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MA Contemporary Art Theory
Thinking the Sensuous

Essay 1: **Enacting Bas Jan Ader**



Bas Jan Ader, *Broken Fall (Organic)*, 1971

It's a crisp sunny morning in December. The sky is almost clear except for a few wispy clouds up high. A light persistent breeze blows across the heath, animating the patches of long grass, and propelling odd scraps of paper towards some apparently predetermined resting place. The steady drone of distant traffic and the occasional roar of a nearby bus only serve to accentuate the relative isolation of my chosen location.

I'm standing before a large tree trying to work out the best possible route upwards. Luckily the tree is old and knarred and so footholds are not difficult to find. I begin climbing, the bark cooler and more damp than I'd been expecting. This is fun – I'm suddenly a boy again anxiously following the path of my quicker, more nimble friend who's already half-way up. The same excitement and sense of daring, and the same fear of slipping are occupying my thoughts as I make it to the branch I'd been aiming for.

Now I'm holding on to the branch above with both hands, edging along sideways, my entire body dangling beneath me. With the branch bending worryingly under my weight I decide I've gone far enough, and stop. For a few moments – though not for as long as I'd imagined – I hold on, my body feeling heavier all the time. Finally my grip starts to slip, and I drop down onto the grass below. The stinging shock of the hard impact shooting through my legs, I collapse to the ground, breathless...

What does it mean to enact (or at least to have a desire to enact) an artists work? To what extent is it possible to draw from a work itself an imperative to “do the same”? A work of visual art, unlike for example a musical score or a theatrical play script, is generally not considered to be a template for a “performance” in this sense. It tends to be understood as something that “has happened” as opposed to something that “can happen”. There may seem to be exceptions to this definition of the artwork as existing in the past tense: video works for example are repeatedly re-played in a gallery, installations are reconstructed each time they are exhibited, and seminal works of performance art are periodically re-performed. It could be argued that these examples – at least for the viewing subject – provide instances of a temporally distinct and “present” encounter with the artwork. But if we leave aside the specific question of the subject-object encounter and think instead at the level of ontology, then these instances can be conceptualised as mere re-occurrences of what could be called the “what-has-already-been-made”. That is to say despite the undeniable present-ness of these particular encounters, they are nevertheless encounters with a fundamentally already-actualised entity. The works in themselves have not been altered.

There are of course many kinds of contemporary practice which sit outside of this formulation. For example work which involves the participation of the viewer in a genuinely active sense could be said to exist absolutely in the present. The nature of the outcome of the so-called “relational aesthetics” work of Rirkrit Tiravanija for instance depends entirely on the variable nature of the contributions of particular individuals brought together in particular settings. And for those forms of work too that are reconfigured according to an engagement with a particular site or context it could equally be said that they exist fully in the present. The socially engaged works of Thomas Hirschhorn for example could easily be imagined as having the potential to be endlessly re-initiated with each time a radically unique set of outcomes – the economic, political, cultural, or geographic conditions of the particular sites of his projects dictating their open-ended outcomes. But my particular concern here is not to affirm the already widely acknowledged qualities of these kinds of practices. Instead I wish to draw out some of the philosophical implications – especially in relation to a notion of the “subject” – of the re-enaction of a form of work more resistant to the act of being-made-present: specifically I will be addressing the performance-based works of the conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader.

Ader's small body of work has begun to occupy an increasingly prominent position within the discourses surrounding the production and reception of contemporary art. From the late

1980s and early 1990s onwards, his increasingly frequent solo exhibitions and inclusions in group shows, along with a steadily growing body of writing on his work, have contributed to a general increase in the awareness and sense of relevance of Ader's oeuvre – manifested most notably through an engagement with his work by other practitioners such as Tacita Dean or Jonathan Monk. That his work is worthy of serious critical engagement is therefore not in doubt. But what exactly would the motivation be behind treating particular examples of his work as if they offered a kind of “template” for a re-enactment? What spaces would be opened up by making this particular theoretical (and practical) move? The investigation can in fact take several possible trajectories, each of which is able to offer a philosophically distinct account of the role or definition of the “subject” in the enactment. Firstly I will offer a brief discussion of the importance of “practice” as it appears in Althusser's characterisation of ideology. This will then be developed through a consideration of the “event” - initially as it occurs in Deleuze, and then, in what I consider to be its most useful formulation in this context, in Badiou.

Althusser's contention is that the “ideas” or “representations” which seem to make up an ideology do not have an ideal or spiritual existence: they are materially grounded. He asserts that 'an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices'.¹ In addition, Althusser holds that because concretely existing individuals have always-already been interpellated by ideology into subjects, the existence of the beliefs of those individuals is therefore material on every level. For an individual it can be inferred that 'his ideas are his material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject.'²

Based on this thoroughly grounded and materialistic understanding Althusser (as part of his general concern to explore the mechanisms of “ideological state apparatuses”) goes on to conclude that subjective freedom is therefore an illusion. His point is that there can be no “outside” of ideology: no transcendent viewpoint from which the subject can escape its materiality. Following on from what Althusser himself acknowledges to be this Spinozian understanding of the “immanence” of ideology, we can now understand his stress on its materiality and its basis in practice – and begin to appreciate the significance of his famous citing of Pascal's formula, 'kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe'.³ The subject, in an immanent relation ideology, is wholly “in” its practices.

For a formulation of an immanent or material subject to be useful then in theorising the enaction of a work of Bas Jan Ader, it is necessary to imagine the enaction as something like a material practice. That practice, according to the Althusserian model, would be governed by a ritual, which would itself be defined by the logic of the artwork (the “ideological apparatus” in this sense). The enactor would therefore be “interpellated” by the work into becoming subject to it. However unlike in Althusser's model – in which the subject is posited as one wholly determined by political, economic, ideological and theoretical structures and practices – the issue here is not to explore any loss of subjective agency. Instead, it is to consider a particular case in which the individual's action is voluntary, in other words, an intentional subjectivation. For it is precisely through making this choice that the enacting individual can fully enter into the artwork's “materiality”, and have a properly immanent relation to it.



Bas Jan Ader, *All My Clothes*, 1970

...Of course, I don't live in California. My house doesn't have an easily accessible roof, tapering into the gentle incline of a veranda at the bottom. My roof isn't even particularly visible, being right up on top of a three storey South London Victorian terrace. It certainly doesn't have the right kind of laid back, sun-baked feel. In all honesty I've never given any thought to it before now – it doesn't really have any significant relation to my life.

But still I need somewhere to leave all my clothes. Luckily I do have a garage with a sloping corrugated-iron roof, one side of which faces my garden. It's possible to climb up the

fence behind it and onto the roof without too much difficulty.

I take a bundle of jumpers with me and start climbing. Unfortunately with only one hand free this proves far too difficult, so I decide to throw them onto the roof instead. This is far more straightforward – pretty soon I will have thrown my entire wardrobe onto the garage roof. Actually, this is quite enjoyable; after a while I find myself making decisions as to where to place certain items to the best visual effect.

Apart from one slightly too ambitious attempt to throw a sock onto the very top of the roof, the whole process goes smoothly. There they are: all my clothes. I just hope my neighbours aren't at home to see them...

In order to develop further the subjective implications of the enaction of an artwork I will now turn to the notion of the “event” and consider it in two notable philosophical articulations. For Deleuze the event is a crucial concept for an understanding of the workings of an immanent world. It is for him essentially a process of becoming – that is, a passage from the virtual to the actual, or a bringing forth from pure multiplicity to a particular state of affairs in time and space. To help unpack this fairly complex picture it might be worth contrasting it with a seemingly more straightforward conception of an event. Instinctively, and according to our accustomed understanding of the flow of time, we might think of an event as something that at one point has a potential to happen, and then at another (later) point actually happens. As time passes, the event moves from being a possibility of something happening, to it happening, and then finally to it having happened. This seems clear enough. In a similar sense we can say that if Ader's work is taken to exist in the form of a template, and thus posited as potentially re-enactable, the “event” would simply be the realisation of this potential through re-enaction. But this would be to only partially understand the Deleuzian event. For as Deleuze warns us in 'Difference and Repetition':

The only danger in all this is that the virtual could be confused with the possible. The possible is opposed to the real; the process undergone by the possible is therefore a “realisation”. By contrast, the virtual is not opposed to the real; it possesses a full reality by itself. The process it undergoes is actualisation.⁴

Deleuze's ontology utilises the Stoic distinction between two kinds of entities: on the one

hand there are bodies that exist in space and time, characterised by particular “states of affairs”; and on the other hand incorporeal beings or transformations, which 'are not things or facts, but events. We cannot say that they exist, but rather that they subsist or inhere.⁵ An event then, according to this understanding, cannot accurately be said to take place (or to exist) in time; it needs instead to be conceptualised in terms of its relation to the virtual.

The template of Ader's work, if we employ Miriam Fraser's articulation of Deleuze in her essay 'Event', could be compared to an infinitive verb – which in this case might perhaps be expressed as “to Ader”. The infinitive, she explains, is so important to Deleuze's conception of the event because of its dual nature: it is not only virtual and incorporeal, but also indicative of a substantive relation to a state of affairs. It can therefore be asserted that an event,

is not bound to a particular space and time, but may be experienced whenever and wherever it is actualised anew. It is because an event can be actualised in multiple ways that it retains an openness to reinventions (or re-eventualisations).⁶

In the case of the enaction of Ader's work then, the Deleuzian event does not lie fully in the template (the virtual), nor entirely in a particular instance of an enaction (the actual), but in the becoming-particular of the template (the becoming actual of the virtual). The event, in other words, lies in the movement between the two: in the “becoming” itself. What is of crucial importance here is that the enaction is no longer merely a re-presentation of a past event, but that the “becoming-present” becomes an event in itself. And it is at this level that the implications for the enacting subject can be teased out. For instead of simply picking up the template for an existing work of art and depositing it in the present – signalling a separation from and a diminution of the original event – the enacting subject can experience the work of art for themselves as an event in itself. Because although they may factually be comprised of the same set of occurrences, the original work of art and its re-enaction are not in fact the same event.

At this point things seem to be getting contradictory: the event of the Ader artwork and the event of its re-enaction appear to be at once the same event and not the same event. It is tempting at this point to remedy the situation by thinking each event as a unique phenomenological encounter for a particular subject. But since to think the event through such (transcendental) subject-centred terms would be to break with Deleuze I will not pursue this here. Instead I will follow Brian Massumi in his 'A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia' and

consider the event in terms of its “meaning” (or in Deleuzian terms its “essence”). As Massumi sees it, meaning cannot be found in the “genesis of the thing”, nor in the thought of that genesis, nor in the words written or spoken of it – it is to be found instead 'in the process leading from one to the other'; that is, in “translation” (or for Deleuze, “doubling”):

The infinitive is an especially apt form in which to express an essence: translation on the level of thought and language catapults the inexhaustible complexity of each unique encounter's conditions of emergence into an indefinite circuit of reproduction and systematic variation. Translation adds another layer of definition (de-finition) to an event's dynamism. It repotentialises it, makes it repeatable, multiplies it.⁷

Each particular “translation” (or “doubling”) of an event creates in effect a new and distinct “meaning” (or “essence”): the event is repeated yet differentiated in each becoming. Massumi continues:

The fact that an event can be reproduced [...] does not belie its utter uniqueness (its separation or difference from all other events; the absolute singularity of the conditions of occurrence of any given reinsertion). For reproduction is translation, a transformational carrying-over to another site or substance. In itself, the event only has extinction. [...] The uniqueness of the event means that its happening is always also its undoing.⁸

The event of Ader's work considered in this light becomes an infinitely actualisable and re-enactable virtuality.

This formulation is of course determined by its use of the concept of multiplicity. That an event is able to happen at all is, for Deleuze, predicated on its prior possibility for existence within the sphere of the virtual. The event is an actualisation or emergence from the infinitely multiplicitous field of the “what is possible”. Everything in a sense is “already there” within this multiplicity – just without having yet been abstracted into a presentation (or a “state of affairs”) in time and space. In 'The Logic of Sense' Deleuze writes:

Just as the present measures the temporal realisation of the event – that is, its incarnation in the depth of acting bodies and its incorporation in a state of affairs – the event in turn, in its impassibility and impenetrability, has no present [...] The agonising aspect of the pure event is that it is always and at the same time something which has just happened and something about to happen; never something which is happening.⁹

Virtuality for Deleuze is an indivisible continuity: for as with the “pure duration” of Bergson, this

is an ontology that allows for no sequentialising or cutting up of time. What has already happened and what is still to happen are in a sense concentrated into a single continuity and intensification of life. As Badiou characterises it, for Deleuze, 'the event is the ontological realisation of the eternal truth of the One, the infinite power [*puissance*] of Life'; for Deleuze, he says, 'unlimited becoming becomes the event itself'.¹⁰ Badiou's own system of thought, in contrast, gives the concept of multiplicity an ontologically entirely differently treatment. A reorientation will be necessary then at this point, which will hopefully be aided by the brief sketching out of Badiou's philosophical system which follows.

Badiou quite simply has no place for any conceptualisation of multiplicity as an all-encompassing totality, as the sum-total of all that is possible, as "One". For him there is only a multiplicity of multiples for which any attempt to give unity to or "count" as One is merely an after-effect, a belated fiction. 'What comes to ontological thought,' asserts Badiou in 'Being and Event', 'is the multiple without any other predicate other than its multiplicity. Without any other concept than itself, and without anything to guarantee its consistency.'¹¹ Considered solely in itself, in the absence of anything extrinsic to its own immanent logic, the multiplicity therefore can be thought of only as "void" – as a none rather than a One. It is a radical infinity, or, according to the mathematical Set Theory from which Badiou's formulation derives, a "superabundance" (and here already we can see how Badiou is rejecting the "pantheism" latent in Deleuze and explicit in Spinoza).

This pure multiplicity then, is the first of what Badiou describes as the three levels of being;¹² it what he calls the "something is". The next level of being – the "something exists" – is being in the world, for which Badiou introduces the term "situation". A situation is a form of structured multiplicity; it is the 'counting-for-one that qualifies the situation as being this particular situation'.¹³ It is definite in the way that pure multiplicity is not: it has characteristics, is describable, and – most importantly for Badiou – is quantifiable. A situation is named as such precisely because it can be "counted as one"; precisely, that is, because it can be distinguished from the "not-one" or void (from all that it is not).

The third level of being, finally, is where "something happens": it is the level at which the event occurs, and, crucially for Badiou, is where truth emerges:

In order for there to be truth, there has to be something other than the situation. Now I am absolutely an immanentist – I am convinced that if there is truth, it isn't something transcendent, it's in the situation – but I am

nevertheless led to the conclusion that the situation, as such, is without truth. This antinomy must be resolved. That's where I turn to the category of "the event" [...].¹⁴

Badiou's event is where something new is created: it is a rupture, a cut in the continuum of the world. It is a 'chance, incalculable, disconnected supplement to the situation'.¹⁵ Within what Badiou terms the four modes of truth – politics, love, science, and art – the rupturing event takes the form of, respectively: revolution, passion, invention, and creation. The events in these cases are breaks with the way things are: decisive moments in which truth takes place. Whilst for Badiou truths are necessarily produced in specific situations, they nevertheless somehow surpass them – they begin with an event that transgresses the existing logic that structures those situations.

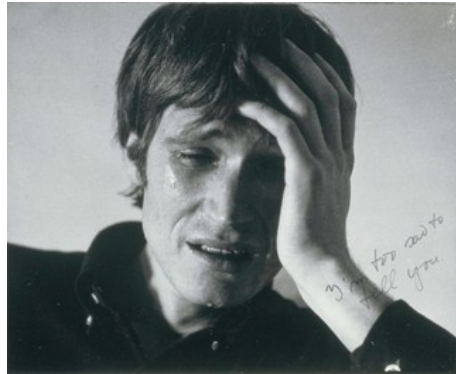
And so, given this brief outline of Badiou's system of thought and the place of the event within it, it should now be possible to think the re-enactment of the work of Bas Jan Ader according to it. The first move is to align Ader's work with one of Badiou's four modes of truth: that of art. Further, it needs to be established that the original work constituted the production of a truth within that sphere: that it was an event. What this entails is firstly to envision the "situation" as being the early 1970s conceptual art scene in general; and secondly it must be established that, as a moment of creation, Ader's work formed a "break" within that situation – that it exceeded what, at that specific point, was perceived to be possible to be created within it. In other words, the work must be seen as one of those exceptional moments where an artistic truth is born.

As it stands however, this reads simply as a characterisation of the work as art-historical rupture. However useful this understanding of the work of art as event may be in other more interpretative contexts, it is still based on a temporal distinction between its significance as a past event and any status it may gain as a re-enacted artwork. The problem posed is this: if it was the original event that was site of the production of truth, then how could a mere enactment of that event be anything other than an impotent replication of what already exists? As we have seen through a recourse to a Deleuzian model of difference and repetition, it is possible to find a solution to this apparent difficulty by positing the enactment-event as at once unlimited becoming and singular event. But in order to think the problem specifically in terms of the enacting subject, it is I think more useful to appeal instead to Badiou's understanding of the relation of the subject to the truth-event.

Badiou's suggestion is that subjects are “seized” or “convoked” by a truth-procedure; that in fact they do not pre-exist the event at all. Individuals become subjects only in the production of truth: they are transfigured by the truth they proclaim. A subject, moreover, is 'a relation between an event and the world';¹⁶ without it, Badiou contends, the event could not be discerned and named as such – it would remain a supernumerary excess. Truth, subject, and event are in fact inseparable for Badiou; they are interconnected aspects of the same process. Truth comes into being only through the subject's proclamation of it; the subject is constituted as such only by his or her fidelity to the event – and the event itself is defined by its production of a truth.

To be a subject, then, is to be subject to truth (a truth that, importantly, is not a transcendent given, but a production). So, put simply, it can be stated that: since the truth initiated by the event of Ader's work is constituted only by its declaration as such – that is, only through endless subjective effort – its enaction (or re-eventualisation) is imperative for its continued existence.

In order for the re-enactment of Bas Jan Ader to be something more than an (initially necessary) gesture of art-historical affirmation of a past work, there has to be a positing of the enactor as a subject in his or her own right. It must not be forgotten that we, the viewers of art, the scholars of art history – we have subjectivities too. For as Deleuze puts it: 'something in the world forces us to think,' and 'this something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter.'¹⁷ We must exit the gallery for a while, leave our books behind, and encounter exactly what it is we are looking at and talking about. To be able to think Ader, we must ourselves “Ader”. In Badiou's terms the enactor has to be understood as engaging in the truth-procedure itself, for: 'either you participate, declare the founding event, and draw the consequences, or you remain outside it.'¹⁸ Like the revolutionary who both believes in and constitutes the revolution through fighting for it, the enactor, in order to get close to the artwork, must enact. The alternative would seem to be an impure engagement; a tame, sanitised, distanced approval – a mere shadow of the wild, unpredictable and potentially transformative nature of genuine fidelity to the truth of the artistic event.



Bas Jan Ader, *I'm Too Sad to Tell You*, 1971

...Really, this shouldn't be difficult. All I have to do is sit in front of a plain white background and cry. But that's exactly the problem – how can I cry with nothing to cry about? Surely there must be something. I try to think about my past: deaths in the family, missed opportunities, failed relationships, regrets. But no tears. The future, then: deaths in the family, missed opportunities, failed relationships, regrets, my own death.

I'm thoroughly depressed now; but still, alas, no tears. I grimace, frown, close my eyes, screw up my face. But I just can't seem to shed a tear.

How did you do it Bas Jan? I've seen the production still, and it all looks so clinical – the lights, the film camera, the camera operator (your wife, I believe). But I know you can't let me know – I know you can't let anyone know – you're too sad to tell us, you said.

I'm not sure how long I've been sitting here for now. Eventually I give up. Or at least, I give up trying.

And then it happens.

Tears start to trickle down my cheeks.

Tears – of happiness...

Notes

- 1 Althusser, p. 113.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p.114.
- 3 *Ibid.*.
- 4 Deleuze, p. 211.
- 5 Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, p. 7.
- 6 *Fraser*, p. 130.
- 7 Massumi, p. 19
- 8 Massumi, pp. 19/20.
- 9 Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, quoted in Badiou, *The Event in Deleuze*, p. 34.
- 10 Badiou, *The Event in Deleuze* (chapter in *Logiques des Mondes*), p.38.
- 11 Badiou, quoted in Hallward, p. 81.
- 12 Badiou worked through this account of his ideas in a 2005 lecture 'The Subject of Art'. The lecture acted as a partial presentation of the ideas which would be elaborated more fully in his most recent work *Logiques des Mondes*.
- 13 Badiou, quoted in Hallward, p. 94.
- 14 Badiou, *Being by Numbers*, p. 87.
- 15 *Ibid.*.
- 16 Badiou, *The Subject of Art*.
- 17 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 139.
- 18 Badiou, quoted in Hallward, p. xxvi.

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