

Bas Jan Ader

*In Search of
the Miraculous*

Jan Verwoert

Afferall Books

A Life On The Ocean

the o - cean wave, A home on the
the deck I stand Of my own swift

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The top staff contains the melody, and the bottom staff contains the bass line. The lyrics are printed below the notes, with a vertical bar line separating the first two measures from the last two. The lyrics are: 'the o - cean wave, A home on the' on the first line, and 'the deck I stand Of my own swift' on the second line.

A partial view of a musical staff at the bottom of the page, showing the beginning of a new line of music.

Bas Jan Ader

*In Search of
the Miraculous*

Jan Verwoert

Afterall Books Editors
Charles Esche and Mark Lewis

One Work Series Editor
Mark Lewis

Managing Editor
Caroline Woodley

Other titles in the *One Work* series:

Hollis Frampton: (nostalgia)
by Rachel Moore

*Ilya Kabakov: The Man Who Flew into Space
from his Apartment*
by Boris Groys

*Joan Jonas: I Want to Live in the Country
(And Other Romances)*
by Susan Morgan

Richard Prince: Untitled (couple)
by Michael Newman

One Work is a unique series of books published by Afterall, based at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design in London. Each book presents a single work of art considered in detail by a single author. The focus of the series is on contemporary art and its aim is to provoke debate about significant moments in art's recent development.

Over the course of more than 100 books, a variety of important works will be presented in a meticulous and generous manner by writers who believe passionately in the originality and significance of the works about which they have chosen to write. Each book contains a comprehensive and detailed formal description of the work, followed by a critical mapping of the aesthetic and cultural context in which it was made and has gone on to shape. The changing presentation and reception of the work throughout its existence is also discussed and each writer stakes a claim on the influence 'their' work has on the making and understanding of other works of art.

The books insist that a single contemporary work of art (in all of its different manifestations) can, through a unique and radical aesthetic articulation or invention, affect our understanding of art in general. More than that, these books suggest that a single work of art can literally transform, however modestly, the way we look at and understand the world. In this sense the *One Work* series, while by no means exhaustive, will eventually become a veritable library of works of art that have made a difference.

First published in 2006
by Afterall Books

Afterall
Central Saint Martins
College of Art and Design
University of the Arts London
107-109 Charing Cross Road
London WC2H 0DU
www.afterall.org

© Afterall, Central Saint Martins
College of Art and Design, University
of the Arts London, the artist and
the author.

ISBN Paperback: 1-84638-002-2
ISBN Cloth: 1-84638-019-7

Distribution by The MIT Press, Cambridge,
Massachusetts and London, England
www.mitpress.mit.edu

Art Direction and Typeface Design
A2/SW/HK

Printed and bound by
Die Keure, Belgium

Images courtesy of Patrick Painter Editions
and Kunstverein Braunschweig



Bas Jan Ader
*In Search of
the Miraculous*

Jan Verwoert

The author would like to thank the seminar group at the Academy of Fine Arts Umeå, the audiences at Index, Stockholm and ACCEA, Yerevan for their inspiring comments and Daniel Pies and Paulina Ołowska for their invaluable ad hoc advice and criticism.

Jan Verwoert is a critic and writer on contemporary art and cultural theory. He is contributing editor of *frieze* and writes for *Afterall*, *Springerin* and *Metropolis M*. He teaches at the Academy of Fine Arts Umeå and the Piet Zwart Institute, Rotterdam.

For Lutz



In Search of "Miraculous"

previous page

In Search of the Miraculous
(Art & Project bulletin no. 89,
July 1975), in association with
Claire Copley Gallery (detail)

1. Existential Conceptual Art

In the fall of 1973 Bas Jan Ader took a night-time walk through Los Angeles, from the Hollywood hills down to the Pacific Ocean. He recorded this walk with a series of 18 black-and-white photographs entitled *In Search of the Miraculous (One Night in Los Angeles)* (figs.1 – 2). Starting beside a highway at dusk and arriving by the sea at dawn, Ader is shown traversing the urban sprawl at a determined but unhurried pace, often visible only as a silhouette in a dark alley, or shot from behind against a panorama of city lights. Like subtitles on a movie image, Ader wrote the lyrics of the Coasters' 1957 song *Searchin'* line by line on the bottom of the photos, and thereby linked the romantic iconography of the solitary wanderer to a commodified version of the quest for the sublime in the guise of an old pop song about the search for love. In 1974 Ader decided to continue this work and turn it into a three-part conceptual piece. His plan was to realise the quintessential sailor's dream, to cross the Atlantic in a one-man yacht, document the voyage and then close the project with a third work, a walk through Amsterdam at night that was to mirror the Los Angeles piece.¹

In April 1975, as a prelude to the Atlantic crossing, Ader presented the 1973 photographic piece in the eponymously titled show 'In Search of the Miraculous' at the Claire Copley Gallery in Los Angeles. Printed on the invitation card to the exhibition was an image of a vintage-looking black-and-white photograph taken on board a sailing ship rocking through rippling waves,

across which the show's title was printed in elegant italics (fig.3). On the opening night a group of Ader's students from the University of California in Irvine sung traditional shanties to piano accompaniment (fig.4). The performance was photographed and recorded on tape. During the show the images were projected as slides on a carousel, the music played from the taped recording and the lyric sheets displayed on the wall (fig.5). In July 1975 Ader announced the Atlantic crossing in a bulletin published by his Amsterdam gallery Art & Project (fig.6), in association with Claire Copley and the Groningen museum in Groningen, Holland — Ader's native town, where all three parts of the project were to be shown after its completion. The bulletin contained the sheet music to the shanty *A Life On The Ocean Wave* (fig.7) and a black-and-white photograph of Ader on his tiny boat, facing away from the camera towards the horizon as if about to set course for the open sea. Here the title of the piece was given as *In Search of the Miraculous (Songs for the North Atlantic: July 1975—)*. On the 9th of July 1975 Ader set sail from Cape Cod to cross the Atlantic in his one-man yacht, Ocean Wave.

In Search of the Miraculous is the consequent realisation of an idea, the idea of the romantic tragic hero on a quest for the sublime. In this cycle of works Ader first isolates and objectifies this idea by boiling it down to its essential features: one individual, silent and alone, approaches the limits of society and culture where the city borders on nature at the coastline, and goes beyond this limit into the unknown by travelling across the

ocean on a boat by himself. This is an odyssey that is, by definition, both an experience of what lies beyond normal life and a form of homecoming, as Ader will be going back to the land he comes from. Ader then puts the idea into practice with highly economical means, through a series of performances with a clear-cut outline, documented through photographs and texts. All excess information is stripped away from the idea. No stories are told about the background of any of the actions Ader performs. Only an announcement, the documentation and some of the material (the music sheets) used in the process are presented. Although he performs the walk and the crossing, Ader downplays this personal involvement in the work by presenting himself as merely a figure with few discernible character traces: a man whose features are barely visible, whether photographed on a boat at sea, or walking through LA at night. The particular personal identity of both of these figures remains more-or-less irrelevant to the piece. Seen from a conceptual point of view, Ader (as well as his collaborators) simply plays a role in order to realise an idea. The entire cycle of *In Search of the Miraculous* is thus characterised by the particular way in which Ader uses the means of conceptual art — the purposeful reduction of art to the staging of a specific idea — to frame a key motif from the culture of Romanticism, that of the wandering tragic hero on a quest for the sublime.

The concise conceptual underpinnings of the work are met by a sensibility for the intertextual filiation of ideas as Ader extracts the motif of the romantic tragic

hero on a quest for the sublime from popular images or songs, and thereby places it in a framework of cultural reference. *In Search of the Miraculous (One Night in Los Angeles)*, for instance, plays on the iconography of a solitary traveller that may initially have been derived from Caspar David Friedrich's paintings of lonely wanderers facing sublime landscapes, and which by 1975 had been filtered through into the romantic pop imagery of beatnik road movies. Thus, by titling the images of his nocturnal wanderings with the lyrics of the Coasters' song, Ader links a historic visual idiom of romanticism to the modern vernacular of pop culture. The song breaks down the motif of the romantic quest into a set of simple phrases and then repeats them: 'Gonna find her / Gonna find her / Well now if I have to swim the ocean you know I will / and if I have to climb a mountain you know I will / and if she is hiding up on blueberry hill / am I gonna find her still / you know I will cause I've been Searchin' / oh yeh Searchin' my goodness / Searchin' everywhich way.' The combinatorial effect of placing these words with Ader's images of a night-time walk is highly ambiguous. On the one hand the absurdly formulaic character of the lyrics foreground the derivative nature of the images and thereby makes the entire work seem like a practical study on the rhetorics of romantic representation. On the other hand, the genuine experience of a night-time walk, which the images clearly communicate, fills the empty formula of the song-text with new meaning. You feel that the beauty of the idea of the romantic quest might in fact lie in the simple truth that in order to find love you have

to travel. Through the ambiguous interplay of text and image the integrity of the romantic idea is thus simultaneously dismantled as pure rhetoric and restored as a true experience.

The choir performance and the plan to cross the Atlantic push this critical ambiguity even further. Here Ader goes beyond the citation of particular images or words towards the evocation of an entire genre: the world of stories, songs, films and fashion that surround the motif of the sailor as romantic hero. Perhaps it can be called the genre of the 'ocean romantic'. Just as the songs that the choir intonates can be understood as stock examples of the musical genre of the shanty, so the photographs Ader uses for the invitation card and bulletin can be seen as tokens of a particular type of photography, as they contain only the absolute minimum of visual characteristics needed to identify them as romantic representations of sea travel. What further serves to frame these themes as genre motifs and create a certain distance towards them is Ader's conceptual choice to select motifs and media that are, if not openly nostalgic, at least decidedly uncontemporary. This decision can be traced through all the works of the cycle: instead of citing the lyrics of a then-contemporary pop song, Ader chooses a formulaic and arguably corny tune from the 1950s, as well as the highly evocative but hopelessly antiquated form of the shanty. Instead of colour photography, Ader takes black-and-white images and uses slides instead of film. Significantly, the performances themselves stage untimely actions: crossing LA on foot in place

of taking a car; singing shanties in a choir instead of playing pop in a band; and, above all, attempting to go across the Atlantic in a one-man yacht instead of taking a plane. These are all ways of acting and representing that are at odds with the customs of the modern world, and deliberately so.

Ader invokes the idea of the romantic quest through genre representations and untimely acts. He thereby makes it clear that the only way to access this idea today may be through second-hand motifs gathered from the stocks of a prefabricated romanticism. Yet, the twist in his work is that he takes these second-hand motifs and tries them out for real. In this sense, the *In Search of the Miraculous* cycle could be understood as a conceptual experiment. By wandering through LA from dusk until dawn, by staging a shanty choir and by trying to cross the ocean alone Ader puts the idea of the romantic quest to the test in order to see what it is worth and to experience what it feels like to act out an un-contemporary idea. To search for the potential truth of the romantic idea in the face of its obvious commodification may seem quixotic. But this is where the experimental character of the work makes all the difference. Ader does not insist on the validity of the romantic idea or deny its erosion like a stubborn traditionalist. Instead he acknowledges and actively foregrounds the fact that the motifs through which this idea manifests itself today are historical, rhetorical and commodified. The experiment lies precisely in the attempt, against these odds, to find out if the idea has any meaning or not. At the same time Ader brings his

doubts into play by framing his experience as an experiment conducted on a set of abstract cultural terms, the outcome of which — a series of conceptual artworks — may arrive at a hypothetical, but not a final, claim of truth. Ader's work encompasses and moves between desire and doubt, experience and speculation, and it does so with a certain lightness. This attitude manifests itself, for instance, in the melancholic humour with which Ader traces the romantic sublime in the banalities of the Coasters' lyrics, and thereby proves that the sublime and the banal are today each other's flipside.

Yet, this thought-experiment is not just a mind game, for, by putting himself in the position as test person, Ader makes an existential investment in the work. He invests both his desires and doubts into the process, and ultimately puts his life at stake in the attempt to cross the Atlantic single-handedly. Ader prepared well for the voyage and was already an experienced sailor, having sailed from Morocco to Los Angeles in 1962. However, the crossing ended tragically: after three weeks at sea radio-contact with Ader's boat, the *Ocean Wave*, broke off and in April 1976 its wreck was discovered off the Irish coast. Ader himself was missing and his body was never found.

How is it possible to continue to talk about a work that ended so abruptly with the death of the artist? By attempting to cross the Atlantic Ader put the role of the romantic tragic hero to the test by living out one of the last remaining dreams of the romantic quest our society holds dear — the fantasy of the solitary

sailor who transcends the limits of society in an encounter with sublime nature. In the end, through his disappearance and death, Ader came to embody this role of the romantic tragic hero in an unexpected and irrevocable way. The work is *about* the idea of the tragic and is itself a tragedy. Therefore, to speak about the work as if nothing happened and to treat it simply as a conceptual piece would mean to betray the existential loss it entailed. However, to portray it solely as a work sealed by the artist's death and therefore to disregard its speculative conceptual dimension would equally do neither the work nor Ader himself justice. In this sense, to create a cult around the disappearance of the artist seems wrong. In fact, one of the most problematic aspects of contemporary subcultures is its maintenance and glorification of the cult of a romantic heroic death. The long unholy lineage from James Dean, Brian Jones, Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix through to Ian Curtis and Kurt Cobain in this sense re-affirms the general misconception that artists can gain ultimate authenticity, can prove that they were for real and not just performing, only if they go beyond their work and make that extra sacrifice of their own life. The art world may be more discreet in its cults, yet the work of artists who die an untimely death — artists such as Wols, Eva Hesse or Blinky Palermo — is often treated as if it were exceptionally auratic.

To confuse the artist as a person with the role he assumed when he explored the motif of the tragic romantic hero would be, in the case of Ader, especially problematic. To credit him with a cult authenticity

would be to effectively discredit the key concerns of his work that lie precisely in the critical conceptual exploration of the very terms of romantic authenticity. It is, after all, one of the merits of Ader's work that it disentangles the concept of the romantic act from its coercive ties to a belief system, and thereby makes it possible to reconsider the idea, intellectually as well as emotionally. To do justice to Ader, therefore, would mean to respect the liberating way in which he moves freely between the general idea and the specific experience of the romantic quest, and avoid suffocating the work under the heavy cloak of heroic authenticity. Nonetheless, the existential dimension of *In Search of the Miraculous* needs to be taken seriously.

This book is an attempt to find concepts that might describe the intimate ties between the conceptual and existential that characterise Ader's approach. The *In Search of the Miraculous* cycle, in this sense, can be seen to epitomise the particular method, commitment and humour that Ader develops throughout his work. To contextualise this cycle and further delineate Ader's proposition of an existential conceptual art, the book will discuss a selected number of his earlier works in relation to *In Search of the Miraculous*. The following chapter situates Ader's position in relation to more canonical definitions of conceptualism. It then looks more closely at how he uses conceptual art to re-stage motifs from the repertoire of romantic culture, and compares his invocation of the sublime in the *In Search of the Miraculous* cycle to his embrace of melancholia in the short film *I'm Too Sad to Tell You* (1970–71; figs.8–9).

In both works Ader can be seen to distil emotional truth from generic representations of romantic sentiments through the conceptual experiment of their real-life enactment. By showing how the theatrical staging of grand emotions produces true experiences, he creates a sense for both the mundane mechanics and vital importance of existential drama. Developing this notion of existential drama further, the final chapter considers the different ways in which Ader interprets the concept of tragedy in the series of films *Fall* (1970–71). With a humour that comes close to that of slapstick comedy, Ader here treats tragedy as an untimely principle at odds with modern rationalism. Yet, as he stages small tragic scenarios, he testifies to a need for a sense of depth and determination, foreclosed by rationalism, which may only be reached by pushing things to the point of crisis in the enactment of existential drama. In light of these arguments the attempt to cross the ocean as part of *In Search of the Miraculous* emerges as a conceptual experiment designed to test and potentially redeem the emotional value of a generic romantic sailor's dream. At the same time the voyage comes to figure as the endeavour to grasp the truth of tragedy as Ader, following the logic of dramatic climax, goes beyond a point of no return to bring about a decisive experience.

2. Staging Grand Emotion

In 1967 Sol LeWitt wrote in his 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art': 'Conceptual art is made to engage the mind of the viewer rather than his eye or emotions.'² Even if many of the conceptual works of the 1960s

and 70s are not fully recognised by this definition, LeWitt's writing certainly captures the idea or spirit that conceptual art has become associated with. In critical opposition to the cult of individual artistic genius that the supporters of abstract expressionism had attributed as the source of the visual power of painting, conceptual art was launched as a strictly intellectual, iconoclastic and anti-subjective art form. In his 'Paragraphs' LeWitt therefore dismisses all aspects of art connected with the paradigm of self-expression, aspects such as style and taste, as well as the emotional impact and psychological content of a work. Instead he proposes an art that is based on definite ideas, an art that would set clear, systematic and impersonal rules for the execution of a work, thus overruling the moment of subjective decision making. 'To work with a plan that is pre-set is one way of avoiding subjectivity,' he writes and concludes: 'The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.'³

A closer reading of LeWitt's writing, however, reveals a more complex understanding of the type of rationality he wants conceptual art to epitomise. The poetic and humorous side of his thinking comes out in sentences such as: 'Irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically.'⁴ Or, 'The logic of a piece or series of pieces is a device that is used at times only to be ruined.'⁵ Here LeWitt reveals that it is primarily the practical procedures of art production from which he wishes to eliminate all traces of subjectivity. The *ideas* on which conceptual works are based, on the other hand, remain as residues of intuitive thought.

Ultimately, LeWitt's outline for conceptual art is a critique of conventional rationality: through the strictly logical realisation of illogical ideas conceptual art should transcend reason by rational means.⁶ LeWitt beautifully frames this ideal of reason transcending itself in the short sentence: 'Other plans imply infinity.'⁷ This opening up of the conceptual work to the sublime, however, is portrayed as a solely intellectual experience that is disconnected from any sensual sensation, emotional impact or existential content. In this sense LeWitt decrees:

*It is the objective of the artist who is concerned with conceptual art to make his work mentally interesting to the spectator, and therefore usually would want it to become emotionally dry. There is no reason to suppose, however, that the conceptual artist is out to bore the viewer. It is only the expectation of an emotional kick, to which one conditioned to expressionist art is accustomed, that would deter the viewer from perceiving this art.*⁸

In the light of LeWitt's ideas, it becomes clear that Ader's work stands out precisely because it realises some of the key concerns of conceptual art while it openly contradicts others. On the one hand Ader uses exactly those methods that LeWitt defines as essentially conceptual: he follows his thoughts through 'absolutely and logically' by realising his works according to pre-set plans (walk through LA for one night; sing selected shanties; cross the ocean alone). Likewise, the concise form and purposeful execution of his works are as rational and cool as you could wish conceptual

art to be. On the other hand, the 'emotional kick' LeWitt wants to see banned is precisely what Ader's work delivers. It engages the mind *and* the eye *and* emotions by means of highly evocative images and music. Moreover, far from being 'avoided', subjectivity is the very idea Ader focuses on. The yearning for the sublime, invoked by the cycle *In Search of the Miraculous*, is in fact one of the grand emotions in which the romantic cult of subjectivity is centred. Historically, the project of romanticism could be understood as the development of a radical sense of selfhood through the cultivation of intense feelings. To seek the encounter with infinity in open nature — as Ader does by facing the night sky and ocean — is one of the key ceremonies created by this culture of sentimentality to intensify self-experience. In this ceremony the self is made to experience itself most fully, paradoxically, in the very moment when, overpowered by the force of the sublime, it senses the possibility of its own dissolution.⁹

Romantic literature is rich with accounts of this limit experience, a prominent one being Novalis's morbid *Hymns to the Night* (1800). Here Novalis hails the obliteration of the self in the face of the sublime: 'Aside I turn to the holy, unspeakable, mysterious Night[...]. I am ready to sink away in drops of dew, and mingle with the ashes.'¹⁰ He does so, however, only to portray this moment of obliteration as a pathway to higher experiences: 'More heavenly than those glittering stars we hold the eternal eyes which the Night hath opened within us.' *In Search of the Miraculous* echoes these ideas. Yet the tone in which

Ader articulates them is significantly different. The grave, flowery language of romantic poetry is replaced by the cool aesthetics of conceptualism. So, the key twist of the work lies in the fact that Ader invokes the grand emotion of romantic self-experience in a form that is decidedly unemotional and non-subjective. By introducing rational distance through the conceptual form of his works, he detaches the romantic motifs and emotions from their accustomed *milieu* and thereby makes it possible to approach them differently and anew. In particular, it is the lightness of touch and unabashed boldness with which Ader stages these motifs that allows them to be looked at, freed from the weight of tradition, as simple ideas with great emotional value.

Yet, in the act of framing key motives of romantic culture through the strategies of conceptual art, Ader also brings out the residual romanticism that LeWitt commits to when he aims for conceptual works to 'imply infinity'.⁴¹ By playing out the full evocative potential of conceptualism, he interprets idea-based art not as an exercise in logic (as Joseph Kosuth maintained) but as a practice that seeks to transcend reason by rational means (like his contemporaries Robert Barry or Douglas Huebler). It is precisely because of the suggestive openness of their conceptual form that Ader's works create a sense of the sublime. They preserve, through their cool form, the abstract character of the idea, even in the moment of its actual realisation and thus never exhaust its meaning. Framed as conceptual works, a lonely walk through LA to the Pacific at night,

the recital of shanties and the solitary crossing of an ocean become gestures that point towards infinity as an idea that eludes rational comprehension, and therefore becomes the object of yearning. By foregrounding this evocative, suggestive and open-ended quality of the conceptual gesture, Ader shows how deeply indebted conceptual art is to the aesthetics of the sublime, and how it could be therefore understood as an art form dedicated to the 'search of the miraculous'.

This conceptual take on the romantic is an approach that Ader develops throughout his entire work. *I'm Too Sad to Tell You* (1970–71) is a strong case in point. The grand emotion Ader frames here is a pendant to the unsatisfied yearning for the sublime: the feeling of infinite sadness. *I'm Too Sad to Tell You* is a portrait of Ader crying. He made it in four different versions, the first being a 16mm black-and-white silent film, shot in the autumn of 1970, which has now been lost. The second version, also made in 1970, is a black-and-white photograph. It shows Ader's face in close-up, eyes closed, lips half-opened, tears streaming down his cheek. His head is tilted slightly to the side with his brow resting against his left hand and the left side of his face covered in shadows. The words 'I'm too sad to tell you' are written across the image in its lower right-hand corner. Ader used the same photograph for the front image of a postcard he sent to different people with the message 'I'm too sad to tell you' dated 'Sept 13 1970' on its back. The fourth version was another 16mm black-and-white silent movie of around two-and-a-half minutes in length, shot in 1971. Taken in a single

long shot, the film shows Ader crying in close-up. His facial expressions vary steadily, but subtly. His face contorts, he clenches his teeth, closes his eyes, his eyelids tremble, he tears at his hair and brushes his tongue over his lips. He lowers his head and holds it in his hands. For a moment he fights back tears. Then they flow down his cheeks again. Despite its intensity, however, the crying does not seem like a sudden emotional outburst. There is no dramatic build-up or climatic moment of release. Ader just cries. What he displays is not a momentary stir of emotion, but an elementary *emotional state* of grief.

Ader gives no reasons for his grief. In fact, he expressly declares his intention to withhold any explanations for the way he feels: 'I'm too sad to tell you' is both the title of the piece and the message he sends out to people. So while he shows every sign of sadness through his facial expressions, Ader also rules out the possibility of a psychological interpretation of his body language. In doing so he goes beyond a mere defensive prevention of a biographical reading. In fact, he actively disconnects the expression of grief from any story that may go with it *and* unframes the state of sadness from the interpretive context of psychology. By exhibiting it as a state or condition without a story, Ader isolates sadness as an idea. By concentrating his performance on facial expressions and a few gestures he presents the signs of sadness as a visual language. By doing the crying for real he stages sadness as a fact. The piece invites interpretation not on a psychological level, but rather on a conceptual, rhetorical and existential one.

As it isolates the idea of the sadness for no reason, *I'm Too Sad to Tell You* can be read as an allegory of melancholy. Ader singles out a sentiment, which, in the history of ideas, is as closely connected to the formation of modern subjectivity as the yearning for the sublime invoked by the *In Search of the Miraculous* cycle. In philosophy and the arts, melancholia is associated with the air of solitary self-reflection. As such, it only came to be truly appreciated in Renaissance thought, prior to which it had been seen primarily as a pathological disorder. It was in his treatise *De Vita* (1489), Masilio Ficino elevated the sentiment to the rank of the sublime, '*Melencolia illa heroica*', by identifying it as a character trait of great loners who suffer under moments of morbid inertia as the downside of their ingenious creativity.¹² Iconic works such as Dürer's *Melencolia I* (1514), or melancholic heroes such as Shakespeare's Hamlet subsequently immortalised the idea of melancholia as the curse of genius and trademark of outstanding individuals.¹³ In its modern guise melancholia also came to reflect the existential despair over the hollowness of the world. To cite Novalis: 'Afar lies the world — sunk in a deep grave — waste and lonely is its place. In the chords of the bosom blows a deep sadness.'¹⁴ In the culture of sensibility, to publicly shed tears in turn was a common practice to act out this existential despair or, its pendant, sublime exaltation. Goethe's Werther, for instance, confesses his need for grand emotion thus: 'Oftentimes do I then bend my knee to the earth, and implore God for the blessing of tears, as the desponding labourer in some scorching climate prays for the dews

of heaven to moisten his parched corn.’¹⁵ This cultural history of melancholia as a notion and emotion that is crucial to the modern sense of self reverberates in Ader’s *I’m Too Sad to Tell You*. Yet, it does so because Ader boils the representation of the grand emotion down to its most basic form, a picture of someone crying in close-up. The image, therefore, magnetically attracts historical meaning for the very reason that it is essentially no more than a suggestively empty sign.

When you look at it from this abstract conceptual perspective, the visual form of *I’m Too Sad to Tell You* appears like a practical study, a short *étude* in the visual rhetoric of representing sadness. As Ader goes through the motions conventionally used to signal grief, the film version of the piece becomes like an animated typology of the facial expressions of this particular emotion. He shows what sadness characteristically looks like. In this respect the work echoes the baroque concept of emotions as a language with a basic grammar of distinctive expressions. Such a visual alphabet of the passions, for instance, can be found in the illustrated treatise *Conférence sur l’expression générale et particulière* (1668) by the court painter Charles Le Brun, who categorised facial expressions according to the systematic account of the emotions Descartes gave in *Les Passions de l’âme* (1649). In many ways this alphabet of the passions survives in the visual grammar of Hollywood cinema, probably most prominently in the genre of melodrama. It is here that faces are presented in close-up, ready to be read like an open book. And it is also from here that Ader borrows

the visual form for *I’m Too Sad to Tell You*. The film is like a sketch for a melodrama, one shot from a ‘weepy’, comparable in its form, say, to the image of James Dean crying in *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955). Similar to the way he staged the performance of shanties in the course of *In Search of the Miraculous*, Ader here cites not a motif but an entire genre. He invokes melodrama and its visual conventions as a general form of portraying the passions. Again, the somewhat uncontemporary look of the black-and-white silent film, as well as the untimely feel of melodrama further heightens the awareness of the rhetorical character of the image. Seen in this light, Ader could be said to be translating and transforming the emotion he displays into an aesthetic form, a cultural concept and, finally, an idea.

At the same time, however, you can see that Ader really is in tears. And his crying is moving. It has an impact, it touches you like any display of intense grief would. Neither the conceptual framing nor the rhetorical character relativises the emotional truth of Ader’s display of sadness. It is abstract and personal, theatrical and genuine at the same time. Even if it is clearly staged for the camera, there is nothing ostentiously smart or fake about it. Crying is one of the most basic and straightforward ways to communicate sadness; if we see someone cry we see that he is sad. The existential truth of emotions lies in the reality of their expression. This is the simple truth that Ader makes you see and feel for real. He makes clear that the emotions can be understood simultaneously

quality. In the sense that the motifs on which these works are based are taken from the repertoire of romantic culture, the gesture that characterises the staging of these works is very much like the gesture of communicating through the covers of books picked up from shelves.

And just as these covers say all that there is to be said, so Ader's gestures touch the rock bottom of romantic culture. The motifs he uses and the ideas he realises capture and convey the emotional realities around which this romantic culture is built.

The truths that Ader and Godard discover in their respective use of rhetorical figures lies not only in their expressive content, but also in their emotional impact. If the content of an emotion cannot be dissociated from the form in which it is expressed, the crucial question is how and to what effect this form of expression is used. In other words, the *mode of address* that is characteristic of emotional expressions becomes the key to understanding what it means to express an emotion *per se*. By using the cinematic convention of a close-up of the person who displays emotions, Ader and Godard both demonstrate that the direct rapport, the face-to-face confrontation with the other is the mode of address that is designed to create maximum emotional effect. They thereby also show that the truth of this mode of direct address lies less in the depth and degree of differentiation with which it conveys a feeling, but more in the intensity of the impact it has and impression it makes. In other words, the truth of an emotional



1. *In Search of the Miraculous*
(*One Night in Los Angeles*), detail
from series of 18 black-and-white
photographs, 1973



characteristic of our social experience is the need to understand what it means to express an emotion per se. By using the cinematic convention of a close-up of the person who displays emotions, Adir and Gorenz both demonstrate that the direct rapport, the face-to-face confrontation with the other is the mode of address that is designed to create maximum emotional effect. They thereby also show that the truth of face-to-face direct address lies less in the depth and degree of differentiation with which it conveys information, but more in the intensity of the impact it has on the viewer than it makes. In other words, the truth of an emotional

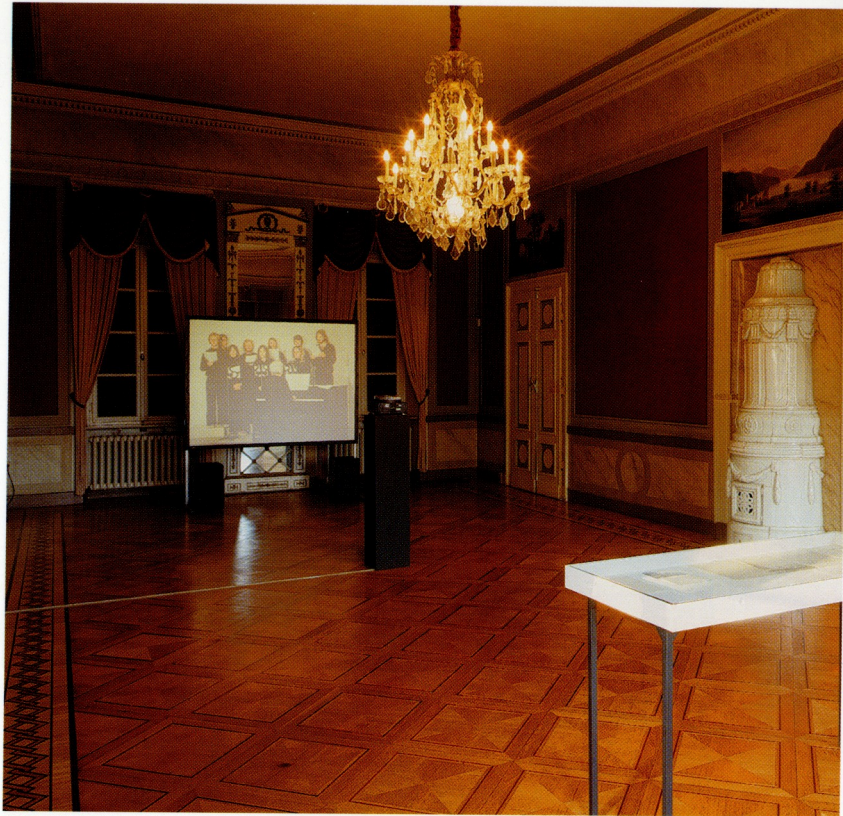
2. *In Search of the Miraculous (One Night in Los Angeles)*, series of 18 black-and-white photographs, 1973



3. *In Search of the Miraculous*,
invitation card, Claire Copley Gallery,
1973



4. *In Search of the Miraculous*,
performance of sea shanties,
Claire Copley Gallery, 1973



5. *In Search of the Miraculous*,
installation view, Claire Copley Gallery,
1973

art & project

bulletin 89

1007 amsterdam
willemsparkweg 36
(020) 713991

drukwerk aan
printed matter to

bas jan ader

"in search of the miraculous"
(songs for the north atlantic; july 1975 -)

in cooperation with the claire s. copley
gallery, los angeles, usa, and the
groninger museum, groningen, holland

6. *In Search of the Miraculous*
(*Art & Project* bulletin no. 89, July 1975),
in association with Claire Copley
Gallery (detail)

120 ✓

A Life On The Ocean Wave

HENRY RUSSELL

Allegro

1. A life on the o - cean wave, A home on the roll - ing deep, Where the scattered wa - ters
2. Once more on the deck I stand Of my own swift - gliding craft, Set sail! fare - well to the
rave, And the winds their rev - els keep! Like an ea - gle caged, I pine On this dull, un - chang - ing
land, The gale fol - lows far a - baft: We shoot thro' the spark - ling foam, Like an o - cean bird set
shore; Oh, give me the flash - ing brine, The spray and the tem - pest roar! A life on the o - cean
free; Like the o - cean birds, our home We'll find far out on the sea! A life on the o - cean
wave, A home on the roll - ing deep! Where the scat - tered wa - ters rave, And the winds their rev - els
keep! The winds, the winds, the winds their rev - els keep, the winds, the winds, the winds their rev - els keep.

7. *In Search of the Miraculous*
(Art & Project bulletin no. 89, July 1975),
in association with Claire Copley
Gallery (detail)

expression lies in its power to make others feel what you feel. What gives the rhetorics of emotional articulation its authentic quality is, then, not so much its expressive dimension but its *appellative* function – its capacity to address, appeal and touch others.

A work in which Ader isolates this appellative function of the emotional mode of address is *Please Don't Leave Me* (1969; fig.10). Ader took two black-and-white photographs of the words 'please don't leave me', which he had painted in big black letters on a white wall in an empty space and then illuminated with a spotlight. Here the emotional expression is condensed into one phrase, a formula for the fear of being left, a formula that is appellative in its very essence. It is a classic example of a performative utterance; as J.L. Austin put it, to use a performative utterance is to 'do things with words'. 'Please don't leave me' is to appeal to another not to go. It is a spoken act that seeks to provoke (re-)actions in the real world. It is a spell put on someone to make him or her stay. To see this appeal is to feel its effect on you. The formula talks to you like a person would. You feel the eyes of someone on you and a look of despair directed towards you when you read it. Even though it is presented out of context, the writing on the wall bears its own context in itself, in the form of the countless scenes in which the words 'please don't leave me' could be pronounced. It is appropriate that Ader projected a spotlight on these words, for the phrase is like a movie or a melodrama contained in a single statement; and like a movie or a melodrama it is designed to move you.

The structural similarity between *Please Don't Leave Me* and *I'm Too Sad to Tell You* lies in the way both works confront you with an emotional expression that is disconnected from any particular content, context or cause, but one that still touches you and feels *real*. In this sense the works could be understood as powerful arguments against the psychological truism that an emotion is primarily defined through its conscious or subconscious content, through the biographical context that gave rise to it and the hidden cause, be it desire, drive or trauma, that motivates it. According to the way Ader represents them, emotions are not motivated by other forces but are motivating forces in themselves. Rather than being *products* of subconscious causes, they are productive themselves in that they seek to trigger reactions and analogous feelings. Ader cries to make you feel the sadness. He addresses the appeal not to leave *to you* in order to *subject you* to its impact. As in Godard's *Une femme est une femme*, the authenticity of the character's emotions is grounded in their rhetorical effect in an interpersonal exchange, not in the psychological motives that may or may not lie behind them. Emotion is portrayed as a language, the truth of which lies in its power to connect people and cause effects in the real world.

One of the most common expressions that describe this potential of emotion to cause an effect is 'to make a scene'. To 'make a scene' can mean to confront someone with emotion in order to make him or her feel what you feel. In this sense, you could say that Ader is making a scene when he stages a walk through LA to the Pacific

at night, or through a recital of shanties or a crossing of the ocean, as well as when he is crying to the camera or painting the plea 'please don't leave me' onto his studio wall. He does these things to make you feel the pain and pleasure of the melancholia that is at the heart of the romantic sentiment. And he makes you see that the practice of making scenes is not extraneous to this romantic tradition but itself a technique that is intimately linked to the cultivation and communication of the emotions around which the culture of romanticism is built. So, in a sense, Ader boils romantic grand emotion down to the basic scenes, gestures and icons through which it is staged. The crucial point, however, is that he does so not to ironise, devalue or dismiss but actually to try and redeem grand emotion — by showing that the truth of this emotion can be found in the full depth and intensity on the surface of these scenes, gestures and icons. Yet, Ader's endeavour to redeem grand emotion is clearly not an attempt to make his peace with tradition. His work, in fact, goes against the grain of the sanctimonious tone that marks the traditional perception of romantic sensitivity — on the one hand by virtue of his rough-and-ready use of romantic motifs and on the other hand by virtue of the fact that the emotional charge recovered from these motifs is precisely the unsettling quality of yearning, despair, tragedy and crisis.

The act of making a scene in this sense is a paradigmatic way to bring about crisis. Ever since people began to demand *more* from life and from other people they have been making scenes to get it. Making a scene is also

about pushing someone to the point where a decision must be taken. If you feel, for instance, that your lover is not committed enough to your love and too undecided about its future, to make a scene is an efficient way of forcing him or her to make a decision and come clean about what your relationship is going to be. Making a scene, in this sense, is a technique that preserves the ancient Greek knowledge of the importance of *crisis* for grasping how things develop. In ancient Greek jurisprudence and medicine the crisis is understood as the moment of decision: the moment (ie. in a conflict) when the situation at hand is experienced as too undecided and thus the crisis is a calling for a decision to be taken, or it is the moment when a decision is felt to be impending. So the state of crisis is the experience of the urgent need for — or of the impending arrival at — the resolution of an unresolved situation.¹⁶

When you look at ‘the scenes’ Ader makes in terms of the crises they bring about, the existential urgency of his work comes fully into focus. By taking it upon himself to cross LA at night and the Atlantic alone he is presenting himself and his viewers with the need and necessity to decide how they position themselves in relation to the idea of the romantic quest. In the face of the emotional and existential investment he makes you cannot remain undecided. The stakes are too high. By confronting you with his tears and the appeal not to leave him, he is daring you to share your feelings with him or turn away, embarrassed and put off by the intimate mode of address of his works. So while Ader’s work has the character of a conceptual experiment and

a rhetorical exercise, the point of this experiment and exercise is to push the viewer (and, first and foremost, himself as the one on whom the experiment is conducted) to a point of crisis to bring about a decision. Obviously, in its most extreme form, Ader puts himself into crisis by attempting to cross the Atlantic in *In Search of the Miraculous*. As much as this work is a conceptual experiment, staged to put the quintessential sailor’s romantic dream to the test, Ader surrenders himself to the forces of the ocean and thereby exposes himself to an existential situation of crisis in which it will be decided whether he can master the challenge implied by this dream.

In the series of films in which he stages falls, Ader deals with this idea of crisis in paradigmatic form. For instance, *Broken Fall (Organic) Amsterdamse Bos, Holland* (1971; fig.11) is a short silent black-and-white 16mm film that shows Ader holding onto a branch of a tree with both hands, his body suspended in the air at a considerable height over a narrow stream. After some time, Ader visibly begins to struggle to hold on and a moment later the inevitable happens and he falls from the tree into the stream and the film ends. It is impossible to tell *how* or *why* Ader got up into that tree, all you get to see is *that* he got himself into a situation with only one possible outcome: sooner or later he will fall. Again, Ader shifts attention away from the content, context or cause of an emotionally charged performance towards its factuality and its effects. He isolates the practical meaning of the act he performs. He shows that ‘to get

yourself into a situation' is an emotional technique which, like 'making a scene', aims at bringing about a decision by provoking a crisis. Following the logic of the crisis, the practice of getting yourself into a situation is about creating a moment of necessity in a situation of contingency. Basically, there is no need to climb up this tree, no one told Ader to do it, just as no one can or will tell an artist what to do. So what do you do when anything goes and nothing matters? You get yourself into a situation which is bound to lead up to a point of no return, where nothing goes anymore and everything matters, be that alone at sea or high up in a tree.

LeWitt was also trying to find a way to bring a moment of necessity into art practice when he proposed that artists should work with a pre-set plan, so that the 'idea becomes a machine that makes the art'.¹⁷ Ader follows LeWitt in that he submits himself to the logic of a pre-set plan and surrenders his body to its own logic and inevitability. Ader does not model this process on machines, however, and this is where he differs from LeWitt. Ader takes recourse in a much more traditional model: the fate of the tragic hero as it is portrayed in Greek tragedy. A tragic hero is someone who takes the conscious decision to carry out a plan that will inevitably lead to his fall. The tragic hero gets himself into a hopeless situation to resolve a crisis by bringing about a resolution that, because he will have sacrificed himself in the process of enforcing this resolution, will, in retrospect, appear to have been inevitable. Ader condenses this entire paradigm in the

act of climbing up, hanging and falling from a tree. He makes his point. No one will care why or how he did it but everyone will be touched by the inevitable consequences of the fact that he did. To seek tragedy is a technique to challenge fate. Quite clearly, this is also what Ader was doing when he took off to cross the ocean in *In Search of the Miraculous*. Still, it is crucial to see that to challenge fate is not a way to seek failure but a way to bring about a decision that feels necessary, irrespective of what it turns out to be.

3. The Need for Tragedy

If we understand the formula of tragedy — the challenge of fate — to underlie the idea of the ocean crossing in *In Search of the Miraculous*, then the series of films entitled *Fall* that Ader produced between 1970 and 1971 become an important point of reference, as it is in these films that Ader develops the idea of the tragic in all of its complexity. While some of the films draw gloomy scenarios to foreground the question of the inevitability of tragedy, others, by blending the tragic with the comic, suggest affinities between the tragic hero and the slapstick actor. *Nightfall* (1971; fig.12), like the other films in the series, is a silent black-and-white film shot on 16mm. It shows Ader, dressed in black and standing in a space, lit solely by two lightbulbs that lie on the floor which, by illuminating him from below, give him a ghostly appearance. In front of his feet is a heavy stone slab. After remaining motionless for some time, Ader bends down, lifts the slab up to his shoulder and tries to balance it with his left hand, which he does for some

seconds before it falls from his hand and crushes the lightbulb to his left. Ader steps back and stands motionless for a moment as if he were contemplating the damage he has just done. Then he steps forward and lifts up the slab, trying now to balance it with his right hand. But he fails again, and crushes the other bulb. With the lights now 'out' Ader disappears into the darkness and the film ends. In line with LeWitt's maxim that 'irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically', the compelling logic of Ader's action produces an outcome that feels wholly inescapable: as the stone must fall, so one light after another will go out. At the same time, however, none of this really *has* to happen. No one has asked Ader to attempt the impossible and bear a weight that is clearly too heavy for him. It is all his choice. In fact, when the nature and actual outcome of his actions begin to dawn, you feel like stepping in and stopping him. Yet there is nothing you can do except watch things take their course.

Nightfall evokes a subtle sense of foreboding crucial to the structure of tragedy: you sense the disaster that will befall the hero if he continues to do what he is doing. And it is precisely your inability to intervene in the action that you witness on the stage or screen that inevitably entangles you in the fate of the hero. Your enforced impassivity transforms you from a viewer into an accomplice of the tragedy that you fail to prevent. Ader frames the sense of foreboding and the moment of enforced impassivity through which tragedies both touch and tie you into the proceedings

they portray. But he does so with very minimal means. What you witness is not the historical and political tidings that seal the fate of the Prince of Denmark but a man who destroys two lights with a stone. As Ader boils the imbroglio of tragedy down to one simple act, its inevitability begins to seem disputable. There is, in fact, no apparent reason why he should actually do what he does in the first place. When you look at his act for what it really is, a deed done for no apparent reason, its intrinsic necessity vanishes and the damage done comes to seem entirely avoidable. By pushing the contradiction between the inescapable inner logic and the apparent unmotivatedness of his act to the fore, Ader puts the very plausibility of tragedy at stake so that we question how we can perceive events as fateful when they are brought about by deliberate actions.

This crucial question has been raised repeatedly throughout the twentieth century, and the dispute over the contemporary credibility of the concept of tragedy plays a crucial role within the critical discourse of modernity. The point at issue here is whether it is still possible and justified to understand the disasters of the modern world in terms of tragic fate when it is clear that today the atrocities of world wars and mass genocides are purposefully planned and rationally administered. Two conflicting positions on this issue are of interest here, characterised by the writings of, respectively, Ludwig Marcuse and Bertolt Brecht.

In 1923 Ludwig Marcuse described tragedy as the truth of the modern condition.¹⁸ He argued that previous ages had suppressed the truly tragic element of tragedy by portraying the death of a hero as the noble sacrifice of a life for a higher ideal or metaphysical value system and, in doing so, glossed over the terror it implied. As these higher ideals and values came to be scrutinised, discredited and dismissed by the critical discourse of modernity, the grounds for justifying a meaningful sacrifice of life were eroded. It is in this moment, when the senselessness of the sacrifice is brought to light in the modern perspective, that the deep truth of tragedy fully emerges. Marcuse writes:

*The absolute tragic element of the tragic tragedy is suffering without sense. Suffering without sense means increased suffering. Only modernity – since Kleist – denies suffering its sense.[...] Only with Shakespeare and Heinrich von Kleist our tragedy begins, the tragic tragedy. The tragic tragedy is the tragedy of man; not of the cosmos.*¹⁹

For Marcuse, to think about the disasters of the modern age in terms of tragedy is a way to acknowledge and mourn the suffering they have caused, to condemn their senselessness and invalidate the euphemistic explanations of ideology.

Writing at the same historical moment, Bertolt Brecht took a radically different stance. For Brecht tragedy cannot be dissociated from the notion of fate, and to portray political, social or historical events as tragic means to interpret them as fateful, thus

representing them in a way that suggests they could not have been prevented and thus have to be accepted. Tragedy, therefore, is just another ‘opium for the people’. The tragic here gives the impression that prevailing social and political conditions had been created by the invisible hand of fate, or uncontrollable forces of nature. In this sense Brecht claims the ‘business’ of tragedy was ‘to accommodate people with their fate’.²⁰ Its primary end, he wrote in 1930, was ‘to portray certain social injustices as eternal and unsolvable problems of human nature and thus fulfil a hidden function within society: to keep people from changing the conditions and reasons for this “tragedy”’.²¹ For these reasons, Brecht also perceives the celebration of the tragic hero as implying an approval of both power and violence. Shakespeare’s tragic accounts of solitary figures such as Macbeth – who, as they face the challenge of their fate as political leaders and irreversibly heave guilt onto themselves, grow into exemplary individuals – are off-handedly dismissed by Brecht as ‘drama(s) for man-eaters’.²² He admits that tragic moments or feelings may arise in the process of recounting the story of a historical figure. Yet, on the whole, he maintains that to describe history at large within the paradigm of tragedy today is inappropriate and unacceptable.

With his own take on tragedy, Ader seems to account for both arguments. When you look at works such as *I’m Too Sad to Tell You*, *Nightfall*, *Broken Fall (Organic)* and *In Search of the Miraculous* from Marcuse’s point of view, they indeed can be seen as strong articulations

of a contemporary sense of tragedy, precisely because they so clearly refrain from giving the tragic moments they stage any transcendent meaning. And as they do not offer any convenient psychological narrative to explain the pain away, they make you feel the depth of grief, failure and the yearning for more as an existential fact. However, when you look at these works from a Brechtian perspective, the heightened sense of theatricality if not absurdity of Ader's actions can, equally, be understood as foregrounding the untimely, unfitting or inappropriate character of tragedy as an aesthetic form. After all, the most prominent feature of these works is that they reduce the grand narrative of tragedy to one moment, one act or one take in a short film: a person weeping, falling from a tree, killing the lights or going to sea alone are each small dramas that simultaneously renounce tragedy as a grand ideological narrative (ie. the tragedy of a people's fate or that of modern history at large) and recoup the tragic emotion on a personal level. So Ader's position on the issue of the contemporary credibility of tragedy remains ambiguous. However, there is a strong undercurrent in his work that reflects the desire to defend the existential value of — or emotional need for — tragedy against its resolute dismissal in the name of a rationalist worldview.

The series of four photographs entitled, *On the road to a new Neo Plasticism, Westkapelle Holland* (1971; fig.13) could be perceived, in this sense, as a plea for the justification of a need for tragedy that rationalism fails to satisfy. The images are taken on a small

path among trees with the lighthouse tower of the Westkappelle in Domburg, Holland, visible in the background — a building that among other things is known for the geometrical form that Piet Mondrian used as the point of departure for his first attempts at abstraction. It was also in the artist colony of Domburg that Mondrian first became acquainted with the spiritualist writings of Helen Blavatsky and Rudolf Steiner, and later wrote the papers on abstraction that he would publish in 1917 in the magazine *De Stijl* under the title 'Neoplasticism in Painting'. In the first photograph, Ader, dressed in black, is lying face down on the path, arms and legs outstretched in angular positions. In the second image his pose is unchanged, but now he lies on a blue blanket. In the third photograph, a yellow oil canister is added in the place above his outstretched left arm; in the fourth the rectangular red plastic box of a car warning triangle appears under his bent right leg to form what, as a whole, now resembles a Mondrian composition. Again, Ader boils tragedy down to a simple scenario that, in a rough-and-ready improvised manner, is staged with props from the car boot. Yet, despite its casual form, there is nothing light-hearted about this work. The sight of the body on the ground immediately evokes the scene of an accident and all the fears and emotions that come with it. Again, Ader 'makes a scene'; he stages a moment of crisis to trigger primary emotional responses. The obvious discrepancy between the abstract form and the emotional connotations of his pose can be read as spelling out a fundamental discomfort with the modern rationalist worldview epitomised by Mondrian's abstractions: there is, after

all, no place for pain in Neo-plasticism. Purged of the notion of tragedy, rationalism has nothing to say about the sudden event of death and the inexplicable grief that it causes.

Broken Fall (Geometric), Westkapelle Holland (1971; fig.14) is a silent black-and-white film shot on the same location as the photographic series. This time Ader is shown standing next to a sawhorse. Most likely the place is somewhere in the dunes because a strong breeze from the sea seems to be blowing through the trees. Ader tries to stand still but the wind makes his body sway. He keeps his balance, yet it does not seem as if he is applying much force to fight against the wind. In fact, very slowly, his resistance seems to wane and Ader allows his body to be increasingly shaken until the wind finally blows him over and he falls sideways into the sawhorse, tipping it over as he goes down. Once more, Ader draws up a tragic constellation with minimal means. What we see is a scenario of crisis, a moment of decision in which the fate of the hero will be sealed: will he continue to stand or will he fall? In this situation the hero is on the edge; he stands on the boundary between nature and culture. Quite literally so, for Ader is caught in the middle between the wind blowing from his right and the sawhorse blocking his way on the left. As the title *Broken Fall (Geometric)* suggests, the triangular sawhorse serves as a stand-in for the geometric, a glib paraphrase of the Mondrian principle, and thus a shorthand symbol for modernist rationalism. So it is a question of nature versus modernism, with Ader in the middle wavering

like a needle between scales. He tips the scales by falling over and collapsing the geometric shape on his left. Nature wins. But it does so because Ader lets it. Slowly he is *giving in* to the strength of the wind and allows himself to be blown over. The film may be mocking modernism. Yet, it is also one of the most beautiful and poignant works about the weakness of the will in contemporary art. Ader portrays the procedure of letting things slip and slide out of control as an intricate technique of bringing about decisions by allowing things to gradually get out of hand. After all, some of the most critical decisions in life come about without conscious effort. There are ways to allow things to taper off, fall apart and gravitate towards a tipping point that changes everything without there ever having been one definite and traceable choice. By staging this procedure of letting things slide as a performance, Ader shows that it is not a form of passivity but a proactive technique, an emotional skill of provoking decisions through an attitude of decisive undecidedness. It is the skill of getting yourself into situations. And it is also how tragedies happen, devoid of explanation. Still, the damage is done and there is no way to undo it. Ader does not embrace or celebrate this technique of active passivity. He shows it for what it is and thereby acknowledges the existential significance of a principle that eludes and mocks belief in the rationality of choices.

Nightfall, Broken Fall (Organic) and *Broken Fall (Geometric)* both foreground the tragic elements of the inevitability, fatefulness and seductive pull of falling, or of submit-

ting yourself to failure. In this sense they elucidate the same willingness to put one's life at the mercy of the elements that Ader acts upon by setting off to cross the ocean in *In Search of the Miraculous*. Still, to see the formula of tragedy that Ader develops throughout his work only in terms of this air of existential gravity would be misleading. Ultimately, it is crucial to the work that Ader generally treats this moment of gravitas with a characteristic lightness by boldly staging it with simple theatrical means. In *Fall I, Los Angeles* (1970; fig.15) and *Fall II, Amsterdam* (1970; fig.16), for instance, Ader blends the tragic element with a comical moment very close to slapstick. *Fall I, Los Angeles* shows Ader sitting on a chair on the gabled roof of a one-storey house. He sits and waits, begins to squirm and sway, and eventually loses his balance, toppling over and rolling down the roof with the chair spinning after him until both fall over the edge of the roof and drop into the back garden shrubbery, a loose shoe spiralling through the air in an arch behind the disappearing Ader. *Fall II, Amsterdam* depicts Ader riding his bike into one of Amsterdam's canals in one short take of 25 seconds. You see him ride round a street corner, go down the lane, swerve slightly towards the canal and then head right over the edge, face forward into the water.

Like a slapstick film actor, Ader performs a short uncommented stunt for the eyes of the viewers. Similar to the flexible body of the slapstick actor who suffers no lasting injuries when he or she gets hit or bumps into things, the physicality of Ader's body disappears into the gesture he performs. He becomes a character,

a cipher, a man who falls from a tree, from a roof, into bushes or into a canal. This abstract element of Ader's performances becomes even clearer when you compare them, for instance, to the work of his contemporary, Chris Burden. When Burden had himself shot in the arm in *Shoot* (1971) or crucified onto the back of a VW beetle in *Transfixed* (1974) he was clearly searching for the kick of the real, and thus acting under the spell of the tantalising question 'are you experienced?' that has haunted consumer culture ever since it started to deliver extreme thrills to the needy in the 1960s. Burden's performances produce bodies of evidence — bodies that bled to prove the authenticity of the experiences it has been subjected to. With Ader there is no blood to prove he had an 'experience'. His body is not on show but it disappears physically by plunging into a river, a canal or bushes, and conceptually by becoming a character who displays a gesture on screen.

This moment of abstraction gives Ader's work its searching and questioning character. It stages the figure of the performer as much as it turns the symbolic meaning of the performance into a subject of speculative thought. If we can understand the *Fall* films as speculations on the contemporary plausibility of tragedy, *Fall I, Los Angeles* and *Fall II, Amsterdam* can be seen to ask whether the slapstick protagonist is not a modern embodiment of the tragic hero. Like the tragic hero Buster Keaton whose characters are existentially at odds with the world, they wage a solitary war against the order of things. The point is, of course, that Keaton's slapstick heroes don't even

recognise the tragedy of their undertakings as they don't, in turn, recognise reality as an obstacle. If they fall they simply get up and keep on pushing until reality gives up its resistance and allows them to have things their own way. Their desires triumph over the reality principle that doesn't ever get a chance to assert itself fully. In this sense the comic element of Keaton's slapstick lies in the fact that his heroes act out tragic scenarios of existential adversity; but they do so with the psychological disposition of a stubborn child who cannot recognise tragedy for what it is and, because of that misrecognition, successfully manages to overcome it.

Ader isolates and restages this moment of existential adversity in the slapstick performance but puts a special spin on it. In his case the quixotic challenge against the reality principle lies precisely in the insistence on trying the paradigm of tragedy out on, or rather *against* contemporary reality; it lies in the gesture of staging a bicycle stunt as if it was a tragic act. Ader's performances, therefore, have a double edge. On the one hand you feel he insists on recouping a tragic element from a form of representation that is ostentatiously generic and untimely. Similar to the way he brings out the moment of direct emotional address in the generic visual language of melodrama in *I'm Too Sad to Tell You*, he isolates and exhibits the moment of existential adversity at the heart of the slapstick genre in films such as *Fall I*, *Los Angeles*, *Fall II*, *Amsterdam* or *Broken Fall (Organic)* and recoups the tragic gravitas and intense longing inscribed into

formulaic sailor's songs and dreams in *In Search of the Miraculous*. In the course of redeeming these existential moments of tragedy he also situates them in the context of an un-contemporary medium. He brings tragedy to life. But he does so by speaking the dead languages of melodrama, slapstick scenarios and black-and-white silent film. In the act of formulating a plea for the need for tragedy he is displacing his own speech by framing it as an outmoded rhetoric. There might be a moment of nostalgia for the existential at play in this approach. Yet Ader never allows this nostalgia to develop into a sustained sentimentality as he keeps his films short and his means of expression basic and, in the end, he is not too precious to do silly stunts on bikes, trees or rooftops. Still, it seems fair to say that the ongoing 'search for the miraculous' in Ader's work is a search for those moments in the stock rhetorics of mass-produced visual culture that bear the potential to allow a moment of existential truth to reveal itself.

In a discussion about this very question the painter and poet Arman Grigoryan remarked that he saw Ader's attempt to redeem these existential moments as the endeavour to trace and recapture elements of a lost literary culture in a mass culture that is predominantly visual.²³ The capacity to understand and experience events in terms of tragedy, he argued, was linked to an abstract and allegorical form of perception intrinsic to — and learned through — literature. This description seems accurate since the moment of abstraction which gives Ader's short films and performances their characteristic quality of conceptual gestures is indeed the

quality of a literary aphorism or allegory. Through his works you begin to 'read' motifs of visual culture as signs with the potential to describe existential emotions. Yet, the endeavour to redeem these moments does not imply an attempt to elevate or ennoble them. Ader does not seek to deny or overcome the ready-made rhetorical quality of the motifs or genres he draws on. Rather it is precisely at the level of their rhetoricity that he discovers their potential. The sight of someone crying in close-up or taking a plunge into a canal touches you because a cinematic rhetoric is played out in its most simple and effective form. In the process of putting them into effect, Ader transforms the motifs he appropriates. First, he unframes them from the film narratives that conventionally give meaning to them. The tragic element emerges because the moments that Ader isolates do not make sense in a readily understandable way. It is the crying for no reason and the falling without comment that invoke the tragic element which, following Marcuse, lies in the experience of the painful absence of an explanation for the existence of grief and failure.

Beyond the process of the appropriation and unframing of cultural motifs there is also the fact of the enactment of the ideas implied by the motifs Ader recoups. It is characteristic of Ader's work that the relation between the appropriation of a cultural motif and its real-life enactment creates a tension that cannot be fully resolved. On the one hand his works are intentionally woven into a broad intertextual net of cultural references, and therefore ask to be read abstractly as

allegorical or aphoristic. On the other hand, the simple fact that Ader enacts the idea implied by the motif continues to pierce the fabric of intertextuality. The endeavour to redeem the ideas of the romantic quest and the tragic element is thus simultaneously characterised through the moments of abstract speculation and personal sacrifice.

In terms of this conceptual tension between speculation and sacrifice, *In Search of the Miraculous* is an extreme case in point. Like Ader's films and photographic pieces, this cycle of works is tied into a net of intertextual references. Its title is taken from the book *In Search of the Miraculous* by the Russian writer and modern mystic Petyr Demianovich Ouspensky (1877–1947), an account of the occult theory of George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff (1877–1949) and a primer on spiritual self-improvement. Throughout modernity occult theories, such as those of Ouspensky and Gurdjieff, have been continuously developed in tandem with scientific rationalism. With the modernist project of constant progress they share the axiom of enlightenment that self-improvement is the destiny of man. It is only the terms of this progress that they define differently. Essentially, modern mysticism understands itself, just like romanticism, as a critical complement to the modernist project. It articulates the discomfort with the existential alienation produced by scientific rationalism and promises to offer a remedy in the form of practical ceremonies for the recovery of the spirituality and raw vitality that modern secular societies deny to their members. In the introduction

to his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant traces this blind spot of modern enlightenment in the one urge that critical reason and empirical sciences can never satisfy nor contain: namely, the 'desire for metaphysics' inherent to human existence. He writes: 'For human reason, without being moved merely by the idle desire for extent and variety of knowledge, proceeds impetuously, driven on by an inward need, to questions such as cannot be answered by any empirical employment of reason, or by principles thence derived.'²⁴

This passage is one of the most explosive in the *Critique*, as Kant here acknowledges the existence and relative legitimacy of the very principle the containment of which is the project of his writing. His mission is to free thinking from all the chimeras, mirages and pointless debates which the desire for metaphysics has produced in the history of religion and philosophy. Kant ventures to do so by drawing a clear division between the areas of thought where objective knowledge is justified through its grounding in empirical perception and those foggy areas beyond empirical knowledge (concerning the meaning of life, god and the self) where reason inevitably drifts off into fanciful speculations. While his intent is to bar modern reason from venturing out into territories where it is bound to lose itself, he, astonishingly, admits that to try and do precisely that is a basic human need. One of the key motivations of romanticism and modern mysticism could then be seen to come from exploring and exploiting precisely this blind spot of the unsatisfied need for metaphysics

of modern man, resulting in a long history of attempts to transgress and obliterate the dividing line between sense and nonsense that Kant so meticulously drew in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. This history of transgression reaches from the expansive idealism of Hegel over the mystic romanticism of Novalis and William Blake to the occult teachings of Ouspensky, Gurdjieff, the aforementioned Steiner and Blavatsky, on to more provocative figures like Alister Crowley or Anthony la Vey. By calling his cycle of works *In Search of the Miraculous* Ader again finds a shorthand formula to tap into this history and sum up its most essential point, the unsatisfied desire for that which is always missing and found wanting in modern rationalist society: the miraculous. The humour of the citation lies in its casual conciseness. Like the protagonists in Godard's *Une femme est une femme* Ader skims the meaning of what he seeks to say off the cover of a book (which in turn stands in for an entire genre: the field of modern occult writing). He thereby gives a name to the sentiment that could be seen to underlie so many of his projects, including the *Fall* films: the need to redeem the possibility of experiencing existential depth through tragedy.

There are many referential threads that surround the attempted ocean crossing in *In Search of the Miraculous*. One is linked to the book *The Strange Last Voyage of Donald Crowhurst* by Nicholas Tomalin and Ron Hall, which is reputed to have been found in Ader's locker at the University of Irvine, California after his disappearance.²⁵ This best-selling book is a factual reconstruction of the attempt by British amateur

sailor Donald Crowhurst to realise his dream and circumnavigate the globe in a one-man boat as part of a sailboat race in 1969. Crowhurst's voyage seemed ill-fated from the start, and a series of technical problems should have led him to give up the race early on. Against all odds, however, he decided to battle on, and at some point he started sending back false information to shore in order to cover up the fact that he was falling well behind. This made his position only more desperate since it was clear that there was no way he could ever actually catch up with the fictional account of his progress. Having passed a point of no return, Crowhurst for a time seems to have lived through a state of spiritual ecstasy, jotting down existential reflections in his logbooks. A few days after the last entry in the books, the crew of a passing cargo ship found his abandoned boat. Throughout Tomalin and Hall's book, the tidings that lead up to Crowhurst's disappearance are explicitly described as elements of a contemporary tragedy — a tragedy whose protagonist, driven by the romantic desire to accomplish one of the last remaining heroic challenges and master the forces of the elements, heads into disaster with his eyes wide open.

The Strange Last Voyage of Donald Crowhurst is basically a simple, popular book about a tragedy at sea. As such, it may have inspired Ader in the same way in that he draws upon the tragic element in the genres of melodrama and slapstick. But there is nothing to suggest that Ader modelled his own disappearance on Crowhurst's fate. Still, when events become stories

they come to be linked to other stories. As a story, Ader's disappearance cannot be easily dissociated from Crowhurst's, just as it will resonate with other accounts of solitary figures disappearing at sea. For instance, the story of Arthur Cravan who in 1920 was last sighted, equipped with an axe, setting course for the Gulf of Mexico in a small vessel.²⁶ Cravan was celebrated in surrealist circles for his radical commitment to aestheticise his existence and to make aesthetics existential by fighting boxing matches as a poet and writing poetry with the language of a boxer. In accordance with the way he lived his life, Cravan's disappearance appears like a terminal theatrical gesture, a grand exit that frames his existence as a work of art. If you meld Ader's life and work into a story it comes to resemble that of Cravan, as both emerge as renegade romantics who find themselves at odds with the dire reality that surrounds them and thus immortalise their unsatisfied desire for the miraculous in a final work.

Insofar as *In Search of the Miraculous* is a conceptual work based on intertextual references, it suggests a reading of Ader's disappearance as an allegory of the tragic desire for the sublime. Insofar as the attempted ocean crossing is essentially an action carried out in real life, however, its fatal outcome disrupts the abstract form of allegory. From this point of view it is simply a tragedy. These two perspectives might be impossible to reconcile. Yet, Ader's own approach to tragedy may open up a way to connect them. We have seen how, in works like *I'm Too Sad to Tell You* and the

films and photographs of the *Fall* series, Ader develops an understanding of tragedy as a *modus operandi*: he finds the truth of tragedy in the practical logic of bringing about existential decisions and emotional reactions by either pushing a situation to a point of crisis or by allowing a process to gradually reach a tipping point. This practical logic of tragedy is as aesthetic as it is existential. Insofar as it is about 'making a scene', the means for staging crisis are rhetorical and theatrical. Insofar as it is about 'getting oneself into situations', the implications and consequences of the staging of tragedy are existential and very likely irreversible, as necessity is precisely what tragedy aims at producing. And in this sense Ader stayed true to his grasp on tragedy as a practical logic by setting off to cross the Atlantic in *In Search of the Miraculous*; he staged a conceptual scenario in order to push things to a point in real life at which the truth value of the romantic idea of an encounter with the sublime was to be decided.

What we cannot know, however, is what this decision has amounted to in the end. There is, in fact, a constitutive moment of indecision at the heart of *In Search of the Miraculous*. Has Ader failed or succeeded to prove the idea he set out to test by going to sea? What would it mean for this work to fail or succeed? The artist survives death as the hero of the story, his work tells. But because of his actual disappearance the work is not only a story. It is existential. But what does it prove then? It testifies to a fundamental dissatisfaction with reality and the need for something that is more than

real, that is in fact miraculous. But how can a reality prove the miraculous when it lies in the nature of the miraculous to point beyond reality? What the disappearance proves is that beyond death lies a story that tells of the miraculous. Still, death is part of that story and the disappearance will always refer back to its reality of loss and grief. Ader works towards the possibility of redeeming tragedy as a way to grasp the experience of loss and grief. Yet he does this only insofar as tragedy is an aesthetic form that does not make sense of the experience it contains. It acknowledges grief as an existential fact the interpretation of which must remain inconclusive. But it gives a right and a form to that grief. And maybe this is as far as you can go.

1

Facts and details concerning Ader's work are based on Christopher Müller's excellent monographic survey essay 'Bas Jan Ader' to which I feel very much indebted. See Christopher Müller (ed.), *Bas Jan Ader* (exh. cat.), Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Kunstverein Braunschweig, Bonner and Kunstverein München, 2000, pp.53–74.

2

Sol LeWitt, 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art' in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds.), *Conceptual art: a critical anthology*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 1999, pp.12–16. This text was originally published in *Artforum*, Summer 1967, pp.79–84.

3

Ibid., pp.12–13. Writing in 1967, LeWitt was probably thinking here of the cybernetic machines that were being developed at the time and, therefore, we might assume that he was modelling his vision of 'ideas that do work' on the algorithms and control commands that characterise computing.

4

Sol LeWitt, 'Sentences on Conceptual Art' (1969), Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory*, Malden, Oxford and Carlton, Victoria: Blackwell, 1992, p.837.

5

S. LeWitt, 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,' *op. cit.*, p.13.

6

In relation to this strategy for transcending reason with rational means, Johanna Burton writes about the use of systems in early conceptual art: 'And so, counter-intuitively perhaps, recourse to "systems" enabled rather than denied access to the rhizomatic, perpetually variable and vehemently nonlinear, while making visible the myriad structures designed to contain and order.' See Johanna Burton, 'Mystics Rather Than Rationalists', in Donna de Salvo (ed.), *Open Systems. Rethinking Art c.1970* (exh. cat.), London: Tate Publishing, p.67.

7

Ibid., p.13.

8

Ibid., p.12.

9

A canonical example for the idea that the constitution of the self might take place precisely in the moment when its dissolution seems imminent in the experience of the sublime is the argument Kant proposes in 'The Analytic of the Sublime' in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790). As an example of the experience of the sublime, Kant here describes the sight of the night sky, the expanse of which exceeds the field of vision and eludes the grasp of the imagination. It is in the very instant, however, when the subject painfully experiences the limitations of the capacities of its own senses and finds itself overwhelmed by the vastness of the universe, Kant claims, that the subject recognises that it bears the element of universality in itself, in the form of the moral principle — and can thus justifiably assert itself against the magnificence of nature. So, also for Kant, the experience of the sublime becomes a pathway to an intensified sense of self-experience.

10

Novalis's *Hymns to the Night* were originally published in 1800 in the magazine *Athenaeum*, edited by Friedrich Schlegel. The revised English translation by George MacDonald from 1897 is cited from <http://www.logopoeia.com/novalis/hymns.html>, p.1.

11

Jörg Heiser concisely traces the romantic dimension of early conceptual art and its recurrence in the neo-conceptual practices of the 1990s in his essay on romantic conceptualism. See Jörg Heiser, 'Emotional rescue', in *frieze*, no.71, Nov–Dec 2002, pp.70–75.

12

In his appraisal of melancholia Ficino in turn took recourse to Aristotle, who in chapter 30.1 of his *Problemata* asks: 'Why is it that all people who have exceeded in philosophy, politics, poetry or art have been melancholiacs?' Moreover, Ficino proposes a diet to separate the positive from the pernicious effects of melancholia by aligning the gravity and depth brought about by Saturn with the empowering influence of Jupiter. On this subject see also Werner Röcke, 'Die Faszination der Traurigkeit — Inszenierung und Reglementierung von Trauer und Melancholie in der Literatur des Spätmittelalters', in Claudia Benthien, Anne Fleig and Ingrid Kasten (eds.), *Emotionalität — Zur Geschichte der Gefühle*, Cologne, Weimar, Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2000, pp.100–18.

13

Walter Benjamin, 'Ursprung des deutschen Traversierspiels', *Gesammelte Schriften* Vol. 1, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974, pp.203–409; on melancholia, see p.317ff.

14

Novalis, *op. cit.*, p.1.

15

The German original reads: *'Ich habe mich oft auf den Boden geworfen und Gott um Tränen gebeten, wie ein Ackersmann um Regen, wenn der Himmel ehern über ihm ist und um ihn die Erde verdürstet.'* See J.W. Goethe, *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (1774), in Erich Trunz (ed.), *Goethes Werke*, Vol. IV, Hamburg: Wegner, 1960, p.85. I thank Klaus Weimar for his generous advice on the subject. The English translation by R.D. Boylan is quoted after the e-book version of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* on gutenberg.org, p.49.

16

In jurisprudence the crisis is the point in a case when the need for the critique arises, the critique being a judgment that establishes the difference between good and bad, true and false, and thereby makes an undifferentiated understanding of a situation that has become differentiated. In medicine the crisis is the tipping point in the course of an illness when the development of the illness suddenly accelerates and it is revealed whether things will rapidly change for the better or worse.

17

S. LeWitt, 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art', *op. cit.*, pp.12–13.

18

Ludwig Marcuse, *Die Welt der Tragödie*, Berlin, Leipzig, Vienna, Bern: Franz Schneider, 1923.

19

Ludwig Marcuse, 'Die Welt der Tragödie', quoted from Ulrich Profitlich (ed.), *Tragödientheorie*, Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1999, p.246 (author's translation.)

20

Bertolt Brecht, 'Der Messingknäuf' (1939), Profitlich (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.264 (author's translation).

21

Bertolt Brecht, 'Voraussetzung der "Tragik"' (1930), Profitlich (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.258 (author's translation).

22

Bertolt Brecht, 'Neue Dramatik' (1929), Profitlich (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.258 (author's translation).

23

The discussion took place after a talk I gave at the Centre for Contemporary Experimental Art in Yerevan in the summer 2005. I am very thankful for the insightful responses from the members of the audience.

24

Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (second edition), trans. Norman Kemp Smith, London: Macmillan Press, 1929, p.56.

25

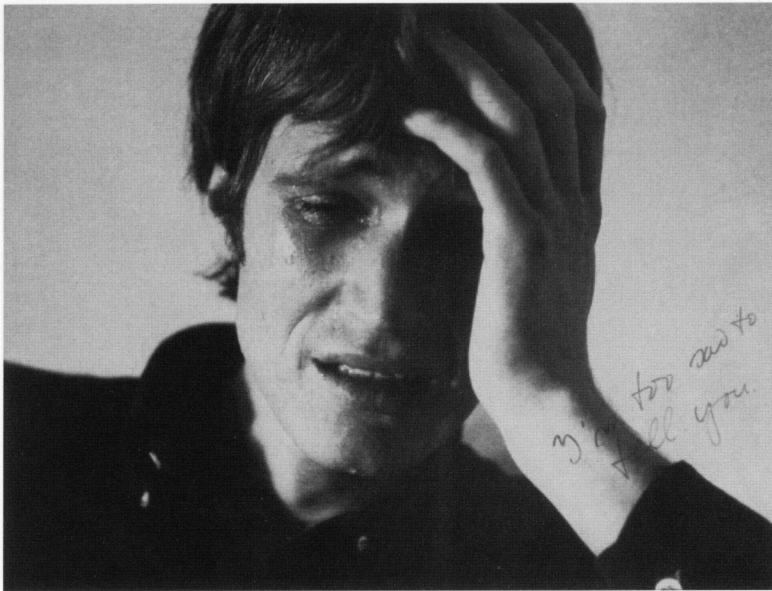
Nicholas Tomalin & Ron Hall, *The Strange Last Voyage of Donald Crowhurst* (first published by Hodder and Stoughton 1970), New York: International Marine/McGraw Hill, 1995. I am indebted to Kirsten Pieroth for an inspiring conversation on Ader and lending the book to me.

26

I thank Cerith Wyn Evans for pointing this link out to me.



8. Film set of *I'm Too Sad to Tell You*,
1970-71



9. *I'm Too Sad to Tell You*,
postcard, 1970–71

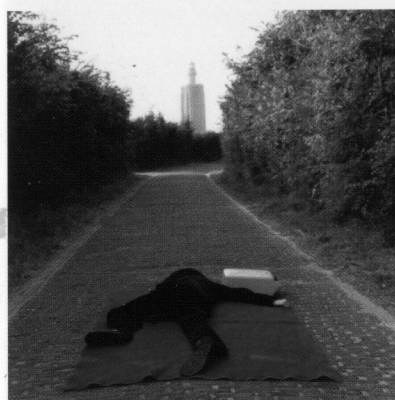
10. *Please Don't Leave Me*,
black-and-white photograph, 1969



11. *Broken Fall (Organic) Amsterdamse
Bos, Holland*, 16mm film, 1971



12. *Nightfall*,
16mm film, 1971



13. *On the road to a new Neo Plasticism*,
Westkapelle Holland, series of 4 colour
photographs, 1971



14. *Broken Fall (Geometric)*, Westkapelle
Holland, colour photograph, 1971



15. *Fall I*, Los Angeles,
16mm film, 1970



16. *Fall II, Amsterdam,*
16mm film, 1970

Bas Jan Ader disappeared at sea in 1975 while attempting to sail from the east coast of the United States to Europe as part of a project titled *In Search of the Miraculous*.

The circumstances of his disappearance have led many interpreters to identify Ader with the role of the tragic romantic hero. This identification has obscured the fact that Ader's art was a critical investigation of precisely those romantic motives his persona has now come to be associated with. In this book, Jan Verwoert highlights the specific ways in which Ader's cycle of works explores those motives with an artistic approach that is as conceptual and analytic as it is poetic and existential.

Other titles in the *One Work* series:

*Ilya Kabakov:
The Man Who Flew into Space
from his Apartment*
by Boris Groys

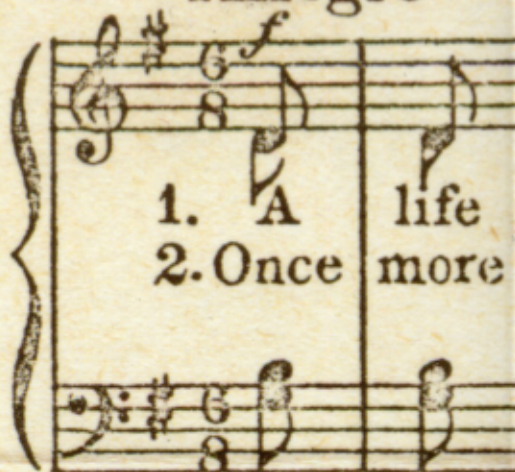
*Hollis Frampton:
(nostalgia)*
by Rachel Moore

ISBN 1-84638-002-2



9 781846 380020 >

Allegro



An Afterall Book

Distributed by The MIT Press