Learn about the work of John Baldessari, and create something you could call a photo, a collage, a puzzle, conceptual art...let’s just call it art!

Supplies
Large piece of paper, glue stick, scissors, any old magazines or books with photos, markers.

Who was John Baldessari
John Baldessari (1931-2020) was maybe the most influential artist of the last 50 years. He has done experimental work using video, painting, photography, and text. Baldessari is mostly known for his use of appropriated, or found, photography. Simply put, appropriated photography is when you make art with a photo or photos that you found.

Baldessari made Waterline by collaging six found photographs into one image. Each individual photograph depicts a setting or action related to water. John Baldessari isn’t particularly interested in what each individual photograph means. Instead, he’s much more interested in what happens when two different images “meet” one another. He’s interested in how they change, and what new stories happen when you put one image next to another one.

Baldessari is careful to maintain a sense of mystery in his art. He does this by cropping each image, and he eliminates key information like the faces of the people. This ensures the story is always open to interpretation. Can you create a story for Waterline?

More About Appropriation
The basic idea behind photograph appropriation is that you can change what a photograph is about by putting it in a new place. You can put it next to a new photograph, or alter how and where you see it.

Artists have been appropriating photographs for a long time. Artists were making art with found photos in the early 1900s. As the century progressed, photography became more and more a part of our everyday lives, and every year people took more and more photographs. How many new photographs do you think get taken every year? It’s hard to say exactly how many, but as of 2020, researchers estimate that number to be over 1 TRILLION. That’s about 2.7 BILLION every day, or about 32,000 new photos every second.

Because there are so many photographs, artists who appropriate them think of them as a shared public resource. Even if you didn’t take a photograph yourself, you can still use it in whatever creative ways you want to. You might already understand this idea if you’ve ever created your own version of a meme.
ART SPOT:
Waterline
All Ages
30 mins

Getting Started

1. Start by ripping out any photographs that grab your attention. Don’t overthink it!
2. Carefully cut out your photographs right on the edges. We want each one to be a rectangle, and we don’t want there to be a border. If you want, you can slice off one of the sides to further crop your images to make them more mysterious.
3. Start moving your pieces around and see if you can connect any of the lines from edges of one photo to the lines on the edges of another photo. In the John Baldessari artwork above you can see an example of this where the top of the water in each photo connects to each other.
4. After you connect 2-3 photos, see if you can connect some more on the other sides of some of those already-connected photos.
5. Add color and alter your found photographs even more by tinting details with markers.
6. Glue your photos in place to finish.

Further Explorations

After you’ve finished, try another! This time, make one based on a theme of your choosing. In Waterline there is the obvious theme of water. So for your next work of art, start by finding photos that relate to one another or have something in common. What they have in common can be visual, something you can see - OR - maybe what they have in common is something else, something you can’t see. If your photos all look very different, they can still have a theme if they all relate to the same idea.

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