Images appropriated from movies, advertisements, and stock photography have been the source material for much of John Baldessari’s art since the 1970s. How visual conventions—old and new; painterly, photographic, and filmic—inform the way we interpret images is a central question he poses through his work. Baldessari not only investigates how formal devices reinforce the narrative content of an image or image sequence, but also asks us to consider the ways in which images circulate in our mediated environment.

The vertically stacked diptych Two Compositions (Formal / Informal; Interior / Exterior) revises the conventions of the genre of group portraiture.¹ Rather than commemorating an occasion or event, Baldessari here focuses on the pictorial strategies that communicate class, rank, and authority among members of a social group. In the upper image, the artist presents us with a long table, around which are seated a group of elegantly dressed dinner guests whose faces are obliterated by monochromatic circles of paint; in the lower image, he likewise manipulates a scene by painting over the entire bodies of a group seated outdoors at a poolside table. Baldessari first introduced these invasive obliterations in the mid-1980s, following a decade in which he explored the relationship between image

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¹ The group portrait gained particular prominence in 17th-century Holland. For a detailed history and analysis of that genre, see Harry Berger, Jr., Manhood, Marriage, and Mischief: Rembrandt’s “Night Watch” and Other Dutch Group Portraits (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).
sequences and sentence structures.² Painterly obliterations overlaid onto photographic images provided him an opportunity to intervene within the structure of the image, and he has used them ever since.

In *Two Compositions (Formal / Informal; Interior / Exterior)*, Baldessari’s cancellations not only render each figure anonymous, but prompt us to consider the social inflections of the settings, in this case a formal dining room compared to a casual outdoor scene. His painterly interventions also draw attention to how such details as facial expressions, gazes, body language, and dress function as markers of both individuality and meaning in portraiture, as well as how settings communicate issues of social class. The painted portrait in a gilded frame in the upper left corner of the top photograph, for example, is instrumental in conveying an air of aristocratic class, which is reinforced by the elegant dress of the guests around the table, the fine dinnerware, tablecloth, and candles. By contrast, the visual language of the lower image is marked as “informal,” an “exterior” scene with bathers in the background, where our attention is directed at the surrounding setting, the plastic chairs, the ketchup bottle, and the incongruently elegant glasses.

Representations of class, social status, and rank, as much as the role of hand gestures and facial expressions as tools for communication, are rooted in the visual conventions of the group portraiture genre. While the individual portrait is traditionally charged with conveying a likeness of the sitter as well as a psychological resonance that reveals the person beneath the mask, the group portrait is concerned with group identities—the family, an institution, a professional circle. It serves as a vehicle to communicate social values or a group’s civic responsibility and power. Social hierarchies and economics traditionally determine who assumes a prominent place within the portrait and who is assigned a marginal role. Dress, setting, and accessories convey information about the individual as much as the social status of the group as a social unit. These are also the

² For example, in Baldessari’s artist book *Brutus Killed Caesar* (1976), each page spread consists of three photographs that echo the three-word structure of the title. On the left and right we see two profile views of men who are “looking at each other.” These portraits remain constant throughout the book; what changes is the image between the two men. The first sequence reads like a rebus—portrait-knife-portrait—but subsequent examples offer different, often humorous, interpretations, as the knife is replaced by images of a gun, coat hanger, banana peel, potted plant, and can of paint, among other items.
formal strategies that Baldessari is consistently investigating and disrupting in his work. The painted areas are abstract and flat, disrupting the coherence of the scene and puncturing its perspectival space. The colored dots that cover the faces in the upper image of *Two Compositions* not only map the logic of perspective, with the red one designating the vanishing point, but also indicate a social hierarchy—in this case, rendering visible how the perspective highlights the person at the head of the table. By contrast, the abstract gray paint that covers the figures of the seated group in the lower image removes the boundaries between the individual figures to create larger, undefined shapes. In this case, Baldessari does not stress hierarchical differences between figures but the cohesion of the group as a social unit.

Baldessari’s interest in how images convey meaning reaches back to his artistic beginnings as a conceptual artist in the 1960s. At that time, the photograph’s relationship to “the real” and to interpretive frameworks became of particular interest to a number of American and European artists, including Baldessari, Robert Barry, Jan Dibbets, Hans-Peter Feldmann, and Douglas Huebler. Much of the work of photoconceptual artists in the late 1960s centered on the presumed objectivity and accuracy of the photographic image, which they upended through image sequencing or the pairing of seemingly incongruous images and titles. By contrast, Baldessari used nondescript photographs and art historical texts to disrupt the pictorial conventions and values that were taught in art schools or communicated through manuals. In the 1970s, he became increasingly interested in popular culture images—for instance, advertisements and movie stills that conventionally operate in a different context—and the associations that arise from arranging two or more unrelated images into sequences. In the 1980s, he frequently used

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3 In 1969, Robert Barry famously photographed gas containers in a landscape. The photographs had titles such as “Inert Gas Series: Helium. Sometime during the morning of March 5, 1969, 2 cubic feet of Helium will be released into the atmosphere.” According to the title, the image documents an empirical act; the pun centers on the fact that gas is invisible to the eye—the eye of the camera as much as the eye of the viewer.

4 A good example is Baldessari’s 1967 series of photo-transfer paintings. *Wrong* (1967) shows a snapshot of the artist standing in front of a palm tree that looks as if it is growing out of his head; the stenciled caption below the image reads “wrong” and follows the pattern of photo manuals that illustrate “good” and “bad” composition. With this series, Baldessari positioned himself against such conventions, further distancing himself from expectations of artistic craftsmanship by having a friend take the photograph and hiring a sign painter to stencil the letters “wrong” below the image. These photo-transfer works should be seen in context with his text paintings, white canvases on which he had a sign painter stencil phrases such as “Everything is purged from this painting but art, no ideas have entered this work” (1967–68).
movie stills as source material for his work, and *Two Compositions* may likewise derive from the juxtaposition of two movie stills—in which case, shifting the viewer’s approach and expectations. While a photograph, like a painting, is traditionally meant to be viewed, studied, shared, and displayed on its own, the film still, by contrast, is a split second frame that is part of the flow of a larger narrative, conventionally accompanied by sound and not seen by itself. By “halting” the movie, the artist is asking us to read the film stills as photographs. In so doing, he returns our attention to those signs and gestures that are indebted to painterly and photographic conventions—conventions that communicate meaning on a purely visual level.

In the end, Baldessari underscores the importance of reading the literal information in the image against a cultural and contextual framework, and he does so by eluding narrative interpretation. Neither his two images nor his title gives us any indication who the people are or what occasion brings them together. Are we looking at “real people” or actors? Are these actual representations of social gatherings, or scenes staged for a movie or advertisement? This uncertainty fundamentally effects our interpretation of the images, reminding us that we are dealing with a mediated and fragmented reality. The pictures we see refer back to a narrative context—a news story, a film, an advertisement, or possibly an account of history—that we can no longer reconstruct.