

# METRO PICTURES

O'Neill-Butler, Lauren. "Review: Bas Jan Ader," *Artforum* (October 2016): 268.

## ARTFORUM

INTERNATIONAL

### Bas Jan Ader

METRO PICTURES

Vito Acconci followed people on New York City streets and Bas Jan Ader fell off the roof of his house in Claremont, California—all in the name of art. This past summer offered the opportunity to compare the divergent flavors of Conceptual art cooked up by this East Coast/West Coast odd couple, in the form of MOMA PS1's formidable survey of early works by Acconci, and Metro Pictures' two-room mini-survey of Ader's career, which tragically ended with the Dutch artist's fabled disappearance at sea in 1975 while navigating alone across the North Atlantic for *In Search of the Miraculous*. The similarities between the two artists' oeuvres were obvious—penchants for poetry, Romanticism, and an intense collapse of art and life. Yet Acconci's work was defined by machismo and masochism, while Ader's was animated by cosmic pessimism: crying, wandering, and finally perishing. Ader's work was also distinguished by its connection to California and to a brand of Conceptualism that mined Hollywood, theatricality, and drama. Or, as Helene Winer put it, when I asked her in 2011 about the shows she curated in this period: "These artists strayed from the tightly scripted parameters of the New York Conceptualists, and without declaration they adapted the intellectual and cultural environment of the area."

Winer, a proprietor of Metro Pictures since 1980, gave Ader his first US show at the Pomona College Museum of Art in 1972, one of a handful of exhibitions the artist achieved before he died. This rare occasion to see so much of his work in New York was illuminating—particularly because the myth of Ader's final, fatal work tends to eclipse his other pieces. That didn't happen here, though his biography—his childhood in the Netherlands, his move to California in 1963—loomed large.

"The difference between Bas Jan and me," artist Jack Goldstein once observed, "is that I wouldn't have to take that boat trip; a flyer would have been enough." But to Ader a flyer would have been artifice, something deceitful and to be avoided. This was clear as soon as one entered the show: A monitor near the gallery's entrance displayed six digital versions of his short black-and-white 16-mm films in rotation: *Fall 1, Los Angeles* and *Fall 2, Amsterdam* (both 1970) as well as *I'm too sad to tell you*; *Nightfall*; *Broken fall (organic)*, *Amsterdamse Bos*, *Holland*; and *Broken fall (geometric)*, *Westkapelle*, *Holland* (all 1971). Whether riding a bicycle into an Amsterdam canal or, perhaps most famously, crying on cue, Ader sought not to simply present or even represent but to personify. As Alexander Dumbadze has noted in his book on the artist, this striving could encompass everything from a law of nature (gravity) to a philosophical idea (free will, truth).

Critics have argued that Ader's ongoing commitment to physical embodiment was most fully enacted in his last work—as the ultimate

dematerialization of art. Yet this claim risks framing the artist's entire production as part of a teleology, with every artwork leading to or anticipating that last decisive act. This exhibition put his small oeuvre under a more generous and generative lens. The plangent, bare-bones installation *Thoughts unsaid, then forgotten*, 1973, for example, with its funereal vase of flowers and titular text scrawled on the wall, may in most contexts seem to bluntly prefigure his death, but here it revealed itself as a more open-ended meditation on memory and transience. Meanwhile, a few small color photographs the gallery labeled "studies" were on view for the first time. Although not considered works by Ader, these images—such as two outtakes from the photoshoot for *Broken fall (geometric)*—shed some light on his processes. For some, the display of this kind of document may seem a form of object fetishism, providing fodder to a work-starved market. But when it comes to an artist who gave so much and produced so little, everything counts.

—Lauren O'Neill-Butler



Bas Jan Ader, *Studies for Broken fall (geometric)*, 1971, two C-prints, each 3½ × 3½"