

Meliksetian MB Briggs

# Art in America

## A Retrospective Dispels Myths Surrounding Bas Jan Ader

By Eugenie Brinkema

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Bas Jan Ader: Please Don't Leave Me, 1969. ©The Estate Of Bas Jan Ader. Courtesy Of Meliksetian | Briggs, Dallas

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Kill a myth at your peril, ruined miracles don't come back.

That's one way of looking at it. Another is this: One type of miraculous can crowd another out, and sometimes the curator's most important job is debris removal. Not that the old wonder was junk, but it was impeding passage. Few will begrudge the Hamburger Kunsthalle its efforts to wreck the legend of the death of Bas Jan Ader in their retrospective, living as we do under the long, smug shadow of desacralization.

And so, regarding the artist, whose biography reads "1942 in Winschoten, The Netherlands—missing at sea 1975," the stance of this show is clear: Enough with your poetics of disappearance, your suicide romanticism. Ader's death during a quixotic attempt to cross the Atlantic alone in a small sailboat—what was to be the middle performance of a triptych that began with a photographed nighttime walk in Los Angeles and was to be completed with an evening wander in Amsterdam—was just a tragic accident. Despite the fact that the work was called *In search of the miraculous*, notwithstanding the venture's improbability, despite the trip seeming to metonymize a career spent subjecting himself to natural forces, the Kunsthalle takes pains to insist that Ader's final work is in no way to be read as his ultimate, that the truest act of conceptual art is not necessarily the obliteration of the self.

These efforts are overt in the catalog, the curator's introductory video, and especially in the room devoted to the legendary unfinished piece, which emphasizes the meticulous preparations for the trip and Ader's previous sailing experience, and includes a fully secular archive of pragmatism: provisions, rations, tools, maps.

The exhibition thereby brings Bas Jan Ader back—not from death to life, but out of the sea and back to shore; or, flip your geometry: It pulls the man out of the ether of artistic

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myth and back down to earth. As earth is where Ader did his most interesting work, if this is a dethroning of an ideal, it is also a fitting fall to the ground.

He was, after all, the great artist of gravity.

Consider his 1972 performance *The boy who fell over Niagara Falls*, in which Ader reads aloud a story from *Reader's Digest* about a boy's survival of a plunge over the waterfall. Or the photo series *On the road to a new Neo Plasticism, Westkapelle, Holland* (1971), in which Ader contorts his limbs into the permitted rectilinear and prohibited diagonal forms of Mondrian with the Domburg lighthouse tower in the background—setting his body down on brick, on blue cloth, with a yellow oil canister, and finally with a red box . A companion photograph, *Pitfall on the way to a New Neo-Plasticism* (1971), throws body, cloth, canister, and box into blurred disarray. Here, ground is both stable canvas for fixed geometric forms and obstacle to their fixity.



Bas Jan Ader: *I'm too sad to tell you*, 1970–71.

©The Estate Of Bas Jan Ader. Courtesy Of Meliksetian | Briggs,  
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Gravity of a different sort insinuates itself into one of Ader's best-known works, the 1970 *I'm too sad to tell you*—a 3-and-a-half-minute film of his face in close-up, tear-stained with the choking grimaces of suffering. The throughline is grief and gravity, both deriving from *gravis*, weighty.

Ader's death has dominated accounts of his life precisely because it was so short. He made his most important pieces between 1970 and 1973. What do you do with such aesthetic promise demonstrated in so short a time? It's the Jeff Buckley problem. Juvenilia and outtakes take on outsize importance. For Ader, the Kunsthalle brings together an impressive amount of material: previously unexhibited early drawings, programs from student shows, letters and postcards, handwritten instructions. This assembly, alongside the fine catalog, enables a rich exploration of the corpus and the promise. Interested parties can contemplate Ader's relation to light, to masculinity, to de Stijl, and to Conceptual art.

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View of the 2025 exhibition “Bas Jan Ader: I’m Searching...” at Hamburger Kunsthalle.

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But then the question: What does one find in the exhibition that could not be encountered in all this documentation? If there is some trace of a long-gone action, isn't that part of what we might want to lump under the miraculous, under the desire to experience something not assimilable to the known?

You'll have to seek it out, but here is a map. Venture to the farthest corner of the mazy rooms, past the reenactment of *Light vulnerable objects threatened by eight cement bricks*. Keep going, you won't see a sign, but search on. It's there, your small, hunted thing.

Four 16mm projectors cross the center of a long, dark rectangular room, their drilling whirl filling the air. Each projects a work on a wall: *Fall 1, Los Angeles*; *Fall 2, Amsterdam*; *Broken Fall (geometric)*, *Westkapelle—Holland*; *Broken Fall (organic)*, *Amsterdamse Bos—Holland*. They were made in 1970 and 1971 and range from 19 to 109 seconds. Description is of limited use. Knowing that they involve Ader's body tumbling off a roof, spilling into a canal on a bike, tipping over diagonally, and plummeting from a branch to a stream does not do justice to these revelations.



View of the 2025 exhibition “Bas Jan Ader: I’m Searching...” at Hamburger Kunsthalle.

“I do not make body sculptures, body art or body works,” Ader insisted. “When I fell off the roof of my house, or into a canal, it was because gravity has made itself master of me.”

But like Beckett’s advice that death does not require us to keep a day free, gravity does not require our consent to be subject to its force. In his falls, Ader lets himself be vulnerable to that to which he was already prey. One sees isolated, slowed down, the changing variables of tension, control, restraint, in the service of suspending, for as long



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as possible, the beautiful precarity of an absurd project. But strain always breaks, flesh gives way. Futile, this resistance: all falling a kind of failing.

Ader's was a corpus of verbs: not tears, the weeping; not the ledge, the falling. Dwelling in the noisy darkness with these looping films, one sees the ordinary miracle of living effort. Not as wondrous, perhaps, as the old myths, but wonderful all the same.