THE ART WORLD

CONCEPTUAL MOTION

From the sixties, in Amsterdam.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

If you were a Conceptual artist in the late nineteen-sixties and early seventies, it scarcely mattered what you did, as long as it wasn't much, and you documented it. The slighter your enterprise was, the better, to advertise the audacity of a sneakily grand coup in the institutional order of contemporary art. "In & Out of Amsterdam: Travels in Conceptual Art, 1960-1976" is a wispy and quite timely show of works by four Dutch, three American, two German, and a pair of British artists, at the Museum of Modern Art. Here are some Conceptualist tactics it revisits: counting one's footsteps on city walks (Stanley Brouwn, 1971); falling off a roof in Los Angeles and riding a bike into a canal in Amsterdam (Bas Jan Ader, 1970); and moving poles that a particular robin liked sitting on to shift the bird's favored territory from one part of a park to another (Jan Dibbets, 1969-70). Here are others, more sustained: boldly lettering abstruse prose on walls (Lawrence Weiner, since 1968) and registering a century's worth of time in a hundred books of three hundred and sixty-five or (one in every four) three hundred and sixty-six numerically captioned, otherwise blank pages (Hanne Darboven, 1970).

It all advanced a common cause of swinging the identity of art away from handmade objects, marketed by dealers, to cogitated manifestations, administered by curators as auteurs. The movement surfaced in a legendary show by the curator Harald Szeemann in Bern, Switzerland, in 1969—"Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form"—in which some artists participated by making a point of not participating. The subsequent heyday of Conceptualism coincided with a crisis: the arrival of a huge generation of art students during a dire economic recession that came on the heels of an unprecedented market boom. Look around. Here we are again. Long in the blind spot of a money-bedizened art world, early Conceptualism may well freshly excite young artists today.

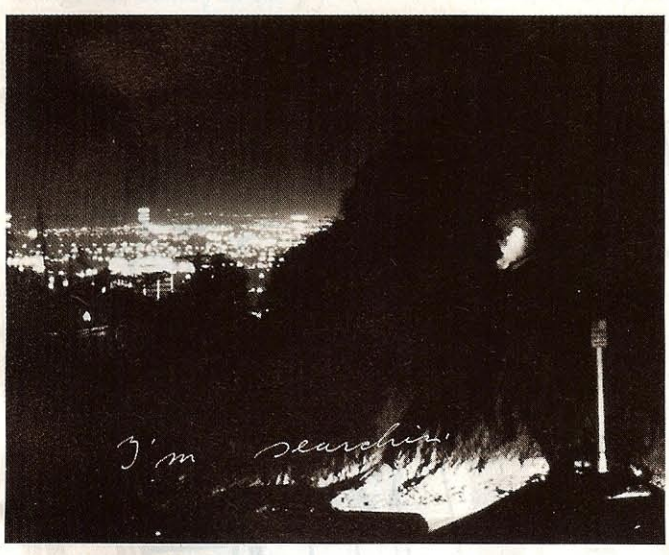
The show's focus is contingent but not arbitrary. Exploring one node of a transatlantic network of mutual influences, it features artists who worked or showed, to significant effect, in Amsterdam back when all artists in Holland, foreigners included, were eligible for support with public funds. A communitarian afflatus extended to the city's leading gallery for Conceptual art, Art & Project (1968-2001), whose archives yield, at MOMA, a subsidiary show of prints, drawings, photographs, publications, and ephemera. Busy and drab to simultaneous extremes, that array is practically viewer-proof. (It just about put me to sleep on my feet.)

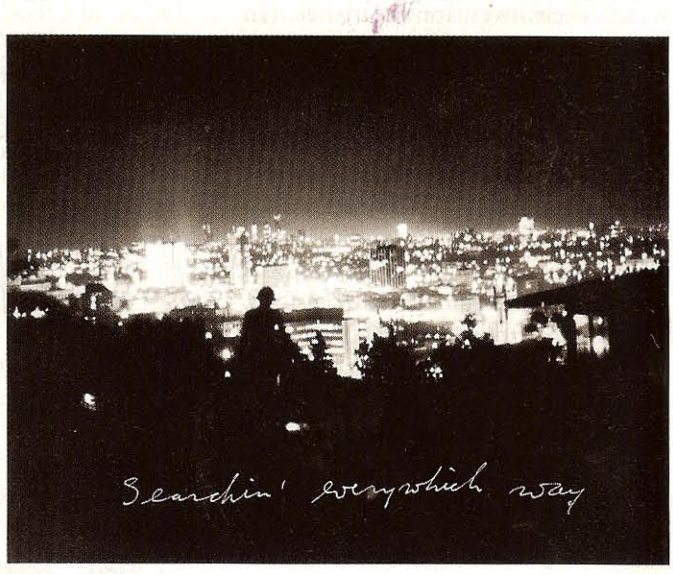
Beamish social democracy, which both channelled and softened the time's contagion of radical politics, inflected avant-garde taste in Amsterdam. None of the show's artists are polemical. All are carefully far-out. Gilbert & George, represented by works that announced the artists' status as "living sculpture," and Sol LeWitt, with an early wall drawing realized by other hands from his instructions, are famous, having long since made lasting marks on general culture. What explains their superiority? Charm, I think. When art comes down to the character and the personality revealed by an artist's decisions, the question of value hinges on how you feel about the artist. Everyone I know adores LeWitt, whose hundreds of proxy wall works constitute a late-twentieth-century canon of public-spirited, reliable beauty. And just try to resist the achingly committed self-presentations of Gilbert & George as icons of gentlemanly aestheticism, posing stiffly in their slightly too small tweed suits, and issuing mannerly obiter dicta. A piece from 1970 reads, "With the tears streaming down our faces we appeal to you to rejoice in the life of the world of art."

Works by the aggressively recondite stalwarts of international biennials Lawrence Weiner and Hanne Darboven (who died this year in Hamburg, at the age of sixty-seven) are less ingratiating. Darboven's obsessive repetitions and compulsive tidiness both fascinate and disturb, conveying an elegantly frozen state of hysteria. Weiner, the subject of a recent retrospective at the Whitney, presumes to objectify language in toneless koans ("MOVED FROM UP FRONT," declares one from 1970) which may tease minds that enjoy being teased. Stanley Brouwn, the footstep-counting Dutchman, and Charlotte Posenenske, a German who shot hypnotically monotonous films from a moving car before abandoning art for sociology, at the age of thirty-eight, register wanly. The American Allen Ruppersberg and the Dutchman Ger van Elk, who were colleagues in Los Angeles—at the time a hotbed of Conceptualism, whose more famous proponents included John Baldessari, William Wegman, and Chris Burden—come off as awfully pleased with themselves. Archly cool, Ruppersberg assembled snapshots and typed index cards for "Where's Al?" (1972), in which many friends at a vacation site wonder at his absence. ("he: Where's Al? she: Maybe he stayed home to read. he: What's he been reading? she: Joan Didion.") Van Elk's photographs of himself posturing as the "K" in "O.K." suggest nothing so much as the idle japes of a coterie whose members live to amuse one another. That leaves the Dutchmen Dibbets and Ader. Dibbets is a man of many methods, including deception. In a catalogue interview with the show's curator, Christophe Cherix, he confesses that the robin photographed for his avian-relocation project forty years ago was "a dead bird, which I put on a stick!" He is also represented by an array of eighty gridded photographs recording the light in a room at eight-minute intervals, from sunup to sundown, on the winter solstice in 1970. Ader died, in 1975, while sailing a twelve-and-a-half-foot boat from America to Europe in the course of completing a work, "In Search of the Miraculous." The craft was found, nine months later, off the coast of Ireland. He was thirty-three.

Ader was and has remained little known. But his few works at MOMA exude a charisma, at once blithe and poignant, that should nudge him to retrospective prominence. "I'm Too Sad to Tell You" (1970), in the Art & Project show, is a photograph of Ader in closeup, weeping. The performance is obviously deliberate, but with real tears. It tantalizes. So, even more so, does a suite of eighteen crude black-and-white photographs (part of "In Search of the Miraculous") taken by the artist's wife, Mary Sue, as she followed him, from dusk to dawn, on a meandering walk from a freeway to a beach in Los Angeles, in 1973. He is a diminutive, flashlight-wielding figure all but indiscernible in inky darkness or silhouetted against incidental lights. Written in white ink across the bottoms of the pictures are lyrics from the Leiber and Stoller R. & B. classic "Searchin'": "gonna find her," "like that Northwest Mounty / you know I'll bring her in someday," and so on. Tears, in this instance, were very nearly provided by me, and I doubt that knowledge of Ader's impending death had much to do with it. Rather, the lonely figure in the vastness of the city, as the beautiful song looped in my memory, ambushed my heart. The work's material shabbiness and playacting artificiality intensified the effect, roping me into complicity with the artist's intention as efficiently as a halcyon film by Godard. Finally, I laughed—at myself and with wonder at certain powers of art that are as easy as pie for gifted artists and unfathomable to the rest of us.

Early Conceptualism, for all its cerebral cast and visual austerity, can easily be considered a last gasp, or a dying fall, of Romanticism. Its proponents were exemplary wanderers, with time on their hands and on their minds, in the wilds of geographic and imaginary space. An ideological stance that rejected subjectivity—which LeWitt codified in his influential proposition that "the idea becomes a machine that makes the art"—simply displaced the figure of the artist from an expressive presence in the work to an Oz-like sovereignty behind the scenes. The effect is less one of attitudes becoming form than one of form becoming, in the sense of enhancing, attitudes of heroic initiative. The movement's ideals of community fail to convince, in this light. They flattered in-groups of enviable individuals, on the one hand, and burgeoning networks of institutional support systems, on the other. It was all very special, but fun for a while. ♦





Two photographs from Bas Jan Ader's 1973 series "In Search of the Miraculous (One Night in Los Angeles)."

COURTESY BAS JAN ADER ESTATE/PATRICK PAINTER EDITIONS