

Tallman, Susan. "Searchin' Every Which a-Way." *Art in America* (October 2009), p. 139-145.



SEARCHIN' EVERY WHICH A-WAY

A prime destination for artists in the '60s and '70s, Amsterdam was especially appealing to Conceptualists, as seen in a focused show at New York's MoMA.

BY SUSAN TALLMAN

IT IS A FAMOUS STORY in the annals of Conceptual art. In July 1975 the Dutch filmmaker, photographer and performance artist Bas Jan Ader set sail from Cape Cod for England in a 12½-foot sloop called *Ocean Wave*. The voyage was the second segment of what was to have been Ader's magnum opus, *In Search of the Miraculous*. The first part had taken place in Los Angeles some months earlier: an exhibition with a slideshow and recording of singers performing sea chanteys (they had appeared live at the opening), and a series of 18 black-and-white photographs showing the artist wandering the streets of L.A. after dark, from the city center to the ocean shore. Across the bottom of the photographs, the artist had handwritten in white ink the lyrics to the 1957 hit "Searchin'" (written by Leiber & Stoller for The Coasters). The third part of *In Search of the Miraculous* was to be presented in Groningen, where Ader had grown up. This time a Dutch choir would sing chanteys, and documentation from the voyage would be accompanied by a second set of photographs, to be shot in Amsterdam.

Like many artworks of the time, *In Search of the Miraculous* addressed ideas of displacement, wringing its content from the spaces between things: between Holland and America, seeker and object of desire, departure and landfill. But the coolly conceptual aspects of the piece were offset by the absurd, vaulting ambition of the title (taken from the esoteric thinker P.D. Uspensky!); the corny, chronic longing of the song lyrics; and

Left, Allen Ruppersberg: *Where's Al?* (detail), 1972, 160 chromogenic prints with 110 typewritten index cards, dimensions variable. Courtesy Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles.

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the very real dangers of crossing an ocean in a tiny boat. Had Ader succeeded, his would have been one of the smallest crafts on record to cross the North Atlantic. (There were two documented Atlantic crossings in smaller boats prior to 1975, though both used different routes than Ader.) But he didn't make it. The empty *Ocean Wave* was found half-submerged 150 miles off the coast of Ireland, nine months after leaving Chatham.

In the years that followed, Ader's reputation quickly narrowed to the mad performance of his disappearance and (presumed) death.² His aspirations seemed to have little to do with the considered, formally concise and emotionally constrained practices of Conceptual art. Sol LeWitt's famous statement was taken as definitive: "When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art" (*Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*, 1967). By this standard, work like Ader's was outside the pale; perfunctory execution and single-handed sailing have nothing to say to each other.

of this show is drawn.) Van Beijeren and van Ravesteijn conceived Art & Project not as a shop for flogging paintings, but as a vehicle for investigating the social function and utility of art. In the first issue of the publication *Bulletin* that Art & Project produced between 1968 and 1989, they explained:

art & project plans to bring you together with the ideas of artists, architects and technicians to discover an intelligent form for your living and working space. art & project invites you to participate in its exhibitions which will explore ways in which art, architecture and technology can combine with your own ideas.³

Bulletin embodied Art & Project's peculiar combination of chaotic curiosity and archival tidiness. Each of the 156 numbers conformed to the same layout: the lowercase title was printed on a single sheet, which could be folded once to produce a standard-size folio, and easily posted or filed. (They were issued in editions of 800; 400 were mailed and 400 given away at the gallery or by request.) The contents, however, varied widely: some shed light on exhibitions in the gallery, others functioned as artworks in their own right. The form served, as Cherix explains, as "an alternative or supplementary site for artists to work from,"⁴ a site that, unlike a gallery, was both mobile and multiple. Physically slight and grandly ambitious, *Bulletin* embodies a particular ethos more distinctly than sculptures and installations can, and Cherix, who has curated prior exhibitions of the publication in Europe, has done a commendable job of displaying a sizeable group of issues on the walls of the second-floor print galleries.

Like the artists, *Bulletins* traveled: *Bulletin* 56 was posted from Venice by Jan Dibbets. It opens to reveal a pair of photographs in which sky, sea and land are trimmed to conform to the mathematical ratio of the Golden Section, which is diagrammed abstractly on the back. And like the art, *Bulletins* were participatory: *Bulletin* 22,

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But LeWitt also wrote, as the very first of his *Sentences on Conceptual Art* (1969), "Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists," a description that embraces Ader as readily as Lawrence Weiner. The scattershot community of artists to which Ader—and Weiner—belonged shared not only a preference for conceptual structures but a pervading curiosity about the limits of human control.

ORGANIZED AT NEW YORK'S Museum of Modern Art by Christophe Cherix, of the department of prints and illustrated books, "In & Out of Amsterdam: Travels in Conceptual Art 1960-1976" has reconstructed this ephemeral community and the frequently profound work it produced. The show focuses on Ader, Stanley Brouwn, Hanne Darboven, Jan Dibbets, Ger van Elk, Gilbert & George, LeWitt, Charlotte Posenenske, Allen Ruppersberg and Weiner. In the late '60s and early '70s, all of them spent time in Amsterdam; some acquired apartments or houseboats, while others never held on to more than a hotel room. Amsterdam had been a breeding ground for Fluxus and Happenings, and under the direction of Willem Sandberg (1946-62) and Edy de Wilde (1963-85) the Stedelijk Museum mounted groundbreaking exhibitions of kinetic art ("Bewogen Beweging" [Moved Movement], 1961), participatory environments ("Dylaby," 1962) and Conceptual art ("Op Losse Schroeven" [Square Pegs in Round Holes], 1969). This was not Paris in the teens or New York in the '40s, however: Amsterdam was no hotbed of creative souls crammed into adjacent studios, painting, drinking and fighting late into the night. The artists in this show constitute not so much a movement as a flavor. Theirs was a deft conceptualism, at once personal and self-effacing.

One factor in common was that all of them were associated with the influential Amsterdam gallery Art & Project, founded in 1968 by Geert van Beijeren (who died in 2005) and Adriaan van Ravesteijn. (In 2007 MoMA received an Art & Project/Depot VBVR gift of 230 works, from which a substantial part

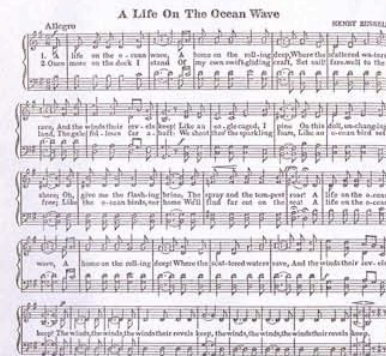


Opposite, Bas Jan Ader: Art & Project *Bulletin* 89, August 1975, photolithograph, 11 1/2 by 16 1/2 inches unfolded. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy Bas Jan Ader Estate and Patrick Painter Editions.

Below, Ger van Elk: *The Co-Founder of the Word O.K.—Marken* (No. 5), 1971, printed 1999, chromogenic print, 27 1/2 inches square. Collection the artist. Photo Michiel van Nieuwkerk. © Ger van Elk.

art & project

bulletin 89



1007 Amsterdam
Willemstraat 20
1017XJ Utrecht

Handwritten text
printed outlay to

bas jan ader

"In search of the airman"
(song for the north atlantic; July 1975 -)
in cooperation with the airline a, copy of
gallery, los angeles, ca, and the
grootenoy museum, groningen, holland



by Douglas Huebler, offered clues to the whereabouts of a signed statement the artist had hidden outside the gallery in Amsterdam. Other clues could be purchased, and the finder of the statement got to own the piece. As former Stedelijk curator Rini Dippel points out in the MoMA catalogue, *Bulletin* "distributed projects about space and time in space and time."⁵

"IN & OUT OF AMSTERDAM" takes its title from a 1971 work by Weiner: *IN AND OUT, OUT AND IN, AND IN AND OUT, AND OUT AND IN*. Cherix uses it to evoke both a situation (the artists' itinerancy) and a subject matter (the displacements, gaps and ellipses that are the essence of the work on view). The habit of travel is introduced at the entrance to the show by a grid of road movies by Posenenske, each documenting a different stretch of flat, oddly artificial-looking Dutch landscape. It shows up next in Ruppertsberg's *Where's AI?* (1972),⁶ a wall of thumbtacked snapshots and index cards presenting people's musings about the missing artist's location ("What happened to AI? He went to New York, I think . . ."). The piece could be

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seen as a comment on peripatetic bohemia, or perhaps as a memento mori, a reminder of the ultimate vanishing.

Travel was invoked as the experience of *not* being in another place, rather than recounted, travelogue-style, by an artist documenting the place where he is. Amsterdam became not-Paris in Gilbert & George's *The Tuleries* (1974) and, in works by Ader and van Elk, who used Amsterdam as a foil for Los Angeles, not-California. Ader's short, silent, tragicomic films *Fall 1* and *Fall 2* (both 1970) show the artist rolling off the roof of his Los Angeles bungalow and bicycling into an Amsterdam canal. Van Elk's *The Co-Founder of the Word O.K.* (1971) presents the artist bodily improvising a semaphore for the universal expression "OK" on palm tree-lined boulevards and on quaint old-world quays. (These were actually shot in Marken, a twee preserved village a few miles north of Amsterdam.)

The Dutch artist Brouwn has built his entire career around physical movement from one location to another. Since 1972, Brouwn, the Ghost Orchid of Conceptual art, has asked that his work not be reproduced, nor biographical details printed (his pages in the MoMA catalogue are just text, no images). The idea may be to ensure direct experience of



Above, view of Gilbert & George's *The Tuleries*, 1974, charcoal on paper, eight parts; at the Museum of Modern Art. Collection Rijksmuseum Twenthe, Enschede, The Netherlands. Photo Jason Mandella.

Left, Sol LeWitt: *Area of Amsterdam Between Leidseplein, Jan Dibbets's House, and Kunstijbaan Jaap Eden*, 1976, cutout city map, 4 1/4 by 18 3/4 inches. Museum of Modern Art. © LeWitt/Artists Rights Society, New York.



the work, but it doesn't quite play out in that fashion. *This Way Brouwn* (begun 1960), in which the artist asked people to draw maps and write directions to a particular (unnamed) location, has become legendary through word of mouth. So when one finally gets to see these oddly mute sheets, the material fact, set against one's prior mental image, comes as something of a jolt. (I, for one, had imagined the drawings would be much more elaborate than the short squiggle or single right-ish angle I found.) It is an inversion of the relationship between LeWitt's wall drawings (one of which appears in the show) and the instructions for their execution. The failure of words (or paint or images) to convey meaning or experience is, of course, central to much Conceptual art. Cherix points out how with Brouwn, and also Darboven, who is represented by an installation of 100 books of 365 or 366 pages each, cumulatively corresponding to the days of a century, "anecdotal facts are sup-

pressed, turning a concrete experience into an abstraction."⁷ It is true: Darboven's minimally notated days have no events; Brouwn's directions have no addresses.

Elsewhere, however, the anecdotal is unexpectedly present, as in LeWitt's Amsterdam "rips" (1976). In each of these the artist has excised a particular feature or area from a map of the city, creating a carefully shaped absence. An Amstel River-shaped hole wiggles its way through one; in another, everything bearing the word "park" has been removed, while other greenswards, such as the *Amsterdamsse Bos*, are left intact. In a third, the entire city is missing apart from the narrow triangle established by the Leidseplein, Jan Dibbets's house and the Jaap Eden ice-skating track. This last offers a typical LeWitt conundrum: the triangle, tidy and rational as a geometric construction, would on the ground cut destructively through streets, buildings and canals. It is a neat illus-

tration of the disconnect between the abstraction of mapping and the realities of physical space. Nevertheless, there is more than a whiff of personal biography about the triangle's quixotic specificity—the Leidseplein is the Times Square of Amsterdam, but Jan Dibbets's house is clearly a personal landmark. And the Jaap Eden skating track? Why?

Gilbert & George are famous for turning personal biography into glossily impersonal artifacts, but the work shown here dates from a time when their persona as gentlemen manqués was not yet a self-supporting cliché. *The Tulleries*, reinstalled at MoMA, was originally commissioned by van Beijeren and van Ravesteijn to occupy a 19th-century sitting room in their Amsterdam home. The artists covered the walls, three chairs and a coffee table with charcoal drawings of trees, grass and, in one section, themselves, gazing at each other through the smudgy foliage. Paris is overlaid on Amsterdam, a landscape on an interior. An oddly fragile habi-

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tat (made of paper, after all), it is at once wryly romantic (two men casting smoldering looks at each other in a Parisian park) and unforthcoming (they stand apart, arms at sides, and the chairs look profoundly uncomfortable).

Again and again in this show conceptual structures break open to reveal something deeper and darker. Ader and van Elk, who were close friends, were both raised in the Netherlands and hit their stride in the most un-Dutch of places, Los Angeles. Both were drawn to a smart/funny strain of L.A. art that includes Ruscha and Baldessari, but both remained, at a fundamental level, engaged in the quintessential Dutch battle between *burgerlijk* substantiality and Calvinist asceticism, between pragmatism and transcendence.

For me, the two knockout works in the show were Ader's *In Search of the Miraculous* and van Elk's *La Pièce* (1971). Like Ader, van Elk employs the sea as a spiritual metaphor in a way that is at once silly and utterly sincere. *La Pièce* was commissioned for Sonsbeek, an Arnhem-based sculpture exhibition that had, by 1971, become a nationwide festival of international avant-garde art. That year at Sonsbeek, Donald Judd contributed a 50-by-50-foot-square enclosure, and Michael Heizer sliced up a large section of the town of Heerlen. Materials were heavy and texts were sparse and enigmatic. For his piece, van Elk decided "to make a small work of art of absolute beauty." This was not a joke, or not entirely. The piece would embody beauty in two senses: "The beauty of a simple piece of wood beautifully painted white, and the beauty in the technical sense, namely an object painted in that very place in the world where there is not dust to create dirt."⁸

Having heard about an Asian tradition in which artists went to sea to produce the most pristine lacquerware, van Elk booked passage on the freighter *Transontario*, and at two o'clock in the afternoon on Jan. 11, at 58°38'N, 10°13'W (northwest of the Outer Hebrides), he went out on the deck and painted one side of a small block of wood. Almost four months later, at four in the afternoon on May 6, at 46°31'N 80°18'W (some miles southeast of Newfoundland), he mount-

ed the deck of the S.S. *France* and painted the other side. Though the block of wood was only around 3 by 4 inches, *La Pièce* was, as the artist has pointed out on several occasions, the largest work in Sonsbeek 71.

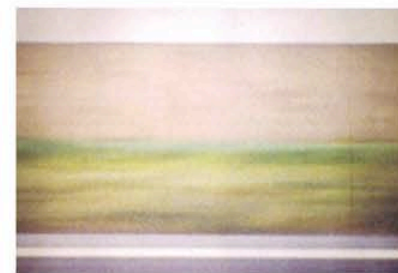
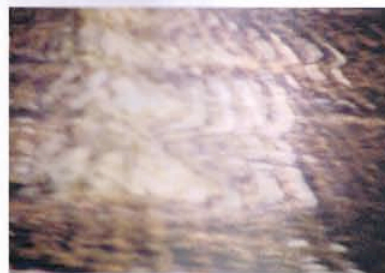
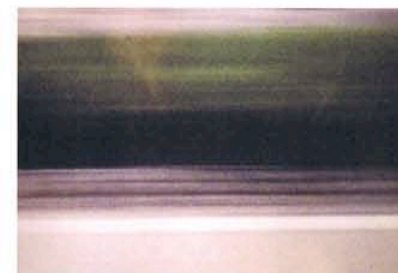
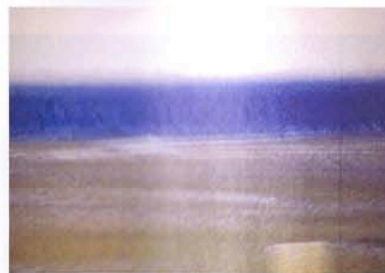
At MoMA the white block lies upon a red velvet cushion, within a Plexiglas display box, on a wall-mounted shelf. A chart marked with the route and photographs of the windswept artist in the act of painting hangs nearby. The heavily front-loaded presentation is typical van Elk; no one is more adept at calling attention to the way art calls attention to itself. Van Elk wrote that, for him, the piece was "a kind of solution, or observation, in the discussion of the material-lessness of 'conceptual art.'"⁹ The block of wood is interesting because of the story told about it; but the story wouldn't be all that interesting without the block of wood as its apotheosis. With a gimlet-eyed awareness of the limitations of objects and of words, van Elk was taking aim both at the pretensions of American Minimalism and at Dutch austerity, but there is also something genuinely moving about the crazy pursuit of "absolute beauty" on a sooty freighter in the freezing cold, and yes, even about the blank block of wood on its velvet throne. Van Elk's "beauty," like Ader's "miraculous," was a quest, unconventional in form, but age-old in its desires. The laughable impossibility of success is, of course, the point: one can only defer—never defeat—dust, gravity or death.

"In & Out of Amsterdam" does us a number of favors. It presents work not seen often enough in this country (Brouwn, Dibbets, van Elk, Posenenske) and shines new light on familiar eminences like Darboven, Gilbert & George, Weiner and LeWitt. It offers up a few perfect works of art. Most importantly, it resurrects a moment when the materiality of art was an open question and level-headedness not yet a virtue, and when "searching" encompassed empirical inquiry, physical travel and unrequited desire. ○

¹ *In Search of the Miraculous* is the title of Ouspensky's 1947 book about the teachings of the mystic G.I. Gurdjieff, but the phrase may also have carried more personal associations for Ader. His clergyman father was a martyr of the Dutch Resistance, and his parents had hidden Jews during the war. His mother's memoir, *Een Groninger Pastorie in de Storm*, also published in 1947, includes the question: "Is there no place here for the miraculous?" ² In recent years there has been a flurry of interest in Ader: several of his works have been re-editioned (see Wade Saunders, "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities," *Art in America*, February 2004, pp. 54-65). His films have become easily accessible online on YouTube and basjanader.com, and are widely quoted and imitated by younger artists. A documentary about Ader's work and disappearance, *Here Is Always Somewhere Else*, directed by Rene Daalder, appeared in 2007. ³ *Art & Project, Bulletin 1*, quoted in Rini Dippel "Art & Project: The Early Years," in Christophe Chérix, ed., *In & Out of Amsterdam: Travels in Conceptual Art, 1960-1976*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 2009, p. 26. ⁴ Christophe Chérix, "Seedlings from Amsterdam," in Chérix, p. 18. ⁵ Dippel, p. 32. ⁶ The original *Where's A?* was created in 1972, with a planned edition of three, to be fabricated when needed. The work in this show is an exhibition copy made by the artist for MoMA and the Art Institute of Chicago (where it will appear in an exhibition on conceptual photography opening Dec. 2011). Unlike the three other copies, which are all framed, the exhibition copy conforms to Ruppersberg's original mode of presentation. ⁷ Chérix, p. 21. ⁸ Ger van Elk, *Artist's Statement, in Sonsbeek 71: Sonsbeek buiten de perken, Deel/Part 1*, Arnhem, Stichting Sonsbeek, 1971, p. 107. ⁹ *Ibid.*

"In & Out of Amsterdam: Travels in Conceptual Art, 1960-1976," is on view at the Museum of Modern Art, New York [through Oct. 5, 2009]. The accompanying 170-page catalogue, by the show's curator, Christophe Chérix, includes additional essays by Rini Dippel, Christian Rattemeyer and Phillip Van den Bossche.

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Charlotte Posenenske: *Untitled*, 1968, four Super 8 films transferred to 16mm, each approx. 3½ minutes. (Bankfurt Brunn Frankfurt/M., Estate Posenenske)