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HYPERALLERGIC

ART REVIEW

Bas Jan Ader Made Fate Into an Art

So much of what Ader explored was about surrendering to destiny, but also about heeding internal calls — to adventure, open horizons, and the sublime.

Kimberly Bradley
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Bas Jan Ader, "Fall 2" (Amsterdam, 1970), 16mm film, 19 min. (© The Estate of Bas Jan Ader / Mary Sue Ader Andersen / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2024. Courtesy Meliksetian / Briggs, Dallas

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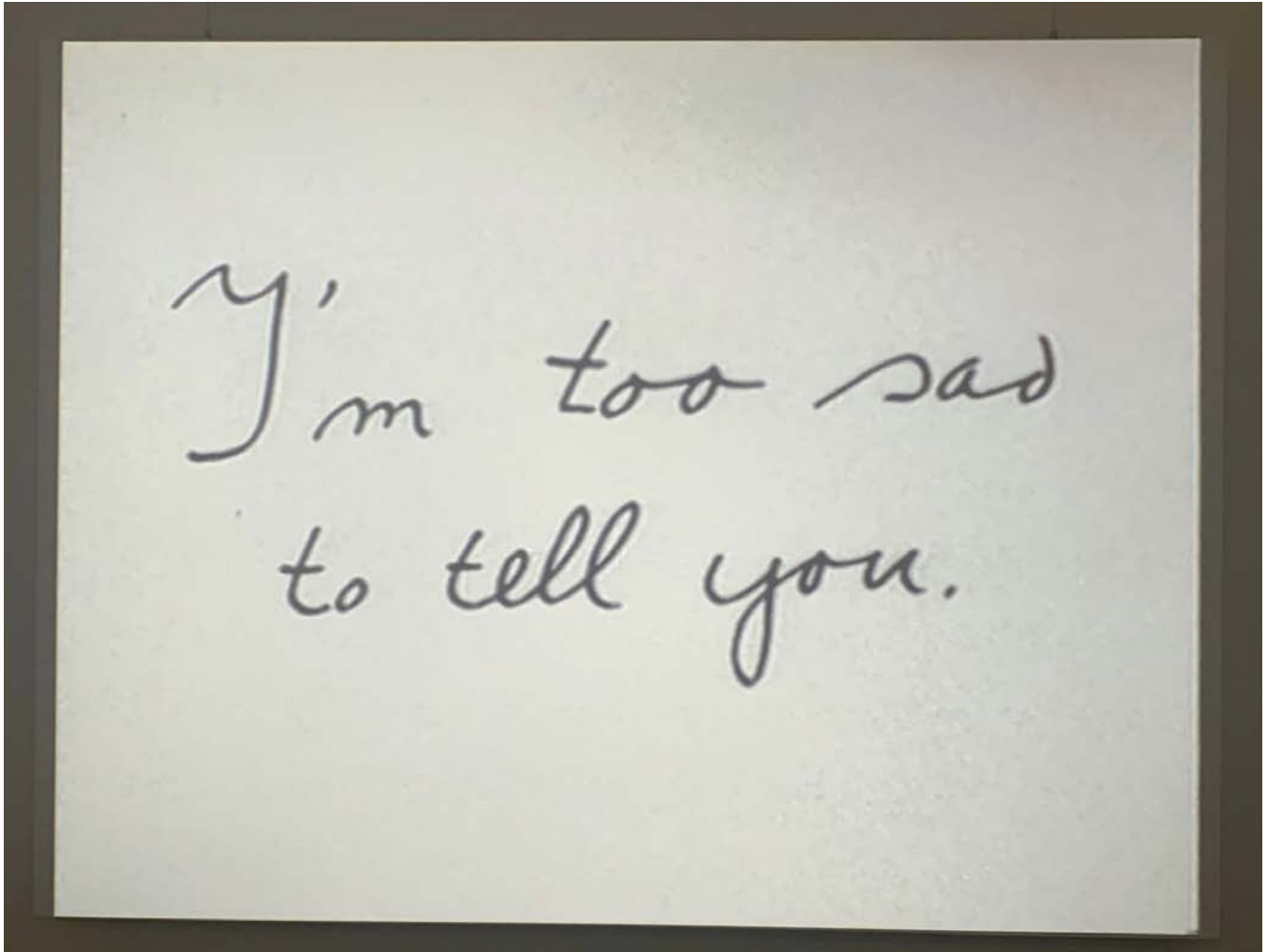
HAMBURG, Germany — Only July 9, 1975, the artist Bas Jan Ader, age 33, set sail from Cape Cod, intending to cross the Atlantic in a 12.6-foot vessel called *Ocean Wave* and then mount an exhibition at the Groninger Museum in his native Netherlands.

The journey was, famously, never completed. The battered boat was found off the coast of Ireland months later, but there was no trace of the artist beyond a few personal belongings. This now 50-year-old art world tragedy, which began as part of the artist's *In Search of the Miraculous* trilogy (a three-part performance, with the transatlantic journey intended as the second part), made Ader into the consummate artist's artist and the subject of much study and discussion.

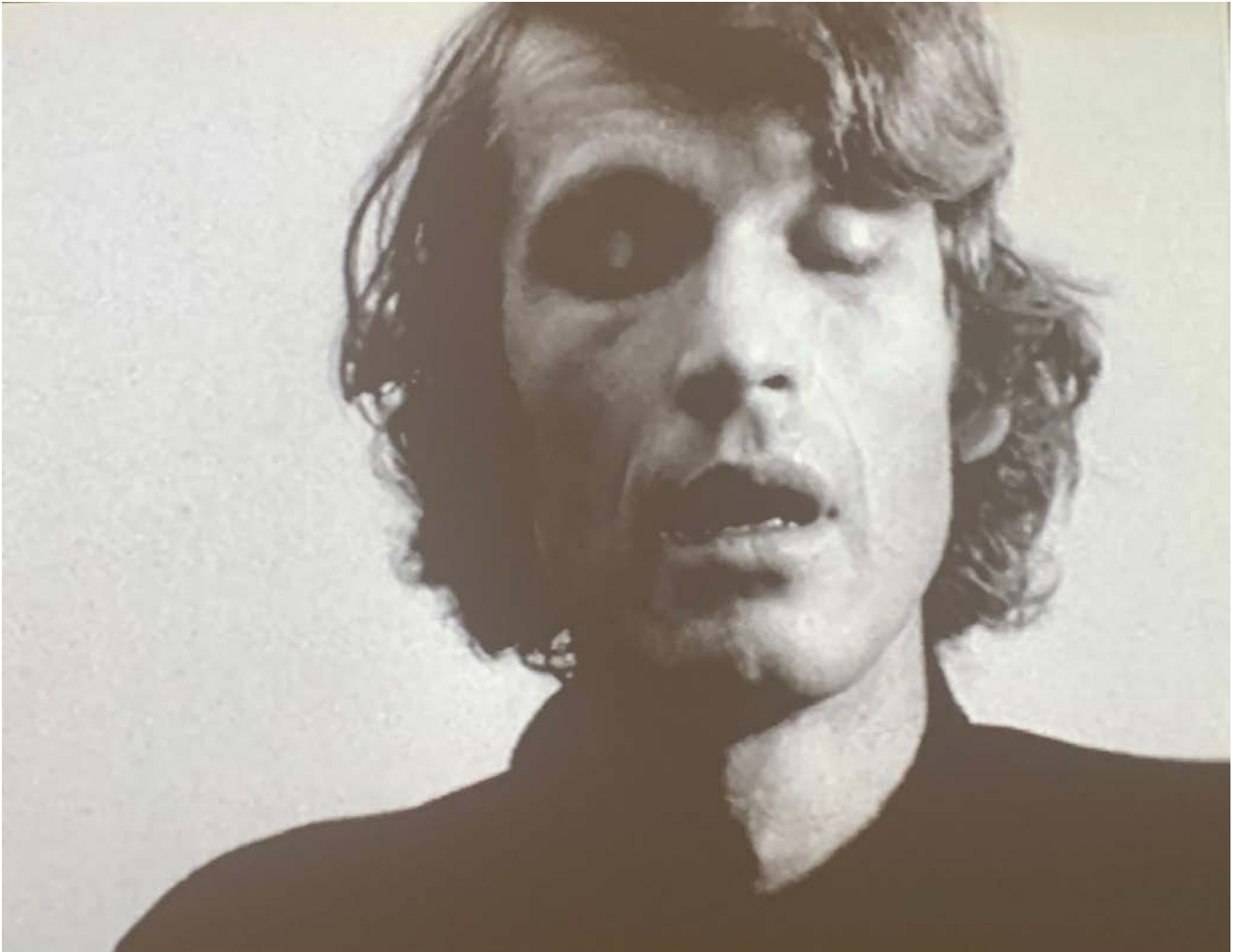
A half-century later, this and other works, all produced between the late 1950s and Ader's untimely disappearance, are the subject of *I'm Searching ...*, a rare solo exhibition at the Hamburger Kunsthalle. The show is commemorative and comprehensive: Exhibited here for the first time are early works on paper from a portfolio recently found in Drieborg, Netherlands. Also new is a fabricated version of a neon piece in primary colors spelling "Piet Niet" — an homage to, and rejection of, Piet Mondrian, whose ideas Ader closely studied — which previously existed only as a sketch for a planned installation. But viewers get the artist's greatest hits too: his four "Fall" videos from the early 1970s and, of course, the poignant "I'm too sad to tell you" (1971), in which an unspeakably pretty, young Ader

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— in a tight closeup on black and white film — weeps inconsolably and inexplicably for about three and a half silent minutes.



Still of Bas Jan Ader's film "I'm too sad to tell you" (1971) (photo Kimberly Bradley/*Hyperallergic*)



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The show unfolds chronologically, and the earliest works are unsurprisingly in traditional mediums. Charcoal drawings, swirly drawings of bicycles, and abstracted minimalist portraits are clearly student experiments, made while he was at the Rietveld Academy (where he enrolled at age 17), exposing the young artist's attempts to find a voice and identity. But they hint at later forays into ideas like land- or seascape, balance, and maintaining or losing control. Additionally exhibited for the

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first time is a painted seascape Ader made while working as a farmhand in the Netherlands in 1961. In it, sea and sky meld in fields of gray-blue color that he'd leave behind when he moved to California in 1962.

After failing out of Rietveld, he earned an MFA from Claremont Graduate University in Los Angeles. In the US, he quickly dove into photography and film, often to document his solo performances. Even in these early years the work was concerned with existential issues, including failure and emotional vulnerability, as well as longing, expressed in word pieces like "Please Don't Leave Me," featuring these handwritten words on the walls of his garage studio. For "All My Clothes" (1970), the artist has spread his clothing haphazardly on his small house's shingled roof. In the two small photographs titled "Study for Farewell to Faraway Friends" (1970), Ader appears both standing and sitting on a grassy knoll gazing over the sea; the figure's solitude perhaps evokes the Romanticism of Caspar David Friedrich's "Wanderer Above the Mist" (1819) or "Monk by the Sea" (1810).



"Piet Niet" based on Ader's sketches. (photo Kimberly Bradley/Hyperallergic)

Falling as deliberate failing later becomes a recurring theme. The four now-iconic silent "Fall" shorts run on old 16mm film projectors in one large room at Hamburger Kunsthalle. In "Fall 1" (1970), Ader's lanky body rolls off his own roof; in "Fall 2" (1970), he rides his bike into a canal in Amsterdam; in "Broken fall (organic)" (1971) he hangs and swings from the branch of a tree before falling into a stream. The action is a mix of slapstick and philosophical resignation. The two static projected images that represent "Untitled (Swedish Fall)" (1971) show Ader standing in a Swedish forest in one slide and on the ground, as if a felled tree, in the other; scholars have suggested that this piece alludes to Ader's childhood — in

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1944, when he was two, his father was executed in a forest after it was discovered that he'd assisted Jews in escaping the Holocaust.

Some later works are revived or reconstructed, like “Thoughts unsaid. Then forgotten” (1973/2023), an installation consisting of the above phrase written on the wall, and a bouquet of flowers: As the flowers wilt, the phrase is painted over, a gesture of erasure and forgetting. The exhibition’s final space includes the first part of the unfinished *In Search of the Miraculous* trilogy, for which Ader walked with a flashlight through desolate areas of Los Angeles from nightfall to sunrise. Photographed by his wife, Mary Sue, the 14 still black and white images show him wandering through a dark, lonely dreamscape, ending with a final seaside shot. The room is otherwise filled with evidence of his unfinished last work: documentation of his tiny sailboat, a film of the choir that sent him off, photos and Super 8 footage of the boat’s launch, newspaper articles from shortly after his disappearance, even the very sextant that Ader used as a navigation tool.

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Bas Jan Ader in his boat *Ocean Wave* in Chatham, Massachusetts, July 9, 1975 (© The Estate of Bas Jan Ader / Mary Sue Ader Andersen / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025. Courtesy Meliksetian | Briggs, Dallas)

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With its straightforward choreography and detailed but unsentimental wall texts, the exhibition avoids overtly romanticizing the artist's work and end, but the mythology surrounding him cannot help but permeate the sequence of works. What might Ader have been thinking before embarking on his final journey? For all the philosophical underpinnings behind his practice (the "Fall" pieces riff on a line from Wittgenstein regarding gravity, and Ader took a copy of Hegel's dense *Phenomenology of the Spirit* on his journey), did he fail to understand the risk of what he was attempting? He had sailed the Atlantic before, as a deck hand, in an 11-month journey in 1963. As artist Tacita Dean asks in an essay from 2006, did he feel protected because what he was doing was art? In his restless search for transcendence, was he setting himself up for all too familiar failure, or placing himself in the greater hands of fate? Was there a moment, as in his "Fall" films, in which he chose to lose control, and be overcome by the forces around him? In the 2007 documentary *Here Is Always Somewhere Else*, directed by fellow Dutch California transplant Rene Daalder, Ader's widow claims that the artist "didn't expect to not make it." He'd also said he would someday like to disappear for three years, and then return. She waited three years before accepting that he wasn't coming back.

Many conceptual artists of Ader's era died young: Gordon Matta-Clark and Robert Smithson also passed in their 30s. But as a personality, Ader was the most reclusive, interior, melancholy, and metaphysical — perhaps simply the most Northern European. His small but powerful body of work

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focused on playing with and ultimately succumbing to the forces around him rather than etching utopian visions on urban structures or natural landscapes. So much of what Ader explored and produced was about surrendering to or even accelerating a certain destiny, but at the same time about heeding strong internal calls — to adventure, the freedom of open horizons, and the sublime. Countless later artists have taken his work's and life's existential themes as inspiration. His longings may (or may not) have remained unattained, but here, they are not forgotten.

Bas Jan Ader: I'm Searching... continues at Hamburger Kunsthalle (Glockengießerwall 5, Hamburg, Germany) through August 24. The exhibition was curated by Brigitte Kölle with curatorial trainee Julia Kersting.