essential text on the artist. It contains a detailed analysis of the impact of commercial art on Ruscha's work. While Hollywood film is included in the discussion, it is never treated in its own right. Margit Rowell and Cornelia Butler's exhibition catalogue *Cotton Puffs, Q-Tips, Smoke and Mirrors: The Drawings of Ed Ruscha*⁹ also repeatedly mentions the impact of Hollywood film on Ruscha's work, but again there is no systematic discussion of it. It is one of several influences that are considered. Sylvia Wolf's *Ed Ruscha and Photography*,¹⁰ like Rowell and Butler's catalogue, was published in conjunction with a major exhibition of Ruscha's work at the Whitney Museum in 2004. It is an important resource that takes a fresh look at the use of photography in Ruscha's art. Taking an approach similar to that adopted by Rowell and Butler, Wolf explores the relationship of the photography to film. She also

⁹ Margit Rowell and Cornelia Butler, *Cotton Puffs, Q-Tips, Smoke and Mirrors: The Drawings of Ed Ruscha* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004).

¹⁰ Sylvia Wolf, *Ed Ruscha and Photography* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004).

discusses Ruscha's films, but his still photography is the main focus of Wolf's investigation.

Important sources for Conceptual art in general include Lucy Lippard's *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* and Robert Morgan's *Conceptual Art: An American Perspective*.¹¹ They examine the origins and basic tenets of Conceptual art, its self-reflexive interrogation of art and its relationship to Dada (particularly to Duchamp), formalism, Minimalism and Fluxus. However, they do not consider Hollywood film's affinities with Conceptual art. Camnitzer, Farver and Weiss's *Global Conceptualism* and Tony Godfrey's *Conceptual Art* consider Conceptual art as a global phenomenon and identify common practices, including the use of photography; however, allegiances to commercial cinema are not explored. More recent sources, such as Peter Osborne's *Conceptual Art* (2002) and Michael Corris's *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth and Practice* (2004), broaden the previous, narrowly linguistic definition of Conceptual art by offering a more historically, culturally and critically inclusive approach. None of these sources deals with the use of film and the influence of Hollywood as a discrete and exclusive category.

¹¹ See Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, Inc., 1972) and Robert C. Morgan, *Conceptual Art: An American Perspective* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1994).

Alexander Alberro offers an interesting new assessment of Conceptual art and its commercial leanings in *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*.¹² He suggests that the Conceptual art movement was founded not only by the artists, but also by the New York art dealer Seth Siegelaub, who promoted the artists, curated exhibitions and organized publications. Siegelaub also made strategic use of marketing and advertising and helped launch several artists' careers. Through Siegelaub's efforts, the increasing commercialization of the art world can be clearly observed. While Alberro draws no specific comparisons between Conceptual art and the Hollywood film industry, he nonetheless sets the stage for such parallels, especially in his discussion of the increasing importance of the celebrity aspect of the artist's persona.

On Hollywood cinema, Thomas Schatz's *Hollywood Genres* and *The Genius of the System* and David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* are the seminal texts.¹³ They examine the history, industrial practices, business

¹² Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).

¹³ See Thomas Schatz. *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era*. (New York: Metropolitan Books and Henry Holt and Company, 1988) and David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

considerations, and sociological and aesthetic components of filmmaking in Hollywood. But each treats the making of Hollywood films as a self-contained practice and does not examine its relationship to art.

This dissertation comprises five chapters. Chapter 1 explores the early phases of Baldessari's and Ruscha's careers, while providing an overview of trends in American art and Hollywood film in the 1960s. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 will each examine one aspect of the typology of influence: the use of film and video and the investigation of cinematic narrative; the appropriation of filmic narrative structure; and the use of the apparatus of cinema in painting. While a typology is not an approach often used to analyze Conceptual art, it is a useful framework from which the more complex discussion of the works' relationship to film theory is built. Chapter 2 examines shared practices in Baldessari's and Ruscha's art, while Chapter 3 focuses on Baldessari and Chapter 4 on Ruscha. Chapter 5 consists of concluding remarks.

Chapter 1, "Shifting Ideologies and Practices in the 1960s," investigates the artistic climate in which Baldessari and Ruscha began their careers. It briefly surveys the atmosphere of social and political unrest in which these artists came of age. The artists' education, early works and influences, and gallery affiliations are all explored, as is their association with Conceptualism. In particular, I consider the little-discussed relationship of Conceptual art to commerce. The chapter also

gives a brief overview of the various pressures facing the Hollywood studio system during the 1960s.

Chapter 2, “Process, Structure and Medium: The Artists’ Films and Videos,” explores the use of film in both Baldessari’s and Ruscha’s art and Baldessari’s use of video. I analyze the use of narrative in their film and video works by exposing affinities with film scholar David Bordwell’s theory of Hollywood film narrative.

By 1963 the two artists were producing works that emphasized process, de-emphasized the end product and decentralized the role of the artist. Increasingly attracted to industrial production techniques, both artists relied on mechanical modes of reproduction, in particular the use of photography. Ruscha’s photography books, such as *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963; ill. 34), reveal a dispassionate, apparently artless and seemingly banal approach to their subjects. Sometimes Ruscha did not even take the photographs himself. Similarly interested in giving his art the impersonal and generic appearance of commercially manufactured products, Baldessari employed a commercial sign painter to execute works such as *Pure Beauty* and *Examining Pictures* (1967–1968; ill. 43, 44). These approaches echo the mechanical, efficient and anonymous assembly-line process of commercial filmmaking, while employing a serial documentary process, a uniquely filmic format.

Projects such as these sparked an interest in filmmaking. Ruscha made two 16mm films: *Crackers* (1971), starring artist Larry Bell and model Leon Bing, and *Miracle* (1975; ill. 41), a story of a curious day in the life of an auto mechanic featuring artist Jim Ganzer and singer Michelle Phillips.

The interest in narrative that characterized Ruscha's film projects was shared by Baldessari. He made more than forty films and videos in the period from 1968 to 1977. They range in length from 20 seconds to 30 minutes and largely involve an analysis of filmmaking conducted by taking apart the various components of film, reassembling them, (sometimes omitting crucial elements) and calling the final result a film.¹⁴ In opposition to his extensive use of narrative in photomontage works, Baldessari created films, such as *Title* (1973; ill. 47), in which the absence of narrative blocks any kind of plot progression and creates the effect of a sequence of unrelated still photographs. My discussion of these films and videos serves as a springboard for examining the ways in which the artists transcribe the influence of film back into the fine arts.

Chapter 3, "John Baldessari: A Story That Ends Up Mostly about Film Narrative," examines Baldessari's use of filmic narrative as a

¹⁴ Van Bruggen, *John Baldessari*, 83.

structural device in his photcollage works. Baldessari created many mixed media works that revolve around verbal and visual modes of storytelling. These compositions combine either mass-media images or film stills. *Blasted Allegories* (1978; ill. 56) incorporates numerous unrelated film stills in a seemingly random sequence, blocking any kind of familiar narrative flow and placing the onus on the viewer to construct an alternative system of meaning from the components. I use structuralist film theory, specifically the writings of Christian Metz and Raymond Bellour, to explore Baldessari's use of filmic narrative as a structural device. In his works that reference the Hollywood cinema, Baldessari either uses film stills as raw material or adopts a storyboard format. I also consider Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralist linguistic theories as a shared point of origin for structuralist theories dealing with the production of meaning in Hollywood films and the way narrative structure is utilized in Baldessari's art.

Chapter 4, "Ed Ruscha: Welcome to the Machine," explores the way Ruscha's two-dimensional works co-opt various aspects of the apparatus of Hollywood film. I identify three basic categories of reference to film in these works: imitation of the view of the world afforded by the movie camera; imitation of the unique qualities of the projected image; and evocation of the particular view of reality advanced in Hollywood films. Ruscha's usage of these various film

components underscores Hollywood's role as a fantasy-making machine that provides spectatorial pleasure and also shapes viewer perception. This characterization of Hollywood film is also found in a type of film theory known as "apparatus theory." My method of analysis in this chapter is to use elements of apparatus theory to discuss Ruscha's paintings that fall into the three categories mentioned.

In Chapter 5, the concluding chapter, I examine of the implications of opening up a new framework for discussing Baldessari's and Ruscha's art. The chapter also explores how the discourse on Conceptual art may be broadened even further by identifying links with the visual practices of the Hollywood cinema and with film theory.

Chapter 1

Shifting Ideologies and Practices in the 1960s

The 1960s were marked by tremendous social and political upheaval. The Vietnam War was escalating, and the failed U.S.-backed Bay of Pigs invasion nearly led to a nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union in 1961. Massive student uprisings took place across Europe and America. President Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy were all assassinated within a five-year span. The year 1968 in particular, according to international affairs reporter and author Mark Kurlansky,¹ was a year of not just national but global revolution in which Poland, France, Mexico and the United States all saw a “spontaneous combustion of rebellious spirits,”² despite significant national differences. Sentiments that united people around the globe in their particular rebellions included their desire to rebel just to rebel, their ideas about how to do it, their sense of alienation from authority, and their extreme dislike of any form of authoritarianism.³ Kurlansky identifies four factors specific to the United States that combined to form the combustible rebellious mix of 1968: the successful example of the civil rights movement; nearly an entire

¹ Mark Kurlansky, *1968: The Year That Rocked the World* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004)

² *Ibid.*, xvii.

³ *Ibid.*

generation plagued by feelings of profound disenfranchisement; the escalation of the universally hated war in Vietnam that served as a focal point for rebels in search of a cause; and the coming-of-age of television, in which coverage was not yet so tightly controlled and packaged the way it is today.⁴ This revolution was televised.⁵

The rising sense of distrust among young people toward institutions and authority of all sorts also extended to the art world. Many American artists reacted against the most recent manifestation of modernism, the heroicism of Abstract Expressionism, and instead reached for means of expression that were iconoclastic, eclectic and nontraditional and that eschewed any notion of a cohesive modernist metanarrative. Modern art, abstraction especially, had become the establishment by the 1960s and young artists were rebelling against it. Art critic Kim Levin wrote, “After nearly a century of Modernism, art in

⁴ Ibid., xviii.

⁵ It is worth noting that while Kurlanksy correctly observes that television coverage of 1968 was not distilled and packaged the way it is today and that various revolutions of that year were televised, television in 1968 was by no means a new and loosely controlled medium that afforded an uninflected, unexpurgated view of social conflict. According to Lynn Spigal and Michael Curtin, by the latter half of 1950s and through the 1960s, television was in its “classical period” in which production, distribution and exhibition practices were standardized. Further, by 1960 television was the country’s dominant form of entertainment and information. It was not coming of age: it had already arrived. The network’s coverage of the riots and of various social movements was controlled, contextualized and presented as an integral part of its “something for everyone” philosophy, which included both footage from Vietnam and the military comedy *Gomer Pyle USMC*. Lynn Spigal and Michael Curtin, eds., *The Revolution Wasn’t Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 2-3.

Europe as well as America seemed to have reached a point where the only means left for radical innovation was to be reactionary.”⁶

Of this time, the Conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth reflected that the traditional “languages” of art could no longer be used to say new things and that painting had to be erased in order for new art to be made.⁷ Conceptual artist Sol LeWitt rejected outright both painting and sculpture as viable artistic media because of their connotation of an entire tradition that limited the artist.⁸ The idea of authorship of the work of art was challenged in 1968 by Roland Barthes in “The Death of the Author.”⁹ He stressed the role of the reader, rather than the author, in identifying meaning in texts. Ed Ruscha and John Baldessari began making art in this climate in which painting was under attack, traditional art institutions were regarded with suspicion, and the author was no longer afforded the sole right of assigning meaning to the work of art. Nearly from the outset, their careers were involved with a search for new visual idioms and approaches to art making.

⁶ Kim Levin, *Beyond Modernism: Essays on Art from the '70s and '80s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 165.

⁷ Joseph Kosuth, “Joseph Kosuth on Ad Reinhardt,” *Cover* (spring/summer 1980): 10.

⁸ Sol LeWitt, “Sentences on Conceptual Art,” *Art-Language* 1, no. 1 (May 1969): 11–12.

⁹ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill, 1977), 142–148.

John Baldessari was born on June 17, 1931, in National City, California. He attended San Diego State College from 1949 to 1953, and majored in art with a minor in literature. He was also interested in philosophy and took several courses in it. After receiving his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1953, he attended the University of California at Berkeley, where he studied art history. However, he left UC Berkeley after becoming frustrated by his failed attempt to maintain a comprehensive cross-indexing system on everything he had ever read.¹⁰ Realizing that complete knowledge was unattainable and that we all must settle for partial knowledge of the world, Baldessari returned to San Diego State College and completed a master's degree in art in 1957.

He took a job teaching in a San Diego high school and worked on his paintings, which demonstrated the influence of Cézanne and Matisse. Surprisingly, it was not until he met the artist Rico Lebrun (1900–1964) during a summer studio class that Baldessari felt convinced that he should become an artist. He felt unsure of himself, and Lebrun's encouragement prompted him to pursue this career path. In 1957 he left San Diego for Los Angeles. There he audited courses at the Otis Art Institute and at the Chouinard Art Institute (now the

¹⁰ Van Bruggen, *John Baldessari*, 11.

California Institute of Arts). He remained in Los Angeles until returning to San Diego in the summer of 1959.

Ed Ruscha was born on December 16, 1937, in Omaha, Nebraska, and later moved to Oklahoma with his family. As a young boy attending Catholic school, Ruscha developed an interest in art and began drawing his own comic strip, which was inspired by real-life events. He also collected stamps and was interested in movies, magazines and comics. Ruscha has remarked that the Hollywood movies he saw as a child sparked his interest in black-and-white photography and even made him think of becoming an artist:

“ . . . they had a lot to do with the formation of my ideas.” It was those movies—and, in particular, John Ford’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940)—that initially generated his interest in black-and-white photography. “The idea of black-and-white photography got me into that movie. . . . I guess it brought a lot of things together that encouraged me—to maybe become an artist or do something, leave Oklahoma.”¹¹

Upon graduating from high school in 1956, Ruscha drove to Los Angeles to pursue his ambition of becoming a commercial artist. The Art Center School was the preeminent commercial art school in Los Angeles. Ruscha applied, but was disappointed to learn that there were no more available places for that year. Instead, he applied to and was

¹¹ Ed Ruscha, quoted in Margit Rowell, “Cotton Puffs, Q-Tips, Smoke and Mirrors: The Drawings of Ed Ruscha,” in Rowell and Butler, *Cotton Puffs, Q-Tips*, 14.

accepted at the Chouinard Art Institute. Baldessari also audited some courses at the Chouinard from 1957 through 1959, although the two were not acquainted with one another at that time.

Elsewhere in the country, the traditional hierarchy that placed greater value on painting and sculpture than on commercial and graphic arts was firmly entrenched, but not so in Southern California.¹² The Chouinard was the training ground for not only Ruscha and Baldessari, but also for animators. It was primarily known as a training school for Walt Disney animators and as a place where alternative arts were championed. For example, Mexican social realist David Alfaro Siqueiros was invited to teach a class on mural painting there in the early 1930s, in conjunction with painting a mural for the school. Ruscha began his studies there with the intention of possibly working for Disney.

Part of the appeal of Chouinard for Ruscha was its bohemian atmosphere, in which he immersed himself. He described it as “beards and sandals . . . Bohemianism on the march.”¹³ For Ruscha the move to California and enrollment at Chouinard marked a personal change, a relinquishing of old ways and ideas. He stopped listening to Elvis

¹² Neal Benezra, “Ed Ruscha: Painting and Artistic License,” in Benezra and Brougher, *Ed Ruscha*, 145.

¹³ Ed Ruscha, interview by Paul Karlstrom, 29 October 1980–2 October 1981, transcript, Oral History Program, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 19.

records, stopped going to church, became engrossed in making art and became a serious person.¹⁴

At the time, important artists such as Robert Irwin, Billy Al Bengston and John Altoon were teaching at Chouinard. Ruscha did not take classes with Bengston, but he did attend classes taught by Don Graham (drawing); Emerson Woelffer; Herbert Jepson; Rico LeBrun; and Marvin Rubin (commercial art and advertising). Ruscha cites Rubin as an influence along with Irwin and Woelffer.¹⁵ Fellow students included Larry Bell, Joe Goode and Lynn Foulkes. Goode and Ruscha, childhood friends, had come to Los Angeles together from Oklahoma and shared a house with some other friends while attending the Chouinard.

The Institute's course catalog for 1954 reveals that students in both fine art and commercial art specializations were expected to take the same core courses in design, drawing and painting.¹⁶ Ruscha took classes in illustration and graphic design and even took a watercolor

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 20.

¹⁶ The Chouinard is now the California Institute of the Arts, or Cal Arts, having merged with the Los Angeles Conservatory of Music under the guidance of Roy and Walt Disney in 1961. However, Cal Arts has preserved year-by-year excerpts from the Chouinard catalogue on its web site at <http://www.calarts.edu/alumni/chouinard/years.html>.

course with Minimalist Robert Irwin.¹⁷ He also studied photography, which was not commonly offered at art schools in the late 1950s and early 1960s. With aspiring film industry personnel and artists receiving similar training in the city that was home to the film industry, boundaries between film and fine art began to blur. The movies had become a dominant form of visual culture in the twentieth century; therefore, it was not surprising that artists such as Baldessari and Ruscha should increasingly draw on the visual idioms and structure of film in their art making.

Of this period, Ed Ruscha recalled:

There seemed to be a world of possibilities out there for photography, cartooning, or maybe humor, and abstract painting. Maybe they all came together in one story. But I didn't just eliminate everything in my history and study only fine art. It just didn't happen that way.¹⁸

The art scene in Los Angeles had become more cosmopolitan starting in the late 1950s. Prior to that, California artists strongly favored figurative and landscape paintings. The human body was the primary subject matter of David Park, Paul Wonner, Elmer Bischoff and Theophilus Brown, all of whom were associated with the Bay Area Figurative School and painted in a style vaguely reminiscent of early

¹⁷ Wolf, *Ed Ruscha and Photography*, 15.

¹⁸ Quoted in Walter Hopps, "A Conversation between Walter Hopps and Edward Ruscha," in *Edward Ruscha: Romance with Liquids, Painting 1966–1969* (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 1993), 107.

fauvism and German expressionism. Joan Brown and Rico Lebrun also favored an expressionistic style in their depictions of the human form. Influential ceramic artist Peter Voulkos worked in an Abstract Expressionist style and taught at the Los Angeles County Art Institute (now Otis College of Art and Design) from 1954 to 1959 and then at UC Berkeley until 1985. Another trend in the mid-1950s was the infusion of the dominant Abstract Expressionist strain of modernism fused with representational and landscape elements. Artists working in this style included David Park and Richard Diebenkorn. Helen Lundeborg's cool, Minimalist landscapes even verged on the abstract. With the exception of Diebenkorn, all of these artists are considered West Coast regionalists.¹⁹

Quickly, though, ideas and artists from all over the world began to make their presence felt in southern California, and its art scene began to heat up. In 1960 Nikki de St. Phalle staged a Happening behind the Renaissance Club on Sunset Strip. She also staged another memorable happening at the Everitt Ellin Gallery in Los Angeles where she fired a shotgun at paint-filled balloons in the lot behind the gallery. The Dwan Gallery in Los Angeles began showing work by well-known

¹⁹ For a discussion of art in California from 1940 to 1960 see Sheri Bernstein, "The California Home Front 1940–1960," in *Made in California: Art, Image and Identity 1900–2000*, eds. Stephanie Barron, Sheri Bernstein and Ilene Susan Fort (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art in association with University of California Press, 2000), 147-190.

New York artists including Ad Reinhardt, Franz Kline and Robert Rauschenberg. The exhibition *My Country 'Tis of Thee*, at Dwan from November 18 to December 15, 1962, included works by Pop artists Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Indiana, Jasper Johns, Marisol, Claes Oldenburg, Robert Rauschenberg, Larry Rivers, James Rosenquist, Andy Warhol and Tom Wesselmann. Meanwhile, the Pasadena Art Museum was quickly gaining a reputation as one of the most daring and inventive museums in the country under the aegis of curator Walter Hopps. His first exhibition, *New Paintings of Common Objects*, was held from September 25 to October 19, 1962, and was the first West Coast appearance of what would come to be known—in some cases rather misleadingly—as Pop art.²⁰ The exhibition spotlighted the work of Ruscha, Goode, Lichtenstein and Warhol.²¹

In parallel with these developments, young West Coast artists were creating works that were no longer branded exclusively as examples of West Coast regionalism, although their work bore allegiance to certain regional trends, particularly the interest in landscape. Younger artists continued to depict the landscape, but in a less idyllic manner. Lee Friedlander's photographs often present

²⁰ Ruscha designed the show's poster by calling up a commercial printer and dictating the copy over the phone.

²¹ William R. Hackman, "L.A. Chronology," in *Sunshine & Noir: Art in L.A. 1960–1997*, ed. Lars Nittve (Humblebaek, Denmark: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 16.

uneasy relationships between people and their surroundings. British-born artist David Hockney's California plein air paintings display a rather cool and distant attitude toward the landscape.²²

Other aspects of California culture that inspired innovation in young artists were cars and the beach. Billy Al Bengston, who surfed, raced motorcycles professionally and is said to have inspired the character Moondoggie in the Gidget movies,²³ was among the new generation of West Coast artists who flaunted their fascination with the aesthetics of cars and surfboards. Bengston, who had been a student of both Voukos and Diebenkorn, often worked with automobile lacquer dripped or spray-painted onto sheet metal. Bengston's student Judy Chicago took the car aesthetic even further by painting directly onto the hood of car. In 1970 Joe Goode (credited on the calendar as José Bueno) produced a calendar featuring Los Angeles artists in their cars. This project suggests both the iconic, even fetishistic power of cars in California culture and the rising celebrity status of young artists.²⁴

Despite the burgeoning of a vibrant and rather unique arts culture in California during this time, California artists were still prejudicially

²² Howard N. Fox, "Tremors in Paradise," in Barron, Bernstein and Fort, *Made in California*, 200–201.

²³ *Ibid.*, 202.

²⁴ For a discussion of the automobile's influence on art, see Gerald Silk, ed., *Automobile and Culture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1985).

viewed as less serious and their art less intellectually relevant than their East Coast counterparts. As art critic Peter Plagens observes, “Modern art on the West Coast, 1945–1970, was still considered a slightly suspicious, laughing-all-the-way-to-the-garret, bohemian enterprise by society at large.”²⁵ Among the reasons for this were these aesthetic evocations of car culture, sun and surf, and Hollywood, to a degree.

Contemporaries and friends, Bengston and Ruscha both gravitated toward the laid-back, sun, fun and cars lifestyle of Venice Beach, in southwest Los Angeles, where an artist colony sprang up. Goode, Ken Price and Craig Kauffmann were among the other artists who flocked to Venice Beach.²⁶

Bengston was an important role model to the younger Los Angeles artists in his extended circle. Through the demonstration of lifestyle cool, involving surfing, motorcycle riding, driving cool cars, Bengston offered these artists a template for becoming an “entrepreneur and exotic cocktail-party guest that would lift them out of their myth-of-New York, starving-artist mentalities into self-confident Hollywood professionalism.”²⁷ The way Bengston harnessed the

²⁵ Peter Plagens, *Sunshine Muse: Art on the West Coast, 1945–1970* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), 6.

²⁶ Fox, “Tremors in Paradise,” 202.

²⁷ Plagens, *Sunshine Muse*, 5.

California lifestyle allowed him—and the younger artists who followed his example—to become what is in common vernacular called “a player.”

Bengston and Ruscha were represented by the pioneering Ferus Gallery, which was run by Walter Hopps and Ed Kienholz and was one of the first to open in Los Angeles in 1957. Ruscha had his first one-man show at Ferus in 1963 and stayed with Ferus until it closed in 1966. Ferus occupied a special place in the Los Angeles art scene, striking a balance between East and West Coast artists. East Coast artists who exhibited at Ferus included Lichtenstein, Johns, Frank Stella, Ellsworth Kelly, Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Joseph Cornell, Robert Morris and Carl Andre. Other West Coast artists showing at Ferus included Chicago, Kauffman, Ed Moses, John Altoon, Larry Bell, Robert Irwin and Kienholz himself. There was a sense of camaraderie among the local Ferus artists and also a somewhat cliquish mentality. Altoon, Irwin, Kauffmann, Kienholz, Moses, Bengston and Allen Lynch formed the core group and referred to themselves as the Ferus “Studs.” They socialized together at motorcycle races and at their favorite watering hole, Barney’s Beanery. Chicago, who became famous in the 1970s for her feminist art, had the special status of being the only

woman permitted to hang out with the Studs.²⁸ While Ruscha was always friendly with the group, he maintained a slight distance from it.

Thanks to the blossoming art scene in Los Angeles and the art on display at Ferus and elsewhere, Baldessari and Ruscha were exposed to the emerging West Coast style of their peers,²⁹ to painters working in the style of the New York school, to Pop art and to major European artists such as Josef Albers, Kurt Schwitters and Giorgio Morandi. Baldessari and Ruscha responded to and against the art they were now seeing in their new hometown. For both, the response largely involved increased skepticism about late modernist painting. Neither artist felt an affinity towards the Abstract Expressionist style or the West Coast style, both of which dominated Ferus and the Chouinard.

Even more distant from the Ferus scene than Ruscha, Baldessari had no gallery representation in Los Angeles at the time and recalls feeling like a bit of an outsider.³⁰ Discouraged by the lack of enthusiasm in Los Angeles for his early modernist-inspired painting, which had more in common with Rico Lebrun's work than with Billy Al Bengston's, Baldessari moved back home to San Diego in 1959. There he taught art

²⁸ Fox, *Tremors in Paradise*, 205.

²⁹ The sleek, industry-inspired Finish Fetish or L.A. Look found in the works of Bengston, Chicago, Price and Kauffman.

³⁰ John Baldessari, telephone interview by Bettina Riccio Henry, August 2005.

in the city high schools and engrossed himself in a long-favored theme of California artists: landscape painting.

By 1962, however, a more abstract style began to emerge in his painting. Increasingly, Baldessari began using photography as a means to inform his paintings, to gather source material. This quickly evolved into a new way of working. He frequently found himself taking pictures of billboards, and then actual billboard fragments replaced the photographs of billboards. He often cut up large posters into numerous equal-sized parts. Baldessari then mounted the poster fragments on plywood or Masonite, sometimes singly and sometimes using all fragments. He modified the images in some way by painting over them, or collaging over them or sometimes simply blocking out entire sections of the poster sheet (ill. 1). The resulting effects were disrupted continuity and pictorial unity, disorientation of the spectator and prompting of new associations,³¹ all themes that Baldessari would pursue in the coming years.

Deviating still further from traditional painterly practices, Baldessari became more interested in the interrogation of the nature of art and its ability to convey meaning. In 1966 he began a series of paintings that entailed transferring photographs onto canvas and then

³¹ Van Bruggen, *John Baldessari*, 14.

having commercial sign painters paint text beneath the images. Some of these works featured completely ordinary photographic scenes, taken from car windows and coupled with inscriptions that did little more than identify the location, e.g., *Looking East on 4th and C, Chula Vista, California* (1967-1968; ill. 2). Other works in this series paired deadpan images with texts dealing with the nature of art. For example, *An Artist Is Not Merely a Slavish Announcer* (1966–1968; ill. 3) features the text “AN ARTIST IS NOT MERELY THE SLAVISH ANNOUNCER OF A SERIES OF FACTS. WHICH IN THIS CASE THE CAMERA HAS HAD TO ACCEPT AND MECHANICALLY RECORD” underneath a photo transfer of an ordinary southern California streetscape.

The idea of creating art out of the everyday was not new. The Pop artists had already explored this possibility. Ed Ruscha had also already begun to pursue this concept.³² Baldessari knew and was influenced by Ruscha’s early work. Van Bruggen cites Ruscha’s conceptual treatment of his environment in the painting *Standard Station 10¢ Western Being Torn in Half* (1964; ill. 4) or in his book projects, such as *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (1965; ill. 5), as an

³² As a result Ruscha was initially lumped together with Pop artists, as in Hopp’s *New Paintings of Common Objects* exhibition, a categorization that is not entirely accurate and with which Ruscha is not entirely comfortable.

inspiration to Baldessari.³³ The dispassionate depiction of ordinary scenes and locations was a commonality in the art of Ruscha and Baldessari.

Continuing with his use of photography and questioning of the boundaries of art and issues of originality and uniqueness, Baldessari produced a series of fourteen paintings entitled *Commissioned Paintings* in 1969 (ill. 6). Baldessari took photographs of hands pointing to various ordinary objects. Fourteen amateur painters then painted reproductions of the photographs. Finally, Baldessari hired a professional sign painter to include the final element: a caption identifying the amateur painter, e.g., "A PAINTING BY DANTE GUIDO." The canvases are uniform in dimension and the position of the pointing hand is very similar in each. With their overt emphasis on particular objects identified by the pointing hand, these works deliberately call attention to the documentary nature of much Conceptual art. Apparently, the idea came from a remark reportedly made by the painter Al Held: "All conceptual art is just pointing at things."³⁴ Baldessari took the remark literally, both parodying it and also further

³³ Van Bruggen, *John Baldessari*, 29.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

interrogating the purpose of art by creating works of art that implicitly ask, “Is that all it is supposed to do?”

In another series, Baldessari took this concept to its logical conclusion by eliminating painted imagery from the canvas altogether. His text on canvas works, mostly executed between 1967 and 1968, dealt with increasingly sophisticated quotes borrowed from sources such as Clement Greenberg, Barbara Rose and art historian George Kubler. In *Painting for Kubler* (1967–68, ill. 7) he paraphrased a passage from Kubler’s 1962 book *The Shape of Time* that expressed the notion that art is not created in a vacuum and that works of art are connected to other works of art.³⁵ In such works, Baldessari extended the self-reflexive impulse of Conceptual art further by making art not about art, but about art theory. In so doing he raised questions about the relationship of art to theory and about extent to which clear manifestations of theory can be found in a work of art.

Using a strategy that he would employ increasingly in the next decade, Baldessari began to co-opt an element from a Hollywood film for inclusion in his two-dimensional works. For example, the text in *Semi-Close-Up of Girl by Geranium (Soft View)* (1968; ill. 8) comes from the stage direction from D. W. Griffith’s 1916 film *Intolerance*:

³⁵ Ibid., 32.

“Finishes watering it—examines plant to see if it has any signs of growth, finds a slight evidence—smiles—one part is sagging—she runs fingers along it—raises hand over plant to encourage it to grow.” As Coosje van Bruggen notes, Baldessari chose an excerpt that told its own concise little story.³⁶

Finally, Baldessari gave up painting completely. In 1970 he marked the end of his career as a painter and his rebirth as a Conceptual artist through his *Cremation Project* (ill. 9), in which he had many of his early paintings “cremated” in the San Diego mortuary. The cremation was photographed. He had the ashes placed in a book-shaped urn, which he put on a shelf. Later, he placed a notice, or an affidavit, in the San Diego *Union* announcing that all works created by him between 1953 and 1966 that were still in his possession were cremated on July 24, 1970. In September of that year, *Cremation Project* was included in the *Software* exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York. To be more precise, what was exhibited was the series of photographs that documented the cremation, the bronze memorial plaque and six caskets.

While Baldessari’s frustration with the Los Angeles art scene was growing, Ruscha was also uneasy in his situation. While still a student

³⁶ Ibid.

at the Chouinard, he was so eager to get started on his career as a commercial artist that he managed to secure employment as a freelance sign painter and a graphic designer. He also hand-set type and worked the presses at the art-book publishing firm Plantin Press. After leaving the Chouinard in 1960, Ruscha worked as a printer's assistant and graphic designer in an L.A. advertising agency. During 1965, he was employed under the pseudonym Eddie Russia as chief layout artist for *Artforum* magazine, which was published in Los Angeles at that time. But after several years and various jobs, he found that a career as a commercial artist was not in fact his true calling. Commercial art was painstaking work that did not afford the degree of freedom that painting did. His growing discontent with Abstract Expressionist style painting was coupled with a gradual rejection of commercial art as a viable career choice. This created a dilemma for Ruscha: which avenue would he pursue? However, unlike Baldessari, who progressively rejected painting completely, Ruscha reconciled himself with the medium over time.

Ruscha recalled that while at the Chouinard, he, along with the other students, painted in the Abstract Expressionist style because it was fashionable. Yet Ruscha was not content to continue to work in this

manner because he felt that he could contribute nothing new to it.³⁷ For him, the challenge was how to paint but not to paint in this manner. His breakthrough came when he began to combine elements of commercial art and preexisting imagery with paint on canvas. Paintings such as *Su* (1958; ill. 10) show the influence of commercial art, with typeface lettering combined with wide, horizontal, Abstract Expressionist–looking strokes of paint.

Early influences for Ruscha included John Altoon, Robert Irwin and Edward Kienholz. Although quite different in terms of their artistic styles, these artists shared a passionate commitment to their art that inspired Ruscha. Further, Altoon had struggled, just as Ruscha had, with the choice between commercial art and painting.³⁸ However, the inclusion of letters and then words in Ruscha's work suggested other new influences: Kurt Schwitters, Robert Rauschenberg and, most importantly, Jasper Johns. Ruscha saw Johns's *Target with Four Faces* (1955; ill. 11) reproduced in a *Print* magazine article in 1957.³⁹ Johns provided Ruscha with a viable alternative to Abstract Expressionism. Johns selected existing objects and images and transformed and

³⁷ Ed Ruscha, "Ed Ruscha: I Have This Kind of Lofty Idea of Landscape Being Pivotal to Making a Picture," interview by Fred Fehlau, *Flash Art* 138 (January/February 1988): 70.

³⁸ Benezra, "Ed Ruscha: Painting and Artistic License," 147.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

enhanced them by removing them from their original context and focusing attention on them. “In Johns, Ruscha found an artist who had mastered the processes of painting but who had turned that mastery against the soul-bearing ethos of Abstract Expressionism,”⁴⁰ a similar aspiration to Ruscha’s own. Through Johns’s example, Ruscha located a way to continue to make paintings despite his prevailing ambivalence.⁴¹

By about 1960, Ruscha was producing paintings that took the problems and constraints of painting as their very subject matter, much like Johns’s *Target with Four Faces*. Johns blurred the distinction between an actual target and a painting of a target. Similarly, in *Box Smashed Flat* (1960–1961; ill. 12), Ruscha painted a faithful scale depiction of a box of raisins that looks as if it has been run over by a car and then affixed to the canvas. The intention was a pun about both the flatness of a two-dimensional canvas and the trajectory of modern art as it progressively acknowledged the actual flatness of the pictorial space.⁴² This playful interrogation of the precepts of twentieth-century painting bears a striking similarity to Baldessari’s *Commissioned*

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Kerry Brougher, “Words as Landscape,” in Benezra and Brougher, *Ed Ruscha*, 161.

Paintings that parody Al Held's purported remark about the nature of Conceptual art.

From April through October of 1961, Ruscha traveled through Europe, visiting Austria, England, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Scotland, Spain and Yugoslavia. He saw original works by Pablo Picasso, Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, which helped to further this thinking about painting.⁴³ In his paintings from this period, text came to play an increasingly important role.

Like Baldessari, Ruscha went on to produce a series of paintings consisting of text alone. Between 1961 and 1964, Ruscha made a series of monosyllabic word paintings. Paintings such as *Boss* (1961), *Ace* (1962) and *Electric* (1963; ill. 13) feature lone words, sometimes horizontally oriented, amid an expansive field of pure paint. Unlike Baldessari, however, Ruscha created a sense of visual drama in these word paintings. What the text was intended to convey is ambiguous. Ruscha has remarked that making these paintings was almost like painting a landscape.⁴⁴ Margit Rowell observes that they are rather like giant billboards seen out the window of a moving car. Rowell further

⁴³ Wolf, *Ed Ruscha and Photography*, 89.

⁴⁴ Brougher, "Words as Landscape," 161.

suggests that the effect of watching things moving through the car window is akin to the experience of watching images move on the cinema screen. She points out that in the early 1960s (as now), southern California was both a car culture and a movie industry culture. She likens Ruscha's word images to Hollywood film credits that roll across the screen. She suggests that the word images elicit a reaction similar to that one experiences while watching a film's opening credits: One scans the information in anticipation of being psychologically and emotionally engaged.⁴⁵

Like Baldessari's, Ruscha's early work prominently featured the use of other, less conventional, media in addition to painting. Ruscha started taking photographs in his student days. By 1963, his interest in photography expanded into a book project, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (ill. 34), a collection of twenty-six photographs of various gas stations along Route 66. This project, inspired by the trips Ruscha made between Oklahoma City and Los Angeles, deals with the sameness and the sequence of the filling stations. They become points on a map, a 1,400-mile landscape.⁴⁶ In *Every Building on The Sunset Strip* (1966: ill. 36) Ruscha used the book format to create a kind of narrative based on

⁴⁵ Rowell, "Cotton Puffs, Q-Tips," 21.

⁴⁶ Brougher, "Words as Landscape," 163.

repetition. It is at once a document and a fiction, presenting both Hollywood the real place and Hollywood the dream factory without differentiating between the two.⁴⁷

The decision to capture inconsequential, ordinary images from everyday existence in photographs and book projects was an alternative and a reaction to the heroic, expressive and intense stance of the Abstract Expressionist style of painting. Ruscha liked the deadpan, training-manual-like compositions that were captured by the camera's eye, although he always saw photography as a means to orient his approach to painting, not as an end in itself.⁴⁸

In *Royal Road Test* (1967; ill. 37), another book project, the narrative impulse overtook the impassive reportage of inconsequential images. The book chronicles an orchestrated event in which Ruscha and his friends Mason Williams and Patrick Blackwell participated. Traveling on a highway southwest of Las Vegas, Williams threw a Royal typewriter out the car window. The three pulled over and then Ruscha and Williams examined the shattered remains of the typewriter, while Blackwell photographed them. They took meticulous measurements that reveal that the typewriter fragments were scattered

⁴⁷ Ibid., 164.

⁴⁸ Rowell, "Cotton Puffs, Q-Tips," 12.

over 189 feet. Deadpan captions accompany the photographs. These captions are at once pseudoscientific and completely hilarious.

Between 1967 and 1970, Ruscha executed only drawings and prints, still working with purely text-based images. The smaller scale of a print provided a comfortable page-sized home for his single word compositions, which were rendered in a ribbon-like typography and which featured dramatic contrasts of dark and light, as in *Optics* (1967; ill. 14). Rowell suggests that the evocation of illumination in this drawing in conjunction with “the word’s optimistic upward thrust connotes a romantic atmosphere or emotion, like a flickering text on a silent movie screen.”⁴⁹

Unconventional materials figured largely in the drawings and prints from this period. Many of the drawings were made using gunpowder. Blood, coffee, onion juice, petroleum jelly, tobacco, Pepto-Bismol, mustard, cream, chocolate and tomato paste were also among the substances he introduced into his prints and drawings. Some, such as cream and tomato paste, did not hold up in the printing process, but others adhered to the paper and held up well.⁵⁰ Ruscha’s choice of

⁴⁹ Ibid., 16–17.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 18–19.

these materials underscores how the stuff of everyday living, like mustard and like the movies, serves as fodder for his art.

In 1970 Ruscha was invited by his friend and workshop curator Henry Hopkins to participate in a graphics workshop for the 35th Venice Biennale. His contribution, entitled *Chocolate Room* (ill. 15), was created by silk-screening 360 sheets of paper with chocolate paste and then affixing them to the interior walls of the American pavilion like shingles. The work inspired visitor participation, as many viewers moistened their fingers and wrote on the chocolate-coated sheets. Many of the visitors' written contributions centered on Vietnam War protests. Interestingly, Ruscha nearly boycotted the Biennale as part of a massive artist war protest. He changed his mind at the last minute, largely motivated by his friendship with Hopkins.

Despite Ruscha's interest in Johns and despite the fact that he was included in several exhibitions of Pop art, he was no more comfortable being a Pop artist than he was being an Abstract Expressionist. Neal Benezra observes that the example of Marcel Duchamp reinforced Ruscha's distrust of both Pop and painting.⁵¹ A major retrospective of the works of Marcel Duchamp, entitled *By or of Marcel Duchamp or Rose Sélavy*, was curated by Walter Hopps at the

⁵¹ Benezra, 150.

Pasadena Art Museum in 1963. At this time, Ruscha met Duchamp, whose works he had known and admired since high school. What appealed to Ruscha was Duchamp's decidedly nonpainterly approach and his defiance of convention. Additionally, according to Benezra, Ruscha's obsession with chocolate as a material, which culminated in his *Chocolate Room*, was triggered by his interest in Duchamp's *Chocolate Grinder*.⁵² Duchamp's iconoclastic objects provided both Ruscha and Baldessari with a blueprint for creating art from unconventional, even banal, materials that challenged assumptions about the very nature of art—and did so with humor.

Conceptual art, especially the West Coast variety, can therefore be seen as an extension of the Duchampian readymade, an ordinary object that implied that art resided in the idea and not in the object itself. Like Duchamp's art, Conceptual art turned away from traditional practices and media. It focused on interrogating the ideas underlying the creation and reception of art, rather than on adding yet another stylistic convention to the historical succession of modernist avant-garde movements.⁵³

⁵² Ibid., 152.

⁵³ Edward A. Shanken, "Technology and Conceptual Art," in *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth and Practice*, ed. Michael Corris (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 236.

Sol LeWitt articulated the rationale for Conceptual art in two articles, one in 1967 and one in 1969.⁵⁴ He wrote that in Conceptual art, the idea assumed primary importance and the execution of the work of art was “a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.”⁵⁵ LeWitt went so far as to reject painting and sculpture entirely on the basis of their inherent aesthetic appeal.

Many works of Conceptual art that investigate where meaning resides in art and how art conveys this meaning often rely on text as a device for examining the interstices between visual and verbal languages as semiotic systems. For example, Joseph Kosuth’s *One and Three Chairs* (1965; ill. 16) comprised an actual folding chair, a photograph of a chair, and a photographic enlargement of a dictionary definition of a chair, inviting the question: Which is the true essence of a chair or any material object? Text-based art fulfilled the ongoing mission of Conceptual art: to dematerialize the art object.⁵⁶ Both Baldessari and Ruscha employed text in their works for precisely such reasons and both contributed significantly to the evolution of West Coast Conceptualism.

⁵⁴ See Sol LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” *Artforum* (June 1967): 80-83, and “Sentences on Conceptual Art,” *Art-Language* (May 1969).

⁵⁵ LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” 80.

⁵⁶ Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*, 163.

By 1970, Conceptual art had officially arrived. That year the Museum of Modern Art mounted an exhibition entitled *Information*, curated by Kynaston McShine.⁵⁷ This exhibition, a landmark for Conceptual art, included Baldessari's short film *Viewpoint* (1968) and Ruscha's boxed portfolio of *Stains* (1969).⁵⁸ Among other artists included in the exhibition were Carl Andre, Mel Bochner, Hans Haacke, Les Levine, Doug Huebler, Joseph Beuys, Bruce Nauman, Lawrence Weiner, Yoko Ono, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, Robert Smithson and Dennis Oppenheim.

According to Edward Shanken, "Conceptual art is a meta-critical and self-reflexive art practice, engaged in theorizing the possibilities of signification in art's multiple contexts, (including its history, criticism, exhibitions and markets)."⁵⁹ However, some Conceptual artists actually went beyond theorizing about art's exhibition spaces and markets—they protested against what they considered to be unfair practices and bias. Artist-organized denouncements of art world capitalism and museum practices were not uncommon in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Art Workers Coalition, an activist group whose members

⁵⁷ The catalogue for the exhibition is by Kynaston McShine, ed., *Information* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970).

⁵⁸ See pp. 120-122 for a discussion of *Viewpoint*.

⁵⁹ Shanken, 236.

included Carl Andre, Robert Morris and Mel Bochner, engaged in numerous protest acts. The group was formed essentially to disrupt the conventional art world. Its acts included picketing the Museum of Modern Art in 1970 because the museum's trustees also headed corporations that were providing the machinery of the Vietnam War and profiting from it. The Coalition also organized the New York Art Strike in 1970. In an attempt to close the Metropolitan Museum of Art for the day, they protested art world bias, calling for artists to be appointed as museum trustees and for better representation of female and black artists.

However, the relationship of Conceptual art to the establishment and the extent to which this art was and is collectable and saleable is an aspect of the movement that has recently been reassessed. Conceptual art was not entirely anti-commercial, as had been traditionally supposed. It may have attempted to de-emphasize or question art's commodity status via its dematerialization of the art object, but even without objects the art proved to be saleable.

According to art historian Alexander Alberro, the 1960s in general, and the advent of Conceptual art in particular, saw a shift in marketing and promotion of art and artists and in the pattern of

consumption of art collectors.⁶⁰ For all its unrest, this decade ushered in both an economic boom and a new economic paradigm. Multinational capitalism relied more than ever on new methods for disseminating information, on advertising and on the media in order to reach consumers and spark new appetites and patterns of consumption. In significant ways, the art of this era was inextricably linked to these trends. In the art world, too, new products and markets emerged during this decade. Art collecting was becoming less of an elitist pastime. Newly wealthy businessmen transformed art patronage and turned collecting into a conspicuous public activity. Investing in art became somewhat like investing in the stock market, like a business enterprise. This was particularly true of contemporary art, which was snapped up at record rates. Because it was new and unproven in the marketplace, it sold at bargain prices, yet held great investment potential. Alberro observes:

The cumulative effect of these trends, coupled with changes in tax laws, contributed to a booming market for contemporary art that in turn inflated the exchange value of art and attracted an even greater number of patrons. Financial journals made investment recommendations for art, singling out the potential of the work of a

⁶⁰ Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, 2.

number of artists and artistic movements, and newspapers covered museum and gallery exhibitions more thoroughly in their social columns.⁶¹

Initially, it would seem that Conceptual art's de-emphasis of art objects would render it impervious to this growing trend. However, its concurrent "egalitarian pursuit of ... publicness"⁶² perfectly poised the movement for commercial viability. The challenge that artists and dealers of Conceptual art faced was: What exactly would be sold to a collector if the work of art was not an object? The answer was the means that many businesses used to reach potential consumers—advertising.

Seth Siegelaub, one of the leading New York dealers of Conceptual art, was a major force in cultivating and shaping the movement and the media's coverage of it. His gallery, Seth Siegelaub Contemporary Art, located at 16 West Fifty-sixth Street in New York, sold fine art and Oriental rugs from 1964 to 1966. The rugs were sometimes incorporated into the shows in an effort to create a setting that projected an image of the art collector as a cultured individual

⁶¹ Ibid., 7.

⁶² Ibid.

surrounded by refined objects.⁶³ Siegelau had a flair for marketing. He believed that “if marketed correctly, almost any artwork, no matter how unconventional, could be sold.”⁶⁴ According to Siegelau, a Conceptual work of art could be split into “primary information” (the essence of the work) and “secondary information” (the material information by which one becomes aware of the work). The secondary material—exhibition catalogues, assembly instructions, maps, photographs, videos, magazines, merchandising—can be sold when there is no art object to sell. In this way the publicity *becomes* the art.

Siegelau represented Conceptual artists including Carl Andre, Robert Barry, Lawrence Weiner and Doug Huebler, first in his gallery, then in his home (after he closed his gallery in 1966 due to financial concerns) and simultaneously at Max’s Kansas City nightclub, a hotspot that attracted artists, critics, collectors and Hollywood celebrities. Dealing privately out of his home, Siegelau had even more freedom to operate as a marketing and advertising executive. He saw that he did not need a gallery to show or sell idea-based art, and he was free of the overhead associated with operating a gallery.

⁶³ Ibid., 10.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 11.

Through a carefully honed strategy, Siegelauub attracted the attention and the buying power of art's new corporate patrons through direct-mail advertising. He wrote and distributed a brochure to prospective corporate clients that extolled the virtues of art collecting as a sound business practice and an invaluable image enhancement. In addition to discovering and introducing numerous artists via group exhibitions, he was a tireless publicist, writing press releases and proposals and sending them to patrons, art organizations and newspapers and magazines.

Sharing in the entrepreneurial spirit, the artists that Siegelauub represented began to take much more interest in their careers and to "increasingly resemble personnel in other specialized professions in which success came to those who managed and publicized their work most strategically."⁶⁵ Many young artists were beginning their careers with advanced degrees in art and a desire to be successful.⁶⁶

Just as art dealer Siegelauub understood the important role mass media could play in the art world, so, too, did Conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth. A highly skillful advocate of his own work, he knew how to

⁶⁵ Ibid., 1.

⁶⁶ For example, Minimalist Donald Judd earned a B.A. in philosophy and an M.A. in art, both from Columbia University. Vito Acconci holds a B.F.A. from Holy Cross College and an M.F.A. from the University of Iowa. Chris Burden has a B.F.A. from Pomona College and an M.F.A. from the University of California at Irvine.

deliver the right sound byte in an interview. He coordinated well-publicized group artist lectures at the School of Visual Arts in New York during 1966 and 1967 and launched an arts newsletter *Straight*, for which he was the chief editor. Along with fellow artist Christine Kozlov, he opened his own art gallery in the East Village, the Lannis Gallery, in 1967. He went to great lengths to cultivate a public image, selecting particular clothes, dyeing his hair, and making regular appearances at Max's Kansas City to see and be seen, to solidify important social connections.

Siegelaub and Kosuth were kindred spirits in this regard. Kosuth was invited to participate in group shows organized by Siegelaub. The art critic Arthur R. Rose, whom Siegelaub persuaded to write a review of a show that he had organized, was none other than Kosuth in pseudonym.⁶⁷ The pseudonym that Kosuth chose was reminiscent of another "Rose," Marcel Duchamp's alter ego, Rose Selavy. Other artists of this era, such as Donald Judd and Robert Smithson also wrote art criticism. What was so extraordinary about Kosuth's situation, however, was that as Arthur R. Rose, he wrote about his own work and the work of other Conceptualists. He actively shaped a movement.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, 28.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

The importance of the collaboration between Siegelau and Kosuth in the development of the Conceptual movement cannot be underestimated. Both were masterful in their ability to manipulate and control publicity and in using mass media and communication technologies to disseminate art. They shared the goal of bringing together like-minded artists in order to create a more or less coherent movement that could be easily identified by the media and, more importantly, by patrons.⁶⁹ In the advertising and marketing industries, this is known as “branding.”

Alberro only discusses the situation of New York-based artists. However, given the similar trend occurring simultaneously on the West Coast, with artists posing for calendars, making group appearances at motorcycle races and inspiring film characters, it is clear that both East and West Coast artists were becoming increasingly savvy with regard to the varied intersections between art, commerce and celebrity. Despite the East versus West divide in the art world, this instinct for branding was something that united artists on both coasts. Andy Warhol is often regarded as being on the vanguard of this trend, but it is important to note that other artists, such as Bengston and Kosuth, responded similarly, even if they are less well remembered for it. By the

⁶⁹ Ibid., 52–53.

1960s, art in America was becoming an overtly commercial enterprise that relied on marketing, advertising and corporate funding and whose key figures were becoming businessmen, careerists and stars. In short, the art world was going Hollywood.

However, Hollywood was changing, too. Neither the art world, nor the Hollywood film industry was immune to the pervasive atmosphere of change and upheaval that characterized the 1960s. Just as the current strain of modernist painting was being supplanted, the dominant mode of production in Hollywood—the studio system—was in its death throes.

The studio system dominated Hollywood film production during what is known as the “classical era,” that is, the period from the advent of sound until 1960.⁷⁰ During this time, eight studios reached the peak of their production powers, controlling all aspects of movie making from the time a film was merely a script in development to the time it was released in theaters. These studios were Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), Paramount, RKO (Radio-Keith-Orpheum), Warner Brothers, Universal, 20th Century Fox, United Artists, and Columbia. Film historian Thomas Schatz identifies the classical era of Hollywood as not only synonymous

⁷⁰ The starting point for the sound era of Hollywood film is denoted by the release of Warner Brothers' *The Jazz Singer* in 1927, the first full-length feature film with sound. In fact, Warner Brothers had been experimenting with sound in their Vitaphone short films since 1926.

with, but inextricably linked to the studio system.⁷¹ He asserts that a balance of social, industrial, technological, economic and aesthetic forces was the hallmark of the classical era. The achievement of the balance between all these factors in turn produced a consistent system of consumption and production, a set of formalized creative practices and constraints, and, therefore, a body of films with a uniform style and a standard way of telling stories. This mode of storytelling relied on camera work, cutting, plot structure and themes. Schatz explains that it was the studio system that maintained the equilibrium between these forces and, therefore, that the terms “studio era” and “classical Hollywood” describe the same industrial and historical phenomena.

Unlike the pressures facing modernist art, though, those confronting studio-era Hollywood were largely external. In May 1948, the Supreme Court ruled that the incorporation of production, distribution and exhibition of films constituted a monopoly. It handed down three separate decisions that broke apart Hollywood’s enormously profitable, integrated business model of production, distribution and exhibition. The first suit was an antitrust one and resulted in the Paramount decree,⁷² which prohibited block booking,

⁷¹ Schatz, *Genius of the System*, 8–9.

⁷² The decree was so called because Paramount was the first studio named in the original complaint.

blind bidding and price-fixing and banned any kind of privileged relationship between studios and theaters. Further, the five majors, MGM, RKO, Warner Brothers, 20th Century Fox and Paramount, were required to divest themselves of all their theater holdings and to operate solely as production-distribution companies. The other two Supreme Court decisions stemmed from separate but related cases brought against two large theater chains, the Griffith and Schine circuits. The Court's verdict in each abolished policies that gave these circuits unfair advantage over smaller independent theaters. No longer would these circuits or any other large chains have first crack at big feature films or be entitled to longer runs. The Supreme Court's rulings meant that the integrated majors had to handle production and marketing of each film on an individual basis, a very expensive way of working that seriously undermined the studio system's continued viability.⁷³

This series of decisions hurt the five biggest studios the most. These studios developed and owned their own theater chains. This allowed them to dominate the first-run movie market and the movie theaters in the major urban centers, which generated the majority of the country's box-office revenues. Each of the five major studios developed a distinctive production and marketing strategy specifically geared

⁷³ Schatz, *Genius of the System*, 435.

toward the number, size and location of its theater holdings.⁷⁴ Their control over vast blocks of theaters effectively prevented competitors from selling their films unless they allied themselves with one of the five major studios. Even independent filmmakers were closely tied to the studio system, typically to one of the five integrated majors. They borrowed the studios' personnel, leased their production facilities and, most importantly, relied heavily on their first-run theaters. It was a neatly symbiotic relationship as the so-called independents were utterly dependent on the studios for resources and exhibition facilities, while the studios needed the independents to cultivate the "high end" of the market by creating quality art films, from which the studios earned a sizable exhibitor's fee.⁷⁵

Another factor contributing to the collapse of the studio system was the rejection of it by key personnel: actors, primarily. Previously, shackled by contracts mandating exclusive and sometimes long tenures of service at one studio, big-name stars found ways to circumvent the system entirely, using their increasingly powerful agents to negotiate short-term contracts and/or picture-by-picture deals. The contract system no longer held any appeal for stars whatsoever—financially

⁷⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

overextended studios were increasingly terminating these contracts. Stars gained more control over their finances, projects and publicity by operating independently of the studios.⁷⁶ This is a situation not unlike that of young artists in the 1960s rejecting traditional art world modes of production, writing their own criticism, seeking representation outside established galleries and museums and generating their own publicity.

An example of a star who went freelance with great success during this time was James Stewart. Stewart's agent Lew Wasserman was the most important agent at the most powerful agency in Hollywood: MCA. The deal that Wasserman brokered for Stewart in the early 1950s was an important and influential one. Stewart was looking for a way to gain a certain amount of independence and control over his career, in addition to maximizing his salary and avoiding huge tax payments. Wasserman ingeniously found a way to tie his client's income to the performance of the movies in which he starred. The Stewart-Universal deal required Stewart to sacrifice an up-front salary in lieu of a 50 percent share of the net profits of each film he made with the studio. Stewart's payments were spread out over the full life span of a film. This could be several years or even more if the film was sold to television. Stewart made several hit films with Universal during this

⁷⁶ Ethan Mordden, *The Hollywood Studios: House Style in the Golden Age of the Movies* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1988), 368–369.

freelance period including *Winchester '73* (1950), *Harvey* (1950) and *The Glenn Miller Story* (1953). By 1955 he was named the industry's top box-office star and was the highest paid actor in Hollywood. But his deal with Universal was not exclusive. In fact some of his best work of the 1950s was done under director Alfred Hitchcock at Paramount. He also made westerns for both MGM and Columbia during this period.⁷⁷

The final blow for the studio system was the advent of television. Initially, it was regarded as a novelty, just as talking pictures had been in their early days. However, the major Hollywood studios followed events in the television industry very closely. In the late 1930s they were already active in television research, manufacturing and investing in television production companies, broadcasting stations and networks.⁷⁸ By the 1940s several studios declared an interest in producing programming for television. Columbia and Universal set up subsidiary telefilm production units in the early 1950s, although the television plans of most of the other studios remained unrealized at that stage.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Schatz, *Genius of the System*, 470–472.

⁷⁸ William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 67.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

Reacting to economic pressure caused by a severe box office downturn that began as early as 1948, the major studios had to make some changes. By the 1950s the power had shifted from exhibition to production and distribution. However, the threat of major exhibitor boycotts temporarily forestalled a wholehearted move into telefilm production or the sale of feature films to television. It was Howard Hughes' sale of the RKO film library to television that finally triggered the wave of sales of feature films to television.⁸⁰ Nonetheless, the studio executives still believed that they could differentiate between television-oriented products and movie-house oriented products and remain financially viable with both. In an effort to emphasize this perceived difference, the studios concentrated on color, big-budget productions and introduced 3-D and wide-screen formats, things that viewers could not get from a TV screen. However, television had a big advantage: There was no repeat cost, just the initial purchase price of the set. As the 1950s wore on, television manufacturing improved, screens became wider, and color sets were introduced. The quality of the programming became more diverse, and increasingly included old movies. But by the mid-1950s, some of the major studios, including Warner Bros., were shifting their regulated operation to series

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

television. By the early 1960s, the studio-based film industry was finding it difficult to compete effectively with television.⁸¹

By the year 1960, the classical era of Hollywood film, characterized by the dominance of the studio system, had drawn to a close. Clearly, though, the film industry in the United States did not cease to exist—only the studio-based dominance collapsed. What sustained the ailing U.S. film industry during these troubled times was its ability to adapt to the shifting pattern of consumption. As Lawrence Alloway points out, the once absolute distinction between commercial and art cinema had somewhat eroded by the 1960s. More Americans than ever were graduating from college. Further, they possessed a more comprehensive knowledge of film than ever due to films being shown on television. In short, this meant that American audiences had become more discriminating in their consumption of films.⁸²

Alloway also explores the return of fast cutting to the commercial cinema of the 1960s. In the Hollywood classical era, cuts were smooth and inconspicuous, calling as little attention to themselves as possible in service of maximizing narrative continuity. However, post-studio-era cinema saw a return to the fast cutting that was characteristic of Soviet

⁸¹ Mordden, *Hollywood Studios*, 370.

⁸² Alloway, *Violent America*, 22.

montage—another indication of the merger of avant-garde and commercial cinema.⁸³ Alloway further observes that the reemergence of fast cutting may be traced to television commercials and their need to convey the maximal amount of information in a minimal amount of time.

Both the art world and the Hollywood film industry experienced change in the 1960s. Interestingly, though, they were changing in different ways as a result of similar pressures. The art world was becoming more attuned to commercial impulses, while film was evoking its avant-garde roots as one strategy to remain commercially competitive with its chief rival—television.

There is an often-overlooked connection between Conceptual art and Hollywood film. In an era when classical forms, i.e., modernist painting and the studio system, were in simultaneous decline, the cultural currency of movies and art was growing ever stronger and more interdependent. Painting did not die and Hollywood movies did not die, but they did change. Both art forms found new channels of distribution—thanks to television, movies were more widely circulated than ever, and the print media, the music world, television and social events brought art to a wider public. As artists became more like movie stars in their attention to matters of celebrity, image, publicity and

⁸³ Ibid.

business, and as art dealers began functioning more like Hollywood agents, movie stars in turn became artists. The career of Dennis Hopper perfectly underscores the link between the art world and the film industry.⁸⁴ The well-known star, director and co-writer of *Easy Rider* (1969), Hopper was also an accomplished photographer and art collector. It was no coincidence that amidst this crossover climate, artists such as Baldessari and Ruscha should look to Hollywood film for inspiration in their art.

Peter Plagens argues that Los Angeles in particular had essentially two strategies during this time in terms of positioning itself vis-à-vis the New York art scene: It could either accept “Second City” status, or it could proclaim itself essentially different. The former tactic would make Los Angeles art relevant but potentially inferior, while the latter would avoid the accusation of inferiority, but risk irrelevance. With regard to major art styles of the 1960s and 1970s, e.g. Pop, Minimalism and Conceptual art, Plagens asserts that Los Angeles opted for the runner-up role of Second City. While the New York brand of these styles was gritty, aggressive and neurotic, the Los Angeles version was clean, friendly and well adjusted in comparison—“Lawrence Weiner vs. John Baldessari: scholastic Conceptual art vs. oh-lighten-up

⁸⁴ David E. James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 282.

Conceptual Art.”⁸⁵ However, while Plagens and other critics of the era may have seen the situation that way at the time, this orientation, particularly where the works of Ruscha and Baldessari are concerned, warrants reassessment. Beneath the deceptive veneer of these friendly, humorous works that blithely evoke popular culture lies a complex engagement with theoretical trends of the day. As such, the ways in which Ruscha and Baldessari deal with Hollywood film in their art reveal an approach as intellectually adventurous as anything coming out of New York at the time.

Howard N. Fox, curator of modern and contemporary art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, wrote:

During the 1960s and 1970s, the mythology of California shifted like a tectonic plate, nudging popular conceptions out of place and occasionally thrusting new ones suddenly and violently into national awareness.⁸⁶

In addition to the Hollywood plate shift and the general art world plate shift, California in the 1960s also saw a group of its own young artists thrust into national prominence, in contrast to the previous decade’s artists, who had been thought of chiefly as regionalists. Amid this convergence of events, John Baldessari and Ed Ruscha were creating works of art that rebelled against the art world establishment

⁸⁵ Plagens, *Sunshine Muse*, 4.

⁸⁶ Fox, “Tremors in Paradise,” 193.

and explored new terrain. Although in some ways they had little in common with their West Coast–style contemporaries, they, too, were inspired by distinctive aspects of California culture. While Bengston, Chicago and Kauffmann were drawing inspiration from the automobile aesthetic, Baldessari and Ruscha were increasingly referencing Hollywood films in their works.

Both artists shared an interest not just in the superficial co-opting of the imagery of Hollywood film, but in the structure, apparatus and sociological implications of it, all of which featured prominently in their works of the late 1960s, 1970s and beyond. Even more fundamentally, their shared desire to explore narrative processes and structures and their ability to convey meaning led Baldessari and Ruscha to engage in one practice specifically—making their own films.

Chapter 2

Process, Structure and Medium: The Artists' Films and Videos

This chapter is devoted to Baldessari's and Ruscha's use of film and Baldessari's use of video. Their choice to work in these media was by no means unique during that era. Many artists of Baldessari's and Ruscha's generation experimented with the moving image in the 1960s and 1970s. Baldessari's and Ruscha's works in film and Baldessari's videos bore some similarities to those of their contemporaries; however, their particular interest in the extensive use of narrative in these media differentiated their work. Further, although the two artists invoked narrative in their films and videos in complementary ways, the end results were strikingly dissimilar.

My approach in this chapter, which is one not undertaken in previous scholarship on either artist, is to identify the theoretical currents in their film and video works. Because it is the relationship to Hollywood film that I wish to elucidate, I use film theory, rather than art theory, to achieve this goal. I first identify key concepts in film historian David Bordwell's neoformalist theory of film narrative: process and structure. I then demonstrate how Ruscha and Baldessari each employ these respective concepts first in two-dimensional works and ultimately in film and/or video.

The Emergence of Video Art

Affordable video equipment first became commercially available in the late 1960s, offering artists a new medium of unknown capabilities in which to work. Artists involved with various movements, including Conceptual art, Pop art and Fluxus, began making their own films and videos, pioneering the use of the video in particular.¹ The emergence of video art paralleled and overlapped the growth of performance art. Video offered a means to capture ephemeral practices and fleeting, unrepeatable performances that challenged the materiality of art, without the expense and time commitment involved with shooting a film.²

The practices of video art and filmmaking united East and West Coast Conceptual artists. For example, Vito Acconci and Chris Burden used these media to create visual records of their performance-oriented art in order to give it a life span beyond the original performance(s) and in order to reach a wider audience. Acconci's *Seedbed* (1972; ill. 17) and Burden's *Shoot* (1971; ill. 18) are precisely that: film documents of

¹ A discussion of artists' pioneering use of video in the 1960s and 1970s may be found in Anthony Huberman, Alanna Heiss and Glenn D. Lowry, *Video Acts: Single Channel Works from the Collections of Pamela and Richard Kramlich and the New Art Trust* (New York; P.S. 1 Contemporary Arts Center, 2003). Among the artists discussed are Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman, Nam June Paik and John Baldessari.

² Klaus Biesenbach, "Video Acts," in Huberman, Heiss and Lowry, *Video Acts*, 12.

preternatural performance pieces. *Seedbed*, a 10-minute, black-and-white, silent Super-8 film, captures Acconci's famous performance-installation piece, a ruthless interrogation of artist and spectator, of public and private acts, and of social authority and power.³ For it, a special ramp was constructed in the Sonnabend Gallery in SoHo. Acconci lay beneath it, masturbating and announcing into a microphone his fantasies about the visitors walking above him. His words were broadcast in the gallery through loudspeakers. These loudspeakers were the only visible evidence of an art installation in the gallery. The lack of audio in the *Seedbed* video detracts somewhat from its efficacy as a document, since an integral element of the original performance piece is not present. The equally famous—or infamous—*Shoot*, a black-and-white, sound film of approximately 8 seconds, documents one of the most extreme examples of 1970s Conceptual/Performance art: Burden allowing a friend to shoot him in the arm with a .22-caliber rifle.

The Duchampian idea that art may be found in everyday objects and activities was adopted by many young artists in the 1960s and 1970s. Film's ability to capture ordinary acts in real time suited the

³ For a thorough discussion of *Seedbed* and Acconci's other films and videos, see Kate Linker, *Vito Acconci* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994).

medium to this approach to art. Artists such as Bruce Nauman, Nam June Paik, and Andy Warhol, among others, staged mundane, repetitious and, occasionally, eccentric acts specifically for the camera.

In the silent, black-and-white, 16mm film *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* (1967–68; ill. 20), Bruce Nauman does precisely (and only) that. He walks around the perimeter of a large square marked off with masking tape on the floor of his studio. He shifts his hips in an exaggerated manner as he gingerly places one foot in front of the other, moving repeatedly around the square for the film's entire 10-minute duration.⁴

Button Happening (1965; ill. 21) is one of Nam June Paik's earliest videos. Recorded on computer tape in a single day, it captures a single action: Paik repeatedly buttoning and unbuttoning his jacket. A spirit of humor similar to that found in Nauman's *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* is present.

Paik also pursued a different direction in his films and videos. *Missa of Zen* (1966-1969; ill. 22), a 2:28-minute, silent, black-and-white collaboration with experimental filmmaker Jud Yalkut, is actually a TV

⁴ See Coosje van Bruggen, *Bruce Nauman* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988) for an analysis of Nauman's video work.

screen, filmed from an extremely oblique angle.⁵ The resulting image is a ghostly, flickering vertical sliver at the left side of a darkened frame, a visual equivalent of a Philip Glass musical score of the same era, such as *Music in Similar Motion* (1969): minimal, repetitive and abstract.

Andy Warhol's first film *Sleep* (1963; ill. 19) comprises more than 5 hours of footage of the poet John Giorno sleeping.⁶ It should be noted, though, that Warhol's film is not an unmitigated single-shot document of someone getting a night's sleep. It contains several different camera angles, variations of lighting and atmosphere and meticulous editing, with several shots repeated multiple times throughout the duration of the film. The footage was shot over a period of months, not in a single night.⁷ *Sleep* is actually a carefully orchestrated evocation of deadpan banality in much the same way that Ruscha's *Royal Road Test* is.⁸

In addition to his prominence as a Pop artist, Warhol was a key figure in American avant-garde film of the 1960s and is credited by film

⁵ For criticism and interpretation of Paik's work, refer to Toni Stooss and Thomas Kellein, eds., *Nam June Paik: Video Time, Video Space* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993).

⁶ Callie Angel discusses Warhol's films and techniques in detail in "Andy Warhol, Filmmaker," *The Andy Warhol Museum* (New York: D.A.P.; Stuttgart: Cantz, 1994), 120–145, and in "Some Early Warhol Films: Notes on Technique" in Thomas Kellein, ed., *Andy Warhol Abstracts*, exhibition catalogue (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1993), 72–82.

⁷ Fred Camper, "The Lover's Gaze: Sleep," *Chicago Reader*, 28 April 2000, n.p.

⁸ See page 86 for a discussion of *Royal Road Test*.

historian P. Adams Sitney as being the main precursor of the structural film movement.⁹ Structural film was an American avant-garde movement, the heyday of which is roughly considered to be from 1967 to 1972, or from Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1966-1967) to Hollis Frampton's *Hapax Legomena* (1972).¹⁰ Among the progenitors of the movement are Snow, Frampton, Paul Sharits, Peter Kubelka, Ernie Gehr, Tony Conrad, Joyce Wieland and George Landow.

As part of the film avant-garde, structural film manifests the avant-garde's deeply ambivalent relationship with Hollywood film, displaying a particular mistrust of the linear narrative that dominated classical Hollywood film. In place of narrative, social content and modes of editing governed by both, structural film offers an inversion or denial of narrative, minimal content and sequencing governed by blueprints, mathematical formulas and logical propositions.¹¹ The structural film constantly seeks to remind the viewer that the content of the film image is an illusion and to draw attention to the material reality of the celluloid surface.

⁹ P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-1978* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974). 371.

¹⁰ Paul Arthur, *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film since 1965* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 80.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

Sitney defines the four distinguishing features of the structural film as: fixed camera position, the flicker effect, loop printing and rephotography off the screen. However, all four elements are seldom present within a single film, according to Sitney.¹² He cites Warhol's *Sleep* as an example of a structural film as it contains the fixed camera position, loop printing to repeat several shots over the film's nearly six-hour duration, and the freezing of a still image of the sleeper's head. The freeze process, says Sitney, emphasizes the grain and flattens the image the same way that rephotography off the screen does.¹³

It is no coincidence that MoMA's 1970 exhibition *Information* featured films by Warhol, *Sleep* and *Empire* (1964), films by Shartis, Landow, Snow, Frampton and Gehr, and works by Baldessari and Ruscha, including Baldessari's film *Viewpoint*, which also involves a loop.¹⁴ What Warhol, structural filmmakers, and Baldessari and Ruscha shared is a complex negotiation with classical Hollywood cinema, particularly with its linear narrative component, and an emphasis on the material reality of the film medium. Also not coincidental is the fact that structural film paralleled the development of theoretical enterprises that

¹² Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 370.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 372.

¹⁴ See pages 120-122 for a discussion of *Viewpoint*.

involved linguistics, philosophy, psychoanalysis, anthropology and sociology, such as structuralist film theory and apparatus theory, which I use to analyze works by Baldessari and Ruscha, respectively.

Ruscha and Baldessari's films can be understood to an extent in the context of the works of their fellow artists who were experimenting with film and video. The films of both artists demonstrated the quirky humor and focus on the ordinary found in *Button Happening* and *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square*. Ruscha's films, like Warhol's, also reveal an interest in, although perhaps not an expert demonstration of, uniquely cinematic values. But unlike Acconci, Nauman, Burden and other artists who used film and video to document ephemeral performances, Ruscha and Baldessari shared a concern that was not a focus of any of the Conceptual projects mentioned: narrative, and the adoption, rejection and exploration thereof. In this regard, their use of film and video has more in common with the work of Warhol, who first defied generic narrative strategies in *Sleep* and then later relied on them in films such as *Lonesome Cowboys* (1969), a camp interpretation of the Western genre, and more in common with the makers of structural film who were also influenced by Warhol.

Bordwell

Film historian David Bordwell identifies three nonexclusive ways to analyze the use of narrative in film: narrative as representation, narrative as structure, and narrative as process. Representation refers to portrayal of a reality. Structure is the way in which components are combined to make a whole, while process describes “the activity of selecting, arranging and rendering the story material in order to achieve specific time-bound effects on a perceiver.”¹⁵ These distinctions are useful for identifying the way in which Ruscha’s and Baldessari’s approaches to narrative in their films differ.¹⁶ Ruscha uses narrative as process in his books and films, while Baldessari views it as a structural component, which he interrogates in his photomontage works, films and videos.

Bordwell defines the essential elements of film narrative.¹⁷ There is the story, which embodies the film’s action as a chronological, cause-and-effect chain of events that occur within a given duration of time and a spatial field. The story is not a pro-filmic event; it is never materially

¹⁵ David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), xi.

¹⁶ I am not suggesting that Ruscha and Baldessari have read Bordwell’s theory, but rather that theory offers an effective means for discussing their work.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 49–62. Bordwell actually refers to story and plot by the Russian formalist theory terms for them, *fabula* and *syuzhet*, respectively. In the interest of clarity, I have used English translations.

present on the screen or in the soundtrack. It is signaled via shots or via music and from these cues the viewer infers a story event. For example, from a shot of Jeff standing, facing a window, we infer that Jeff is looking out the window. The plot is the actual presentation of the story in the film; it is the system by which the components are arranged. However, its pattern is not medium dependent: the same plot could be embodied in a novel or in a play. Causality, time and space relate the story and the plot to one another. The third element, style, is the systemic use of film-specific techniques to mobilize the narrative. Examples of styles are noir and neorealist. Each style employs specific kinds of techniques—cinematography, editing, sound, mise-en-scène.

The issue of knowledge (and who possesses it) is Bordwell's fourth narrative element. This encompasses information included in the plot, information that is left out, and which characters' states of mind are revealed. The final element that Bordwell considers is that of the narrator-author. Sometimes a film possesses a character-narrator. A person who is not part of the story, a non-character narrator, may provide voice-over commentary. More controversial than these is the conceit of the implied narrator, because it necessarily raises questions about the identity of the implied spectator.

In a sense Bordwell's theory of narrative is somewhat atypical, not because of his argument, but because of when it was written.

Published in 1985, Bordwell's writing provides a theoretical overview of one of the most privileged topics in film theory of the 1960s and 1970s—classical cinema.¹⁸ His neoformalist approach bears similarity to the narrative theory of Christian Metz, who is possibly the single most influential contributor on the subject. A notable difference, however, is that Bordwell does not attempt to identify a linguistic structure of cinema, whereas Metz does.¹⁹ It is worth noting that many important essays on narrative in classical Hollywood cinema were written not in the 1980s but in the 1970s,²⁰ the decade in which Baldessari made films and videos that dealt with the narrative elements of Hollywood films.

Despite the fact that Bordwell aligned himself with a theoretical trend belonging to the previous decade, the nature of his investigation, his concepts are useful tools in the examination of Ruscha's and Baldessari's evocation of narrative. Most essential is his analysis of

¹⁸ Philip Rosen, "The Saussurean Impulse and Cinema Semiotics," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 13.

¹⁹ See Chapter 3 for a detailed discussion of Metz's semiotics of cinema.

²⁰ Important theories of film narrative include Christian Metz, "Problems of Denotation in the Fiction Film" and "Some Points on the Semiotics of Cinema," in *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), Raymond Bellour, "Segmenting/Analyzing," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 1 (August 1976): 331–353, and "The Obvious and the Code," *Screen* 15 (winter 1974–75): 7–17, all of which are discussed in Chapter 3, and Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6–18.

narrative as process, applied to Ruscha, and narrative as structure, as applied to Baldessari's films and videos.

In addition to an interest in narrative, the two artists also shared some other approaches. By 1963 Ruscha and Baldessari were producing works that emphasized process, de-emphasized the end product and decentralized the role of the artist. Increasingly attracted to industrial production techniques, both artists relied on mechanical modes of reproduction, in particular the use of photography. It is to Ruscha's photographs that his reliance on a cinematic style of narrative can be traced.

Ruscha

Ruscha's photography books, such as *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963, ill. 34), reveal an utterly dispassionate and seemingly banal approach to their subjects. In some cases Ruscha did not even take the photographs himself.²¹ The books were not always individually numbered, as limited editions would normally be.²² This fact radically undercuts their status as precious art objects.

Ruscha explored a shared set of narrative concerns across several media, although they are largely absent from his paintings,

²¹ The photographs for the book *Thirtyfour Parking Lots* (1967) were taken by commercial photographer Art Alanis.

²² Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*, 99.

where other filmic issues are investigated. His films employ his most extensive and conventional use of narrative, although not his most successful. The two films attest to his sustained interest in commercial production techniques and all things Hollywood. All of his forays into narrative demonstrate a seemingly artless and humorous approach to mundane images and stories. Ruscha credits his time at the Chouinard with making him aware of the art of movies, with their ability to tell stories and convey emotions,²³ although from a purely pop culture perspective, he had loved them since childhood.

In order to trace Ruscha's evolving use of narrative, I follow the methodology of Whitney Museum Curator of Photography Sylvia Wolf's exhibition catalogue, *Ed Ruscha and Photography*, discussing first photographs, then books and films.²⁴ I use several of her comparisons, as noted in the text. However, where I diverge from Wolf's discussion is in the articulation of Ruscha's increasingly complex use of narrative in each medium, culminating in his two narrative films, *Premium* (1971) and *Miracle* (1975). While Wolf discusses all Ruscha's books, I deal only with the ones that show an evolution in his treatment of narrative.

²³ Ed Ruscha, artist's statement, *50 West Coast Artists: A Critical Selection of Painters and Sculptors Working in California*, ed. Douglas Bullis (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1977), 113.

²⁴ Sylvia Wolf, *Ed Ruscha and Photography* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004).

Ruscha and Photography

Ruscha was intrigued by photography since his student days at the Chouinard. He was not alone in his interest in the medium. This relatively new form of artistic expression, for which recognition as fine art had only developed in the United States in the postwar period, also intrigued many other artists of his generation. Pop artists such as James Rosenquist, and Tom Wesslemann used advertising photography as source material for their paintings. Andy Warhol enlarged publicity photographs of celebrities and screen-printed them over canvases. Other artists working in southern California also embraced photography. London emigrant David Hockney took a great number of photographs of local scenes and used them as source material for his paintings and drawings. Actor and artist Dennis Hopper, who was a friend of Ruscha's, took many photographs of the Los Angeles scene in the early 1960s, including shots of parties, gallery openings, and gas stations, such as *Double Standard* (1961; ill. 23).²⁵ In 1969 Ruscha would use that title for a screenprint of a gas station.

Like his friend Hopper, Ruscha would eventually delve into photography for photography's sake, rather than use it only as source material for paintings, drawings or prints, as many of his contemporary

²⁵ Richard D. Marshall, *Ed Ruscha* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2003), 58.

artists were doing. Ruscha has often sought to downplay the role of photography in his art making, describing it as a means to an end, an inspiration for paintings; however Sylvia Wolf observes that there is ample evidence to suggest that his engagement with photography is far more extensive than his ambivalent statements on the matter suggest.²⁶

Ruscha's introduction to photography was a course he took at Chouinard in 1959. In it, he learned to expose and develop film and make his own prints. The course stressed the importance of the medium as an aid to graphic art and design, not as a fine art in its own right.²⁷ This emphasis resonates in the way Ruscha often discusses his own photographs. In his design classes, Ruscha was exposed to the history of photography and to the work of Walker Evans, László Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray, who was living in Los Angeles at that time.²⁸ In terms of imagery, Ruscha was drawn to the abstract qualities of Evans's compositions, to his deadpan documentary approach to vernacular subjects and to the specificity of his photographs. Evans's *Main Street, Saratoga Springs, New York* (1931; ill. 24) featured an elevated and oblique angle and a repetition of similar forms, all of which

²⁶ Wolf, *Ed Ruscha and Photography*, 13.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 16–17.

would later appear in Ruscha's work.²⁹ But beyond these elements, it was Evans's ability to capture a specific subject, place and time that would appear in Ruscha's own photographs, forming the kernel of a narrative.

Another photographer who had a strong influence on Ruscha was Robert Frank. Frank's book *The Americans* (1959; ill. 25) had a great impact on Ruscha's art, even if there was no direct influence of shared imagery. Ruscha profoundly appreciated the way that Frank's photographs captured America in an improvisational style devoid of an artful aesthetic.³⁰ Moreover, the design of Frank's book also made an impression on Ruscha. Its spare and clean format featured images on the right pages and captions on the left pages, with the photographs deliberately sequenced to form a narrative.³¹ This aspect, the book format and its layout, not Frank's specific commentary on postwar America, shaped Ruscha's own approach to photography and books.

Two of Ruscha's early untitled photographs (1959–1960), an arrangement of nails inside a cardboard box top (ill. 26) and the edge of a tightly rolled newspaper perched on a window ledge (ill. 27), both shot with a Yashica 2¼ camera, reveal a similar approach to ordinary

²⁹ Ibid., 20.

³⁰ Ibid., 2021.

³¹ Ibid., 21.

objects as found in the work of Jasper Johns, especially *Target with Four Faces* (1955; ill. 11), which Ruscha also discovered during this time. The point of similarity is the presentation of ordinary objects in a way that makes them seem more abstract and flat.³² The effect may have something to do with the mechanics of taking photographs with a twin-lens reflex camera, a box camera held at waist height. The photographer had to look down into the opening at the top of the camera to see the subject reflected on a piece of frosted glass. Unlike a 35mm camera, a box camera does not emulate the act of seeing; it imposes a degree of distance from the subject.³³ Therefore, the viewer is forced to see nails in the box top and the rolled-up newspaper through the eye of the camera. A similar sort of distancing characterizes the filmmaking process. This mediation of the apparatus of the camera, specifically the movie camera, also features strongly in Ruscha's paintings.³⁴

Starting in 1960, Ruscha took several photographs of friend and fellow artist Joe Goode's 1938 Plymouth that prefigure some of his work to come. In *Joe's Car #1* (1960; ill. 28) he cropped and mounted the picture as a diptych, while *Joe's Car* (1961; ill. 29) is a grid of nine

³² Ibid., 16–17.

³³ Ibid., 55.

³⁴ See Chapter 4 for a detailed discussion of Ruscha's paintings.

identical images of the car. An interest in banal, serialized imagery and wry humor would figure prominently in Ruscha's future book and film projects.

A seven-month vacation trip across Europe in 1961 with his mother and brother gave Ruscha an extensive period of time in which to refine his skills as a photographer. He took hundreds of photographs of people, landscapes, architecture, signs and merchandise in shop windows. Wolf describes the photographs from Europe as revealing "a visual intelligence and curiosity that could have led him to be an accomplished photographer."³⁵ But he had no ambition along those lines. He explored the medium's possibilities and then moved on. Wolf also notes that unlike most photographers who make clumsy pictures at first and then refine their skills over time, Ruscha began with a good eye and sharp sensibility, but then deliberately turned away. Just as he rejected Abstract Expressionist painting, he also rejected conventional photography in favor of something else.³⁶

Within months of his return to the United States, Ruscha made a series of black-and-white photographs of household items such as a can of Spam, car wax, rubbing alcohol, turpentine and a box of raisins.

³⁵ Wolf, *Ed Ruscha and Photography*, 109.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Each photograph in this series, entitled *Product Still Lifes* (1961; ill. 30, 31) features a product positioned against a white background, lit with strong frontal lighting that tends to flatten the object but with a side accent that casts a shadow and gives some depth.³⁷ These images pair Ruscha's interest in commercial subject matter with the photographic medium, often used commercially.

Ruscha used some of the same images in his painting. The Spam can appears in *Actual Size* (1962; ill. 32), while the raisin box appears in *Box Smashed Flat* (1960-1961; ill. 12). *Actual Size* was shown in the exhibition *New Paintings of Common Objects*, which was organized by Walter Hopps for the Pasadena Art Museum in the fall of 1962. Also included in this exhibition, Pop art's first in California, were works by Jim Dine, Roy Lichtenstein, Wayne Thiebaud and Andy Warhol. *Actual Size* and the *Product Still Lifes* series both resonate with the emerging Pop art sensibility, which often featured banal, ordinary subject matter, sometimes presented in serialized format, such as Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962; ill. 33), and which was sometimes made using mass-production techniques, such as silkscreening.

³⁷ Ibid., 101.

Ruscha's Books

In 1963 Ruscha made the first of his sixteen photographic books, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (ill. 34). Printed in three editions, the book is forty-eight pages long and roughly 7 x 5 inches in dimension. The first edition was of 400 numbered copies. Positioned on the right-hand pages, twenty-six black-and-white photographs are accompanied on the left-hand pages by one-line captions that provide only the names of the gas stations and their locations. This layout, photo on one page and caption on the other, was similar to the layout of Frank's *The Americans*. Ruscha used it in several of his books.³⁸

The subject matter of the book is a series of twenty-six gas stations along Route 66 between Los Angeles and Oklahoma City. Ruscha took the photographs during several trips between his new and childhood homes. The limitation of twenty-six images in the book, which makes the book seem like a primer on gas stations, was somewhat arbitrary and was driven by his decision about the title, which was made before he had taken any of the photographs.³⁹ The selection of the particular images was not arbitrary. The photographs, chosen specifically for their aesthetic qualities, resemble those of Walker Evans

³⁸ Ibid., 112.

³⁹ Ibid., 115.

both in their uninflected style and in their depiction of contemporary life. Further, the use of serialized mundane imagery was something that Ruscha had previously explored in the *Product Still Lives* and in the photographs of Joe Goode's car. Wolf suggests that the mechanical, repetitive and tedious nature of layout and graphic design work, which Ruscha undertook briefly, was brought to bear in a positive way in book projects such as these.⁴⁰ There is a certain tedium in the repetitious presentation of mundane, utilitarian gas station after gas station. Perhaps Ruscha wanted the viewer's experience of the book to mirror the process of making it or to echo the monotony of driving along this particular stretch of road.

The sequence of the photographs in the book does not form a linear narrative documenting of a trip from point A to point B. What these photographs ultimately do is conjure the idea of the trip even if they do not form a faithful narrative of what the trip was like. The book is at once a conceptual and comical undertaking. There is Ruscha's conceptual interest in cataloguing, coupled with a completely arbitrary decision regarding the extent of the cataloguing—only twenty-six images, presented out of West-to-East order, but rather in alphabetical order.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 29.

Ruscha said that he wanted to be “the Henry Ford of book making.”⁴¹ He wanted to make affordable books that would be accessible to all: portable, friendly products for mass consumption. The price of an original edition copy of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* was \$3.00. However, Ruscha was equally delighted to give away copies to fellow artists and friends. He declared, “What I really want is a professional polish, a clear-cut machine finish . . . I am not trying to create a precious limited edition book, but a mass-produced object of high order.”⁴² In short, Ruscha was trying to make a quality commercial item that he wanted everybody to see, like a Hollywood film.

Ruscha was fascinated with the book as an ordinary, artless object and pleased by its Duchampian quirkiness.⁴³ Wolf classifies *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* as a photographic readymade. She points out that just like Duchamp’s readymades, Ruscha’s book was perplexing to some and downright unimpressive to others. However, the small scale and unembellished presentation of which Ruscha was so proud did not find favor with the Library of Congress. In October of 1963 Ruscha offered to donate a copy to the library, and it rejected the offer. Not discouraged, Ruscha instead placed an ad in *Artforum* (ill. 35)

⁴¹ Ibid., 120.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Marshall, *Ed Ruscha*, 59.

proudly brandishing this rejection, deliberately highlighting the skepticism about the book.⁴⁴ He continued to make books; however, his approach changed slightly.

Every Building on the Sunset Strip (1966; ill. 36) was an ambitious book project that involved driving east to west along the two miles of Sunset Boulevard known as “the Strip” with a motorized camera, capturing every building on both sides of the street and noting the street address of each one. Ruscha first attempted to photograph the Strip on foot, but parked cars obstructed the shots of the storefronts. The subsequent successful effort involved mounting a 35mm camera on a car, attaching a drive motor to the camera to advance the film automatically allowing for rapid-fire exposures, and shooting a continuous strip of black-and-white motion picture film, approximately 250 frames. This whole process was in fact quite close to operating a movie camera; Ruscha was making a 35mm camera function like a movie camera, capturing a continuous narrative. In order to obtain all the addresses, Ruscha’s then-girlfriend, Donna Knego, whom he later married, walked the entire Strip and recorded each one.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Wolf, *Ed Ruscha and Photography*, 122.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 139.

The book's dimensions are 7 x 5 5/8 x 3/8 inches, closed. It was printed in two editions: 1000 in 1966, and 5000 in 1971.⁴⁶ The process of creating the mock-up was laborious; it involved cutting up all the photographs, hand-pasting them on a board, and then placing the street numbers underneath the correct buildings.⁴⁷ The resultant document is an accordion-folded, twenty-five-foot-long strip of paper (when extended), the format of which is reminiscent of the topography of the Strip or the horizontal orientation of a movie screen or a foldout map. The south side of the street (8024, Schwabs Pharmacy, to 9176) runs along the upper portion of the page, while the north side (8101 to 9171) is presented upside-down running along the bottom of the page. Ruscha even meticulously noted the names of all the streets that crossed the Strip.⁴⁸

The buildings were photographed at midday, which meant that the sun was high in the sky, and the buildings appear rather flat with few shadows, like the *Product Still Lifes*. Ruscha compared the images to a Western town film set—completely flat, just paper with nothing behind them. Wolf argues that although Ruscha insisted that his focus

⁴⁶ Wolf reports that another edition of 500 copies may also have been printed in 1969, but that the records have been destroyed. *Ibid.*, 286.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁴⁸ Marshall, *Ed Ruscha*, 59–60.

was on making books, this book can be considered a movie in still images.⁴⁹ Given the way in which the photographs are shot and presented in the book, and the Hollywood nature of the subject matter, this claim is valid.

Ruscha's approach to *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* was as an object and a conduit for an idea. It was a serialized photographic readymade that simply contained the information stated on the cover. With *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, however, the book format transforms into a record of a journey down the Sunset Strip. This book is at once a map (as alluded to by its foldout format) and a narrative of a trip. However, as Ruscha made more books, this approach continued to evolve.

Ruscha took the documentary and narrative aspects of *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* even further in his 1967 book *Royal Road Test* (ill. 37). In some respects, this, a collaborative effort, was Ruscha's most elaborate book project to date. Its concept, execution and documentation were the result of the partnership between Ruscha and his friends, artists Mason Williams and Patrick Blackwell. The concept of the book was to document, in pseudoscientific fashion, the process and results of throwing a Royal typewriter out the window of a speeding

⁴⁹ Wolf, *Ed Ruscha and Photography*, 140.

car. Ostensibly, the event was carefully planned, executed, and the results of the experiment were diligently photographed and labeled.

This book was a departure from Ruscha's other book projects not only in terms of its fully developed narrative content, but also in terms of its physical characteristics. Copies of the book were neither numbered nor signed. Four editions were printed in runs of 1000, 1000, 2000 and 1500, respectively. There are a total of sixty, 9 7/16 x 6 1/2 inch, spiral-bound pages, thirty-six pages of captioned black-and-white photographs (all printed flush to the edge of the page) and sixteen pages of text, arranged chronologically and documenting every minute detail of the experiment. "Date: Sunday, August 21, 1966. Time: 5.07pm. Place: US Highway 91 (Interstate Highway 15) traveling South-Southwest, approximately 122 miles Southwest of Las Vegas, Nevada. Weather: Perfect. Speed: 90 m.p.h." The captioned photographs include portraits of the typewriter, the 1963 Buick Le Sabre from which it was thrown, Ruscha (the driver), Mason Williams (the thrower) and Patrick Blackwell (the photographer), along with numerous shots of various typewriter parts strewn across the desert. Ruscha described the project in the following manner, "It's like a police report . . . What a

police photographer would produce in a report of how somebody was killed.”⁵⁰

While the book mimics the organizational techniques of scientific reports, it also parodies the documentary impulse of Conceptual art with wit, irreverence and a decidedly Dada sensibility. In fact, Mason Williams’s preface to the book was drawn from an *Encyclopedia Britannica* definition of the Dada movement: “It was too directly bound to its own anguish to be anything other than a cry of negation; carrying with itself, the seeds of its own destruction.” This introduction contributes to its sense of pseudo-intellectualism and false seriousness.⁵¹

In reality the event was not a carefully planned one, rather it was entirely spontaneous and the narrative was manufactured after the fact. The three friends were returning home from a trip to Las Vegas and suddenly decided to throw the typewriter out of the car. Only after the fact, and several miles down the road, did it occur to them to go back and investigate what happened to it.⁵² At that point, they decided to “document” the event retroactively and construct a narrative around it.

⁵⁰ Ed Ruscha, quoted in Douglas M. Davis, “From Common Scenes, Mr Ruscha Evokes Art,” *National Observer* (28 July 1969): 17.

⁵¹ Wolf, *Ed Ruscha and Photography*, 172.

⁵² *Ibid.*

The project bears more allegiance to mockumentary film (a satire of the documentary film genre, perfect examples being Rob Reiner's *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984) and Christopher Guest's *Best in Show* (2000)) or to any fictionalized story presented in a film as fact than it does to a scientific experiment, to an objective report of an event or to the stoic documentary style of much Conceptual art. Bordwell's description of narrative as a process of selecting and arranging the material in order to guide the viewer through a journey through space and time applies to this project.⁵³

Another book project in a similar vein was *Business Cards* (1968; ill. 38), a collaboration with fellow artist and friend Billy Al Bengston. The two designed business cards for one another as cheaply as possible. They then exchanged the cards at a dinner party on a designated date. The book is a photographic document of the project from the conceptualization "December 27, 1967: Conception of a business card exchange (sorry – no photo available)" to the exchange of the cards at the party. It measures 8 3/4 x 5 5/8 inches, with thirty-two pages and twenty-one photographs. The print run was one edition of 1000 signed copies. Fellow artists Larry Bell and Ken Price took the photographs. Ruscha's design for Bengston's card is fairly

⁵³ See pages 70–72 for a discussion of Bordwell's narrative concepts.

conventional: it is a standard-sized business card with Bengston's name in red gothic typeface and his address below. A sample card is included in the book. Bengston's card for Ruscha is less ordinary. It is handwritten on a piece of paper, includes a pronunciation guide for Ruscha's name ("Rew-Shey") and is signed by Bengston. It is reproduced in the book with a black-and-white Polaroid photograph. The project, which is both a spoof and a commentary on increasing similarities between corporate and art world practices, pokes fun at the seriousness with which corporate identities are designed, while at the same time taking a jab at the art world as a place of business, where artist don ties and jackets and require professional identification.⁵⁴

Like art books, films are a collective endeavor in terms of their production and distribution; in each undertaking the person identified as the artist commonly assumes a directorial role. Ruscha directed his books and their increasingly robust narratives, but in this project he also assumed the role of actor. *Business Cards* was the first book he conceived of as a narrative process from the outset, complete with a cast, props, causal acts that take place over time, and a dramatic climax. This is in contrast to *Royal Road Test*, in which a narrative was fashioned retroactively from a spontaneous act. Ruscha would take his

⁵⁴ Wolf, *Ed Ruscha and Photography*, 177.

collaborative capers even further, making a seamless transition into recording them on film.

Crackers (1969; ill. 39) was a crossover project. Ruscha originally conceived of it as a film, but initially lacked the funds to make it. As a result, it emerged first as a book. The idea for the project came from a previously unpublished short story by Ruscha's friend Mason Williams, entitled "How to Derive Maximum Enjoyment from Crackers" (1967). This time Ruscha had a fully developed script for his narrative. The result was a kind of shaggy dog story that follows a couple on a first date through seduction, abandonment and, bizarrely, their inclusion in a gigantic tossed salad.

It is 240 pages long with 115 black-and-white photographs occupying the entirety of the right-hand pages, while the left pages are blank. Since the chronologically sequenced photographs depict only small incremental changes in movement, the publication functions as a movie flip book; if one flips through it quickly and consistently enough, it gives the impression of watching a film. However, some of the photographs are vertical and some horizontal, so it is sometimes necessary to rotate the book in order to follow the action. Ruscha, Joe Goode and Ken Price took the photographs for the book, which was

produced in one edition of 5,000 copies.⁵⁵ There are no captions; the narrative is conveyed solely through visual images.

This project appealed to Ruscha because the short story has an inherent ability to convey a narrative. He wanted to investigate storytelling at this point in his career and found that he was not able to do so to his satisfaction in his paintings. The book was a better medium for expounding a time-bound narrative. However, it turned out that in this case, film was a better medium for telling a story in visual terms. Ruscha was never happy with *Crackers*. He described the book as “a movie fallen short” and “one of the weakest things I’ve ever done.”⁵⁶ After *Crackers*, Ruscha made seven more books but none of them involved the degree of time-bound, sequenced narrative that *Crackers* did.

Ruscha’s Films

The film version of *Crackers, Premium* (1971), starred artist Larry Bell, comedian Tommy Smothers, fashion designer Rudi Gernreich and model Leon Bing, and was shot in 16mm.⁵⁷ The title is a reference to the Premium brand of crackers. This cinematic version of the story

⁵⁵ Wolf, *Ed Ruscha and Photography*, 254.

⁵⁶ Ruscha, interview by Paul Karlstrom, 79.

⁵⁷ Prints of Ruscha’s two films are not readily available. I was able to view *Miracle* at the Whitney Museum; however, I was not able to screen *Premium*.

takes the form of a spoof of a hard-boiled detective genre film, complete with morally ambiguous noiresque characters who talk tough, live fast and smoke lots of cigarettes. Not only was Ruscha using the medium of film to tell Mason Williams's story more fully, he was relying on the formulaic narrative constructs of Hollywood film—specifically, the character and plot conventions of the hard-boiled detective genre—to do so.

Film and television historian David James notes that *Premium* can be thought of as a film of a word and therefore as a parallel to Ruscha's paintings of words, like the word "Spam" in *Actual Size* (1962; ill. 32) and also revolving around foodstuffs. As clever and humorous as the word paintings are, *Premium*, James finds, represents the opposite end of the spectrum in Ruscha's oeuvre. He describes it as:

A shaggy dog story whose vulgar, bathetic narrative exploits both class and gender inequalities, *Premium* is redeemed neither by humor nor by any filmic values; rather it is a trite and clumsy rehearsal of the codes of commercial narrative with pedestrian field-reverse shots and inset close-ups resembling those of a first-year film school project. Summarily representing the intersection of the hip fringes of the L.A. art world and the fashion and entertainment industries, its glitterati performers personify the way that, rather than furnishing an inspiration or even useable frame of reference for an independent filmmaker, Hollywood can corrode the integrity of the projects that approach it.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde*, 282-283.

A \$13,000 grant awarded to Ruscha by the Guggenheim Foundation in 1971 gave him the financial means to realize this film project, which was shot in five days. The five days were not consecutive; they shot for two days, took a break, and then shot for the remaining three. Ruscha felt that it would have been impossible to shoot for five days in a row. In fact, he felt a bit overwhelmed by the massive collaborative effort that goes into making a film.⁵⁹ He described film as a difficult medium and a do-or-die venture because of the money and number of people involved in production. Further, the inherent constraints of reaching a wider audience without a distribution deal, which he did not have, also frustrated Ruscha.⁶⁰ He did, however, enjoy assuming the directorial role.

An inspiration for the film, in general spirit if not in form, was a film by photographer Robert Frank. *Pull My Daisy* (1959; ill. 40), a collaboration between Frank and the painter Alfred Leslie, was a loosely woven narrative based on the third act of Jack Kerouac's unproduced play *The Beat Generation* (1957). The performances of the cast members, such as poet Allen Ginsberg and painters Larry Bell and Alice Neel, gave the film an innovative free-form sensibility. Like Frank's

⁵⁹ Ed Ruscha, "A Kind of Huh," interview by Willoughby Sharp, *Avalanche* 7 (winter–spring 1973): 39.

⁶⁰ Ed Ruscha, "Feature Interview: Edward Ruscha," interview by Diane Spodarck, *Detroit Artists Monthly* 2, no. 4 (April 1977): 1.

still photography, the film displayed a seeming artlessness that masked the preparation and craft involved. Despite the appearance of improvised performances and the modest location of Leslie's loft, the actors were actually rehearsed and the set was dressed.⁶¹ The film was part of an alternative artists' cinema that emerged in the late 1950s in New York. What Wolf refers to as Ruscha's "larks and capers," ventures such as *Business Cards*, *Royal Road Test*, *Crackers* and *Premium*, followed the irreverent, beat sensibility of *Pull My Daisy*.⁶²

Miracle (1975; ill. 41), also shot in 16mm, was Ruscha's second and last film. It is the story of a curious day in the life of an auto mechanic and features artist Jim Ganzer as Jimmy the mechanic, Michelle Phillips of The Mamas and the Papas as Trixie, his girlfriend, and Dana Derfus as Dana, Jimmy's friend and fellow mechanic. The 28-minute color film was Ruscha's fullest exploration of purely cinematic narrative—although perhaps not his most successful engagement with Hollywood film—and relies on standard film techniques such as the use of nondiegetic sound, narration, editing, mise-en-scène and carefully orchestrated camerawork.⁶³

⁶¹ Bruce Jenkins, "The 'Other' Cinema: American Avant-Garde Film of the 1960s," in Brougher and Ferguson, *Art and Film since 1945*, 197.

⁶² Wolf, *Ed Ruscha and Photography*, 178.

⁶³ The diegesis is the world of the film's story. It includes onscreen actions as well as actions presumed to have occurred offscreen. It also includes implied offscreen spaces. Nondiegetic

The film begins with Jimmy in the car repair shop, puttering around and then making lunch. He is covered in grease from head to toe and the garage is equally filthy with a cluttered workbench, overflowing ashtrays, grease-stained floor, rats and nude centerfolds all over the walls. The only thing in the garage that is not filthy is the 1965 red Ford Mustang, which is in pristine condition, apart from a problem with the carburetor. At 12.45pm Trixie calls; we know this because the camera pans to the clock on the wall in Jimmy's shop, and they arrange a date for 6.30pm that evening. Jimmy explains that he has a carburetor to work on but it will not prevent him from meeting her.

Once Jimmy removes the carburetor from the engine, a transformation begins. Through a series of extreme close-up shots, alternating with some shots taken from a steep vantage point above Jimmy's head and accompanied by church organ music, Jimmy's transformation is chronicled. His face is no longer dirty, his hair is combed, and his grease-stained coveralls are becoming cleaner. Jimmy works frenetically, placing two phone calls to his friend Dana to get some advice about the specifics of carburetor mechanics. Dana cannot answer any of Jimmy's questions and tells him that he will get back to him with the answers. Meanwhile, Jimmy works more and more

sound, such as the mood music referred to in *Miracle*, comes from a source outside of the narrative.

meticulously, cleaning out the carburetor with an air hose, making diagrams, performing mathematical calculations, consulting books, looking at engine parts through a microscope. All the while his hands, coveralls and surroundings become cleaner, tidier and more organized. He works straight past 6.30pm, forgetting all about his date with Trixie. He refuses to let Dana in when he comes to help. By 8.45pm both Jimmy and the garage absolutely gleam with cleanliness; he puts the carburetor back into the engine. As gospel music plays in the background, Jimmy puts the key in the ignition and turns it. The car starts, and Jimmy's transformation from grease monkey to scientist is complete.

The very nature of the plot reveals Ruscha's irreverent wit: Jimmy ignores worldly pleasures in order to achieve the kind of spiritual revelation that can only come from the transcendent experience of rebuilding the carburetor of this pristine, almost sacred, vehicle.⁶⁴ This is, of course, a comical commentary on the almost religious nature of the California car culture.

Both films demonstrate Ruscha's humorous approach and his adherence to the conventional narrative codes of Hollywood. Using narrative as process, Ruscha carefully arranges the material to

⁶⁴ Wolf, *Ed Ruscha and Photography*, 180.

demonstrate a cause and effect over the passage of time. The stylistic choices in the film, such as editing and sound, serve to seamlessly propel the narrative along.

Although Ruscha developed his interest in narrative across several media—still photography, books and film—he handled it differently in the two-dimensional works than he did in his films. In his books, Ruscha freely defied the typical expectations of readers, creating instead photographic books filled with deadpan, ordinary imagery with little or no text; he maintained a conceptual approach. In so doing, he realized highly evocative works with a decidedly cinematic quality. Of *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* and its unconventional filmstrip-like format, David James writes:

A lexicon or a digest of his other books, it unmask Hollywood to reveal Los Angeles and unmask Los Angeles to reveal an endless façade of stucco buildings, palm trees, vacant lots, and gas stations, all without human presence, as if some dull apocalypse had turned it into an uninhabited twilight zone. It is not only his best movie; it is one of the best movies made in L.A.⁶⁵

However, Ruscha's faithfulness to the forms and processes of Hollywood-style filmmaking amounted to a more conventional, almost commercial approach to this medium, which made the practice much harder to sustain without all the other aspects of the industry to bolster

⁶⁵ James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde*, 284.

him, e.g., studio backing, an experienced crew and a distribution deal. Additionally, his films lack the kind of ambivalent tension regarding Hollywood that can be found in *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* and many of his paintings and that make these works more complex negotiations with Hollywood film.

Ruscha described himself as a frustrated film director.⁶⁶ When asked in a 1988 interview if he had any plans to make any more films, Ruscha summed up his respect for and frustrations with filmmaking:

Movies are a great medium . . . But the whole idea of a single person making a whole movie is almost impossible. You have to cooperate with many people. I have to be alone in my studio. I don't have a lot of assistants . . . I don't need anybody around. I like being alone, and I find great satisfaction in just doing my own work. But to make a movie, to get the means to the end is so overwhelming. You might get a great product, you might not, but that's why I appreciate Hollywood and respect those people that make feature films. I hate video. I'm a dimwit in mechanics and computers, and everything is moving in that direction now. I know they can do great things. But I still like the quality of film, and everything I had to go through to make the couple of films that I did was worth it. But it's so expensive. The only way to do a movie is to do a feature in today's big world. Unique ideas are usually subjugated to small productions, and in that case the films are never seen. It's just not a spontaneous medium. I'd rather paint pictures.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Brougher, "Words as Landscape," 171.

⁶⁷ Ed Ruscha, "Ed Ruscha," interview by Bill Berkson, *Shift* 2, no. 4 (1988): 16.

Baldessari's Games and Stories

Baldessari recalls that in the 1960s, he began to find painting too limiting and was looking for more.⁶⁸ He had always been an amateur photographer. Initially, he incorporated photography into his art making as a form of visual note taking. It was a means to an end, just as it was for Ruscha. However, an interest in language and communication propelled Baldessari to extend his use of photography. He liked the idea that photography was a common language, more of an everyday vernacular than painting. He observed that more people owned cameras than were artists.⁶⁹ It was important to him to communicate in a language that people could understand. Abstract painting was not such a language.

Through his photographic experiments, Baldessari began “the process of trying to figure out what art was.”⁷⁰ In *Choosing (A Game for Two Players): Rhubarb* (1972; ill. 42), Baldessari explored what he felt was one important aspect of art: making a choice. The seven photographs that comprise the work chronicle a kind of choosing game in which a participant was asked to choose three stalks of rhubarb from

⁶⁸ John Baldessari, *Spring Series Program: Conversations with Contemporary Artists*, Guggenheim Museum, New York, 27 April 2005.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

a group. They could choose the rhubarb sticks for whatever reasons they liked. The three chosen stalks of rhubarb were arranged in preparation to be photographed, Baldessari pointed his finger at one, for whatever reason he chose, and the photograph was taken. The chosen piece of rhubarb remained, the other two were discarded and two new sticks, chosen by the same participant, were added. Again they were lined up to be photographed and Baldessari would pick one of the new grouping of three, point at it, and the picture would be taken, and so on. The process continued until all the sticks of rhubarb were used.⁷¹

Like Ruscha, Baldessari explored commercial production techniques in his art. Embarking upon his "revolt against painting,"⁷² Baldessari employed a commercial sign painter to execute works such as *Pure Beauty* and *Examining Pictures* (1967–1968; ill. 43, 44), which had more in common with the impersonal and generic appearance of commercially manufactured products than with traditional painting, specifically abstract painting. However, the mere fact that this work comprised a canvas with paint on it made it an adequate signifier of art

⁷¹ Van Bruggen, *John Baldessari*, 47.

⁷² Baldessari, *Spring Series Program*.

for Baldessari.⁷³ This approach echoes Ruscha's use of a commercial photographer and the mechanical, somewhat anonymous aspect of commercial filmmaking, in which the artist (the director) performs just one function of the many required for the work's completion and distances himself from the physical act of making the work.

Concomitant with his disenchantment with painting, increasing use of photography and interest in language, Baldessari began to incorporate another element in his art: storytelling. Van Bruggen observed that incorporating storytelling into his art was another means by which Baldessari could sidestep the confines of traditional art making:

By concealing his point within a fictitious account Baldessari retains some of the complexities of real life. It is his way of avoiding a rigid, linear manner of pinning down facts, opting instead for the vitality of the unexpected within the chaos and banality of daily life as expressed in a folktale or an ordinary anecdote.⁷⁴

His use of storytelling serves to introduce a narrative structure into his art and also gives him the perfect vehicle to convey humor, to demonstrate the "oh, lighten up" approach to art making—all of which is analogous to Ruscha's approach.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Van Bruggen, *John Baldessari*, 69.

The Pencil Story (1972–73; ill. 45) consists of two color photographs of a pencil. The photos are mounted on board with a caption written in colored pencil below. In the first photograph the pencil is unsharpened, in the second it is sharpened. The handwritten text reads:

I had this old pencil on the dashboard of my car for a long time. Every time I saw it, I felt uncomfortable since its point was so dull and dirty. I always intended to sharpen it and finally couldn't bear it any longer and did sharpen it. I'm not sure, but I think that this has something to do with art.

Baldessari questions his own likes, dislikes, aesthetic preferences and how they factor into the artistic process in the form of a narrative that chronicles the pencil's transformation, a transformation prompted by Baldessari's unease at having to witness its unsharpened state. Through the pairing of language and still photography, Baldessari uses narrative in this work to create continuity between the two photographs. On the basis of this example, it may seem that Baldessari uses narrative as Ruscha does, as a process, but in fact he does not. Another example will make this point more clear.

A Different Kind of Order (The Thelonious Monk Story) (1972–73; ill. 46) demonstrates, as the title suggests, a different sense of order. It is a series of five black-and-white photographs accompanied by a sheet of paper with typewritten text. All six elements are mounted on board and framed. The photographs, each of a scene of destruction of some

kind, are mounted and hung crooked. The text relates a story about the jazz musician Thelonious Monk and his wife. Monk decided to cure his wife of her phobia of objects hanging crookedly on a wall. To do so, he tilted all the pictures on the wall. When she saw the pictures askew, she would straighten them out. Monk would come along and tilt them again. This process continued until Monk's wife could accept this different sense of order and allowed the pictures to remain crooked.⁷⁵

In *A Different Kind of Order*, Baldessari does not utilize the visual qualities of the photographic medium to create narrative by suggesting causal connections between the photographs the way that Ruscha does with little or no text in *Crackers* or in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*. Instead, he uses a series of images that ostensibly reject narrative cohesion, yet constructs a relationship between them exclusively via text. He provides a series of disjointed images, including a broken telephone pole, a damaged boat and a hurricane, between which we cannot immediately infer any causal link or observe any consistent rendering of time or space. He then grafts these elements together by the inclusion of the story about Monk and order, creating the inference that the hurricane has caused the damage in the various photographs. As in *The Pencil Story*, the presence of narrative is a unifying one in

⁷⁵ Van Bruggen, *John Baldessari*, 80–81.

this work, but this unity does not come from the process of selecting and arranging the material and allowing the material to then tell the story. The six photographs work against narrative as process: They tell no story. Only through combining photographs and text is the narrative achieved. This is a use of narrative as a structural device.

Baldessari—Film and Video

While teaching at Cal Arts in the 1970s,⁷⁶ Baldessari was exposed to the video art of Nam June Paik, the Fluxus art of Emmett Williams and Allen Kaprow's Happenings. He was especially influenced by Paik, describing him as a teacher and a colleague.⁷⁷ The art of his contemporaries, combined with his already established penchant for both narrative and photography, sparked a new artistic curiosity in Baldessari, which easy access to the school's film and video equipment made it possible for him to explore. He recalled that at one point, Cal Arts had 26 Sony Portapaks and did not offer any life drawing classes.⁷⁸ This reflected the eagerness of the staff and students to experiment with new media. Prior to his appointment at Cal Arts, Baldessari had not worked in video at all.

⁷⁶ He accepted a position at Cal Arts in 1970 and taught there until 1990.

⁷⁷ Baldessari, *Spring Series Program*.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

Unlike Ruscha, who made only two films and a conscious decision to never work in video, Baldessari was fairly prolific in both media. He made more than twenty films in the period from 1968 to 1977, some in Super 8 and some in 16mm. He used both black-and-white and color film. The films range in length from 20 seconds to 30 minutes. He also made more than twenty videos between 1970 and 1977. The videos were shot in both black and white and in color, and range in length from 2 minutes to 30 minutes.⁷⁹

In direct opposition to *The Pencil Story* in which he constructs a narrative from two still photographs, Baldessari created films, such as *Title* (1973; ill. 47), in which the absence of narrative blocks any kind of plot progression and creates the effect of a sequence of unrelated still photographs.

Title, a 25-minute, black-and-white and color 16mm sound film, is a film about filmmaking. It breaks down the filmic experience into its basic components. These components are not reassembled in a manner that affords any kind of flow or narrative continuity, creating a sense of stasis in this series of discrete vignettes. It begins with a series of 30-second long shots of various things—a dog, a man, a chair and a

⁷⁹ Baldessari's films and videos have not received as much attention as his paintings, photographs and photomontage works. As such, there is a gap in primary and secondary sources regarding a discussion of these works.

rock. Initially, each thing is alone in the shot. The next series of shots presents simple relationships between the objects—man to dog, dog to rock, rock to man. Next is a sequence of simple actions: a finger moving, a hand trying to balance a stick, peas in a pod being pressed, a bottle hitting a rock and a hand hammering.

A segment on sound follows. It features both natural and manmade sounds such as background music and speech, at varying degrees of loudness: crickets chirping, a drill buzzing and the sound of coughing. The next section deals with monologue and dialogue. A student responds to inaudible questions, and a man and woman read but do not act out the script of a cowboy movie.

Color is the topic of the next segment. Shots of the six colors of the color wheel include a red apple, an orange carrot, a yellow lemon, a green fern, a dyed blue flower and a natural purple flower.

Baldessari examines the component of timing in two shots, which are both 30 seconds in duration but which have a different psychological aspect that distorts the viewer's perception of time. The first is a shot of clouds, which seems to last far longer than 30 seconds. The second, taken from the top of a tall building, is of a pedestrian entering the shot from the right and leaving it on the left. Van Bruggen notes that time seems to pass far more quickly in this shot because it is

punctuated by a mini-narrative, by action, unlike the shots of the clouds.⁸⁰

In the segment devoted to camera movement, first the camera moves along a wall, from left to right, picking up and losing a student who remains stationary. Next, the student moves from left to right while the camera remains stationary. Finally, the camera pans, following as the student walks around.

The element of lighting is explored in a segment that involves a stationary outdoor shot, in which the sun passes from dawn through midday to dusk. Baldessari demonstrates how different lighting affects one's interpretation of the same image: a woman in three-quarter view, lit first from the left, then from the front, and finally from the right.

In the final portion of the film, Baldessari took excerpts from various film scripts and instructed two Cal Arts film students to go out and shoot them. He then assembled the scenes in no particular order and gave them subtitles from the shooting scripts: "Rock, with music background," "Close-up of Holland's face," etc.

In a sense, it might be argued that *Title* is a kind of documentary film—a completely uninflected presentation of factual information about the world outside of film with no interpretations or manipulation of

⁸⁰ Van Bruggen, *John Baldessari*, 91.

events by the filmmaker.⁸¹ The film was shot without retakes in order to preserve a sense of spontaneity and to prevent it from appearing to be labored. It is also a visual how-to guide on filmmaking, methodically demonstrating and mixing and matching the various building blocks of a film: color, sound, plot, movement and camerawork, to name a few. Narrative is wholly absent from the film, which tends to read more like a collection of similar but unconnected segments that show no progression or temporal relationship. The issue of whether something is a whole or only a part is a concept that Baldessari pursues in this film and in others. He has remarked that this method of “pulling things apart”⁸² is one approach toward art making upon which he relies.

After the title credits, there is a voice-over by Baldessari in which he announces, “I am going to tell you a story and this story is true,” creating some expectation of an ensuing conventional narrative. What follows is in fact a primer of the elements that generate narrative in a film, and then various combinations of these elements, producing a rather poor approximation of an “ordinary” film. David James observes

⁸¹ For a detailed discussion of what constitutes a documentary film, refer to David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997), 42–46.

⁸² Baldessari, *Spring Series Program*.

that the story the film tells is actually the story of the emergence of the conventions of the medium's industrial use.⁸³

The resonance with structural film is strong in *Title*. The primary elements of film language had been a source of investigation for East Coast structural filmmakers Paul Shartis and Hollis Frampton, among others, for almost a decade by this time. Baldessari's film, however, evidences no specific awareness of their work.⁸⁴

The film *Script* (1973–1977; ill. 48) is a kind of sequel to *Title*. It took several years to complete the 16mm, 25-minute film, because some of the sound was stolen and had to be redone. This was one of Baldessari's more collaborative endeavors; he recruited his Cal Arts students to work on the film. The cast comprised seven pairs of students who were given the same seven scenes from different Hollywood movie scripts and instructed to act them out. The same cameraman and soundman (also students) filmed each of the student pairs; however, none of the actor pairs saw the performances of any of the other pairs. The film is divided into four segments: shots of the actual shooting scripts for the scenes; performances of all seven scenes by each pair; a repeat of the performances ordered by scene

⁸³ James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde*, 286.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

instead of by actor pair; and a director's cut of the ten best scenes.⁸⁵

This mix-and-match approach, which is also present in *Title*, illustrates Baldessari's propensity for using "the wrong way, rather than the right way, to create art."⁸⁶ He does this in the spirit of inquiry; the process is rather like taking apart a telephone and putting it back together in order to understand how it works. Baldessari's goal is to find out how art works.

The first segment, the shots of the shooting scripts for the ten different scenes, announces through their very inclusion that this is a film about the structure of narrative film. Shooting scripts are tools utilized in the filmmaking process and are not normally exposed in the final product. One of the film's main thrusts is the indeterminate nature of a movie script, revealing the variety of ways in which the words contained in the script may be performed. Some of the students recite their lines flatly, while other attempt to act them, with varying degrees of imagination and success.⁸⁷

There is a significance to several of the scene shooting scripts that has been overlooked in previous scholarship. Scene three features a character called Joe Gillis, scene six is between Norma and Joe

⁸⁵ Van Bruggen, *John Baldessari*, 91.

⁸⁶ Baldessari, *Spring Series Program*.

⁸⁷ James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde*, 286.

Gillis, and scene ten features Max and Joe Gillis. All three of these scenes are taken from the iconic Hollywood film *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), directed by Billy Wilder and featuring the characters Norma Desmond, Joe Gillis and Max von Mayerling. James reflects that although Baldessari's films display more than a passing similarity to the concerns of structural film, they are in fact more aligned with French cine-semiology of the same period. Baldessari's interest in the scripted feature film led him, as it did cine-semiologists such as Metz and Bellour, to Hollywood.⁸⁸

Not only did Baldessari use with components from a well-known Hollywood film in order to make a film about the structure of film, he also selected a film with reflexive content to serve as his content. *Sunset Boulevard* is Hollywood movie about an aging silent film star, Norma Desmond, desperate to make a comeback, and her entanglement with struggling screenwriter Joe Gillis, whose desperation to obtain his big break has fatal consequences. Desmond can be understood as representing both old Hollywood and the art world establishment, including painting, while Gillis is a substitute for the new, television-era Hollywood and for the young artists, like Baldessari,

⁸⁸ Ibid.

looking to distance themselves from traditional art forms and yet inextricably linked to them.

Baldessari's approach in these films was analogous to his approach toward much of his other art of the period, such as the *Commissioned Paintings* series (ill. 6). He did not paint the text or the images in these paintings; neither did he operate the camera in this film. He directed both the paintings and the film, which were cooperative efforts involving the participation of several people, yet he is credited as the artist, the author of these works, just as the director is commonly considered to be author of a film. This is a designation, incidentally, that *Sunset Boulevard* calls into question. Gillis's plight as a struggling screenwriter is a consistent focus of the plot. He complains that scriptwriters are not sufficiently appreciated and that "audiences forget that films are written; they think the actors make it up as they go along." This emphasis on the screenwriter raises the question of whether it is possible for screenwriters to be film authors.⁸⁹ As *Sunset Boulevard* challenges notions about film authorship, so does Baldessari's work raise questions about the role of the author of a work

⁸⁹ For a detailed discussion of reflexive remarks in *Sunset Boulevard*, refer to Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 88–89.

of art. Ultimately, he asserts that authorship need not entail the work being executed by the artist's own hand.

In tandem with raising questions about authorship, Baldessari also aimed to disrupt the viewer's response to cinema by creating films that challenge and largely disregard two of the primary aspects of commercial films: narrative and drama. By rearranging some components of a film and eliminating some others, Baldessari wanted to force viewers to examine their ideas and preconceptions regarding what a film is and how it conveys its meaning. "Deprivation of information"⁹⁰ is a technique that he often used in service of this goal. He raised the question of whether a film without a narrative is successful. Van Bruggen argues:

Opposing film's usual linear, hierarchical system of individual parts, which predict and determine the outcome of the whole, Baldessari juxtaposed unrelated components of what seems at first sight completely irrelevant content. All the parts lead in different directions, yet the subject matter is placed in a framework of elegant simplicity, one based on the Minimalist principle "less is more."⁹¹

Another project that deals with issues of structural legitimacy in the absence of narrative and drama is *Baldessari Sings LeWitt* (1971; ill. 49). The black-and-white video is approximately 13 minutes in length

⁹⁰ Baldessari, *Spring Series Program*.

⁹¹ Van Bruggen, *John Baldessari*, 84.

and involves just what the title suggests: Baldessari singing Sol LeWitt's thirty-five "Sentences on Conceptual Art,"⁹² in an ironic and funny collision of the intellectual (art theory) and the commonplace (popular music). The opening shot is of a chair and microphone placed in front of a blank wall. After approximately 30 seconds, Baldessari enters the shot from the left and sits in the chair. He announces his intention to sing all of LeWitt's sentences using the same ordering and numbering that LeWitt uses. He declares that his purpose is to pay tribute and that he hopes to bring LeWitt's sentences to a wider audience than they have previously reached through publication in exhibition catalogues and books. Baldessari then proceeds to sing all thirty-five sentences, announcing the number first and pausing in between sentences. Each sentence is sung to its own unique and recognizable tune in an utterly deadpan manner. Baldessari explains in the introductory segment that if he feels that he has not sung the sentence well enough or gotten the phrasing quite right, he will repeat it, which he does in several cases. Some of the tunes he uses include "Tea for Two," "The Star-Spangled Banner," "Heaven," "Camptown Races" (he even adds the "doo-dahs" into the sentence in the appropriate spots), "Auld Lang Syne," and the Beatles' "If I Fell."

⁹² Sol LeWitt, "Sentences on Conceptual Art," *Art-Language* 1, no. 1 (May 1969): 11.

The comic absurdity of the video is compounded by Baldessari's rather average singing voice and by the fact that viewers quickly fall into the game-show-like mode of naming that tune. Even the stated intention, of bringing LeWitt's ideas to a wider audience, is an ironic one, because such a film lacked the distribution means of a commercial film and would not actually reach a mass audience.

In spite of the levity, Baldessari makes a serious point, exposing that medium is important in conveying the message. Thanks to its mass appeal and widespread distribution, the medium of film is available for the transmission of many messages, sometimes irrespective of how inaccessible the message is. In this video, the name-that-tune element becomes so strong that LeWitt's sentences are relegated to the role of lyrics, comically incongruous lyrics. As the Museum of Modern Art's Video and Media Curator Barbara London points out, the context does have an effect upon the interpretation of the content being presented.⁹³ In an art history seminar class, LeWitt's sentences would be taken quite seriously, but sung, and sung badly on film, they are just funny. As a result, Baldessari quickly shoots down his own straw-man premise that even inaccessible notions such as LeWitt's art theories can reach a broader audience if they are sung on film in a kind of weird, static movie

⁹³ Barbara London, "For the Love of Scan Lines," in Huberman, Heiss and Lowry, *Video Acts*, 21.

musical with bad singing, no costumes, dance numbers, sets and or plots.

Conversely, there is also the suggestion that within a film, the specific conventions of the genre, such as the musical numbers in a musical, take primacy over the particular elements of content. The actors can sing about anything—as long as they are singing, that is the main thing on which the viewer will focus. In this project Baldessari again employs his strategy of deprivation of information and questions what it means to call something a film when basic elements that a viewer has come to expect of a film (e.g., a narrative, characters, sets, acting, costumes, editing, etc.) are absent from the project.

Baldessari's do-overs, when he fails to sing sentences to his satisfaction and sings them again, call attention to the fact that mistakes are not intentionally left in commercial films. They are meticulously removed through retakes and editing. Once Baldessari finishes singing all thirty-five sentences, he gets up from the chair and walks off camera. The video ends just as it began with an attenuated shot of the empty chair.

In addition to Nauman and Paik, another contemporary working in a manner significantly similar to Baldessari at this time was William Wegman (b. 1943). Wegman, who moved to California in 1970 to teach at California State, Long Beach, had turned away from painting in the

late 1960s and began experimenting with photography and video. Starting in the early 1970s Wegman began producing short, performance-oriented videos, many featuring his Weimaraner dog, Man Ray, in deadpan parodies of “high” art achieved through sight gags and understated humor. Like Baldessari, Wegman used a portable video recorder to capture single take, real-time idiosyncratic performances that are both funny and smart. Both artists’ works employ deceptive simplicity to subvert conventional assumptions about art. In *Baldessari Sings LeWitt*, Baldessari achieved this through song; in many of Wegman’s videos, he achieved this through dog-centered narratives.

Some Words I Mispronounce (1971; ill. 50) is another video that explores structural integrity and distortion. The black-and-white video is only 2:30 minutes in duration. Baldessari walks on screen from the left with his back to the camera. He begins to write on a blackboard. As the shot is a rather tight one, encompassing just his head, torso and a portion of the blackboard, it is not always possible to see the words as he writes them because his body sometimes obstructs the view of the blackboard. Once he is finished writing, he exits the frame to the right to reveal the following words printed on the board:

POOR
CASK
BADE
BEELZEBUB

BOUGH SWORD

There is no audio; therefore, the viewer is left with no idea of exactly how Baldessari mispronounces any of these words, lending an air of complete absurdity to the exercise. Baldessari writing words on a blackboard conjures images of teacher teaching a lesson. The point of this lesson, however, is unclear.

The second portion of the video consists of a single tight shot of a page of a book. The page contains a passage explaining the importance of emphasis in speech, along with a sentence written phonetically, indicating where the emphasis falls. It is accompanied by notes on a musical scale to give the correct intonation of each word in the sentence. Audio is introduced in the form of Baldessari, now acting as the student instead of the teacher, repeatedly pronouncing the sentence, “yoo tEH-oo’ mi wAHt Ahi doo-oo,” which is “You tell me what I do” with the emphasis placed as if he were speaking Chinese instead of English. Baldessari’s exaggerated intonation and use of the rules for one language to pronounce a sentence written in another language reduce the words to nonsense.

The two components of the video investigate language systems and meaning through disjunction and juxtaposition. Each vignette deals with the reduction of the English language to the basic units of sound

and pronunciation of words. If the point of the video's lesson was to teach proper pronunciation of the English language, then it would be a failure. It is, however, intended as an exercise in the absurd that reveals the limits of a system of language, e.g., when meaning is blocked by an exaggerated pronunciation of a series of words. Baldessari describes himself as "interested in language always."⁹⁴ Ultimately, this video is an interrogation of the very language of video and film conducted by exaggerating certain elements (extreme close-ups and no sound versus loud sound) and eliminating others (plot, characters, editing, camerawork and visual continuity), rendering the results as structurally nonsensical as Baldessari's lesson on pronunciation.

The 16mm film *Viewpoint* (1968) is a similar project, but it extends beyond an examination of the language of film; it also exposes the various points of view that are present in a film or in any text intended to convey meaning. The silent film consists solely of several sentences, printed in white capital letters, moving right to left across a black background. It is actually a filmic document of a lighted moving message in which text moves across an L.E.D. display. The text reads:

VIEWPOINT – WHAT TO PUT IN: WHAT TO LEAVE OUT:
THE EYE HAS A TENDENCY TO PREFER LITTLE SHAPES
TO BIG MASSES. IT ALSO PREFERS TO BUILD AN IMAGE

⁹⁴ Baldessari, *Spring Series Program*.

BIT BY BIT. TO THE BEGINNER, A SUBJECT SUCH AS THIS PRESENTS A BAFFLING PROBLEM ... J.B. 68 ...

This text moves across the screen in a continual loop for the duration of the film, repeating 15 times in the film's 3-minute duration.

The film addresses, in a haiku-like fashion, all the processes and points of view that comprise the experience of making a work of art or a film—the author's and the reader's. First, the author makes decisions regarding the work: "What to put in: What to leave out." Next, the viewer watches the film and takes in the visual stimuli in a manner preordained by human cognitive functions, "The eye has a tendency to prefer little shapes to big masses," etc. Finally, the viewer attempts to assign meaning or make sense of this visual information, "To the beginner, a subject such as this presents a baffling problem." The subject of this work is particularly baffling in this filmic rendering; based on Baldessari's choice of this medium, the viewer would probably expect a narrative format. Baldessari describes the conscious decision to exclude an essential component in a work of art as his strategy of "deprivation of information," which causes the viewer to focus on certain elements of a work of art when other, primary information is intentionally obstructed or omitted.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Ibid.

The viewpoint mentioned in the film's first line is actually a shifting one. It moves from the viewpoint of the creator to the viewer over the course of the film's (or any film's) life cycle, but can also refer to viewer reception and interpretation and the viewer's empowered role of assigning meaning to a conceptual endeavor such as this in which no discernable plot is advanced. This relates to Bordwell's concept of knowledge as an integral part of a film's narrative—specifically, whose thoughts or intentions are made known in the narrative.⁹⁶ Baldessari distorts that structure not by limiting the points of view of the characters (there aren't any characters in the work), but rather by addressing the activities of the narrator and the reader, which are not usually referred to directly in the narrative space of a film.

Baldessari thus characterizes filmmaking as a conceptual activity and gives the viewer a less controlled experience of cinema. The onus is on the individual viewer to locate meaning in the text. In the absence of a prescribed narrative structure to guide the viewer through an ordered series of causal relationships that evolve through space and time, this meaning could be different from the one that the filmmaker intended.

⁹⁶ See pages 70–72 for a discussion of Bordwell's theory of narrative.

Another type of Baldessari's video projects was one that shared an aim with his photographic works like *The Pencil Story*, which involved the construction of a narrative from static images. *Ed Henderson Reconstructs Movie Scenarios* (1973; ill. 51) is a 30-minute, black-and-white video that deals directly with this theme. Baldessari operates the camera and narrates, assuming a sort of director-narrator role. He explains at the beginning of the film that he will show a series of movie still photographs to his sidekick Ed Henderson, a student at Cal Arts. Henderson is charged with explaining what is taking place in the scene and constructing the entire narrative of the film based on a single photograph.

As in *Baldessari Sings LeWitt*, an air of deliberate clumsiness and awkwardness characterizes all action in the film. There is no script or rehearsed scenario. The video is in no way an exercise in skillful manipulation of the medium. The photographs were taken when the films were broadcast on television and were taken from the television screen. The quality of the photographs is very poor; sometimes the glare from the television screen is caught on film and in another case the image itself is almost indiscernible. This was an intentional strategy; Baldessari recalls that he "took a lot of photos off of the television and

tried to be artless about it.”⁹⁷ He turned on the television, put on a channel—no channel in particular—set up the camera and left for the day. One by one, Baldessari tacks up these photographs to a board. He does not stop the video camera when he does this; all action is captured on film, including his hands coming into the frame. Baldessari remarked on this phenomenon, recalling that in early video everything was captured in real time, and nobody had any editing facilities. He remembered that fellow video pioneer William Wegman once remarked to him that you can always spot a video from the late 1960s or early 1970s because the artist always stands up at the end to turn off the camera. This no-editing approach was a hallmark of the era.⁹⁸

Baldessari shows Henderson six different photographs, none of which he has ever seen before. Henderson constructs very detailed explanations of both the photos themselves and of the entire film narrative, including the genre to which the film belongs (e.g., musical, science fiction, Western), the characters, their motivations and, in some cases, a title for the movie, the decade in which it was made and whether the film was commercially successful. His imaginary plots and the ease with which he constructs them reveal the extent to which the

⁹⁷ Baldessari, *Spring Series Program*.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

standardized language of Hollywood film genres had permeated the American consciousness. The project bears Baldessari's brand of absurdist and sly humor. It is, after all, a self-reflexive undertaking, devising a film with a narrative that is the construction of a filmic narrative from static images.

Baldessari has commented on the use of movie stills in his art:

I think I'm well enough attuned to culture to know what will trigger people's minds. On the other hand, I don't want to spell it out for them . . . I like to confound people with something completely simple, artful, and on the other hand create a very complex murky troublesome piece.⁹⁹

A similar project, the black-and-white video *Ed Henderson Suggests Sound Tracks for Photographs* (1974, 27:51 minutes, sound; ill. 52), explores the relationship between image and sound, demonstrating how the music that accompanies the image shapes our perception of it. In this video Baldessari shows the extent to which genre narrative structures are stamped onto mass consciousness and how the simple combination of image and sound can evoke an entire narrative.

Here he uses another series of generic photographs of images such as a cowboy roping a steer, switchboard operators, sailors aboard a ship and a car with a snake lying in the driveway directly in its path.

⁹⁹ Marc Selwyn, "John Baldessari," *Flash Art* (summer 1987): 64.

He tacks them up in front of the camera; however, this time Ed Henderson cannot see them. Baldessari describes the photos to Henderson. Based on Baldessari's descriptions, Henderson must select the appropriate music or sound effect to accompany the image. Henderson has a selection of records from which to choose and a turntable on which to play them. His choices are basically guesswork, as he has never listened to the records before.

Baldessari explains that they will do three attempts for every photo, and from the three attempts, they will pick the most successful one. They run through fourteen photographs. When Baldessari does not feel that Henderson has selected an appropriate sound accompaniment, he gives Henderson additional information, usually about the emotional content of the image, in order to help Henderson make a better selection.

The fact that Baldessari does not rely on a single photograph in this exercise or in other videos where Henderson is charged with a similar task demonstrates a preference Baldessari has articulated. He declared that, "Multiple images are a compulsion. I dislike single images."¹⁰⁰ So strong is this compulsion that he finds a way to translate it into his film and video work, as if repeating the photograph-sound

¹⁰⁰ Baldessari, *Spring Series Program*.

pairing trials with Henderson multiple times serves to validate his methodology. This repetition of imagery is also found in *Script*, where scenes are repeated over and over, each time with different actors.

Van Bruggen observes that sometimes a mood evoked by a musical selection enhances the narrative aspect of the photograph. In other cases, humor is the result of a mismatch between sound and image, as when a silly-sounding beep is paired with a picture of a snake lying in front of a car.¹⁰¹ These mismatches tend to block the evocation of a narrative.

The game-show factor, present in *Baldessari Sings LeWitt*, also appears in this video. It is as if Henderson is a contestant who has three tries to successfully match the audio to the visual that Baldessari describes. This playful, game-like approach and the almost arbitrary nature of the selections are elements that are also present in *Choosing (A Game for Two Players): Rhubarb*. Another crucial aspect of both works is decision making. Making choices is an important aspect of the artistic process for Baldessari.¹⁰²

The Meaning of Various News Photos to Ed Henderson (1973, 15 minutes, black and white; ill. 53) is another video in this series dealing

¹⁰¹ Van Bruggen, *John Baldessari*, 78.

¹⁰² Baldessari, *Spring Series Program*.

with the construction of a narrative based on a single image. Baldessari introduces eight news photos to Henderson and asks him to identify what is taking place in each. From a photograph of three birds, geese or ducks, Henderson infers that the birds are not just geese but Canadian geese, that one is male and the other two are female and that the picture was taken at a zoo by a news photographer who seized the moment when the male goose was advancing toward him to snap the comical shot. There is no evidence for any of these claims within the image itself. Henderson's responses regarding the images serve to construct narratives. Henderson quickly moves beyond a mere description of what he sees and ascribes meaning. The video raises questions about inference and meaning, factual information and the manipulation thereof. Although Henderson performs essentially the same task that he did in *Ed Henderson Reconstructs Movie Scenarios*, it becomes a more suspect activity when the source material is not a Hollywood film still, but a photograph of an actual event. Baldessari demonstrates that when we lack a context for an event, our inferences reflect cultural myths and fears, such as those portrayed in Hollywood genre films.

Both Ruscha and Baldessari used film to explore narrative. However, Ruscha was more bound by the traditional processes of making commercial narrative films and found the endeavor too

complex, time consuming and expensive. Ruscha followed an organic growth pattern of using increasingly sophisticated methods from books through to films for constructing narrative, adopting each time the industrial, mechanized, collaborative processing involved in each. His films mark the culmination of his investigation of narrative.

Baldessari, on the other hand, approached filmmaking as a conceptual activity. Rather than adhere to preexisting processes and formal characteristics of film and video, he chose to deconstruct them. Many of Baldessari's films and videos analyze the process of making films and how films convey their meaning. All of these concerns are analogous to ones reflected in his two-dimensional art of the same period. Filmmaking for Baldessari was a process of taking the structure apart, reassembling it again, and calling the final result a film.¹⁰³ He forces viewers to assess whether that designation is a valid one, based on their own expectations. This relates back to Bordwell's structural method of narrative, which considers the way the components are combined to make a whole.¹⁰⁴ Baldessari uses narrative as a structural tool with which to conduct his examination of film.

¹⁰³ Van Bruggen, *John Baldessari*, 83.

¹⁰⁴ See page 70.

He kept his projects very modest in scope and did not collaborate to the extent that Ruscha did. He conceived of the projects himself, directed them and sometimes acted in them or operated the camera. He brought the same set of concerns regarding narrative to photomontage works, to film and to video.

In a way it seems that the choice of medium is almost beside the point for Baldessari. While Ruscha pursued the concept of narrative across various media in a quest for its fullest expression, Baldessari examined narrative from the perspective of various media for the results they yielded in the dissection of narrative structure. Baldessari displays no affinity for the inherent properties of film and video media; indeed, he treats them as interchangeable. He does not seem to have a compelling artistic reason for deciding to shoot a project on film rather than videotape.¹⁰⁵ The fact that Baldessari did not treat the medium of video as intrinsically different from film was borne out by his statement that videos were a way to make cheap movies.¹⁰⁶

However, it would be incorrect to deduce that Baldessari failed to understand or respect the qualities of the media. He made a conscious

¹⁰⁵ Decisions about which media to use were more likely governed by practical concerns. Video was more accessible and cheaper to use than film.

¹⁰⁶ Baldessari, *Spring Series Program*.

choice to stress other elements and to identify the limitations of each medium. Just as he made non-painterly paintings, he also made non-cinematic films and videos.

Baldessari remarked on his decision to work in film and video, “the world is about change and flux, it’s not about being static.”¹⁰⁷ Film and video appealed to him as a more satisfactory means of capturing transitory aspects of the world than painting. Baldessari also observed that even though part of the original appeal of these media was their dynamism, his films and videos evolved to a point where they became quite static, while his other non-film work became more and more dynamic.¹⁰⁸ The next chapter is devoted to an exploration of Baldessari’s other work and the ways in which it incorporates both narrative and filmic elements.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

Chapter 3

John Baldessari: A Story That Ends Up Mostly about Film Narrative

The previous chapter considered Baldessari's use of narrative as a structural device in his films and videos. This chapter explores the ways in which Baldessari incorporated these same filmic narrative structures into other media, primarily his photcollage works.

Initially it may seem that Baldessari's engagement with film in his two-dimensional works is a straightforward one: He frequently uses film stills, and sometimes scripts or storyboards, as raw material. But my objective is to demonstrate that the interplay between his photcollages and Hollywood narrative film is far more complex.

Relying on strategies similar to those employed in his film and video works, Baldessari created many mixed media works that deploy text and images to tell stories or deconstruct the narrative process. Many of these photcollage works were created during the 1970s, the period in which Baldessari was actively working in film and video. Numerous works from this era, such as the *Blasted Allegories Series* (1978; ill. 56) and *Movie Storyboard: Norma's Story* (1974; ill. 59), not only incorporate film stills but also sequence them out of order, intersperse them with unrelated images, or rupture the visual integrity of the still image(s) by obstructing key narrative elements from view. All of

these techniques disrupt narrative flow and place the onus on the viewer to construct an alternative narrative from the fragments.

Significantly, there is a common point of origin for theories regarding the production of meaning in Hollywood films and the way in narrative structure is utilized in Baldessari's art: Both have their roots in Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralist linguistic theories. Therefore, my method for demonstrating Baldessari's use of filmic narrative as a structural device in his two-dimensional photocollages is first to outline the structuralist approach to Hollywood cinema narrative and then to apply this analysis to Baldessari's photocollage works that reference the Hollywood cinema.

Structuralism and Saussure

The structuralist movement reached its height in Europe and the United States in the 1960s and its theories influenced many different fields, such as linguistics, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, philosophy of mathematics, art, literature and film. Structuralism, rather like Conceptual art, can be seen as a loose approach with many different variations and no clearly defined school of authors. Broadly speaking, structuralism is a way of thinking about the world that involves the perception and description of structures. It examines the web of relationships, or structures, through which meaning is produced

within a culture. According to structural theory, meaning is created and reinforced through the various practices and activities of a culture, e.g., food preparation and serving rituals, religious rites, games, and creation of literary and nonliterary texts, all of which serve as systems of signification.¹

Despite the lack of a strictly cohesive school of structuralists, Ferdinand de Saussure is commonly seen as the main progenitor of the movement. British scholar Terence Hawkes, for example, refers to Saussure as the person “whose work forms the groundbase on which most contemporary structuralist thinking now rests.”² Saussure (1857–1913) was a Swiss linguist who laid the foundation for many developments in linguistics in the twentieth century. He categorized linguistics as a branch of a general science of signs that he called *semiology* (now generally known as semiotics).

His work *Cours de linguistique générale* (*Course in General Linguistics*) was published posthumously in 1916 by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, based on notes taken by his students during a series

¹ For general discussions on structuralism, see Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); Peter Caws, *Structuralism: The Art of the Intelligible* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1988) and Philip Pettit, *The Concept of Structuralism: A Critical Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977). My discussion relies most heavily on Hawkes, who provides a useful overview of the evolution of structuralist thought from the eighteenth century to the twentieth century. Further, he discusses structuralist applications in the fields of linguistics, anthropology and literature.

² Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, 19.

of lectures he delivered at the University of Geneva between 1906 and 1911.³ A seminal text on linguistics, its central notion is that language can be analyzed as a formal system of organized difference. Saussure argued against the traditional view regarding the study of language. This view relied on the notion that the world consists of independently existing objects with features that can be perceived clearly and individually, and whose nature can be classified accordingly.⁴ The implication for linguistics that stems from this worldview is that language is an aggregate of many separate units, words, all of which have separate meanings attached to them. This whole—language—exists within a diachronic (historical) dimension, and is a natural organism, subject to observable laws of change. In place of these ideas, Saussure favored a relational view of language as a social product, not always consciously or rigidly defined.

He defined the basic elements of a language as *signs*. Signs have three components: the *signified*, the perceivable material that stands for something (e.g., marks on paper or audible sounds); the *signifier*, the meaning associated with the perceivable material; and the

³ All references to Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* in this chapter are taken from this translation of the work: Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye in collaboration with Albert Riedlinger; trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959).

⁴ Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, 17.

actual thing to which the first two elements refer. A crucial element of Saussure's theory is the notion that in verbal language the association between the signifier and the signified is nearly always arbitrary. Although a sign is a unity of signifier and signified, there is no innate connection between the two.⁵ Meaning occurs on the basis of unconscious but collectively legislated conventions within a given tongue, such as English or Finnish. This means that that the sign as whole is a mental construct, the basis of which is not necessarily conscious.⁶

The assertion of the arbitrariness of signs allowed Saussure to posit the notion of language requiring a relatively abstract underlying system, *langue*, because according to his theory, the system that organizes signs is what permits meaning to be produced. *Langue* is the unconscious but finite system that is the prerequisite for the practical application of language, or *parole* (speech). Together *langue* and *parole* form language, that is, the overall system of distinct signs that correspond to distinct ideas.⁷ The concepts of the arbitrary nature of signs and of an abstract system from which meaning is derived are ones that Baldessari pursues at length. Some manifestation of them

⁵ Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 67.

⁶ Rosen, "The Saussurean Impulse," 4.

⁷ Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 10.

may be found in nearly every work that references Hollywood film. A favored method of deployment, used in the *Ed Henderson* videos, is to use an isolated film still as a sign representing a whole set of Hollywood narrative conventions.

According to Saussure, the linguist may study *parole*, but the ultimate focus for structural analysis must be *langue*. Since his conception of the linguist's objective is the construction of an abstract and closed system, additional methodological tools are required to study the general characteristics of such a system. Among these tools is his recommendation that language should be studied both in its diachronic (changing over time) aspects, as it had been traditionally, but also as a synchronic slice of a cluster of signs and rules for producing understandable speech.⁸ The importance of diachronic and synchronic study is that it acknowledges language's historical dimensions in addition to its current structural properties and adequacy.⁹ Baldessari pursues the idea of diachronic and synchronic systems of meaning in *Concerning Diachronic/Synchronic Time: Above, On, Under (With Mermaid)* (1976; ill.63), arranging the pictorial elements according to

⁸ Rosen, "The Saussurean Impulse," 5.

⁹ Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, 20.

both methods simultaneously in a grid format. The result is the possible coexistence of multiple narratives within one work.¹⁰

However, Saussure's most far-reaching idea for linguistic study was the key relation of *difference*, which gives definition to the various components of *langue*. Because signs are comprised of an arbitrary union between signifier and signified, a signifier has linguistic value only in relation to other signifiers, that is, to what it is not. Signs are defined negatively. Saussure uses the concept of *difference* to sum up these negative relationships: language can be understood in the most basic sense as a system of differences between signifiers. All aspects of language are based on relations. He describes two main axes of differential relationships: the *syntagmatic* and the *paradigmatic*. The *syntagmatic*, or horizontal, relations involve positioning, creating an ordered combination of signs such as sentences. The *paradigmatic*, or vertical, relations are based on substitutions.¹¹ This notion of *syntagmatic* and *paradigmatic* relations is one that Baldessari would use in his art in a direct way.

Saussure's ideas and terminology had a great effect on the development of structuralist and post-structuralist theories that

¹⁰ See pages 172-173 for a discussion of *Concerning Diachronic/Synchronic Time*.

¹¹ Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 122.

developed in a number of disciplines in the 1960s and 1970s. Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan and Claude Levi-Strauss are among those who adopted and adapted his ideas to other nonlinguistic aspects of culture. Conceptual artists in the 1960s drew heavily on theoretical resources, chief among them Saussure's semiology, along with Wittgenstein's logical positivism.¹²

Film theory was another area in which Saussure's impact was significant, specifically in the emergence of cinema semiotics. The concept of *syntagmatic* relation, in particular, is one that was readily adapted by film theorists to examine the basic meaning-producing unit of film. The manner in which Saussure's concepts were applied to film theory, particularly by theorist Christian Metz and theorist and critic Raymond Bellour, bears a strong similarity to the way in which Baldessari applied them to his photocollage works.

The Formulation of Cinema Semiotics and Christian Metz

An important film theory issue on which structuralism had an impact was the extent to which cinematic signification can be productively analyzed via the kind of linguistic system advanced by Saussure.¹³ The focus for this type of analysis became classical

¹² Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, 225.

¹³ Rosen, "The Saussurean Impulse," 3.

narrative cinema, that is, mainstream Hollywood films made in accordance with the film studio practices that were codified by the 1920s. This was not only because of their economic and aesthetic impact, but also because a studio-era film, with its regulated range of variation, was an ideal systematizable entity from which the structuralist could formulate the cinematic equivalent of verbal language's *langue*.¹⁴

A classical film is identifiable by a series of qualities, not all of which are present in each film, but which constitute a regulated range of variation. These qualities include invocation of a narrative form, conveyance of this narrative form via plot and characters, and application of a consistent style through *mise-en-scène*, camerawork, editing and genre conventions. Since these qualities appear in Hollywood films with enough frequency to constitute a network of structural repetitions and differences, a number of Saussurean concepts can be productively applied to the articulation of the semiotics of cinema.¹⁵

In the late 1960s when structuralist analyses were flourishing in other disciplines, so, too, did they surface in film theory. French film theorist Christian Metz's writings of the 1960s and 1970s are foremost

¹⁴ Ibid., 8.

¹⁵ Ibid.

in the semiotic approach to film theory, and his contributions continue to exert great influence. In 1976 film scholar J. Dudley Andrew described Metz as “the most influential product of the growing university concentration on film.”¹⁶ Metz undertook advanced studies in linguistics, all the while maintaining an avid interest in film. Due to the expanding scope of modern linguistics and changes in the French university system in the 1960s, Metz was able to write his dissertation on cinema and earn his doctorate. Andrew identifies Metz as the center of the organized, international, quasi-scientific approach to film theory. He credits Metz with the evolution of semiotics in the latter portion of the twentieth century.¹⁷

Metz argues that because of film’s social function as a “machine for telling stories,”¹⁸ that is, its narrative aspect, it is a system for the production of cultural meaning. As such, it is a perfect candidate for structuralist analysis. Baldessari also recognizes film narrative’s viability as a subject for structural investigation. But while Metz’s approach is to observe and document the workings of the storytelling machine,

¹⁶ J. Dudley Andrew, *The Major Film Theories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 181.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Christian Metz, “Some Points on the Semiotics of Cinema,” originally published in *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974) and reprinted in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen and Leo Braudy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 169.

Baldessari's is to disassemble the machine in order to understand how it works and sometimes to reconfigure the parts into a kind of Frankenstein's monster that clearly bears a relationship to conventional Hollywood narrative, but does not work quite the same way. He sutures together unrelated film stills to create synthetic narrative possibilities in works, such as in *A Movie: Directional Piece Where People are Looking* (1972-73; ill. 57), and he excises crucial information from other works, such as *Violent Space Series: Two Stares Making a Point but Blocked by a Plane (For Malevich)* (1976; ill. 61) in order to create a multivalent narrative situation.¹⁹

Metz believes in the linguistic approach to cinema, but in order to justify the study of cinema as a language, the basic differences between film and language must be acknowledged. The primary issue for Metz is that there is no unit in film that equals the word in language. The image, the smallest unit in cinema, is already at the same level of a sentence or a paragraph. Instead Metz argues that what he calls the *grande syntagmatique*, a large syntagmatic category or narrative segment, serves as the basic unit for semiotic analysis in film.²⁰

¹⁹ See pages 162-165 for a discussion of *A Movie* and pages 170-171 for a discussion of a *Two Stares Making a Point but Blocked by a Plane*.

²⁰ Christian Metz, "Problems of Denotation in the Fiction Film," originally published in *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University

He identifies some of the codes of cinema semiology as montage, camera movements, scale of the shots, relationships between the image and speech, and sequences. However, he points out that a specific language of cinema was not present from its inception; it evolved as the medium matured and as it developed a specific set of cinematographic procedures, i.e., the ones just mentioned, to address the problem of conveying a narrative. The function that these codes perform with relation to filmic narrative unites them into a syntax of film, the complete syntactical unit being the *grand syntagmatique*.

Further, Metz asserts that, unlike the relationship that Saussure posits between the signifier and the signified in structural linguistics, in film the relationship between the two is not arbitrary, and, therefore, one cannot study the signifiers without the signified.²¹ The grammar of cinema is tied to its narrative function. Had the dominant mode of cinema not become narrative, says Metz, its grammar would have been entirely different or perhaps would not have existed at all.

The semiology of a film narrative is not the same as a ballet narrative or a novel narrative of the same story. That is to say, the narrative units (e.g., montage, camera movements, scale of the shots,

Press, 1974) and reprinted in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 43.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

etc.) are medium specific. Metz asserts that there are two approaches that can be taken to the structural analysis of film narrative: There is the semiotics of the narrative film, which is his main interest; and there is also a structural analysis of actual *narrativity*, that is, of narrative taken as a system independent from the medium in which it resides (e.g., film, book, etc.).²² The notion of narrativity found a practical application in Baldessari's art.

One difficulty of Metz's work is that it can more readily be seen as an investigation of the language of film than as an exploration of film's narrative structure. He focuses chiefly on what happens on the image track and the editing thereof, and does not give as much attention to other elements, such as sound and temporal aspects. Further, Metz's discussions often remain purely theoretical, lacking references to specific examples from films.

Raymond Bellour

Film critic and theorist Raymond Bellour (b. 1939 in Lyon, France) builds on aspects of Metz's theories to identify a system of strict repetitions and regulated differences in the classical cinema, both within individual films and over a large body of films. Some of Bellour's

²² Ibid., 59.

writings can be seen as practical applications or case studies based on Metz's theories.²³

Both Metz and Bellour argue that ordering of images and sounds in films is based on certain identifiable types of narrative organizational schemes in which every image and every sound perform a function in the presentation of a story and thereby regulate the flow of sensations and meanings to the spectator.²⁴ Unlike Metz, however, Bellour does not privilege the image over sound so radically. The two agree about the semiotic uniqueness of cinema and are cautious about emphasizing parallels between the cinema and spoken or written language. In fact, Bellour avoids the use of linguistic terminology completely.

However, while Metz notes the lack of direct correlation between language and cinema, whereby no film image truly corresponds to a word in language, he simply switches his focus to a larger structure, his *grand syntagmatique*, in order to argue for the existence of a semiotic logic contained in a system of narrative segments.²⁵ It is here that he and Bellour diverge. Bellour believes that there is actually no such

²³ For example, Raymond Bellour, "Segmenting/Analyzing," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 1 (August 1976): 33–53, which entails a shot-by-shot analysis of the film *Gigi*, and "The Obvious and the Code," *Screen* 15 (winter 1974–75): 7–17, which examines twelve shots from the film *The Big Sleep*.

²⁴ Rosen, "The Saussurean Impulse," 8.

²⁵ Tom Gunning, "The Work of Film Analysis: Systems, Fragments, Alternation," *Semiotica* 144 (May 2003): 346.

compact, self-contained unit in film, be it small or large. Further, he argues that film actually resists analysis because it cannot be quoted, as literature can. This is not to say that film cannot be analyzed, rather that Bellour problematizes the analytical process far more than Metz does.

While Bellour avoids the problem of defining the essential element of the cinema, he does nonetheless rely on shot breakdowns in his analyses of films, accepting them as somewhat arbitrary place markers within a film. Likewise, he discusses the larger figure of the segment and its equally arbitrary nature, but for him the segment does not form a logical system as the *grand syntagmatique* does for Metz. Bellour seems to shift back toward Saussure's position that the nature of the relationship between the signifier and signified is an arbitrary one, a notion that Metz rejected.

The analyzable system present in film, according to Bellour, is not a combination of fixed elements or the process of classifying them, but rather a series of dynamic tensions that must be worked through and resolved. The value in discussing the shot in this way is that it reveals these formal similarities and oppositions—symmetries and dissymmetries, as Bellour calls them. Examining a sequence of shots allows the analyst to uncover the real structure of the film, which resides in the alternation between shots. While this concept of the shot

seems close to the syntactical unit of the *grand syntagmatique*, it is not quite as rigid as that. Bellour argues not for the syntax of any given unit of the film, but for the comparisons and contrasts that exist between shots or larger segments. Bellour's conception of textual order is dynamic, whereas the order within the *grand syntagmatique* is more controlled. Bellour sees the text as the product of dynamic tensions that must be worked through and resolved. He wrote that classical Hollywood cinema relies on rhymes or repetitions of components such as setups, places and shots in order to advance the narrative through the ordered network of resemblances. Symmetries help reveal dissymmetry, which results in some sort of narrative resolution. Bellour says that this repetition-resolution effect is so pervasive in Hollywood film that it can be found not only in the beginning of film as compared with the end, but also from segment to segment.²⁶

According to Bellour, this constant flux between balance and imbalance in American film is designed to be imperceptible, but it is the engine that propels the narrative along. The fluctuation between, and sometimes the simultaneous co-existence of, balance and imbalance can be observed in a number of Baldessari's works that reference Hollywood film. An example is *Blasted Allegories* in which Baldessari

²⁶ Bellour, "Segmenting/Analyzing," reprinted in Rosen, *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, 66–67.

creates an imbalance in content, by blocking the development of any kind of conventional or even comprehensible narrative flow, but also creates a kind of balance through the more abstract surface pattern, which is achieved through color, shape, and a precise grid of syntax, and tends to unify the work.²⁷ The purpose of Bellour's analysis, which seems similar to Baldessari's approach in a work like *Blasted Allegories*, is not to discover the text's secrets, but rather to show the method by which the text is produced. The way in which this formal symmetry-asymmetry fits together with the narrative creates the final balance of the classical fiction film.²⁸

Bellour's method of analysis, as demonstrated in "The Obvious and the Code," partly consists of taking a sequence and isolating a limited number of formal opposition and identifying patterns based on their distribution through the segment. Formal oppositions between shots include: whether the shot is moving or static; closer or more distant shot sizes (which can include intermediary sizes); camera angle; presence or absence of specific characters; subject or object of the look (point-of-view structure), speech and time.²⁹ These are the codes.

²⁷ See pages 159-162 for a discussion of *Blasted Allegories*.

²⁸ Gunning, "The Work of Film Analysis," 349.

²⁹ Bellour, "The Obvious and the Code," 7-17.

As Gunning observes, “Bellour’s analyses uncover the methods of the classical film: the play of symmetry and asymmetry, the patterns of rhymes, repetitions, and interruptions.”³⁰ In so doing they evince a position that is at once an affirmation of certain aspects of the Saussurian brand of semiotics as applied to film by Metz and a questioning and reworking of Metz’s theories. Bellour articulates a semiotic approach to narrative cinema that is less monolithic and totalizing, more multivalent and post-structural than Metz’s.

However, one point of strong commonality between Metz’s and Bellour’s ideas is the concept of cinematic codes. As Andrew points out, theorists aiming to identify a semiotics of cinema, such as Metz and Bellour, discuss codes a great deal. While codes do not exist in films per se, they are, nonetheless, the rules or the logical relationships that allow the message of the film to be transmitted and understood. Signification is the process by which messages are conveyed to the spectator. It consists of messages systematically conveyed by a code. Codes do not take the form of material expression: “They are logical forms pressed onto this material to generate messages or meaning.”³¹

³⁰ Gunning, “The Work of Film Analysis,” 357.

³¹ Andrew, *The Major Film Theories*, 224.

This notion of codes is key for my analysis of Baldessari's photcollages and his investigation of narrative structures, as Baldessari overtly structures works around his own codes. In *Blasted Allegories* and *Word Chain: Sunglasses (Ilene's Story)* (1975; ill. 55) these codes for the production of meaning dominate the works, with narrative taking a subordinate role, if any. Often his codes bear a relationship, usually an oppositional one, to the conventional narrative of Hollywood film.

Narrative Systems in Baldessari's Photcollages

By 1970 Baldessari had abandoned traditional painting all together, marked by his *Cremation Project*,³² favoring more ephemeral media such as film and video, and two-dimensional mixed media compositions that combined text and photographs. This shift was influenced in part by a desire to move away from the physicality of painting but also by his interest in making art that communicated effectively. Of the choice Baldessari said, "Why not give people what they understand the most, which is the written word and the photography? Why fight it?"³³ Baldessari recalled coming to the

³² See page 31 for a discussion of *Cremation Project*.

³³ John Baldessari, "Interview with John Baldessari," by Hugh M. Davies and Andrea Hales, 14 November 1995, San Diego, in *John Baldessari: National City*, ed. Hugh M. Davies and Andrea Hale (San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996), 86.

realization around this same time that, “I was more interested in language than in painting.”³⁴

One observes a sea change in his art making practices. He began to draw inspiration from popular culture and from other disciplines. Baldessari began collecting film stills and using them as raw material in his art.³⁵ His interest in making art that communicated effectively made commercial films a good choice for material, as visual literacy for these images would be quite high.

As an avid reader, Baldessari also immersed himself in current philosophical trends; he was familiar with Saussure’s theories, which further sparked his curiosity about language and systems of conveying meaning.³⁶ Poetry, philosophy, linguistics and anthropology are all disciplines that have shaped his thinking and influenced his work.³⁷ Saussure’s model exerted a particular influence because it resonated with a set of practices that many artists of Baldessari’s generation favored. That is to say, Saussure’s ideas were received by the artists of

³⁴ John Baldessari, “A Conversation with John Baldessari,” interview by Moira Roth, 6 January 1973, Santa Monica, California.

³⁵ This is a practice that he still maintains.

³⁶ In a phone conversation with the author, Baldessari remarked on having read Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics* in the early 1970s.

³⁷ Marcia Tucker, “John Baldessari: Pursuing the Unpredictable,” in Marcia Tucker and Robert Pincus-Witten, *John Baldessari*, with an interview by Nancy Drew (New York: New Museum, 1981), 11.

the 1960s as part of their growing recognition that even the purely optical qualities so valued in abstract painting by modernists were actually the product of a sophisticated critical discourse about this optical experience, rather than an immediate quality of the experience itself.³⁸

Curator Marcia Tucker suggests that Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* might have been an inspiration for the segment of the video *Some Words I Mispronounce* in which Baldessari attempts to read the phrase "You tell me what I do" aloud in a Chinese dialect, following the printed instructions for the musical inflections.³⁹ Tucker contends that Baldessari was thinking of the passage in Saussure that remarks that although Chinese and Indo-European languages are not related, they may be compared in some ways.⁴⁰ Baldessari takes this notion of comparison to an amusing and slightly absurd extreme, by trying to pronounce one language according to the rules of pronunciation of another.

Van Bruggen observes that the vehicle of the story suits Baldessari very well. His stories start with a chain of associations that

³⁸ Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, 28. Artists included in this discussion are Joseph Kosuth and Sol LeWitt, who are associated with Conceptual art.

³⁹ See pages 118-120, for a discussion of this video.

⁴⁰ Tucker, "Pursuing the Unpredictable," 32.

transform themselves into a kind of narrative asking for a context.⁴¹

Regarding the use of language in his work, Baldessari remarked, “Language seems to me to be a very viable material to use in a creative way. We always think about using forms in some creative way and that seems to me interesting, but no more interesting than using words.”⁴²

Saussure wrote that “each word is like the center of a constellation; it is the point of convergence of an definite number of coordinated terms.”⁴³ Baldessari uses words in his art in exactly this way: to suggest constellations or webs of meanings and narrative possibilities. One can see evidence of this approach in *A Sentence of Thirteen Parts (with Twelve Alternate Verbs) Ending in FABLE* (1977; ill. 54), which features arbitrarily selected words combined in numerous ways that suggest multiple meanings.⁴⁴ The work is a foldout booklet that comprises twenty-five images, television stills, each labeled with a single word, noun, adjective or verb. Once unfolded, they form the shape of a cross. The twelve pictures in the horizontal axis are labeled in yellow. All but one (the first picture, which is labeled “THE”) are nouns or adjectives, to be read from left to right. This horizontal strip,

⁴¹ Van Bruggen, *John Baldessari*, 69.

⁴² John Baldessari, “A Conversation with John Baldessari.”

⁴³ Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 126.

⁴⁴ Tucker, “Pursuing the Unpredictable,” 14.

which can be understood as a Saussurean *syntagmatic* axis, is intersected by the vertical element of the cross, which consists of thirteen images labeled with verbs. Any one of these verbs could be substituted into the sentence and alter its meaning. This embodies Saussure's concept of *paradigmatic* difference. Van Bruggen observes that Baldessari rejects fixed definitions and meaning in favor of the possibility for constant flux and that this reflects the intellectual climate of the 1970s: a structuralist attitude rooted in Existentialism. Instead of a single, rigid interpretation of linguistic signs, Baldessari favors the coexistence of pluralistic meanings.⁴⁵

Word Chain: Sunglasses (Ilene's Story) (1975; ill. 55) involves the evocation of a similar associative web of meanings. The work is composed of sixty-two 35mm black-and-white contact prints and one color contact print on grid paper and a typewritten sheet of paper. The pictures form a syntactic sequence: They tell a story that is based on association of the images depicted. Baldessari began with a gridlike structure in mind for the work. The story begins at point A, designated by a picture of sunglasses, moves left to point B, occupied by a photograph of two blocks, and then down to point C, where there is a photograph of a smile. Baldessari then gave these coordinates to his

⁴⁵ Van Bruggen, *John Baldessari*, 101.

assistant Ilene, whom he charged with the task of constructing a story, starting with these images and using words. Once she constructed her story, she was asked to photograph the visual equivalents of each aspect of her narrative. These are the photographs that occupy all points in between A, B and C. The story is Ilene's; the structure is Baldessari's.

One of the governing principles of this work seems to be the Saussurean notion that in a language system the nature of the relationship between the signifier and the signified is an arbitrary one. The signifiers are the photographs that Ilene took; they signify the narrative of her story. This particular locus of meaning was purely a function of the fact that Ilene was the originator of the story. Had the person creating the story been another person—another studio assistant or friend or Baldessari himself—the result would have been an entirely different set of signifiers and signified, the meanings of which would likely not be immediately recognizable to anyone other than the creator of the story. Baldessari functions here almost as a linguist exposing the code or structure of Ilene's mini narrative system. Saussure wrote that "language never stops interpreting and decomposing its units."⁴⁶ In alignment with this notion, Baldessari

⁴⁶ Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 169.

sometimes uses random words and images to suggest a relation between them—to impose an order or language or narrative out of a series of seemingly unrelated words and images—as he does in this work. At first glance, it may seem like a series of unrelated images and arbitrary relationships, but once the circumstances of its production are understood, it becomes a system for the production of intelligible meaning.⁴⁷

However, the parallels to semiotic analysis in Baldessari's art are not limited to Saussure's work. In his art Baldessari was interpreting and adapting Saussure's theories in a manner that can be understood as a visual corollary to semiotic theories of narrative film that Christian Metz and Raymond Bellour were formulating at roughly the same time that Baldessari was creating his photocollages. Baldessari confirms that he read Metz's writings in the 1970s. He did not know about Bellour's work, which is not entirely surprising, as Bellour's writings were not initially translated widely into English.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Baldessari actively facilitates this understanding by providing explanatory materials that are exhibited with the works.

⁴⁸ Baldessari, interview by Bettina Riccio Henry. When Baldessari heard a description of Bellour's theory of the language of narrative cinema, he not only agreed that it bore a relationship to his work, but also asked for titles of essays by Bellour, so that he might read them.

Baldessari recalled a fantasy of wanting to see all the paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art put together side by side like a continuous series of movie stills.⁴⁹

I always would go into a museum and look at paintings like frames in a film and wondering what the frame was that might have been before it, you know, or after it. Or if it became a wide-angle shot, what would, what was, how did the artist see beyond the frame, and so on. And really going about at it in a sort of cinematic photographic way, and I guess it was just a vague irritation of the frozen-moment idea. And I said, "Well, there are a lot of other moments that could have been frozen, why this one?" . . . "Why this, rather than that one?"⁵⁰

This statement reveals several things about Baldessari's approach to art. His desire to create a narrative sequence out of unrelated still images, which are in fact frozen moments, suggests that he sees the potential for the articulation of a narrative structure within a two-dimensional work, and this structure extends or least implies what resides beyond, before or after, the particular narrative moment depicted. The daydream prefigures one way in which he would begin to work: creating two-dimensional works that were more narrative schematic diagrams than they were aesthetically oriented. Baldessari questioned the primacy given to some objects, moments or acts in the conveyance of a pictorial narrative; he wanted to use other moments

⁴⁹ Tucker, "Pursuing the Unpredictable," 10.

⁵⁰ John Baldessari, interview by Christopher Knight, 4 April 1992, electronic transcript, Oral History Program, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

and things to see what other stories might emerge. The shift to using film stills as material allowed him to access the cinematic possibility in his art by extending its boundaries beyond only the moment depicted. This extension is achieved by invoking culturally ingrained patterns of storytelling—the formulaic narrative structures of Hollywood films, specifically.

When asked if he found something inherently cinematic in art that informed his choice to work with film stills or to create storyboards or to reference film in any other way in his work, Baldessari replied that because film has become such a dominant visual mode in our culture, it inevitably affects our perception of everyday reality and mediates the way we see things; therefore, it has certainly affected how he and others think about art. One cannot help seeing many aspects of life, including art, like a movie. Conversely, one often finds oneself thinking that aspects of films, like a favorite character, are real. Baldessari finds that this interplay between “real reality” and “movie reality” creates an interesting tension. And the coexistence of multiple truths, meanings or realities is a notion that he finds more plausible than the assertion of the existence of any singular one. Baldessari also expanded on his museum daydream, saying that he recalled thinking about an individual painting purely in cinematic terms, i.e., what if one could see the view

that Cézanne had painted in close-up or via a wide-angle shot, as if through a movie camera?⁵¹

In a method similar to *Fable* and *Word Chain*, the *Blasted Allegories* series was constructed from a series of randomly shot photographs of television images paired with words and assembled in accordance with a system, resulting in a web of tenuous meanings. To create the series, Baldessari compiled a repository of images, which were photographed from the television. The photographs are either black-and-white, full color or single color (comprising the six hues of the spectrum). For the single-color photographs, he used a series of color filters on the camera. These photographs were then shown to friends and inscribed with the first appropriate word that they could think of to describe the image. In this practice Baldessari diverges from Metz's notion that a still image is not equivalent to word, but rather to a sentence or paragraph. But here as in other works, such as the *Ed Henderson* videos, Baldessari employs still images as signs, signs for a set of narrative conventions that can in turn be distilled down to a single word.

Baldessari states that recruiting others to label the photographs was done deliberately to "escape my own sensibilities."⁵² The

⁵¹ Baldessari, interview by Bettina Riccio Henry.

photographs were filed alphabetically according to color. The photographs were assembled into the “sentences” of each work according to a set of conditions prescribed by Baldessari. These conditions, which are presented along with the works when they are exhibited, differed from work to work in the series.

In *Blasted Allegories (Colorful Sentence and Purple Patch)*:

Starting with Red Father... (1978; ill. 56) the red arrow at the top left indicates the starting point (the red image labeled with the word “FATHER”). The sentences are meant to be read horizontally from left to right, but also vertically from top to bottom. Each segment begins with the color red and continues in accordance with the color spectrum. However, this sequencing must be preserved not only horizontally, but vertically, too, which results in diagonal bands of a single color running through the piece. The diagonal band running directly through the center of the work is purple, hence the “purple patch” referenced in the title. Some of the resulting sentences include “Father exchanging acrobats indeed harassed grocery” and “Where delayed damage means inward leap,” which can sound at once revelatory and utterly nonsensical.

⁵² Ibid.

The phrase “blasted allegories” comes from an 1854 letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne to James T. Fields in which Hawthorne wrote “Upon my honor, I am not quite sure that I entirely comprehend my own meaning in some of these blasted allegories; but I remember that I always had a meaning – or, at least, thought I had.”⁵³

The emphasis in the work is on the process of and system for construction. Van Bruggen writes, “Despite its visually seductive aspects, *Blasted Allegories* is about the transformational process, the arrangement of a whole series in a permutating group.”⁵⁴ Her point can be extended to include not only a system for construction but systems for comprehension as well. Baldessari has constructed his own semiotic logic in this work. He defines the basic narrative units of picture-color-word combinations, but as Bellour might describe it, the structure of the work resides in the patterns and alternations of patterns between these units—the symmetries and dissymmetries present in the work. The work is an interlocking grid in which the visual order of the images is derived from the word order and vice versa, creating a structure that is so pronounced that it practically renders the work an abstraction. No matter which way one reads the grid, no cohesive narrative gels,

⁵³ As quoted in Van Bruggen, *John Baldessari*, 108.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

despite the fact that, strictly speaking, the sentences are syntactically correct. Even so, the particular choices of words cause them to not make strict sense, hence the title *Blasted Allegories*, referencing the passage in which Hawthorne complains that he cannot recollect the meaning he intended to convey. Baldessari has taken Metz's notion about the medium-specificity of a narrative grammar to an extreme, to the point of reducing it to an absurdity.

The repetition of the color pattern extends beyond the level of a formal device and suggests associative meanings. The colors can indicate the states of mind of the subjects in the photographs or the emotional value of the words, either of which suggest alternative meaning structures to the ones conveyed by the horizontal and vertical sentences. The diagonal bands of colors then force the recognition of both a different and coexistent formal order and narrative basis. This relates to Bellour's proposal that the dynamic alternations of formal elements in a film propel the narrative along invisibly yet strongly, except that here Baldessari makes his structural mechanisms completely visible.

A Movie: Directional Piece Where People Are Looking (1972–73; ill. 57) consists of twenty-eight black-and-white photographs, images of films taken from the television, with acrylic paint and mounted on board to form the shape of what might be best described as a giant lowercase

letter “e”. The arrangement of the photographs is dictated by the direction in which the person in the photograph is looking—that is where the next photograph is placed. Within this arrangement, there is a kind of flow or progression between the images, yet there is no direct interaction between them. No two people who are pictured side by side ever look at one another. It is a kind of flow chart. To clarify this progression, which is one of both composition and narrative, Baldessari has labeled each photograph with an arrow to indicate the direction of the person’s glance. The result is another work involving a taut and highly visible structure that, in this case, creates a synthetic narrative cohesion out of unrelated images, rather like Baldessari’s daydream about the paintings in the museum.

The fact that the arrangement of the photographs forms a letter is an inadvertent pun on the extent to which Baldessari was toying with the notions of language and narrative as structures and as inseparable from the visual forms of his art. By arranging unrelated components in this manner, Baldessari invites viewer to manufacture connections between them, to create their own narratives based on genre-based conventions of characters and setting—for example, some photographs feature a cowboy, others look as if they might be taken from a crime thriller.

Baldessari says that he is “distrustful of single images” because they seem to stand for a single truth. But when two or more images are placed side by side, the mind naturally wants to start making narrative connections between them. This is what Baldessari invites his audience to do. However, he does attempt to govern this experience somewhat. To some degree he wants the audience to free-associate, but he also provides a basic roadmap through his narrative flows.⁵⁵ In this work, he provides arrows that correspond to the direction of the gazes, inviting the viewer to fill in the reason that the cowboy is looking at the femme fatale, and she at the gangster, etc. The fact that the pictures form the shape of an “e” indicate that as with a cinematic narrative, there is a definitive starting point and an end although there might be repetition in the sequence.

Bellour wrote that in film there are units that are characterized by a chronological coincidence between the unique consecutiveness of deployment on the screen (the signifier) and the unique consecutiveness of the time of the fiction (the signified). Bellour refers to these essential narrative units as segments. They are moments in the film chain that are delimited both by an elusive but powerful sense of dramatic or fictional unity and by the more rigorous notion of identity

⁵⁵ Baldessari, interview by Bettina Riccio Henry.

of setting and characters of the narrative.⁵⁶ Bellour defines several cinematic codes that string these segments together. The point-of-view shot is one code, and it is the element that Baldessari uses here to string his narrative units (the film stills) together. The fact that the point-of-view shots are false ones only serves to expose a mechanism that, when utilized in an organic filmic narrative structure, is normally invisible, but so powerful that it imposes an interpretation of narrative integrity on a series of unrelated images.

Story with 24 Versions (1974; ill. 58) consists of four black-and-white close-up photographs of hands performing an action, each titled in pencil with a simple descriptive sentence, e.g., “He held the book” or “He took out a cigarette.” The four captioned photographs are presented in twenty-four different sequences to reflect every possible syntactical combination of the sentence-photograph units, hence the story with twenty-four versions. This is similar to the strategy that Baldessari employed in the film *Script* in which he shot seven sets of actors performing the same scene.⁵⁷ The idea being that a slightly different story is told each time through small differences in gestures or inflections in *Script* or the photograph order in *Story with 24 Versions*.

⁵⁶ Raymond Bellour, “The Obvious and the Code,” reprinted in Rosen, *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, 93.

⁵⁷ See pages 110–112 for a discussion of the film *Script*.

This work also illustrates Bellour's concept that narrative meanings reside not within the individual narrative units themselves but in the interplay resulting from the way they are strung together. Additionally, the ordered repetition of the photographs forms a surface pattern, that in turn creates an almost abstract visual pattern that is in itself a kind of structure.

Movie Storyboard: Norma's Story (1974: ill. 59) consists of six panels of black-and-white photographs and ink on storyboard layout paper. It is a reassembly of a storyboard from a commercial film script, which, along with narrative written by Baldessari, results in a new story. Baldessari bases his story on *Sunset Boulevard* and uses some of the same scenes that appear in *Script*, including the first frame featuring Norma saying, "No one ever leaves a star. That's what makes one a star." But Baldessari cleverly reworks the plot of *Sunset Boulevard*. In the film, scriptwriter Joe Gillis is asked to adapt aging star Norma Desmond's autobiography to film. Norma shoots and kills him in the climactic scene. In Baldessari's version, both a scriptwriter and a painter lose their lives. As the author, Baldessari identifies with Gillis,⁵⁸ but he also identifies with the painter, as a maker of images. In a

⁵⁸ Winifred Pauleit, "Movie Stares," in *John Baldessari: A Different Kind of Order (Works 1962–1984)* ed. Edelbert Köb and Peter Pakesch (Cologne: Verlag Der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2005), 96.

humorous postmodern allusion to Barthes, Baldessari kills both the author and painter—a symbolic death for the traditional artist—and banishes Norma off screen (echoing her fate in the film). As in the film, the director survives. And it is with this directorial role that Baldessari realigns himself as an artist. He does not specifically script or illustrate every aspect of the work, but generally directs the undertaking, leaving room for viewers to inscribe their personal interpretations onto the blank areas.

The images used include personal photographs that Baldessari had lying around the studio, such as those of the painter Richard Allen Morris, mixed with photographs taken from the television, including some from the program *77 Sunset Strip*.⁵⁹ None of the images are stills from *Sunset Boulevard*. The texts, which also include instructions for sound cues and camera angles, mostly complement the images. But the story is not completely intact: It contains pictorial and verbal holes where there are no suitable existing images or texts to fit the narrative. In such cases, blank white spaces are left where an image or text would have been. A storyboard is a preparatory layout in filmmaking, but Baldessari presents it as his final product, echoing the conceptualist

⁵⁹ Van Bruggen, *John Baldessari*, 93.

idea that the process of making a work is more important than the end result.⁶⁰

The physical appearance of the work closely resembles strips of 35mm movie film, which strengthens its formal affinities with Hollywood film. As further evidence of this association, again in this work Baldessari plays with what Bellour calls dynamic tension, moving back and forth between symmetry and dissymmetry by using a familiar film plot and yet deviating from it and by leaving these holes in the narrative structure. Most of the gaps occur where images would have been. Again Baldessari invites the viewer to make the leap of imagining what visual element might accompany the text, while using an evocation of the narrative outline of a well-known Hollywood film to direct the viewer toward certain associations.

In the same vein is *Violent Space Series: Story Outline (A Story That Ends Up Mostly in Bed)* (1976; ill. 60), a narrative created with images taken from television. Each is labeled with a word signifying the activity or object depicted (most of which have overtones of violence) and ordered so that the words create a story. The eight black-and-white images are arranged in two columns of four. Again mimicking the appearance of strips of film, they form two separate narrative strings

⁶⁰ Ibid.

that are intended to be read from top to bottom. Both stories end in the same way, with the word “BED” accompanying an image of a person in bed.

Van Bruggen observes that this work shares some characteristics with the *Blasted Allegories* series.⁶¹ The linear arrangement of the image-word pairs evokes a narrative pattern, and the image and caption are surrogates for one another. However, there is a significant difference between this work and the *Blasted Allegories*. Here, the word strings do not form complete sentences, nor do they seem to follow any syntactical logic. Without the images, the words in the right-hand column—TALKING, FALLING UPSIDE DOWN, BED—do not form a comprehensive narrative flow. However, when they are considered in conjunction with the images—two people talking, one firing a gun at another, a person falling dead, and another going to bed—then a narrative begins to emerge. The text offers cues for reading the images; it is a substitute for Bellour’s code of speech, which provides context for the visuals and helps advance the film’s narrative.

Using a favored strategy, Baldessari takes these images from their original narrative context and uses them to form a new narrative structure. While this act destroys the integrity of the original cinematic

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 111.

narrative (meaning the original narrative structure to which these images belong), it is an affirmative act of what Metz called *narrativity*, that is, the investigation of the structure of narrative independent from any medium-specific language.

Violent Space Series: Two Stares Making a Point but Blocked by a Plane (For Malevich) (1976; ill. 61) and *Violent Space Series: Nine Feet (Of Victim and Crowd) Arranged by Position in Scene* (1976; ill. 62) feature a shared strategy of removing or blocking of key pieces of visual information, that is, each disturbs spatial relationships and their impact on narrative. While spatial relationships are not explicitly identified by Bellour as one of the narrative codes, they are nonetheless implied in the shots he defines as codes. For example, long shots automatically define spatial relationships when they are point-of-view shots because they reveal the distance between the viewer (the character from whose perspective the shot is taken) and object of the shot.

Two Stares Making a Point but Blocked by a Plane is a black-and-white photograph, again a film still, mounted on board. The photograph depicts two men standing on a rooftop gazing fixedly, perhaps even with fear, at something that is completely obscured by a large white square that Baldessari has collaged over the photograph. This lends an open-ended emotional quality to work, leaving it entirely

up to the viewer to determine, based on the looks on the men's faces, what lurks beneath the white square or whether it is the giant white square itself of which they are afraid. Therefore, the white square can be understood both as a blank space—the elimination of information—and as a figure—the addition of information.⁶² Additionally, the work is a gentle jab at Kasimir Malevich's Suprematist notions that art based on pure form could be universally comprehensible regardless of cultural or ethnic origin. Baldessari advocates instead the stronger possibility of subjectivity and multiplicity of meaning. So the white Malevich-like square occupying a pivotal position in this work is not a utopian form that affords universal comprehension. It is a multivalent entity subject to individual interpretations—fear and confusion, as displayed by the men in the still, among them.

In one interpretation of *Two Stares Making a Point but Blocked by a Plane*, a piece of information central to the pictorial narrative is obscured, yet in *Nine Feet (Of Victim and Crowd) Arranged by Position in Scene*) all pictorial elements are masked with the exception of the feet of the nine people depicted in the original black-and-white photograph, another film still. This reduces the scene to a binary sign: feet down for spectators and feet up for the victim. If Baldessari often

⁶² Pauleit, "Movie Stares," 97.

questions the extent to which a film still can represent an entire narrative, here he further questions whether just a few pieces of information within a still can accurately represent of the whole image. The elimination of all other information from the image, e.g., facial expressions and body language, raises the question of how many cues are necessary to convey the basic essence of a narrative. Additionally, this strategy of removing or blocking certain information relates back to Baldessari's comment regarding lining paintings up to form a continuous narrative and selecting particular moments or objects for depiction. In a work such as this one, Baldessari puts into practice his question of "Why this one and not that one?" by giving the viewer only certain pieces of information about this scene—the feet—rather than exposing facial expressions or body language.

Baldessari addresses the issue of time and its role in the comprehension of a narrative in *Concerning Diachronic/Synchronic Time: Above, On, Under (With Mermaid)* (1976; ill. 63). The series of six black-and-white photographs features three pairs of shots: the topmost pair is of a plane and a large bird, both in the air; the middle pair comprises two shots of the ocean; and the bottom couplet is two underwater shots—two people in an underwater craft on the left and a mermaid on the right. The work is a matrix and can be interpreted by assigning the columns time values and the rows place values. For

example, the two columns can be understood as two synchronic slices in time, and the three photographs in each column as events occurring at the same moment in time in different places: above, on and under the sea, as the title suggests. The rows can be understood as identical places captured at different moments in time, or, in other words, diachronic time segments. Taking the top row as an example, one could see an airplane in the sky first, and later a giant bird in the same position.

The references to synchronic and diachronic clearly refer to Saussure and his recommended method for studying language; he advocates a synchronic approach. However, Baldessari employs both modes of investigation in this work. His strategy emphasizes another of Bellour's narrative codes, that is, the element of time and the dynamic role it plays in advancing a narrative. *Concerning Diachronic/Synchronic Time* is an ideal illustration of Bellour's point since the temporal component is varied in the work. The result is two different sets of narratives that hinge upon different concepts of time.

One of Baldessari's works with the closest apparent relationship to film is *Black Dice* (1982; ill. 64), which is named after the film from

which the still image is taken.⁶³ To create the work, Baldessari took an 8 x 10 film still and divided it twice vertically and twice horizontally. The resultant nine equal parts were all developed into etchings, which are intended as both autonomous units and fragments of a greater whole. Although they are presented in order, they are so reworked that it is difficult to make out the original underlying image without having seen the still first.

Black Dice marks a slight shift in Baldessari's focus. In this work he does not incorporate the film still wholesale, instead he translates it into an etching. Also he is now working with a single image, rather than with a sequence of stills. Although Baldessari continues to use film stills as raw material to the present, his use of them from this point forward became more varied than it had been in the photocollages of the 1970s. One focus for those works was dismantling a film still or stills and obstructing comprehension of narrative content or redirecting of narrative flow, as in the *Violent Space Series*. Another approach was synthesizing unrelated images and, often, words in a narrative held together by virtue of formal and logical structures, as in *Blasted Allegories*. By time of *Black Dice* the endeavor became more about affirmative use of the independent aesthetic language that he had

⁶³ *Black Dice* (1948), directed by St. John Legh Clowes, it is actually a British-made, American gangster film. It is also known by the title *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*.

himself developed over a decade of creating these photomontage works, and less about interrogating the narrative conventions and structures of Hollywood films. That is to say, the way in which Baldessari alters the film still in *Black Dice* is more a construction of his own visual language and less a deconstruction of preexisting narrative structures. The film still in *Black Dice* is transformed into an almost exclusively aesthetic element. It is not part of a narrative structure. In this regard, the work is somewhat anomalous, as Baldessari has continued the practice of synthesizing unrelated images to create a narrative from them. More recent works from the 1980s through the present rely on both approaches: the deconstruction of preexisting narrative structures and the construction of an aesthetic characterized by use of irregularly shaped canvases and erratically shaped compositions (as opposed to gridlike compositions), film still collages and color.

Despite the fact that this is the only occasion on which Baldessari ever name checked a specific film, the work has little to do with the film, per se. When asked about this work in particular and whether it related to something specific about the film, Baldessari replied that it was something like the manner in which Picasso included bits of newspaper in his collage works. The reference serves a formal purpose and invites the viewer to make content associations, which may or may not yield

anything meaningful.⁶⁴ The comparison to Picasso is very useful in considering the distinctions between the photocollages and *Black Dice*. The subtle and intricate compositions of Picasso's analytic Cubist phase are corollaries to Baldessari's complex narrative web structures. His synthetic Cubist phase features fewer, simpler forms with a more decorative, brightly colored aspect to them. It is less focused on the dissection of a form or a structure. In that way, it can be compared to *Black Dice*.

The way in which *Black Dice* differs from the photocollages of the 1970s underscores an essential point about Baldessari's engagement with Hollywood film in the 1970s. He does not reference specific films in order to make a statement about their iconic power or cultural currency, as a Pop artist might. Instead, Baldessari references a filmlike way for conveying meaning—via the structure or the codes, if you will, of narrative cinema. It is this pursuit that makes his photocollages visual corollaries to the theory of cinema semiotics put forth by Raymond Bellour and, to a certain extent, the writings of Christian Metz. Baldessari uses the film still as a signifier for an entire set of genre narrative conventions, which it can easily stand for, as evidenced in the

⁶⁴ Baldessari, interview by Bettina Riccio Henry.

Ed Henderson Reconstructs Movie Scenarios video.⁶⁵ Since genre plots have become a culturally ingrained language that we all understand, a single film still can stand for a whole set of narrative conventions, whether those of film noir, horror films or musicals.

The film stills Baldessari uses are always of commercial Hollywood films, often genre films, never art films, never foreign films, and never iconic, recognizable films.⁶⁶ This prevents the aesthetic or unique qualities of the image from dominating the work and inscribing a set of meanings on it. Initially, Baldessari's choice of particular stills was arbitrary, governed by his desire to work with found imagery. His first method for obtaining these images was to set up a camera on a timer in front of the television. This methodology satisfied his prerequisite for using images that were completely uninflected and did not depict one particular moment over another one. The images captured were purely a factor of when the camera snapped the picture. Baldessari recalls that at some point he learned he could buy film stills instead of taking his own photographs. When he began buying the stills, he consciously gravitated toward the most generic images he could find, partially

⁶⁵ See pages 123–125 for a discussion of this video.

⁶⁶ Although *Black Dice* was not a Hollywood film, it overtly emulated the American gangster film genre.

because these stills were cheaper than those of famous films.⁶⁷ Issues of economy aside, the lack of specificity of the B-movie stills was important to Baldessari. He said, “I have to work with stuff that doesn’t jump out at you too much, that has a sort of low level of importance, let’s say.”⁶⁸

Regardless of the method of he used to obtain the stills for his work, the end results are identical. Baldessari wants to force viewers into a kind of game whereby they can rely on their knowledge of narrative convention of film genres in order to glean some associative meanings and, at the same time, comprehend the unique syntax that Baldessari superimposes onto them. As such, the film stills perform a structural function—they suggest a narrative or narratives and create an order or a kind of controlled disorder in the way they rupture expectations regarding narrative flow. They are narrative signs that either confirm or disrupt viewers’ expectations about the narrative content of the work based on the nature of their relationship to the system of genre narrative—positive, negative, or arbitrary—and also based on their relationship to one another. Baldessari describes the endeavor as equal parts deconstructing a generic filmic narrative and

⁶⁷ Baldessari, interview with Bettina Riccio Henry.

⁶⁸ John Baldessari, “An Interview with John Baldessari,” by Kirk Varnedoe, *MoMA Magazine* (winter–spring 1994): 11.

constructing his own unique syntax.⁶⁹ The use of serial imagery, the titles of works, which sometimes include the words “movie” or “storyboard,” and the physical shape of the works, particularly the emulation of strips of celluloid, all further support the idea that film served as an inspiration for the structure of the photocollages, both on a conceptual level and a formal level.⁷⁰

By exploring this system of filmic narrative in his art, Baldessari was not necessarily asserting its monolithic power; rather he was manipulating it in various ways, to reveal its limitations and question its capacity as a relevant structure for conveying meaning, often even suggesting alternative narrative paths. This current in his art is aligned with the writings of both Metz and Bellour that attempt to define a cinema semiotics, while simultaneously questioning the nature of the constructs on which it is based.

Beyond this similarity to the theoretical constructs of another discipline, Baldessari’s questioning the authority of a single system for conveying meaning is also directly linked to the prevailing cultural politics of the 1970s. Shortly after the adoption of Saussurian structuralism in many disciplines, oppositional theories began to

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ The serial nature of Hollywood genre films stems from regulated, repetitive patterns of plot, characterization, lighting, and camerawork that vary just slightly from film to film within a single genre. Films in any one genre are variations on a theme.

emerge. In film theory, for example, there was a tendency in the early 1970s to discuss textual traits that opposed the system of classical cinema as markers of an oppositional cinema because this permitted a political evaluation that encouraged stylistically radical practices. While this polemic was sometimes overly simplistic (it allows only for a binary relationship between a totalizing system of power and an opposing radical otherness), it did pave the way for important artistic explorations. Questions were raised in not only film theory and criticism, but within filmmaking itself. Film scholar Philip Rosen describes these questions as:

interrogations of the cinematic and cultural potential of textual traits which might be defined as against the classical system of signification (e.g., uneconomical use of elements of narrative form, stylistic and formal opacity, a stoppage of the recirculation of normally repeated figures or a hyperbolation and laying-bare of such recirculation).⁷¹

This sounds as much like a description of Baldessari's photcollage explorations of filmic narrative structures as it does of the practices of avant-garde filmmakers during the 1970s.

⁷¹ Rosen, "The Saussurean Impulse," 10.

Chapter 4

Ed Ruscha: Welcome to the Machine

Baldessari explored a set of concerns pertaining to filmic narrative structure across several media, including film, video and photocollage. Ruscha was also concerned with film narrative, but unlike Baldessari, he confined his investigation of this aspect of film to book and film projects. This is not to say, however, that his two-dimensional works are devoid of references to Hollywood film, quite the contrary. Ruscha's two-dimensional works involve an equally prevalent, albeit slightly different locus of references to Hollywood cinema than those contained his films and books.

This chapter explores how Ruscha utilizes various aspects of Hollywood film in his two-dimensional works. Some of Ruscha's most complex engagements with Hollywood film can be found not in his films, but in these two-dimensional works, which align themselves both with certain concerns of structural film and more pervasively with film theory. I have identified three different categories of film references in these works. They are: imitation of the view of the world afforded by the movie camera (extreme high and low angle shots, the panoramic vistas of CinemaScope, aerial shots); the imitation of the unique qualities of the projected image (the leader strip, film titles, scratched celluloid); and evocation of the particular view of reality advanced in Hollywood films

(references to generic dialogue or stereotypical attitudes towards people, places or historical events).

The adoption of these various aspects of Hollywood films performs a singular function in Ruscha's work: It characterizes Hollywood as a machine that makes fantasies—the world depicted in film. This fantasy machine not only prompts viewer pleasure, but, even more significantly perhaps, it exposes and shapes the viewer's perception of the world. It reveals the shared values of a culture. As such, Ruscha's reliance on these various elements of film parallels aspects of what is known as "apparatus theory," a trend that dominated film theory in the 1970s and 1980s, the time span during which Ruscha made many of these works. My method for uncovering affinities with film in Ruscha's work is first to describe the main points of apparatus theory and then to use these concepts to analyze several works by Ruscha that conform to the three categories outlined above. While I often refer to Kerry Brougher's essay "Words as Landscape"¹ for concepts that support my argument, my approach differs significantly from Brougher's in that he does not suggest this link between Ruscha's art and apparatus theory.

¹ Brougher, "Words as Landscape," 157–175.

There is no direct evidence to suggest that Ruscha has read apparatus theory.² However, as it is strongly based on other theories that were more widely circulated in the 1960s and 1970s, namely psychoanalytic and semiotic theory, it is not out of the question that Ruscha would have encountered similar notions via conversations with friends and other artists who were familiar with them.

Apparatus Theory

Apparatus theory, which emerged first in France in the 1970s, was derived from a blend of Marxist theory, semiotics—especially Christian Metz’s articulation of cinema semiotics—and psychoanalytic theory. Apparatus theorists, chief among them Jean-Louis Baudry, Jean-Louis Comolli, Christian Metz and, later, British theorist Laura Mulvey, claimed to have identified the deep levels of spectator pleasure, which originated in repressed and unconscious desires. Baudry and others described the classical Hollywood cinema as a powerful, univocal fantasy machine with a specific purpose: to foster in the spectators

² No primary or secondary sources referenced in this dissertation mention Ruscha having read Baudry or any film theory. Further, in email exchanges between the author and Sylvia Wolf (dated January 18, 2006) and the author and Robert Dean, editor of the *Edward Ruscha Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings*, (dated January 25, 2006) both individuals stated that they had no knowledge of whether Ruscha had read any of these theories. Dean specifically remarked, “Ed’s not a theory reader that I know of.”

specific psychological states that induce receptiveness to an ideological agenda.³

Apparatus theory deals with the positioning of the subject vis-à-vis the machinery of cinema, that is, the projector; the projected, framed image; and the darkened theater. The extent to which the subject's position is determined by the machinery of cinema and the existence of any ideological and psychological determining factors and/or implications of that machinery are issues that are of primary concern to apparatus theorists.

In apparatus theory one must deal not only the actual machinery itself but also with the signifying processes, especially those of narrative.⁴ These processes often extend beyond cinema—they encompass cultural traditions of storytelling that existed long before film. Baudry and other apparatus theorists looked at the intersection of film and culture. They were concerned with the cultural determinations that produce the cinematic apparatus and, inversely, how and why certain realms of representation serve as components of sociocultural formations. When apparatus is discussed in film theory, the author is

³ Carl Plantinga, "Movie Pleasures and the Spectator's Experience: Toward a Cognitive Approach," *Film and Philosophy*, Volume II, ed. Allan Casebier (Portsmouth, Ohio: Society for the Philosophic Study of the Contemporary Visual Arts, 1995), unpaginated, electronic publication, http://www.hanover.edu/philos/film/vol_02/planting.htm.

⁴ Philip Rosen, "Apparatus: Introduction," in Rosen, *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, 282.

usually referring not just to the basic camera-projector mechanism, but also to the machine in the context of larger sociocultural forces. The literal machinery is only one particular manifestation of these forces.⁵

An important question that must be addressed is: If all representational entities appeal in some way to the spectator's self-recognition, what is it that cinema does that no other signifying practice does in quite the same way? Baudry and Comolli argue that there is a desire on the part of the spectator to believe in the image, but they explain the development and utilization of the cinematic apparatus on the basis of an "ideology of the visible." Instead of characterizing cinema as a response to a natural human desire, they describe a cinematic apparatus that participates in the psychic and social construction of spectators whose subjectivity is then reconfirmed by their belief in the image.⁶ This notion, manifest in Ruscha's paintings dealing with Hollywood and Hollywood film, was adapted from Lacan's idea of mirror-misrecognition.⁷ The subject in front of the mirror obtains an illusory sense of identity. Similarly, cinematic representation creates in the spectator an illusory sense of himself or herself as someone who

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 283.

⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), 1-7.

“identifies” with the position of the camera and, therefore, is the author or owner of the visual spectacle of the film. However, both this image of which the viewer believes he or she has ownership and the position from which he or she purports to own it are actually products of the system of representation.⁸

Baudry

The single most influential writer on apparatus theory is French theorist Jean-Louis Baudry. His 1970 essay “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus,”⁹ was influenced by Christian Metz, specifically by Metz’s conception of Freudian primary identification adapted to the cinematic model. According to Freud, infants of both sexes relate first to the mother as their primary identification and become her “loveable object” to insure her constant attention. She is the source of the child’s ego identification. Metz adapts this notion, substituting the spectator for the infant and film for the mother.¹⁰

In this essay, Baudry anchors his argument in this essay around the main physical aspects of the cinematic apparatus—the camera and

⁸ Richard Allen, “Psychoanalytic Film Theory,” in *A Companion to Film Theory*, ed. Toby Miller and Robert Stam (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 1999), 130–131.

⁹ Originally published in *Cinéthique* (1970), nos. 7-8, and reprinted in Rosen, “Apparatus: Introduction,” 286–296.

¹⁰ Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

the projected image—and then uses them to elucidate the ideological, psychological and sociological ramifications. He observes that it is no coincidence that the motion picture camera was constructed after the model of the camera obscura. The projected image resulting from the motion picture camera echoes the perspective developed during the Italian Renaissance.¹¹ The dimensions of the projected image, the ratio between height and width, are all derived from Western easel painting. There is an ideology inherent in this perspective. Perspective in Renaissance painting is based on a fixed point of reference in accordance with which objects in the composition are organized and which, in turn, dictates the very spot that the viewer must occupy.¹² This optical construct—the scene depicted in the painting—is the projection-reflection of a “virtual image” whose “reality” is created through this very depiction. On this point Baudry concludes that:

Western easel painting, presenting as it does a motionless and continuous whole, elaborates a total vision which corresponds to the idealist conception of the fullness and homogeneity of “being,” and is, so to speak, representative of this conception. In this sense it contributes in a singularly emphatic way to the ideological function of art, which is to provide the tangible representation of metaphysics. The principle of transcendence which conditions and is conditioned by the perspective

¹¹ Baudry notes that the use of lenses of different focal lengths can alter this perspective. However, his point is that this is standard perspective of which there are variations. The significance of this particular perspective is that it places the subject at the center of the spectacle.

¹² Baudry, quoted in Rosen, “Apparatus: Introduction,” 289.

construction represented in painting and in the photographic image which copies from it seems to inspire all the idealist paeans to which the cinema has given rise.¹³

Here Baudry moves beyond Metz's psychoanalytic framework to examine the image-making methods and capacities of the cinematic machine as influenced by Marxism.¹⁴ The Marxist aspect of his position is the notion that the scientific instrument of the camera is not neutral. It serves the ruling class. It does this by propagating the visual codes of Renaissance humanism (namely, perspective), which places the individual at the center of this spectacle. At the center of this ideology is the notion that reality is visible and that the camera can capture it.¹⁵

Baudry identifies some elements that distinguish film from other forms of visual representation. The movie camera can capture movement, and the projected image has a kind of dynamism not present in the inert realities depicted in painting and still photography. The movie camera registers a series of images and because it moves, it can record multiple points of view, which nullify the fixed position of the eye-spectator that is integral to Western easel painting.

Meaning is produced not only by the content of the images, but by the illusion of continuity, which is achieved through the rapid

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Rosen, "Apparatus: Introduction," 283.

¹⁵ Andrew, *The Major Film Theories*, 238.

projection of separate frames. There is a paradoxical relationship of film to difference. At its essence, film relies on a continual series of small differences between frames; yet, for the illusion of film to live, it must negate these differences. On this point Baudry echoes Raymond Bellour's notions that formal symmetries in conventional narrative film help to reveal narrative dissymmetry, resulting in some sort of narrative resolution, and that constant flux between balance and imbalance in American film is designed to be imperceptible.¹⁶

In the projected film image, individual differences between frames disappear so that movement and continuity can emerge. But the movement and continuity come from the same tiny discontinuities that they tend to erase. The key factor is that the brain performs the operation of transforming these separate images into a coherent series united by continuity, movement and meaning. This is to say, continuity is an attribute of the subject.¹⁷

Ruscha's works such as *Triumph* (1994: ill. 71) depict a moment or an image, in this case two frozen frames of the end credits of a film, that seem to rupture this continuity and, therefore, spoil the illusory reality constructed by the film's narrative. Yet somehow the very

¹⁶ See pages 144–150 for a detailed discussion of Bellour's theory.

¹⁷ Rosen, "Apparatus: Introduction," 291.

transcription of these mechanical workings of film to a large-scale painting only serves to affirm the illusion, the iconic status of the fantasy machine that it initially seems to undermine.

Baudry calls cinema the “psychic apparatus of substitution.”¹⁸

The instrumentation, that is, the apparatus in its mechanical and ideological sense, is hidden or repressed as part of the cinematic viewing experience. It is a substitute for the spectator. In this regard, Baudry’s theory and Ruscha’s art are aligned because in numerous cases, Ruscha offers an inherently cinematic view of the world. The movie camera apparatus is a substitute for the subject in paintings such as *The Los Angeles County Museum on Fire* (1965–68; ill. 66), which I will discuss in greater detail later in this chapter.

Baudry draws an analogy between the visual properties of cinema and unconscious mental states. Cinema is an apparatus that has certain causal effects upon the spectator that can be explained by psychoanalytic theories. According to Baudry, the film spectator is captivated by a simulacrum of reality offered by the cinema. The viewer perceives an image and believes this perception to be a real, unmediated glimpse of the world. In fact, both the world that the spectator perceives and his or her point of view about this world are

¹⁸ Ibid., 296.

created by the cinematic apparatus. Because of this, the apparatus confirms the spectator's belief in this "reality," rather than cause the viewer to dismiss it as a reality determined only through representation.¹⁹

A painting such as *17th Century* (1988; ill. 76) also tackles this point about the world and viewer's point of view being governed by cinematic representations that are accepted as realities. The painting, which is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, offers a series of amusingly clichéd notions about the seventeenth century that reveal how the cinematic apparatus can influence a spectator's views and beliefs, in this case about a particular period in history.

There are some relevant limitations to apparatus theory. The attraction, and at the same time weakness, of the theory is its simplicity; it claims to have identified the essential psychological and ideological effects of conventional narrative film. Positing these monolithic effects has allowed apparatus theory to take an unequivocal position on the allegedly harmful psychological and ideological consequences of viewing Hollywood films. Yet in its wholesale identification of ideological subjugation as the norm for the film spectator, the theory also makes untenable assumptions about spectators and about the existence of a

¹⁹ Allen, "Psychoanalytic Film Theory," 135.

uniform, ahistorical, psychological effect. The spectator's experience in viewing mainstream films is more complex, more diverse and contradictory than apparatus theory allows. In summary, apparatus theory fails to account for the diversity and, in some cases, the simplicity of the pleasures of the cinema.²⁰

Film theorist J. Dudley Andrew also expresses reservations about the reductive Marxist implications of apparatus theory. He describes the theory as one that accuses conventional narrative cinema of supporting the dominant ideology of a modern repressive culture. Proponents of the theory, he says, insist that the ideology inherent in financing, production and distribution dominates cinematic signification to the point where it merely repeats this ideology.²¹ He finds this an inadequate approach to conventional narrative cinema.

Despite its evident limitations, apparatus theory is still a useful tool for exposing the deeper level of meaning invoked by the conspicuous film references in Ruscha's art. As mentioned above, apparatus theory draws from cinema semiotics, in addition to psychoanalysis and Marxist theory.²² Andrew observes that apparatus theory is, in fact, an extension of semiotic film theory. It moves beyond

²⁰ Plantinga, "Movie Pleasures."

²¹ Andrew, *The Major Film Theories*, 238.

²² Rosen, "Apparatus: Introduction," 281.

scientific identification of the structures that produce meaning in cinema to an analysis of the worldview and ethical dimensions implicit in this meaning. Apparatus theory concludes that there is no neutral system of meaning. Signifying systems necessarily invoke sociological and psychological ones.²³

This relationship between semiotic theory and apparatus theory can provide insight into the way in which Hollywood cinema is invoked in Baldessari's versus Ruscha's art. If Baldessari is intent on interrogating the structural components by which meaning is conveyed in film and art, cinematic imagery in Ruscha's paintings can be understood as an exploration of the sociological implications of evoking the cinematic system of signification within a work of art.

Ruscha's Cinematic Depictions of the Ordinary

By the 1960s, the allure of the cinematic apparatus was taken for granted, yet it exerted enormous influence on visual culture. Film scholar Richard DeCordova observed that until about 1907 audience attention on the cinema focused on the inherent appeal and novelty of the apparatus of motion picture projection—the technical feat of displaying images and stories on the screen.²⁴ Early films were shown

²³ Andrew, *The Major Film Theories*, 240.

²⁴ Richard DeCordova, "The Emergence of the Star System and the Bourgeoisification of the American Cinema," in *Star Signs* (London: BFI Education, 1982), 66.

as a type of novelty act in vaudeville theaters, a context that amplified their connection to illusionism and magic. The relationship between film and magic was epitomized in the films of Georges Méliès (1861–1938), French illusionist turned filmmaker.²⁵ Through the innovative use of various techniques such as editing, trick photography, stop motion and slow motion photography, and double exposure, Méliès created surreal effects not previously seen on film, most memorably a rocket ship landing right into the eye of the “man in the moon,” in his *Le Voyage Dans la Lune - A Trip to the Moon* (1902).

It was only after a decade of exhibition, once the novelty of creation and presentation of cinematic images waned, that an emphasis on other aspects of film, such as the systematic reliance on plot and stars, emerged.²⁶ During the classic era of Hollywood, camerawork and editing were refined in service of creating a fluid narrative format. Other silent-era techniques such as dissolves, fade-ins and outs, and hand-tinting, which were more conspicuous and tended to not contribute to a seamless narrative flow, were largely discontinued in the era of sound.

Ruscha’s interest in what can therefore be seen as one of the more matter-of-fact aspects of film by the 1960s (i.e., imagery evocative

²⁵ For a detailed discussion of Méliès’s contribution to early cinema, see Elisabeth Ezra’s *Georges Méliès* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

²⁶ P. David Marshall, “The Cinematic Apparatus and the Construction of the Film Celebrity,” in *The Film Cultures Reader*, ed. Graeme Turner (London: Routledge, 2002), 228.

of the cinematic apparatus specifically) is consistent with his propensity toward ordinary objects, as evidenced in his photographs, such as the *Product Still Lifes* (ills. 30-31) and book projects like *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (ill. 34).²⁷ As a lifelong fan of pop culture, including Hollywood movies, Ruscha constructs or defines a point of view in his paintings that places the viewer into the role of movie spectator, a role for which the movie camera is a surrogate. During a time when his contemporary Andy Warhol was making works of art dealing with the iconic presence and commodity status of movie stars, Ruscha explored a much more implicit and somewhat forgotten aspect of the filmmaking-exhibition process—the actual apparatus and how it shapes our perception of the world around us.

Unlike Baldessari, Ruscha never turned his back on painting completely, although he struggled to find his own style in the wake of the Abstract Expressionist movement. Like Baldessari, however, Ruscha found great inspiration in photographic works, which he initially considered simply a means to an end in the art making process. Ruscha began incorporating the same kind of vernacular imagery and commercial art-inspired compositions that dominated his early photographic works into paintings such as *Box Smashed Flat* (1960–

²⁷ For detailed information on these works, see pages 81–83.

1961; ill. 8). Additionally, his continued engagement with the media of books, prints and, to a lesser extent, films and graphic design also informed his painting. As Neal Benezra points out, “by eluding characterization as a painter, Ruscha was able to free himself both from the tradition of recent painting and, eventually, from his own early work.”²⁸ By according painting a less privileged status, he found more flexibility of expression within the medium. One way he was able to break out of the traditional boundaries of painting was by harnessing the visual canons of film—not merely to depict images that looked like movie stills or to paint likenesses of movie stars, but rather to represent everyday objects and places from an inherently cinematic point of view.

The three categories that I use to describe the ways in which Ruscha’s work parallels elements of apparatus theory—imitation of the view of the world afforded by the movie camera, imitation of the unique qualities of the projected image, and evocation of the particular view of reality advanced in Hollywood films—are not intended as hard and fast distinctions. Several works I discuss actually fit in multiple categories. I have employed these categories as a means to clarify the works’ associations with apparatus theory, not to limit interpretation of them.

²⁸ Benezra, “Ed Ruscha: Painting and Artistic License,” 154.

The Cinematic Eye

The first category of Ruscha's paintings that deal with film comprises works that imitate the view of the world afforded by the movie camera, a world dramatically represented in wide-angle, panoramic vistas, dramatic low and high angles, aerial shots and stark, klieg light illumination.

In many ways, *The Los Angeles County Museum on Fire* (1965–68; ill. 66) is an inherently cinematic depiction of the museum. The point of view from which the building is shown is a dramatic and cinematic high-angle aerial shot, which tends to diminish the stature of the building. To prepare for this painting, Ruscha flew over the museum in a helicopter and took photographs of it. He recalled that there was also an aerial photograph of the museum on the cover of the Los Angeles telephone book (ill. 67), which also helped him to work out his composition.²⁹ Of this compositional technique, Ruscha remarked:

Aerial photography has always been riveting to me. The idea of seeing something from the air – not where you're looking at something from directly up above – but where you're looking at something from an angle. It's something that moves me as an artist.³⁰

²⁹ Ed Ruscha, quoted in David Bourdon, "Ruscha as Publisher [Or All Booked Up]," *Art News* 71 (April 1972): 69.

³⁰ Ed Ruscha, "Conversation with Ruscha in His Studio," interview by Alexandra Schwartz, Venice, California, 29 October 1999, in Ed Ruscha, *Leave Any Information at the Signal*:

This depiction of the museum makes it seem more like a scale model than a temple or monument of art and culture. It looks like a scale model of the museum that might be built by the special effects departments of a film studio in order to serve as a prop for the creation and filming of a fire.

The rendering of the strange yellow-green space that surrounds the museum is atmospheric and nondescript, as if the museum were enveloped in some post-apocalyptic fog or floating in outer space. This stark treatment has the distinct air of unreality about it. All details of the surrounding landscape, buildings, landmarks—like Hancock Park and the La Brea Tar Pits—and skyline are eliminated from the painting, contributing to an eerie sense of drama and an artificial cinematic theatricality. It looks like a film set. An uncredited aerial photograph of the museum (ill. 67) taken from a vantage point similar to the one depicted in Ruscha's composition reveals that, when seen in its actual context and without the fire and murky green fog, the building bears little resemblance to a film set for some futuristic science fiction film.

The fire itself is another purely fictive element of Ruscha's creation. Its inclusion adds to the air of spectacle and cinematic excess, especially since the flames are shooting straight out of the back of the

museum. They suggest propulsion, movement through space, as if the museum is a spacecraft and the flames are created by the burning of the rocket fuel that is the craft's power source. The museum was already a strong visual landmark, but Ruscha's representation catapults it to a new level of visual drama. He recalls, "I knew at the time that I started the picture that I was going to assault that building somehow."³¹ He presents us with a view of the museum as mediated by cinematic excess: This is the museum "Hollywoodized." In his films he relied on narrative as a process to convey meaning, as it is commonly used in Hollywood film. In this painting Ruscha achieves a more sophisticated articulation of process, using a Hollywood aesthetic as a means, a process, to transform the appearance of the building.

Two paintings that incorporate a common set of filmic references, *Trademark with Eight Spotlights* (1962; ill. 68) and *Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas* (1963; ill. 69), are often discussed in conjunction with one another. *Trademark* depicts the film studio 20th Century Fox's logo, an iconic image that is familiar to anyone who has seen a film made by this studio. *Standard Station* is a rendition of one of the gas stations Ruscha photographed for his book *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (ill.

³¹ Ruscha, quoted in Bourdon, "Ruscha as Publisher," 69.

34),³² but the gas station is rendered in exactly the same style as the movie studio logo painting. *Standard Station* was painted after *Trademark* and deliberately references it in style and composition. The palette for both works consists only of red, yellow, black and white, colors often used in graphic design compositions. The bold geometric shapes are large and rendered in a completely flat manner.

These two strongly angled compositions are purely cinematic, echoing the appearance of the 20th Century Fox logo on the movie screen. This is not a vantage point one frequently sees in painting. It is a low angle framing, that is, the position of the viewer seems to be below that of the subject depicted as if one is below ground level, looking up at the logo or gas station. This gives the object depicted a commanding air, an iconic status, a larger-than-life quality, in sharp contrast to the manner in which Ruscha depicted the Los Angeles County Museum as less monumental than in real life. Also, both the logo and the gas station are dramatically illuminated, as if klieg lights were shining on them in preparation for a film shoot. Ruscha commented on the strong right-to-left diagonal that dominates the composition of both works:

³² For a detailed discussion of this project, see pages 81–83.

I needed a simple answer to delineating a canvas, I suppose. I used a lower right-hand to upper left-hand corner diagonal across the canvas, and sliced it in half. Then it was a matter of filling one half of that canvas with some sort of idea that I had. I could see that a lot of subjects could work their way into this format. It was like broadcasting something from a tiny point, then expanding beyond the limits of things.³³

While Ruscha likens this compositional arrangement to broadcasting, it can just as easily, or perhaps even more aptly, given the nature of what is depicted, be compared to projecting, as in the projection of an image on a small strip of celluloid onto a large movie screen and then expanding the iconic presence of the image even further beyond the physical limit of the screen.

Prior to these compositions, most of Ruscha's paintings were of a smaller scale. These two canvases are large by design. *Large Trademark* is 66 3/4 x 133 3/4 inches and *Standard Station* is 65 x 124 inches. Both have a strong horizontal orientation, as does *The Los Angeles County Museum on Fire*, which is 53 1/2 x 133 1/2 inches. This scale combined with the grandiose and theatrical nature of the depictions evokes the oversized images one sees on the screen in the movie theater—it is a cinematic way of looking at the everyday world, through which the most mundane of buildings becomes an icon. Of *Standard Station*, Ruscha reflected, "It has to be called an icon; that's

³³ Ruscha, interview by Paul Karlstrom, 68.

the main thing about the painting. It sort of aggrandizes itself before your eyes.”³⁴

Relating these images back to Baudry’s essay, what all three paintings share is a view of the world—of real buildings in two cases—that is not empirically possible. It only exists as a perception of the subject—when the subject is the mechanical apparatus of the movie camera. Ruscha assaults the museum—a temple of culture—by making it look like a set for a disaster or science-fiction film, while he aggrandizes an ordinary Texas gas station by making it look like a cinematic monument. In so doing he demonstrates two ways the point of view of the apparatus can distort representation of real objects and places.

Ruscha remarked that he wanted to make “a comic comment on the idea of speed and motion in a picture.”³⁵ What better way to do it than to emulate the kind of representation of an object that is afforded by the movie camera, which produces not still but moving images?

“Hollywood dreams” – I mean, think about it. Close your eyes and what does it mean, visually? It means a ray of light, actually, to me, rather than a success story. And so I play around with the ray of light rather than with the success story. I’m not interested so much in success stories or living out success stories personally. The phenomenon of the thing is just

³⁴ Ibid., 66.

³⁵ Ibid.

the imagery that comes out of it. If you look at the 20th Century Fox (logo), you get this feeling of concrete immortality. The letters actually come out of this shaft that is shooting way back in the ground like this, you know, and it's all substance. But in a sense that's like a ray of light so those images are in my work.³⁶

This ray of light that Ruscha refers to repeatedly is evocative, especially the way it is depicted in the 20th Century Fox logo as a stark shaft of light emitted by the movie projector as it projects images from celluloid up onto the movie screen. This dovetails into the next category of filmic reference in Ruscha's art: evocations of the projected image.

The Projected Image

This grouping of filmic paintings imitates the physical characteristics of the projected image itself. Such works reference the leader strip, the scratched appearance of old or damaged celluloid, the aesthetics of film credits, and specific proportions of the movie screen and projected image. In so doing they align themselves with structural film's concern with the medium's material base.³⁷ This group of works can be differentiated from the first in that they are not simply everyday objects depicted in a uniquely cinematic way. These representations assert the material reality of film, of celluloid. Not only is there a tendency, as in the first category of Ruscha's works, to perceive the

³⁶ Ed Ruscha, transcribed from the film *L.A. Suggested by the Art of Edward Ruscha* produced and directed by Gary Conklin, 28 min., Mystic Fire Video, 1981.

³⁷ James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde*, 283.

world through the cinematic eye, there is also a deeper level of commitment to the reality of the images that appear up on the movie screen, even when they are only manifestations of material defects in the celluloid. The acceptance of these elements into the visual lexicon of the culture is an extension of what Baudry described as the projection-reflection of a “virtual image” whose “reality” is created through this very depiction. Although Baudry was referring to the actual content-related images shown in movies, it is nonetheless also applicable to the other visual elements that appear on the movie screen, even if they are accidental, such as scratches are.

Triumph (1994; ill. 71) is a horizontally oriented work that consists of the words “The End” depicted twice in a black Gothic-style font on a white, hazy background. In each instance the word runs off the canvas at the top and at the bottom. There is a plain white strip that bisects the canvas horizontally. Additionally, there are numerous thin vertical white lines along the canvas at irregular intervals and lengths. All these elements create the appearance of a film end title projected slowly enough so that one can see the distinctions between the individual frames, as represented by the white horizontal band on the canvas. The vertical white lines mimic the appearance of scratches on the celluloid. This painting makes tangible the projection element of the cinematic apparatus. But rather than rupturing a sense of belief in the images

contained in the narrative aspect of the film itself, this exposure of the mechanical aspects of the projected image only serves to create a sense of anticipation or longing for those other images. This content-oriented imagery, although equally as artificial as the leader strip or end titles, constitutes a reality that the viewer recognizes, accepts and derives pleasure from. Viewers recognize the accidental images and accept them as real even though they tend to rupture the “reality” created in the film’s narrative by calling attention to its artificiality. In addition to possessing their own materiality, these manifestations of the projection apparatus provide a kind of Pavlovian trigger to another realm of projected imagery that is the main part of this viewing experience—the feature film itself.

Ruscha also celebrates the material reality of film as an object in *Western* (1991; ill. 72). Another monochromatic work, it depicts the blurred silhouette of two teepees enveloped in hazy, atmospheric space. Again, erratically placed vertical white lines along the canvas create the impression of scratched celluloid. Ruscha wanted to call attention to the purely formal and abstract elements of film. He explained, “I’ve been exposed all my life to movies in a state of

deterioration . . . Now I'm painting scratches on the film. I think it's beautiful the way film shows scratches."³⁸

In Ruscha's liquid word paintings, such as *Rancho* (1968; ill. 70) the very plasticity of the letters and the space they occupy are influenced by the visuals of film—the letters seem to float like film titles over a hazy, atmospheric, ambiguous space.³⁹ This rendering of space can be contrasted with the treatment in earlier paintings such as *Electric* (1963; ill. 13) in which the space is absolutely flat.

Kerry Broucher observes, “the space in Ruscha's paintings and drawings is very similar to the space in the opening credits of films and arose at the same time that film titles were becoming an art form in their own right.”⁴⁰ Ruscha was aware of this emerging art form and had attended lectures by innovative film title artist Saul Bass, who designed title sequences for films such as Otto Preminger's *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1955) and Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), *North by Northwest* (1959) and *Psycho* (1960).⁴¹ Like Ruscha, Bass began his

³⁸ Ed Ruscha, quoted in Mary Voelz Chandler, “Art Museum, Library to Feature ‘Word’ According to Ruscha,” *Denver Rocky Mountain News*, 10 September 1995, sec. F, p. 82A.

³⁹ Broucher, “Words as Landscape,” 166.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 167.

career as a commercial artist, but sought another livelihood that imposed fewer creative constraints.

Another work that directly references the material and mechanical aspects of film projection is *9,8,7,6* (1991; ill. 73). Very similar in conception to *Triumph*, it replicates in black and white the look of a leader strip that precedes the portion of the celluloid that is actually recorded on. The leader, which is numbered in movie camera film, is used by the projectionist to feed the film through the projector and to ensure correct alignment of the film in the sprockets and rollers. It is not meant to be projected, although it often is by mistake. Representations of these kinds of images in paintings serve to accentuate or validate them and suggest that they have a place in the visual vocabulary of a culture. This aspect of film viewing has become more than just a prequel to the main visual event or a technical mishap; it is a tangible visible reality in and of itself.

A precedent for Ruscha's exploration of the material elements of film can be found in the work of filmmaker Bruce Conner (b. 1933). Conner's *A Movie* (1958; ill. 74), which was made by piecing together scraps of B-movies, newsreels and shorts, uses the some of same elements as Ruscha does—the leader strip and film titles. Conner places these elements throughout the film in an attempt to undercut

audience expectations.⁴² His technique also foreshadows Baldessari's use of similar filmic fragments.

There is another manner in which *9,8,7,6* imitates a material aspect of the projected image: its dimensions. The ratio of width to height in this work is 1.71:1. The Academy ratio is the standardized shape of the film frame established by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. For many years this ratio was 1.33:1, that is, the frame was 1 1/3 times as wide as it was high. Later, this ratio was changed to 1.85:1.⁴³ It is this amended ratio that *9,8,7,6* roughly approximates.

With the advent of CinemaScope, Cinerama and related widescreen technologies in the 1950s,⁴⁴ Hollywood attempted to provide a truly big screen big screen to compete with television. These technologies aimed to provide what a small television screen could not possibly offer—the sense that the viewer was a part of the action, not just a spectator. The original aspect ratio of 1.33:1 was increased to

⁴² Ibid., 167–168.

⁴³ Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art*, 477.

⁴⁴ CinemaScope was used by the 20th Century Fox studio. Other studios employed other similarly named widescreen technologies: WarnerSuperScope (Warner Brothers), SuperScope (RKO) and Vista Vision (Paramount). The first film to employ one of these widescreen technologies was *The Robe* (1953) made by 20th Century Fox using CinemaScope. CinemaScope has not been used since 1967.

2.77:1 in the case of the Cinerama technology and 2.66:1 for CinemaScope.⁴⁵

Western has a ratio of 2.76:1, which comes very close to the proportions of widescreen cinema. Ruscha pushed beyond that ratio in other works that are very strongly horizontal, such as *The Back of Hollywood* (1977; ill. 80). At 22 x 80 inches, this work has a width to height ratio of 3.6:1, wider even than the panoramic vistas of CinemaScope and related technologies—more Hollywood than a Hollywood movie. It is this extreme widescreen format that Ruscha often favors in paintings that contain other cinematic references.

Large-scale painting was certainly not unique to Ruscha's oeuvre. The Abstract Expressionists often favored large canvases. Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950–51), for example, is 7 feet, 11 3/8 inches, by 17 feet, 9 1/4 inches. Some of Ruscha's contemporaries also worked on a large scale. Pop artist James Rosenquist's *F-111* (1964–1965) measures 10 feet by 86 feet. But there is a fundamental difference in the use of the large-scale format in Rosenquist's and Ruscha's works. Ruscha's large format emulates the proportions of widescreen cinema at the same time that his subject matter references Hollywood film in a way that tends to mythologize it.

⁴⁵ George Custen, *Twentieth Century's Fox: Darryl F. Zanuck and the Culture of Hollywood*. (New York: BasicBooks, 1997), 321.

Rosenquist's monumental canvas extends far beyond the dimensions of widescreen. It is a room-sized work that, although it references popular culture generally, does not remark upon Hollywood film specifically. *F-111* offers critical commentary on the relationship between the military industrial complex and American consumer culture. Ruscha himself noted the similarities in scale between his work and Abstract Expressionism and Pop art; however, he was also quick to observe about his large-scale paintings that "by Abstract Expressionist standards, by Pop Art standards, they're small paintings, or medium-sized paintings, they're not even that big."⁴⁶

This strong horizontality in Ruscha's paintings also relates to California car culture both in its evocation of the dimensions of billboards that one would see from the car window and in its suggestion of movement; however, there is another point to consider here. Baudry observes that the aspect ratio of the screen image, 1.33:1, is derived from the proportions of Italian Renaissance painting and that any other proportions should be understood as a variation from that norm. But more important than the specific proportions of a screen image and Ruscha's imitation thereof are the ideological notions implicit in the Renaissance canons. As Baudry points out, they are translated

⁴⁶ Ruscha, interview by Paul Karlstrom, 68.

wholesale onto the cinema. Ruscha completes the circle by readapting the proportions and their attendant implications back into painting—not just any paintings, but paintings specifically referencing cinema.

Traditional one-point linear perspective places the individual at the center of the spectacle. Further, Western easel painting champions the notion that reality is visible and can be captured by the camera or painted on a canvas. Ruscha offers an interesting corollary to Baudry's assertion of the reality of the visible. He takes images found only on the movie screen, images that are not intended to be representations of reality—scratches on film, film leaders, film titles, illusory space—asserts their material reality, their inclusion in a shared visual vocabulary precisely because we have all seen them up on the movie screen. They are, in fact, signs, that stand for the material aspect of old Hollywood films. Baudry argues that the ideology of cinematic representation, as derived from Western painting, is that reality is visible and can be depicted. But in Ruscha's paintings there is an implicit assertion that if it is visible and has been projected onto the movie screen, it is real insofar as it indicates a shared belief or aspiration, e.g., "boy meets girl." It transcends mere Hollywood make-pretend.

Hollywood Is a Verb

The final category of Ruscha's works that demonstrate an allegiance to film and to apparatus theory evokes the concept of Hollywood as a fantasy machine. As he used narrative as a process in his books and films, he uses Hollywood in these paintings as a transformation process, or a verb. For Hollywood to be a verb, it has to have not only meaning, but also meaning that involves the notion of agency. What gives the word "Hollywood" agency is the common comprehension of and even belief in the representation of reality contained in Hollywood films. Ruscha's works in this category delve into the perceptions, stereotypes, and psychological components behind this belief in Hollywood reality. In the way that they deconstruct generic narrative structures in order to identify how we apprehend meaning from these structures, they come closest to Baldessari's two-dimensional works.

The painting *Western*, discussed above in the context of the projected image, also warrants mention here in terms of its evocative content. Similar to Baldessari's photocollages and films and videos, this work tends to invite free association of all the shared cultural stereotypes—our visual collective unconscious, if you will—about the generic plot structure and clichéd, simplistic value system of the Western film. In this stereotype, cowboys are the good guys and

Indians are the bad guys, and civilization triumphs over savagery, hence the eerie monochromatic depiction of the teepees (dwelling of savages) silhouetted against an ominous sky.⁴⁷ As Richard Marshall points out, the work alludes to not only Native Americans, but more specifically to scenes from Hollywood westerns that characterize the Native Americans.⁴⁸

Another work that alludes to psychological states as mediated or defined by generic conventions of Hollywood film is *I'll Be Getting Out Soon and I Haven't Forgotten Your Testimony Put Me in Here* (1994; ill. 75). In this work there are words and no images, or at least no images that relate to the text. The painting consists only of several rows of horizontal bars of white paint on a raw linen canvas. There is one bar for each of the fifteen words in the title of the work. In a reversal of his usual strategy, Ruscha eliminates the words from the painting, quite literally leaving the viewer to fill in the blanks. The titles of this work and other works in this series suggest dialogue from gangster B-movies. Like Baldessari's videos and photocollages, this work relies on the viewer's knowledge of generic film plot structures to impose meaning on it.

⁴⁷ For a detailed discussion of the conventions of the Western genre, refer to Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*, 45–76.

⁴⁸ Marshall, *Ed Ruscha*, 184.

17th Century (1988; ill. 76), another painting done in the extreme widescreen format, is a rather comical pastiche of what life in that era would involve. It features a series of words meant to evoke an image of what life was like then. These words, which include “war,” “alchemy,” “taxes,” “plague,” and “damsels,” are rendered in a Gothic-style typeface against a dramatically silhouetted black-and-white landscape of a ship on the sea with a very low horizon line.

The composition is rendered as if it were a still of montage sequence in a film. A montage is a series of successive short shots or images that are rapidly juxtaposed into a coherent sequence to suggest meaning. Montages were often used in conventional narrative films as an efficient way to convey concepts or events that need to be mentioned without taking up too much time or narrative weight. For example, the breakfast montage in *Citizen Kane* (1941) is a quick succession of shots featuring breakfast quarrels that signal the growing estrangement between Kane and his wife. When montage is used in this way, it is a kind of cinematic shorthand to provide a narrative transition. It also suggests how our ideas about life in the seventeenth century might be reduced to these elements as a result of our repeated experience with Hollywood’s depictions of the seventeenth century.

The physical framework of this painting lets the viewer know that this is an inherently Hollywood approach to the subject (the

seventeenth century). The work itself evokes conventions in seventeenth-century painting, specifically the strong chiaroscuro, low horizon lines and seascapes that characterize Dutch seventeenth-century landscape painting. But Ruscha also makes the cinematic references clear. The extreme widescreen format, the black-and-white palette and the dramatically lit sky with the text floating on top of it like film credits are all cinematic visuals that provide a blueprint for understanding the work's meaning.

Another painting that invokes a Hollywood narrative cliché is *Boy Meets Girl* (1987; ill. 77). The monochromatic canvas features a backdrop of city lights at night with the words “Boy Meets Girl” scrawled across this backdrop in large white letters. Ruscha is referencing one of the most fundamental narrative conventions in Hollywood film—boy meets girl, song and dance ensues, obstacles are overcome, they fall in love, marry and live happily ever after. So ingrained and accepted is this sequence of events that the mere mention of the phrase “boy meets girl” serves as shorthand for it. It is not necessary to depict the actual events. Here, as elsewhere in Ruscha's paintings of a similar vein, use of the black-and-white palette is meant to invoke a sort of nostalgic attitude toward these narrative conventions of the classical Hollywood cinema. While Ruscha presents these pictures as an exposition of these stereotypes, this does not mean that he is overtly

critical of them, as Baudry plainly is. Ruscha maintains an ambivalent stance. As part of the Los Angeles art scene that was at once deliberately anti-intellectual and deeply intertwined with Hollywood, Ruscha stops short of a Marxist cry for reform of this system in which Hollywood films disseminate and confirm a set of values. Instead, he straddles the line between critique and amused, affectionate and somewhat detached observation.⁴⁹ Ruscha revealed his fondness for Hollywood film, despite its negative aspects, when he said, “With all the vulgarity of Hollywood and the movie cinema (sic) industry and everything, it’s still a great medium.”⁵⁰

Similarly, *Sin – Without* (1991; ill. 78) suggests a Hollywoodized value, an attitude toward religion—sin and the lack of it. Like *17th Century*, this work is in the extreme widescreen format and features the work “sin” rendered in an extremely large white typeface across the backdrop of a monochromatic, atmospheric sky with dramatic rays of sun emerging from behind a cloud. The use of this dramatically lit sky could easily be a reference to Paramount Studios’ logo (ill. 79) or, as

⁴⁹ David James makes the point in *The Most Typical Avant-Garde*, 234-235, that the possibility of a cultural of Marxism in avant-garde Los Angeles film had been destroyed by the blacklist and that the L.A. art scene’s deep dependence on Hollywood in the late 1960s is a big part of what cut it off from the sector that had been partially responsible for its initial development: the New York art scene. James’ observation resonates with and provides a possible context for Ruscha’s avoidance of a Marxist stance in these works.

⁵⁰ Ed Ruscha, “Feature Interview: Ed Ruscha” by Diane Spodarek, originally published in *Detroit Artists Monthly* 2, n. 4, (April 1977): 1–5, and reprinted in Ruscha, *Leave Any Information at the Signal*, 81.

Richard Marshall suggests, to a scene from Cecil B. DeMille's biblical epic *The Ten Commandments* (1956, Paramount) in which heavenly shafts of light emerge from behind dark clouds in order to emphasize a dramatic moment.⁵¹ The reference to the logo or to the scene in the film and the use of the widescreen format provide further clues that the work is an inherently Hollywood conceptualization of sin. On one level the painting offers a visual definition of what it means to lead a life without sin—the achievement of some sort of higher state of spirituality, being closer to god, as suggested by the heavenly sky. Of course the work is a pun, as the notion of “without” is reflected in the title of the painting only. The painting itself almost seems to be a glorification of sin (or, more specifically, of the word sin), suggesting that although our culture might frown upon the commission of sins, it still derives huge pleasure from a visual culture that glorifies sin, packaging it for our consumption and entertainment, as Hollywood does. Sin is such an integral part of the Hollywood offering that it crosses multiple narrative conventions. It functions on the level of supranarrative device, appearing in musicals, screwball comedies, gangster films, Westerns and film noirs. The title is also a play on words: “sin” means “without” in Spanish.

⁵¹ Marshall, *Ed Ruscha*, 183.

A work that references Hollywood in a manner more overt than most others is *The Back of Hollywood* (1977; ill. 80). The widescreen painting of the back of the famous Hollywood sign with the background of a dramatically cinematic sky was an offshoot of a billboard art project in which Ruscha participated. Sponsored by the Eyes and Ears Foundation in 1977, the ARTboard festival, which continues to the present, gave a number of artists, including Ruscha, William T. Wiley, Victor Moscoso, D. J. Hall and Rick Griffin, the opportunity to paint billboards in the Los Angeles and San Francisco area. Created to expose a random urban audience to conventional “high art” situated in unconventional locations, the billboards were displayed, some in Los Angeles in February 1977 and some in San Francisco in November 1977, and then returned to the artists. Ruscha’s billboard was displayed near his former subject, the Los Angeles County Museum, on Wilshire Boulevard.⁵²

Ruscha painted the Hollywood sign in reverse on the billboard with two air compressors in an old Columbia movie studio. Movement was an integral part of the work’s creation. Ruscha recalls, “There was a moving wall to work on and a machine pulled the stretched canvas up

⁵² The Eyes and Ears Foundation web site, <http://www.weallr1.com/index2.html>.

twenty feet and down to the floor; you could work on any area.”⁵³

Equally, motion played a part in the work’s display. When viewed through a car’s rear-view mirror, the word “Hollywood” was righted.

Kerry Brougher observes that the work playfully turns “the language of popular culture back on itself in an attempt to celebrate America’s myth-making machine. Ruscha finds a way to mask the real with the ideal to propagate myths.”⁵⁴ As Brougher suggests, there are occasions when cinematic reality can trump actual reality. Much of Ruscha’s work is devoted to the identification of those moments.

Ruscha made the following remark regarding *The Back of Hollywood*, but it can just as easily be interpreted as a statement regarding Hollywood’s ability to transform the outlook of an entire culture:

The idea of Hollywood has lots of meaning and – to me – is this image of something fake . . . being held up with sticks. That to me had more in meaning (sic) with the term “Hollywood” than the other usual associations. I looked outside my window here and I saw the sign “Hollywood” and it became the subject matter for me. It only lasted for a while so the actual remnants of the sign are not even important to me. I don’t even think it should stay; it doesn’t even mean “landmark” to me. It might as well fall down. That’s more Hollywood – to have it fall down or be removed. But in the end it’s more Hollywood to put it back up, see?

”Hollywood” is like a verb to me. It’s something that you can do

⁵³ Ruscha, “Feature Interview: Ed Ruscha,” 78.

⁵⁴ Brougher, “Words as Landscape,” 169.

to any subject or any thing. You can take something in Grand Rapids, Michigan and “Hollywoodize” it. They do it with automobiles; they do it with everything that we manufacture. It all somehow comes out of that.⁵⁵

The degree of “Hollywoodizing” present in Ruscha’s art—the dramatic widescreen compositions, the depictions of the film medium itself, and the extended engagement with the generic conventions and stereotypes present in Hollywood film—suggests an awareness of the pervasiveness of “Hollywoodization” in contemporary culture. While Ruscha’s articulation of this phenomenon is not identical to Baudry’s postulate that the world that the spectator perceives and his or her point of view regarding it are created by the cinematic apparatus, it is close. Ruscha presents us with a world and with points of view about this world that have been transformed by the cinematic apparatus, by Hollywood’s strong influence on culture, visual and otherwise.

Although Ruscha does not echo Baudry’s concepts to the point of drawing the pejorative Marxist conclusions that Baudry does, or to the point of calling for reform, or to the point of psychoanalyzing the spectator, Ruscha’s use of Hollywood film in his art resonates with the basic elements of cinematic apparatus that Baudry identifies, if not always with the conclusions he draws from them.

⁵⁵ Ruscha, *L.A. Suggested by the Art of Edward Ruscha*.

Ruscha identifies Hollywood as a verb, as a process. It is a transformative process that is applied in everyday life, and it is a process he uses in his art, just as he used narrative conventions as a process. The Hollywood process is one that can glamorize, idealize, mythologize or stereotype, but the net result is the same. It transforms our understanding of the thing upon which it acts. Kerry Broucher observed that, "when Ruscha speaks of his work he refers not only to the real world but also to the cinema. In Ruscha's work, we cannot divide the experience of America from that of the cinema, the two having merged into a larger American myth."⁵⁶ Ruscha's art presents a view of the world implicitly mediated, even redefined, by Hollywood cinema. According to Broucher:

The overall effect of these silhouette paintings is of nostalgia and memory. Unlike the widescreen works of the 1970s and early 1980s, which arrived at a way of making paintings via the current technological developments of the cinema (widescreen, Technicolor), and as such seemed embedded in their own Pop time, the silhouette paintings refer back to classic Hollywood cinema, to film noir and the Western, to a bygone black-and-white era set in the picture palace with the imperfections of the projection and sound systems as a recurring integral part of the experience. Like Route 66, the golden age of the cinema exists now only as a ghost of its former self, as images that with our current distance begin to confuse history and fiction . . . The depiction of history in the cinema reconstitutes itself as history.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Broucher, "Words as Landscape," 165.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 173.

Ruscha's work has often been interpreted as social commentary on the American way of life. Reviewer Joan Casademont, for example, described his paintings as "American idioms that reflect specific material values."⁵⁸ As such, the notion that Ruscha uses numerous aspects of the Hollywood cinema—a dominating aspect of American visual culture and perhaps culture in general—to make manifest these values is a logical extension.

When asked about the sociological aspect of his work, Ruscha observed that the photographs of Walker Evans and the movies of John Ford woke him up and triggered in him "a sort of black-and-white cinematic identity crisis".⁵⁹ What this statement suggests is the extent to which Ruscha defined his own identity in relationship to these photographs and films. As such, it does give credence to Baudry's claim to the interdependency between the cinematic apparatus and the spectator who is socialized to a degree by the apparatus and whose subjectivity is, in turn, reconfirmed by a belief in the cinematic image.

Ruscha has remarked that he enjoys the works of the British writer J. G. Ballard (b. 1930).⁶⁰ Ballard's novels, such as *Empire of the*

⁵⁸ Joan Casademont, "Ed Ruscha, Leo Castelli Gallery," *Artforum* (December 1980): 81.

⁵⁹ Ruscha, *Leave Any Information at the Signal*, 250.

⁶⁰ Ed Ruscha, "Premeditated: An Interview with Ed Ruscha," interview by Jana Sterback, *Real Life Magazine* 14 (summer 1985): 29.

Sun (1984), which echoes his own childhood experience of war,⁶¹ often feature a slightly surreal and dislocated sense of space and time. Further, there is an element of social commentary, specifically on the role of technology in modern society, in the works of both Ruscha and Ballard. The inextricable connection between humans and technology and the notion that human experience and interaction is mediated, and in some cases made possible by, technology is one that is strongly advanced in Ballard's 1973 novel *Crash*.⁶² This graphic, violent novel is at once controversial and a cult classic.⁶³ The book's characters have a sexual fetish for automobile accidents and are determined to experience the horrors and adrenaline rush of car crashes with as much immediacy as possible. In the words of the novel's protagonist, the wounds caused by automobile accidents are "the keys to a new sexuality born from a perverse technology."⁶⁴ This notion of technology mediating human experience is equally present, although far less disturbingly or perversely so, in Ruscha's works that offer mythologizing views of ordinary objects, places or even history as implicitly mediated

⁶¹ J. G. Ballard, *Empire of the Sun* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984).

⁶² J. G. Ballard, *Crash* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1973).

⁶³ There have been film adaptations of both *Empire of the Sun* and *Crash*. *Empire of the Sun* (1987) was directed by Steven Spielberg. *Crash* (1996) was directed by David Cronenberg.

⁶⁴ Ballard, *Crash*, 13.

by the vision of reality advanced by the cinematic apparatus of Hollywood films.

This area of overlap between Ruscha and Ballard stresses the sociological-psychological component that characterizes Ruscha's ongoing involvement with Hollywood film in his art. The element of social commentary differentiates the ways in which Baldessari and Ruscha engage with Hollywood film in their art: Baldessari often relies on film narrative as a structure to convey or block the apprehension of meaning, while Ruscha focuses on Hollywood as a verb, a process that can shape a culture's ideas.

Chapter 5 Conclusion

John Baldessari and Ed Ruscha have each maintained a decades-long engagement with Hollywood film in their art. Both artists have worked in the medium of film in ways that have referenced studio-era Hollywood films, either by emulating their visual codes and narrative conventions, in Ruscha's case, or by deliberately reconstructing and recombining them, in Baldessari's case. Additionally, each artist extended their exploration of structure and process of Hollywood film into their two-dimensional works.

Recent works by each artist reveal that Hollywood film continues to be a source of inspiration. In 2001 Baldessari created a multi-channel video installation entitled *Five 1968 Films* (ill. 81). The installation consists of the projection of six synchronized DVDs. Each projected image is a split-screen composite of four Hollywood films, all of which premiered in Los Angeles on August 20, 1968: *The Green Berets*, *Planet of the Apes*, *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Thomas Crown Affair*. The running time for each film varies: for example, *Planet of the Apes* is just 112 minutes, while *Rosemary's Baby* is 136 minutes. When a given film ends, its quadrant goes black. Each projection also includes a different soundtrack emphasis, completely subverting the focus from any single soundtrack. This leads the viewer to observe the abstract

patterns and discontinuities in sound, just as the fractured visuals tend to form an abstract pattern or structure, rather than allowing the viewer to experience the original sonic, visual or narrative continuity of any one film. Using film to create an abstract crazy quilt resembles the strategy that governs Baldessari's two-dimensional works such as *Blasted Allegories (Colorful Sentence and Purple Patch): Starting with Red Father...* (1978; ill. 56).¹ Such an approach illustrates Bellour's idea about the structure of a work residing in the patterns and alternations of patterns between the essential units that comprise the work. In other words, meaning is conveyed by the symmetries and dissymmetries present in the work.

According to Baldessari, the significance of the date August 20, 1968, is that it was the day on which Prague was invaded by Warsaw Pact troops, signaling the end of a utopian period and the beginning of unrest and uncertainty.² Baldessari chose the films because he considered them to be representative of this particular period.³ In this

¹ See pages 159–162 for a detailed discussion of this work.

² Adam Budak, "Baldessari's Perfect Moments: Towards Pleasure and Instruction," in *John Baldessari: Life's Balance; Works 84–04*, ed. Edelbert Köb and Peter Pakesch (Cologne: Verlag Der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2005), 21.

³ Budak argues that the films also represent four separate genres: war (*The Green Berets*), science fiction (*Planet of the Apes*), horror (*Rosemary's Baby*) and romance (*The Thomas Crown Affair*). However, I would assert that *The Thomas Crown Affair* represents a hybrid of genres, encompassing romance, crime and thriller.

work Baldessari acknowledges the cultural significance of the year 1968, a year that, as Mark Kurlansky points out, saw social and political unrest reach a boiling point. It was also a year in which Barthes's essay "Death of the Author" served as a clarion call to young artists eager for fresh means of expression that moved beyond the modernist tradition that had come to dominate the art world. It was a year in which the Conceptual art movement could be identified as such, in spite of its diverse practitioners, and as something quite different from the modernist "system". Finally, it was a year in which Hollywood successfully forged on, producing box-office hits—the four referenced by Baldessari, to name only a few—despite the recent collapse of its own dominant mode of production: the studio system.

Recent works by Ruscha, a series of paintings entitled *Course of Empire* (1992–2005; ill. 82–87) exhibited first at the 2005 Venice Biennale and then at the Whitney Museum of American Art (November 17, 2005 – January 29, 2006), perfectly demonstrate his inherently cinematic view of the ordinary world. The series is comprised of one set of five black-and-white Los Angeles landscape paintings executed in 1992 and another set of five color renditions of the same locations painted between 2003 and 2005. The original black-and-white quintet offers a spartan, almost bleak, vision of various Los Angeles

landscapes, mostly industrial or commercial buildings, with the kind of gritty deadpan that evokes John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), a film that Ruscha has cited as a general source of inspiration. The more recent versions of the landscapes not only record the changes in physical appearance of each location, but also imbue the settings with a kind of atmospheric unreality that evokes a more contemporary cinematic aesthetic: high-tech special effects and computer animation. In this series Ruscha still employs the notion of the film aesthetic as a transformation process, except in this case he chronicles a transformation from a studio-era Hollywood aesthetic to the visual vocabulary of the post-studio era, from old Hollywood to new Hollywood. *The Old Tech Chem Building* (2003; ill. 83) features a solitary building against the backdrop of a blood red, cloud-streaked sunset, which looks a cinematic evocation of a post-apocalyptic world. Likewise, the color of the sky in the 2004 version of *The Old Tool & Dye Building* replaces the dramatic black-and-white sky, à la Paramount Studio logo, featured in the 1992 version with the same eerie green fog with which Ruscha enveloped the museum building in *The Los Angeles County Museum on Fire*, (1965–68; ill. 66).

These two recent projects neatly summarize each artist's approach to film in their art. The most fundamental difference can be characterized as follows: Baldessari approaches narrative film structure

(of which Hollywood film is the paradigm) and filmmaking conceptually, while Ruscha approaches notions of Hollywood and Hollywood's construction of reality conceptually. For Ruscha, Hollywood is indeed a verb, a conceptual overlay or prism through which the world may be viewed and, in fact, revised over time as the Hollywood aesthetic itself changes. The notion of Hollywood as a determining point of view continually manifested in Ruscha's two-dimensional works echoes the sociological, psychological and ideological elements of Baudry's apparatus theory.

Another point where the two artists differ is in the use of film and/or video as a medium. Baldessari is happy with his films and videos and continues to work in both media. Time constraints are the only thing preventing him from making more films or videos. Trying to figure out what each medium can do simply takes time.⁴ Ruscha, on the other hand, has made only two films and never worked in the medium again. His affinity is for an older style of filmmaking, characterized by Méliès, which features whimsy and a sort of magic achieved through editing, stop-motion photography and other techniques that rely on the collaboration of a team of people. Baldessari, on the other hand, has never demonstrated an allegiance to traditional filmmaking practices

⁴ Baldessari, interview by Bettina Riccio Henry.

and, perhaps for that reason, has found more freedom in these media. His practice has successfully evolved—for example, *Five 1968 Films* reveals a similarity to the contemporary film by Mike Figgis, *Time Code* (2000), which also presents four separate stories in real time on split-screen quadrants. Again, Baldessari approaches filmmaking as a conceptual activity, while Ruscha, in his only two efforts, maintained a traditional approach to film as a medium for conveying narrative, a far more laborious approach. This difference in approach has likely had an impact on the continued viability of the filmmaking practice for each. Ruscha's practice was simply more difficult to sustain, as it was bound to the conventions of traditional narrative cinema. Despite divergent approaches to their filmmaking and two-dimensional works, each artist's use of Hollywood film has a visual component, be it an observance of Hollywood's visual codes or a deconstruction of them in order to create a new network of images.

Ruscha's statement about the impossibility of a purely conceptual art form relates to the timely issue of placing Conceptual art more firmly within a visual tradition:

The idea of *pure* Conceptualism puzzled me, because I felt like it was impossible to make a statement with a work of art that didn't have something to do with the visual. And so if they were describing Conceptual art as being a thing that had no visual

reference, then I would say, “Well, where are the Conceptual artists?” They *all* have visual statements.⁵

This position speaks to a notion that more recent scholarship, such as Tony Godfrey’s writing, has explored: the alignment of Conceptual art with visual traditions.⁶

Conceptual art has not only been realigned with visual trends, in the case of Baldessari and Ruscha’s art, there are further associations with theoretical currents of the day that are only just beginning to be explored. Two recent essays on Baldessari use the 1989 text on cinema by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995), *The Movement-Image*,⁷ to analyze his art.⁸ Deleuze was interested in cinema and his writings are often referenced in film studies courses. Deleuze considered film to be a composition of images and signs. He identified movement as the primary characteristic of the films of the first half of the twentieth century. Both Koch and Pauleit use Deleuze’s concept of the movement-image to explain narrative and movement

⁵ Ed Ruscha, “Conversation with Ruscha in His Studio,” interview by Alexandra Schwartz, Venice, California, 29 October 1999.

⁶ See page 2 for a discussion of Godfrey’s contextualization of Conceptual art within visual trends.

⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *The Movement-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

⁸ These essays are Getrude Koch, “Serial Painter: Images in Action,” *John Baldessari: Life’s Balance; Works 84-04*, Edelbert Köb and Peter Pakesch eds. (Cologne: Verlag Der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2005): 78 and Winfried Pauleit, “Movis Stares,” *John Baldessari: A Different Kind of Order; Works 1962-1984*, Edelbert Köb and Peter Pakesch eds. (Cologne: Verlag Der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2005): 89-90.

and the interruptions thereof in Baldessari's two-dimensional works that incorporate film stills.

Additionally, Budak also uses philosopher and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard's (b. 1929) *Simulations* (1983)⁹ to discuss Baldessari's uses of film, referring to Baudrillard's concepts of hyper-reality and simulation. Budak finds that Baldessari's movie still photomontages confront the intersection of hyper-reality and actual reality, forcing the viewer to negotiate distinctions between what is real and what is merely representation, a simulation of reality.¹⁰

This signals a new direction in current scholarship on Baldessari of using theory that deals with film as an analytical tool. But while the writings of Deleuze and Baudrillard date to the 1980s, Bellour's writings are from the 1970s. They express an earlier manifestation of similar postmodern currents occurring in the decade in which Baldessari created many of the works that give form to the very same concepts. Deleuze's notion of the movement-image, in particular, can be compared to one of Bellour's methods for analyzing formal oppositions between shots and identifying the patterns through which meaning is transmitted. Movement or lack thereof in a shot is one element Bellour

⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext, 1983).

¹⁰ Budak, "Baldessari's Perfect Moments," 18.

examines, time is another.¹¹ Baldessari uses them both. It should be noted that Deleuze also defined time as a significant element in film. In fact he identified it as the primary characteristic of film in the second half of the twentieth century, making the time-image the focus of the follow-up to *The Movement-Image*.¹²

It is notable that film studies and Conceptual art both appeared in the US in the 1960s. Although this connection has long been overlooked, it provides a way in which the traditionally discussed East versus West Coast divide in Conceptual art can be productively reassessed, revealing it to be less pronounced than it was previously considered. However, there are other points of commonality that also help to bridge that gap.

Peter Plagens observed that between 1955 and 1970, as the New York art world became increasingly saturated, commercial and yet academicized, the West Coast art scene came to resemble it more and more:

The distribution systems grew more similar (in style, not size), the art that fed them also patterned itself more and more after the same models. Styles arrived everywhere with metronomic rapidity – Pop, Op, Post-painterly, Minimalism, post-Minimalism, Process art, Concept art,

¹¹ See pages 144–150 for a description of Bellour's method of analysis.

¹² Gilles Deleuze, *The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

“body: art, and counterrevolutionary forays like Photorealism – and the avant-garde became a predictable mechanism.¹³

What Plagens does not remark upon, and what was perhaps difficult to identify at the time, is that West Coast Conceptual art, in the hands of Ruscha and Baldessari at least, was also demonstrating an affinity for something often considered a predominantly East Coast tendency—referencing theory. It is possible that this phenomenon went unnoticed because unlike their contemporaries who used art theory, Ruscha’s and Baldessari’s involvement was with film theory, and it was camouflaged beneath a laid-back, humorous, “California” exterior.

Plagens also shares Alberro’s view on the increasing similarity between art careers and business careers during this time. He argues that young artists in the 1960s knew that a career as an artist had evolved from the promise of little capital gains, save for occasional jackpot careers, to the necessity of operating with formidable overhead—large quantities of exotic material or equipment, expensive rentals and promotional travel and publicity. And they understood the stepping-stones of inclusion in strategic group shows and representation at the middleweight-to-heavyweight galleries, as well as

¹³ Plagens, *Sunshine Muse*, 154.

the necessity of having their work represented in art magazines.¹⁴ As artists transformed into “semi-showbiz sharpies,”¹⁵ they, in turn, perpetuated this new art world business model by staffing the art colleges and universities and producing students that emulated their methods—not just artistic styles, but also their professional methods for operating within the art world.¹⁶

A prominent West Coast manifestation of this business-oriented trend in the art world was the example of the Chouinard, which has become Cal Arts. With course offerings in painting, drawing, sculpture, music, theatre, dance and commercial art, it was part of a conglomerate: the Disney empire. As his holdings grew, Disney needed a training ground for animators, draftsmen and painters, etc. The Chouinard was just that. Disney began sending his animators there for training in 1931. But as animated cartoons became less profitable, Disney quickly branched out into live-action films, television and amusement parks.¹⁷ Disneyland, for example, opened in 1955. But still believing in the value of a super-school, he bankrolled the new Cal Arts campus in 1961. This new campus, not coincidentally, included a film

¹⁴ Ibid., 158.

¹⁵ Ibid., 159.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 160.

department. Baldessari recalls that the atmosphere at Cal Arts between the film department and the people doing film and video in the art department was “a little combative.” The film school personnel tended to be dismissive of what the art department was turning out. Conversely, the art department felt that the film school was simply “pumping out people for Hollywood.”¹⁸

It would be inaccurate to interpret Ruscha’s and Baldessari’s use of Hollywood film in their art as a cynical and careeristic attempt to cash in on the latest art marketing technique. They were connected, but only obliquely so to this trend in that in addition to film influencing their art, the film industry had an impact on their careers. As a student at Chouinard, Ruscha aspired to be an animator; Baldessari was a professor at Cal Arts. Both made films; and both continue to reference Hollywood film in their art. Their work can be understood as connected to both film theory and to the film industry.

Hollywood film influenced the art of Ruscha and Baldessari not only as subject matter or even as a medium, although Baldessari in particular has made ingenious use of it, but, more significantly, as a means to a new approach to making art. It served as a structure, a process and a conduit for sociological and psychological meanings.

¹⁸ Baldessari, interview by Bettina Riccio Henry.

Hollywood film is a lens through which Baldessari looks at art and how art makes meaning, and through which Ruscha looks at the world.

Television plays an integral part in these artists' relationships to Hollywood film. As television increasingly broadcast Hollywood films in the 1960s, it served to cement their place in the culture's visual vocabulary. It also helped to extend the life span of studio-era films. Television provided Baldessari with a cheap and quick means of obtaining a random sample of film stills—by shooting them from the television set. And Ruscha initially thought he might like to work for Disney, a conglomerate that began leveraging television as a significant distribution channel.

As Baldessari and Ruscha's work demonstrates, Conceptual art was not impervious to social, visual, commercial and theoretical trends of the day. In fact, it is via these artists use of Hollywood film that such connections may be productively explored. As the discourse surrounding Conceptual art continues to broaden, perhaps its relationship to television, which in many ways can be seen as the successor to the Hollywood studio system, is one of the next logical focal points for inquiry.

Filmography

Films by Ed Ruscha

Premium, 1971

16mm, color

24 minutes

Miracle, 1975

16mm, color

28 minutes

Films by John Baldessari

Isocephaly, 1968

Super-8, color

3 minutes

Viewpoint, 1968

16mm, black-and-white

3 minutes

Available for screening at the Museum of Modern Art's Film and Video Library, New York, New York

What to Leave Out, 1968

Super-8 color

5 minutes

Cremation, 1970

16mm, black-and-white

10 minutes

New York City Art History, 1971

Super-8, color

3 minutes

New York City Postcard Painting, 1971

Super-8, color

3 minutes

Waterline, 1971

Super-8, black-and-white

3 minutes

Dance, 1971
Super-8, color
3 minutes

Minimalism, 1971
Super-8, black-and-white
3 minutes

Tabula Rasa, 1971
Super-8, black-and-white
3 minutes

Black-Out, 1971
Super-8, black-and-white
3 minutes

Easel Painting, 1972-73
Super-8 film loop (originally in 16mm), color
34 seconds

Time-Temperature, 1972-73
Super-8 film loop (originally in 16mm), color
4 minutes, 56 seconds

Water to Wine to Water, 1972-73
Super-8 film loop (originally in 16mm), color
36 seconds

The Hollywood Film, 1972-73
Super-8 film loop (originally in 16mm), color
66 seconds

Title, 1973
16mm, black-and-white and color, sound
25 minutes

Throwing Leaves Back at Tree, 1973
Super-8 film loop, color
3 minutes

Ice Cubes Sliding, 1974

Super-8 film loop, color
3 minutes

Taking a Slate: Ilene and David (#1), 1974
Super-8 film loop (originally 16mm), black-and-white
20 seconds

Taking a Slate: Ilene and David (#2), 1974
Super-8 film loop (originally 16mm), color
3 minutes

Taking a Slate: David, 1974
Super-8 film loop (originally 16mm), black-and-white
48 seconds

Ted's Christmas Card, 1974
Super-8 film loop, color
3 minutes

Script, 1973-77
16mm, black-and-white and color, sound
25 minutes

Six Colorful Inside Jobs, 1977
16mm, color
35 minutes

Videos by John Baldessari

Folding Hat: Version 1, 1970
Black-and-white, sound
30 minutes

Folding Hat, 1970
Black-and-white, sound
30 minutes
Available for screening at Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, New York

Black Painting, 1970
Black-and-white
15 minutes

Black Curtain, 1970

Black-and-white, sound
15 minutes

Life Drawing, 1970

Black-and-white
30 minutes

I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art, 1971

Black-and-white
30 minutes
Available for screening at Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, New York

Walking Forward – Running Past, 1971

Color
20 minutes
Available for screening at Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, New York

I Am Making Art, 1971

Black-and-white, sound
19 minutes
Available for screening at Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, New York

Art Disasters, 1971

Black-and-white
30 minutes
Available for screening at Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, New York

Police Drawing, 1971

Black-and-white, sound
30 minutes
Available for screening at Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, New York

Xylophone, 1972

Black-and-white, sound
5 minutes
Available for screening at Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, New York

Baldessari Sings LeWitt, 1972

Black-and-white, sound
15 minutes
Available for screening at Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, New York

Inventory, 1972

Black-and-white, sound

24 minutes

Available for screening at Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, New York

Teaching a Plant the Alphabet, 1972

Black-and-white, sound

19 minutes

Available for screening at Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, New York

Ed Henderson Reconstructs Movie Scenarios, 1973

Black-and-white, sound

25 minutes

Available for screening at Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, New York

How We Do Art Now, 1973

Black-and-white, sound

Segments:

*How Various People Spit Out Beans**Comparing Two Sounds**A 20" Tape**The Eye Does Not Naturally Pan**Cigar Lexicon**On Making a Masterpiece*

30 minutes (total)

Available for screening at Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, New York

Haste Makes Waste, 1973

Black-and-white, video loop

2 minutes

Available for screening at Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, New York

Practice Makes Perfect, 1973

Black-and-white, video loop

2 minutes

Available for screening at Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, New York

Three Feathers and Other Fairy Tales, 1973

Black-and-white, sound

30 minutes

Available for screening at Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, New York

The Way We Do Art Now and Other Sacred Tales [The Birth of Art and Other Sacred Tales], 1973

Black-and-white, sound

Segments:

Some Words I Mispronounce

Anna Names Animals She Has Never Seen

Taping a Stick; Lifting It from the Other End

No Dice

Talking with One Knee to Another

Examining Three 8d Nails

What Follows Is What He Liked to Do Best

For Sylvia Plath

A Riddle

Insincerely Promising a Cat a Carrot

A Sentence with Hidden Meaning

For Marcel Proust

Close-up

Flight Bag (This is a kind of interesting object...)

It Is Cruel to Put a Dog on a Mirror

The Way We Do Art Now (The Birth of Abstract Art)

30 minutes (total)

Available for screening at Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, New York

The Sound Made by Kicking a Bottle, 1973

Black-and-white, sound

3 minutes

Ed Henderson Suggests Sound tracks for Photographs, 1974

Black-and-white, sound

28 minutes

Available for screening at Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, New York

The Italian Tape, 1974

Black-and-white, sound

8 minutes

Available for screening at Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, New York

Six Colorful Stories: From the Emotional Spectrum (Women), 1977

Color, sound

17 minutes

Available for screening at Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, New York

Two Colorful Melodies, 1977

Color, sound

6 minutes

Available for screening at Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, New York

Five 1968 Films, 2001

Multi-channel video installation

Color, sound

140 minutes

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