

Meliksetian MB Briggs

ARTFORUM



Bas Jan Ader, *The artist as consumer of extreme comfort*, 1968/2003, gelatin silver print, 13 1/4 x 19".

Bas Jan Ader

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The surface of Bas Jan Ader's most widely known works depict the artist walking out into the world at the mercy of capricious nature. Powerful forces merge—the inexorable physical laws of the universe and the urge to articulate one's inner emotional state as truth. One man against nature.

The myth surrounding Ader has dissipated over time, yet a critical understanding of his work remains somewhat obscured. The ill-fated voyage of *In search of the miraculous*, 1973—a performance in which the artist went missing after sailing out of Chatham, Massachusetts, on a tiny skiff to traverse the Atlantic—and the failure to recover his body remain a tragedy that nudges Ader into the ludicrous category of those who have martyred themselves for the sake of art. Additionally, photographs such as *Untitled (Swedish fall)*, 1971/2003, and *Broken fall (organic)*, *Amsterdamse Bos, Holland*, 1971/1994, cast the artist as a stumbling, hapless fool mystified by the laws of gravity.

An earlier work, with the suggestive title *The artist as consumer of extreme comfort*, 1968/2003, presents a different sort of persona. In this photograph, Ader depicts himself in the manner of a pensive soul: sitting before a raging fire, book in hand, his faithful pet dog at his feet, lost in reverie. The inclusion of this piece in “Thoughts Unsaid . . . ,” a well-chosen selection of the artist's work at Meliksetian | Briggs's new Dallas location, required a bit more consideration from the viewer, as it gave one the sense that a bigger story exists behind Ader's art. To this end, the show, curated by David Quadrini, went some way toward helping us avoid facile interpretations. The exhibition convinced me that Ader is less meaningful as an exemplar of West Coast Conceptualism and more interesting as a pioneer in the art of depicting a kind of virtue in the face of life's vicissitudes.

Ader was onto something in his tearful video *I'm too sad to tell you*, 1971. It is a breakthrough statement, but one that has less to do with men expressing emotions publicly. Ader's intuition was that a knowing Romantic naïveté would be just the foil to challenge the rehearsed

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Duchampian gestures of his West Coast peers. Tragically, he did not have time to adequately develop this concept. (You might say that when attitudes become form, it is time to reconsider the attitudes.) Under the guise of a relaxed, stoner Conceptualism, Ader transformed the art of California's let-it-all-hang-out ethos into something more surprising and dark—an art aiming for existential substance without the laugh track.

Referring to his peers of the New York School, Ad Reinhardt said that the artist must make a choice between Mondrian or Duchamp—meaning a choice between “art as art” or “art as everything else.” In the photographs *Study for Westkapelle Lighthouse, Holland, 1971*, and *Pitfall on the Road to a New Neo-Plasticism, Westkapelle, Holland, 1971*, we see Ader, a Dutchman, making his choice through an ironic reckoning of Mondrian. All of Ader's actions captured in these photos were enacted within sight of the very lighthouse depicted by Mondrian in a series of canvases dating from 1910. To imagine Ader's work as an extended period of cultural housekeeping, clearing the decks for the bacchanal that never came, is a melancholy thought.

The historical pressures experienced by Ader are well known (and more so) to the current generation of emerging artists: environmental collapse, economic disaster, pandemics, the recrudescence of fascism, the paying back of insane school loans for an art degree, and reduced expectations for decent employment, to name just a few. It's not a hard sell to argue for Ader's relevance to those who earnestly claim their work to be a boon companion in the quest for a haven from the maelstrom of daily life. Within the tendency for contemporary artists to erect a bulwark of sensibility against such dispiriting circumstances, Ader's work stands out. His art commands us to seek nothing as portentous as the miraculous but instead to construct a *modus vivendi* to harmonize the forces that shape us—history, nature, and luck—without perishing in the bargain.

— *Michael Corris*