

John Baldessari,  
*Choosing (A Game  
for Two Players):  
Green Beans, 1971*  
Courtesy the artist



**It was sometimes hard to take seriousness seriously in the 1960s and '70s. Robin Kelsey considers a group of artists who turned to games, whimsy, and clowning around as vehicles for their work.**

## **Playing Around Photography**

Robin Kelsey

In the 1960s and '70s, a bevy of artists experimented with photography as a means of making art from play. The rarified term commonly used to describe their work—*Conceptual art*—has tended to obscure its penchant for witty subterfuge. The approaches of these artists varied: some clowning around in front of the camera, others developed games that produced a series of photographs in compliance with absurd rules, while still others photographed constructed scenes featuring toy figures or other prosaic objects.

How might we understand this historical turn? One way to grapple with the emergence of such practices is to consider playful photography to be the opposite of serious painting. Although Abstract Expressionist painting of the postwar years looked like child's play to some, the art world treated it with great seriousness, finding in Jackson Pollock's dripped and clotted palimpsests the tortured cosmos of a distinctly masculine artistic selfhood. This exaltation of the solitary painter as the bearer of collective conscience in the atomic age struck a younger generation of artists as daft or unsustainable. Pop art arose as a rejoinder—with artists such as Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein finding material for painting in popular subjects (e.g., Coke bottles, Donald Duck) and popular media (e.g., silkscreen, Ben-Day dots). Once this embrace of lowbrow pleasures deflated the momentousness of painterly angst, younger artists, led by Ed Ruscha, turned to photography—the popular form of picture making par excellence.



Duration Piece #5  
New York

During a ten minute period of time on March 17, 1969 ten photographs were made, each documenting the location in Central Park where an individually distinguishable bird call was heard. Each photograph was made with the camera pointed in the direction of the sound. That direction was then walked toward by the auditor until the instant that the next call was heard, at which time the next photograph was made and the next direction taken.

The ten photographs join with this statement to constitute the form of this piece.

April, 1969

Duration Piece n° 5  
New York

Pendant dix minutes, le 17 mars 1969, dix photos ont été prises, chacune ayant pour but de localiser, dans Central Park, l'endroit d'où provenait le chant très caractéristique d'un oiseau isolé. Chaque photographie était prise, l'appareil pointé vers la source du chant. Le chemin était ensuite parcouru dans cette direction jusqu'au moment où, d'un autre endroit, reprenait le gazouillis. Un cliché était alors aussitôt réalisé, et la nouvelle direction immédiatement suivie.

Les 10 photos, jointes à la présente déclaration, constituent la forme de cette oeuvre.

Avril 1969

Douglas Huebler, *Duration Piece #5, New York, 1969*  
© 2013 Douglas Huebler;  
courtesy Paula Cooper  
Gallery, New York, and  
Darcy Huebler/Artists Rights  
Society (ARS), New York

**Conceptual artists playfully critiqued photographic conventions to demystify both serious painting and serious photography.**

By the 1960s, commercial interests were channeling photography in two main directions. One was toward public communication. Illustrated magazines of mass circulation, such as *Life*, *Look*, *National Geographic*, and *Sports Illustrated*, promoted the notion that photographs had a special capacity for communicating insights about modern experience. The other main direction was toward personal commemoration. Companies such as Kodak and Polaroid mass-marketed photography as an easy means of celebrating modern affluence and leisure. No vacation or family holiday was complete without a flattering record of its pleasures.

Photographers seeking to make art struggled to locate their efforts with respect to these commercial forces. Many of them regarded the illustrated magazines with ambivalence or outright disdain and denigrated popular photography as so much thoughtless button-pressing. These highbrow practitioners responded to the commercialization of photography by exalting the fastidiously composed and executed print.

But Ruscha and some other young artists took a contrary tack, adopting photography in a manner that sidled up to both journalistic and popular modes, often to satirical effect. Artists in Southern California were particularly active in this regard: consider Ruscha's deadpan 1963 book *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations*, or John Baldessari's 1966–68 image of himself standing beneath a tree that appears to be growing out of his head, captioned succinctly: *Wrong*. Such works spurned the dictates of fine-art photography in favor of slipshod or outright “incorrect” compositions, banal subject matter, and dopey didacticism.

Conceptual artists playfully critiqued photographic conventions to demystify both serious painting and serious photography. For example, they debunked the notion of *expression*, which had been crucial for a preceding generation of artists in both media. When Bruce Nauman made his *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (1966–67), not only did he stage sculpture as a photograph, acknowledging the photographic mediation of aesthetic experience, he also punctured the aura of artistic

expression, depicting it as a literal stream of water emerging from the artist's mouth. The modern notion of artistic expression often confused the artist with the work; Nauman countered by confusing the work with the artist, by becoming his own sculpture.

Artists of the 1960s and '70s also lampooned the vaunted eye and transformative art of the modernist photographer. At the time, no modernist photograph had won more acclaim than Edward Weston's *Pepper No. 30*, of 1930. In his daybooks, Weston had pointedly distinguished his search for exquisite modernist subjects from the housewife's perusal of produce in the grocery store. He construed his process of selection, composition, and printing as a kind of transubstantiation of an everyday vegetable into an eternal form. Baldessari responded by making a silly game of selecting the best vegetable. In his 1971 *Choosing (A Game for Two Players): Green Beans*, for example, Baldessari proffered a series of photographs based on a simple set of rules. From an array of green beans, one player selects three. The other player then chooses one of the three by pointing to it, and a photograph of this pointing is made. The two unselected vegetables are then discarded and replaced with two others from the array. The process is repeated until the supply of beans is exhausted. This game took all the air out of the modernist search for ideal form, collapsing Weston's transubstantiation into the arbitrariness of sheer whim. It also cleverly suggested that all artistic production is a constrained social process, not a free and solitary creative act.

This mischievous group of artists also used photography to dissect pictorial genres and the myths attending them. Consider, for example, the way Douglas Huebler critiqued landscape in his *Duration Piece #5* (1969), which consists of ten photographs and the following typewritten text:

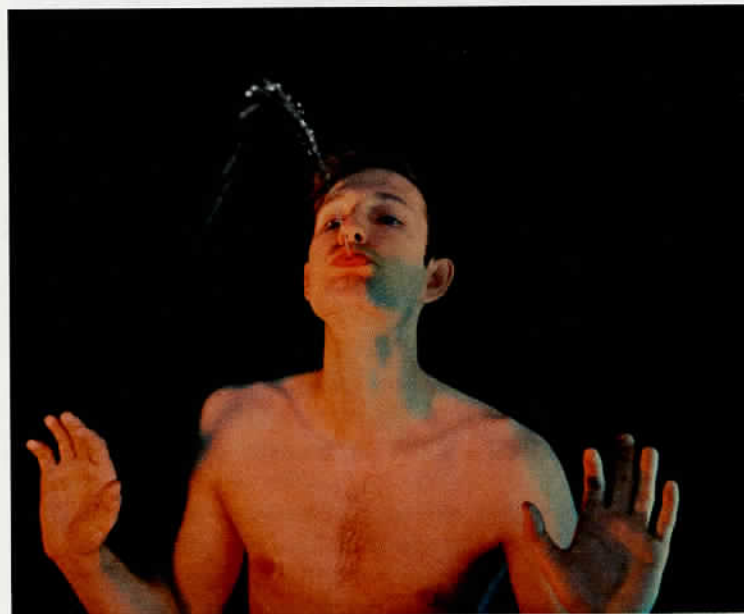
*During a ten minute period of time on March 17, 1969 ten photographs were made, each documenting the location in Central Park where an individually distinguishable bird call was heard. Each photograph was made with the camera pointed in the direction of the sound. That direction was then walked toward by the auditor until the instant that the next call was heard, at which time the next photograph was made and the next direction taken.*

*The ten photographs join with this statement to constitute the form of this piece.*

In abiding by these rules, Huebler surrendered his autonomy to the unpredictable scattering of birdsongs in Central Park. He followed each avian vocalist until he heard the next one, ricocheting from one random aural encounter to the next. His game playfully skewered a host of romantic ideals of landscape, including the notions of following a natural muse, of achieving a correspondence between landscape and music, and of rendering an experience of the invisible visible. It produced arbitrary pictures, drained of subjective aesthetic judgment and lacking composition or taste. Once again, photographic play had become a corrective for painterly pomposity.

Some artists combined pictorial mischief with inventive new ways of getting their art to a public. When her gallery closed in the winter of 1970–71, Eleanor Antin purchased one hundred rubber boots at an Army-Navy surplus store and began photographing them at various sites in Southern California and printing the pictures as postcards. The photographed boots (a readymade rejoinder to Vincent van Gogh's painted shoes) tramp their way through a series of overlapping cultural references from one postcard to the next. The play of absence established by the empty boots is provocative and ambiguous.

Bruce Nauman,  
*Self-Portrait as a Fountain*,  
1966–67, from *Eleven*  
*Color Photographs*, 1970  
© 2013 Bruce Nauman/  
Artists Rights Society (ARS),  
New York



Laurie Simmons, *Pushing Lipstick (Spotlight)*, 1979  
Courtesy the artist and  
Salon 94, New York



In one photograph, they cluster under a bridge, invoking a Jacob Riis-like depiction of the down and out. Whether we are to read the empty boots as a comment on the impossibility of representing one class to another, or on the vacuous conventionality of the composition, or on the suppressed-subject positions of women in representation, is left unresolved. Antin distributed the postcards through a mailing list of about a thousand people and institutions, sending them out in serial fashion over the course of more than two years. She thus harnessed a system built around the leisure industry to circumvent the gallery system.

In the 1970s, the artists Laurie Simmons and David Levinthal each began making photographs of miniature scenes featuring toy figures to explore the intersection of identity, mood, and the politics of representation. Simmons positioned toy figures in dollhouse-like spaces to question the formation of gender identity with the very materials that society uses to reproduce it. Her invocation of play as social preparation prompted critical reflection on how gender is regulated from the earliest stages of socialization. At the same time, she insisted that the spaces of femininity were valid sources for the imagery of ambitious art. Through the use of oblique lighting and stereotypical subject matter, she fashioned worlds haunted by the lifelessness and unreality of stereotype. In *Pushing Lipstick (Spotlight)* of 1979, Simmons played off the public scale of Pop—think of Claes Oldenburg's enormous *Lipstick Ascending on Caterpillar Tracks* (1969–74)—with the private scale of imaginative play.

A great aesthetic paradox of the 1960s and '70s was that to be serious was to risk not being artistically relevant, and some of the most playful artists were the most consequential. The conundrum for art historians is why at this historical juncture seriousness lost its secure grip on art.

Looking to the broader culture, two plausible explanations for this paradoxical state of affairs come to mind. The first is that by the 1960s, at least in the eyes of many young people, America was forfeiting the gravity and respect it had accrued through the defeat of fascism during World War II. The madness of the management of the Cold War and its atomic competition,

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parodied in Stanley Kubrick's film *Doctor Strangelove* (1964), had made the solemnity of officialdom hard to take seriously. Pollock may indeed have been confronting Cold War madness in his own way, but he did so in a swaggering cowboy manner that seemed complicit in national hubris by the time America was riding west into Vietnam.

This hypothesis comports with the received notion of the 1960s as a time of Merry Prankster-style rebellion, but it explains both too much and too little. There are many ways to respond critically to corrupt or mad forms of seriousness besides play. Indeed, the interwar European avant-garde had largely responded to an earlier moment of madness with a perspicacious urgency, or an acerbic mode of absurdity. So why did many in the American neo-avant-garde insist on fooling around?

One answer is that American artists in the 1960s could afford it. Unemployment was low (3.8 percent during the Summer of Love), education was cheap, and productivity was soaring. Although the 1960s are routinely construed as a time of unrest and discontent, the background of the social foment was an unprecedented economic security, which fostered utopian aspirations and may have encouraged artists to mix levity with critique. For artists such as Ruscha, Baldessari, and Huebler, who were too old to be drafted for military service in Vietnam, it was evidently high time for hijinks.

An equally plausible and more interesting explanation for all this artistic tomfoolery is that play had *become* serious. By this I mean that the very military-industrial complex associated with the gray-suited judgment excoriated by Kubrick was giving forms of play a crucial instrumental role in its bureaucratic regime. In the wake of World War II, military specialists determined that handling the complexity of modern systems—from global military operations to nuclear fission—required moving beyond ordinary empiricism into games and simulations. John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern's landmark book *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (1944) provided the paradigm. As Peter Galison discusses in his 1997 book *Image & Logic: A Material Culture of Microphysics*, in the development of the hydrogen bomb, physicists and engineers used Monte Carlo methods to produce simulations of subatomic behavior, making the world of games and simulations an alternate reality in which otherwise unwieldy experiments could be conducted. The RAND corporation soon marketed the approaches it had developed for conducting military games and simulations to other social sectors, and specialists in the social sciences embraced gaming as a new means of modeling modern complexity.

By playing around, young artists in the 1960s and '70s were both critically engaging with a new mode of knowledge production and also reclaiming play from a bureaucratic order bent on turning it to instrumental ends. Play as an autonomous activity has for generations been under threat by bureaucratic managers wishing to instrumentalize it, and American social scientists during the Cold War were particularly concerned about the "durable benefits" and "yield" of leisure time. With games becoming a key instrument of social control, the threat to play as a sphere of autonomous pleasure was greater than ever. Herbert Marcuse, a thinker of importance to many artists, argued in his influential 1955 book *Eros and Civilization* that "play is unproductive and useless precisely because it cancels the repressive and exploitative traits of labor and leisure." In the 1960s and '70s, a young generation of artists sought to open a space between labor and leisure, between the overwrought rhetoric of painting as a kind of transcendental work and the stultifying conventionality of commercially packaged forms of recreation. They took up photography to free themselves

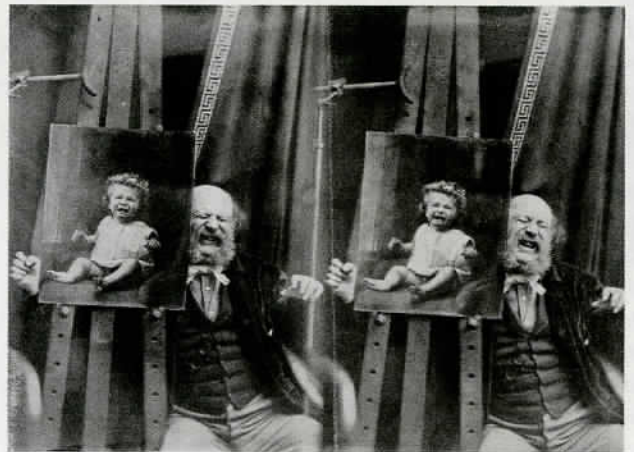
from the straitjacketing legacy of Abstract Expressionism, and to free photography from its futile pursuit of a bankrupt respectability.

This history is interesting to recall today, when so many artists are constructing their photographic surfaces with meticulous care. The age of Chaos Theory is an age of resurgent determinism, when everything from images to weather patterns seems to be governed by computational algorithms and inexorable laws. The gap between video game and drone warfare seems thin indeed, and our anxious economic times contribute to a somber mood. Whether artists can once again find a dream of liberation in the play of photography remains to be seen.



Eleanor Antin, *100 Boots at the Bank, Solana Beach, California, 10:00 am, February 9, 1971 (mailed: April 26, 1971), 1971*  
Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

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Clockwise from top left:  
 Anna Gaskell, *Untitled (Sneeze) #3*, 1995;  
 Joel Sternfeld, *Matanuska Glacier, Matanuska Valley, Alaska*, July 1984;  
 Oscar Rejlander, *Laughing/Crying (Rejlander mimicking *Ginny's Baby*)*, 1871-72; Daniel Bozhkov, *Learn How to Fly Over a Very Large Larry*, 2002, 200-by-300-foot crop sign and flying lessons, East Madison, Maine  
 Gaskell: © Anna Gaskell;  
 Sternfeld: Courtesy the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York; Rejlander: Darwin Papers, Cambridge University Library; Bozhkov: Courtesy the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York