

Performance Responses

edited by Gwyneth Donlon

Grace, Not Gravity

Fall pieces. Created by Bas Jan Ader. 1970-1.

By Lilly Markaki

Isolation has me looking for art where I do not like to go looking for it: the internet. Luckily, one medium lends itself particularly well to this environment: the moving image. Among the works I have returned to online is a group of short films by the Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader, perhaps most known for becoming lost at sea after embarking on a journey *In Search of The Miraculous* in 1975.¹

Produced over a two-year period, these films by Ader are linked by the performance of a balancing act that gives way to a fall—sometimes reluctant, other times decided. Between 1970 and 1971, Ader is captured on film falling and falling again: from a rooftop (*Fall I*, 1970); from a tree (*Broken Fall [Organic]*, 1971); against a sawhorse (*Broken Fall [Geometric]*, 1971); while on a bicycle and into a canal (*Fall II*, 1970). The final, edited versions of these films often begin mid-act and last only a few seconds, although as Alexander Dumbadze has noted, the tension or ambivalence of the body's movement has a peculiar way of stretching time for the viewer (33). Unlike Ader's photographic works, which allude to a fall by showing his body horizontal on the ground, the films sometimes end ambiguously, with Ader's body out of sight.² What does it all mean?

¹ In 1975 Ader set off on the second part of his three-piece work, *In Search of the Miraculous*: a transatlantic voyage from Cape Cod, Massachusetts, to Falthmouth, England, in a 12½ foot sailboat named Ocean Wave. But Ader never completed the journey; all radio contact was lost three weeks into the trip, and his boat was discovered partially submerged off the coast of Ireland eight months later. Ader's body was never recovered.

² I am referring here to *Pitfall on the way to a new Neo Plasticism* (1971), and *Untitled (Swedish Fall)* (1971).

While committed, no doubt, to the exploration of aesthetic possibilities, Ader's falls exceed this fairly narrow project. If his films and photographic works are 'works of art', what they record are actions that begin with the body experiencing itself for itself, for what it is: moving, feeling, thinking—a *life*. In this performance response, I look at how he concentrates his and our attention on the body's movement; how he, if only for a moment, maintains control; how he exchanges control for weight and the body's fate in the fall. Watching Ader, I remember that I too have a body and that body, *my body*, begins to crave movement. The child-like, non-purposive nature of his falls reawakens in me possibilities for movement diminished by adulthood—a frame of mind more than a stage of life. It makes me think of all the movement I would not dare today out of fear not only of hurting myself, but above all, because I am too afraid to look foolish. I suspect that Ader knows and experiences his falls to be troubling in this very profound sense.

The existential dimension to Ader's work is no secret—both his academic record and those who knew him testify to his deep interest in a kind of first philosophy.³ For conceptual artist and Ader's good friend William Leavitt, the entirety of Ader's short oeuvre can be understood as an attempt to get free of all artifice, to an art of fundamental truths. Leavitt recalls him saying 'I want to do a piece where I go to the Alps and talk to a mountain. The mountain will talk of things which are necessary and always true, and I shall talk of things which are sometimes, accidentally true' (Leavitt).

Ader's 'desire for concrete truth' makes itself felt in the way he speaks of his falls in one of his few public statements: 'I do not make body sculptures, body art, or body works [...] when I fell off the roof of my house, or into a canal, it was because gravity made itself master over me' (Leavitt; Sharp 2). For as long as we live in a body, gravity will run through it—a universal fact or a *necessity* as Simone Weil has it (*Gravity and Grace*). Gravity, or rather *the fall*, is our primary state; the world's

³ Jan Verwoert, for example, describes Ader's practice in terms of 'existential conceptual art' (Verwoert 1).

'original configuration' (Serres 147). Standing upright, balancing, we resist the telos which, of course, will one day arrive anyway. In the act of balancing, of resisting, we discover singularity—*the who of the I*. By falling, on the other hand, we give way to the general. If resistance makes up the details of life—choice, chance, creativity—then gravity is the background stage to all that and entropy our common destiny. Surrendering to gravity one knows not so much who, but *what* one is. Made of matter and void, always failing and falling, the body will one day return to dust. As Martijn van Calmthout has put it, 'to fall is to understand the universe' (2006). Why then, do we resist? Why do we strive to balance? In order to live. Does Ader, in falling, therefore refuse life? I don't think so.

Looking at *Nightfall* (1971), it is clear that, for Ader, gravity is linked to an existential drama thoroughly marked by futility and failure. Twice he picks up a concrete block and attempts to balance himself while lifting, but each time the block falls, crashing onto a source of light on the ground until the entire scene is swallowed by darkness. I do not deny that there is a sense of melancholy at the heart of Ader's *Fall* series. In many ways, his work in general appears to me to labour towards making space for failure, for sadness. But it does so in a way that says that all this, too, is life. Returning to the idea of gravity, if its pull presupposes a body, doesn't the experience of the pull demand a body that is, precisely, alive? In as much as it may be a sign of the individual and cosmic oblivion that awaits us all, I interpret the absence of closure in a number of Ader's falling films as an invitation to pay attention to balancing and falling as processes that precede, and proceed *against*, the inevitable. Yes, life is fragile—as the global pandemic has made all the more clear. But to affirm one's vulnerability, *one's being-toward-death*, means also to understand that this flux of disappearance requires the flickering, fugitive presence of life; for only the living can die.

It is almost always possible to discern in Ader's falls critical moments when a decision is made to hold on or to let go. *He exchanges*



Fig. 1: *Broken fall (organic)*, Amsterdamse Bos, Holland, 1971. 16mm black and white film, 1'36". Courtesy of Meliksetian | Briggs, Los Angeles and Simon Lee Gallery, London.

control for the fall, I wrote earlier. There is volition here, but there's also voluntas—the artist persisting even as he decides to let go. By gravity or death, the human will is inevitably brought to an end but what Ader evidences for me is that one can still choose the inevitable; 'The Lord speaks: "I made him just and right, sufficient to have stood, though free to fall"' he writes after John Milton (Dumbadze 16). Ader, it must be remembered, was born in 1942 and his father was executed by the Nazis for harbouring Jewish refugees just two years later. *Untitled (Swedish Fall)* from 1971 shows Ader return to the site of his father's execution to lie on the same land upon which his body would have fallen. Does this work speak of resignation or despair? Again, I don't think so. I think it says that sometimes falling is the opposite of surrendering—a thought to keep close in a time like ours.

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Landscape with Fall of Artist

Created by Amy Sharrocks for the *Come Hell or High Water* festival. London. 5 July 2020.

By Amy Sharrocks

There were gale force winds whipping around us on Sunday 5 July 2020 and the full Thunder Moon pulled the Thames tide lower than it had been all year. Conceived as a ‘pocket of resistance on the banks of the River Thames by Canary Wharf, a place that exists between water and land, private and public space, wealth and poverty, past and present, and an unknowable future’ (Anne Bean), *Come Hell or High Water* was a series of curated art events staged across the full moons of 2020, first activated by Hayley Newman, George Pringle, Sarah Andrew and Anne Bean. The eighth edition took place after the UK’s first national lockdown of the coronavirus pandemic—a rare moment when it was possible to gather again, outdoors, before the next lockdown began. People congregated on the strand of beach revealed at low tide with a sense of collective reeling, not only from the horrors of the global pandemic but also the systemic racism raised to view by the Black Lives Matter protests organised in the wake of George Floyd’s murder. In the midst of this unmooring, I took the invitation to make an artwork for *Come Hell or High Water*, to fall further out of every fixing, cross the strand of beach and fall offshore. *Landscape with Fall of Artist* (2020) was a live artwork where I fell in the river Thames. In falling, I became a dot and a splash against the backdrop of London.

I fell between the full Thunder Moon and the Dark Moon, the greatest magnitude of the evening’s penumbral lunar eclipse. The eclipse, a rare moment of imperfect alignment between the earth, moon, and sun, called for action and wild transformation. Everything felt like it was deconstructing. At times the river was so rough it looked like it was boiling; the outgoing tide full of London dirt. Mary Lemley’s huge cloths from her 1992 work *These Fragments We Have Shored Against Our Ruin* were re-hung from the harbour walls—28 years after

their first appearance. They undulated to different times and cycles, billowing stains accrued from rivers across London like menstrual cloths from river pourings, swirling a confluence of waters around us that helped sustain me in my work. The atmosphere was tense and I was scared to go in. I had a real fear I could be swept away. As I stood in the late evening sun looking out across the water I tried to hold the moment while people at my back both held on to me and urged me in. I felt for the threshold and the separation, pulled towards the sticking point and gathered all my urgencies, all my reasons, aches, worries, and all my fellow fallers: *to fall full*.

Falling is a way of responding with my whole body to these overwhelming times, to this world; to prostrate myself. The etymology of *overwhelm* finds close connections with experiences of being in water. Old and Middle English variations contain original meanings of submergence and capsizing, they refer to the act of 'covering over', making an 'arch cover' and being engulfed—the shape of a wave is intrinsic to this word. Together these meanings pull us to the sense of a body, human or water, hovering at a breaking point it can no longer maintain before collapsing into its source. So in many ways, falling into water feels like coming home: returning to our watery beginning. There is a further strange doubling in the meaning of overwhelm. On its own, to 'whelm' means to tip over or overturn, to turn upside down, so to overwhelm literally means to 'over-overwhelm'. It's a word that both linguistically and physically falls over itself: it's a total rinsing.

Landscape with the Fall of Icarus, attributed to Peter Breughel the Elder, was painted in approximately 1558 (see fig. 1). My mum, the painter Anne Norman, made her watercolour response to it in the 1990s (fig. 2). Re-making artworks you love is a useful practice, a way of licking knowledge from the inside of an artwork. It is not a reproduction so much as an attempt to get closer, a way of accosting the original making and reasoning, to transpose perhaps, or make a translation of sorts. *Landscape with Fall of Artist* was made in response to my mum, whose painting was in response to Breughel's, who painted in response to the Greek myth. It is a set of waves; a tidal action over centuries.



Fig. 1: *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (c. 1558), attributed to Breughel the Elder.



Fig. 1: *After Breughel, Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* by Anne Norman, courtesy of her estate (photograph by Amy Sharrocks).

The story and the paintings have always called to me. When I was younger I identified with Icarus' longing for flight and his intemperance. I felt painfully his ruin, the parent's anguish, and the world's indifference. It is a painting for our times, perhaps, as the world careers from disaster to catastrophe. My fall is a paltry shadow of Icarus' flight but lining up these works it is as if the splash that we can see around his legs makes a ripple that can still be felt today, is still visible around my legs and those of others subsumed by a fall. If we can bear to look, every fall pulls focus not only onto the falling but the attendant loss, grief and indifference. The man sowing the field in Breughel's painting could be any one of us looking the other way, unaware or intentionally avoiding a faller just out of sight and out of reach of care. In the face of apathy, global inequality, and injustice, I am trying to reach out to the fallers, a helpless desperate act to cherish and respond with my own vulnerable body to this ongoing time of disaster: this free fall.

I have fallen in water before. The unexpected thrill as teenage boys rushed to join us in the group fall *DAYTRIP* (2014) on the hottest day of the year in Swansea, by the following year had morphed into a sombre event in Hastings, off the south coast into the English Channel, as the refugee crisis deepened. Before we fell together, we spoke of people who might at that moment be facing the Mediterranean Sea, starting a treacherous journey in the hope of a safe harbour, of the people who had already attempted it, and of those whose bodies were now in the water. We were falling towards them. Every water work demands that we consider who is in the water.

I am aware that when I fall I do so voluntarily—that I am able to get up. At its edge this work performs not only the fall but the recovery, the return to safety and the privilege of living. Often falling artworks, like those by Bas Jan Ader, cut the fall at the moment of impact, or freeze it in mid-air so that there is no epilogue, while each time these falls became a swim and a walk back to dry land. My time in the water made me vulnerable but didn't kill me, not like Ader, who disappeared at sea in the second part of his artwork *In Search of the Miraculous* (1975), or

like the countless and unaccounted for people lost in our oceans. It is an appalling truth that water can be both murderous and restorative. The photograph of *Landscape with Fall of Artist* does not convey how warm the water was, how it softened the fall, held, and restored me. But falling is always unsettling and partly self-destructive: a shaking, a wrench, and violent pull away from what was before. Falling unhinges us. I feel this and I know it to be a dangerous yet necessary practice. This world is over-overwhelming and we need to un hinge ourselves from it, to let go and re-orientate ourselves. Those who have privilege and security need to leave safer ground in search of change.

The paintings by Breughel and Norman are of a vast land and seascape. In all the works, the water is the centre of the image and the fall to one side, as with Dominic Johnson's photograph of my fall in the Thames. The Movement for Black Lives and the global pandemic have pulled focus onto those who have fallen and those most at risk of falling. By attempting to fall out of time, place and economy, events like this pocket of resistance on the beach on the south side of the Thames that day post-lockdown attempt a reorientation; a tentative, floundering, and staggering assembly gesturing towards a new geography. We were cautious with each other on the beach that day, amazed to be out and together, delighted to be social beings again, but not trusting the world as we knew it to be safe.

My mum suffered early onset dementia when she was about 55 years old but continued drawing and painting until the very end of her life. Her change of style documented the gradual erasure of objects and people from her mind as her focus pulled towards the widening chasm she was facing. She died aged 70 after a long, slow deterioration; a gossamer thin loss extending over years. The individual and communal losses of 2020 have been devastating, linking us all, unequally, in vast repeating waves of shared loss, grief and mourning.

The July edition of *Come Hell or High Water* concluded with Anne Bean and Richard Wilson's *Four Gongs for Wuhan*, a wild action that was part protest, part sounding, and part shout of support for the city that had endured the first coronavirus outbreak. Making their way



Fig. 1: *Landscape with Fall of Artist* by Amy Sharrocks, photograph Dominic Johnson (2020).

down the beach towards the water, the artists crashed huge gongs and cymbals, handmade in Wuhan, along the harbour walls, sand, and rocks, ricocheting the crashings through our bodies and across water that might eventually find its way through wavelengths to Wuhan.

I wonder what the passersby made of our rabble on the beach? Did they move closer, long to join us, and jump down onto the sand to shake the world with us? Did they stay well back, head down, eyes askance, and keep walking on? I doubt any of them noticed my fall: I was just one, a tiny one, a barely imperceptible one of many bigger, wholesale, global, over-over-over-overwhelming, crashing falls of these and other times.

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Crave

By Sarah Kane. Directed by Tinuke Craig. Chichester Festival Theatre. 29 October - November 2020. Watched via stream on 7 November.

A dialogue between Kit Narey and Alex Watson

Kit Narey (KN) is a postgraduate student in Gender, Violence and Conflict studies. Alex Watson (AW) is a postgraduate researcher specialising in 2010s British theatre and theories of violence.

AW: Sarah Kane's *Crave*, which debuted in 1998, is a play about isolation, about never being able to fully understand the experiences and emotional depths of another person. The Chichester Festival Theatre production was to be performed to a socially distanced audience when the 'circuit-breaker' lockdown of November occurred. The artistic director, Daniel Evans, responded by organising several ticketed live-streams which could be watched at home. We watched one of these together—but apart. I thought an interdisciplinary dialogue in response to the performance was warranted, not least because of your background in gender and violence studies, which are prominent considerations for Kane's work overall. To start this off, I wanted to ask how your experience of the circumstances around the production impacted how you viewed it (or vice versa)?

KN: As you mention, isolation is the key word. In November we were back to pacing the house in lockdown, so the production felt especially timely. Aside from the economic and health challenges experienced by so many of us this past year, there's been so much space for dark inner monologues because we have all, at times and to differing extents, been lonely. It felt very relevant to those experiences, with suffering endured by all of us in the global pandemic in a shared but individually distinct way. Despair was (and still is) not exactly in short supply—in the news and in conversations with friends. To see it so clearly manifested on stage was impactful.



Fig. 1: (Left to right) Alfred Enoch (B), Erin Doherty (C), Wendy Kweh (M), and Jonathan Slinger (A; also on screen) in Tinuke Craig's production of Sarah Kane's *Crave*. Set designed by Alex Lowde. Photo by Alex Watson (2020).

AW: Agreed. At the same time it was also great to experience 'live' theatre. Although the performance was streamed, it had a different energy to the pre-recorded shows that we've seen through National Theatre at Home, for example. But your image of 'pacing the house' brings to mind the director Tinuke Craig's distinct scenography in this production—namely, the four treadmills (see fig. 1). The movement director, Jenny Ogilvie, seems to push the performers/characters to continually balance, to be 'on their toes' and struggle against their momentum. Craig's inclusion of the treadmills seems to be an open symbol that can be interpreted through some of the issues you've mentioned: economic precarity, the struggle of isolation, and the perpetual cycle of dealing with depression—on a treadmill you are in competition with yourself. Do any of your own studies reflect on the concerns that the treadmills might allude to?

KN: The first thing that comes to mind is the idea of cycles of violence, abuse and suffering, which can come in many forms. C's repeated

victimisation (played here by Erin Doherty) at the hands of people they should be able to trust shows how instances of violence are not isolated events: they echo through lives, leaving marks. Survivors of abuse are often targeted because of their vulnerability, and these experiences can then open them up to further vulnerabilities, meaning that some people experience violence on a chronic basis (as noted by Dick Sobsey and Tanis Doe). We keep moving, but trauma moves with us. Though more contested, it's also thought that if the right (or rather, wrong) set of circumstances occur, we might also see ourselves transform from victim to perpetrator as the rotating motor of suffering pushes us onwards.

AW: Of course, we could certainly question the considerations behind presenting the complexities of victim/perpetrator dynamics in a time and context where reports of domestic abuse, for example, have increased in frequency...

KN: Absolutely, and the first thing to say is that abuse is never justifiable—and I don't think this production endorses or exonerates it. The second is that if we see the rate of any form of violence increase, this is due at least in part to a shift in external circumstances, creating the conditions of possibility for that violence to occur. This changes over time and arises and relocates on a continuum of violence comprising space, time, and form within a society that enables or permits certain behaviours and dynamics (as seen in the research of Liz Kelly and Caroline Moser). Perpetrators rarely see themselves as perpetrators, creating a false, manufactured ambiguity of reality. I'm thinking of A (played by Jonathan Slinger) casually referencing vile acts of child abuse before calmly moving onto other topics. Their presumed victim, C, does not gloss over it so lightly, because for them it was of course a traumatic, world-altering experience. Critically and directly witnessing this is complicated and uncomfortable, as it requires you to consider how someone can do something so incomprehensibly awful and keep

‘walking along their treadmill.’ The characters’ fractured narratives capture this complexity in an unsettling way—but it’s an unsettling concept, so it feels appropriate.

AW: Yes, Kane’s work seems to have this ‘unsettling’ motif of troubling the audience’s empathetic relationship (or lack of one) with perpetrators, which has been posed as enabling a critical distance (as written on by Hillary Chute). In *Blasted* (1995), we are confronted with a coercive rapist only for him to be ‘humanised’ through being placed in vulnerable situations; in *Cleansed* (1998), the masochistic torturer Tinker appears to be in desperate need of love. Katie Mitchell’s 2016 National Theatre production of the latter (which we also both saw) considerably downplayed this aspect of the character to adhere to the dramaturgy, which was informed by Rebecca Solnit’s posing of violence as gendered (*Men Explain Things to Me*)—or, as Mitchell articulates it, ‘that it’s men who do violence’ (interview with Matt Trueman 18.47). On the other hand, Craig’s *Crave* seems to foreground the text’s troubled dynamic between distance and empathy: the projection behind the performers reveals close-ups of their faces, and the treadmills physicalise the characters’ personal struggles. So the ‘humanisation’ of their faces and labouring bodies are met with the distance of the individual treadmills and the screens (including the screens we are watching through at home). I’d like to get your opinion on this—but I think Craig’s production arguably presents Solnit’s understanding of there being a continuum of gender violence (which you mention above) in a more effective way than Mitchell, precisely because of this difficult tension between distance and empathy, between victim and perpetrator. For example, rather than explicitly making ‘men do violence’, *Crave* (as well as not actually showing any explicit violence) intertwines these two positions across its four characters—to differing extents—which is truer to theorisations of how this continuum is perpetuated.

KN: I think you're right; Craig's *Crave* did an impressive job of showing the nuanced, evolving nature of that continuum. As you say, it's not just the spectacular displays, it starts with the subtlest abuses of power, extending 'from minor social misery to violent silencing and violent death' (Solnit 16). I also find it interesting that although none of the characters are marked by any particular gender, it creeps back in in recognisable ways (the casting director Charlotte Sutton obviously assigns certain performers accordingly here). There is a shifting pattern of complicity and exploitation that we are all part of, though we are taught to see ourselves as free agents—both separating us from any understanding of our role in the continuum, and also allowing society to ignore the ways that it permits these dynamics to arise. We are put on these separate treadmills, hooked up to a system we have no real control over. If things go bad, or something is done to us and we stumble and fall, we are told that it is us 'doing individuality wrong.' But violence is not just enabled and ignored in our society, it's also woven into structures, so doing violence of some kind is almost inevitable. We are all victims and perpetrators—a tension that could itself be described as a social 'balancing act'—and this can change across lifetimes, across relationships, even from minute to minute. I thought Craig's production captured this well.

Something we've not mentioned yet, which I think is important to *Crave* and *Cleansed*, is that violence is certainly not the only concern. I find it so easy to focus on because of my areas of interest, but both plays are also about love, and the power and the pain of love. It stands in stark contrast to the violence, but in some places is inextricably interwoven. Watching it hurts, because love can be a narrative refuge where we can hide and heal from pain, but in both plays it drags the pain along with it or cruelly births it. In Mitchell's *Cleansed* I felt like love was present and hideous; in Craig's *Crave* it felt absent yet, unsurprisingly, desperately desired. Which brings us back to how timely it felt when so many of us were separated from our loved ones, and how watching it was actually a little bit cathartic.

AW: Yes—my own studies on violence mark this topic out for me too. Perhaps the depiction of love in Kane’s work is meant to, as you say, complicate our understanding of love and its relation to violence: an arguable inspiration for *Cleansed* is Roland Barthes’ provocative and problematic contemplation that love could be comparable to being an inmate of a concentration camp (49). But there is certainly something cathartic about seeing these complex feelings physicalised onstage. Craig stated in interview that, rather than looking to do ‘feelgood escapism’, she understood the necessity of people needing ‘a place to gather together and grieve’ (interview with Holly Williams). Though this could not be actualised in physical space—resulting in the only time I’ve watched performers bow to complete silence, no applause in the empty auditorium whatsoever (a very weird experience)—Craig’s production certainly understands the power of how Kane symbolises and actualises the aching and torturous depths of love, loneliness, despair, isolation, and violence. And despite that morbidity, I’m glad to share that experience with another person—the uncanny relation of watching this together, but apart, is ‘very Sarah Kane,’ I think!

KN: Definitely. I actually felt emotional at the lack of applause—it was easy to imagine everyone in their respective homes clapping at their impassive screens, with no way of transmitting that approval—we’ve all done so much clapping into the void this past year! Despite being a stark reminder of the unprecedented situation at hand, it was dramatic to create a shared experience of remembering in that moment. In grief or not, I feel that theatre has definitely proven itself to be a powerful tool to bring people together over the past year—not just in terms of entertainment to be consumed and dissected, but also as elusive and valuable shared experiences. In witnessing representations of isolation together, we (for a while) overcome it.

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