

attempted in Boucher studies, and Wakefield should not be blamed for not exploring it.

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### BAS JAN ADER: IN SEARCH OF THE MIRACULOUS

JAN VERWOERT

Afterall Books 2006 £9.95 \$16.00  
71 pp. 16 col illus.  
ISBN 1-84638-002-2

In his tragically short career, the Dutch-born artist Bas Jan Ader has often been called a romantic conceptualist, a seeming contradiction considering the dry, analytical approach of his peers. Themes of noble tragedy, majestic triumph, even grand failure: these were concerns of the Romantics and the Abstract Expressionists – certainly not rigorous subject matter for conceptualist artists. Ader apparently held retrograde interests, but he certainly was no reactionary. He also paid dearly for his art.

In 1975 Ader set sail from Cape Cod, Massachusetts, in a one-person sailboat for the second part of his three-piece work, *In Search of the Miraculous*. He never completed his transatlantic voyage to Falmouth, England: radio contact was lost three weeks into the journey, and eight months later his boat was discovered partially submerged off the coast of Ireland. Ader's body was never found.

Jan Verwoert discusses all these issues and more in *Bas Jan Ader: In Search of the Miraculous*, one of the first in Afterall Books' planned series of 100 short volumes dedicated to single works of influential contemporary art. This book's publication also coincided with a retrospective of Ader's work held in London and Rotterdam in 2006.

Briefly, *In Search* consists of photographs of a night walk in Los Angeles, where he lived and worked, and a chorus of friends and students sing old sea hymns; the ocean crossing; and another night walk in Amsterdam. In an engaging, cumulative argument that spans only 49 pages, the author emphasises how this work investigates rather than embodies the very subject of the romantic, denying the common reading of the artist as a tragic figure, as his death at sea and the resulting cult of personality would have it.

Through the sophisticated use of textual and mass-culture sources – outdated music (old pop songs, even older sea shanties) and obsolete methods of international travel (sailing instead of flying) – this work critically explores how existential thought and the romantic quest for the sublime might still be relevant.

Since Ader lived only to age 33, Verwoert discusses a number of other works. Photographs and short films depicting the artist crying (*I'm Too Sad to Tell You*) and a simple written plea painted on a wall (*Please Don't Leave Me*) present not the expression of the artist's personal feelings but rather demonstrate how verbal and visual signs, taken out of a narrative context, become rhetorical devices serving an appellative function. At the same time, Verwoert argues, Ader never discounts, either cynically or ironically, the power of emotional address: 'Rather than being products of subconscious causes', as an expressionist canvas is, Ader's artworks 'are productive themselves in that they seek to trigger reactions and analogous feelings'. The artist's search now becomes the viewer's.

For many conceptual artists, the idea took precedence over form and content: ideas could be works of art in themselves. Implied in this was a rejection of Romanticism. Ader, though, understood these taboo subjects as abstract ideas and urgently tested their validity. Verwoert's book helps us to understand better the artist's conceptual project.

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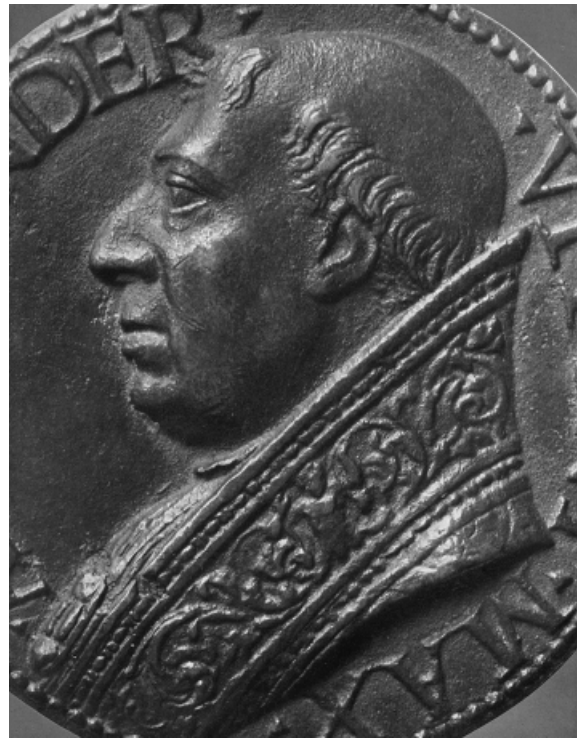
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### THE BURNING OF THE VANITIES SAVONAROLA AND THE BORGIA POPE

DESMOND SEWARD

Sutton Publishing 2006 £20.00 \$24.95  
320 pp. 17 mono illus.  
ISBN 0-7509-2981-2

There are few topics that provide as tempting an opportunity for sensationalism as a biography of Girola-



A realistic portrait of Pope Alexander VI (Borgia), who stood for everything that Savonarola detested – and destroyed him. Medal. (Bibliothèque nationale, Paris). From *The Burning of the Vanities Savonarola and the Borgia Pope* by Desmond Seward.

mo Savonarola – visionary or madman? Heretic or saint? For the art historian, Savonarola is usually treated in the context of the 'bonfires of vanities' of 1497 and 1498, where the focus is on the destruction of luxury goods – including paintings – and Savonarola's formidable influence on such artists as Sandro Botticelli and Michelangelo.

Desmond Seward forgoes the chance of going along this well-travelled road, and seeks instead to offer a balanced portrayal of the friar in an account that stands out for the author's sensitive treatment of the political and religious climate of Florence and Rome in the 1490s. Seward's account of Savonarola's life encompasses the friar's entry into the Dominican order and his rise to prominence in the 1490s, culminating in his appointment as prior of the monastery of San Marco, and the subsequent entry of San Marco into a new Observant Dominican congregation. Here, Savonarola's policies as prior placed the monastery of San Marco firmly within the orbit of religious reform, and, in particular, circles associated with conciliar sympathies. In other words, Savonarola's actions as prior