

# CUMULUS

*From Overseas*

IN EVERY EDITION OF PARKETT, TWO CUMULUS CLOUDS, ONE FROM OVERSEAS, THE OTHER FROM EUROPE, FLOAT OUT TO AN INTERESTED PUBLIC. THEY CONVEY INDIVIDUAL OPINIONS, ASSESSMENTS, AND MEMORABLE ENCOUNTERS—AS ENTIRELY PERSONAL PRESENTATIONS OF PROFESSIONAL ISSUES.

OUR CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE ARE RACHEL KENT, SENIOR CURATOR AT THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART IN SYDNEY, AND GIANFRANCO MARANIELLO, DIRECTOR OF THE GALLERIA D'ARTE MODERNA AND OF THE MUSEO MORANDI, BOLOGNA.

Few artists in recent history have achieved mythic status like Bas Jan Ader. With a career spanning only five years, cut short by his disappearance at sea in 1975, Ader poses both a paradox and an inspiration for subsequent generations of artists. In the modest but compelling array of works that survive him, Ader mapped out his own highly conceptual yet romantic terrain, exploring narrative structure and themes of repetition, failure, as well as physical and emotional vulnerability.

Despite the curious events and ensuing theories that have attached themselves to Ader's disappearance, his artistic legacy has continued to grow ever more visible. This is perhaps not surprising for someone who, although not widely known in his own time, was actively engaged with evol-

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## *Pun to Paradox:* BAS JAN ADER REVISITED

ing practices in conceptual and performance art of the late 1960s and early seventies. The notion of failure embodied by Ader's *Fall* performances, the emotional intensity of his now acclaimed *Crying* pieces, and the romanticism of his ultimately ill-fated search for the "miraculous" at sea, have all found resonance in the work of con-

temporary artists around the world. Ader straddled two continents: the old-world Europe of his origins, and his new home of America. On the West Coast he studied art and philosophy, and taught; from the East Coast he launched his last, fatal, artwork in the form of a planned trans-Atlantic sea-crossing. This work was actually the sec-



TACITA DEAN, TEIGNMOUTH ELECTON, CAYMAN  
BRAC, 1999, C-print, 26 3/4 x 35" / 68 x 89 cm.  
(PHOTO: MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK)

ond installment of an intended three-part project called *IN SEARCH OF THE MIRACULOUS* (1975), which sought to take the artist from Cape Cod to Lands End on the south-west tip of England, linking the artist's two homes. Although Ader's practice has been linked with the early performance and video work of Vito Acconci and Bruce Nauman—embracing performance and the body, subjective experience, and a wide range of emotions—his work also has a distinctly European sensibility. Ader was clear to state, however (despite a reticence to speak publicly about his work), that he did not see himself as a “body” artist, but rather as an artist who uses his own body as a reference point for exploring ideas about narrative and duration,

physical endurance, and human vulnerability. He was fascinated with the country of his birth, the Netherlands, and, informed by the rich art-historical legacy of that country, his work incorporates the primary-colored palette of one of his role models, Piet Mondrian. This Dutch influence is also evident in a suite of photographs that depict the artist arranging flowers in a vase—a wry commentary on clichéd perceptions of Dutch culture's many floral associations.

Scanning the pages of Ader's biography, it becomes curious to note that, since his final one-man exhibition in 1975, very little has been seen of his work until the later part of the eighties. Then from the early nineties on, paralleled by the scholarly re-evaluation of

conceptual and performance practices of the seventies, Ader's work has been surveyed by European and American museums, written about extensively in art journals, and discussed amongst art students and the wider art community with increasing regularity. There has been much conjecture surrounding his disappearance and presumed death, and comparisons have been made to the 1968 disappearance of the failed round-the-world yachtsman Donald Crowhurst. This is despite a published interview with Ader's widow, who maintains that Ader had always intended to reach his location, and that he had researched his trip thoroughly, and had taken with him navigational books, a camera, and notebooks to record his impressions. Furthermore, an exhibi-

tion was planned to take place in Amsterdam, which was to be the final part of the work. Nevertheless, Ader was certainly familiar with Crowhurst's story as, presumably, many accomplished sailors like him would be, and a book on Crowhurst's doomed voyage did turn up in Ader's university locker some months after his disappearance.

Seafaring was a significant interest of Ader's, and he made two memorable trips at the outset and conclusion of his adult life. The first, in 1963, when he was twenty-one, took him from Morocco to California, and the second was the journey that would have brought him back home to Europe, had he completed it successfully. Curiously, Ader also considered this voyage to be a race of sorts—an attempt to beat an existing time record for a solo trans-Atlantic crossing. Nine months after departing, however, in April 1976, his small vessel was found upturned off the Irish coast.

An artist who has engaged with the lost-at-sea aspect of Ader's and Crowhurst's practices is Tacita Dean, as is shown by her sixteen-millimeter films *DISAPPEARANCE AT SEA* (1996) and

*DISAPPEARANCE AT SEA II* (1997), and her illustrated publication *TEIGNMOUTH ELECTRON* (2000). Dean's films draw direct inspiration from Crowhurst's disastrous voyage, during which he faked his navigational position and log-book entries to appear further advanced in an international solo yacht race than he actually was. Having eventually lost his bearings and having become highly delusional, he appears to have jumped from his trimaran, "Teignmouth Electron," to his death. Dean has described Crowhurst's story as a universal parable of human hubris, vulnerability, and failure—but also as a story about truth, given his tragic acknowledgement of his own deceit

and its implications in his on-board diaries.<sup>1)</sup> While Crowhurst's and Ader's journeys clearly have different moral dimensions, each having ended in failure reveals the inevitable vulnerability (physical and spiritual) of man confronting nature. In their own ways, both men may have achieved a form of moral redemption by glimpsing something of the miraculous in death.

Crowhurst and Ader together form the subject of Danius Kesminas and Michael Stevenson's chamber opera, *The Strange Voyage of Bas Jan Ader* (2001). Performed in Germany in October 2001, under the artists' collaborative rubric, Slave Pianos, the work blends the satirical humor for which



TACITA DEAN, *DISAPPEARANCE AT SEA*, 1996,  
16 mm anamorphic film, optical sound, 14 minutes /  
*VERSCHOLLEN AUF SEE*, 16-mm-Film, anamorphisch,  
Lichtton, 14 Minuten.

(PHOTO: MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK)

both artists are known with a deeply integrated understanding and exploration of musical structure, which, mirroring the lives of its protagonists, “tapers into a diatonic oblivion.”<sup>2)</sup> Drawing on extracts from interviews, diaries, and other printed materials, the voices of Crowhurst, Ader, Ader’s widow, and her interviewers are interwoven to create a layered piece about their search for enlightenment, with its inherent frustrations.

Ader’s voyage into oblivion is also recalled in a major new work by the seminal California artist Chris Burden, *GHOST SHIP* (2005). Burden’s work also appropriates the popular myths and legends that surround shipwrecks and abandoned craft that were so favored by the Romantic poets. In his project, an unmanned replica of a Shetland, “Sixareen,” controlled by pre-programmed computers, sails from Fair Isle to Newcastle Gateshead. Its arrival was scheduled to coincide with the annual Tall Ships’ Race 2005 nearby.

Loss, frailty, and failure are persistent themes in Ader’s practice. In his *Fall* works, he hoists a concrete block over a cluster of light bulbs until his grip weakens and the block crashes to the ground, crushing the scene’s source of light. In another work, the artist cycles his bike along an Amsterdam riverbank until his concentration flags and he veers off into the water. Then there’s the piece where he dangles from a tree branch until his stamina gives way and he falls into the water below. In another work, we encounter Ader leaning awkwardly against a carpentry saw-horse until his balance falters and he topples sideways. (The location of this last performance proves significant, filmed, as it was,



before the Westkapelle Lighthouse, which is featured prominently in Mondrian’s early paintings.) As one writer observes: “Ader cast himself as ‘The Artist,’ however, it is a role with such grandiose expectations that the individual must fall perilously short.”<sup>3)</sup> *Slapstick* permeates these works, underscoring their seemingly arbitrary nature with a more complex exploration of duration and expectation. Repetition is also a central theme; the artist is seen re-staging the same narrative drama over and over again until it has been finally resolved—with the inevitable crash to earth.

The repetitive structure of Ader’s *Fall* works has found resonance in the work of Fiona Tan and Marijke van Warmerdam, both of whom live in Amsterdam near where many of Ader’s *Fall* works were originally situated. In Tan’s performance pieces *ROLL I & II* (1997) and *SLAPSTICK* (1998), for example, she films herself rolling over

and over again on a sand dune and flopping repeatedly to the ground, having awkwardly tripped herself up. In *SLAPSTICK*, the title itself draws parallels with Ader’s own distinctive humor—especially with a Buster Keaton-like sensibility. But unlike Ader, whose visual narratives are always truncated at the precise moment of impact, Tan’s films loop, causing their beginnings and endings to conjoin, thus, denying resolution. This play upon ordinary gestures and/or repeated events is something of a hallmark for van Warmerdam, whose filmed depictions of a man taking an endless shower, or a girl performing a repetitive sequence of handstands up against a wall, become quite hypnotic viewing experiences. In *VOETBAL* (1995), however, van Warmerdam breaks the cycle of repetition by asserting a definitive narrative conclusion. In this work, the artist’s camera circles a young boy in a school yard as he tries to balance a ball

BAS JAN ADER, *IN SEARCH OF THE MIRACULOUS*,  
1975, photograph / *AUF DER SUCHE NACH DEM  
WUNDERBAREN*, *Photographie*.

(PHOTO: PATRICK PAINTER INC. AND BAS JAN ADER ESTATE)



upon his head. The film concludes only when human stamina gives way and the ball falls to the ground. The artist's text pieces, such as *GOOD DAYS*, *BAD DAYS* (1996), similarly recall the directness of Ader's own textual appeals.

Another recent resident of Amsterdam, French artist Jimmy Roberts, has also been impacted by Ader's *Fall* works; Roberts has literally inserted himself into the picture frame in place of Ader in well-known performance documents. Thus, in his film *L'ÉDUCATION SENTIMENTALE* (2005), he restages Ader's familiar fall sequences, capturing him physically as he tumbles from his bicycle and as he drops from a tree branch. Separated from Ader by three decades, Roberts does not seek to pay homage to his elder subject, but rather to carve out his own position in relation to art history. Fantasy and humor prevail in his work as Roberts goes on to draw parallels

with other legends such as David Bowie and Iggy Pop. (He depicts himself dancing between their respective album covers, *Heroes* and *The Idiot*.)

Young artist Todd McMillan, from Sydney, Australia, has sought to relocate the "missing artist" in his own direct reference to Ader's photograph *FAREWELL TO MY FRIENDS* (1971), as well as in his short film *BY THE SEA* (2004). In the latter, McMillan stares out to sea like Ader (or like the German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich) for a twelve-hour period—from dusk to dawn. In this romantic piece, McMillan's "search" clearly proves to be in vain, for what (or whom) he seeks is already far gone. Likewise, Ader's referencing of Friedrich has been interpreted as one of mourning for the Romantic tradition.<sup>4)</sup>

Absence is a recurrent theme in Ader's practice: his literal absence from the picture frame at the concluding moment of his *Fall* works, the

absence of bygone eras, absent others, his own absence (*ALL MY CLOTHES*, 1970), and lastly, the absence of explanation. Take for example the emotionally charged work *PLEASE DON'T LEAVE ME* (1969), and *I'M TOO SAD TO TELL YOU* (1970–71), which is both a photograph and a film of the artist crying uncontrollably before the camera's impervious stare. This shifting between ecstasy and shuddering misery again finds contemporary parallels in Sam Taylor-Wood's *HYSTERIA* (1997) and in Georgina Starr's filmed self-portrait *CRYING* (1994). Taylor-Wood's film, like Ader's, is silent. It depicts, in close-up, an anonymous woman whose slow-motion crying paradoxically resembles hysterical laughter as much as it does desperate weeping. Highlighting the delicate, often interchangeable balance between these two emotional extremes, it lays bare the private depths of human vulnerability, while remaining a public performance on celluloid.

Some critics have described Ader's last performance work as his greatest disappearing act. Far from disappearing from the pages of art history, however, Ader has come to be increasingly inscribed within them.

1) Tacita Dean, "The Lie," *Teignmouth Electron* (London: Book Works in association with the National Maritime Museum, 1999), unpaginated.

2) Quoted from program notes produced by the artists to accompany the opera and its performance in Aachen and Düsseldorf, October 2001. *The Strange Voyage of Bas Jan Ader* formed the second of a two-part chamber opera. The other component, *The Broccoli Maestro* (after writings by Tony Clark), cast an Australian slant on the notion of "failure."

3) Brad Spence, "Painfully Ironic," *Bas Jan Ader* (Irvine: The University of California, 1999), p. 37.

4) *Ibid.*, p. 39.