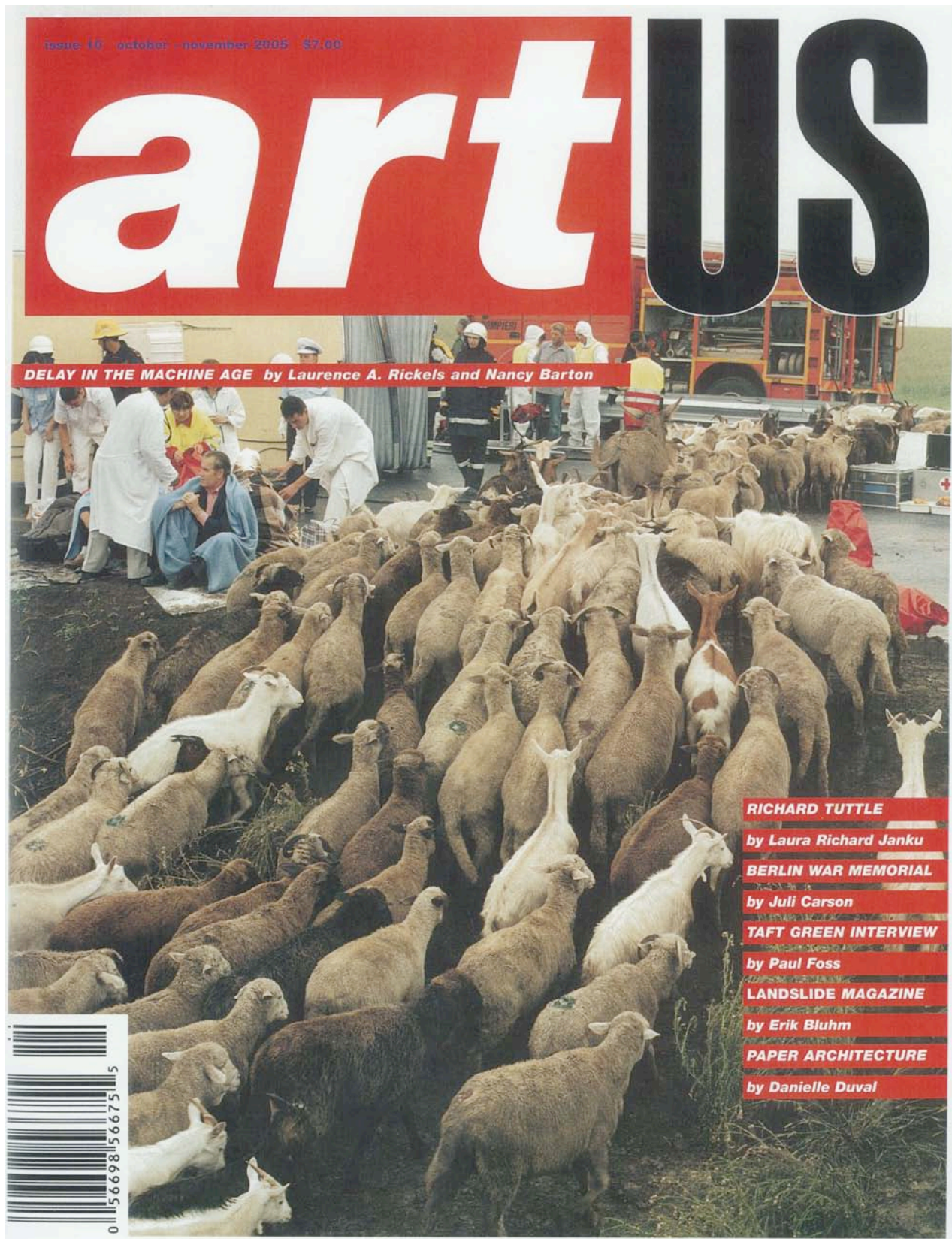


Erik Bluhm, "Minimalism's Rubble: On William Leavitt's and Bas Jan Ader's Landslide (1969-70)," *artUS* (Oct - Nov 2005), p. 14-17.



POSTMORTEM

Minimalism's Rubble:

On William Leavitt's and Bas Jan Ader's *Landslide* (1969-70)

ERIK BLUHM

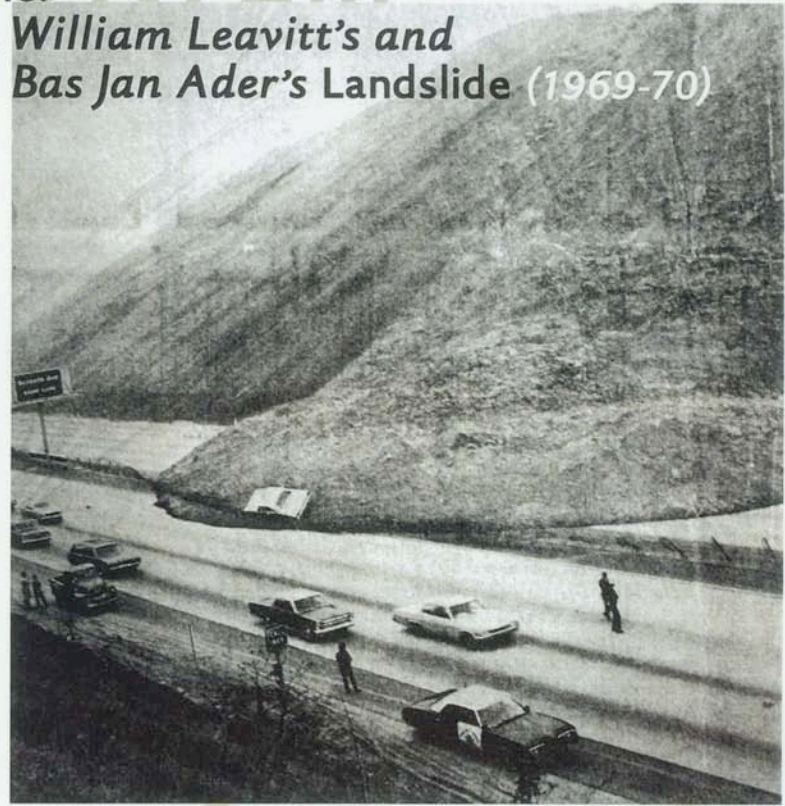
AAAARRGH!



In February of 1969 a slim, mimeographed magazine called *Landslide* surfaced in the Los Angeles art world. The hand-stapled editions consisted of typed interviews with heretofore-unknown artists, instructions for staging your own "happenings," and announcements for upcoming performances. There was no staff listed; the editors were anonymous. The issues were mailed out to a hand-picked "subscription list" about 40-strong, which included artists like Allen Ruppersberg and influential types like New York curator Henry Geldzahler. No one knew how he or she got on the list.

This "Quarterly Journal of Underground Art" spotlighted emerging and, at the time, unheard-of artists—Dove Feeler, a proto-Polke dot artist; John Grover, a lumber-obsessed minimalist; and a young sculptor ("under exclusive contract to *Landslide*") by the name of Brian Shitart. There was analization by a critic named Fawn Mopleans. These made-up names and nonexistent characters, like everything in *Landslide*, were invented. "The intent was purely satirical," recalls its instigator, William Leavitt, who had recently graduated from Claremont College. "It was a reaction to the pretentious art writing of the time."

By the mid-1960s *Artforum* had eclipsed the other leading periodicals like *Art News* and *American Artist* by becom-



ing the forum for contemporary (and therefore "relevant") art. Via its pages, minimalist and conceptualist thought was almost instantly adopted into the art world mainstream as the heir presumptive to the fading suns of Abstract Expressionism and Pop art. Put off by the insular vocabulary of this emergent criticism, Leavitt, then working an administrative job at Chouinard Art Institute, sought to undermine its authoritative voice through parody. "I had the Gestetner machine at my disposal," he remembers. "And in a 40-hour-a-week office job there's a lot of slack time."

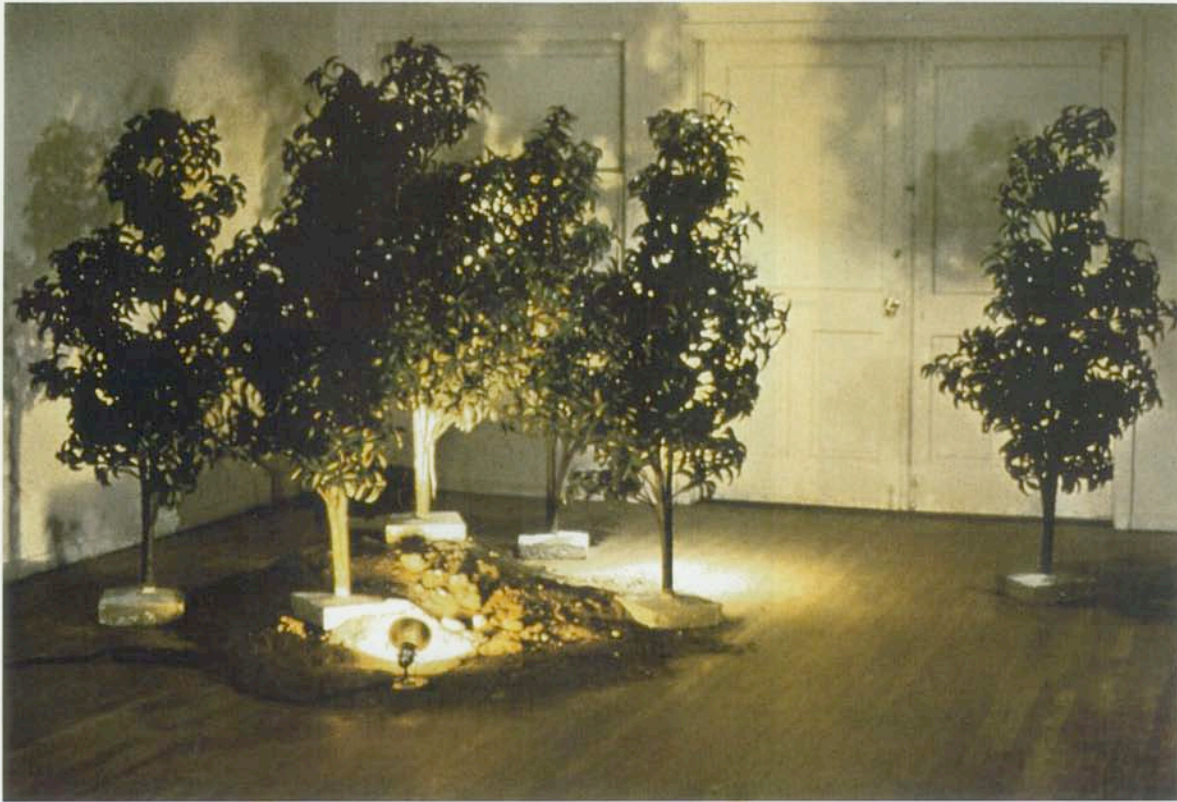
Leavitt soon enlisted Dutch-expatriate Bas Jan Ader as a partner in *Landslide*'s production. "When Bas Jan caught on to who was doing it, he wanted in," says Leavitt of his friend, with whom he had studied sculpture at Claremont. Ader's quest for "art free from allusion" made him the ideal candidate for such a

gambol.¹ Other local artists were also aware of the publication—Jack Goldstein and Ruppersberg knew Leavitt from Chouinard where the two worked on the maintenance crew—and their extended circle constituted *Landslide*'s main reading audience.

"*American Artist* had a section where an artist would paint a painting and there would be a picture spread showing the steps," says Leavitt. "And then Bruce Conner did a parody of that in *Artforum*, which was called 'Bruce Conner Makes a Sandwich.' So there was that other thing [a recognition of the obsolescence of established language] that was already happening." Leavitt's initial strategy with *Landslide* was thus to take the most "out" position—to take the *American Artist* approach—and apply it in the context of conceptual or minimal art.

"In the late 1960s, [minimalism] was everywhere," explains Leavitt. "The Dwan

(THIS PAGE) BONUS LANDSLIDE PRINT (NON-MEMBER MAILING), 1969. (TINTED INSET) "AAAARRGH!" COVER OF LANDSLIDE #2, (OPPOSITE TOP LEFT) WILLIAM LEAVITT, UNTITLED, 1970, INSTALLATION WITH LIVE SOUND OF WATER CIRCULATING IN WOODEN BOX, DIM. VAR. COURTESY MARGO LEAVIN GALLERY, LOS ANGELES. (BOTTOM) IMAGE OF JOHN GROVER WITH REDWOOD BEAM SCULPTURAL INSTALLATION (FROM LANDSLIDE #4, 1969.)



Gallery, Robert Morris, Keith Sonnier. It was very slick and cool." Leavitt and the artists he fraternized with, specifically Ger van Elk, Bas Jan Ader, and Ruppertsberg, were operating under premises and guidelines that were far less definable, thus resisting the tidiness of the ever-reductive mainstream. "It was really just a matter of temperament," Leavitt admits. "I wasn't interested in that [discipline]. I think I got through that in graduate school."

Though wholly fictitious, *Landslide* was more than a simple put-on. "I knew

Bob Morris, Don Judd, Sol LeWitt pretty well back in New York," explained John Grover in *Landslide* #IV. "But I never really gave much thought to their influences." The fictional interview with a mustachioed carpenter-turned-sculptor made light of the current attenuative trends, yet at the same time Leavitt's invented Q&A touched on issues relevant both to his own work and that of the stylistic trajectory at large.

"I was always struck by the beauty of the mass-produced home and the myriad structures possible with very simple materials," said Grover, posing in suede and denim in front of a series of L-shaped beams in his studio. "It goes to the core of our culture. This system of putting things together serially." Grover's insight (and thus Leavitt's) was at once comedic and poignant, in a way identifying with the then-current strategies of Dan Flavin and Judd, while revealing their seeming

absurdity in the canon of art thus far.

Issue #II, titled "Aaaarrgh!", featured a step-by-step recipe for people to "share in the glee" of their very own "At Home Happening."² *Landslide*'s list of necessary items included two "9 x 12 sheets [of] polyethylene,"¹ "1 article by John Coplans or Robert Smithson from *Artforum*," and "1 Frisbee." Participants were encouraged to perform such acts as smearing the plastic sheeting with margarine, removing one shoe and driving around the block, or "chant[ing] softly any sound that comes to mind." Issue #VI was a 15-cent McDonald's hamburger mailed out in a plain cardboard box (imagine Geldzahler's reaction!). Issue #III was five packing peanuts in an envelope stamped, "Expandable Sculpture."

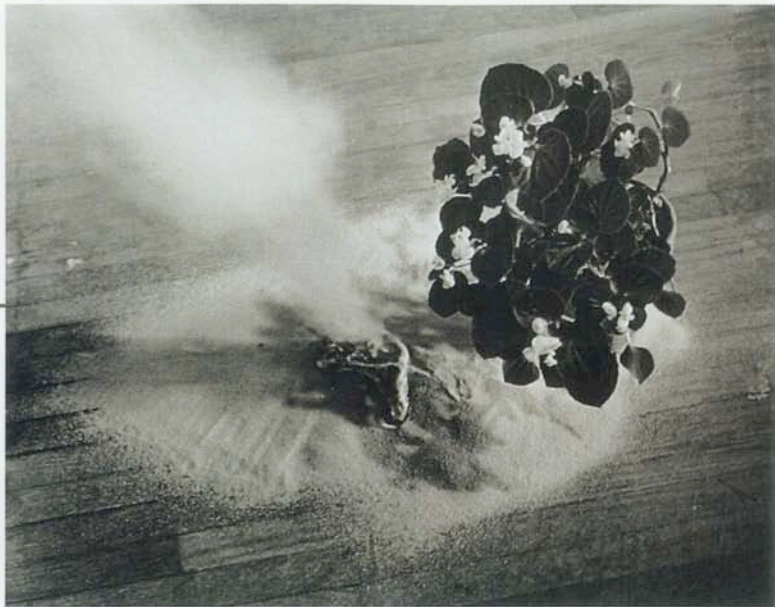
While the lineage of specious artist-produced publications can be traced from early-twentieth-century Dada and Surrealist publications to Beat-era





imprints like Ed Sander's *Fuck You—A Journal of the Arts*, Leavitt denies any direct inspiration from that tradition. "I was aware of what [Fluxists] Alison Knowles and Dick Higgins were doing with Something Else Press," he admits. More influential, he says, was the literature of do-it-yourself counterculture. "The *Whole Earth Catalogue* was around at the time promoting the alternative earth movement and all things to do with Hippiedom." With its plans to build geodesic structures, organic gardening tips, and macrobiotic diets, *Whole Earth* was less a shopping forum than a coded lifestyle guide. It was informative, new and, more importantly, presented in an amusing and entertaining fashion, in the emerging language of its audience.

Landslide followed a similar strategy. Not only did it provide a somewhat public voice—albeit an anonymous one—for Leavitt (and in turn Ader), but it functioned as a forum for dialogue on issues both actual and invented, concrete and theoretical. It was this sort of real/fake engagement that Leavitt was exploring in his own installations. In pieces like *California Patio* (1972) Leavitt toyed with authenticity, "presenting fragments of outdoor and indoor locations" in a



three-dimensional form. "The constructions appear to be un-manipulated settings made from the actual materials used in the 'real' original," wrote Helene Winer then in *Art in America*. "His intention is to relate a story or set a scene precisely without actually presenting all the particulars." Just as the invented sculptor John Grover takes form through staged photographs, name-dropping and pseudo-philosophical quotes, Leavitt's environments exist as convincing scenarios with very little holding them up. "Unlike stage sets or illustrations," continued Winer, "each piece is in itself a fiction based on certain romantic attitudes to real places, social strata, styles and taste."

By 1970 *Landslide* had diverged from its intended satirical path and was instead becoming a sort of test vehicle for its creators in their own practices. "Initially it was a way of participating without citing one's name to it and to see what would happen," recalls Leavitt. "But the last issue was the one that kind of pushed us away from that." *Landslide* #VII featured a selection of "random selection" photographs in which Leavitt arbitrarily chose several objects, arranged them on a wooden floor, and photographed them. A shovel and a portable radio flanked a

sleeping dog. In another, a tree and a bag of packing material were ringed by scattered pieces of paper. It was work that was all but indistinguishable from what Leavitt was producing for his own shows. "We thought, this is getting too close to what we're really doing. We were cannibalizing our own work." Hence *Landslide*'s demise stemmed from its creators incorporating their own made-up ideas into their "legitimate" endeavors. Its mythology became fact.

Interestingly, the events promoted by *Landslide* were "real," although their perpetrators remained in the shadows. A *Hillside Work* (1969) at Immaculate Heart College in Los Feliz consisted of hundreds of lit traffic flares scattered down a hillside, creating a static "poured" form that echoed (and perhaps spoofed) Smithsonian's synchronous experiments with asphalt and glue. "It looked more like a Christmas tree," admits Leavitt, who placed a microphone at the pour's apex to capture the hissing of the flares.

Piece G (1970) at Mt. San Antonio College in Walnut, CA featured a pen full of sheep, an artificial waterfall, and a women's choir. The artists' disparate contributions, and in turn their divergent approaches, are quite evident upon view-

(TOP LEFT) PHOTO OF BILL AND AL AT "AL'S GRAND HOTEL" IN 1971. (RIGHT) WILLIAM LEAVITT, RANDOM SELECTION: SAND, SMOKE, MEAT, PLANT, 1969, UNIQUE B&W PHOTOGRAPH, 15.5 x 19.5 IN. COURTESY MARGO LEAVIN GALLERY, LOS ANGELES.

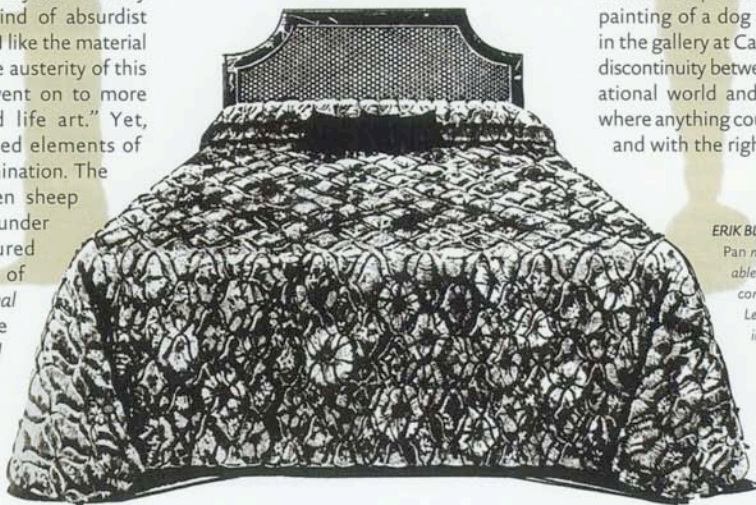


ing the 16mm film that documented the nighttime event. Ader was responsible for the choir, an element he would revisit for his *In Search of the Miraculous* show at Claire Copley Gallery in 1975. Leavitt contributed the waterfall, which functioned less as a displaced nature element than as a dramatic device simulating exoticness and therefore suggesting storyline, much as his plant and sound "installation theater" pieces at Eugenia Butler Gallery did the same year. "The way I went was toward a kind of absurdist theater," argues Leavitt. "I like the material of lights and sets and the austerity of this sort of thing. Bas Jan went on to more of a kind of reasoned life art." Yet, the performance retained elements of *Landslide's* satirical examination. The presence of a half-dozen sheep milling about in a pen under bright spotlights augured the pastoral direction of Newton Harrison's *Survival Series* (1970-73), Bonnie Sherk's *Sitting Still* (1970) and *Public Lunch* (1971), or even Joseph Beuys's own pseudo-ecological installations.

Though *Landslide* ceased to exist as an entity in 1970 after seven issues, Leavitt and Ader continued their collaboration, albeit more casually, up until Ader's untimely passing in 1975. Leavitt was the cameraman for Ader's 1970 film *Fall I*, and the two participated in group shows together at Cal Arts and at the Pomona College Gallery in 1972. They had concurrent shows in Nova Scotia in 1973, and were represented in a film program

in Düsseldorf (along with Ruppertsberg and Goldstein) that same year.

When questioned as to why a magazine, Leavitt reiterates that the main motive was opportunity, and what could be done out of a ten-foot-square office. "I wasn't really interested in painting at that time. I was more interested in sculpture and in this juncture, like the painting of the dog on the easel," says Leavitt, referring to his *Painted Image* (1972) in which he placed a rather pedestrian painting of a dog on a large display easel in the gallery at Cal Arts. "I like that kind of discontinuity between the square representational world and this real modern one where anything could be put in this context and with the right rationale it was art."



ERIK BLUHM was the editor of *Great God Pan* magazine, which is currently viewable at greatgodpan.com. The author conducted interviews with William Leavitt in Silverlake, May 2003, and in Los Feliz, July 2005.

NOTES: 1. Cited in Paul Andriess, *Bas Jan Ader: An Artist in Search of the Miraculous*, catalogue (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1988). 2. From liner notes to *Alan Watts's This Is IT* (MEA Records, Sausalito, 1962).

(TOP LEFT) WILLIAM LEAVITT & BAS JAN ADER, *A Hillside Piece*, 1969, 16mm film still. (RIGHT) BAS JAN ADER, *Broken Fall (Organic)*, 1971, film still detail. (BOTTOM) PRINT OF BRIAN SHIRTART PIECE FROM *LANDSLIDE* #1.