

# METRO PICTURES

Cohen, Alina. "Bas Jan Ader's Fateful, Final Work Left Him Lost at Sea," *Artsy.net* (January 23, 2019).

ARTSY



*Bas Jan Ader aboard "Ocean Wave" about to set sail July 9, 1975, 1975*

Even before Andy Warhol created his Factory, a hotspot for wannabe artists from the 1960s through the 1980s, public hangouts like bars and nightclubs were the place where many sociable artists solidified their careers. Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse staked out Paris's La Closerie des Lilas, while the Abstract Expressionists held court at New York's Cedar Tavern. As today, artists' presence within an urban "scene" has often amplified their visibility among curators, writers, and collectors. A handful of artists, however, have built their personal mythologies via the opposite strategy: They disappeared.

Twentieth-century art boasts a variety of recluses, from Cady Noland, who withdrew from the art world in 1999, to Lee Lozano, who made her absence into an artwork: *Dropout Piece* (1970–72). Yet Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader retains the title of the art world's most mysterious disappearance. In 1975, as part of an art piece, he embarked from Massachusetts in a small sailboat on a journey across the Atlantic Ocean. He never returned, and his body is still missing. Ader's disappearance was a tragic yet fitting denouement for an artist who'd built a practice around existential ideas and heroic, romantic gestures. If artists in the 1970s were already thinking about how to merge art and life, Ader merged art and death in a chilling new way.



*Studies for I'm too sad to tell you, 1971*

Bastiaan Johan Christiaan Ader was born into the drama of World War II in 1942. His father, a minister, helped Jews escape the Holocaust by sheltering them in the Ader home in the Dutch countryside along the German border. In 1944, the Nazis arrested the elder Ader and then killed him, along with six other prisoners, by firing squad. According to interviews with gallerist Paul Andriessse and Ader's brother Erik, the minister asked his captors to shoot him last, so that he could offer consolation to the other victims. "He then met his fate with a strength of conviction that haunted his eldest son for the rest of his life," wrote art historian Alexander Dumbadze in his 2013 book about the artist, *Death is Elsewhere*. Throughout his life, Ader made only oblique references to this early trauma.

He went on to study art at Amsterdam's Gerrit Rietveld Academie, but became enamored by the United States during a study-abroad year in Washington, D.C., in 1960. Three years later, he moved to Los Angeles, integrating himself into the city's nascent Conceptual art scene. Lanky with high cheekbones, Ader already had movie-star good looks; where better to establish himself than the City of Dreams?

During this time, Ader attended the Otis Art Institute, where he gained a reputation as a prankster. He wooed a fellow artist, Mary Sue Andersen, by approaching her on campus, lifting his shirt, and proclaiming the beauty of his belly button. They married in 1965, the same year that Ader began his graduate studies in art and philosophy at Claremont College in Southern California. The artist particularly gravitated toward Albert Camus's ideas about freedom and fate. "There is only one really serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide," Camus famously wrote. Life is absurd, the existential philosopher suggested; we're fated to suffer, and we must choose whether or not we want to succumb to the endless cycle of meaninglessness. It seems apt that the act of falling, with its mediation between earthly forces and human foibles, became central to Ader's work in the early 1970s.



*Untitled (The Elements)*, 1971/2003

One of Ader's first films, the 1970 black-and-white movie *Fall I (Los Angeles)*, opens with the artist sitting on a chair atop his house. The audience watches helplessly as he leans forward and topples down the slanted roof, bringing his seat with him. The chair catches on the awning while the artist descends into the bushes (hidden mattresses broke his fall). Later that year, back in his home country, Ader repeated the gesture in *Fall II (Amsterdam)*. In this second film, he rides a bike along a canal, then tilts over the edge, plunging into the water. The project becomes particularly ominous in retrospect, given Ader's probable drowning death only five years later.

In 1971, for the video *Broken Fall (Geometric)*, *Westkapelle, Holland*, Ader foundered sideways over a sawhorse in the middle of a tree-lined path. In the film, he kilters to the right, rebalances, then tilts again and knocks over the object as he falls. "There is the implication that he is not moving willfully but has instead given himself over to nature," Dumbadze explained. By contrast, Ader's own actions in the earlier two films—scooting off the chair, tilting his bicycle—contribute to the sense that despite gravity, he was indeed making choices. The third film shows Ader's increasing interest in relinquishing control, even at the expense of his own safety. In a forthcoming catalogue essay, Philipp Kaiser, curator of "Disappearing—California, c. 1970: Bas Jan Ader, Chris Burden, Jack Goldstein," opening at the Modern Art Museum Fort Worth on May 10th, explicitly connects Ader's "decided interest in loss of control and self-determination" with the death of his father, an early trauma that inspired Ader's fixation on "falling, and thereby vanishing."



*Studies for Westkapelle, Holland, 1971.*

In the upcoming exhibition, Kaiser links Ader with Chris Burden and Jack Goldstein, two other major figures of Los Angeles's Conceptual art scene in the 1970s who similarly explored extreme modes of performance. Indeed, the *New York Times* once called Goldstein "An Artist With an Ever-Increasing Desire to Disappear." For his California Institute of the Arts thesis exhibition in 1972, Goldstein buried himself alive, breathing through a plastic tube. In the 1990s, he withdrew from artmaking altogether, and in 2003, he committed suicide. Kaiser posits that all three artists responded to "the omnipresence of death in the context of the Vietnam War; the temptation of magic's sleight of hand; and a fascination with the morbid and the sublime." Feminist art, which often focused on the violence wrought on the female body, was also emerging; Kaiser notes, without drawing specific conclusions, that these artists staged their disappearances just as women were becoming more visible and vocal in the art world.

Like Goldstein, Ader and Burden veered uncomfortably toward self-harm in their practices. In Burden's famous 1971 performance *Shoot*, the artist had a friend shoot him in the arm in front of an audience. For another stunt that same year, he disappeared for three days without alerting anyone. He titled the action *Disappearance Piece*. "Actually, all I did was check into a motel," he later said. "But it was a funny thing: I didn't feel I could do anything during those three days. I didn't read, or eat or even watch television. How could I, when I'd disappeared?" The piece suggests that outside the public eye, beyond the camera, an artist is a different person. Pushing this idea to the edge, in the early 1970s, Ader traded futures on the stock market and called the trades "art," positing that a private, mundane activity could also be an aesthetic endeavor. He hardly spoke about this action; by denying the work an audience, Ader suggested that an artwork doesn't necessarily need one to validate it.

Given that Ader, Burden, and Goldstein were working in Tinseltown, it's no surprise that their art teetered between the spectacular and the unseen. Dumbadze even connects Ader's off-kilter performances to the slapstick tradition of Buster Keaton. But his romantic self-presentation and storied life also garnered him a very different comparison. As David Pagel once wrote, "Ader is the James Dean of contemporary art." In 1973, Ader initiated his final project, giving it a title worthy of Hollywood: *In Search of the Miraculous*. The first part consisted of 18 black-and-white photographs that play on industry tropes. All taken in one night, Ader depicted himself in various locations around the city as the hero of a dramatic nocturnal tale. (Helene Winer, director of Metro Pictures, which represents Ader's estate, recently talked to *Artsy* about how the artist's output doesn't just figure into California Conceptualism, but also prefigures the image-obsessed Pictures Generation, who often questioned the latent meanings in commercial imagery.)



*Nightfall* (video stills), 1971.

The second part of Ader's piece—connected to the first mostly through the shared title—was to consist of a solo excursion across the Atlantic from Chatham, Massachusetts, to Falmouth, England. Ader embarked on a 12.5-foot-long sailboat named *Ocean Wave* in July 1975. Just before he left, he organized a performance of sea shanties, or sailors' songs, at Los Angeles's Claire Copley Gallery, where his *In Search of the Miraculous* photographs were on view. He planned to organize another, similar performance at the Groninger Museum in Holland, where he was slated to exhibit work shortly after his intended arrival in Europe.

Ader was an experienced sailor, and the sport had been integral to his youth. At age 19, the artist voyaged with an American sailor from Morocco to the Canary Islands and around the Pacific. His new scheme, then, possessed a personal, cyclical structure; it closed a loop in Ader's practice and lifelong geographical trajectory. After navigating the sea and facing the elements, he'd end up right back in his home country. The entire endeavor recalls the famous final line of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

Nearly a year after his departure, in April 1976, a Spanish fishing crew found Ader's boat off the Irish coast. The artist himself was never found—he'd apparently disappeared into the sea. Such mysterious circumstances, of course, bred suspicion. Maybe Ader hadn't drowned, but survived and began a new life for himself with an alternate identity. Maybe he committed suicide. Given his interests in presence and absence, foible and fate, both could have been in line with Ader's larger aesthetic project.

To this day, it's unclear what happened to Ader's body. He placed himself at the ocean's mercy, far from any camera or observing eye. Years later, *In Search of the Miraculous* seems less like a grand, romantic gesture than an intimate artwork about something most viewers never get to see: an artist alone, struggling, adrift.