

Meliksetian MB Briggs




Meliksetian MB Briggs

ARTFORUM

MARCH 1999

LEGEND OF THE FALL

BRUCE HAINLEY ON THE ART OF BAS JAN ADER



Anticipating **Bas Jan Ader's** first US retrospective, **Bruce Hainley** examines the Dutch-born Conceptualist's modest output and the cult that has grown up around the work since the artist disappeared at sea in 1975, while attempting to complete part two of his performative triptych *In Search of the Miraculous*. Seen in full at UC, Irvine, Ader's oeuvre should cement his status as a seminal influence on recent LA art.

LEGEND OF THE FALL

Meliksetian MB Briggs



Opposite page: **Bas Jan Ader, Farewell to Faraway Friends, 1971**, color photograph, ca. 19" x 23". Edition of three. This page, left: **Bas Jan Ader, I'm too sad to tell you, 1970**, black-and-white photograph/postcard, 3 1/2 x 5 1/2". Edition number unknown, sent to friends and acquaintances. Right: **Invitation card, Claire Copley Gallery, Los Angeles, 1975**.

THE ARTIST IS CRYING AND TOO SAD TO TELL ANYONE WHY.

A postcard with the dated note—"Sept. 13 1970. I'm too sad to tell you."—shows Bas Jan Ader racked by tears. Whatever caused the tears to flow (the artist never publicly stated the reason) is ultimately beside the point. And yet Ader reenacted his private sadness, restaged it, photographed it to mail to others. While his piece retains a "real" sadness, it keeps vital the artifice and melodrama inherent in placing himself before his own camera while crying. Almost all of Ader's work pulsates with a crisis of some personal intensity. His sincerity is sincere—until it's not only sincere. Certainly connections exist between the postcard's sad note and the ominous and purely theatrical qualities of some of his early, simple wall texts ("Please don't leave me"; "Thoughts unsaid then forgotten") and carefully chosen titles, like *Farewell to Faraway Friends*, a photograph of a lone Ader standing on the coast, framed by the setting sun on the horizon—a photo whose sincerity is toyed with by the kitschy, touristy "sunset" colors. To look at this another way, consider for a moment: If I told you that during the month I've been thinking about Ader I cried several times, and that I'm crying right now, would you buy it?

Maybe it's just easier to admire a dead Conceptual artist than a living one, but that doesn't account for the intense, cultlike following of Ader and his work, particularly in Southern California. There's a dream logic in considering that Charles Ray

navigates his sailboat in part for Ader. Christopher Williams has hauntingly memorialized the artist in *Bouquet for Bas Jan Ader and Christopher D'Arcangelo, 1991*. Ader's rigorous poetics can be felt in Martin Kersel's excellent explorations of gravity, attraction, and repulsion. Artist Collier Schorr has written lucidly and lovingly about him. Even much younger artists acknowledge Ader's quiet power. Jennifer Bornstein, whose own complexly simple and mysteriously accurate photos and films recall the best of Ader's gifts, told me: "His subject matter is so banal, but the fact that he does it anyway and how it is transformed in execution continues to amaze. Is it manipulated or is it real? He walks such a fine line."

Ader's obscurity is, at least in part, due to his dying young, at age thirty-three, while undertaking the second installment of a proposed three-part work, *In Search of the Miraculous*.

The first part consisted of still photographs of Ader noirishly wandering the freeways, back alleys, hills, and coastline of Los Angeles at night with a flashlight. Each frame of the nocturnal perambulation contains a line from a 1957 Coasters song, "Searchin'," in Ader's hand. When this initial part was first shown, Ader displayed a bulletin done with the Dutch alternative space Art & Project and had a choir sing sea chanteys—in part as a way of announcing the imminent voyage that would comprise the next stage of the piece: an attempt to sail from Cape Cod, Massachusetts, to Falmouth, England, in a thirteen-foot sailboat, a trip he projected would take around sixty days. He planned to document the entire journey. Ader took off on July 9,



Meliksetian MB Briggs



1975; three weeks into the voyage, radio contact failed. His brother, Erik, reported the following: "On about April 10 [1976] a Spanish fishing trawler found his boat about 150 nautical miles west-south-west of Ireland. It was two-thirds capsized, with the bows [sic] pointing down. Judging by the degree of fouling, it looked as though the boat had been drifting around in this position for about six months."

At the time of his sailing away, Ader was teaching at the University of California, Irvine. Because of the dual and slyly duplicitous nature of his explorations (is he really crying? is he really sad?), many of his students thought his disappearance at sea was staged. In his foreword to the catalogue accompanying Ader's just-opened exhibition at Irvine, the first retrospective of the artist in the United States, curator Brad Spence relates that when Ader's faculty locker was opened, it contained "a copy of the book *The Strange Last Voyage of Donald Crowhurst*

At the time, this text seemed to offer a possible clue to Ader's disappearance, for it 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."

A man sits in a chair next to a small table with a lamp, a glass of water, and a copy of *Reader's Digest*. He proceeds to read a story about a boy who survived tumbling over Niagara Falls in a small boat, punctuating each line of the story with a sip of water from the glass. When the story is concluded, the glass has been emptied, and the man rises to leave.

Ader presented *The boy who fell over Niagara Falls* in 1972 at Art & Project; then the props were reduced to the *Reader's Digest* at the Kabinett für Aktuelle Kunst in Bremerhaven (documentary photographs show Ader seated next to a moderne table and gallery filing cabinets). *The boy who fell over Niagara Falls* contains most of what has come to be identified with Ader's mature work, especially his witty use of the pared-down poetic metaphor (the sips of water contain the cataract in a glass; the suggestion of the watery falls recapitulates the pratfalls that make up a number of Ader's best projects as well as the tears he cried, and the ocean he drowned in). Ader gestures toward the mortal risk and failure inherent in any search for the miraculous or experience of the sublime: Just as the boy might not have survived the forces of Niagara, so the glass of water contains the intimate possibility of drowning.

Both Collier Schorr and Jan Tumlir, in his catalogue essay for the retrospective, have focused on Ader's repetition of various gestures and actions. In addition to its performance, *The boy who fell over Niagara Falls* exists as a series of photographic works; *I'm Too Sad* began as a group of ideas in one of Ader's notebooks: "Short film 'I'm too sad to tell you' drink tea sadly and begin to cry//Postcard of me sadly crying. On back: 'I'm too sad to tell you'//The space between us fills my heart with intolerable grief//The thoughts of our inevitable and separate deaths fills my heart with intolerable grief." He then made a photograph, a film, and the postcard edition. Perhaps more than repetition, Ader was exploring the conundrum of how to document—in language and/or visually—any performance or action. It is as if he were investigating the ontology and epistemology of the then-nascent fascination with performance and its documentation, with a thoroughness eluding any other Conceptual artist. Ader's concerns could be reiterated from work to work, as the video *Primary Time*, 1974, reformulates *Untitled (Flower Work)*, 1974, a photographic series in which Ader, clad in black top and pants, stands before a red, yellow, and blue bouquet of flowers; in the final image of each of the three rows of photos, the bouquet, carefully rearranged, is composed only of red flowers, then yellow

This page, left: Bas Jan Ader, *The boy who fell over Niagara Falls*, 1972. Performance view of Bas Jan Ader reading a *Reader's Digest* article about Art & Project, Amsterdam, 1972. This page, right: Bas Jan Ader, *Light vulnerable objects threatened by eight cement bricks*, 1970, installation/action, documented by fourteen 35 mm color slides, all written on with ballpoint pen. Opposite page: Bas Jan Ader, *Broken Fall (Organic)*, *Amsterdamse Bos, Holland (detail)*, 1971, black-and-white photograph, 18 x 30". Edition of three.



ADER GESTURES TOWARD THE MORTAL RISK AND FAILURE INHERENT IN ANY SEARCH FOR THE MIRACULOUS OR EXPERIENCE OF THE SUBLIME.

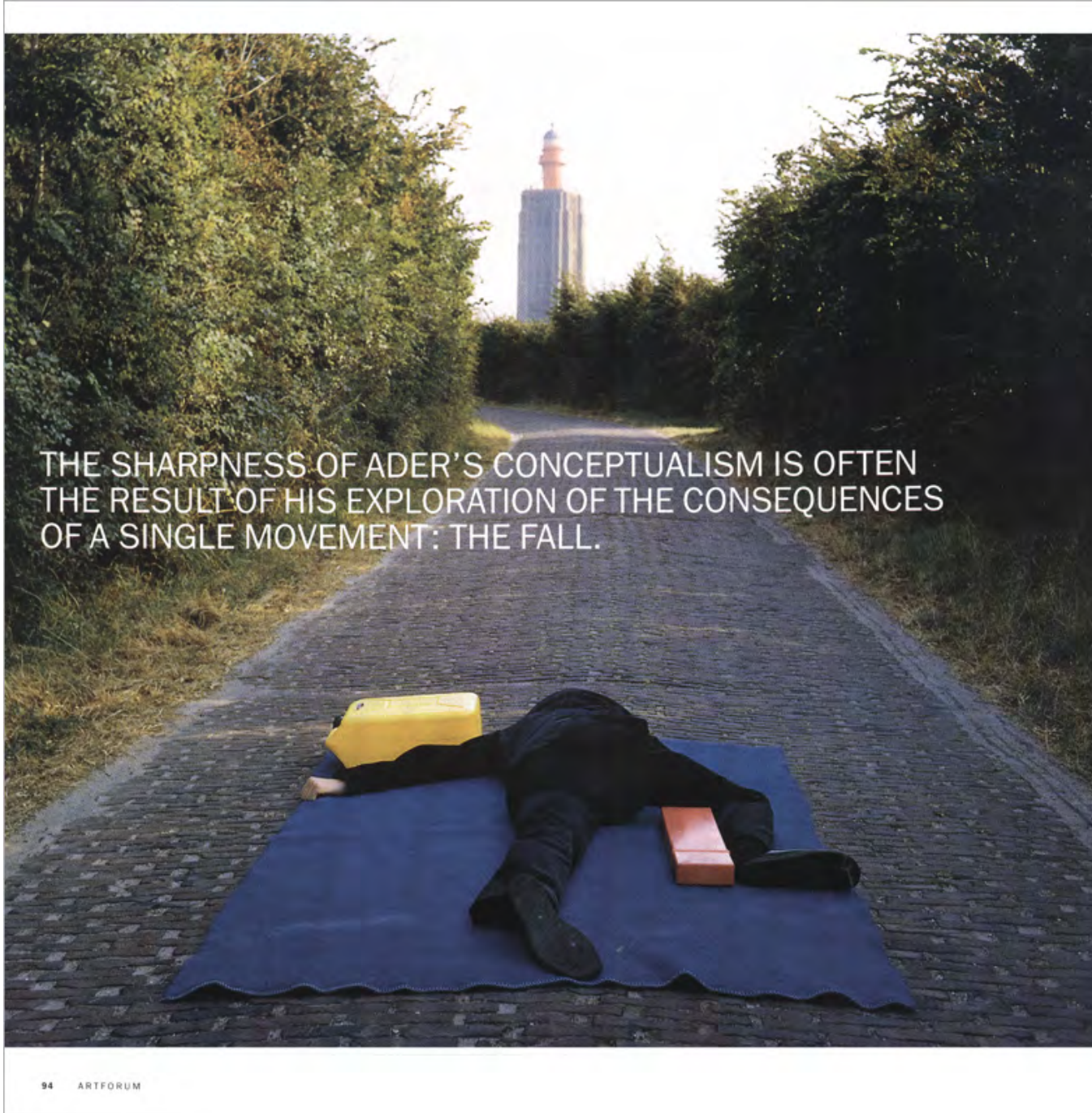


flowers, then blue. While these closely related pieces echo the artist's humorous *On the road to a new Neo Plasticism, Westkapelle Holland, 1971*, a slapstick meditation on Mondrian and De Stijl, the flower works expand to bloom with memories of Ader's homeland, stereotyped (fittingly enough) with American notions of Dutchness: The bouquet, although resolutely not of tulips, recalls their bright red and yellow and the inattention stereotyping allows.

Born in the Netherlands in 1942, Ader spent most of his adult life in the United States, in or around Los Angeles, although he returned to Holland for many important exhibits. He studied at Otis College of Art and Design, where he met his future wife, Mary Sue Andersen, and received an MFA at Claremont Graduate School. He did postgraduate work in philosophy at Claremont before beginning to teach art at Mount San Antonio College. But for all his educational and philosophical pedigree, there's nothing academic about the work, and the sharpness of Ader's Conceptualism is often the result of his relentless and humorous exploration of the metaphorical, comical, and performative consequences of a single movement: the fall. Almost all his major works make use of the conceit, even when it is not their central theme. In the simple, beautiful early piece *Light vulnerable objects threatened by eight cement bricks, 1970*, cinder blocks are suspended by long ropes above "light vulnerable

objects"—a bouquet of flowers in a vase, pillows, eggs, lightbulbs, a birthday cake—until Ader cuts the cord; tension and suspense over, the cinder blocks fall to collide with the objects below. A brief film in which Ader smashes a group of illuminated lightbulbs by tossing stones on them is called *Nightfall* (and as Tumlir shrewdly points out, "appears to symbolically extinguish all the enlightenment currents that power the proverbial lightbulb of 'Idea Art'"); his *On the road to a new Neo Plasticism* deploys the primary colors (red, yellow, blue) associated with the modern Dutch masters but is centered by Ader's splayed, prostrate body, post-fall; even the photographic work, *Untitled (Tea Party), 1972*, in which he crawls through a wooded area to the makings of a silver-service setting and proceeds to sip tea, only to have a trap box fall over him, relates to falling—not just the literal action of the box that will entrap him but the allusive connections to the Mad Hatter's tea party after Alice has fallen down the rabbit hole. Allowing Ader's metaphorical navigations to make their fullest journey, *In Search of the Miraculous* may evoke earlier myths of explorers risking the earth's flatness and falling over its edge, punishment for their pride. In one of his notebook entries, Ader jotted an idea for a postcard: "Greetings from Beautiful Ader Falls." More ominously, he wrote, "All is falling."

Meliksetian MB Briggs



Meliksetian MB Briggs



Ader did not invent the fall, and its connections to failure are as old as the Bible. While Ader's use of falling as an overriding theme or device summons the grand themes—the fallenness of man, existential human abasement—it's also his homage to vaudeville and early film, particularly Buster Keaton. Until there is a thorough, scholarly history analyzing the connections and divisions among art performance, avant-garde theater, and dance in New York and Los Angeles, it will be difficult to gauge how, when, and in what ways Ader's work influenced and was influenced by others working in the late '60s and early '70s. It is interesting to consider that while Yvonne Rainer explored ordinary movement—certainly the fall is one of the most ordinary of movements—and Charles Ludlam staged something like his version of Wagner's Ring cycle, his own absurd sequined *Götterdämmerung*, artists in California were more concerned with the agon of gravity: in the Bay Area storefront he was renting, Bruce Nauman fell to his floor after *Failing to Levitate in the Studio*, 1966; Howard Fried accrued in heavy piles garments weighted down by dirt in *All My Dirty Blue Clothes*, 1970; Paul McCarthy practiced hurling his body

in "missile-like trajectories" in *Leap and Too Steep, Too Fast*, both 1969; instead of searchin' the LA byways, Chris Burden dropped to the street and crawled through glass in *Through the Night Softly*, 1973. Yet for all the postwar effects and residues of macho heroism pervading LA during Ader's time there, the tonality of his project is entirely different. Spence pinpoints "a sense of tension in Ader-the-director and Ader-the-actor in the production of his own tragedy: he dramatizes the exalted elements of self-invention and self-destruction." He took a gentler though no less agonistic approach than others. A notebook entry reads: "My body practicing being dead."

In a series of quotations by Ader collected by his friend, artist William Leavitt, there is a line from one of Ader's favorite songs—"It's not just a feeling, it's a philosophy"—followed by a proposal for a project never completed: "I want to do a piece where I go to the Alps and talk to a mountain. The mountain will talk of things which are necessary and always true, and I shall talk of things which are sometimes, accidentally true." Perhaps Ader's predilection for contingency, his steering into things that are "sometimes, accidentally true," is his quiet contribution and one reason his work resonates with more assuredness today than when it was conceived.

The balance that Ader attempted to strike between irony and romantic quest is one that many are searching for today. His many works confronting the history of Dutch art—from Vermeer and Rembrandt to Mondrian and the followers of De Stijl—position his belatedness as something to be considered and riffed on rather than something to become stultified by. As he wrote on a Christmas postcard in 1970: "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." Ader's search for the miraculous, his journeying in and around the sublime—caught on a postcard or in a Coasters tune—acknowledges even as it anticipates a contemporary yearning for the heroic, for art to tap into something greater and grander than the self-weary self, yet he managed to treat this desire with a healthy dose of irony: if he knew that his strivings were grand, he also knew that they might fail—or that he may fail them—yet he ventured on anyway, winnowing the materials of his art until it would go on without him, winnowed so that even the irony fades, only to return in unexpected ways. In his notebook he once planned: "Whale series of photograph on dead in ocean, being washed ashore. My body practicing having been drowned." Did he complete or fail to complete this project? □



Opposite page: Bas Jan Ader, *Pitfall on the way to a new Neo Plasticism*, Westkapelle Holland, 1971, color photograph, 15½ x 11½". This page, left: Bas Jan Ader, *Broken Fall (Geometric)*, Westkapelle Holland, 1971, color photograph, 15½ x 11½". Edition of three. Right: Bas Jan Ader, *Untitled (Flower Work)*, 1974, one of twenty-one color photographs, each 11 x 14". Edition of three.