THE PETIT CINÉMA OF JOHN BALDESSARI David Salle

I have a mental image of John Baldessari in his studio around 1968. The studio was an abandoned movie theater near San Diego. The floor was raked so the only level surface on which to work was the stage. I imagine John at the easel, the blank movie screen filling his whole field of vision behind the canvas. Maybe the light was arranged so that John's shadow was cast up on the white screen. Did he see himself as the protagonist in a movie about the struggles of a painter?

This essay is about how an artist starts with a set of moves—and how those moves grow into a successful style that can be exported to or from the provinces so that other artists groping around for a container for their sensibility suddenly have a template and a way to proceed, because ideas are a dime a dozen and the real struggle is with finding a form. From 1971 to 1975 I had the privilege of being a direct observer and occasional participant in John's work, so this piece is also a personal reminiscence of the period when John was literally "making it new." So much has been written about John the intellectual. If I can, I want to restore to the work a sense of mystery and psychological complexity.

Some Background
When CalArts opened its doors in 1970, John Baldessari started a class called Post-studio Art, which for practical purposes meant anything other than painting. In the context of the early 1970s, when the term "conceptual art" was new, everything seemed possible, and that very everythingness was so wide open, coming as it did amid the Southern California zeitgeist of alternatives in everything from diet to radio to sexuality, the natural cool art student response was a kind of blasé, automatic acceptance of whatever was being done. John's class soon became a cadre, almost a kind of revolution-ary cell, and John was unusually accessible to his students—it seemed as though he never went home. At school, John had a ready audience, a willing work force, and an entourage of young people who (at least in their minds) got up in the morning and moved in a new way. Once a certain attitudinal threshold was crossed, best expressed by the catch phrase: "anything can be art/art can be anything," you had to be alert—you never knew where an idea was going to come from. As the name of the class had it, the point was anything that happened *outside* the studio. This often meant finding ways to keep John amused on field trips to the bounty of kitsch art palaces that was Los Angeles. I'm sure John thought he was humoring us; we thought we were supplying him with material. One class found us at Farmers Market in Los Angeles, where someone had the idea to buy a freshly plucked chicken and kick it around all the stalls so that we could "docu-ment" the "process" before the poor scraped-up bird was deposited in a dumpster next to a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant. You get the idea: irreverence veering off into smart-assedness with occasional glimmers of high surrealist poetry.

Leaving Painting Behind, or Style—What Is It and How Do You Get One?
In the early 1970s nobody wanted to have a style, they just wanted to do things, to stay loose and close to the experience. Especially in Southern California, having a big-time signature style was the art world equivalent of going corporate at a time when the counterculture was making its last stand. As the film critic Manny Farber put it in his classic essay, "White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art" (*Film Culture*, 1962), style, for someone like Andy Warhol, was like a little pillow to prop up the artist's signature. He went on to call the pop artists "painting tycoons," and in 1971 no one wanted to emulate that example. For John at the beginning of the 1970s, the starting point for much of the work was an attempt to avoid the question of style—in the sense that style was the end result of a set of personal choices that reflect one's sensibility as well as one's relation-ship to past art. But, art being art, one's sensibility can never really be cast out, and though John did manage to avoid relying on his personal taste in constructing his new kinds of images, he also arrived at a way to touch the image with a surprisingly delicate and sensitive grasp, so that pictures of noses and palm trees, fingertips, crummy office

chairs, and ordinary cars parked on meaningless streets take on a specific expressive character. In trying to sidestep all the questions of personal taste that John would have had to confront had he continued to paint, he managed to back his way into an aesthetic just as startling, poignant, and, seen from this remove, glamorous as the look and feel of the new wave of French cinema at the end of the 1960s.

For all its occasionally willful obscurity, I think John's work speaks rather clearly to certain personal themes, and the central drama of John's early work was the destruction of his paintings and his renunciation of the life of a painter. What John could accomplish in painting was simply not scratching the itch he must have felt—the desire to more completely inhabit his work, which is the dream of every artist; the longing for completion that comes from uniting form and content, which is accomplished by making one's own life and preoccupations the material of one's art.

The End of Painting—A Tragedy or an Opportunity?

From the few paintings of the early and mid-1960s that survive, it seems that John could have had a perfectly viable career as a painter, Southern California Ironic Pop Image Division. Some paintings, like *Bird #1* and *Truck*, both from 1962 (pp. 3, 4), and particularly *God Nose* (1965, p.7), are still funny and offbeat, and show a sensibility willing to sacrifice a lot of painting's pieties to deliver the joke. They are impressive in their ability to get out of their own way—something that can be said about John's work to this day. So the destruction of his paintings has all the more gravitas. From today's vantage point, the *Cremation Project* (1970, pp. 50, 75), with its newspaper announcement and documentary-style photographs of the incinerator technician, could appear to be the wry, prankish impulse of someone not serious. If there had been a fraternity of young artists, the *Cremation Project* might have been a stunt pulled on a drunken weekend at Zuma Beach—"Hey, let's burn all the paintings!" But I don't think we can underestimate the trauma at the heart of that 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. The interesting thing is to see how, after this act of renunciation, John went about constructing a way of working using studio-produced as well as found photographs that would be as malleable and complex and ultimately as expressive as the phantom he had been unsuccessfully pursuing in his painting. The early photographic and video pieces, the works from the early to mid-1970s when John was "making it new," are singularly expressive and high-level achievements, all the more so as their starting point, both in terms of subject matter and materiality, is so modest. It's worth remembering that in 1971 the idea of assembling groups of photographs in either a grid or a linear composition, with or without words, was anything but a sure bet as the stuff of a big-time art style. I think the unchartered territory that opened up when John burned his paintings was redirected by a kind of epiphany he had around 1970. I remember being struck by it: John told his students that the single most important visual artist of the 1960s was neither Warhol nor Jasper Johns but Jean-Luc Godard. Not just the most important filmmaker, but the most important visual artist. What happened was something like this: having rejected painting, in a sense having been rejected by painting, John looked around for a guiding spirit and saw that the syntactical visual poetry of Godard's great 1960s films, with their emphasis on montage over story and their existential way of presenting character, could have direct implications for his art.

Why Was It So Important to Take the Artist out of the Equation?

The rejection of everything that smacked of personal choices was very much in the air in the art of the late 1960s, and it can only be seen as an extended reaction against the abuses committed in the name of abstract expressionism as it was being carried out by a second and even a third generation of painters. Without going into a history of style from 1958 (the year of Jasper Johns's first show at Leo Castelli Gallery) to the

mid-1960s, all roads artistic were headed in the direction of minimizing the personal. To someone from Mars this might have seemed like a strange development; isn't that what artists *do*? But art, or painting anyway, had become the hiding place for a lot of bogus-feeling personality exhibitionism, and serious-minded people who wanted to be artists needed to find a way to escape the prison of sensibility and the trivializing narcissism it implied. *Any* other decision-making process would do: chance operations, a verifiable proposition, an irreducible (supposedly) geometric figure, or in John's case, simply following a preexisting rule book and/or having someone else make the work. The first principle of John's art, starting with the photographic paintings of the mid- to late 1960s and continuing to the present day, was to remove, as much as possible his personal taste from its making.

My point, however, is slightly different. Even though John's work of the early 1970s takes as its starting point a rigorous artlessness and a subversion of personal taste, John still could not, as indeed any real artist cannot, help but let the personal in. He could not help but infuse his overall photographic construct with the kind of reflected glamour, a kind of insouciance even, which I think is in part the legacy of many hours spent in the dark watching movies, especially French movies of the mid-1960s, and most especially the movies of Jean-Luc Godard. Whatever congruent intellectual concerns John found in Godard's work—like the use of extreme discontinuity and the misalignment of picture and word, as well as the elevation of montage—the fact is Godard's camera spends a lot of time gazing at the faces of young people. And I think the source of the glamour in John's early photographic work resides, as it does in Godard's, in the fact that so many of the ostensible subjects are young people, people a little bit unformed, who are posing. We could say that the real subject of much of John's work from the period of the early to mid-1970s, before he began to make extensive use of found images, is youth itself.

These works were made during a period in John's life when he was intensely involved in teaching, when CalArts was new and exciting, and when young people—his students—still had the change-the-world optimism of the 1960s counterculture. In those first years at CalArts, when John spent so much time with his students, he naturally drafted many of them into the work, on both sides of the camera, executing various everyday tasks or just *standing there*. In many of John's early works what we see is youth's embrace of the world in all its tentativeness and receptivity. Consciously or not, young people, not being fully formed, tend to impersonate certain recognized types. It is perhaps the earliest and most long-standing form of appropriation; when a camera is focused on them, young people tend to take on the aspect of people in a movie. There is a doubleness to this impersonation: the actors in Godard's films, many of them untrained, were themselves often impersonating American movie stars of an earlier period, or just projecting the attitude of young people in movies. They weren't playing characters so much as just *being*, in the existential sense of the word. I think it's possible that John, perhaps without even realizing it, on some level internalized Godard's use of nonactors and other regular people to create a semidocumentary urgency and naturalness in his work. In those first years at CalArts, certain personalities emerged in the work who can be identified; we can even name names. Among the principal actors in John's *petit cinéma* were a dark-haired beauty named Shelly, who at times bears an uncanny resemblance to Anna Karina; a sandy-haired, freckled midwesterner, Susan, whose countenance seems to harbor an ironic, wise-cracking worldview; Ed, who is pure unbridled anarchy and id; and Matt, who looks like a slacker Jacques Tati. It's only a small leap to say that John created an alternative Southern California version of the nouvelle vague with his own repertory company of types and faces. Only one year younger than Godard, John was a new wave baby.

Chapter 5, in Which a Nonstyle Becomes a Style and Vanquishes Loftier Styles

I remember a party sometime around 1973, when John and Michael Asher were approached by a guy who was a pillar of the old-fashioned art world of Venice Beach, a sculptor who had a burgeoning career (big New York gallery), but who by that time could feel, even in his drunken state, that he was on the wrong side of the stylistic slope. The guy's pretty wasted and he comes sloshing up to John and Michael, drink in hand, belligerent, and says, reaching for menace, "Hey, aren't you the guys that did away with the *object*?" It was like watching a dinosaur lumber to its final resting place.

A style can be judged successful if it influences the work of other artists; John's work in the 1970s was almost immediately influential and has remained resonant for several generations. It provided a template for putting things (images, ideas) together using directed energy with an eye toward discreet objects that end up on the wall. The other mode of success, the one measured by the internet art indexes and the veneer of public attention and general grooviness has been much slower to arrive, but it too has found its way to John's studio door. What is it about this style that has made it so successful, as both influence and commodity? For the first part, ask, "What is it that John's style has allowed other artists to *do*?" And that question has a two-part answer. First, there is the aesthetic, followed by the mechanics (how a piece is put together), which in turn becomes integrated into the aesthetic but in a slightly different way. The hallmarks of John's style in the early and mid-1970s are: 1) a cool, uninflected look, 2) the use of irony as a distancing device that frames images and keeps appropriated sources at arm's length, 3) malleability—the assumption that the parts of the whole can be recombined into different, equally interesting wholes; that is, the strategy for combining things is more important than the things combined, which leads to 4) the creation of a syntax, a readable language of images, or the feeling that one exists even if it cannot be precisely described. The first two qualities are, as I said, about how the art looks, and the other two are about how it functions. The functional part has entered the collective consciousness of several generations of artists, but the look of John's early photo-graphic and video work has also made its way into the collective unconscious. At least three generations of artists have had themselves photographed doing dumb stuff in dumb settings. This is largely John's fault.

What the aesthetic of John's work accomplished was to give the everyday-Joe artist a way to embrace and lavish a little love on the everyday-Joe visual culture that is all around us all the time, especially if one is stuck in the provinces and doesn't really have access to the ethos or the rationale of a more highbrow style. Part of John's legacy is the elevation of the generic and unheroic, the vernacular of everywhere and nowhere that began in the late 1950s (well, actually, with dada around World War I) and continues to this day. John's work made a snapshot of a thing, of a nothing, really—a ball in the air, a guy in a T-shirt standing in a nowhere street, a Volvo, whatever—cool. Anything could be cool as long as you didn't try to exert too much influence over it. That neutrality, feigned or otherwise, would come to embody a generation's wishful relationship to the trashy world that is our visual culture, like one long episode of that old TV show *Route 66*, which was about life as seen from a passing car. John's sophistication and knowingness conferred on the right mundane object or situation a powerful aura of cool.

Drama Is the Enemy of Cool

In the 1970s the uninflected would always trump any kind of expressionism. Since most young people crave the condition of cool above just about anything else, can the collective work produced over the last thirty-five or so years be seen as a struggle to locate a sense of personal drama inside what are the rather ironclad rules that govern the aesthetics of cool? In other words, how do you get a specific identity into the stand-in, which is to say, "How will they know it's me?" Every successful style must

also have at least a touch of the heroic, and, the norms of cool notwithstanding, under-neath the affectless surface of John's work there lies the beating heart of a poet. Apart from its satirical, piety-skewering, mocking quality, John's work is actually quite poignant—it speaks to the amazingly resilient desire to make art, which is to say, to forge unlikely connections between things and experience the freedom to access unexpected emotional currents, to make poetry, to make a new meaning or at least to be free of the old one.

Of the dramas large and small implicit in John's work are these questions: Can this be enough? Will they know how sensitive I really am? Will they see the *real* me underneath this refusal to reveal any personal stuff or to engage in any obvious universalities? The development of John's work in the 1970s is a powerful example of an artist turning left in order to go forward. John resolved aesthetic issues by sidestepping them entirely; the unlikely, strange, and often moving result is the creation of a persona in the work, a stand-in for and a connection back to the artist John might have been if he had contin-ued painting. Traces of the wishful earlier self can still be felt in the work so seemingly devoid of personal mythology, and the stylistic result is work that, in its reticence, is elegant and even suave. *Suavity* is not likely the first word to come to mind in thinking about John's work, or about John as a person. On the surface of it, *shaggy dog* seems like a better description of the man and his world, but I stand behind it because, in art, the style that eliminates the most baggage is the most elegant, and John's work is exactly what it needs to be, neither more nor less. John's reluctance to state the obvious (or sometimes to state only what is obvious) also serves to maintain a polite respect for the viewer's intelligence. At times obscure, even recalcitrant, without the seductive surface of painting to fall back on, John's work still manages an eloquence about its own heuristic origins.

Some Examples—How They Work
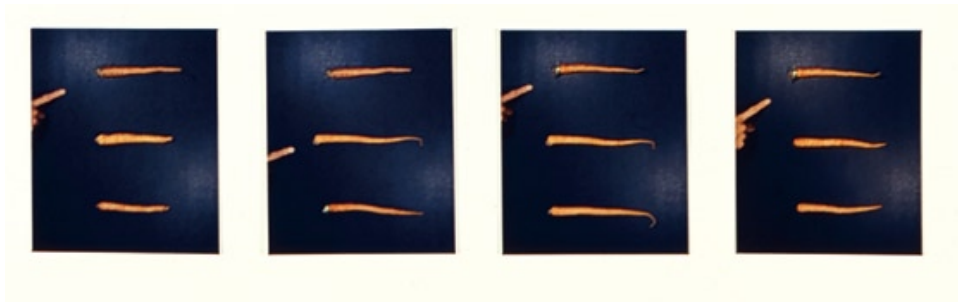
John Baldessari, *Choosing: Carrots* (detail), 1972

Choosing: Carrots, 1972
The game is silly and irrelevant, even absurd, but must be carried out to the letter. The "author" of the work of art is only allowed the use of one earnest fingertip in this act of aesthetic selection, this faux exercise of taste. Even so, John manages to erect a hurdle that the wised-up viewer has to be able to jump: If you don't think this is enough, there's nothing I can do for you.

Aligning Balls, 1972

The location of the ball in the frame is the organizing system, a red thread on which the images are strung like beads. In its insistence on *framing* and *tracking*, the work approaches a cinematic momentum. The red ball is being thrown but also being chased. The piece bears a resemblance to, is almost a companion to, the Oscar-winning film *The Red Balloon*, one of the most watched films of its time and one that has almost no dialogue. As in John's work, the story is told pictorially, and the muteness helps to create a sense of the thing that is always just out of reach, that can never be held—a sense of loss that is the source of much of the poignancy found in John's work of this period.
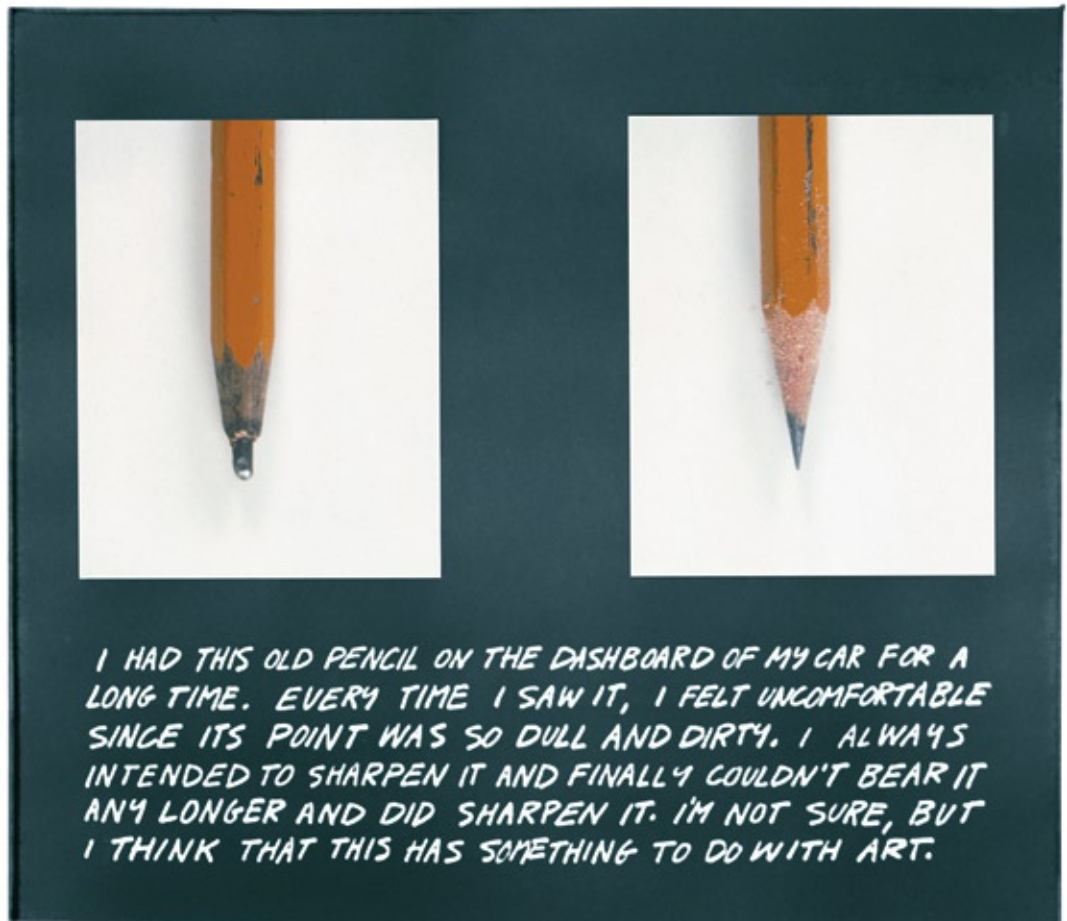
Goodbye to Boats (Sailing Out), 1972–73
John has rarely explained the emotional engine behind a specific work, but in this case, he told an interviewer the moving story of finding an old photograph of his father waving to a ship on which John's mother was sailing for Europe. There is an almost devastating poignancy and psychological valence in this work, as if the repetition of the act of waving can obliterate the sadness of the loss of the mother. But the John in the photographs is only waving at random boats, none of whose passengers know of his existence or even see him. It is an act of psychological appropriation that cuts to the core of artistic motivation: to mirror, to be *seen* by the other, to simultaneously internal-ize and externalize a significant or troubling event, to pretend to nullify loss.

John Baldessari, *Goodbye to Boats (Sailing Out)* (detail), 1972–73

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.

John Baldessari, *The Pencil Story*, 1972–73.
Two Type-B prints on board with colored
pencil, 22 x 27¼ in. (55.9 x 69.2 cm) overall.
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Nicola Bulgari,
New York

The Pencil Story, 1972–73

This work directly expresses the artist's anxiety about "doing something," the anxiety of staring at a blank piece of paper. It seems to me a work about wanting help, not expecting to get it, and finally getting it. A seminal work that marks the beginning of John's lapidary parables about the sensibility of a certain kind of postmodern artist. That artist is: peripatetic (and travels light); workmanlike, not given to high-flown rhetoric; and somewhat winsome.
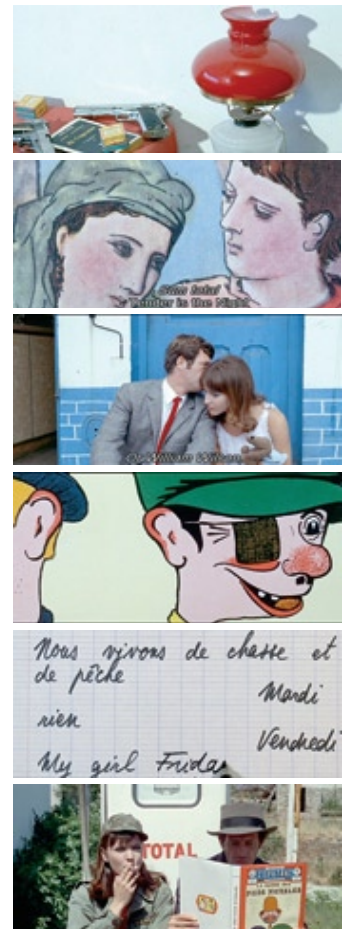
Story with 24 Versions, 1974

A work about the tension between image and narrative; the two are not aligned, rather there are moments of congruence and noncongruence. It's like watching *Pierrot le fou*, in which a subtitled sequence of dialogue is out of synch with the spoken dialogue. John's experience of nouvelle vague was absorbed through caption and image. The feeling of disconnect provoked by this disjunctive timing is one of loss of immediacy, a sense that meaning—from tone, from exact wording—has been lost.

LEFT John Baldessari, *Story with 24 Versions* (detail), 1974. **RIGHT** Stills from montage sequences in Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot le fou* (1965), with Anna Karina and Jean-Paul Belmondo

Portrait: Artist's Identity Hidden with Various Hats, 1974

This piece speaks to the artist's desire to both create and avoid creating a persona in his work. Lest there be any doubt as to John's identifications and allegiances, this work puts us squarely in the world of Buster Keaton, whose famous hat-choosing sequence in the film *Steamboat Bill, Jr.*, is the model. In the film, we see Keaton's character trying on and rejecting literally dozens of hats, each one accompanied by a different expression; it is an essay on the theme of an actor's malleability and overall lack of fixed identity. John's hats resonate with Buster's—some days the artist is just a clown.

Action/Reaction (Synchronized): Finger Touching Cactus, 1975

The aforementioned Shelly appears in many of John's works of the period. A kind of collegiate femme fatale in a trench coat; she is, or was, our Anna Karina. The juice of this piece, of John's art at this time, comes from the juxtaposition of the images and their position in a sequence—their syntax. This technique has become such a common-place that it is hard to remember how liberating it looked in 1975. Around this time John started to make his own films; he'd graduated from the one-camera, one-setup documentary mode that he used for his video tapes to enlisting students from CalArts's film school to help produce his movies. I remember John saying something to me about his anxiety at the thought of actually making movies, as distinct from appropriating cinema's visual language, and everything it implied. Filmmaking, which up to that time had been an impetus to his work but also something that cast a shadow over it, was about to be confronted head-on.

TOP Anna Karina (with Jean-Claude Brialy and Jean-Paul Belmondo) in Jean-Luc Godard's *Une Femme est une femme* (1961). BOTTOM John Baldessari, *Action/Reaction (Synchronized): Finger Touching Cactus* (detail), 1975. Twelve black-and-white photographs on board, 5 x 7 in. (12.7 x 17.8 cm) each. Collection of the artist

The Artist Hitting Various Objects with a Golf Club, 1972–73
One of John's funniest works and one of the funniest works by any artist during the last
thirty-five years. The aesthetic mode of this minimocumentary is the grid, which empha-
sizes the poignancy of these listless images masquerading as little factoids. It is sweet
and playful in a subtly subversive way. Snapshots of the artist swinging a golf club—could
anything be more absurd? Does John even play golf? Is the golf club a symbol of the
father, with John playing at the willfully destructive impulses of the loner child? Unlikely
as it may sound, the figure of the artist standing on the lawn whacking away at various
things with a golf club reminds me of the persona of new wave actor Jean-Pierre Léaud,
who in countless films by Godard and François Truffaut played a character who is
maddeningly incapable of bending his moral code to accommodate the needs of another
person. Léaud's characters were all, more or less, versions of his directors; in *The 400
Blows*, he *is* Truffaut, and later, in Godard's *Masculin féminin*, Léaud impersonates the
director's fury at and frustrations with women. The obstinacy in his relations with others,
and his hostility to modern life gives the Léaud protagonist a kind of hapless comic
presence. The fact that his character usually gets the girl in the end is more a testament
to the generosity of women than a measure of his superior philosophy.

John Baldessari, *Line of Force* (detail),
1972–73. Thirty-three color photographs on
board, 4 x 5 in. (10.2 x 12.7 cm) each

Line of Force, 1972–73

The most primal act of selection is to point, and pointing/selecting is one of John's most powerful and often-invoked metaphors for making art. In this iteration, John reduces the content and the form to the same essential minimum: pointing and nothing more, the muteness of the act underscores its almost brutal force, which is in turn made slightly ridiculous because, like all of John's work from this period, it exposes, in ways that are still mysterious, its own constructed nature. As in so many of John's works, indeed in John's oeuvre, this work is really saying, "Pay attention. Shut up and pay attention, please." It is also saying, "I'd really like to tell you but I just can't right now." And also, "Can't this be art too?" And the body of John's work has answered its own question.