



Photos by Alexei Tylevich



# John Baldessari

by Katya Tylevich

# One Guy's Laughing



*Raised Eyebrows/Furrowed Foreheads: (with Tuxedo), 2008, three dimensional archival print, laminated with lexan and mounted on sintra with acrylic paint, 244,48 x 86,68 x 10,16 cm. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York*



Baldessari's studio. Photo by Alexei Tyievich

At about that age when misguided young people hang Bob Marley posters in their bedrooms, I taped a John Baldessari print — *Two Highrises (with Disruptions) / Two Witnesses (Red and Green)* – next to my bead curtain and bean bag chair. On the one hand, I feel I owe Mr. Baldessari an apology for that. On the other, what a cacophony of mixed signals. It's perfect.

*Two Highrises* is among the artist's most recognized works. A diptych of sorts: on top, a man and woman in fabulous seventies get-up — a red spot, a green spot covering their respective faces; below them, two high-rises exploding, in an image eerily reminiscent of 9/11 (it's been said many times before), even though it was created in 1990. An artwork that pushes simultaneously on two buttons in the brain: 'I get it' and 'I don't get it'.

'When you achieve the right kind of tautness – then you've done something,' Baldessari tells me. We are sitting in his studio, some blocks east of Venice beach. Baldessari's postmodern workspace is a little bit 'Gehry's Disney centre' and a little bit 'Apocalypse Now', what with helicopters swooping down at various intervals, making for exciting background music, rendering our words inaudible but dramatic all the same. Baldessari laughs and calls Los Angeles 'butt ugly'. He says: 'I'm always slightly pissed off here.' That's one reason he chooses to keep it as his base. 'I rejected many other places — New York, Europe — for being too beautiful.' San Francisco? I ask. 'Too beautiful.'

Later, when I bring up the subject of his rather conservative art education, Baldessari tells me that he went against everything he was taught. Is it good for an artist to have something to go against? I wonder. 'Well, if I only saw art that I liked around me, why would I make art?' says Baldessari. 'I do it because I think I can do something else, or because I'm not seeing everything that I want to see.'

So being content is a detriment?  
'Content is always a bad idea.'

## I tried to correct the deficits of my art education. I went against everything I was taught

— *You worked for a long time out of your first studio in Santa Monica. Is it a mental shift to be working in Venice now?*

I still have the Santa Monica studio, but I'm using it for storage right now. The real mental shift was when I moved to Santa Monica in the first place. When I came up from San Diego in 1970, the artist community was here in Venice. But I didn't have much money then, and the rent was cheaper in Santa Monica. It's a strange bifurcation. For many years, Venice was low rent, low-income, and then the artists starting coming in, and artists always change a neighbourhood — it gets some cachet, a lot of people in the movie industry start moving in. My theory is that one reason for a lot of the shootings and crime around here is that some people are just pissed off. [Laughs.] Look at me here, come on. I'm guilty. I have a small building down the street where I have a woman doing printing for me. When I bought it, the realtor said, 'That's interesting. The building in the back has its own power supply and everything. Looks like it went up in a weekend.' They were probably growing pot there. Which is normal enough. Then the realtor said: 'But you might be interested, your neighbour next door is the son of Tom Hanks.' It's that kind of convergence.

— *Do you feel you've joined a community of artists now that you're in Venice?*

Whatever art scene was visible here in the seventies, has since moved east. But back then... the curator Hal Glicksman had a great idea that on Main Street [in Venice] there should be stars on the sidewalk for the artists that worked there, like the Walk of Fame in Hollywood.

— *Did you feel part of that community?*

No, not at all. I was teaching at the University of California in San Diego when I was offered a job at CalArts, and that's why I moved up to Los Angeles. I was pretty much in charge of visiting artists there, and I just wanted to break this aesthetic that I saw: light and space and plastics and so on. I said, 'Well, there's a lot of other kinds of art going on in the world.' I was familiar with art in Europe, in New York, and I invited people from different countries and cities to CalArts so that there were different voices speaking. Although, one person I did invite to speak was Ed Ruscha.

— *I understand you were hesitant about calling yourself an 'artist' in the first place.*

Yeah, because I was born in what's euphemistically called a 'service community'. I would actually call it a ghetto of San Diego. The high school I went to didn't even have college counselling. They just didn't expect anybody to go any further. I didn't know who Matisse or Picasso were. I didn't know anything about art until my first year of college. So

the idea of calling myself an artist... I guess I thought, 'Well, if you say that, everyone will look at you like you're an exotic flower.' They wouldn't know how to respond, knowing you were an artist. What's that? What I did is I told people I was a teacher; I taught art. I wouldn't necessarily say I became an artist late in my life, but let's say I was 'a late bloomer'. I was in my early thirties, around there. I didn't meet any real artists until I was that age. That's when one of them told me: 'You should be an artist.' Nobody had ever said that to me before. That's really all I needed to hear. See, my instructors in art school, they were teachers who painted on the weekends. I really wouldn't call them artists in the sense that we think of artists.

— *Do you think the way we generally think of artists has changed with time?*

Oh, yeah. Now, everybody knows what an artist is.

— *And what is an artist, exactly?*

A person who makes a lot of money.

— *Would you like to see that way of thinking change?*

I would, but I can't change the course of the world. I do think it's unfortunate for today's younger artists because they didn't know any other way. For me, the idea of money was never an issue. Not that I'm 'pure', but it wasn't an issue. You just did art because you liked doing it, and you had friends who did art, and that was that.

— *Did you enjoy teaching art?*

Very much. Yeah. But I always try to add that I didn't do it because of any noble calling. I needed money. That's all. And then once I did it, I found out, you know, I had a knack for it. [Helicopter flies overhead.] They know you're here, huh?

— *I notice that in several interviews, you reiterate that much of art comes from trying to escape boredom.*

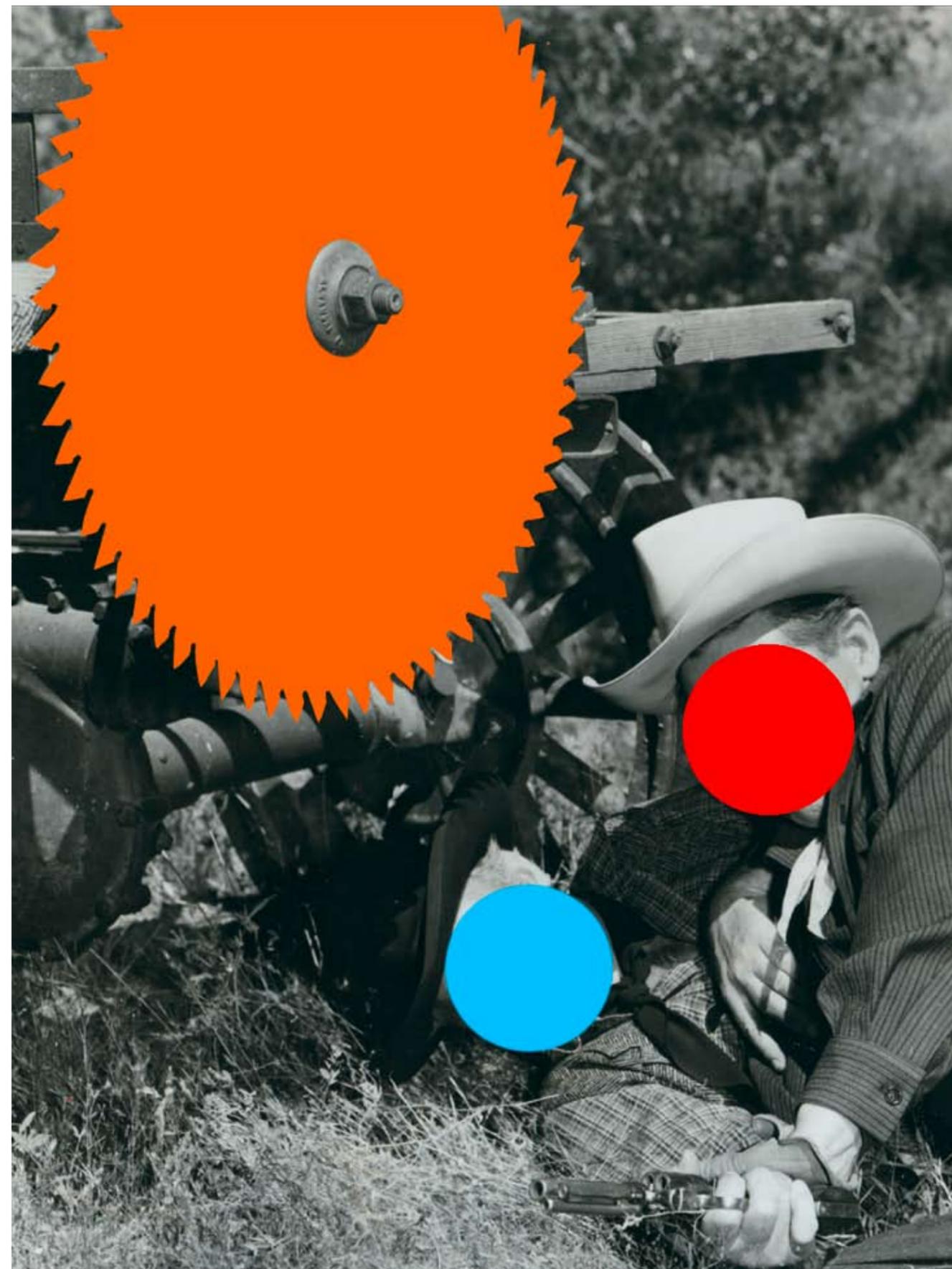
I think so. I can only speak for myself, but I tend to think that a lot of art comes from boredom. Look at kids, they get bored constantly. Pretty soon they start lining up a row of rocks or playing with toy soldiers and that's basically art-making. Yeah, I get bored. I try to make my life more interesting.

— *Is it fear of your own boredom or is it also fear of eliciting boredom in others?*

Fear isn't the word. I think it's a *duty* not to elicit boredom.

— *You famously don't believe in owning an image.*

No. I don't think you can own an image any more than you can own a word.



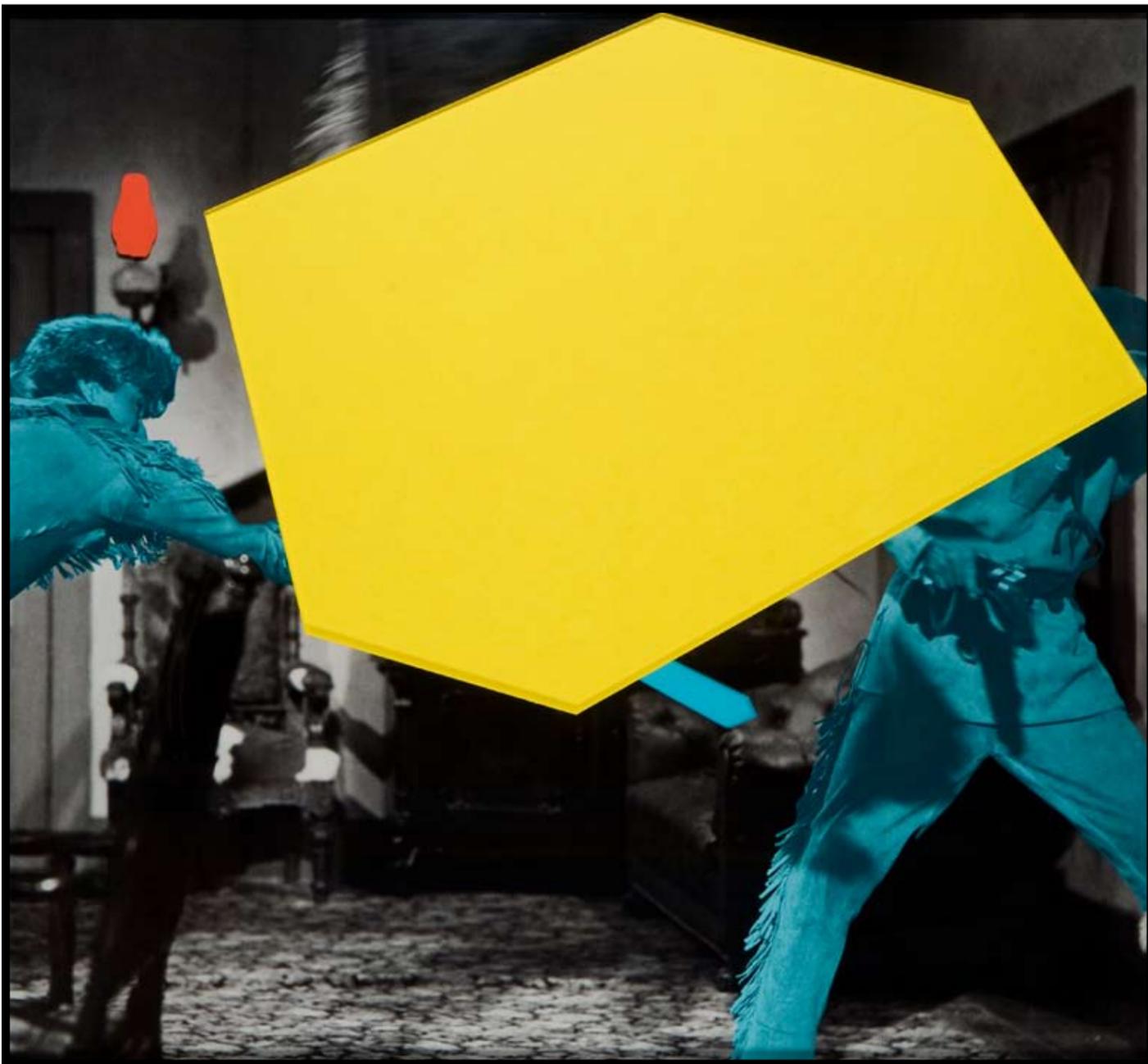
*Radial Saw (Orange): With Two Person Fight (Blue and Red), 2004, three dimensional archival print with acrylic paint on sintra, albond and gatorfoam panels, 214 x 160,65 x 10 cm. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York*

Arms & Legs (Specific: Elbows & Knees), etc: Arms with Cowboy Hat, 2007, three dimensional archival print laminated with lexan and mounted on sintra, 184,1 x 151,7 cm. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York



Opposite: Noses & Ears, Etc. (Part Two): Two (Flesh) Faces with (Blue) Ears and Noses, Two (Flesh) Hands and Hobby Horse, 2006, three dimensional archival digital photographic prints with acrylic paint, 194,3 x 181,6 x 10,1 cm. Courtesy: Marian Goodman Gallery, New York





*Blockage (Yellow): With Two Persons Fighting (Blue), 2005, three dimensional digital archival print with acrylic paint on sintra, dibond and gatorfoam panels, 180,3 x 181,6 cm. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York*

## Copyright is a wall that can't keep standing. I don't see how it will

— *Is that a bold statement? I mean, there's no shortage of artists being sued.*

I think it's just common sense, taking into consideration the future. Copyright is going to be modified greatly, or it will crumble because of technology and information exchange. Copyright is a wall that can't keep standing. I don't see how it will.

— *What do you make of the word, 'conceptual'?*

Well, right now it's meaningless. In terms of the art world, it's one of those words that can mean everything and nothing.

— *We recently spoke with Lawrence Weiner in New York and he had strong opinions about the word 'conceptual'.*

Lawrence is one of my best friends and I'm not going to comment. [Laughs.] Some words get to be clichés. They just lose their meaning. Take words like 'Impressionism', 'Expressionism' – people get familiar with the artists associated with the words, and the words themselves lose their meaning. Ask me 'what's Impressionism?' and I'll talk about Monet. Roy Lichtenstein and Claes Oldenburg were my friends. I made the mistake of referring to them as pop artists. And Lichtenstein said, 'We're not pop artists; we're artists.'

— *Do you characterize the colours you use?*

Well, for me, anyway, it's hard to look at red and not think about blood or danger, for example. But it's all cultural, I think. Or personal. At first, when I stopped painting, I was trying to get away from using colour in my work – or trying to get away from using colour tastefully, let's say. You know, this kind of green here in this amount, but next to this kind of red in this amount, and so on. I suppose you'd call that relational painting. When I got into photography, I started to use colour as signal or code, without thinking about taste at all. A lot of my works then would involve colour sequences. If I used red, then I would use it chromatically: the colour after that would be orange, yellow, and so on. And then a lot of my early pieces are in six parts, and involve the six colours, and it's nothing about good taste at all – it's just a structure.

I later started to block out faces with either a white or black disc. That's when I thought, if I start using colour, I can use these people almost like characters in a play. This person might be threatening; he's waving a gun. But in Western culture, green means: 'okay' and 'safe'. I might put green over his face. He looks dangerous, but he's really not. Or somebody else looks safe but is really dangerous. I can be like a director and a theatre ensemble. But that's just for me. I don't expect anybody else to read it that way. That's not a goal.

— *Do you think about the responses your works will elicit when you're in the process of working?*

Sure I do. I think you're deluded if you think you're working in isolation. Nobody's like Emily Dickinson – and even her

works were discovered. Why do you think people write in a diary? Because they think it's going to be discovered one day. Nobody does anything in private, no matter what they say. And art's about communication, anyway. So I do think about it.

— *Do you like to be present in the gallery or museum when you have an opening?*

I hate it.

— *You prefer the studio?*

I just don't like social occasions.

— *Does it bother you when you know your works are being misread?*

I can't prevent it. I can't control how people react to my work. I think I'd be deluded to think I did have control. There's this one cartoon from the New Yorker by Charles Addams, where you're looking at people in a movie theatre; they all have horrified looks on their faces, except this one guy who's just laughing.

— *And that says it all.*

Well, I think it does. One of my best friends – and a huge influence – was Sol LeWitt. I find a lot of his work to be really funny; but I think very few people share that opinion.



*Blockage (Yellow): With Tent and Sword Fight (Green), 2005, three dimensional digital archival print with acrylic paint on sintra, dibond and gatorfoam panels, 180,3 x 196,3 cm. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York*



*Hands and/or Feet (Part One): Skateboards/Tiger, 2009, three dimensional archival print laminated with lexan on sintra with acrylic paint, 149,5 x 159 cm. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York. Photo by Marc Damage*



*Arms & Legs (Specific: Elbows & Knees) etc.: Three Arms (Two with Flowers), 2007, three dimensional archival print laminated with lexan and mounted on sintra with acrylic paint, 151,7 x 156,2 cm. Courtesy: Marian Goodman Gallery, New York*

Nobody does anything in private,  
no matter what they say.  
And art's about communication, anyway

— *When you sang LeWitt's 35 Sentences on Conceptual Art, was that meant to be humorous?*

No, not at all, but I think people think it is.

— *I think people read a lot of humour into your work.*

Yeah, and I can't help that either. I don't intend to be humorous. I just think it's the way I see the world. If I were trying to be funny, I wouldn't be doing the work I do.

— *Are you still collecting found photographs?*

Not as avidly as I once did. I'm still vastly interested in imagery of any kind, and I subscribe to a lot of magazines and buy a lot of books. But I think right now, rather than mining photographs or art, I'm mining the history of art. I'm working on these 'art history tests' that test your knowledge. The tests all come from contemporary art — you can guess from where. The titles come from film noir movies, and the date is the date of the work. I'm putting different titles and matching them with an image. You should give it a try. What I'm getting at, is people's penchant to 'know everything', and I'm pushing that penchant so then, maybe, they're not so sure about knowing everything.

— *Was this born out of personal observation, or...?*

Boredom. It was born from boredom. I was getting tired of working with photographs and movies; I thought I would work with images from art.

— *Do you take issue when Los Angeles tries to claim you as a Los Angeles artist?*

I don't like being geographically pinpointed. I don't think any artist does. I don't know how it can matter. I'm just as against that as I am against categorical titles like 'conceptual artist' or 'pop artist', or this artist or that artist, or a female artist, a male artist, a black artist, a white artist.

— *Some people take issue with the word 'artist' altogether.*

For me, at least, it's about how the work is used. I would never exhibit in a photo gallery, for example, because I'm not a photographer. If I were doing design work for magazines, then I would be a designer not an artist. Being an artist, for me, is something between pure research and applied research.

— *Is your mining for art history a pure research?*

I do consider it in that way, because nobody's asking me to do it; nobody's dictating to me what I do. People try to. You know: Do a commission. I listen to them, and it becomes clear that they have certain ideas about what's going to happen, and I have to say, 'I'm not interested.'

— *Are people trying to tell you what you should do more often now?*

Probably less often. Maybe, by now, they know the answer they're going to get. I was asked to do a work in San Francisco for a new Medical Centre up there at the University of San Francisco. They were asking various artists to do something. I made two proposals, and one is more dicey — at least that's the word I would use — than the other. I told the guy heading the program, 'I'd rather do the more dicey

proposal. I don't think they're going to like it. But I don't care.' I don't need the money, I don't need the attention. So, that's just the way it's going to be.

— *When do you hear back from them?*

I don't know. [Laughs.] You know, the only other person that's better at that is Bruce Nauman. He says, 'Well, when I have an idea I'll let you know.'

— *Do you have to grow confidence as an artist to be able to say that?*

I think so. You go on, you have a sense of what you can do and what you can get away with. I think I've said it a couple of times in print, now: Art is what you can get away with. I still think that. In getting away with it, you have to convince other people to share your opinion. If you think your art is the greatest stuff in the world and nobody else does, then you're in trouble. Art is about developing a consensus, you know. All art is about consensus, otherwise it goes in the cellar.

— *They probably weren't teaching you that in art school.*

When I realized what I would be doing, I tried to correct the deficits of my art education. I went against everything I was taught.

— *Do you think having something to go against, benefits the art that results from that action?*

If I only saw art that I liked around me, why would I make art? I do it because I think I can do something else, or because I'm not seeing everything that I want to see.

— *So being content is a detriment.*

Content is always a bad idea.

— *Has your attitude changed at all, in years? The art world has changed, after all.*

You know, I think I would love to change. On a ridiculous level, things do change. Some of my early pieces — the text, and photo pieces — well, I couldn't give them away when I made them. I think the highest price I ever got for one was \$500, but the record auction price was something close to six million dollars. And I haven't changed. The world's changed. I think the first time I ever made enough money where I could leave teaching for a while was in the mid eighties. But that wasn't me, it was the art world.

— *So the question is whether outside response changes your own understanding of yourself as an artist.*

Well, I think, 24/7, I have to keep on asking myself, when it comes to tough decisions, am I doing this to please somebody other than myself? The bottom line is that the buck stops with you.

— *First and foremost, you feel you have to be happy with your art?*

Well, 'happy'. That's one of those terrible words.

— *You're right.*

To use a few more words: You have to feel it's the best you could do right now.

Noses & Ears, Etc. (Part Two); (Pink) Face (with Green) Nose and Arm and Pillow, 2006, three dimensional archival digital photographic prints, with acrylic paint, 188,6 x 181,61 x 10,16 cm. Courtesy: Marian Goodman Gallery, New York

