

## The Case of Bas Jan Ader

Brad Spence

In considering the work of artist Bas Jan Ader, there is an almost irresistible temptation to lapse into speculative narratives of the sensational and popular variety. This is perfectly understandable, since his story climaxes with the artist lost at sea in a risky performance—leaving behind only a modest number of works that seem laden with foreboding clues. Even aside from dramatic questions of the artist's ultimate fate, responses to his work are rife with personal projections and detective-style sleuthing as to his psychological state and artistic intent. Such a frenzy in the interpretive process suggests that a measure of self-consciousness is warranted in any narrative voice-over to Ader's tragic plight.

While it would be premature to describe the case of Bas Jan Ader as a mystery of grand and deliberate design, intended to simultaneously interrogate and exploit our tendencies to construct retroactive, narrative meaning, the artist's work was persistently engaged with these issues. With a certain obsessive consistency, Ader would repeatedly thrust himself into the center of an irreconcilable dichotomy: the contradictory position of being both the subject and object of a story—director and actor in his own production. In the short films, photographs, slides and performances which comprise his remarkably short career as an active artist (1970-1975), Ader casts himself—a handsome, mute, vulnerable presence—as the protagonist in scenes that are simultaneously melodramatic, funny and strangely opaque.

To begin a discussion of Ader's work in terms of scripting, performance and artistic personas is to employ a vocabulary that is entirely comfortable in the late-nineties. Presently, the *self* as a discursive construction of competing roles has been extensively theorized as well as thoroughly canonized in the work of artists such as Cindy Sherman. It is noteworthy that Ader studied art in Southern California in the late sixties when a Minimalist-Conceptualist practice was attempting to eliminate the contaminating "cult of personality" from artmaking, in favor of a more objective, scientific approach. While Ader adopted much of Conceptualism's orthodoxy, particularly its evidentiary treatment of the art object, he often chose subjects—e.g. flowers, sunsets, tears—which engaged the sort of vulgar sentimentality that was antithetical to the prevailing empirical ethos.



The circumstances of Ader's disappearance are follows: On July 9, 1975, he departed from Cape Cod, Massachusetts in a 12 foot, 6-inch sailboat. His destination was Falmouth, England, on a solo voyage he projected to take 67 days—a record for the smallest vessel to cross the Atlantic. Three weeks in Ader's voyage, radio contact was broken, and there were no further signs of him until the empty hull of his craft was discovered off the coast of Ireland the following April. His body was never found.

Ader's trans-Atlantic feat was conceived as the second part of a trilogy titled *In Search of the Miraculous*, 1975. The first part was held at the Claire Copley Gallery in Los Angeles, where a small choir with piano accompaniment sang sea shanties. The third was planned for a museum in his native Netherlands. Initially, Ader's disappearance met with nearly unanimous skepticism. Even those close to the artist interpreted the event as a fabricated stunt perfectly in keeping with his sly, cryptic approach to art and life. Known for his enigmatic presence, (e.g. he perpetually wore navy blue seafaring garments) Ader's demeanor has been described as one part prankster and another brooding, melancholy European—he emigrated alone to Southern California in 1963 at age 22. Certain apparent clues, such as the copy of *The Strange Last Voyage of Donald Crowhurst* found in his faculty locker, seemed to point to a hoax or dubious intent. The discovered text gives a non-fictional account of a sailor's attempt to fake a non-stop, solo voyage around the globe and his eventual loss of sanity and life to the sea. Only after several years was it finally accepted that, whatever the circumstances, the artist was in fact gone.

Much of Ader's work centered on the simple act of falling. *Fall I (Los Angeles)*, 1970, documented in black and white, Conceptual-style photographs, finds the artist sitting in a chair atop the roof of his California bungalow. In the sequence that follows, he inexplicably loses his poise, awkwardly rolls down the roof and plummets into the bushes below. Similar pieces find the artist biking into a canal, *Fall II (Amsterdam)*, 1970 and loosing his grip on a tree branch, *Broken Fall (Organic)*, 1971. By removing these perilous moments of action from any motivating context, Ader invites two almost mutually exclusive possibilities for interpretation. The first focused on the irreducible physicality of his performance; the artist, in experiencing the corporeal threat of a particular situation, offers his body as the finite producer and bearer of meaning. That is, in the Modernist-Materialist tradition of "it is what it is," the body becomes the ultimate interpretive measure. Although Ader was unusually guarded in speaking about his work, he pointedly denied this perspective as his sole intent: "I do not make body sculpture, body art or body works. When I fell off the roof of my house or into a canal, it was because gravity made itself master over me." Thus Ader opens his work to a second group of more literary possibilities: metaphor, allegory, irony and the corresponding narratives of the self. His *falls* make themselves available as symbols ranging from subjective failure and dissolution to that of a theological order.

Ader repeatedly enacts the Cartesian contradictions between the experience of bodily pain and the intersubjective production of consciousness. In his essay, "On the Essence of Laughter," French poet Charles Baudelaire discusses the comedic convention of falling in terms of this experience of fragmentation: "The man who trips would be the last to laugh at his own fall, unless he happens to be a philosopher, one who had acquired by habit, a power of rapid self-division, and thus of assisting as a disinterested spectator at the phenomenon of his own ego." Thus for Baudelaire, falling can engender a sense of doubling. A person who has tripped and is falling is losing the self-possession of consciousness and becoming an object. To laugh during a fall is not merely to imagine yourself as another spectator, that is in another subjective state, but to recognize the smug folly of consciousness in facing its own material constitution.

In some sense, falling, as a forced union of mind and matter, could be seen as a rehearsal for the more immutable event of dying. This analogy is palpable in Ader's short film *Nightfall*, 1971. Shot in his garage-studio, the camera records the artist painstakingly hoisting a large brick over his head. His figure is harshly lit by two tangles of light bulbs. He suddenly loses control of the brick,

crushing one strand of lights. As he again lifts the brick, allowing tension and dread to accrue, the climax seems inevitable—the brick will (and does) fall and terminate the camera's remaining illumination. Here the film abruptly ends with the irrevocable logic of consciousness extinguished. This simple cause and effect sequence performs a narrative that is startlingly incongruous with its conclusion. The brick is witnessed demolishing the lights, but that seems to be an insufficient explanation for the void of meaning it leaves in the wake of the film's ending—the blunt finality of another's death, by implication, creates a similar scramble to find language for a disturbing rupture.

All artists, of course, eventually yield the interpretive legacy of their work to their audience. Ader, however, from early on, seems preoccupied with this eventuality and makes work as if he were already absent. Conscious that popular conceptions of the tragic artist frequently dominate the public's reception of art, he willingly casts himself in the role of the troubled genius. The following notebook entry provides a clue to his degree of self-consciousness: "Write an article regarding Van Gogh's genius and pre-eminence as modernist through the price of the cutting off of an ear (public always recognized implicitly his real achievement as an artist was this act.)"

In a very early series of photographs, eventually abandoned, Ader decidedly assumes the position of "the artist." One image, titled *The Artist as Consumer of Extreme Comfort*, circa 1968, shows Ader reclining by a fire, sipping wine and reading a book. Another, *The Artist Contemplating Forces of Nature*, 1967, finds him smugly smoking a cigar in a wicker chair that is balanced on his rooftop (he will later begin his first fall from this vantage). This early ironic posturing clearly illustrates Ader's interest in fulfilling romantic expectations for "the artist" in the manner of a character actor.

In his later work, a degree of irony is still palpable through the use of kitschy, sentimental imagery, even as the act becomes increasingly difficult to discern as such. The series of films and photographs *I'm too Sad to Tell You*, 1970-71, document Ader crying for the camera. This trope of Hollywood melodrama, the teary close-up, becomes a rather convincing display of emotion. Here again, he isolates the action from any narrative context, which the Hollywood counterpart depends upon for effect. In one version of this piece, Ader reproduced a tearful still as a postcard—writing the title on verso and sending copies to artworld denizens. Thus "the artist's" personal misery is converted into a consumable souvenir. Language's failure to convey experience—"my sadness can not be told in words"—is quickly supplanted by its ability to tell narratives. Ader purposefully lends this scene of despair to a storyline of the romantic, miserable artist, however trivialized in the translation.

Perhaps a parallel could be drawn between Ader's creation of an artistic persona cast adrift in the currents of public reception and *In Search of the Miraculous*, in which he put himself at the mercy of the sea. Such an analogy—between linguistic and natural forces—is played out in other works, e.g. a compost heap amalgamating dirt and texts, *473 Reader's Digest Digested*, 1970, and an uncompleted series in which the artist stands at the ocean's edge holding TV-style cue cards on which the Greek elements "fire," "air," "water," and "earth" are handwritten. With *In Search of the Miraculous*, the classical comparison of narration to a journey dovetails such that Ader's scripted tale of romantic quest is placed in contradictory proximity with his bodily peril. The sea's natural forces of aleatory danger threaten the integrity of language, whose ordering logic of cause/effect, departure/arrival, beginning/end produces the story of a self. The body's vulnerability lies in precarious tension with the desire to insert oneself in a meaningful, controllable narrative. Ader brought these irreconcilable contradictions to an excruciating climax in a work that quite appropriately fails to provide simple resolution.

The fact that Ader's body was never recovered continues to allow manifold speculative scenarios of suicide, new lives or brazen recklessness. His story's ambiguous denouement finds an ominous parallel in a 1972 performance *The Boy Who Fell Over Niagara Falls*. For the duration of this exhibition, Ader would, twice daily, sit in the gallery and read aloud a short story from that quintessential source for abridged, popularized narratives, *Reader's Digest*. The piece tells of a boat excursion that inadvertently carries the captain and a seven-year-old passenger over the Niagara Falls. This true story is simultaneously tragic and miraculous as the captain perishes and the boy survives. In the narrative form as it is methodically conveyed by the artist, the characters drift toward consequences that, with the emphasis of repetition, seem fated; and like Ader's own artistic plight, ends with poignant ambiguity.



---

Brad Spence curated the first US retrospective for the artist Bas Jan Ader in 1999. As an artist, he is represented by the Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica and Atelier Cardenas Bellanger, Paris. Spence is currently working on a book entitled *To Hell With Everything and Everyone*.