



BAS JAN ADER IN THE AGE OF 'JACKASS'

RENE DAALDER FINDS THAT IT'S NOT JUST LAUGHTER THAT ACCOMPANIES FALLING ABOUT

Contemporary Magazine, February 2004

art... is still doubly a servant – to higher aims no doubt, on the one hand, but nonetheless to vacuity and frivolity on the other

Underlined quote from Hegel found in Bas Jan Ader's belongings

The only project that ever came my way without me having to tenaciously pursue it is the film about the late Dutch/Californian conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader that I am currently making. Two Californian artists, Chris Kubick and Anne Walsh, had made an audio CD for which they surrounded a group of psychic channelers with the art of Yves Klein and prompted them to get in touch with the late artist in the afterlife. When they told me about their current plan to take these channelers on a boat trip in order to psychically connect with Bas Jan Ader, who

disappeared at sea during a solo Atlantic crossing in a tiny sailboat, I started to wonder about my compatriot's curious fate. On a subsequent trip to Holland, the mere mention of Ader led almost immediately to my being enlisted by the Dutch TV station VPRO to make a documentary about him. They were convinced that the biographical coincidence of both of us emigrating at a young age from Holland to California would give me the proper perspective to shed some new light on the bi-cultural artist, which hopefully the movie will end up doing.

I had heard about Ader before, on the occasion of a 1999 retrospective at the University of California in Irvine, where he used to teach. Articles at the time painted a rather eccentric picture of the artist whose work is a complex mixture of irony, romanticism and physical

challenges. Ader left behind a small oeuvre, putting himself at the centre of photographs and films which, when seen together, seem to hint at an unfolding storyline. The self-referential narrative quality of his work is undoubtedly one of the reasons that Ader's art appeals to so many younger artists that have followed in his footsteps. In the course of putting together the larger narrative of Ader's life, however, it occurred to me that the reasons why his work strikes such a strong chord today may well be the very same ones that caused him not to be entirely understood in his own time. According to his friend Bill Leavitt, Ader considered cool California hipster artists like Alan Ruppertsberg or Jack Goldstein a bit of a joke, and was apparently quite prepared to make a bigger joke, at the considerable risk of blowing his own cool

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Previous page: Documentation from filming of Fall II. Amsterdam, 1970. colour photograph. below: Broken Fall (Organic). 1974/94, photograph. 46 x 63.5 cms, edition of 3. Both images courtesy: Bas Jan Ader Estate, Modern Art Inc, London, Patrick Painter Editions, Hong Kong/Vancouver



cover in the process.

For example, in one of his more famous pieces, *I'm Too Sad To Tell You* (1970), the handsome artist is crying in front of the camera, exhibiting an overt 'femininity' that we can readily appreciate today but which would have been wholly unacceptable in the macho artworld of California in the 1960s, had it not been for the implied irony of the piece.

The same can be said about a rather sentimental photograph of Ader portraying himself as a lone figure silhouetted against an ocean sunset, called *Farewell to Faraway Friends* (1971). Once again, irony was the artist's first line of defense in a project that strongly echoed *The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818), a painting by the nineteenth-century German artist Casper David Friedrich in which a man can be seen meditating upon the mysteries that lie beyond land's end. Friedrich, like other Romantic artists of his era, considered himself part of a unified reality that transcends individual experiences while seeking to penetrate a world of spirit rather than surfaces. While there was nothing unusual in this for Ader, who studied philosophy for two years, to his students – who he urged to follow his example – it was rather bewildering given that they had just been told by American Minimalists like Donald Judd to ignore representation and look at the materials and the art object as the thing itself, no questions asked.

The first part of Ader's final project, which was supposed to be a three piece work, consists of a series of photographs of the artist searching at night for something or someone with a flashlight along the freeways and the backyards of L.A. Finally he arrives at the edge of the sea by dawn to 'explore his own relationship to the great unknowables', as Robert Rosenblum defines the mindset of the Northern Romantic Tradition in his great book on the subject. Ader called the triptych *In Search of the Miraculous*, which happens to be the title of a well-known book on the mystical philosopher George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff, who himself knew a thing or two about commingling with the cosmic powers.

In other projects, like a photographic work called *Pitfall on the way to a new Neo Plasticism* (1971), Ader appears to have taken a fall in front of a lighthouse made famous by the 'neo plasticist' painter Piet Mondrian. In fact, several other works by Ader refer to Mondrian, suggesting a strong, if ironic, bond between himself and the Dutch abstract artist who, like Friedrich, was constantly trying to establish contact with what Rosenblum terms 'a world that lay beyond or beneath the outer shell of matter'.

Ader's best-known work consists of his *fall* pieces, a series of films in which he can be seen



All My Clothes, 1970, silvergelatin print, 28 x 35.5 cms. Courtesy: Bas Jan Ader Estate, Patrick Painter Editions Inc, Hong Kong/Vancouver

falling from a tree, from the roof of his house in Claremont or riding his bicycle into a canal in Amsterdam. These films have often been grouped with other expressions of torturous self-sacrifice, such as Chris Burden's famous artistic feat of having himself shot in the arm, but once we start to investigate Bas Jan's work in a broader context we discover a more timeless subgenre in the conceptual art movement that revolves entirely around gravity.

The list of works fitting this category ranges from Yves Klein's *The Painter Hurls Himself Into the Void* (1960) and the fainting spells in Pipilotti Rist's 1988 video *Pipilotti's Mistakes [Absolution]* to Marco Schuler's hilarious wind tunnel slapstick in *Schuler Getting Dressed* (2000), not to mention numerous other great films in between. In fact, so long is the list of gravity-driven films that we may very well look at this elemental force of nature as a medium in its own right which, today more than ever before, is being explored with a vengeance. Extreme sports, acrobatic ballet, bungee jumping, skydiving, *Jackass*, all are acts of human defiance against a power much greater than ourselves, which puts us at the edge of mortal disaster while simultaneously providing us with the thrill of being alive.

Scientists never cease to be in awe of how the gravitational force is so finely tuned that even the slightest variation in its pull would have made life in the universe impossible. It is because of phenomena like this that it has lately become a trend in some corners of the scientific

community to reinstate God as a key factor in various equations that at present cannot be understood. Other scientists of course perceive their colleagues' sleight of hand as completely inappropriate, just as Ader's ambiguous metaphysical agenda would have been considered with great suspicion by his peers in the artworld, had they bothered to look beyond the much lauded irony of his work.

Even when he set out on his final single-handed journey to return home from America to Holland on board a tiny boat called *Ocean Wave*, many looked at the small vessel as an artistic choice which, like the project's title – *In Search of the Miraculous* – was construed as further confirmation of Ader's flair for the absurd. In truth, however, Bas Jan, who was a competent sailor, wanted to break the record set by an American who a few years earlier had crossed the Atlantic in a 13-foot boat. And with regards to the larger goal implied in the project's grandiose title, there can be no question that for Ader, along with Friedrich and Mondrian, the sea represented an uncharted region at once geographic and spiritual, where the boundaries between the natural and the supernatural worlds would be most likely to disappear.

Like all great art, there are many interpretations of this unfinished masterpiece, but interestingly most of them have chosen to overlook yet another clue to its significance, in this case the book he took along on his trip: *Hegel's Phenomenology of the Spirit*. To the reader of the German philosopher's thesis it



Farewell to Faraway Friends, 1971, colour photograph, 45.5 x 59.7 cms. Courtesy: Bas Jan Ader Estate, Patrick Painter Editions, Hong Kong/Vancouver

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becomes clear that, once again, the artist had some of the Big Themes on his mind. Hegel's dense writings can be quoted at length to assign a more educated meaning to Ader's final quest but, for the purpose of this article, it should suffice to mention that Hegel held the opinion that reality should be thought of as a big mind trying to figure itself out. In a Hegelian sense, rather than in the sense of a mediated artistic experience, Bas Jan Ader's last voyage was an attempt to participate in the Truth. 'Formation is the vanishing of being into nothing and the vanishing of nothing into being,' Hegel wrote. And even if one cannot completely fathom what he specifically meant, one can easily imagine Ader pondering such thoughts as he surrendered himself to the forces of nature, in freefall between Heaven and Earth, as far removed from the mediated world he'd left behind as is humanly possible...

The chances are that identifying some of these themes in his work will help us to understand the romantic attraction to Ader that is felt by

many contemporary artists who are living in a world in which Global Positioning Satellites have rendered the creation of a masterpiece like *In Search of the Miraculous* all but impossible – especially the vanishing part for which, in our present culture, we're hard-pressed even to find the proper metaphors. But to witness how Ader's small and austere oeuvre 'successfully manages to translate the most complex metaphysical experiences in as unlikely a medium as his Conceptual Idea Art should be encouraging to those who are trying to come to terms with similar yearnings today.

Bas Jan Ader's work will be on show at Modern Art Inc, London from 27 May to 4 July. See modernartinc.com for details

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Contemporary Magazine, February 2004