

Meliksetian MB Briggs

# ARTFORUM



Bas Jan Ader, *Broken Fall (organic) Amsterdamse Bos, Holland, 1971*, 16 mm transferred to video, black-and-white, silent, 1 minute 26 seconds.

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## Bas Jan Ader

### MELIKSETIAN | BRIGGS

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The Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader toiled in semi-obscurity throughout his career and then, in 1975, disappeared from the face of the earth. His last show, exhibited at the Claire S. Copley Gallery in Los Angeles, was delivered in three parts: a photographic travelogue that shows him wandering through the nocturnal cityscape of Southern California, his adopted home, toward the shore; a program of sea chanteys, sung by a student choir; and a projection of the choir's performances in the gallery. The trip that led to the eighteen-part photographic travelogue was intended to be followed by another journey, which can only be imagined, as it began far off-site: The artist departed from Cape Cod, aboard a small boat, on a planned Atlantic crossing to England. Ader aimed to set a new record with this voyage by completing it in the smallest craft to date, thereby grounding the always ambiguous notion of artistic success in the hard-and-fast metrics of sport. On the last point, he failed. His vessel was found floating near the coast of Ireland, the artist presumed drowned. And yet, with its title, *In search of the miraculous*, 1973, the work enjoins viewers to maintain an open mind: Even—or especially—in disaster, a potential apotheosis lurks.

At Meliksetian | Briggs, we were treated to a highly focused selection of pieces that avoided being overshadowed by Ader's final chapter, instead elucidating the importance of water, as material and metaphor, to all of his work. Included were two of his signature fall pieces: *Fall 2, Amsterdam*

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*(Book Set)*, 1970, is a sequence of ten black-and-white photographs showing Ader riding his bicycle into a canal; *Broken fall (organic)*, *Amsterdamse Bos, Holland*, 1971, is a video that was looped on a monitor, showing the artist struggling to hang by his hands from the branch of a tall tree, finally releasing his grip and splashing into a creek below. Also on view was *The boy who fell over Niagara Falls*, 1972, displayed in both video and photographic versions. Here, Ader, comfortably seated and leafing through a copy of *Reader's Digest*, reads aloud the true story of a boy who survived the fatal Niagara currents even as his rescuer perished. Periodically, he pauses to take a sip of water from a glass at his side, swallowing the last drop just as the story ends. And then Ader was shown crying in *I'm too sad to tell you*, 1971, presented here in two photographic studies that have been widely circulated in reproduction but that take on an acutely ominous cast in this context. Water in, water out; although we are mostly comprised of water, we still cannot survive inside it. What is “miraculous” about all of these exercises in self-dissolution and loss is that they imply the possibility of transfiguration, a baptismal rebirth in art.

It is easy to forget the impact that Ader had on artists in the 1990s, the period of his rediscovery among those still wrestling with the legacy of Conceptualism and wanting to infuse its analytical premises with affective content. The melancholy Romantic sentiment infusing so much of the output of the YBAs, the American “slacker” set, and even some proponents of relational aesthetics certainly owes something to Ader. Today, when his cult of personality has thankfully dimmed, it is the absolute precision with which this work stages the relation between life and art that stands out. As

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the show at Meliksetian|Briggs demonstrated, Ader embodied the virtues of persistence in the face of disinterest, of creative seclusion as a means of sharpening concentration, of high ambition on a low budget. Moreover, one could say that Ader “died as he lived,” or, to put it otherwise, that his life was carried out in preparation for dying; every one of his “falls” could be described as a little death. It would be a romantic cliché to claim that Ader “died for his art,” but less so to suggest that Ader sought to live in his art—that is, to live elsewhere, in the immersive, fluid realm of aesthetics.

— *Jan Tumlir*