

The Death of Painting

John Baldessari is today known as one of the leading conceptual artists of his generation, using found or appropriated images and exploring the associative power of language. Like many experimental artists Baldessari began his career in the more traditional realm of painting; yet rather than merely moving on from these early works, Baldessari had them destroyed.

In the summer of 1970 all paintings in the artist's possession dating from the thirteen years 1953–1966 were incinerated at a crematorium in San Diego. He took the precaution of making slides of most of them but the exact number of works destroyed is unknown. Baldessari conceived of the destruction of his early works as an artwork in itself called *Cremation Project*. In a letter to a critic shortly afterwards he wrote, 'I really think it is my best piece to date'.

Baldessari began his career in his home town of National City near San Diego, painting and exhibiting while working as a high school art teacher. He soon formed part of a group of artists in southern California who rejected the still dominant ethos of New York-based abstract expressionism. A world away from the chaotic gestural traces of Jackson Pollock, or the brooding monolithic paintings of Barnett Newman, works such as the punning *God Nose* 1965 suggested a more light-hearted and critical approach to art. (This particular canvas, which belonged to the artist's sister, was one of the few to have escaped the *Cremation Project*). In all, about ninety paintings made in the period May 1953 to March 1966 survived because they were owned by others. According to the artist, 'hundreds' of paintings that were still in his possession were burned. But what they were remains a mystery: the artist has not released images of the destroyed pictures.

Baldessari began to use photography in his paintings from 1966. As he said in 1981:

I stopped trying to be an artist as I understood it and just attempted to talk to people in a language they understood ... but rather than point realistically and aspire to the conditions of a photograph, why not just use the photograph or a text? I thought I would do all that on canvas so that the canvas would be an art signal.

The resulting *National City* paintings, depicting the artist's hometown, were the subject of his first solo exhibition in Los Angeles, and, because based on a conceptual approach, were excluded from the *Cremation Project*.

John Baldessari born 1931*All Baldessari's paintings made between May 1953 and March 1966 and in his possession on 24 July 1970.*

As the 1960s progressed Baldessari's works continued to move away from the idea of the great artist, as glorified in the New York art scene. In 1969 the artist detached himself entirely from the physical process of creation with a series of works called *Commissioned Paintings*. Critiquing the idea that conceptual art 'pointed' to or signalled things rather than depicted them, Baldessari took a series of photographs of a hand pointing at everyday objects and commissioned local amateur artists to paint the images, together with a clear – but ironic – statement of their authorship in lettering on the canvas. Such paintings were excluded from the 1970 *Cremation Project* because they dated from a later period and were already conceptual in character.

Baldessari's large studio was filled with artworks he had made over the years (he had sold very few). He later said he felt that he was drowning in his paintings and at the same time becoming more and more doubtful about the idea that painting alone was art. For the 1969 exhibition *Konzeption–Conception* in Germany he sent a series of notes including one titled, 'The world has too much art – I have made too many objects – what to do?' One of his answers to the question was:

Burn all my paintings, etc., done in the past few years. Have them cremated in a mortuary. Pay all fees, receive all documents. Have event recorded at County Recorder's. Send out announcements? Or should it be a private affair? Keep ashes in urn.

After a one-day studio exhibition and sale in December 1969, Baldessari decided to create an artwork out of his desire to make a fresh start. He found a crematorium owner in San Diego who was prepared to incinerate his artworks. All the paintings he still owned dating from between May 1953 and March 1966 – the dates he started and stopped painting – were, if necessary, broken into smaller pieces before being loaded into the furnace normally used for human cremations. The process was documented by David Wing for the artist as part of *Cremation Project*.

The project was both highly emotional for the artist, involving as it did getting rid of thirteen years worth of his production as a painter, and conceptual in that it asked the difficult question of whether it mattered if artworks no longer existed materially. As Baldessari explained in 2005, 'A lot of that [*Cremation Project*] was coming out of ideas such as, where does art reside? Is it physically there in that painting? Is it in my head? Could it be a trace memory? Could it be a photo? What is necessary for it? Can you just talk about it? And so on.' At every stage, the process of the paintings' cremation was made to parallel the cremation of a human body. The paintings' ashes were decanted into the boxes usually used for human remains, filling nine adult-sized containers and a smaller one that would typically be used for the ashes of a child or an amputated limb.

Baldessari kept a portion of the ashes in an urn made to resemble a book with leather-lined covers. The inscribed plaque on the book's cover, 'John Baldessari May 1953–March 1966', signalled the American's view that this action represented the death both of his paintings and of himself as a 'traditional artist'. And after the incineration, Baldessari used his local newspaper to announce the demise of his paintings, just as friends and relatives might publish news of a death. (Interviewed in 1973, Baldessari admitted he had needed to publicise his action in order to prevent him returning to

painting as a 'safe' technique: 'I had to advertise it. It's sort of like when you're dieting, you're supposed to ... tell people you're dieting, so that if you don't diet, then they say, "Well, I thought you were dieting". So if anybody caught me painting, they'd say "I thought you stopped painting".')

More than simply a death, the cremation of Baldessari's early works also marked a beginning for the artist, a stage in a cycle following which new pieces could be created. Suggesting such a renewal, some ashes were baked into biscuits, although Baldessari has said that he only knew of one person who actually ate one. The paintings' ashes were also used in some of Baldessari's subsequent works. For *A Potential Print* 1970 a footprint was made in ashes sprinkled in a corner and a photograph taken. As the accompanying text explained, the footprint – a play on the making of an artistic print – referenced an old superstition about predicting death. The incinerated remains of a 'body' of work, the ashes entered Baldessari's conceptual practice both as raw material and as a set of associations with scope for punning jokes about art itself.

As Baldessari's fame and influence grew, he was repeatedly questioned about the meaning of *Cremation Project*. In 2009 he recalled with some embarrassment that at the time he had felt it fitting that the incinerated paintings, which were made of minerals and natural materials, should return to the earth: his paintings were just one point on a cycle of 'endless return'. Works that escaped the furnace have been included in later retrospectives, suggesting a greater acceptance by Baldessari of those early works and – conceivably – perhaps even a sense of regret at their loss.

Many artists edit their work, getting rid of or refashioning artworks they do not wish to be known or to be remembered by. But Baldessari went one further in creating a conceptual artwork from a clinical erasure of a substantial chapter of his past, and in embedding the remains of his old works in new works. *Cremation Project* marked a decisive turning point in Baldessari's career, and, with its pronouncement of the death of painting made literal through the trappings of a cremation, it became a landmark in the history of conceptual art.

Underscoring the human dimension of Baldessari's action, however, artist David Salle focused on the trauma of the loss and the excitement of a fresh start involved in the project: 'I don't think we can underestimate the trauma at the heart of the repudiation; the yawning abyss of failure (for what else is it except an admission that these works that I had thought were me are not me), which was also the exhilarating breaking down of a previously locked door.'

Text—
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