

The Search of Bas Jan Ader

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Bas Jan Ader's conceptualism is tempered by the poignant inclusion of personal and emotional content, particularly of a melancholic nature. During his extremely short career as an artist from 1964 to 1975, Ader produced video, installations, photography, and performance in Los Angeles. Fittingly, the possibility or impossibility of executing a concept was one of his main artistic concerns. Much of his work depends on the trope of the fall: his most cohesive series is of the artist "falling" in various situations, from a roof and a tree, on a bicycle, into a canal and a pond. He was a skilled sailor and was interested in bodies of water as symbolic of the infinite. This played out tragically in his final work, *In Search of the Miraculous*, in which he set sail from Cape Cod across the Atlantic in a 13-foot boat and was never seen again. He is often remembered via the mythology of his untimely end. In his work he also explored the theme of heroics, once calling himself ironically a "Dutch Master;" he was certainly conscious of his own persona as a sort of tragic hero—one who set out to fail, and perhaps unwittingly succeeded.

The linguistic proposal is hugely important to Ader. The premise of his works almost always includes a preceding descriptive title, a *fait accompli*. The 1970 work, *Light vulnerable objects threatened by eight cement bricks*, included eggs, light bulbs tangled in their wires, some flowers in a vase, a book, a cake, and a painting. Ader then cut the strings, allowing the cinderblocks to crush the objects below. This piece has the quality of existing as a powerful concept solely through its title; the work is already executed as it is linguistically called into being.

The conceptualism of many artists working contemporaneously with Ader involved a combination of solemnity and ironic detachment. Alexander Alberro situates Ader's work in the context of artists like Vito Acconci and Christopher D'Arcangelo.¹ In all of their practices, an assertion of bodily presence coexists with a decentering of the artist as subject. All three men emphasize their physical vulnerability in carrying out their performative work. Yet Ader complicates the very notion of carrying out a work.

William Leavitt noted that Ader "wanted to create an art that had no artifice, an art that was based on absolute and irrefutable truths like those of mathematics His work however arrived at something quite opposite of this absolute. He arrived at a poetic recognition of the Sisyphean struggle entailed in achieving such a goal."² The idea of starting with a concept and arriving at its opposite—or never arriving—is pertinent to his 1973 installation at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. A vase of flowers stood next to the wall on which a few letters of the text "thoughts

¹ Alexander Alberro. "Reconsidering Conceptual Art, 1966-1977" in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999), xxi.

² Paul Andriesse. "Bas Jan Ader, an artist in search of the miraculous" in *Bas Jan Ader: Kunstenaar* (Amsterdam: Openbaar Kunstbezit, 1988), 70.

unsaid / then forgotten” were painted each day. By the time the phrase was complete, the flowers had wilted.³ The temporality invoked by the “then” of forgetting in the text is literalized by the effects of time on the flowers. This piece shares an interest in language as image with the work of Lawrence Weiner, among others. Yet the presence of the vase of flowers adds a more lyrical element than Weiner’s monumental and evenly stenciled wall text. What does it mean to conjure the idea of a thought both unsaid and also forgotten? William Leavitt also noted that “as well as his desire for concrete truth, he has a corresponding attraction to the imperfect, the broken, the mistaken, and the misunderstood.”⁴ This perhaps explains the presence of the wilting flowers, and Ader’s emotional self-inscriptions in some of his other works. His 1969 installation used the text “PLEASE DON’T LEAVE ME” written in large letters on the wall. The thread of melancholy narrative is continued in his most famous work, *I’m too sad to tell you*, which existed as a video, a photograph, and a postcard sent to a large number of friends and acquaintances. In the video, Ader is shown attempting to speak. He repeatedly opens his mouth in a gesture of pain and internal struggle. He places his hands over his face in defeat, tears stream down his cheeks; he rocks back and forth with eyes lowered, breaking into bouts of grimacing sobs. Language pulls conceptual weight here—*I’m too sad to tell you* has already negated the possibility of speech.

Ader opens his mouth, on the verge of speaking, just as John Cage’s orchestra raises their instruments for an excruciating duration of negated action in his famous silent work *4’33’’*. The sounds are generated from the audience and the environment itself. The expectations of harmonious and sublime sounds are denied in order to make the listener aware of human time and space. This absence is yet fraught with emotional tension. The strength of this piece is its mesmerizing quality: each second promises an outburst, while the moment of climax continues to be deferred, prolonging the suspense indefinitely. The utter silence of the film denies the narrative arc of that viewers expect: the anticipation of action or conflict. Linear modes can no longer be credible.

Ader was susceptible to the unfathomable grief of the world, and he understood the dilemma involved in representation. This can be seen as a postmodernist gesture, an early example of an artist that could no longer lay much trust in the *grands récits* typical of “Dutch Master” style history, including those ideologies promoted by conservative religion, which had been highly important to his family in Holland. His emphasis on failure repudiates the notion of heroic progress. He operates on the border of dry conceptualism, endowing his work with his own pitiful subjectivity. His deadpanning is laced with emotion, and this provides a subtle undercurrent of narrative. Yet the narrative is always a tragic one, one that emotional or bodily harm.

³ Bill Leavitt as told by Andriessse, “Bas Jan Ader, an artist in search of the miraculous” 80.

⁴ Andriessse. “Bas Jan Ader, an artist in search of the miraculous”, 70-71

Testing endurance and emotional fragility becomes a test of the artist's physical body in Ader's other films that involve falling. *Fall I, Los Angeles* of 1970 shows the artist and the chair he was perched in tumbling down the roof of his house. *Fall II, Amsterdam* shows Ader swerving on a bicycle into a canal. Ader explained in an interview: "I have always been fascinated by the tragic. That is also contained in the act of falling; the fall is failure. . . . Everything is tragic because people always lose control of processes, of matter, of their feelings."⁵ The inability to speak is a failure demonstrated in *I'm too sad to tell you*. The loss of bodily control against gravity presents itself in his series of falls. The 1971 *Broken Fall (Organic)* shows the artist dangling from a tree branch until he slips into a creek below, and *Broken Fall (Geometric)* reveals Ader seemingly swaying in the wind before falling against a wooden sawhorse. Starting with work like *Light vulnerable objects threatened by eight cement bricks*, the trope of the fall enters into his oeuvre. It continues to play out with his later performative videos that use his body as the object to test fragility or resilience. It seems this juxtaposition is in fact psychically or symbolically present in nearly all of his works.

In a Christmas card to Art & Project gallery in 1970 he wrote "I'm making a subdued work. On the film I silently state everything which has to do with falling. It's a large task which demands a great deal of difficult thinking. It's going to be poignant. I like that. I'm a Dutch Master."⁶ The Fall has a mysterious symbolic air that is never made clear by the artist. In response to the question of why, he simply stated, "because gravity overpowers me."⁷ These videos are tragic in a sense, yet also comical in their element of spectacle. Jörg Heiser likens them to early slapstick comedy. He says that they "reformulate—and to some extent parody—conceptual performance and its documentation."⁸ Christy Lange points out the similarity of Ader's fall videos to Bruce Nauman's *Failing to Levitate in the Studio*.⁹ There is indeed a similar gesture whereby failing itself is staged and systematically documented. They both set out to document their shortcomings as other artists may document their triumphs. Emma Cocker notes that Ader's "inhabitation of the Sisyphian trope can be seen to oscillate between a genuine attempt at a given (if impossible) task, and the playing out" of such a theatrical attempt.¹⁰ The fall is a physical miming of the abject, the consciously acted-out opposite of success.

Perhaps the phonetic similarities of fall and fail informed him in some way. A short writing by Tacita Dean on Ader was included in the 2010 Whitechapel Documents of Contemporary Art volume on Failure in which she compares him to Icarus and says that "not to have fallen would have meant failure."¹¹ This sets up a kind of impossible binary for judging success, one that becomes whimsical in the way it doubles back on itself.

⁵ Betty van Garrel. 'Bas Jan Ader's tragiek schuilt in een pure val,' *Haage Post*, 5 January -11 January 1972.

⁶ As quoted by Andriessse "Bas Jan Ader, an artist in search of the miraculous" 75.

⁷ Andriessse. "Bas Jan Ader, an artist in search of the miraculous" 75.

⁸ Jörg Heiser. "Curb your romanticism: Bas Jan Ader's slapstick" in *Bas Jan Ader : please don't leave me* (Rotterdam, Netherlands, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2006), 25.

⁹ Christy Lange. "Bound to Fail" in *Failure* (Cambridge, Mass, MIT Press, 2010), 133.

¹⁰ Emma Cocker. "Over and Over, Again and Again" in *Failure*, 157.

¹¹ Tacita Dean. "And He Fell into the Sea" in *Failure*, 129-130.

Ader's only true performance work, *The Boy Who Fell over Niagara Falls* occurred twice daily for a week in 1972 at Art & Project in Amsterdam. The performance consisted of his reading a story as it was printed in Readers' Digest about a boy who survived plunging down the waterfall in a small boat. As he reads it he slowly drinks a glass of water. Here too, the title of the work contains the crux of the action.

In a notebook, he wrote down the quote from Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "The Lord speaks: 'I made him just and right, sufficient to have stood, through free to fall.'"¹² Although there has been very little written about Ader, both Paul Andriessse in 1988 and Erik Beenker in 2006 did not miss the *fall of man* connotations. Both of Ader's parents were preachers and his father, after whom Ader was named, was shot by a firing squad in World War II after being caught helping Jews.¹³ Although not overtly religious, there is certainly an element of martyrdom and tragic heroicism in Ader's oeuvre.

In works like *I'm too sad to tell you*, a heroic struggle seems to be taking place. Erik Beenker asserts the religious overtones of this piece, drawing reference to the weeping Christ of many medieval paintings.¹⁴ Ader's relationship to heroicism is a complex one. The myth that has been created about him after death has contributed to a kind of mysticism and tragedy that surrounds his name. Yet as a working artist his interest was not in narcissism, though video art can easily take on narcissistic tones, as Rosalind Krauss would argue about Vito Acconci's *Centers* of 1971. It is a 20-minute video of Acconci pointing at the center of the lens, or, as she puts it, "using the video monitor as a mirror."¹⁵ By contrast, Ader is negating and parodying the image of the artist-hero. For the poster for his MFA show at Claremont College, a photomontage of Ader smoking a cigar on his roof is combined with a cartoon cloud with the text "The Artist Contemplating the Forces of Nature." He puns on the image of the artist as braving all forces of the elements in dedication to the accomplishment of his genius.

Jan Verwoert argues that Ader ultimately takes recourse to the classical Greek model of the tragic hero who "takes the conscious decision to carry out a plan that will inevitably lead to his fall."¹⁶ This type of doomed, Sisyphean heroics can be seen to some extent in *Broken Fall (Organic)*. Longer than his other videos, the duration becomes a test of his endurance and physical strength, pitted against nature and the forces of gravity. But because the shot begins with him already dangling from the tree, the narrative is focused on the ebbing energy of the artist, rather than his ability to climb. His struggle to accomplish the work can only end in defeat, with a plummet into the water below.

¹² Andriessse. "Bas Jan Ader, an artist in search of the miraculous" 76.

¹³ Erik Beenker. "Bas Jan Ader (1942-1975 missing at sea): The man who wanted to look beyond the horizon" in *Bas Jan Ader : please don't leave me* (Rotterdam, Netherlands, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2006), 13.

¹⁴ Beenker. "Bas Jan Ader (1942-1975 missing at sea)" 13.

¹⁵ Rosalind Krauss. "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism" in *October* (MIT Press. Vol. 1, Spring 1976), 50

¹⁶ Jan Verwoert. *Bas Jan Ader: In Search of the Miraculous*. (Cambridge, Mass 2006)

Broken Fall (Organic) has a posthumously haunting quality when taken in the context of his final work, *In Search of the Miraculous*. Regarding his final work, Erik Beenker said that “he put his fate in the hands of the overwhelming forces of nature, possibly in a religious longing to be swallowed up by infinity.”¹⁷ Beenker then refers to Paul Andriessse and his similar intimation: “In the middle ages the highest form of pilgrimage was to go to sea in a small boat.”¹⁸ *In Search of the Miraculous* was a three-part piece that began in 1973 with a nighttime walk from the Hollywood Hills to the ocean, photographed and inscribed with lyrics from the Coasters’ song “Searchin’”. Eighteen black and white photographs of the artist moving through L.A. with a flashlight were displayed in a row, organized as a sort of filmstrip. The last image is of him at the very edge of the sea. He then conceived of a trans-Atlantic journey in a one-man yacht only four meters long, and concluding with another nighttime walk, this time through Amsterdam upon his arrival. In April of 1975, Ader exhibited *In Search of the Miraculous* at the Claire Copley Gallery in Los Angeles. For the opening, a choir sung traditional sea shanties. Afterwards, lifesize images of the choir were projected onto the wall while the recording of the songs played. On July 9, 1975, Ader set sail from Cape Cod. He was last seen by fishermen off the coast of the Azores islands, about 500 miles from the US coast.¹⁹ Remnants of his boat were found off the shore of Ireland, but Ader was lost at sea. He was 33 when he died and his death was not intended. To contemplate this piece is to contemplate a meta-level of the failure of the artist and the limit of the human range.

Ader’s work has gained new attention in the 21st century. When *I am too sad to tell you* was shown at the Istanbul Modern in the spring of 2012 as part of a travelling show from the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, it was placed in important dialogue with other video works. Vito Acconci’s *Blindfolded Catching* of 1970 was directly adjacent. Both demonstrate excruciating acts of endurance, but Ader presents a more romantic take on conceptualism. *I’m too sad to tell you* appears to test of the body’s emotional limits, whereas Acconci tests the body’s physical limits. The Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam recently acquired much of Ader’s work and several exhibitions and films have recently been put together about the artist. The fact that he has resurfaced in the art world’s imagination bears witness to the strength of his oeuvre, truncated though it is. His personalized and poetic take on conceptualism and his “searching and never-finding quality” are just as moving as they once were.²⁰ To build failed expectations—the slipping grasp, the inability to speak—into the premise of his work opened up a new horizon for artistic activity, one that he strove towards until the end.

After his death, the following underlined quote from Hegel’s *Aesthetica* was found among Ader’s notes and books: “For the beauty of art is the beauty that is born—born again, that is—of

¹⁷ Beenker, “Bas Jan Ader (1942-1975 missing at sea)” 17.

¹⁸ Andriessse. “Bas Jan Ader, an artist in search of the miraculous” 63.

¹⁹ Beenker. “Bas Jan Ader (1942-1975 missing at sea)” 9.

²⁰ 1988 translation from Dutch by Beth O’Brien, as quoted by Andriessse in “Bas Jan Ader, an artist in search of the miraculous” 67-66.

the mind.”²¹ The realization of that beauty is impossible. The completion of the gesture occurs in the mind of the beholder. This impulse is literalized by his final work, which of course could not be completed. Ader attempted to avoid the constraints of finality through a conscious refusal of standard methodology.

²¹ as quoted by Paul Andriess in his essay “Bas Jan Ader, an artist in search of the miraculous” in *Bas Jan Ader: Kunstenaar*. (Amsterdam: Openbaar Kunstbezit, 1988), 72.

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