

BAS JAN ADER

**DEATH IS
ELSEWHERE**

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FOR SIMONE

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FALLING

I

One day in April 1970, Bas Jan Ader began to prepare, with the help of his wife, Mary Sue, and his friend the artist William Leavitt, a piece that would be called *Fall 1, Los Angeles*.¹ Some black-and-white film footage from the making of the work survives. It shows Ader, tall and slender, his hair somewhat long, walking out of the house that he and his wife had bought several years earlier in Claremont, a picturesque college town some thirty miles east of downtown Los Angeles. Typical for the area, the wood-frame structure, which no longer stands, sat fairly far back from a main thoroughfare. It faced the distant city; to the north loomed the San Gabriel Mountains, and directly south were flat vistas similar to the landscape Ader knew from his childhood in Holland. The film records Ader ambling down the front steps, then turning to his right to climb a ladder that leans against the front porch roof. He ascends cautiously, one hand occupied with the chair he is carrying. Once on the roof he appears a bit wobbly, but as soon as he gains his footing, he moves from the lower porch to the gable of the main roof, sliding along like a tightrope walker until he finds a suitable spot for his chair.

The final, edited version of *Fall 1, Los Angeles* (fig. 1), running just twenty-four seconds (six of them devoted to the title), comes across as a visual aphorism. It opens with Ader, dressed in a long-sleeve shirt and bell-bottom pants, the loose fabric flapping like pennants in the breeze, sitting erect atop the house on the simple, straight-back chair, his hands resting on his thighs. The initial moments feel like an eternity as he gradually tilts to his right, his hands extended toward the shingled roof. Once horizontal, he begins to tumble. Through two full rotations he builds momentum, but not enough for him to clear the almost flat roof of the veranda. He makes one more roll, then, before friction stops him completely, scoots toward the edge and hurls himself over. This last heave causes his right shoe to fly off and twists him around entirely; he picks up speed on his way toward the ground. A mattress hidden in the bushes softened Ader's impact, and a few brief

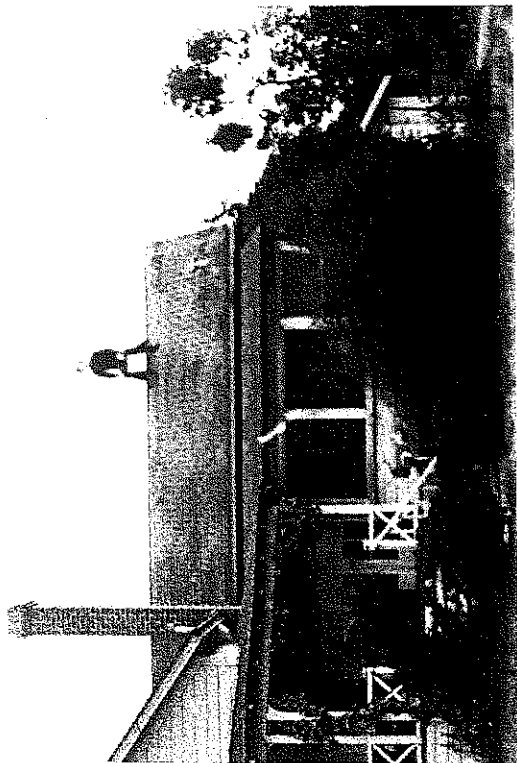


Figure 1. Bas Jan Ader, *Fall 1*, Los Angeles, 1970. © The Estate of Bas Jan Ader.

shots from the outtakes show Leavitt running into the frame to check on his friend, who, despite rumors to the contrary, was unharmed.²

Ader discussed *Fall 1*, *Los Angeles* in an interview with Willoughby Sharp that appeared in the winter 1971 issue of *Avalanche*. Sharp had been in Los Angeles the previous autumn to take the measure of what was then a misunderstood and widely underappreciated art scene. Helene Winer, curator of the Pomona College Art Gallery, the most progressive exhibition space in the Los Angeles metropolitan area, drove Sharp around, introducing him to artists she found interesting.³ Sharp had been in Los Angeles before, in 1969, when the gallerist Eugenia Butler brought him down from San Francisco. It was during this trip that he met Leavitt, at one of the many parties Butler hosted. Sharp took an interest in Leavitt's work, and in the course of a studio visit, Leavitt showed him a book that included stills from *Fall 1*, *Los Angeles*. Sharp was intrigued by what he saw, and while the two were having drinks Leavitt telephoned Ader to see if he would be willing to have one of his works reproduced in *Avalanche*. Excited by the possible attention, Ader quickly accepted.⁴

Sharp never met Ader, but they talked over the phone, with Sharp asking simple questions in the hope of eliciting profound responses.

He was taken by Ader's seriousness and commitment to his art, which made Sharp want to conduct a more formal interview, something Ader was reluctant to do.⁵ Nevertheless, he did speak about his art. What Sharp brought to print is one of Ader's few public statements on the subject, and its singularity makes it all the more significant. It neither jibes with comments made by conceptual artists who were influenced by the advances of analytic philosophy, nor shares common ground with Los Angeles-based artists like Laddie John Dill, who came to prominence in the wake of the Finish Fetish and Light and Space movements. Ader's thoughts seem out of sync with those of many of his contemporaries, for what he said, or at least what Sharp transcribed, was, "I do not make body sculptures, body art, or body works. When I fell off the roof of my house, or into a canal, it was because gravity made itself master over me."⁶

Fall 1, *Los Angeles* was not exhibited until the summer of 1971, well after Ader's conversation with Sharp and just a few months after his comments appeared in print. In some ways, Ader's enigmatic statement supplements this and other *Fall* works to come. His remark implies that he fell not because he wanted to but because gravity—a force that had somehow attained subjectivity—compelled it. Events could not have unfolded differently; nothing he could have done, no decision or even indecision on his part, would have altered the course of events—even though in the film there are two instances in which he punctures the illusion of his submission. The first comes at the start of the piece: his slow, controlled extension out of the chair and onto the roof. The second is his slight shuffle toward the edge of the veranda roof (fig. 2). Ader clearly initiates both actions, although the logic of the work and of his declaration to Sharp ascribes that agency to gravity. These are volitional gestures, expressions of will, a decision to initiate as well as to interrupt an event he asserts is predetermined. Of course, Ader's rolling himself forward can be seen as innocuous, but in light of his declaration, it opposes the conceit of *Fall 1*, *Los Angeles* and establishes a tension between his will and a determinist power.

Toward the end of 1980, five years after Ader's death, the young Dutch art historian Paul Andriessé interviewed Leavitt. Andriessé was compiling information for the Ader catalogue raisonné. The conversation was probably recorded, but what survives are Andriessé's notes, either taken during the interview or made in the following days. The

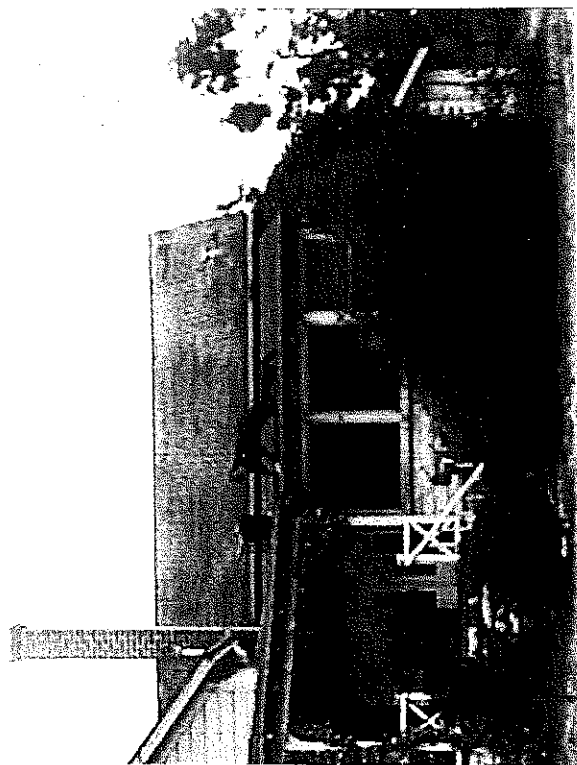


Figure 2. Bas Jan Ader, Fall 1, Los Angeles, 1970. © The Estate of Bas Jan Ader.

notes are generally decipherable to anyone with previous knowledge of Ader's career. Andriesse was meticulous in his accounting, trying to ascertain as much detail as possible. There is a remark about *Reader's Digest*, talk about Ader's 1967 graduate thesis exhibition and how Ader's father was brave and intelligent, and discussion of *Piece G*, a collaborative work made by Ader and Leavitt at Mount San Antonio College in 1969. Leavitt also mentions that Ader's interest in falling was tied to the philosophical problem of free will and determinism.⁷

That Leavitt was so candid regarding Ader is remarkable. Over the years, he became less willing to speak about his friend. In a letter he wrote to Andriesse in the spring of 1988, he explains apologetically that he will not be able to contribute an essay to Andriesse's forthcoming catalog on Ader because his writing has been impeded by a welter of conflicting emotions.⁸ Eventually, though, he did send Andriesse a short compendium of quotations from Ader, as well as several of his own reminiscences. The eight notes, some just a line, others a full paragraph, speak to the time before their friendship began to dissolve, toward the end of 1972.⁹ Two of Leavitt's reflections recount

how Ader was deeply invested in philosophy as he searched for concrete truths. Leavitt also describes how Ader sought to rid his practice of artifice, aspiring to art that would reveal an authenticity he thought existed in mathematics. Leavitt did not share Ader's motivations. He found them strange, if not overdetermined, but consistent with Ader's interest in imperfection, failure, and the Sisyphean nature of his work. It was the content of the work that most concerned him, not the connotations of its presentation.¹⁰ In the spring of 1970, art was a way for Ader to think philosophically. It was not so much that Ader wanted to depict the issues as that he wanted to actualize them; authenticity, for the work of art, lay not in representing philosophical concepts but in embodying them.

If a central theme runs throughout Ader's brief but fecund career, it is this pursuit of concrete truths and the elimination of artifice.¹¹ His initial interest in the question of the will is curious given the art historical context, since few of his contemporaries considered existential questions. Far more common were engagements with formalism, phenomenology, the nature of art as such, the critique of representation, and the relation of art to politics. Nevertheless, Ader's investigation into the status of the will—or for that matter, into freedom—initiated within his practice inquiries far more universal in scope and radical in their constitution: he searched for ways for art and life to communicate without recourse to mediation. At stake was a reorientation of art: the way it functioned, the way it looked, the way it interacted with its public. Ader was never short of ambition, and the potential impossibility of his efforts was not lost on him. To a certain extent, he accomplished his goal, but only at the expense of his life. His death—so sudden, so dramatic, without art historical precedent—necessitates talking about his life alongside his art. This is a historiographic operation that coincides with the particular conditions of Ader's art, which increasingly foregrounded his life and placed it in a dialectical relation with his practice. To think historically about Ader's life and art is not to compose a biography or to suggest that artistic meaning rests in biography. Rather, it is to see these entities as equally open to interpretation, and to look to their coexistence to explain Ader's relevance today. In his mysterious passing and the unavoidable emphasis on his myth, anachronism and aura become one. It is here that Ader remains alive while his death is elsewhere.

Ader did not speak much about falling and its significance. One assumes that in conversations with friends, colleagues, and others who might have inquired the topic came up, but in print—whether in interviews or his own writing—there is little beyond his statement to Sharp.¹² Ader's silence, if it can be called that, does not indicate a lack of reflection; his ruminations were in the works themselves. Over a two-year period, beginning in 1970 with *Fall 1, Los Angeles*, Ader made around fourteen works (nearly half of his entire production) that in one way or another had falling as the central theme. Most were either photographic or filmic, but one, *Light Vulnerable Objects Threatened by Eight Cement Bricks* (1970), was an installation cum performance, while another, *The Boy Who Fell Over Niagara Falls* (1972), was simply a performance. These works do not cohere as a singular position, nor do they advance an argument that progresses from *Fall 1, Los Angeles* to *The Boy Who Fell Over Niagara Falls*. Ader had higher ambitions for these explorations. On December 19, 1970, he wrote to his dealers, Adriaan van Ravesteijn and Geert van Beijeren, at the Art & Project Gallery in Amsterdam, that he was working on a series of introspective works in which he silently declares on film everything there is to know about falling. He admits that the works will be difficult to make, but he is convinced that in their final state they will be extraordinarily moving.¹³

Ader's preoccupation with the physical act of falling goes back at least to his days at the Otis Art Institute, which he attended from 1963 to 1965. He had arrived in Los Angeles in the first part of 1963, and his good friend Ger van Elk, whom he knew from the Instituut voor Kunstnijverheidsondwijs in Amsterdam, had encouraged him to continue his studies in the United States. Familiar with the American education system after a year abroad as a high school student in the Washington, DC, area, Ader spent a few months preparing and eventually passed several equivalency exams that paved the way for his matriculation at Otis. At the time, he was living in Hollywood with Van Elk, who had come to the United States a year or so earlier to further his education and to be closer to his father, an animator at the Hanna-Barbera Studio.¹⁴ It was at Otis that Ader met Mary Sue Andersen, a graduate student from Arizona who was the daughter of the school's director. Ader, as the story goes, approached Andersen one day dur-

ing a break between classes. She was with a group of friends huddled around a coffee stand not far from campus. Supremely self-confident, Ader introduced himself by lifting up his shirt, exposing his bare stomach, and exclaiming that he had one of the five most beautiful belly buttons in the world.¹⁵ Andersen was taken by his charm, and not long afterward they moved in together.¹⁶

While at Otis, Ader began to study photography. This marked a shift from his previous work, which had consisted mainly of muddy, gestural paintings in the figural abstraction vein. These pieces had won him a fair amount of success. During his year in the DC area, at the age of nineteen, he had had the opportunity to show at both the Upstairs Gallery and the Galerie Realité.¹⁷ Ader was obviously precocious, and his already sizable ego was swelled further by the praise he received not only in the local press but in a *Voice of America* interview and several articles that appeared in Dutch newspapers.¹⁸ Now, as Ader grappled with an unfamiliar medium, trying to master its intricacies and potential, he took numerous pictures. Some are simple snapshots of Andersen curled up in a chair or reading quietly; others show her parents caught in moments of contemplation. From the few contact sheets that remain, it seems that Ader was interested in capturing unposed moments, as is further evident in several shots of older women distractedly eating lunch. These are curious photos, shot from a low angle, perhaps taken on the sly with the camera resting on a table. Interspersed among the character studies are pictures of the architectural oddities that dot Los Angeles, and of signs promoting everything from fishing bait to the miraculous powers of Jesus Christ. But if Ader had a subject he returned to on a regular basis, it was the Bradbury Building in downtown Los Angeles, which at the time was falling into a state of ruin. Almost weekly, Ader and Andersen would sneak into the historic structure, and Ader would photograph its overlapping staircases, intricate ironwork, monumental elevators, and the glass roof that makes the massive building seem light and airy.

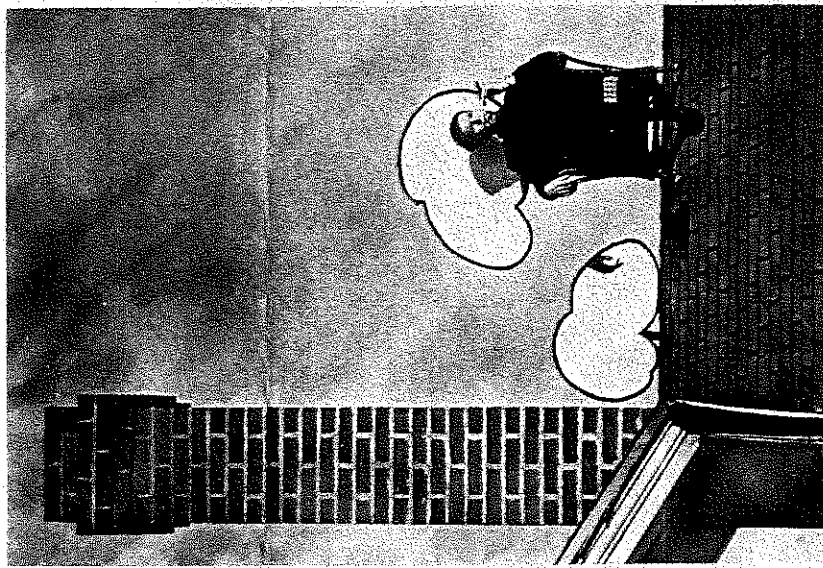
Ader was widely liked by his peers at Otis and was known for his sense of humor, a blend of deadpan drollness and daring physicality reminiscent of Buster Keaton. His comic timing was excellent, and he would disrupt class with gestures that were performative in spirit.¹⁹ At times he feigned ignorance of English—despite being fluent—and affected a thick Dutch accent, acting as if he could not comprehend the

lecture or assignment. His classmates struggled to stifle their laughter as Ader's subversive humor revealed their professors' indifference toward the students. On one occasion, Ader instigated what was perhaps his first fall. It was during an American literature class, and Ader, dressed (as he almost always was) all in blue, sat off in a corner, away from the other students. The instructor, famously boring, spent much of the class reading passages from the book assigned for that day. He spoke in a monotone, smoking cigarettes and cracking asides that delighted only him. As the students drifted toward sleep, Ader crept slowly toward the edge of his seat. Inch by inch he shifted his body until he fell to the ground with a tremendous clatter that toppled the chairs around him.²⁰ In a gesture such as this, the slapstick element, and the pretense that everything was normal was especially important.

Soon after graduation, in June 1965, Ader and Andersen were married in Las Vegas. A close friend of Andersen's, Jan Oestern, acted as their witness, and it was she who filmed the young couple as they approached the chapel. A brief fragment of film shows Ader on crutches smiling toward the camera. Nothing, of course, was wrong with his legs; he simply thought it funny to fake an injury and to approach a solemn event with an apparatus that literally and metaphorically kept him from falling. The spontaneous and private wedding came as a shock to Ader's mother, who had hoped, when the day came, to perform the ceremony herself.²¹ She knew how serious Ader and Andersen were and approved of their relationship, deeming Andersen to be a positive influence on her son.²² There were plans to have a second ceremony in Holland, but this never transpired despite numerous visits after their marriage.

Not long after the wedding, Ader enrolled in the master of fine arts program at Claremont Graduate School. Little information exists about his course of study, nor is there much documentation of the art he made over the two-year period. Several installation shots from his thesis exhibition in the spring of 1967 show that he created mixed-media work that incorporated elements of painting, sculpture, and drawing. These pieces, far removed from both the emotive work he had done in Washington and his more detached photographs from Otis, barely allude to the more conceptually oriented art to come, although the exhibition poster is suggestive (fig. 3). A pop sensibility emerges, with a pictorial strategy akin to John Welsley's but with a softer, more humane

IMPL(OSION)



BAS JAN ADER

M. F. A. Show Opening Friday February 3 7-9 p.m.
February 4 through 12 1:30-5:30 and Sat. 10-5. Long Gallery,
Claremont Graduate School and University Center Claremont California

Figure 3. Bas Jan Ader, *Impl(osition)*—The Artist Contemplating the Forces of Nature, 1967. © The Estate of Bas Jan Ader.

figuration. These were flat, obdurate compositions, literal depictions of brick walls, made with red paint and thick black lines. A fairly large painting shows Ader, his head tilted slightly to the right, riding his bicycle straight toward the viewer.²³ Another work is more sculptural: a bicycle, missing its wheels, lies atop a painted, cloudlike brick wall spread out on the floor.

Hung on the wall in a neat grid is a series of drawings that are more complicated compositionally than the other works in the show, juxtaposing multiple images and incorporating textual elements in a manner reminiscent of early Jasper Johns. Some, in particular those depicting women, have hints of Tom Wesselman's paintings from the mid-1960s, albeit with figures that have eyes and a sense of identity. Others are more haphazard in their organization, as seen in the inconsistent shading and the abandonment of perspective. In their original context, the drawings illustrated two fairly long poems: *What Makes Me so Pure, Almost Holy? And More* and *What Does It Mean? Cheep Cheep* (fig. 4). The combination of word and image had been printed in an edition of one hundred as an artist book, which in retrospect is an anomaly in Ader's practice. It is not the book format that seems strange; only a few years later he self-published, in the style of Ed Ruscha, a small volume containing film stills from *Fall 1, Los Angeles* and *Fall 2, Amsterdam*. What is odd is the profusion of writing: sustained, thought out, and, in comparison to his notebook from later years, extensive. The poems were written in Ader's distinctive hand, and he utilized this freedom from the limits of typesetting to place words on paper in an artful manner. The pages of text are as formally complex as the drawings and it could be said that each illustrates the other equally. In terms of structure, the poems are more like prose than lyric: their content a bit opaque, fantastical in many ways, but grounded, one presumes, in aspects of Ader's childhood. Images abound of Ader playing with his friend Bea, of a passing truck with geraniums for wheels, of a school trip marred by the death of a bicyclist, as well as comparisons between life in Los Angeles and in Holland, both loved by Ader but wonderfully different.

The book pays little attention to falling; its themes are Ader's memories, his longing for home, and his celebration of America. Yet the idea of falling arises in the exhibition as a unifying principle that must have been clear to Ader even if not wholly visible in the works. In a

short text written for his thesis committee, he lucidly explains, albeit in outline format, the goals and ambitions of his show: "In this project the notions of fall and rise were to be explored. . . . Something dealing with this notion is present in each piece, and most titles reflect this."²⁴ He does not go into detail, merely mentioning the titles of some works: *Humpty Dumpty—Fall Guy*, *Sue Falls—Table Your Feelings*, and *Niagara Falls*. But other issues were important as well. Ader describes a relation between part and whole in which individual works matter less than how "an environment made up out of separate, but cross breeding pieces" forms a larger, interconnected meaning.²⁵ He also elucidates the tension between the real and the illusory. It is to this dualism that Ader seems to have given his most sustained thought, both conceptually and visually, as with the piece in which the bicycle rests atop the painted canvas. This work becomes for Ader a situation wherein the actual and the representational blur, a gesture, possibly, to the avant-garde aspiration of fusing art and life.

Whatever the issues Ader believed he was exploring in his thesis exhibition, he put them to rest, at least visually, once he commenced graduate study in philosophy at Claremont College. He may have been dissatisfied with the conceptual rigor of his work, or it could be that he saw this time of study as the next step in his education. During his two years at Claremont, Ader made perhaps two works, and neither was concerned with falling, but rather with the social status of the artist. In the staged photograph *The Artist as Consumer of Extreme Comfort* (1968/2003), Ader sits in a Barcalounger, his gaze trained wistfully toward a fireplace, an open book on his lap, his dog lying at his side.²⁶ The work is playful, and striking in that Ader is central to its composition. It is not, however, a self-portrait, and it reveals little about him. The piece has more in common with his college pranks and unresolved graduate work. Ader must have felt the absence of an intellectual core in this work, since his subsequent art, particularly that which engaged with the problem of falling, became more philosophically focused.

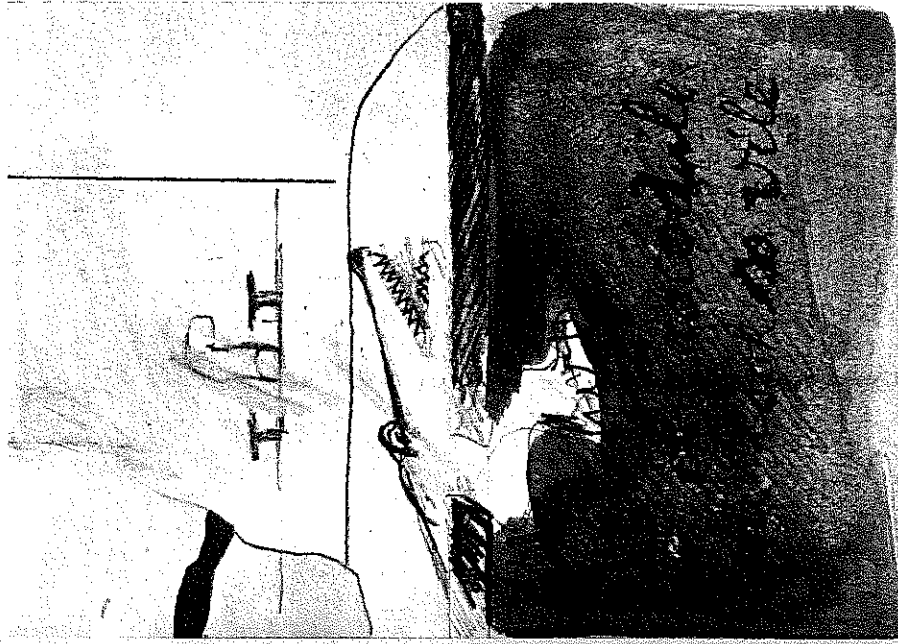
Ader wrote hardly anything concerning his ideas about falling in his notebook, a sparse collection of thoughts, asides, wordplay, and directives for future works that he started, presumably, a year after receiving his MFA and continued at least until the summer of 1971.²⁷ The notebook contains hints as to paths he might have followed with certain projects, as well as ideas he deemed inadequate. There Ader wrote

Instead of making muspies out of
mashed up
elephant
skin.
I wore wooden shoes
and trained the Crocodile to go
kitchen sink to win bicycle ~~and~~

Then a BIG TRUCK with gerani-
ums for wheels came by carry-
ing a cannon and six thousand steel
shovels.

The same night I saw the seven (7) bear
tins gang (7) up on the sleeping dwarf and put
his head in a bucket of coffee.

his head in a bucket of coffee.
later I cleaned my chest with the
vacuum cleaner while tragically
and known to only few, the little fish
that could already swim when it was
four (4) days old, drowned in mud air. E



such fragments as "Prolegomena for 16 falls fraught with extreme personal danger," "The Fall of Far Out Modern Sculpture," "The Fall of Jericho quite literally painted with letters falling(en) off a wall," "device to prevent the falling of people (objects)," "fall in Vermont big red leaves fall on me," "I move about & things fall on me (bricks) while I save a cup of tea from spilling," "the earth will fall beyond where it will be tomorrow," and "all is falling." Additionally, he reminds himself to "do film 'nude descending staircase,'" an obvious allusion to Marcel Duchamp. There is also an undated scrap of paper bearing a quote from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "The Lord speaks: 'I made him just and right, sufficient to have stood, though free to fall.'" ²⁸ These fragments are teasingly ambiguous, almost as open-ended as *Fall 1, Los Angeles*. The phrases Ader recorded had obvious appeal, but he rarely titled his work so wittily. If anything, his notes hints as to how he brought his art into the world, not koans for understanding his creations.

Perhaps most intriguing are several newspaper clippings he collected around 1972 and 1973, after he completed the majority of his fall pieces. ²⁹ It does not seem that he scoured the *Los Angeles Times* on a regular basis, nor do the clippings, most of them photographs, respond to or anticipate particular works. Instead, the content of the images, often with telling captions, offers a glimpse into Ader's feelings and thoughts on falling. One shows a Brooklyn man who had threatened to jump from the window of a building; a priest and a police officer convinced him not to, but as he backed away from the edge he slipped and fell — fortunately into the safe embrace of a police net below. Another captures a distraught husband in Recife, Brazil, pleading with his wife not to leap to her death with their one-year-old child; in the photo, he reaches to grab his daughter from his wife, who, after hours of coaxing, would ultimately choose not to jump. In these dramatic scenes the end seems inevitable, but in each tragedy is averted. The two photographs show moments when two individuals confronted the most fundamental decision — to live or to die — with both eventually opting for life.

Another pair of clippings, however, strikes a different note. An illustration from a Jehovah's Witness magazine shows a burly man, muscles straining, struggling to row his small boat out of the overwhelming currents pulling him toward the lip of a massive waterfall. The fatalistic belief of the Jehovah's Witnesses suggests the outcome of

the implied narrative, and Ader may have seen it as expressive of his own worldview. The tragedy depicted is metaphorical, in contrast to the other clipping, which also involves a waterfall of sorts: it depicts a rescue team trying to save someone who has been swept over the Cedar River Dam in Iowa. The scene is chaotic, the boat nearly capsized. Moments later, one of the rescuers shown would fall overboard and himself drown. It is obviously chilling to know that the image captures life on the verge of death, to recognize that, in the attempt to do good, to save a person threatened with death, another life would be lost.

Before Ader began to cull these images he did an interview with the journalist Betty van Garrel, which appeared in the *Haagse Post* in the first weeks of 1972. ³⁰ Van Garrel focused on Ader's interest in falling, the tragic, and on how the death of his father at the hands of the Nazis affected his enigmatic art. In retrospect, Ader regretted consenting to the interview. He found it to be filled with inaccuracies and insensitive toward his current and completed works. In a letter to Van Ravesteijn and Van Beijeren, he describes the article as an absolute farce and even wonders if Van Garrel's intention was to be malicious. ³¹ Two years later, in a letter to the curator of the Groninger Museum, Poul ter Hofstede, he declared that he "shall never again give interviews to the popular press." ³² Despite Ader's protests, the powerful and compelling statements Van Garrel attributed to him ring true, especially when he says, "I have always been fascinated by the tragic. That is also contained in the act of falling; the fall is failure." ³³

As the phrases dotting his notebook attest, Ader derived pleasure from various kinds of wordplay. He was attracted to the similarity of the words "fall" and "fail," in sound and in spelling. Leavitt mentions the fall-fail relation in his discussion with Andriess in 1980, and in the writing on Ader since his death, the conjunction of the physical act of descent and a quality of abjection has consistently guided interpretation of the work. ³⁴ In almost all accounts, with a couple notable exceptions, Ader's connection with failure has been posited as a sign of his passivity — of a sense or conviction that his shortcoming was foreordained, beyond his control, and that, if anything, he was a victim. ³⁵ This presumption of passivity colors the allusions to failure despite the evidence of the *Fall* works, in which, almost always, some gesture or subtle movement represents a choice made, an exercise of

individual will, even if there are doubts throughout all of the pieces as to the efficacy of the will.

On June 1, 1970, a couple of months after completing *Fall 1*, Los Angeles, Ader opened a one-week solo exhibition at Chouinard Art School in Los Angeles. The show consisted of a single installation, *Light Vulnerable Objects Threatened by Eight Cement Bricks* (fig. 5). Positioned throughout the room were several eggs, two pillows, a radio, flowering plants, an arrangement of paper bags, a store-bought sheet cake reading "Happy Birthday," a poster (or perhaps a photograph) of a dark-haired woman, and a string of lightbulbs. Above these objects were eight cinder blocks suspended by rope. Formally, the regularity of the cinder blocks — most hanging slightly askew — contrasted nicely with the everyday objects, which had no special significance beyond their shared fragility. At some point, after the opening, Ader went through the room and, one by one, cut the ropes, allowing the blocks to crush whatever was below. The poster received little damage, which could not be said for the cake or the lightbulbs. The plant survived somewhat; the flowers on the edge remained standing, while those in the middle were flattened. The image of the block resting among the yellow flowers is quite poetic, so too the idea of Ader walking through the room destroying random things. It was part of the performance to exercise his will, and with eight decisive actions Ader set in motion the events in which fate would run its course.

3

The corner of Kerkstraat and Reguliersgracht in central Amsterdam, where the Herengracht, the Keizersgracht, and Prinsengracht form a half circle that radiates outward, is like much of this picturesque part of the city: sixteenth- and seventeenth-century houses packed closely together, made almost exclusively of brick that is either left in its natural red or painted a blackish gray. These inviting structures are strangely conventional, never deviating much in order or in kind. Many have extremely large windows, seemingly out of proportion to the rest of the building, but offsetting the effect of the endless gray skies that dominate a city whose only points of elevation are the bridges spanning the canals. Some of the buildings lean forward, their tops reaching beyond their foundations. This architectural quirk en-

abled merchants using pulleys mounted near the tops of the structures to lift goods more easily to storage areas on the upper floors. It also makes the houses seem to bow gently to passing pedestrians, cyclists, and slow-moving barges.

It was the summer of 1970, and on the eastern side of the Reguliersgracht Mary Sue Ader manned a 16-millimeter camera. The camera, fixed in position, was trained on a spot across the canal, with one edge of the pictorial frame capturing the point where the Kerkstraat intersects with the Reguliersgracht. Leavitt and Van Elk were there as well, with at least one of them standing on the opposite side of the Reguliersgracht. They both took photographs as events unfolded, and one of their pictures is exceptionally beautiful, its color composition standing in stark contrast to the black-and-white footage that would become *Fall 2*, *Amsterdam*. The photo shows Ader, on a bicycle, plunging toward the canal. It is slightly blurred, suggesting a rapid descent. Ader holds a bouquet of flowers in his right hand, his eyes focused on the murky water several feet below. The picture is more dramatic than the film, as is another color image that simply shows the flowers Ader once held floating listlessly in the water. Both suggest something spectacular, even romantic — the melancholic inevitability of the moment permeating every aspect of the photographs.

The finished film is nineteen seconds long, six of which are given to the title (fig. 6). Ader emerges from Kerkstraat and turns right on the Reguliersgracht. He pedals slowly, wobbling just a bit, as one does when traveling in a languid, casual manner. There is no one else visible, no barges moored to the side of the canal. A small car is parked at water's edge; its trunk protrudes into the shot. Compositionally, the piece seems to share qualities with structuralist film: a fixed image, no zooming or panning, no application of effects. The wall of the canal bisects the picture, providing a sort of horizon line. A fair amount of unused footage has survived, shots that suggest the piece was initially more about an Amsterdam street scene than a stirring event. People are walking, a duck floats in the canal, and some individuals cross the bridge as a taxi drives down the Reguliersgracht. Ader had to time his action precisely, and as he enters the frame in the completed version of

Figure 5 (following pages). Bas Jan Ader, *Light Vulnerable Objects Threatened by Eight Cement Bricks*, 1970. © The Estate of Bas Jan Ader.



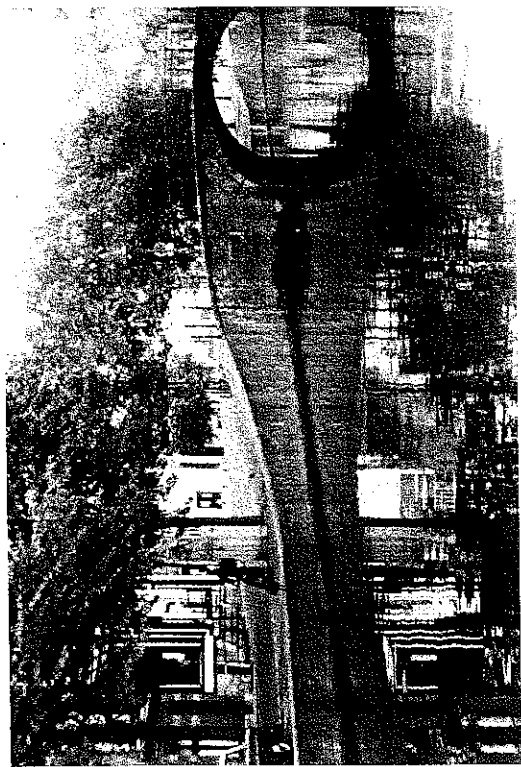


Figure 6. Bas Jan Ader, *Fall 2, Amsterdam*, 1970. © The Estate of Bas Jan Ader.

the film there is little hint of what will happen. He passes a couple of trees, which obscure him from view, then heads toward the canal, maintaining a steady pace. He approaches the edge and turns ever so slightly to his right; for an instant he seems to straddle a fine line between falling and not. It is hard to prove, and repeated viewings only create more ambiguity, but it appears that when Ader is at the point of no return, he leans his bicycle into the fall in order to propel himself downward. Regardless of active intent or unintended passivity, Ader hits the water almost face-first, his torso taking the brunt of the impact as his bicycle disappears from view. The film quickly fades to black, leaving the fate of Ader and the ramifications of his actions shrouded in suspense.

Fall 1, Los Angeles and *Fall 2, Amsterdam* were shown on the same reel in the summer of 1971, when they were included in the film section of the major international exhibition *Sonsbeek buiten de perken*.³⁶ Although conceived as separate pieces, the material conjunction makes them a kind of diptych, within which one is free to read associations, connections, and even a progression of ideas. Both commence in medias res, with no prologue or explanation of why Ader is sitting on a roof or bicycling by the canal. The events are presented as ordinary occurrences that abruptly become highly unusual experiences. And

however oblique the origins of the action in the two pieces, their conclusions are equally ambiguous, since there is no aftermath, no opportunity to see whether Ader has been harmed. He makes it impossible to know what exists beyond the confines of the film, and he forecloses speculation by means of hermetic compositions that enforce the fictional contest between the will and determinism. In each piece, and within the framework of submissiveness, Ader performs noticeable acts that counter his otherwise studied passivity. What is not clear, though, is the benefit he gains from his freedom, since neither film depicts the importance of choice. If anything, the films distinguish themselves from one another in terms of their mood. *Fall 1, Los Angeles* comes across as unintentionally heroic because of the absurdity of its situation and the forcefulness with which Ader appears to hit the ground, whereas *Fall 2, Amsterdam* stands out for its pathos, a sentiment grounded in the conditions of ordinary life: he cycles—like almost everyone in Amsterdam—and then suddenly turns toward the water, the force of the impact causing him to flinch meekly.

Sonsbeek was the first exhibition Ader participated in that included major American artists like Carl Andre, Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Robert Smithson. Staged primarily in the Dutch city of Arnhem, much of the ambitious program took place outdoors, with a number of works occupying a large eighteenth-century formal garden. Critics of the show commented on its thematic and practical disorganization. Presenting an array of singular artistic positions, it had little conceptual unity. Nor had the curator, Wim Beeren, completed the installation by the time of the opening.³⁷ Ader had received an invitation in early April to exhibit as part of a separate film program held in an inflatable tent close to Sonsbeek Park.³⁸ A number of interesting artists were slated for this section, and it was an achievement for him to be presented in such company. In a letter written in impeccable English, Ader accepted the invitation, but with several caveats: he hoped that the curator would find a less “avant-garde” way of showing his and others’ works, and, “in view of the fact that I have lived in the U.S. for the last 10 years and the list of Dutch artists already appears to be inflated with too many names, most of whose work appears to be of questionable international merit, I wish to be included among the U.S. contributors.”³⁹

The latter request was denied, but it does reveal the degree to which

Ader identified with his adopted homeland and its art scene. His implicit critique of the show was well founded, as some of the best works in *Sonsbeek* were by Americans, especially those who exhibited far from the exhibition's primary venue. *Sonsbeek's* dispersed nature facilitated the creation of several earth works by such artists as Robert Smithson, whose *Broken Circle/Spiral Hill* (1971) was made in a quarry on the outskirts of Emmen in northwest Holland, about fifty miles south of Ader's childhood home in the furthest reaches of the Groningen province.

Ader was born in the town of Winschoten on April 19, 1942. His father, Bastiaan Jan Ader, for whom Ader was named, was the minister for the parish of Nieuw-Beerta, situated close to the German border. The church from which the elder Ader led his Dutch Reform congregation was like many in the region: a brick structure, built on the slightest of rises, with a rectangular plan that welcomed astringent Calvinists into an open space devoid of images but awash in sunlight. At the time, the Aders lived across from the church in one of the few houses of the village. It was quite stately, considering the rustic location, but Groningen was one of the more prosperous regions of Holland, its farmers becoming wealthy owing to projects to reclaim land from the ever-encroaching sea.

Ader was born during the height of World War II. His parents, uncomfortable with the situation and morally opposed to Nazism, were active members of the resistance and helped save around two to three hundred Dutch Jews from deportation to German camps. Ader's father was a major organizer in the resistance movement, helping, in particular, Jews who worked in an Amsterdam hospital find safe shelter in the countryside. The Aders hid Jewish families and individuals for indefinite periods of time, an enterprise that required everyone in the family, and everyone who worked for them, to maintain secrecy. The immense difficulty of the task was compounded by Nieuw-Beerta's geography. Its proximity to Germany intensified anxiety, and the flat landscape afforded no natural hiding places; Ader's family home was out in the open for all to see. Shutting Jews in and out had to be done under the cover of darkness or the shroud of fog, with local members of the resistance relying upon their knowledge of footpaths to traverse the muddy fields.⁴⁰

Ader had memories of artillery fire and the flashes of distant combat seen from the second-story windows of his family home.⁴¹ It is hard to separate what he observed from what was added by his adult imagination — a projection of things he thought he should have seen growing up in the midst of war. His family did have several encounters with the Nazis. On at least one occasion, Nazi soldiers ransacked their home, telling Ader's mother to pack her things and remove herself and her two young children. Clothes were scattered about violently, pictures, furniture, and personal effects thrown carelessly out the windows. Worse, Ader's father, then in central Holland, was arrested for his involvement with the resistance and imprisoned by the Germans. It was during this confinement, knowing that his death was inevitable, that he came to truly know the strength of his faith. On the night of November 20, 1944, just sixteen days after his second child, Erik, was born, he and six other prisoners were pulled from their cells and taken to a spot in the woods where they were to face a firing squad. Ader's father asked to go last in order to comfort the others and prepare them for their journey to the next world.⁴² This generous act meant that he had to see each of his companions killed. He then met his fate with a strength of conviction that haunted his eldest son for the rest of his life.⁴³

After the war, the family moved to the nearby village of Drieboerg, and it was here that Bas Jan Ader spent much of his youth. His mother was financially well provided for, not only because of a government stipend for families of war veterans, but because her parents were well off.⁴⁴ The house she had built in 1947 was sizable yet modest, especially compared to the palatial estates built twenty or thirty years earlier, which combined the manor house with a tremendously large barn. Situated close to the road, the two-story structure was separated from traffic by a neatly kept lawn. Across the road and visible from their living room was a cultivated field. Behind the kitchen was an attached one-story structure, a fairly large, rectangular room with windows on its long sides. Toward the front of the room was a small dais and space enough for twenty to thirty people to fit comfortably. Here Ader's mother conducted weekly services, providing pastoral care to the congregants of Drieboerg. The room also served as an ad hoc community center, where people would gather during the week to discuss

concerns and share news. Home life and church life blended seamlessly, the domestic space of the family and the devotional space for the village residents separated only by a door.

Ader was an irascible child, antagonistic toward authority figures and indifferent at best when it came to his studies. His performance in school was poor and his behavior subject to discipline. When he was fourteen, his mother tired of dealing with his transgressions and sent him to a foster home. The period away lasted a year; upon his return home he continued his education at the local grammar school. The following year he was on the move again, attending a boarding school for the next academic year. Much of Ader's time outside of school, though, was spent on fishing boats that trawled the coastal waters not far from Drieborg. He also worked regularly on a nearby farm, and the owner's household became like a second family. Throughout this period of delinquency and manual labor, Ader's mother never hid her desire for her firstborn to follow in his parents' pastoral footsteps. Indeed, it was presumed that Ader would become a minister. Each Sunday he and his brother would help their mother with the service, doing many of the little things necessary to facilitate the congregation's worship. Calvinist Protestantism was part of the Ader's daily life, as it was integral to his mother's being. The sacred and the profane were never held in opposition, but melded into a deeply spiritual life in which faith was a constant and moral standards high.

In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin stressed that the fall of man derived from Adam's lack of faith.⁴⁵ The descent from paradise, when man became manifestly human, occurred because Adam questioned the knowledge of the Divine. In Calvin's rendering, Adam's doubt was presumptuous. To try to comprehend God's will is an act of hubris; God's divinity is knowable only through grace. Calvin, who was deeply influenced by the writings of Augustine, reached a compelling understanding of Christianity, wherein man's will was essentially denied. At stake was not only the accountability of man in the eyes of God, but also an understanding of God's omniscience and the economy of his goodness. As Augustine states in both *Confessions* and *Of Free Choice of the Will*, the status of the will, its conceptualization as a human faculty and an attribute of reason, is necessarily a question concerning evil.⁴⁶ Augustine points out that God stands for all that is good and by his very nature is incapable of sin, yet evil still persists among

those who are made in his image, and it is necessary to account for the contradiction. The one logical explanation is that man was given the ability to exercise free will in order to choose whether to do good or to do evil. God did not foreordain transgression, but enabled each individual to decide the course of his actions. The role of necessity—what one essentially does, out of natural compulsion—creates a problem in Augustine's formulation, because of its connection to God and his creation of man. Nevertheless, the will gives individuals a degree of freedom from God's dominion, and is also the theological principle that relieves God of culpability for man's transgressions.

Calvin's conception of the will expanded upon Augustine's. There are moments when Calvin became more severe in his belief: at times he conceives of the will as nonexistent, except in the case of sin. Calvin laments man's flawed nature and the passing of God's punishment for Adam's transgression, original sin, from generation to generation. The path to the deliverance promised by God can only be opened by grace.⁴⁷ Calvin follows Augustine in ascribing any willed movement toward goodness to God's intervention. Faith is a gift from above, not something consciously attained. Any redemptive act by man or woman derives only from God's benevolence, while sin, not borne of necessity but committed through the power of reason, is the fault of man alone.

Ader never mentioned Calvin in any public statement, nor does his name appear in Ader's notebook or other written ephemera. Yet elements of the Christian reformer's conception of the will correspond with aspects of *Fall 1*, *Los Angeles* and *Fall 2*, *Amsterdam*.⁴⁸ The associations are at once general, in the way Ader describes gravity's omnipotence—a substitute for God's will—and specific, in the gestures through which Ader aids or hastens his descents, acts of will that would be impossible without gravity's impetus or, it could be said, God's grace. But to leave the link between Ader and Calvin at this point would be to disregard nuances in both. If one infers that Ader's engagement with falling bears a direct relation with his Dutch Reform background, then these ephemeral pieces speak to the fall of man. Calvin, as well as Augustine (and for that matter, almost all Christian thinkers before the Reformation), links the question of the will to that of morality: one makes a choice that invariably impinges upon salvation. Ader's works lack this theological sense of sin, which echoes through-

out Calvin's writings. Ader's moralism is more ambivalent, less spiritual. It is hard to tell in *Fall 1*, *Los Angeles* and *Fall 2*, *Amsterdam* whether something is righteous or not. Conceptions of good and evil are unimportant in this context; in the case of Ader's first *Fall* films the subject is closer to freedom as such. There are hints of the element of failure, but not as is commonly assumed: to the degree that he falls because gravity demanded it, his action is successful. To the degree that his interventions at once mark an interruption in the dominion of gravity's will and facilitate that which is preordained, he succeeds as well. Failure, in Ader's initial *Fall* films, lurks in the overall tragedy of the situation, not a tragedy that is necessarily romantic in the banal sense, but tragedy in the face of an inexplicable fall and the irredeemable loss of free will.



Ader never fulfilled his mother's pastoral expectations. Not long before he headed to Washington, DC, for his year abroad, he renounced his faith in God, incapable of believing in a system that seemed untenable.⁴⁹ He did not criticize those who remained believers, nor did he disparage the importance of faith in other people's lives. But, for him, the Trinitarian structure of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost rang hollow, salvation seemed arbitrary, and God's justice appeared without reason. In doctrine's stead, like many young adults of his generation, Ader found refuge in the writings of Albert Camus.⁵⁰ Camus's philosophical works and literature provided a moral center for Ader, one that did not derive justification from a higher power, but instead focused on the individual and the choices he made in an inexplicable world. In the decade between Ader's immersion in Camus and the development of his *Fall* projects, a number of other intellectual influences (from Hegel to Wittgenstein) helped form his worldview. But throughout, he seems to have internalized aspects of Camus's thought, which served as a foundation upon which he built other ideas: a point of departure, often emanating from *The Myth of Sisyphus*.⁵¹

Camus begins his famous essay thus: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide."⁵² This provocative statement takes the ontological question of being and frames it in terms of willful death. Yet from there he proceeds, not to think about the end

of existence, but to ruminate upon life and how to function in a world that is increasingly alien to man. Camus sensed that the meaning of life was fading rapidly, leaving the relation between man and the world strained, if not severed. He characterized this phenomenon as the condition of absurdity, and it is this state of being that he pits against suicide, the ultimate reproach to the habit of living. Yet suicide, after its initial prominence in the essay, fades away, as the life-affirming aspects of Camus's argument emerge, for it is not the meaninglessness of life that matters but how one lives it. Camus distills this understanding into the tension between rational man and irrational world, a dichotomy that the wide range of existential and phenomenological inquiries of the then recent past had been unable to resolve. Camus spends time parsing these various arguments, coming to the conclusion that what typifies the quest to divine true meaning of the irrational world in the writings of Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers is the desire to announce with confidence, "This is clear."⁵³

The inability to take stock of the irrational world implies that apprehension of the absurd is not the same as the condition of the absurd. The irreconcilable nature of the sensory and the ideational precludes setting forth any generally acceptable definition of the phenomenon. Nevertheless, Camus, working through the writings of Søren Kierkegaard, suggests that "the absurd is sin without God" — a formulation that must have appealed to Ader, since the moral-theological structure in which he was raised had now been transformed into a secular model, wherein God's judgments no longer matter though free will does.⁵⁴ Camus's conception of the will began with the presumption that man sought to reconcile the rational and the irrational, with the understanding that the absurd rests between the poles. To unify the fundamentally opposite requires a leap of faith, and one no different from what Christianity asks of its followers. But the absurd man, caught between antagonistic positions, does not want to commit to something he does not fully comprehend. It would be irresponsible to embrace a position of passivity, to cede one's will to unknown forces. Instead, the absurd man chooses to live without appeal, without recourse to a faith blinded by the unknown. This allows one to accept one's fate consciously, all the while understanding that it is absurd. Camus sees this condition of self-reflexivity — what might be presented as the essential act for truly living — as creating a permanent state of revolt:

"Revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it."⁵⁵

The paradox of this statement—that one willfully embraces what is foreordained—is for Camus the source of individual liberation. He is not concerned with metaphysical freedom, or what might be considered freedom, as such. Instead, he thinks of freedom as it relates to him as an individual, as a sentient being who experiences a world controlled not by an almighty God but by another ruthless force: the State. But what could become a political diatribe then slips into another sort of discussion; Camus argues that freedom is only possible with the promise of the eternal.⁵⁶ Freedom of this sort, and its connection to the afterlife, are illusions that arise without the revelations of the absurd, for the enlightenment that comes from the fundamental state Camus celebrates is the recognition that there is no future. Real liberation lies in the acceptance of one's circumstances, the acknowledgment of one's place within a causal chain of events. One is free only upon realizing that he is bound to his fate, a recognition that places death at the furthest reaches, its singular experience of truth repelled by a desire for the here and now, a desire to live, as Camus says, without appeal. It is a strange way in which to exist, with no teleological goal except forestalling the ultimate end, no real freedom when one considers that death will come whether one wants it to or not.

Does the freedom Camus describes say something about the will Calvin ostensibly renounces and Ader complicates in his films? Hannah Arendt commenced a series of reflections, just a few years after Ader began his work on falling, on both the faculties of thinking and the will.⁵⁷ In her ruminations on the will, which in many ways are a summation of the great thinkers on the subject, a quiet argument emerges that can be seen as a blend of Calvin's and Camus's positions. Her subtle claim helps reveal the full implications of Ader's engagement with the will, for as she contends, taking as her starting point, much like Calvin, the work of Augustine, a willed act is only that if there is a possibility for its converse. This profoundly simple observation leads to a fatalistic assessment that is akin to Camus's findings. Arendt hazards a claim that begins with Augustine's concept that being and time originate together, a point of view "affirmed by the fact that each man owed his life not just to the multiplication of the species, but to birth, the entry of a novel creature who as something en-

tirely new appears in the midst of the time continuum of the world."⁵⁸ Origins, therefore, are not located in creativity, but in what Augustine calls, in *City of God*, "natality," which leads Arendt to say that this tells "us no more than that we are doomed to be free by virtue of being born, no matter whether we like freedom or abhor its arbitrariness, are 'pleased' with it or prefer to escape its awesome responsibility by electing some form of fatalism."⁵⁹

"Doomed to be free," Arendt's phrase is haunting, in large part because it captures many of the themes implicit in Ader's early *Fall* work. Her pithy formulation both speaks to Calvin's assertion that anything one wills toward the good is because of God's grace, and conveys Camus's sense that freedom comes from the realization that one is not free, that one essentially has no will, or at most a will that has little efficacy on events. Arendt's observation is shrewd because it does not directly pit determinism against the will; no opposition exists between freedom and fatalism, no reductive choice between radical passivity or its converse. Her approach is more fluid, in that it accounts for an exchange between one's will and forces of a higher power. That is not to say that the give and take is in equal measure, or that it strives for a kind of harmony where obviously there is none; instead, it says that one is in fact free, but not of his own choosing. Arendt's doom is an oblique fatalism—a determinism in which freedom is bestowed on the basis of birth. But this gift is not without conditions, and those conditions can be as much, if not more, of a burden than living life under the auspices of a divine will. Freedom, as she describes it, is not necessarily positive, nor is it a quality that allows one to be an agent of change. One may will something freely without any effect besides perpetuating the doom initiated with one's birth.

It is this last sentiment, so clear in retrospect in both *Fall 1, Los Angeles* and *Fall 2, Amsterdam*, that emerges fully in Ader's *Broken Fall (Organic)*, *Amsterdamse Bos*, *Holland* of 1971 (fig. 7). Ader was once again in Europe for the summer, and during this time abroad he enjoyed a remarkably fecund period in his practice, making a number of works in Holland and in Sweden. *Broken Fall (Organic)* was filmed on the outskirts of Amsterdam, in a large, open parkland called the *Amsterdamse Bos*. Its spacious fields and numerous paths are crisscrossed by man-made canals, often separated from the earthen shores by wooden barriers. Like much of the Dutch countryside—spaces where the spread



Figure 7. Bas Jan Ader, *Broken Fall* (*Organic*), Amsterdamse Bos, Holland, 1971. © The Estate of Bas Jan Ader.

of civilization has been somewhat resisted — the perspective is skewed by the multiplicity of horizon lines formed by the planar landscape, the uniform tree line, and frequent low cloud banks.

Ader worked that day with Peter Bakker, one of Erik Ader's closest friends and a knowledgeable cameraman and film editor. They fixed the camera to a tripod, focusing it on a sizable tree whose bare branches extended over a narrow canal. The film opens with Ader hanging from a branch about fifteen to twenty feet above the ground. No clue is given as to how he got there; no backstory explains the unusual circumstance. Instead, it could be said, following Arendt's idea of natality and how one is doomed to freedom, that Ader was born into the piece. He is in a precarious position. He shuffles his hands slightly, moving himself further out on the limb. He adjusts his grip, looking up occasionally to check the integrity of the branch. After a short while, his body becomes still. He looks to the side. Again, his hands begin to move — his grip loosening and shifting — and, responding to that disturbance, his torso and legs sway. As calm subsequently returns, he glances again to the side and then above. The relative peace continues

for a while. It seems longer than it is — the entire event takes a little more than a minute — but the tension draws out time, as when Ader slowly tilted off his chair in *Fall 1, Los Angeles*. Just when things seem to settle into some degree of stasis, Ader looks down toward the water for the first time. In an instant one hand releases, then the other, his body plummeting. He lands forcefully in the canal no more than a foot or two deep.

As with *Fall 1, Los Angeles* and *Fall 2, Amsterdam* there is a critical moment, so brief it can be easily overlooked, in which Ader makes a choice. In the two earlier works, conceived in terms of the idea that a deterministic force, gravity, holds sway over the situation, the exertion of the will — shuffling to clear the veranda, leaning into the fall — both momentarily suspends gravity's reign and accelerates the event, suggesting that no way exists, even when one is not passive, to escape what has been foreordained. *Broken Fall* (*Organic*) is slightly different. The piece is expressly about freedom, about the will, about the ability to make a choice that has a corresponding nonchoice. Determinism lurks, but it is of a different kind, not something malicious like gravity or potentially random like God. Instead, it is freedom itself that controls the situation; it is this quality that has doomed Ader. Hanging from the branch, high above the canal, Ader was presented with a choice: he could continue to hang on, or he could let go. Whatever option he settled upon the result would be the same: a tragic descent, which was Ader's concrete truth.

themes discussed here. Throughout the entirety of the project I have benefited immensely from my friendship and conversations with Cameron Martin. And although they were not directly involved with this book, it bares the mark of my two greatest art historical influences: Rob Rush and Richard Shiff. My editor, Susan Bielstein, has my gratitude for her steadfast commitment to this project, her sage advice, and for treating me first and foremost as a writer. Thanks are also due to Anthony Burton, Joel Score, Laura Avey, and Matthew Avery, for making my experience with the University of Chicago Press perfect.

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It is difficult to know how to thank my parents now that I have a child of my own. Words seem ineffective in conveying my gratitude for all they have done in order to make it possible to write these very lines; nevertheless I will try: thank you. To my brother, thank you for being a wonderful uncle. To Elias, now two years old, thank you for your wide-eyed wonderment that makes me see each day in greater, more immediate detail. And finally, to my wife, Simone, who has been through all of this with me: hearing every idea, discussing every minutia, reading every page. This book is hers as much as it is mine. I would be lost without her, and for this reason—along with my unwavering love—I dedicate this book to her.

NOTES

FALLING

1. Ader was initially unsure what to call the piece. It was only when he was completing the loan agreement forms for the major 1971 exhibition *Sonsbeek buiten de perken* in Arnhem, Holland, that he finally settled on the title. See Doede Hardeman, "The notion of fall and rise were to be explored," in *Bas Jan Ader: Please Don't Leave Me* (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, 2005), 152–53.
2. Interview with William Leavitt, Los Angeles, CA, December 7, 2009.
3. Interview with Helene Winer, New York, NY, August 4, 2011.
4. Paul Andriessse, interview with Willoughby Sharp, New York, NY, January 7, 1981, Paul Andriessse Archive (hereafter PAA). Ader acknowledges receiving this call in a letter to Art & Project Gallery, November 14, 1970, Art & Project Gallery Archive, Bas Jan Ader Dossier (hereafter APG; Suzanne Jansen, with the author's assistance, translated the letters in this archive from the Dutch). There was, in the ensuing months, some tension between Ader and Sharp with regard to which work was to be published in *Avalanche*. Bas Jan Ader, letter to Art & Project Gallery, February 17, 1971, APG; Paul Andriessse, *Bas Jan Ader: Artist* (Amsterdam: Stichting Openbaar kunstbezit, 1988), 75.
5. Paul Andriessse, interview with Willoughby Sharp, PAA.
6. Willoughby Sharp, "Rumbles," *Avalanche*, no. 2 (Winter 1971), 2.
7. Paul Andriessse, interview with William Leavitt, November–December 1980, PAA. Ader's interest in the tension between free will and determinism was confirmed in an interview with the author. Interview with William Leavitt, Los Angeles, CA, December 7, 2009.
8. William Leavitt, letter to Paul Andriessse, March 16, 1988, PAA; Andriessse, *Bas Jan Ader*.
9. Both William Leavitt and Mary Sue Ader Andersen describe how Leavitt and Ader ceased being friends around the end of 1972 or the beginning of 1973. Interview with William Leavitt, Los Angeles, CA, December 7, 2009; interview with Mary Sue Ader Andersen, Ventura, CA, December 6, 2009.
10. Andriessse, *Bas Jan Ader*, 72.
11. Andriessse associates these qualities with Ader's *Fall 1*, *Los Angeles* and *Fall 2*, *Amsterdam*. Andriessse, *Bas Jan Ader*, 75.
12. In a letter to the organizer of the *Sonsbeek* exhibition in Arnhem, Ader described the nature of his films: "The artist's body as gravity makes itself its master." See Hardeman, "Notion of fall," 153. Ader also gave an interview to Betty van Garrel in which he discussed falling and the tragic. See Van Garrel, "Bas Jan Ader's tragiek schuilt in een pure val," *Haagse Post*, January 5–11, 1972, 48–49.

13. Bas Jan Ader, letter to Art & Project Gallery, December 19, 1970, APG.
14. Van Elk attended Immaculate Heart College, studying with such people as Sister Corita Kent. Interview with Ger van Elk, New York, NY, September 22, 2009; Christophe Cherix, ed., *In and Out of Amsterdam: Travels in Conceptual Art, 1960–1976* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 82. The possible influence of Kent on the art of Van Elk and Ader is difficult to determine. Van Elk earned his undergraduate degree in 1963. Ader worked briefly in the college's cafeteria, and may have taken a couple of classes at the school upon arriving in Los Angeles. He was twenty at the time, and soon enrolled at the Otis Art Institute (now the Otis College of Art and Design). Van Elk moved back to Holland after graduation and did graduate work in art history at the University of Groningen. His art took many forms in the years following his return home: from Arte Povera-type sculpture to ephemeral conceptual projects. There is little in these pieces that suggest the influence of Kent, who was primarily a printmaker. The same is true for Ader, who started to make what he considered serious art in 1969. Ader does not mention Kent in letters or his personal notebook. In recent interviews (see above), Van Elk has discussed her importance, which may reflect a contrarian effort to claim a nontraditional artistic origin. What Van Elk now says he found exciting about Kent was not her art per se, but the idea of a nun making progressive, contemporary art.
15. Interview with Mary Sue Ader Andersen, Ventura, CA, December 6, 2009.
16. The move was also prompted by the efforts of a disgruntled neighbor to force Ader and Van Elk out, which included setting fire to their apartment. See Cherix, *In and Out*, 82.
17. See Hardeman, "Notion of fail," 149.
18. Interview with Erik Ader, Usquert, Netherlands, September 16, 2009.
19. What follows is taken, except as noted, from a fairly long reminiscence by the artist John Lees about his times with Ader at Otis. See Lees, letter to Paul Andriess, July 15, 1988, PAA. Van Elk recalls similar disruptions when he and Ader studied together in Amsterdam.
20. Other instances of Ader's disrupting class included one in which he and Andersen nonchalantly entered a group critique and proceeded to hang two large, blank canvases high upon the wall without saying a word or acknowledging the presence of anyone else in the room.
21. Interview with Erik Ader, Usquert, Netherlands, September 16, 2009.
22. Interview with Mary Sue Ader Andersen, Ventura, CA, December 6, 2009.
23. This work was actually painted by Mary Sue Ader. Paul Andriess, interview with Erik Ader, 1981, PAA.
24. The document, entitled "Implosions . . . Paintings and Constructions," is reprinted in its entirety in *Bas Jan Ader: Please Don't Leave Me*, 150–51.
25. *Ibid.*, 150.
26. According to Mary Sue Ader Andersen, the work was meant to be an edition

of three. Ader printed only one copy in 1968 because of financial constraints. The edition was completed posthumously in 2003. For more on this issue, see the catalog entry for the work in *Bas Jan Ader: Please Don't Leave Me*, 34.

27. Erik Beenker says that the notes begin as early as 1968. He gives no direct evidence for this, and the notebook page to which he refers is undated. See Beenker, "Bas Jan Ader (1942–1975 missing at sea): The Man Who Wanted to Look beyond the Horizon," in *Bas Jan Ader: Please Don't Leave Me*, 13. His point finds possible corroboration several pages later in the note "The artist is consumer of extreme and absolute comfort," which is quite close to the title of Ader's 1968 work *The Artist as Consumer of Extreme Comfort*. It is not clear, though, if this statement relates contemporaneously to the 1968 work. A later date may be indicated by a note, written during Ader's visit to Sweden in the summer of 1971, describing an unrealized piece: "make a photograph of me next to Swedish end of road, [next to the] begin of water sign" (Bas Jan Ader notebook, PAA). These unrealized works of art, made during the time Ader shot *Forewell to Far Away Friends* (1971), are held in the Bas Jan Ader Archive, Patrick Painter Inc. (hereafter PPIA).

28. PAA; the quote is from *Paradise Lost*, book 3, 98–99.

29. PAA. One clipping from the *Los Angeles Times* is dated May 19, 1973. Another is undated but has part of a story discussing aspects of the Watgate investigation.

30. Van Garrel, "Ader's tragiek schuilt," 48–49.

31. Bas Jan Ader, letter to Art & Project Gallery, January 21, 1972, APG.

32. Bas Jan Ader, letter to Poul ter Hofstede, August 20, 1974. The letter, held in the Groninger Museum exhibition archive (RHC Groninger Archieven, Groningen), has been published in English translation in *Bas Jan Ader: Please Don't Leave Me*, 156.

33. Quoted in Beenker, "Bas Jan Ader," 13–14.

34. The trope of failure has been taken up in, e.g., James Roberts, "Bas Jan Ader: The Artist Who Fell from Grace with the Sea" (32–35), and Collier Schorr, "This Side of Paradise" (35–37), both in Frieze, no. 17 (June–August 1994); Jan Tumlir, "Bas Jan Ader: Artist and Time Traveler," in *Bas Jan Ader*, ed. Brad Spence (Irvine, CA: Art Gallery, University of California, Irvine, 1999); Bruce Hainley, "Legend of the Fall: Photographer Bas Jan Ader," *Artforum* 37, no. 7 (March 1999): 90–95; Jörg Heiser, "Emotional Rescue: Romantic Conceptualism," *Frieze*, no. 71 (November–December, 2002), 70–75; Heiser, "Curb Your Romanticism: Bas Jan Ader's Slapstick" (25–28), and Tacita Dean, "And He Fell into the Sea" (29–30), both in *Bas Jan Ader: Please Don't Leave Me*; and Jan Verwoert, *Bas Jan Ader: In Search of the Miraculous* (London: Afterall Books, 2006).

35. Heiser and especially Verwoert provide the notable exceptions. Verwoert convincingly reads Ader's work as a critique of the cultural construction of tragedy.

36. Andriess, *Bas Jan Ader*, 76.

37. Kasha Linville, "Sonsbeek: Speculations, Impressions," *Artforum* 10, no. 10 (Summer 1971): 56.

38. Letter to Bas Jan Ader from R. W. D. Oxenaar, director of the Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller-Otterlo, March 25, 1971, PAA.
39. Bas Jan Ader, letter to the Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller-Otterlo, April 28, 1971, PAA.
40. Interview with Erik Ader, Usquert, Netherlands, September 16, 2009. E-mail correspondence with Erik Ader, July 17, 2012.
41. Paul Andriessse, interview with Carolyn Noren White, 1980 or 1981, PAA.
42. Interview with Erik Ader, Usquert, Netherlands, September 16, 2009.
43. Paul Andriessse, interview with William Leavitt, PAA.
44. Interview with Erik Ader, Usquert, Netherlands, September 16, 2009.
45. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. MacNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1:241–53.
46. Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Philip Burton (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001); Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993).
47. Calvin, *Institutes*, 297–99.
48. Commentators have broadly alluded to this in recent years.
49. Interview with Erik Ader, Usquert, Netherlands, September 16, 2009.
50. *Ibid.*
51. Ader talks about Camus in his interview with Van Garrel, “Ader’s tragiek schuilt,” 48–49; Andriessse, *Bas Jan Ader*, 75.
52. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 3.
53. *Ibid.*, 27.
54. *Ibid.*, 40.
55. *Ibid.*, 54.
56. *Ibid.*, 57.
57. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, *Thinking*, and vol. 2, *Willing* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978).
58. *Ibid.*, 2:217.
59. *Ibid.* Arendt was not yet satisfied with this answer. It was too open-ended, insufficient to explain why one makes one choice instead of another, or how this equates to freedom, a freedom to decide a course of actions. But she saw a way out of this impasse through an analysis of judgment. Fate, tragically, did not allow her to complete what she willed; a week after writing that all are doomed to be free, she passed away suddenly, the victim of a heart attack.

REPRESENTING

1. For a discussion of *Landslide*, especially from the point of view of Leavitt, see Erik Bluhm, “Minimalism’s Rubble: On William Leavitt’s and Bas Jan Ader’s *Landslide*,” *artUS* 10 (October–November 2005): 14–17.

2. Andriessse, *Bas Jan Ader*, 72.
3. The best discussion of the relation between the art of Ader and Burden is Christopher Müller’s exhibition catalog, *Bas Jan Ader: Filme, Fotografien, Projektionen, Videos und Zeichnungen aus den Jahren 1967–1975* (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2000).
4. Interview with Claire Copley, New York, NY, June 28, 2009.
5. Corinna Ferrari, “Chris Burden,” *Domus*, no. 549 (August 1975), 50.
6. Peter Plagens, “He Got Shot—For His Art,” *New York Times* (September 2, 1973), D1, D3; Frazer Ward, “Watching Chris Burden’s Shoot,” *October*, no. 95 (Winter 2001), 114–30.
7. Plagens, “He Got Shot,” D3.
8. On the issue of masochism, see Kathy O’Dell, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art, and the 1970’s* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Ward makes the allusion to Vietnam and the violence portrayed on television one of the central points of his argument in his essay “Watching Chris Burden’s Shoot.”
9. Ward’s primary argument regarding *Shoot* concerns the tension between the public and the private and how a private event has public consequences, especially in terms of a public made complicit in an event that could have had a fatal outcome.
10. Tom Wolfe, “The Me Decade and the Third Great Awakening,” in *Mauve Gloves & Madmen, Clutter & Vine* (1976; New York: Bantam, 1999), 117–54. See also Andreas Killen, *1973 Nervous Breakdown: Watergate, Warhol, and the Birth of Post-Sixties America* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2006).
11. Both notes in PAA.
12. Paul Andriessse suggests that Ader liked Mondrian because of “his search for harmony through a rigorous reduction of visual means.” Andriessse, *Bas Jan Ader: Artist* (Amsterdam: Stichting Openbaar kunstbezit, 1988), 77.
13. Harry Cooper, “Mondrian, Hegel, Boogie,” *October*, no. 84 (Spring 1998), 138. See also Yve-Alain Bois, “The De Stijl Idea,” in *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 101–21.
14. Piet Mondrian, “Neo-Plasticism: The General Principle of Plastic Equivalence,” in *The New Art—The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, ed. and trans. Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), 137.
15. Mary Sue Ader said in an interview from 1976 that “[Ader] often referred to Mondrian’s ideas about neo-classicism, and the colors red, yellow, blue, black, and white. He felt very much like being identified as an individual instead of part of a movement.” Liza Bear and Willoughby Sharp, “A Telephone Conversation with Mary Sue Ader,” *Avalanche* (Summer 1976), 27.
16. The show ran from April 4 to April 24. Kosaka did not take part because he felt what he was doing at the time—mainly ephemeral performances—was not art in the sense that those exhibiting understood it. Interview with Hirokazu Kosaka, Los Angeles, CA, August 17, 2011.
17. Interview with Helene Winer, New York, NY, July 1, 2009.