Searchin' yeah searchin'

Juliana Engberg

left
Bas Jan Ader, I'm too sad to tell you, 1971,
black-and-white film stills, 3 min 21 sec duration,
courtesy Bas Jan Ader Estate, Patrick Painter Editions,
and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney,
as seen in their exhibition 'Masquerade', 2006.

In 1975 the Dutch-born, California-dwelling artist, Bas Jan Ader, was finally declared perished at sea – not lost – but gone. Bas Jan Ader set sail on 9 July 1975 from Sea Harbour, Chatham, Cape Cod. In his little 3.8-metre boat he expected to sail solo across the Atlantic and come to shore at Land's End, England. By his calculations the journey would take sixty-seven days. The sea voyage was the second part of a three-part project titled *In search of the miraculous*. The third part was to involve a choir singing sea shanties. The first part was Ader walking, from dusk till dawn, the way lit by flashlight, around Los Angeles and eventually to the edge of the shore. The first part eventuated in seventeen black-and-white photographs of fairly grainy, incidental things and places, upon which Ader wrote the words to 'Searchin', a song by the Coasters.

By December of 1975 hope had faded to resignation. In 1976 Ader's boat was found, partially submerged, off the south-west coast of Ireland. No discovery has been made of Bas Jan Ader's body. It is the stuff legends are made of – cults even – but to the disappointment of those closest to him, Ader's disappearance, at the time, made few ripples.

Over a number of years, and in various group exhibitions exploring the ever elasticised dimensions of conceptual art, I have seen one or two of Ader's works, here and there. His films and photographs popped up in the Tate's recent 'Open Systems',[1] the Barbican's 'Colour After Klein',[2] and the Museum of Contemporary Art's 'Masquerade' in Sydney.[3] Despite his absence, a trickle of solo exhibitions have also taken place. Ader's was not a vast output: in fact one would say it is a catalogue verging on the ephemeral: a few pale photos, some black-and-white 16-mm films, a small folio of colour photographs, slide and film works. Each work somehow invested with a kind of prophetic loss. Falling, crying, pleading, searching and leave-taking: this was Ader's melancholic, introspective repertoire; the only respite from this being his few works in red, yellow and blue: a homage to his modernist mentor, Piet Mondrian.

The late Bas Jan Ader now has a gallery supervising his estate, and a website is pending. A recent survey seen in various places including the Basel Kunsthalle, where I visited it, stretched this small archive every which way to fill four large rooms. Films were often seen as 16 mm and additionally as transfers to DVD; the same photos appeared in different versions. Faded photos and slides added to the sepia of sadness which both the legend and the works contain.

It is hard to be cynical about Bas Jan Ader's output – even when you detect the hint of onion on his fingers in the crying film *I'm too sad to tell you,* 1970. It all seems so genuine and forlorn, so eternally lonesome. And even though we know someone must have been filming his deliberate bicycle ride plunge into the Amsterdam canal, the lack of reaction to this sudden event, and the never emergent Ader, leaves one feeling an acute loss – for Ader and for oneself. Here. Gone. Ader's works are imbued with a fatal sense of mortality.

To me it does not seem surprising that interest has built around this legacy of intimate, pain-filled works. The rise in attention for Ader coincides with one of the bifurcations in recent contemporary art. His output exemplifies the small, singular, solitary self-gesture of the lone artist, as against the gigantic, spectacularised event-style art that has taken up residence in the large spaces of entertainment such as the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. Ader's introverted, doubt-filled gestures are about as far removed from Olafur Eliasson's crowd-pleasing *The weather project*, 2003, as a grain of sand is from the sun.

It seems we are currently drawn to the cathartic, communally experienced, new-awesome-sublime events such as Eliasson's, or Rachel Whiteread's dwarfing white cubes and the funster sublime of Carsten Höller's massive slippery slides at the Tate; or the gorgeous sublime of Pipilotti Rist's edenic fantasy on the canopy of St Stae, Venice; the abstract sublime of Nike Savvas's 100,000 floating coloured balls at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne; and even the catastrophic sublime of Susan Norrie's video work *Undertow,* 2002. The reasons for this interest are, as one might imagine, social, political and emotional. We want to be absorbed into a mass experience and feel part of a community.

Vastness is comforting inasmuch as it is so large we cannot take responsibility for it; it must take responsibility for us: look after us, and offer us something – a vista to be absorbed in, a place where we take in and let out air – a space to lose ourselves in momentarily. Obviously the grandeur of the sublime provides us with a respite from the pressures of the real world, even while the real world might be, sublimely, gigantically, impinging upon us.

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Immanuel Kant suggested the sublime is associated with feelings of awe and respect. He located the sublime in the mind rather than in objects, but agreed that certain conditions must always prevail to manifest the sublime. That other commentator of the awesome and sublime, Edmund Burke, gives us the simple recipe: vast, dark, and overwhelming things are sublime. And we love these things because, as Burke offers:

> *These qualities produce painful vibrations in the 'finer organs' of the body which, like the 'grosser organs', require stimulation and exercise in order to remain healthy. When not carried to violence or to the destruction of the body, these vibrations produce delight and health as they clear the parts of a dangerous and troublesome incumbence.*[4]

In other words, manifestations of sublime pleasure serve to stimulate our senses, thereby alleviating the unhealthy physiological consequences of inactivity.

But almost as an escape from the awesome, we are at the moment also absorbed by the isolated events of the 'everyman' represented by the works of artists such as Ader. These works are about our need to take responsibility; to encounter the painful and hard things; to experience the tragedy that the sublime only simulates. Ader's durational films, such as *Nightfall*, 1971, in which the artist holds and finally releases a concrete block over a vulnerable light globe; or *Fall I* and *Fall II*, 1970, in which the artist hangs by his arms from the limb of a tree, only to finally relinquish his grip and plunge into the river below, make us share in the effort as well as the failure of the gesture. Through Ader's small acts we recognise our own scale of humanity.

To this list of smaller gesturers and journeymen one might add the video works of Pieter Laurens Mol, which demonstrate the artist failing in attempts to fly, remain upright, and show him urinating in his jeans; Rodney Graham, whose films pitch the individual against the world in cyclical meandering yet enclosed narratives; or Francis Alÿs, whose 'walks' and gestures, such as pushing a block of ice around the streets of Mexico city, or walking with paint pouring from a can, map a kind of ephemeral place of small incidents and actions. Janet Cardiff's audio tours identify particular, often overlooked, points of interest, and Richard Long's walks, in some sense, established the journey genre inside the practice of art.

The legacy of these little, anti-sublime, anti-monumental things was encapsulated in the wonderful collection display of photos and ephemera at Tate Britain, in which the works of Long, Barry Flanagan, Bruce McLean, Hamish Fulton and Richard Wentworth – students under Peter Kardia at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design – seem so right for now. Wentworth's ever evolving photo-series, *Making do and getting by*, 1970–, of ad hoc 'everyday' sculptures, found things and little corrections (paper propping up a table leg, a note jammed in a parking meter, etc.) is the kind of human-scaled gesture that modifies and tames the enormity of existence.

So while we contemplate the larger picture, the big-foot biennales, and the objects of grandeur, it's also true to say the little guy and individual action are back. British artist Mark Wallinger's recent celebration and vindication of the individual pitched against the juggernaut of the institution, *State Britain*, 2007, in which Wallinger faithfully recreated the placards and banners of lone peace protester, Brian Haw, 'demonstrates' the principle.[5] Haw cannot, by law, maintain his vigil outside London's Houses of Parliament because of the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act, 2005, which prohibits unauthorised demonstrations within a one-kilometre radius of London's Parliament Square. Wallinger, however, has placed his 'recreation' in the Tate Britain's great hall, along a line that intersects the 'zone' of exclusion: a gesture of multiple significance. Perhaps the greatest moment of this re-protest is the official warning that accompanies the exhibition: 'This display contains images of human suffering which some visitors may find distressing.' The point exactly.

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1 'Open Systems: Rethinking Art c. 1970', Tate Modern, London, 1 June – 18 September 2005.
2 'Colour After Klein', Barbican Centre, London, 26 May – 11 September 2005.
3 'Masquerade', Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 23 March – 21 May 2006.
4 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1968.
5 'Mark Wallinger: State Britain', Tate Britain, London, 15 January – 27 August 2007.