

Please don't leave me (Bas Jan Ader)
Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam
Published in *Camera Austria*, December 2006,
n° 96, p. 75-76

(translated from French by John Doherty)



BAS JAN ADER. *Please don't leave me*, 1969. Gelatine silver print, 28 cm x 53.5 cm.

as a whole, and this is not the least of his merits. To begin with, the cycle comprises a series of black and white photographs taken by Mary Sue Andersen in 1973, showing Ader wandering by night through Los Angeles. Words have been written on the images in white ink – the lyrics of a song by The Coasters (a well-known 1950s blues group), which confer a certain ambivalence on these images of distraction.

Then there is a postcard that invites the public to an exhibition of Ader's work at the Copley Gallery in Los Angeles. The front of the card shows the port side of a boat in a storm; someone is leaning over the rails, unrecognisable in the spray.

And finally there is the Copley exhibition itself, which opened in April 1975, with the photographs of Ader's nocturnal peregrinations in the City of the Angels. To mark the start of the exhibition, a choir formed by nine of the artist's students with a piano accompaniment performed two sea songs (as pretty as they were trivial): 'What are the wind and waves saying?', and 'Goodbye, my love, goodbye'. Eighty slides of the choir were incorporated into the exhibition, along with an audio recording. This event was supposed to be followed by a second exhibition, at the museum of Groningen in Holland. Ader's intention was to cross the Atlantic in a four-metre sailing boat (the smallest vessel ever to have attempted a journey of that distance). During the crossing – which was of the dual nature of a sporting exploit and an artistic test – he proposed to take a set of photographs that would complete his oeuvre, as it would complete the voyage itself.

On 9 July 1975 Ader left Cape Cod, Massachusetts, for a journey that was to last between eight and ten weeks. But the days passed, and there was no sign of him. An intensive search proved fruitless, and the exhibition in Groningen was called off. On 18 April 1976, some Spanish fisherman found Ader's boat off the south-west coast of Ireland. Did he drown in a storm that broke the mast of his frail craft? This is the most likely hypothesis, though the enigma has not been wholly dissipated, given the nature of his creative work.

It is probable that there was indeed an accident, but a certain suspicion remains as to the possibility of a suicide. It has to be admitted, and not without a certain degree of astonishment, that this possibility (or rather, the very idea of a disappearance, with the doubt it entails as to the fatality of the outcome) is consistent with the logic of Ader's career, and has endowed it with an extra dimension, notwithstanding the tragic nature of its conclusion.

The Rotterdam exhibition, and Verwoert's book, pay tribute to an artist who deserves greater recognition, and elucidate the issues that were central to his work.

(Translation from French: John Doherty)



BAS JAN ADER. *PLEASE DON'T LEAVE ME*. Ed. by Rein Wolfs. With texts by Erik Beemker, Tacita Dean, Elbrig de Groot, Doede Hardeman and Jörg Heiser (Engl.). Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam 2006. 176 pages, 23 cm x 27 cm, numerous b/w and colour illustrations. € 38.50 ISBN 90-6918-217-3

JAN VERWOERT: *BAS JAN ADER. IN SEARCH OF THE MIRACULOUS*. Afterall Books (One Work Series), London 2006. 53 pages, 15 cm x 21 cm, 16 colour illustrations. \$ 16, – (paper) \$ 30, – (cloth) ISBN 1-84638-902-2

CONCEPTUALISED PERFORMATIVE SPACE

STEPHEN WILLATS, GILLIAN WEARING

Victoria Miro, London, 2.9. – 30.9.2006
Maureen Paley, London, 10.10. – 19.11.2006

by Niels Henriksen

On Saturday 11th of June 2005 at 11 a.m. a group of four people hit the sidewalk of the shopping parade at Rayners Lane in outer West London. They divided the length of the shopping parade into eight zones, which they then meticulously documented with an old Super 8 camera, an old 35 millimetre Olympus snapshot camera, pen and paper, and a tape recorder. The film and sound recordings, photographs and written descriptions produced at Rayners Lane constitutes 'From My Mind to Your Mind' (2005), the title-work of Stephen Willats' exhibition at Victoria Miro Gallery this September. An exhibition comprising twelve new works made between 2002 and 2006. In the exhibition, the work produced at Rayners Lane was presented as a series of schematic arrangements of texts and photographs divided by broad black lines. As such they resembled a sort of board game, or a playing field for an unfamiliar game of sport. The order of the material reflected the geography of Rayners Lane and the different outputs of the four documentarists. This allowed the viewer to explore the event along different paths and from different points of view. In this very open ended form of representation, the collaborative act of documenting almost became a sort of performance, and this performative aspect of the initial event was mirrored in the way the work presented itself in the gallery. In clearly formulated questions the audience was asked to use the fragmented documentary image of Rayners Lane to create a fictional account of a chance meeting. This participation was assisted by a xeroxed folder repeating the questions, each above an empty box, where one could fill in one's answers. The folder could then be taken home as a memory of one's engagement with the project.

With an outset in the early British Conceptual Art movement surrounding the Drian Gallery and the New Vision Centre Gallery in London, Willats' practice nevertheless seems idiosyncratic. Even though his practice has obvious resemblances with other conceptual artists', his works are always less clear-cut, more complex. Discussing Stephen Willats, people often tend to marvel over how recognisable his works are, although being recognisable is not that unusual a quality in art. Perhaps the remarkable is that Willats' works are recognisable although they are so economical with their aesthetic appearance and always seem so unpretentious in the way they translate the rather advanced concerns that they stem from.

Quoting structuralist and constructivist philosophy and theories of cybernetic dynamics as his seminal influences, Willats has always taken a critical position to theory, but in a very ideological way. This standpoint seems most outspoken in the centre piece of the exhibition, 'New Visions, Barbican Dialogues' (2006). A work that presents the result of a workshop taking place at the modern utopia of the Barbican residential scheme in central London built in the early 1970s. The workshop engaged the theoretical positions of Ludwig Wittgenstein,

Jean-Paul Sartre and Marshall McLuhan in its examination of the environment. Although this sounds rather like a cultural studies essay, and perhaps not the most exhilarating one, it worked quite differently. In an installation of photographic panels, sound recordings and video projections, the work presented a fragmented documentation of three stand-ins giving the on-location talks that they think the respective philosophers and theorists might have given; had they been there. This effectively moved the philosophical standpoints from their usual application in a hermetic environment to being performed in a complex reality. Whereas the three stand-ins were proficient in the theoretical bodies they represented, far from everyone else in the group were, and neither was the audience expected to be. Rather than arguing one case or another the work described various spaces between theory and practical perception. Spaces that were filled with misunderstandings, which were both poignant, funny and even moving.

The varying constitutions of social spaces between artist, workshop and audience in Willats' work seem to take notions of collaboration and participation beyond the point of rhetoric. 'Doing it rather than saying it' has earned Willats comparisons with artists such as Santiago Sierra and Artur Zmijewski. The difference (particularly in comparison with Sierra and to a lesser degree with Zmijewski, I think) is that Willats is able to appropriate these strategies outside the realm of force and violence, in explorations of

for instance, the nature of understanding and agreement.

One could also categorise Gillian Wearing in the broader realm of artistic strategies taking their key from a conceptualised performative space; particularly with her latest show at Maureen Paley. The main new work of the exhibition, 'Family History' (2006), engages the context of the 1974 reality-TV-show, 'The Family', through the perceptions of three different persons, connected to the TV-show in different ways. 'The Family' was a first of its kind in broadcasting a fly-on-the-wall documentary following the life of a working-class family in Reading outside London. In Wearing's project the TV-show simultaneously plays the role of media-phenomenon and a personal childhood memory. When the show first screened, Wearing was ten years old and deeply fascinated by the loud teenage-daughter of 'The Family', Heather. In 'Family History' a video shows a ten-year-old girl watching and commenting 'The Family' in a family living room anno mid-seventies. Then the camera pans out, revealing that the living room is a stage-set, and that next to it is another stage-set resembling that of a talk-show, complete with two figures chatting away in the comfy sofas.

The talk-show scenario, which is set up by Wearing, is screened in its full length in the adjoining room, and features Trisha Goddard, a well-known talk-show-hostess of British daytime TV, interviewing Heather Wilkins, the grown up teenage-daughter of 'The Family'. Between

the girl-actress' misinterpretations, the psychologising questions of Trisha Goddard and the soft-spoken media-professionalism of Heather Wilkins, a critique blends with an unnerve sense of nostalgia. Originally produced for an Ikon off-site project the work toured from Reading to Birmingham this summer. In both locations it was installed in newly converted loft-style apartments; in Reading, one that was overlooking the former home of the Wilkins family. While the work thematises the change in popular concepts of the private, in the end Wearing's Brechtian manoeuvres seem more slick than sincere (not unlike Trisha Goddard). It is perhaps in the way that its critical potential is corrupted by the rather uncanny recuperative ambition of Wearing herself, that the work comes through.

BÜCHER BOOKS

CODEX BEROLINENSIS

JOHN GOSSAGE:
BERLIN IN THE TIME OF THE WALL

Loosestrife Editions, Bethesda 2004

von Carolin Förster

April 1982. Auf Einladung von Michael Schmidt und der Werkstatt für Photographie an der Volkshochschule Kreuzberg besucht John Gossage zum ersten Mal Berlin, um seine Arbeiten auszustellen und einen Workshop abzuhalten. Mit dem Mietwagen auf dem Weg nach Kreuzberg landet er versehentlich an der Berliner Mauer. Diese erste Begegnung wird richtungsweisend für seine Arbeit im nächsten Jahrzehnt. Die Mauer in ihrer Absurdität, Bedrohlichkeit und in ihrer faktischen Erscheinung wird zum Schlüsselthema für den Fotografen, hierher kehrt er bis 1993 regelmäßig zurück und belichtet einige zehntausend Negative. Hier erprobt er neue Ausdrucksweisen. Gut zwei Jahrzehnte später legt Gossage ein monumentales Fotobuch vor, das die Summe seiner Auseinandersetzung mit der Berliner Mauer und der Geschichte der Stadt – und in gewissem Sinn auch die Summe seines gesamten fotografischen Werks – bildet.

Berlin in the Time of the Wall versammelt 464 Schwarzweißfotografien in insgesamt acht Abteilungen zu einem düsteren Panorama. »The Berlin you see here is of another time, a time when the Wall defined the city, its people, their thoughts and mine. Everyone will tell you a different story. It's all just memory now, a history book, so Gossage. Sein Anliegen ist es, Geschichte – persönliche Annäherung wie Zeitschicht – in einer verdichteten Form sichtbar zu machen.

Ein ausführlicher Vorspann und sieben Kapitel erfassen und umkreisen ihr Sujet annähernd chronologisch. Den faktischen Schlusspunkt bildet eine »Coda«: Zahlen zur Mauer, eine Notiz zur Maueröffnung am 9. November 1989 und zur Wiedervereinigung am 3. Oktober 1990, ein Zitat von John Berger als kultursoziologische Definition des Phänomens. Der Titel, so sehr an seinem historischen Thema orientiert, führt eigentlich in die Irre. Denn es ist hauptsächlich die Mauer, die Gossage in den Blick nimmt, die Stadt Berlin erscheint eher in schlagartigen Beobachtungen, kurzen Begegnungen mit Menschen, in Interieurs. Entlang der Mauer und zu ihr hin bewegt sich Gossage, erkundet im Gehen seine Sujets bis auf kürzeste Distanz oder richtet den Blick so weit wie möglich in die Ferne. An bestimmte Orte kehrt der Fotograf immer wieder zurück.

Aber weniger der konkreten Topografie oder gar dokumentarischen Systematik folgt Gossage, sondern er fixiert prägnante Bilder und Stimmungen zwischen Bedrohung, Ödnis und trügerischer, stets gebrochener Schönheit. Sie fügen sich zu einem dynamischen Gesamtbild, das seine bisherigen fotografischen Ansätze vereint – von der sachlichen Auffassung über die Variationen von Unschärfen und Ausschnitten, Fülle



STEPHEN WILLATS. *From My Mind To Your Mind*, 2005. Eight panel work with DVD video films, audio tapes and printed guide. Photographic prints, laser prints, photographic dye, acrylic paint, ink on card. Each panel 144.7 cm x 38 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Victoria Miro Gallery, London.

What is the relationship between a work of art and the period of its production? In what way does a work relate (or fail to relate) to those who perceive it, between different periods? Is the passage of time a reliable basis for assessing artistic quality? How is it that the more recent proposals of Dennis Oppenheim or Robert Morris can sometimes look quite unconvincing, whereas the work they produced during the 1960s and 1970s remains so incisive?

Late 2006 sees the Boijmans Van Beuningen museum in Rotterdam putting on a retrospective of works by the Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader (1942-1975), who was active for just a few years, but who now gives the impression of having represented a stunning synthesis of what art was all about at the time. His approach was indissociable from the preoccupations of a certain bygone age, but it also bears a singular relationship to the interrogations of the present day.

An entire floor of the museum, plunged in a pale penumbra, is devoted to the event. A number of films are projected onto the walls, with others being shown on monitors. Elsewhere, there are groups of photographs. Three adjoining partitions form an alcove in which biographical documents are displayed; but this is the only closed-in section of a museographic configuration that is characterised, in visual terms, by its openness.

The presentation is spare, admittedly, but the fact that only a small number of works can be taken in at

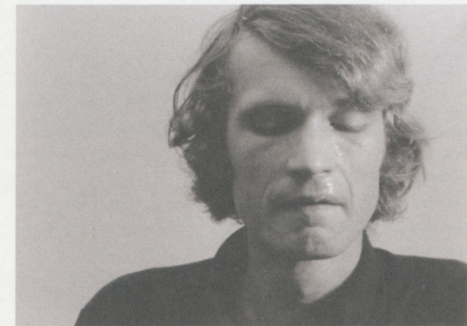
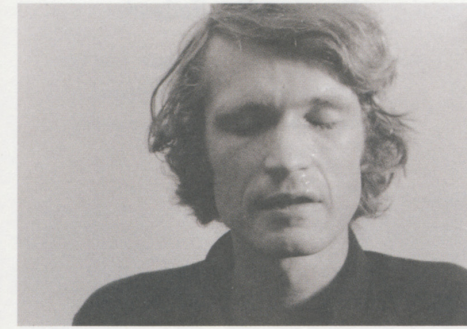


a glance does not in any sense lead to a feeling of being short-changed. Besides which, one of Ader's most striking films can be seen the entrance to the exhibition, and the depth of the work immediately becomes clear. The visitor's steps are measured; measured out. From beginning to end, no instant is insignificant.

I'm too sad to tell you (1970-1971) is a short film (of which three variants were produced) consisting of a single fixed shot lasting several minutes. It is the artist himself who appears on the screen, constantly shaken by sobs. At times he tries to fight back his tears, and wipes his eyes with his hand; then sadness overcomes him once more.

The ostensive character of the film, and its title, cast derision on this impression of affliction (especially in relation to a type of conceptual art that thought of itself as being more reserved, with regard to emotion, then the declining neo-Expressionist movement); but the spectator cannot avoid feeling a sort of compassion for the subject, with the result that he rapidly finds himself unable to form a definite opinion about the presentation. He wonders, naively, if the person is really in pain, or if, on the contrary, he is mocking his audience, and, by the same token, the solemn theme of suffering?

Farewell to faraway friends (1971) is a colour photograph taken, during a trip to Sweden, by Ader's partner Mary Sue Andersen. Ader himself can be seen



at the centre of the image, standing beside a fjord, watching the sun disappearing over the horizon. The same kind of indecision comes through here, in that we do not know what to think about the nostalgia and romanticism of the scene, which is both ironic and sincere. Following the theme of lamentation, what is being dwelt on in this case is the idea of contemplation, that of landscape – and, still more, the pain of love and solitude.

The intelligence and power of these two works lie in Ader's avoidance of the hasty conclusions that usually result from comparisons being drawn between the life and the work of a creative artist, or from attempts to explain the grimness of a painting or a sculpture by the anguished existence of the person who produced it.

Many artists have transcribed, and continue to transcribe, hope and despair in a literal way, due to the force of things – their pathos, or their boldness – but Ader made something out of his torment, finding the resources he needed to manipulate it. Nonetheless, the project did not come into being without difficulties and weaknesses; and the cost of his initiative soon proved exorbitant...

In search of the miraculous (1973-1975), Ader's last cycle of works, might be taken as dealing with the frenetic quest that every artist is supposed to undertake. It is also the title of an excellent book by the critic Jan Verwoert, recently published by the review



Afterall.

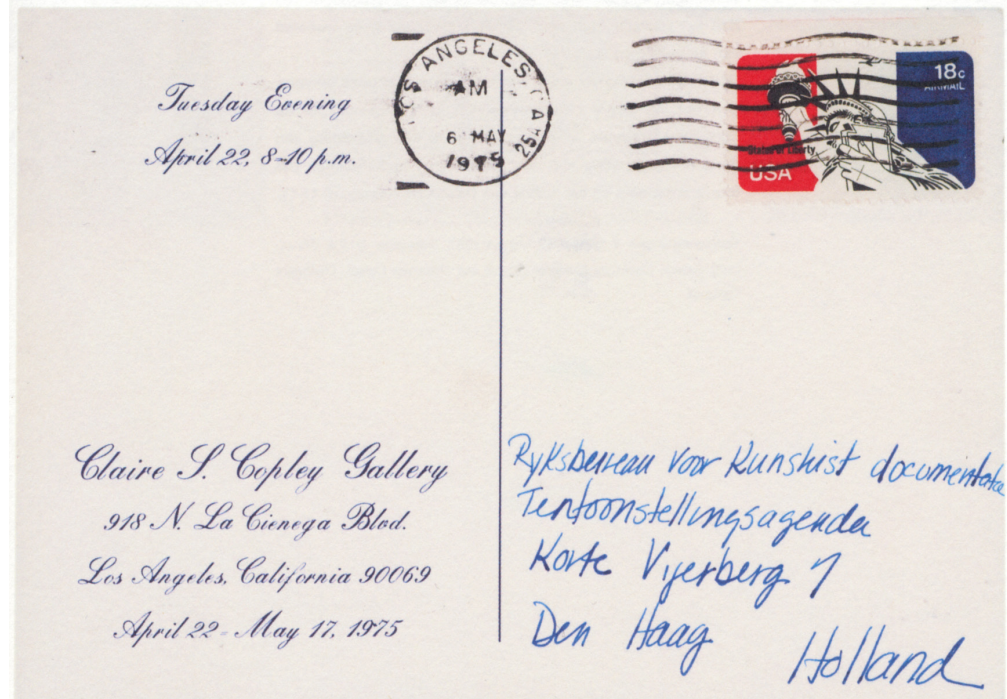
The conceptual and temporal boundaries of the cycle are not easy to define, as it was put together progressively. Verwoert is concerned with circumscribing it as a whole, and this is not the least of his merits.

To begin with, the cycle comprises a series of black and white photographs taken by Mary Sue Andersen in 1973, showing Ader wandering by night through Los Angeles. Words have been written on the images in white ink – the syrupy lyrics of a song by The Coasters (a well-known 1950s blues group), which confer a certain ambivalence on these images of distraction.

Then there is a postcard that invites the public to an exhibition of Ader's work at the Copley Gallery in Los Angeles. The front of the card shows the port side of a boat in a storm; someone is leaning over the rails, unrecognisable in the spray.

And finally there is the Copley exhibition itself, which opened in April 1975, with the photographs of Ader's nocturnal peregrinations in the City of the Angels. To mark the start of the exhibition, a choir formed by nine of the artist's students with a piano accompaniment performed two sea songs (as pretty as they were trivial): What are the wind and waves saying?, and Goodbye, my love, goodbye. Eighty slides of the choir were incorporated into the exhibition, along with an audio recording.

This event was supposed to be followed by a second exhibition, at the museum of Groningen in Holland.



Ader's intention was to cross the Atlantic in a four-metre sailing boat (the smallest vessel ever to have attempted a journey of that distance). During the crossing – which was of the dual nature of a sporting exploit and an artistic test – he proposed to take a set of photographs that would complete his oeuvre, as it would complete the voyage itself.

On 9 July 1975 Ader left Cape Cod, Massachusetts, for a journey that was to last between eight and ten weeks. But the days passed, and there was no sign of him. An intensive search proved fruitless, and the exhibition in Groningen was called off.

On 18 April 1976, some Spanish fisherman found Ader's boat off the south-west coast of Ireland. Did he drown in a storm that broke the mast of his frail craft? This is the most likely hypothesis, though the enigma has not been wholly dissipated, given the nature of his creative work. It is probable that there was indeed an accident, but a certain suspicion remains as to the possibility of a suicide. It has to be admitted, and not without a certain degree of astonishment, that this possibility (or rather, the very idea of a disappearance, with the doubt it entails as to the fatality of the outcome) is consistent with the logic of Ader's career, and has endowed it with an extra dimension, notwithstanding the tragic nature of its conclusion. The Rotterdam exhibition, and Verwoert's book, pay tribute to an artist who deserves greater recognition, and elucidate the issues that were central to his work.

