

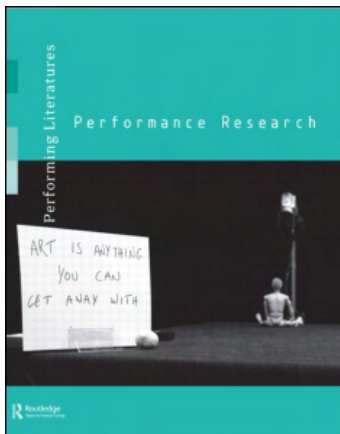
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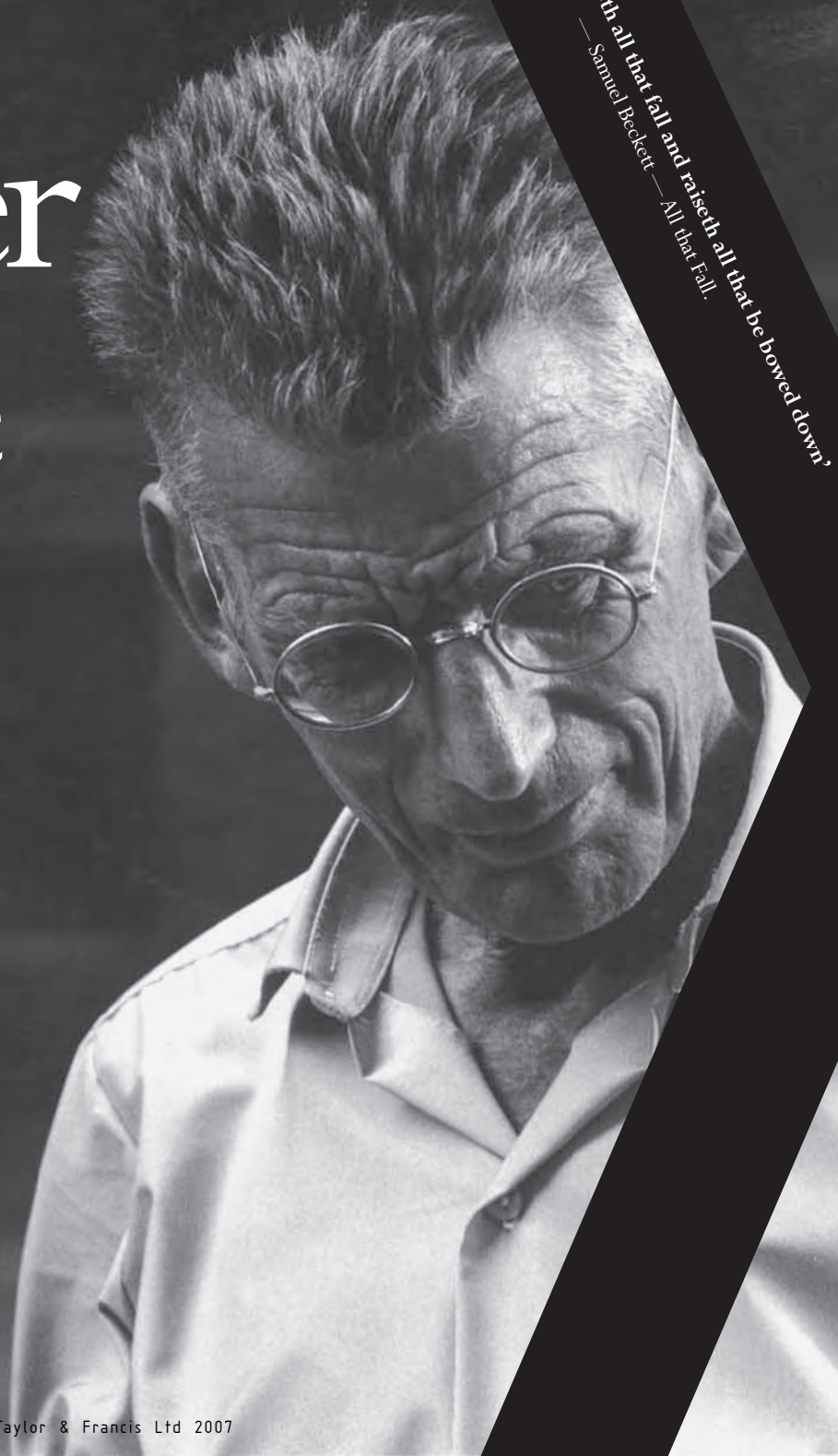
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# After the Fall

The Performative Art  
of Samuel Beckett &  
Bas Jan Ader

Judith Wilkinson

*'The Lord upholdeth all that fall and raiseth all that be bowed down,'*  
— Samuel Beckett — *All that Fall.*



**N**ight falls with a thud in the world of Bas Jan Ader. Although he completed a poignant and hilarious series of falling works before his mysterious disappearance of 1975, Ader's film *Nightfall* (1971) is by far his most powerful. Standing alone in a stark brick garage, garbed in black and lit only by two small bulbs placed strategically on the floor, Ader contemplates a large concrete slab. Shot in black and white and on 16mm, the film has an incandescent quality. There is an unsettling graininess to the image that renders the figure half present and shrouds it in a spectral aura. Hoisting the heavy slab scarcely above his left shoulder, Ader attempts to hold its weight with the palm of his hand. Wrist bent, the artist's arm wavers under the undue strain of the object, and eventually he can hold it no longer. It falls. Crashing to the floor, the left light is extinguished by the fallen mass. Now in partial darkness, Ader begins his unlikely routine anew. Repeating his performance stage right the result is the same. With the final blow the film ends and we, the viewers, are left without light.

Around the same time as Ader produced *Nightfall*, Samuel Beckett was busy creating a new series of black-and-white images designed to fit inside a television screen. Beckett's carefully considered compositions present a vision of life lived without colour. Light emanates and falls in these curious scenes often from an unknown source. As it falls, figures pass in and out of it, moving precariously through the shadows of a monochrome landscape.

There are of course more obvious incidents of falling that come to mind when one mentions the work of Beckett or Bas Jan Ader. The Dutch artist, for

instance, became infamous for his death-defying sequence of falling works, in which he placed his own body immediately at risk. Tumbling from the roof of his California home, or into a picturesque canal in Amsterdam, Ader continually tempted fate and poked fun at the macho heroics that preoccupied so many of his artistic contemporaries. But unlike those of physical performance artists such as Chris Burden or Vito Acconci, Ader's actions were less about bodily experience or the endurance of pain and more reminiscent of the vaudeville antics of Harold Lloyd and Buster Keaton. In a statement made in the early 1970s, Ader clearly defines the key differences between his practice and the deluge of artworks made with the body at this time: 'I do not make body sculpture, body art or body works,' he explains; 'When I fell off the roof of my house or into a canal, it was because gravity made a master over me' (Ader 2006).

The importance of Ader's individual body is erased from the performative act by virtue of a process of continual repetition. His obsessive re-staging of his small number of works forces the viewer's attention away from the persona of the falling artist and towards the concept of falling itself. The artist refuses his audience any insight into the fall other than that which can be gleaned from the precise moment of its occurrence. In repeating this isolated act ad infinitum, Ader freezes in our consciousness the image of the anonymous figure falling.

Similarly inspired by slapstick comedy, Samuel Beckett constructed spaces riddled with ditches and pitfalls into which his characters unwittingly drop. From his early novels *Watt* and *Mercier & Camier* on, Beckett's characters possess an alarming propensity towards

PREVIOUS PHOTO  
Samuel Beckett during  
the filming of *Film*,  
New York, 1964

PHOTO CREDIT  
I.C. Rapoport.

'I do not make body sculpture, body art or body works.  
When I fell off the roof of my house or into a canal, it was  
because gravity made a master over me.'  
— Bas Jan Ader

imbalance (and Watt's ungainly gait is now immortalized in the annals of contemporary art by Bruce Nauman's 1968 re-enactment, *Slow Angle Walk* or *Beckett Walk*). Watt upends himself on the station platform, Molloy is continually catapulted from his unwieldy bicycle, and Didi and Gogo punctuate their wait by tripping each other up. Inserted by Beckett chiefly for their immediate and obvious comic effect, the absurd falls of the early works also serve to build a rhythmic pattern of textual interruption. Using these essential interludes to increase the momentum of the text, Beckett often introduced a new idea amidst the kerfuffle, or allowed the story to change its course. Yet as Beckett began to abandon any clear form of narrative structure in his work,



PHOTO ABOVE  
Bas Jan Ader.  
*Nightfall*, 16mm film, 1971

PHOTO CREDIT  
Mary Sue Ader-Anderson-  
Bas Jan Ader Estate, Courtesy  
of Patrick Painter Editions

such diversionary devices became less crucial. The concept of the fall, however, remained an important motif for Beckett, although its form and function were to be radically transformed.

If the trajectory of Beckett's works can be characterized, as it so often is, as a continual process of reduction and paring down, then the television plays represent a vault forward in this direction. The physical falls of the earlier works are here replaced by a falling away of all that is deemed inessential; an evacuation of narrative, detail and even language. Gone are the mesmerizing rhythmic texts and humorous turns of phrase, succeeded instead by a series of enigmatic figures: the hooded clones of *Quad*, the bodiless

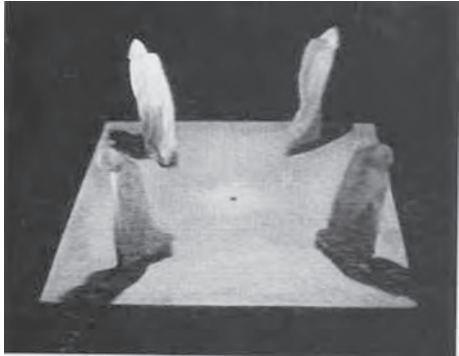


PHOTO ABOVE  
Samuel Beckett.  
From the television play  
*Quad*, 1980

PHOTO CREDIT  
Südwestrundfunk  
Germany

heads of *Was Wo*, and the ghostly dreamer of *Nacht und Träume*. These characters carry no props, have little trace of physical affection and often barely emerge from their chiaroscuro backdrops. Stripped of any form of individuality they gain significance only as part of the image-space they occupy. Beckett's concentration on the importance of the images he was creating for television represents his boldest move into the visual.

We should not imagine, however, that Beckett's quest for the creation of the perfect image began the moment he picked up a camera; he was constantly working towards this end, and his fascination with the visual can be traced back to his early student life in Dublin. While at Trinity College, Beckett forged strong relationships with influential figures in the visual arts: Thomas MacGreevy (Director of the National Gallery from 1950–1963) and Jack B. Yeats, painter and brother to William Butler. Spending many long hours studying everything from Old Masters to the German Expressionists, Beckett took copious notes and recorded the details of images that later re-appear in his own work. His interest in aesthetics, encouraged also by his art-dealer uncle 'Boss' Sinclair, did

not, as many believe, grow out of his love of literature but was always for Beckett a passion of parallel importance. In fact, on two separate occasions Beckett even considered a career move into the visual arts, applying in 1933 for a job as a curator at the National Gallery in London, and later to the great film maker Sergei Eisenstein for work as his apprentice.

As is demonstrated by Beckett's now famous 1937 letter to German critic Axel Kaun, the young writer had already at an early stage in his artistic development become disillusioned with the capabilities of language. 'It is indeed becoming more and more difficult', Beckett complained, 'even senseless for me to write an official English. And more and more', he continued, 'my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it' (Cohn 1984: 171). The things that lay behind this veil of obfuscating language, Beckett believed, were pure images – images which could only be allowed to emerge in his writing if he abandoned the traditional rules of literature and adopted those of music, dance, painting or film.



In repeating this isolated act ad infinitum, Ader freezes in our consciousness the image of the anonymous figure falling.



PHOTO ABOVE  
Bas Jan Ader.  
*Fall I*, Los Angeles,  
16 mm film, 1970

PHOTO CREDIT:  
Mary Sue Ader-Anderson-  
Bas Jan Ader Estate, Courtesy  
of Patrick Painter Editions

The move to French was yet another way in which Beckett attempted to overcome the creative handicaps he found inherent in the use of his native tongue. It is therefore interesting to trace how, as a result of this linguistic crossover, the images in Beckett's texts began to alter once he adopted what he hoped would be a writing 'without style'. Like the Cubists he so admired, Beckett began to strip away all decorative excess from his work to attempt to capture the essence of the image.

In Beckett, the 'old chestnuts'— images of Beckett's childhood home and its surrounding trees, hills, coast, dogs, bicycles and travelling souls — return to us in the later texts as mere snapshots of a reality once lived in full. The larch trees that grew up around Cooldrinagh, and the forty-foot male-only swimming preserve to which Beckett's father would take him and his brother Frank, both found a special place in Beckett's writing. Referring

to these poignant images over and over again, Beckett describes the fear and exhilaration of leaping from the high boughs of the fir trees (despite his mother's admonishments) and of hurtling his small fragile body into the angry waves of the Irish Sea. 'You are alone in the garden', the voice in Beckett's *Company* recounts:

Your mother is in the kitchen making ready for afternoon tea with Mrs Coote. Making the wafer-thin bread and butter. From behind the bush you watch Mrs Coote arrive. A small thin sour woman. Your mother answers her saying he is playing in the garden. You climb to near the top of a great fir. You sit a little listening to all the sounds. Then throw yourself off. The great boughs break your fall. The needles. You lie a little with your face to the ground. Then climb the tree again. Your mother answers Mrs Coote again saying, He has been a very naughty boy. (Beckett 1996: 14–15)

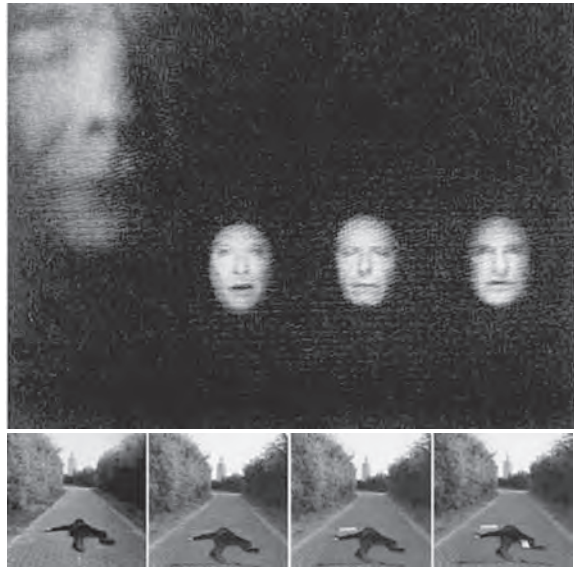


PHOTO ABOVE  
Samuel Beckett.  
From the television play  
*What Where*, 1983

PHOTO CREDIT  
Südwestrundfunk  
Germany

PHOTO BELOW  
Bas Jan Ader.  
On the road to a  
new Neo Plasticism,  
*Westkapelle*, Holland, 1971

PHOTO CREDIT  
Mary Sue Ader-Anderson-  
Bas Jan Ader Estate, Courtesy  
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And then again in the same text:

You stand at the tip of the high board. High above the sea. In it your father's upturned face. He calls you to jump. He calls, Be a brave boy. The red round face. The thick moustache. The greying hair. The swell sways it under and sways it up again. The far call again, Be a brave boy. Many eyes upon you. From the water and from the bathing place. (Beckett 1996: 12)

This terrifying image of a young boy being forced to jump into a perilous pool of choppy water recurs throughout Beckett's writing, having first appeared in his novel *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1932) and again much later in his last novel written in English, *Watt* (1953).

The theatre provided for Beckett, as would music, choreography, film and television later, a new medium in which to try and work through his unsettling archive of imagery. The suspended Mouth of *Not I*, the lone tree of *Godot* and the urn-entrapped creatures of *Play* are but a few of the iconic images that have inspired much contemporary video, installation and performance art practice.

In their film, photography and video experiments of the 1970s, Beckett and Bas Jan Ader share an obsession with a process of refining, isolating and intensifying their images. Yet if these works represent a point of convergence, the trajectories of the two artists emanate from remarkably divergent origins. Bas Jan Ader is explicit about operating in the imposing shadow of his artistic predecessor and fellow Dutchman Piet Mondrian. Inspired by Mondrian's pursuit of spirituality through minimalism, Ader forges his own path towards the miraculous. But unlike Mondrian's paintings, which reflect a restrained sense of harmony and precision, Ader's path is littered with obstructions and hazards. With both hilarious and often tragic results, Ader struggles to reconcile his desire for a reality reduced to simplicity and order with the messy inconsistencies thrown up by everyday life. It is this very impossibility to live up to Mondrian's utopian vision that Ader explores in works such as *Pitfall on the Road to a New Neo-Plasticism* (1971) and *Primary Time* (1974).

In the video work *Primary Time*, Ader faces a vase of mixed flowers, which he proceeds to separate out into the primary



PHOTO CAPTION  
Bas Jan Ader.  
*Fall II*, Amsterdam,  
16mm film, 1970

PHOTO CREDIT  
Mary Sue Ader-Anderson-  
Bas Jan Ader Estate, Courtesy  
of Patrick Painter Editions

colours, blue, red and yellow. This attempt at simplification is presented as an act of futility, as the individual differences of each flower persists despite their similarities of colour. By the end of the 25-minute piece, the flowers have been returned to their original jumbled state in an acknowledgement of failure. In a series of still images entitled *Pitfall on the Road to a New Neo-Plasticism*, Ader again pokes fun at the lofty ambitions of his artistic forefather. Confronted by the young artist face down on the ground, we are reminded of a familiar Beckettian pose. Tripping along the path towards Mondrian's Westphalle tower, Ader's own imperfect body forms the vertical and horizontal lines on a makeshift blue blanket canvas. The materials with which Ader works, his own body included, continually deny his quest for minimalist order, and he is likewise betrayed by his choice of medium. Whereas Mondrian found the spiritual harmony he sought in the abstraction of the paint-

ed line, the lens of Ader's camera, whether photographic, film or video, eagerly absorbs the messy details of the mundane.

Ader's camera thus captures the difficulty of living up to the legacy of abstract minimalism, but for Beckett the move to primarily visual, sonic and later filmic media held the promise of a reduction that had eluded him in writing. Beckett, responding not to a history of visual minimalism, but to Joyce's masterful example of literary expansion, found in the camera a way to reckon with the sensory overload left in his mentor's wake. Elucidating what he saw as an influence ab contrario, Beckett offered the following account of his relationship with Joyce to his biographer Jim Knowlson:

I realised that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, in control of one's material. He was always adding to it; you only have to look at the proofs to see





PHOTO ABOVE  
Samuel Beckett.  
From the television play  
*Nacht und Traume*, 1983

PHOTO CREDIT  
Südwestrundfunk  
Germany

that. I realised that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, subtracting rather than adding... We are diametrically opposite because Joyce was a synthesiser, he wanted to put everything, the whole of human culture into one or two books, and I am an analyser. I take away all the accidentals because I want to come down to the bedrock of the essentials, the archetypal. (Knowlson and Knowlson 2006: 47)

In her essay on *Not I*, Linda Ben-Zvi discusses the transference of this Beckettian classic from stage to the medium of television. In this process of adaptation, Ben-Zvi argues, the aura of the actress is lost. Instead of viewing an individual who has gone through the torture Billie Whitelaw (Beckett's muse) described (Ben-Zvi 1988: 24), we as a television audience are allowed to witness the unrelenting pain of the pulsating mouth protected by the anonymity of the voyeuristic camera lens. What television offers, Ben-Zvi explains,

'is the mechanical reproduction of the event, the camera freezing the moment, acting as a bridge between the viewer and the image mechanically captured on screen (1988:25).

In the work of both Beckett and Bas Jan Ader the aura of the individual is erased. All that is left is the image. Both artists limited their palettes, in a minimalist move towards an essential clarity of vision. Creating images composed largely of black, white and shades of grey, both artists allowed only the primary colours to contaminate their otherwise monochrome terrains. Yet Beckett and Ader, each in his own way, allude to the impossibility of this aspiration for perfected exactness. Ader's comic gestures highlight the difficulty of living up to the artistic vision bequeathed by his modernist predecessors, while Beckett's compulsive repetition, reduction and restaging form an always incomplete movement towards a definite resolution.

However, I am not suggesting through my discussion of Beckett's TV plays and the work of Bas Jan Ader that Beck-

The concept of the fall, however, remained an important motif for Beckett, although its form and function were to be radically transformed.



PHOTO ABOVE  
Samuel Beckett during  
the filming of *Quad*.  
Sddeutcher Rundfunk,  
Stuttgart, 1981

PHOTO CREDIT  
Hugo Jehle.

ett's move to the visual was a complete departure from his written practice. I believe that Beckett like Ader, was above all an image-maker. Whether it is the chattering figures of *Come and Go* or the bracing depiction of light in *Lessness*, the reader or viewer of, or listener to, the Beckett text is confronted with a point of composition: condensed, isolated and intensified. Beckett's uncanny ability to portray a vision of life in one immutable moment spans the breadth of his entire artistic production.

Finally, contrary to the general historical reading of the trope of falling, which so often equates it with failure, I would like to propose that in the works of Beckett and Bas Jan Ader we momentarily fall out of life, over and over again. We suspend our experience of reality, give ourselves over to the forces of gravity and the fall. Most importantly, these are the kinds of fallings that engender a

new beginning, create a fresh start and lead to further creativity. ■

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