

“THE ARTIST’S BODY AS GRAVITY  
MAKES ITSELF ITS MASTER” :  
BAS JAN ADER’S INCOMPETENCE

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1. Bas
2. Jan
3. Ader
4. 1942
5. to 1975
6. 33 years of age
7. lost at sea
8. crossing the Atlantic
9. in a 13-foot sailboat
10. performing a piece
11. called *In Search of the Miraculous*
12. boat found in Ireland

(or Scotland, depending on which telling of the tale you believe).

“The artist’s body as gravity makes itself its master.” (quoted in Godfrey 215)  
These are the words – all nine of them – which Bas Jan Ader used to describe his short films *Falling I (Los Angeles)* and *Falling II (Amsterdam)* when he showed them in Düsseldorf in 1971. “The artist’s body as gravity makes itself its master.” I take these words as my title. And I print the words on the screen. It is important that I do not speak them, because I might be inclined to give them a certain emphasis, stressing certain words. But it is the ambiguity of the statement which interests me. It is the ambiguity that makes the statement appropriate to Bas Jan Ader’s work.

*Falling I* and *Falling II* are both very short films – 34 and 14 seconds. That’s 48 seconds combined. In eight minutes, you could watch them ten times each. In *Falling I*, Bas Jan Ader tumbles in a chair from the roof of his house, a low Los Angeles bungalow. In *Falling II*, Bas Jan Ader rides a bicycle canalside in Amsterdam. He swerves to his left over the lip of the canal and into the water. In eight minutes, you could watch him fall ten times from the roof and ten times into the canal. So where should the comma go in the artist’s statement which accompanied the showing of *Falling I* and *Falling II* in Düsseldorf in 1971?

After “body”?: “The artist’s body, as gravity makes itself its master.”

*or*

After “gravity”?: “The artist’s body as gravity, makes itself its master.”

Either way, we’ve got a problem. In the first instance, the subject of the sentence is the artist’s body. But this creates a pronoun problem. Roman Jakobson famously called pronouns *shifters*. They shift the attention of themselves to whichever or whomever the sentence designates as the absent entity for whom the pronoun stands in. So, if I say “My father, he is a dentist”. Then the pronoun “he” shifts to signify my father. But if I say “He works in mysterious ways”, “he” probably doesn’t mean my father. In this case, it probably shifts to “our Father”, as in the one who art in heaven. Unless, by saying “He works in mysterious ways”, I am meaning to insinuate my father in such a way that I genuinely or ironically invest him with a sense of mystery; a power which conventionally belongs to “our Father”. But, then again, maybe my father practices dentistry under an assumed name or in a back alley hideaway, the address of which can only be acquired by dialing an unlisted number and obeying the spoken instructions. By which I mean to

say, perhaps he really *does* work in mysterious ways. And furthermore, what if I am telling this story about my father to my brother and my sister, In that case the shifting pronoun “he” shifts to accommodate both my father and our father and perhaps our Father who art in heaven. Who am I to say?

If we put the comma after body, we exacerbate this kind of already-existing pronoun problem. We find ourselves tangled in a thorny crown of “it” and “itself”. We are at odds to say what is mastering what. Normally, in the construction “makes itself its”, the it in “itself” and the it of “its” would be one and the same. But here, one has the impression that the it in “itself” and the it of “its”, are neither one nor the same.

So that’s a bit of a funny one:

“The artist’s body, as gravity makes itself its master.”

In the second instance, the subject of the sentence is compound: “the artist’s body as gravity”. In this case the exacerbated pronoun problem goes away. Itself and its agree. But we are left with the sticky “artist’s body as gravity”. Odd right off the bat, it is odder still to think of *Falling I* and *Falling II* as symbolic in this sense: that the artist’s body is itself a pronoun and that, in these two short films which you could watch ten times each in eight minutes, the pronoun “the artist’s body” shifts to signify “gravity”. That *would* be wonderful. But still...

So that’s not quite right either:

“The artist’s body as gravity, makes itself its master.”

Bas Jan Ader is the source of much incompetence. His work is itself an acting out of incompetence. In the films I've mentioned and other Falling pieces, he collapses. He is the embodiment of incompetence. He can't stand on his own two feet. He can't stand it. He will not stand for this. He will collapse, unable to rise to the occasion, to the challenge. He is unfaithful to the intentions of human technology and convention. He can't stay on his bike on the road. He can't remain on the roof of his house. He can't hold the paving stone aloft, above the light bulbs. He can't keep everything from going dark. He can't keep everything from going dark. He is the embodiment and the source of much incompetence. Fidelity is called into question. The notion of low-fidelity invoked. His is a low-fi version of standing, riding, sitting. It doesn't measure up to the standards of these activities. His standing is the incompetent shadow of real standing. He is a man of questionable standing. He is incompetent in the first person. It is his body which cannot stand, which falls into the canal or from the roof. He is the embodiment of incompetence. He is also incompetent in the third person. It is his work and his life which cannot be made to stand up as agreed-upon fact.

Was it a 12-foot boat? or a 13-foot boat?

Was it found washed up in Ireland? or Scotland?

These are verifiable facts. Yet they cannot be verified. Even the status, the authenticity of Bas Jan Ader's works are in question. After his death, two groups interested, for different reasons, in Ader's legacy, made claims as to which works were genuinely his. A gallery in Los Angeles made editions of Bas Jan Ader works, *some* of which were finished at the time of his death. There was bickering and so on. An article by Wade Saunders appeared in *Art in America* last year, outlining the whole sloppy mess. The article takes for granted the idea that there are some works which are verifiably Bas Jan Ader's and others which are erroneously or manipulatively attributed to him.

For Wade Saunders, the author is far from dead. And that is fair enough. Attribution has its ramifications and its implications. His Art in America article, for instance, is entitled In Dreams Begin Responsibilities, which is the title of a collection of stories by Delmore Schwartz who drank himself to a sloppy death in the Chelsea Hotel in New York City. And I type an ellipsis here, to allow those of you who know your modern poetry to snicker to yourselves, thinking: “Schwartz stole the line from Yeats.” And indeed he did. But who knows where Yeats got it from.

What I’m calling incompetence is what others call slippage or unlimited semiosis or *differance* or the play of the signifier. What I’m calling incompetence also peels away from these names, these concepts, these signifiers. Incompetence separates itself from other terms and, as we will see, from itself. Incompetence, as gravity, cannot master itself. Gravity is defined by its indifference. Incompetence is, of course, defined by its difference. It is different from competence. It defines itself by not being competence. It is, in the most literal sense *in*-competence. Here’s what I mean by competence: competence is verisimilitude, identicalness, the agreement of signifier and signified, replication, perfect repetition. In other words, competence is a pipe dream. We all know this. Yet we take its inverse for granted. I stand in front of you today and blather about art and ideas, as if, when I say competence, I can rest assured you’ll know what I mean. But there is no resting assured in communication or representation. Mimesis is shoddy, shadowy; a shell game, at best.

The illusion, the dream that we can communicate transparently, with fidelity, is a dream of competence. It is a dream that the machines of language and representation are efficient and accurate. Elsewhere I refer to this as mechanical competence. Mechanical competence is a figment of our collective imagination. It is the dream in which our responsibilities begin. If

competent representation is a dream, then everything is subject to doubt – or, more positively, to interpretation. Nothing is definitive, not epistemology, not ontology, not identity, not truth, certainly not ethics. Once the *illusion* of mechanical competence is understood as the *reality* of mechanical *incompetence* (the fact that nothing can be represented with perfect fidelity) then a new competence is available. I call this “conceptual competence”. To be certified conceptually competent, a representation must pass two tests: first, it must recognize the fact that mechanical competence is a fiction; second, it must make some use of this knowledge.

In the catalogue which accompanied Bas Jan Ader’s posthumous solo show at the Art Gallery at the University of California, Irvine, Jan Tumlir notes that much of Bas Jan Ader’s work does not lend itself to linguistic paraphrase as easily as the work of other artists who, at a glance, appear similar. So, while Thomas Crow, writing in the same catalogue as Tumlir, claims that “Here [in the Falling pieces, Ader] shared a common territory with Nauman and Burden, who likewise used performance to “write” verbal formulae with their bodies” (Crow 14), Tumlir sees Ader’s work as explicitly extra-linguistic. He senses, in Ader’s work, a feeling that language is insufficiently equipped to reach the experience of being alive. Tumlir asks: If reading and language lead us away from experience, how else do we get there? He claims, provocatively, that Ader approaches the experience language can’t touch “by overreaching, by continually striving to fill a short strip of film or the diminutive and impacted space of the photograph with the sum total of his experience.” (Tumlir 25) A characteristically laconic statement by Ader ties together the question of language and a silent, pensive experience: “In the film I silently state everything which has to do with falling. It’s a large task which demands a great deal of difficult thinking.” (Ader, quoted in Tumlir 24) The “silent stating” of everything demands thinking. Tumlir is right to point out the tension between Ader’s solipsism and the universalism of the human struggle

with language: “This is the operative principle of his work on the whole: the continual flip-flopping between autobiographical text and self-reflexive meta-text, as the artist’s inability to express his inner, emotional experience becomes itself the basis of a sustained meditation on the art-making process.” (Tumlir 26) It seems necessary, though maybe also tautological, to expand Ader’s meditation to incorporate the process of meaning-making; the notion, itself, of meaning. Here, in this fissure, this crevice, this fault, separating language from thought, or – dare I say it? – separating experience from representation, here is where Ader’s art resides. It is both constituted by this fault and constitutive of it. This fault is both its form and its content.

Fault, of course, derives from the same root as fail. And falling and failing, in Ader’s lexicon, amount to the same thing. Falling is faulting, committing a fault, subject to fault. His Fall pieces are willful experiences of failure. And as Tumlir suggests, “failure is so much more poignant, so much more successful, than success ever could be.” (Tumlir 26) In *Light Vulnerable Objects Threatened by Eight Cement Bricks*, an installation from 1970, Ader suspended by means of eight ropes, eight cinderblocks over eight vulnerable objects (a birthday cake, flowers, light bulbs, eggs and so on). Periodically, during the duration of the installation, he entered the space and severed one rope with a utility knife, allowing a cinderblock to fall, allowing it to crash into the vulnerable object below. The first of his Fall pieces dates from the same year, 1970. In these pieces, Ader is the vulnerable object.

There is a significant difference between cinder blocks falling and Ader falling. Because it is falling that is the form and content of the work, not the vulnerable objects, not their victimization at the hands of the block. Nor is Ader’s agency as he who cuts the cord, the right answer to the question posed by Tumlir: If language leads us away from experience, how do we get there? The answer cannot accommodate Ader’s agency, which is, after all, a form of

language. The answer to Tumlr's question, the answer to Ader's question – in truth it predates them both and emanates from a state constituted by and constitutive of them both – the answer to the question is only available through surrender; a surrender of agency, a surrender of the status of subject to the status of vulnerable object, a surrender to gravity. That is why Ader falling is so different from the cinder blocks falling. In these pieces, Ader is the evidence of gravity. He surrenders to it. He doesn't use it to smash vulnerable objects with cinder blocks. He surrenders. So maybe the comma belongs after gravity.

Gravity has no agency. It's effects are not effects of language. How do we get there? How do we approach experience extra-linguistically? Through the effects of what I would call – as opposed to the effects of agency or the effects of language – the effects of a condition. Falling, surrendered to the clutches of gravity, is such a condition. As is its synonym – in the Ader's lexicon – failing. Failing and falling apply evenly and equally to all the objects of the world, to their representation, to their communication from speaker a to listener b, to the truth of their being, insofar as we can understand it. Falling and failing reduce and equalize. Representation, communication, truth, being, understanding: all are subject to failure, to falling, collapsing beneath their own weight, in the inexorable grips of gravity. The effects of this condition are inescapable. As such, they are inseparable from experience.

### **Bas Jan Ader Works Referenced**

*Light Vulnerable Objects Threatened by Eight Cement Bricks* (1970)

*I'm too sad to tell you* (1970) Photo of Ader crying.

*Fall 1 (Los Angeles)* (1970): Fall from roof of Los Angeles house.

*Fall 2 (Amsterdam)* (1970): Ride bicycle into Amsterdam canal.

*Broken Fall (Geometric)* (1971): Fall to his right onto sawhorse.

*Broken Fall (Organic)* (1971): Fall from tree branch into shallow stream.

*Nightfall* (1971): Drop paving stone onto light bulb in garage. Drop paving stone onto second light bulb. Darkness.

### **Works Cited**

Crow, Thomas. "Bas Jan Ader: A Bridge Too Far". *Bas Jan Ader* (catalogue). Brad Spence (ed.) Irvine: The Art Gallery, University of California, Irvine, 1999.

Godfrey, Tony. *Conceptual Art*. London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1998.

Tumlir, Jan. "Bas Jan Ader: Artist and Time Traveler". *Bas Jan Ader* (catalogue). Brad Spence (ed.) Irvine: The Art Gallery, University of California, Irvine, 1999.