

Capsized

In Search of the Miraculous was a three-part performance and installation project conducted over two years by Bas Jan Ader, a Dutch-born conceptual artist who lived in Los Angeles.

The work's first part was a walk Ader undertook through Los Angeles one night in 1973, which was documented in a series of photographs. The second part was an exhibition of the photographs together with images and sounds of a student choir singing sea shanties, which was held in April 1975. For this Ader designed an invitation card showing what looks like a ghost-like figure leaning over the side of a boat in rough seas in anticipation of the solo voyage from America to England that he planned to undertake a few months later. The third element was intended to be an exhibition in Groningen, Holland (near where Ader grew up), which would restage the Los Angeles show and include new photographs and documentation of the voyage. Armed with a movie camera and tape recorder but without a maritime VHF radio, Ader set sail from Massachusetts on 9 July 1975. He never reached his destination, and his capsized boat was found nine months later off the coast of Ireland.

Bas Jan Ader was born in 1942, the son of a Calvinist minister, in Holland. His parents were in the Resistance and helped hide Jews and British pilots from the Nazis. When Ader was two, his father was arrested and shot. Ader, who settled in California in 1963, spoke little about the meaning of his artworks – mainly short films and photographs – but his preoccupation with tipping points in life, both physical and spiritual, may have been influenced by these traumatic events in his childhood. In 1970–1 Ader produced a number of short films showing him falling in one way or another – tumbling off the roof of a house, cycling into a canal or dropping from the branch of a tree. Like other conceptual and performance artists of his generation he used his own body as an object to be manipulated. But his exploration of failure and preparedness to express vulnerability within his practice suggested a willing submission to circumstances beyond his control. 'I do not make body sculpture, body art or body works', he once said. 'When I fall off the roof of my house or into a canal, it was because gravity made itself master over me.' Writing in 1994, James Roberts and Collier Schorr noted the distinctive role played by comedy and pathos in his work, 'Ader fills the requirements of 70s conceptualism by repeating in lieu of explaining, but he also manages, through the slightest variations in expression, to implant a plot that is not universal, but personal.'

Ader was particularly fascinated by the idea of the miraculous escape. In a 1972 performance, for example, he read aloud from the *Reader's Digest* the true story of a boat captain and a boy who accidentally sailed over the Niagara Falls.

Honeycutt grabbed Roger's arm, fighting to hold the boy's head out of the water. But the furious currents tore them apart. The rapids wrenched Roger down, spun him around. Then all at once he was free, thrust out over the edge of the falls, dropping through space.

In the story the captain died but the boy miraculously survived. Ader similarly sought to pit himself against nature to see if he would survive in his 1975 voyage across the Atlantic. Where some have questioned whether Ader was driven to seek death in some way, the ostensible subject of his works was always survival against the odds.

In Search of the Miraculous began with a walk by Ader, holding a powerful flashlight, through Los Angeles one night. His wife, Mary Sue Ader, photographed the walk, which started at dusk in the Hollywood Hills and ended at dawn looking out to the Pacific Ocean. The work posited a naïve faith that the miraculous existed and could potentially be found through determined looking in the environs of a modern American city. The failure to find the miraculous in any literal sense was of course beside the point: the quest was what mattered. Ader was clear that he intended the search to be understood in a spiritual, as well as physical, sense: he named the work, and the bigger project of which it was the first part, after a 1949 book by P.D. Ouspensky, which discussed esoteric teachings about self-development and the cosmos. Ader created a photographic series from the shots and added to each in white ink a line from the 1957 hit *Searchin'* by the Coasters, a Los Angeles-based rhythm and blues group:

Yes, I've been searchin'
I've been searchin'
Oh yeh, searchin' every which way
Oh yeh, searchin'
I'm searchin'
Searchin' every which way ...

The words provided, as it were, an implied sound track for the work, framing the viewers' affective response to the images.

Ader exhibited the nightwalk photographs in April 1975 at the Claire S. Copley Gallery, Los Angeles. He had already mapped out in his mind the three-part nature of the project, and at the opening had his students sing sea shanties (he was then teaching at the University of California) in anticipation of his Atlantic voyage. The recording of the songs, together with photographs of the performance and the sheet music, formed part of the second element of *In Search of the Miraculous*.

A keen sailor, Ader set sail from Cape Cod, Massachusetts, in July 1975 and hoped to reach Falmouth in England in just over 60 days. This would have set a world record for such an extremely small boat (only 12 ½ feet or 3.8 metres). Ader had long been thinking of making a single-handed crossing and planned the trip carefully. He made the boat ocean-ready with stronger rigging and took enough food and water for 180 days, as well as fishing equipment, a movie camera, tape recorder, and books on

navigation and philosophy. His father had cycled from Holland to Palestine at the same age (thirty-three), with many injuries and near-death experiences, and Ader perhaps wanted a similar adventure to memorialise his father.

To commemorate Ader's solo voyage a pamphlet was published by the gallery Art & Project in Amsterdam. The document included a photograph of Ader on his small boat called Ocean Wave and the music for the song 'A Life on the Ocean Wave', with its declamation of a love of adventure in its first verse:

*A life on the ocean wave,
A-home on the rolling deep!
Where the scater'd waters rave,
And the winds their revels keep.
Like an eagle caged I pine
On this dull, unchanging shore.
Oh give me the flashing brine,
The spray and the tempest's roar.*

Ader should have arrived in England in early September, and then gone on to Groninger Museum, Holland. Initially, Ader's wife, Mary Sue, and his brother, Eric, also assumed that the journey was simply taking much longer than expected: they had accepted Ader's own confident assertions that he could manage the trip without much question. Mary Sue later said, 'He was so convinced he was going to make it, and make it in fast time, that he insisted, even though we were desperate for money, and had a teaching contract in California, that I go to Holland to be there as late into September as I could.' She had to return to America but still thought he would eventually arrive. On 17 October the museum director wrote to Ader's wife about the show: 'We didn't hear anything from Bas Jan but we have confidence.' As the weeks passed, however, it became clear that something had gone wrong and it was eventually accepted that he had died at sea.

Nine months after Ader had set sail, a Spanish trawler from La Coruña found the capsized hull of Ocean Wave off the Irish coast. The amount of fouling on the boat suggested that it had been drifting around in this position for about six months. Ader's body was never found, and the boat itself was later stolen. No-one knows exactly how Ader died. Mary Sue Ader was interviewed shortly after Ader's boat was discovered. She confirmed that the third part of *In Search of the Miraculous* would have consisted of documentation about the voyage, a reperformance of the shanties (in Dutch or English), and photographs of a new nightwalk undertaken in Amsterdam. She said that Ader had been so confident about the journey that he had convinced everyone else, including experienced sailors, that it would go well despite the boat's tiny size. She discounted suggestions that he had intended to die or had gone missing deliberately.

Ader left only a small body of work and was not well known at the time of his death. He might have been forgotten. Those in his circle were deeply shocked and there was

an initial reluctance among some to talk about his work; and supporters later struggled to promote it given that he had produced relatively little in his short life. But his insistence on foregrounding pathos and melodrama within a conceptual practice – intensified by the mystery of his disappearance at sea ‘in search of the miraculous’ – continues to resonate as not only distinctive but also, in some ways, a critique of the work of his contemporaries.

His final work was not completed, and he himself was lost in the process of trying to make it, but this loss did not undermine the effectiveness of the work itself. Roberts and Schorr wrote:

While Ader’s vanishing reads like a fable, it stands as a conclusion to a project that revolved around the risk of death. The concept behind the Search was the undertaking of a physical exercise, free from the safety of land, in order to access a spiritual meeting that could deliver the romance of survival in its purest sense. The fact that Ader failed to complete the journey has little bearing on the success of a project that never hinged on making it across the Atlantic, but on trying to make it.

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