

Bas Jan Ader's Art in Relation to the Romantic and Postmodern Sublime: Gravity – Passibility – Sublimity

JOKE BRASSER

"To leave oneself open to new experiences, one's mind must be open to make an illogical choice and then to follow it through to its conclusion."¹

Sol LeWitt, *Sentences on Conceptual Art*

¹ LeWitt's manifest on Conceptual Art is printed, alongside its earlier versions, in Heman 2002.

Introduction

Nowadays, it is hard to find a Dutch art student who does not know the work of the Dutch/ Californian artist Bas Jan Ader (1942-1975). Both his work and his total dedication to it have been very inspiring for young artists. The life and work of Bas Jan Ader are hard to separate from each other; he used himself as object in his short films and photographs and most interpretations of his work focus on the relation between his life and work.

In his documentary *Here is Always Somewhere Else*, Rene Daalder portrays Bas Jan Ader as an artist who did not fit in the Dutch art scene, which was dominated by absurd artworks, such as Wim T. Schippers' emptying a lemonade bottle in the sea, and protest marches for their own sake. (Daalder 2006) The American art scene had more appreciation for Ader's works which explore emotionality, and concern existential problems rather than absurd humor.

2 In her study *Musically Sublime* Kiene Brillenburg-Wurth deconstructs the distinction Lyotard makes between the romantic and postmodern sublime using the concept of 'Form-contrariness': the possibility of form to become un-form, undoing itself, which appears in both romantic and postmodern musical practices. With the concept of Form-contrariness, Brillenburg-Wurth connects Arthur Seidl's 19th century dissertation on the sublime with Lyotard's writings on the Avant-garde/ the aesthetics of the postmodern sublime.

Even though Bas Jan Ader's work did not receive much attention in the Dutch media, it was shown at some of the major art exhibitions in The Netherlands, such as 'Sonsbeek buiten de perken' (1971) and 'Film als beeldend medium' (1974). (Andriesse 8) He was also well represented by a Dutch gallery; Art & Project in Amsterdam. So the portrait of the artist longing for recognition in his own country, as Daalder paints it, may need some revision.

At the age of 22, Ader emigrated to the United States, where he created the core of his small oeuvre between 1970 and 1975. His last work was the trilogy titled *In Search of the Miraculous*, which he never finished because he got lost and never came back from a journey over sea that was part of the second part of the trilogy.

In this article, I will take a new look at Ader's art from a work immanent approach, starting from the premise that "the work has to stand for itself," which was also Bas Jan Ader's own conviction. (Andriesse 8) I will relate his work to the cultural concept of the sublime, implying a dichotomy between the concept of the romantic and of the postmodern sublime.² The romantic sublime is in this respect concerned with transcendence, whereas the postmodern sublime is a sublime of immanence, which doesn't focus on a 'beyond' anymore, but on a play between presence and absence.

My reasons for relating the work of Bas Jan Ader to different cultural concepts of the sublime are the following: firstly, his work explicitly takes the romantic sublime as a theme, for example in titles of works such as *In Search of the Miraculous*, or in a work like *Farewell to Faraway Friends*. Secondly, the notion of the postmodern sublime, developed

by the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, could also be a relevant notion in relation to the work of Bas Jan Ader. According to Lyotard, the sublime, instead of the beautiful, has become the predominant notion in art and functions as a regulative principle for taste since Modernism. (Lyotard 93) This makes the sublime a fruitful concept to consider modern and contemporary art. I hope my analysis of the work of Ader in relation to the sublime will give a new perspective on his artworks, which does full justice to their inherent quality.

Beyond the Romantic Sublime

Bas Jan Ader has often been considered a romantic artist. He has been characterized as “an artist who wanted to look beyond the horizon” (Daalder 2006) and as “an artist in search of the miraculous.” (Andriessse 72) In other words, he has been characterized as an artist in search of transcendence in the romantic interpretation of the sublime. The intertwining of life and art, and the dramatic ending of his life in his last artwork have contributed to this image of the romantic artist. Ader lost his life in the execution of his last artwork and the question whether his death was an accident or a suicide would never be answered.

In Search of the Miraculous was the title of this last work, which consists of a night walk in Los Angeles, the crossing of the ocean in a thirteen feet tall boat and a repetition of his L.A. night walk in Amsterdam. In the execution of this artwork Ader disappeared at sea.

The title of this work implies something beyond this world; the miraculous that has connotations with the romantic desire for transcendence. In some of his early works, Ader refers more explicitly to the romantic quest for transcendence, for example in *Farewell to Faraway Friends* (1971), an early photographic work of Bas Jan Ader. In the photo, the silhouette of the artist is depicted, facing the horizon where the sun is just setting. The natural surroundings and the central position of the silhouette, depicted from the back, clearly refer to paintings of the 19th century romantic landscape painter Caspar David Friedrich. Thus in *Farewell to Faraway Friends* Ader posits himself as a romantic figure contemplating nature.

The sea plays an important role in Ader's work. In *Farewell*, the artist stands at the seashore, which is the same position he takes in the last photograph of the series of eighteen photo's which form the first part of the *In Search of the Miraculous* trilogy: *One Night in Los Angeles*. The series of photo's depicts the artist taking a night walk in Los Angeles. The walk ends, in the last photo, at the seashore, at the boundaries between civilization (L.A.) and nature, foreshadowing the

4 Consider, for example the following lines from Coleridge's 'This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison:' "On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem/ Less gross than bodily; and of such hues/As veil the Almighty Spirit when yet he makes/Spirits receive his presence." (Quoted in Vallins, 39)

second part of the trilogy. The second part of *In Search of the Miraculous* consists of Ader's Ocean journey in which he would sail from California to Groningen in a thirteen feet tall boat. One of the remaining pieces which documented his journey was a photo. It depicts Ader in his small boat at sea. There is no land to be seen in the photo, Ader's boat is drifting on an infinitely extending ocean.

The imagery of the small person depicted from the back in the great natural surroundings relates to the romantic imagery of *Farewell to Faraway Friends*. Nature was seen as a vehicle for transcendence in Romanticism, especially the overwhelming experience of infinity in nature.

In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) Edmund Burke tries to understand the origin of our ideas of the beautiful and the sublime, by means of their causal structures. Burke lists (among other things) greatness, vastness, infinity and magnificence as the material causes for the sublime. Ader refers in his works exactly to those aspects of nature, in *Farewell* where he is silhouetted against an overwhelming landscape, and in the photo of the *In Search of the Miraculous* trilogy where his own smallness in relation to the vast ocean is depicted.

Nature in itself was not an occasion for the sublime, because the concern of the romantics was to reach for what lies beyond visible nature. The experience of greatness in nature was an occasion for the sublime wherein the temporary loss of self created the feeling of unity with the infinity in nature. This experience pointed towards something beyond visible nature, as for Coleridge it was

a veiled manifestation of God in the world.⁴ The ‘beyond’ this experience referred to, was not clearly defined.

Ader uses this 19th century romantic motif in his own 20th century conceptual artworks. However, he seems to use this motif in a humorous way which foregrounds the search for transcendence, instead of the transcendent absolute which he aimed to reach.

Consider for example the humorous dimension of *One Night in Los Angeles*, the aforementioned first part of the trilogy. In the photo’s, Ader is depicted on his night walk while searching the surroundings with a flashlight. On each photo there is a handwritten line from the Coasters’ song *Searchin’*, which is a pop song about the search for love.

The returning lines of this song: “Gonna find her/gonna find her/gonna find her,” contrast sharply with the flashlight search depicted in the photo’s of the night walk. You do not expect the artist to find her, or the higher experience, by searching the surroundings of L.A. with a flashlight. Ader’s attempt to cross the ocean in a thirteen feet tall boat alludes to the same impossibility of reaching a ‘beyond,’ and to the same humor which was displayed in his flashlight search; his impossibly small boat is an equivalent of the flashlight search in the first part of the trilogy, you do not expect him to be able to reach a transcendental absolute by those means.

The different parts of the *In Search of the Miraculous* trilogy are concerned with the search itself rather than with a transcendental absolute. The ‘beyond’ Ader aimed to reach is not defined in his work. Moreover, it foregrounds the impossibility of reaching something beyond, by searching for it with a flashlight and by trying to reach it while crossing the ocean in a very small boat. Ader’s use of romantic imagery fits well into his foregrounding of the impossibility of reaching the ‘beyond’ since the romantic sublime has a strong claim on the possibility of transcendence (according to Weiskel, the essential claim of the romantic sublime is that man can transcend the human), and yet the romantic sublime is an experience, which remains in a state of alienation from the visible world, and at the frontiers of the invisible world. It does not deliver you to the invisible world. (Weiskel 4)

Bas Jan Ader was a 20th century artist who posited himself in his works as a 19th century romantic artist. To identify him with the 19th century romantics points towards a paradox. It is impossible for a 20th century artist to embody a 19th century artist’s quest for transcendence, since the conditions upon which romantic aesthetics commented have changed. The key to our understanding of the romantic sublime is the realization of the impossibility of the transcendence the romantics

5 In this interpretation, I am indebted to Jan Verwoert's study *In Search of the Miraculous* which considers the work as a "conceptual experiment which tests the tragic romantic hero's quest for transcendence." (Verwoert 2006:6)

6 See <www.basjanader.com>

longed for. Ader's work feeds on this paradox. Our understanding of the impossibility of the longing for romantic transcendence is shown, for example, in our definition of *Sehnsucht* as the never to be fulfilled romantic longing for something that you cannot clearly define.

In conceptual art, the historicity of one's own position and of the audience's understanding was an important notion, as becomes clear from Sol LeWitt's *Sentences*: "The artist works within the conventions of his own time" (Quoted in Heman, 52) and he starts from the premise that "each viewer approaches a work of art with a total history of understanding." (54) Ader is not a 'real' romantic but a 20th century artist who uses a motif from Romanticism. Likewise, *In Search of the Miraculous* is not concerned with reaching a romantic transcendental absolute, but with foregrounding the romantic longing for transcendence, and the contemporary audience's understanding of its impossibility.⁵

By its foregrounding of the problem of romantic transcendence, *In Search of the Miraculous* can be related to Ader's *Nightfall*, a black-and-white movie shot in 1971.⁶ *Nightfall* starts with a shot of the artist, standing in a dark room which is only lit by two light sources, lying at his feet. The artist is standing centrally in between the two lights. He lifts a heavy brick, which he eventually drops on the first light. Then he lifts the brick again, until it destroys the second light as well. After this, there is only darkness, and the film ends. When the lights have gone out, there is nothing. This is conflicting with the notion of the romantic sublime, which focuses on something beyond. Ader pushes into play the material causes for the sublime; such as power and privation of continuation, but without converting the image of darkness into

7 For both fall movies, see
<www.basjanader.com>.

a positive symbol of a transcendental absolute. *Nightfall* exemplifies the anxiety for which the romantic sublime should be the solution, without offering the solution itself.

In the next section, I will consider Ader's artworks as works which move beyond the romantic search for transcendence. I will focus on his artworks which center around an experience of the here and now rather than a romantic 'beyond.' The French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard has coined the concept of a postmodern sublime in his book *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (1991). The postmodern sublime experience is an experience of the here and now, instead of a transcendental experience. I will scrutinize Bas Jan Ader's fall works from this angle, and ultimately I will consider the *In Search of the Miraculous Trilogy* in the light of these fall works as postmodern sublime artworks.

Fall

"Fall" is an essential theme for the understanding of Ader's oeuvre. It is also the theme of some of his short films, which are registrations of the simple plot of a fall. Consider for example his first fall film, *Fall I Los Angeles* (1970). In this film, the artist is depicted sitting on a rooftop in a chair. At some point, he loses his balance and tumbles off the roof, face forward. On the way down one of his shoes flies off. For a moment he can take hold of the edge of the roof, but it slips out of his hands, and he falls. *Fall II Amsterdam* (1970) has a similar plot. It opens with a shot of the artist cycling in an Amsterdam street, next to a canal. With a twist of his steering-wheel, he heads towards the canal, in which he and his bike fall with a great splash of water.⁷

There is no climax in the films, there is only the simple registration of a fall.

8 Andriesse also points out that this statement does not apply when one uses a narrow definition of performance art as a theatrical production for an audience performed within the context of visual art and fixed to a particular space and time.

The possibilities of film as a medium are hardly exploited; the camera remains in the same position all through both films. Ader's use of medium is typical for Conceptual Art, which does not foreground the materiality of the artwork since its ideal is the opposite: the completely dematerialized artwork, or an art which consists solely of ideas. In the fall films, the focus is not on the filmic presentation of the fall, but on the fact that it happens, that somebody is falling. Paul Andriesse states that all of Ader's works are essentially to be regarded as performances, because "the execution of a symbolic act by the artist himself formed the basis of his photographic works or films." (Andriesse 79)⁸ Ader uses film and photography only as registrations of his performances.

The presentation of Ader's work remains open; many of his works were not released as films only but also as photographs and sometimes as postcards as well. The same fall could be registered by the use of different media, without the possibility of pointing out an original version of which the other versions are copies.

One of the fall works which was issued both as film and photograph is *Broken Fall (Organic)* from 1971. The film opens with a shot of the artist hanging from a branch above a ditch. There is a lot of movement, he is oscillating between left and right, and the branch moves dangerously up and down. When the movement stops, he is simply hanging there, holding onto the branch with both hands. Then he causes new movements by trying to move to the end of the branch, until he suddenly lets go. The moment when he lets go is over before you notice it – first one hand and then the other – and he falls into



Figure 1. *Broken Fall (Organic)* 1971 Amsterdamse bos. Black-and-white photograph

the ditch. The branch is still sweeping up and down and the artist is lying still in the ditch.

Broken Fall was also issued as a photograph (see Figure 1). The photo depicts the moment just after Ader has let go, in between branch and ditch. The focus on the moment in-between is not only shown in the depiction of exactly this moment in the photo's, but also in the presentation of his work, which always remains open; Ader did not create a final version of the works, but different versions in continually changing combinations.

The state of in-betweenness which is foregrounded in the fall works, is also the focus of the postmodern sublime of liminality.

The sublime of liminality is centered around an experience that remains in between rather than breaking through to another side. The experience is created by a feeling of delight, that from a state of privation, something happens after all. The so called *it-happens event* is located in a most minimal occurrence. Like, for example, the plot of the fall works, which is only the simple registration of a fall.

Passibility

Burke defined the sublime experience as an experience in which all the soul's motions are suspended. (Burke 1971) In the postmodern sublime, the mind willingly suspends its own intentions, in order to welcome the unknown. Lyotard uses the term *passibility* for this state of mind, which is a combination of possibility and a passive mental state. This state of passibility is exactly what is at stake in Ader's fall works. In these works, he places himself in a situation in which he is forced to let go. Gravity plays an important role in this process. Ader creates situations in which he lets gravity make itself master over him. His own motions or intentions are suspended; he falls not by his own will, but by the force of gravity. His own part in this surrender to natural forces is to create a situation which invites this possibility, to get himself up on a rooftop in a chair, hanging from a branch or steering his bike into a canal. One of the only comments Ader made on his fall works was that "gravity made itself master over him." (Andriesse 90) Still, Tacita Dean (artist and admirer of Ader's oeuvre) calls Ader himself a "master of gravity;" because in order to work with gravity as a medium, surrender and decisiveness of purpose are necessary conditions. (Dean "And He Fell Into the Sea")

Decisiveness of purpose and surrender are also strongly emphasized conditions for a conceptual artist to work with in Sol LeWitt's *Sentences on Conceptual Art*; namely to decisively execute an idea, and surrendering to this idea as the driving force behind the artwork. Ideally, "the idea becomes a machine that makes the art." (Quoted in Heman, 37) Combined with the state of passibility emphasized as the necessary condition for a postmodern sublime experience; and the fact that Ader uses himself as object of his artworks, there is a dangerous situation.

Ader uses himself as the object of his art, an art which could be characterized by an openness inviting the possibility of a (postmodern) sublime experience. The concept of Ader's works is the act of suspending one's own intentions, and to give oneself over to a larger force (in the fall works: gravity) in order to create an openness in which a sublime experience might occur. The radical point to which Ader followed this concept was his last work *In Search of the Miraculous*, in which his openness to possibilities included the possibility of death.

In Search of the Miraculous

Art critic Jan Verwoert characterized *In Search of the Miraculous* as an experiment which puts the possibility of romantic transcendence to the test. The essential claim of the romantic sublime is that man

can transcend the human. But in his execution of the quest for transcendence, Ader already announced his quest's failure. Consider, for example, the first part of the trilogy on which Ader executes a night walk in L.A., searching the surroundings with a flashlight. This flashlight search is depicted in a series of photo's which is accompanied by lines from the Coasters' song *Searchin'*, for example the returning lines "gonna find her/gonna find her/gonna find her." This way of executing his search for "her," or the higher, sublime experience by impossible means is repeated in the second part of the trilogy, the ocean crossing. You do not expect the artist to find her, to find the higher experience by searching the surroundings of L.A. with a flashlight. Likewise, you do not expect Ader to be able to cross the ocean in his impossibly small boat. *In Search of the Miraculous* was not a search which ended in grand revelations, or by the artist's successful return home. In the execution of his quest for the sublime, Ader got lost on the Atlantic.

But when falling would be the goal of his fall movies, to fail in his Ocean crossing would mean succeeding in his ultimate fall experiment. In his fall experiments, Ader followed Conceptual Art's aim of executing an idea to its ultimate conclusion: "To leave oneself open to new experiences, one's mind must be open to make an illogical choice and than to follow it through to its conclusion." (Quoted in Heman, 50) I have characterized Ader's fall works as registrations of a performance of self-surrender to a larger force.

Ader's act of self-surrender is a performance of the postmodern sublime, which is characterized by passibility; the mind willingly suspending its own intentions in order to welcome the unknown. In his artworks, Ader was in search of an overwhelming experience which would suspend his own intentions and force him to let go. His own role in this process was creating a situation which invited the possibility for such an experience. *In Search of the Miraculous* is the ultimate fall experiment of Ader's oeuvre, his grandest act of letting go. The work ends in a state of in-betweenness, a state which was also thematized in his fall works and which relates to the postmodern liminal sublime.

Tacita Dean called *In Search of the Miraculous* Ader's apotheosis; his grand final scene. (Dean "And he Fell into the Sea") The word apotheosis also refers to the exaltation of a subject to a divine level. Ader was not exalted to a divine level in the romantic sense of the sublime, but by making the ultimate investment of his life, his work evokes the highest effect of the sublime which Burke has listed: astonishment.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Andriesse, Paul.** *Bas Jan Ader, kunstenaar/artist*. Amsterdam: Stichting Openbaar Kunstbezit, 1988.
- Brillenburg-Wurth, Kiene.** *Musically Sublime: Indeterminacy, Infinity, Irresolvability*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2009.
- Burke, Edmund.** *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. New York: Garland, 1971 [1757].
- Daalder, Rene.** *Here is always somewhere else*. (Documentary) 2006, VPRO broadcasted 4-5-2006 in *Het uur van de wolf*.
- . “Bas Jan Ader in The Age of ‘Jackass’” *Contemporary Magazine* (Spring: 2004). <www.basjanader.com>.
- Dean, Tacita.** “And He Fell Into The Sea”. <www.basjanader.com>.
- Heman, Suzanna, Jurrie Poot & Hripsime Visser (eds.).** *Conceptuele kunst in Nederland en België 1965-1975*. Catalogus Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. Rotterdam: NAI Uitgevers, 2002.
- Lyotard, Jean-François.** *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*. Translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowly. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991. [1988].
- Vallins, David (ed.).** *Coleridge’s Writings Volume 5: On the Sublime*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2003.
- Verwoert, Jan.** *Bas Jan Ader. In Search of The Miraculous*. Afterall Books. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006.
- Weiskel, Thomas.** *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in The Structure and Psychology of Transcendence*. London: John Hopkins University Press, 1979.

SUMMARY

This article discusses several works from the Dutch/Californian conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader (1942-1975). It relates these works of Ader to different cultural concepts of the sublime; the romantic and the postmodern sublime. The interpretation moves away from simply identifying Ader as a romantic artist and his oeuvre as concerned with the romantic sublime, which critics have often done. Instead, it focuses on the way in which Ader thematizes the romantic sublime as a 20th century conceptual artist. It also relates Ader's fall works to Lyotard's concept of the postmodern sublime of liminality, and discusses Ader's last work *In Search of the Miraculous* as a postmodern sublime work which, like the fall works, is an execution of an act of self-surrender to a larger force.

Joke Brasser (1986) is currently pursuing the Research MA Comparative Literary Studies at Utrecht University, having also received her BA degree in Literary Studies there in 2010 (cum laude).