

The ironic turn: the 'self-portraits' of Dutch conceptual artists Ger van Elk and Bas Jan Ader

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## Introduction

If you ask me, the history of mankind falls into three significant stages. In the first, man didn't recognise his own reflection, any more than an animal does. (...) Man was no different to start with. One hundred per cent subjective. An 'I' that could question a 'self' did not exist. Second stage: Narcissus discovers the mirror image. (...) Henceforth the 'I' sees a 'self'. There was no demand for psychological insight at this stage, for man was to himself what he was, namely his mirror image. Whether or not he liked what he saw, his self did not betray him. I and self were symmetrical, each other's mirror image, no more than that. We lie and our reflection lies with us. Only in the third stage were we dealt the blow of truth. The third stage begins with the invention of photography. (...) In former times, when people had their portraits painted and they didn't like the result, they blamed the artist. But the camera can't lie, as we all know. So it is revealed to you over the years through countless photographs that you aren't really yourself most of the time, that you and your self are not symmetrical, indeed that you exist in a variety of strange incarnations for which you would refuse all responsibility if you could. (...) An I seeking to assert itself amid the constant clamour of alter egos. This is the third stage, in which self-doubt, previously a rare state of mind, flared into consternation.

Alfred Issendorf in Willem Frederik Hermans<sup>1</sup>

The self-portrait has played a central role in the history of European art. In the last decade several museums organised exhibitions that presented selections of artistic self-images in various media, which reflected different historical stages, such as 'the early self-assurance of the Renaissance artist, (...), the sentimental subjectivity in Romantic self-portraiture, (...), and finally the obsessive questioning of the self in the era of photography and video.'<sup>2</sup> Museum Arnhem aimed to show the 'evolution of this genre from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present', in the exhibition *The Mirrored Eye. The Self-Portrait in Dutch Art 1900-2015*, which ran from October 3, 2015 until January 24, 2016.<sup>3</sup>

The exhibition was chronologically ordered with different thematic clusters, since 'the genre has not only considerably developed over time, but artists of the same generation also approach self-portraits in entirely different ways'.<sup>4</sup> During my internship at the museum, I researched the 'self-portraits' of Dutch conceptual artists from the 1960s and

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<sup>1</sup> Hermans, 2007, p. 42.

<sup>2</sup> 'I Am Here! From Rembrandt to the Selfie', 2015. <<http://www.kunsthalle-karlsruhe.de/en/exhibitions/preview-i-am-here.html>> (Web. 05 May 2016).

<sup>3</sup> 'Press release to the exhibition the Mirrored Eye', 2015. <<http://www.museumarnhem.nl/ENG/pers/persberichten/spiegelooog-het-zelfportret-in-de-nederlandse-kunst>> (Web. 05 May 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem <<http://www.museumarnhem.nl/ENG/pers/persberichten/spiegelooog-het-zelfportret-in-de-nederlandse-kunst>> (Web. 05 May 2016).

1970s that were exhibited.<sup>5</sup> This thesis continues to research this subject, but will particularly focus on the artists Ger van Elk (born 9 March 1941, Amsterdam – 17 August 2014) and Bas Jan Ader (born 19 April 1942, Winschoten – disappeared 1975, North Atlantic Ocean); both often used their body and new media as templates for their artworks. They were contemporaries and attended the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam (then called the Instituut voor Kunstnijverheidsonderwijs). Van Elk studied there from 1959 to 1961 and continued his education at the Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles in California from 1961 to 1963.<sup>6</sup> Bas Jan Ader started in Amsterdam in 1959, and the following year he lived as an exchange student near Washington D.C.<sup>7</sup> Ader settled permanently in the United States in 1963; he also attended the Immaculate Heart College and later earned a Master of Fine Arts degree at Claremont Graduate University, where he also studied philosophy.<sup>8</sup> From August 28 to October 3, 2015, Grimm gallery in Amsterdam dedicated a duo-exhibition to the work of both artists. The exhibition underlines the parallels between the two contemporaries.

Two filmic ‘self-portraits’, made by Van Elk and Ader, were present in the Arnhem exhibition. The film *Some natural aspects of sculpture* (1970-2002) (Figure 1) by Van Elk was shown on a plasma screen, originally being a 16-millimetre film projected onto a wall. The film starts with a close up of Van Elk’s upper body, with drops of sweat sliding down. This image fades out while a second one fades in. This time his left breast with a stiff nipple and armpit are visible. Van Elk’s body is shivering and his skin is getting goose bumps. Alternately, the two images fade in and out, each lasting approximately thirty seconds. Carel Blotkamp interprets Van Elk’s anatomical, sensual reactions to the environment as substitutes for the romantic idea of the physical pains an artist goes through, while creating a painting or sculpture, as Van Elk also indicates in the title.<sup>9</sup> By referring to the romantic conception of artistic labour and dedication, Van Elk seems to ironise his working position as a conceptual artist, whose artistic practice mainly consists of inventing ideas. According

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<sup>5</sup> The research included various Dutch conceptual artists: Bas Jan Ader (1942-1975), Marinus Boezem (1924), Stanley Brouwn (1935), Jan Dibbets (1941), Ger van Elk (1941-2014) and Pieter Engels (1938).

<sup>6</sup> Blotkamp, 2009, p. 102.

<sup>7</sup> Van Elk describes how he met Ader in America: ‘I knew that Bas Jan was trying to return to America. So I went to the embassy of the Netherlands and I said, “Whenever a certain Bas Jan Ader shows up, tell him that he should give me a call.” Then on a sunny day there was a phone call from the embassy and I spoke to Bas Jan. A yacht he was working on was found adrift on the ocean by the U.S. Coast Guard and brought to San Diego. He didn’t have a home or money, so he started staying with me. We found a nice apartment on Sunset Boulevard, in Hollywood. It only lasted for a short period. The neighbor set our house on fire and we had nothing for a while’ (Cherix, 2009, p. 54, p. 82.).

<sup>8</sup> Cherix, 2009, p. 54.

<sup>9</sup> Blotkamp, 1985, p. 104.

to Blotkamp, the coexistence of these seemingly incompatible issues results in a form of irony.<sup>10</sup>

A version of Ader's silent film *I'm too sad to tell you* (1971, 3'18) (Figure 2a-b) was looped on a 22-inch flat screen. The artist's head is shown frontally and fills the screen, in front of a neutral background. He is crying constantly during the whole film. One moment Ader tries to control his emotions by taking controlled breaths and swallowing his saliva, the next he breaks down and bursts into tears again. The film does not have a beginning or end, and does not provide reasons for Ader's tears. The title already suggests that he is either unable or unwilling to give an explanation for his grief. Jan Verwoert argues that Ader's film in a conceptual way 'isolated the idea of sadness for no reason' and can be read as an 'allegory of melancholy'.<sup>11</sup> The work contains an 'existential truth', by which Verwoert refers to the actual presence of an emotion in Ader's body. The work also 'appears like a practical study (...) in the visual rhetoric of representing sadness'.<sup>12</sup> Ader's work thus can be understood in conceptual, existential and rhetorical terms, but also in an ironic way.<sup>13</sup> Ader is re-enacting crying; the theatrical quality of the work calls into question Ader's sincerity, posing the question: Is Ader even really sad? The confrontation of this theatricality with sincerity gives the work an ironic cachet.

Both works can be related to conceptual art, in particular to the tendencies of Dutch conceptual art. In an encyclopaedic overview from 1960, called *Kunst van nu* (1971), conceptual art is concisely described as:

[A]n art direction, which has developed since circa 1966, wherein the significance lies rather in abstract ideas, than in a material visualisation thereof. The ultimate consequence of this tendency is the autonomous idea, without any type of materialization. Consequently, ideas were often conveyed in written or spoken words. (...) Ideas could also be presented as blueprints, i.e. in the form of sketches, graphs, photographs etc. (...) The realization of projects was always secondary.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, pp. 104-105.

<sup>11</sup> Verwoert, 2006, pp. 16-17.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, pp. 18-19.

<sup>13</sup> Jörg Heiser explains Ader's 16-mm silent film *I'm too sad to tell you* as a conceptual instruction piece. The work is a documentation of a staged emotion, like one would give an instruction to an actor that has to sit in front of the camera and cry for the duration of the film reel (Heiser, 2007, p. 62). He also sees the work as a conceptual abstraction of a melodramatic feeling, as he states that the crying is 'moving and his grief seems earnest', but on the other hand it is like staging 'as an educational film on anthropology a basic human behavior using common facial expressions' (Heiser, 2002, np. <<https://frieze.com/article/emotional-rescue>> Web. 03 June 2016).

<sup>14</sup> Blotkamp (a.o.), 1971, np. Translation by the author.

Correspondingly to this description, both works started with the formation of an idea, which then is executed and recorded.<sup>15</sup> The works are documentations or registrations of natural human characteristics, or physical experiences of the artists. The execution of the idea is boiled down to its essentials and deprived of excess features. Furthermore, all expressive aspects, like colour and sound, are minimized or absent. The conceptual approach and manner of using these technical means in a way depersonalise the self-portraits, as subjectivity, narrative and capriciousness are avoided as much as possible. Besides adhering to this conceptual methodology, both self-portraits contain a form of irony.

What struck me about these works of art was their classification as self-portraits. Never before had I noticed the inclusion of conceptual art in the evolution of self-portraiture. The catalogue accompanying the exhibition in Arnhem describes the self-portrait as a manifestation of a complex artistic psyche in search for the self, as an object for self-expression and self-examination.<sup>16</sup> The conceptual works of art seemed out of place, they did not correspond to the description of the self-portrait from the exhibition catalogue, or to my own understanding of conventional notions on self-portraiture. A first provisional research question therefore reads: How are Van Elk's and Ader's ironical and conceptual works of art compatible with the genre of self-portraiture, apart from the fact that they represent the artists?

First of all, it must be emphasized that the genre of self-portraiture is not monolithic, but changes over time, which can already be noticed when one examines Rembrandt van Rijn's (1606-1669) self-portraits, then called 'portraits of Rembrandt done by himself'.<sup>17</sup> In his *Portrait of the Artist at his Easel* (1660) (Figure 3), Rembrandt is dressed in old clothes, wearing a cap and shirt, his face weary and badly shaven. Rembrandt portrayed himself as an old master, poor, but serene in the solitude of creation.<sup>18</sup> Some art historians interpreted this work as 'form of an internal dialogue by a lonely old man communicating with himself while he painted', or they were 'the result of a necessary process of identity formation: they represent a conscious progressive quest for individual identity (...)'.<sup>19</sup> Ernst van de Wetering refutes interpretations of Rembrandt's self-portraits as a form of self-analysis or as a means

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<sup>15</sup> Blotkamp, 1985, p. 104. Ader's notebook contains a preliminary note to the work *I'm too sad to tell you*: 'Short film 'I'm too sad to tell you' drink tea sadly and begin to cry; postcard of me sadly crying, on back 'I'm too sad to tell you' / 'The space between us fills my heart with intolerable grief' / 'The thoughts of our inevitable and separate death fills my heart with intolerable grief' (Ader in: Andriess, 1988, p. 76).

<sup>16</sup> Westen (a.o.), 2015, p. 7-8. Since Romanticism, the beginning of the nineteenth century, self-portraiture was popularly seen as a 'map of the soul' and mainly involved 'expressing the psychological state' of the artist and the making of a self-portrait became almost automatically 'an attempt for introspection and self-analysis'.

<sup>17</sup> Van de Wetering, 1999, p. 17.

<sup>18</sup> Bredius, 1969, catalogue number 53.

<sup>19</sup> Van de Wetering, 1999, p. 10, p. 19.

of gaining self-knowledge. He argues that personal forms of self-reflection were impossible before the Romantic era and rejects this Romantic view of the self-portraiture, when applied before 1800.<sup>20</sup> According to Van de Wetering, Rembrandt used himself as model to demonstrate his artistic qualities and mastery of portraiture. In the seventeenth century there was a growing consciousness of art as the unique creation of an individual. Fame became a catalyst for making (self-)portraits, *vice versa* self-portraiture, mainly in print, was an effective way of garnering fame.<sup>21</sup> Faces of famous men, *uomini famosi*, including Rembrandt's, were collected. In the case of Rembrandt, the purchaser then owned both 'a portrait of an *uomo famosi* and (...) an autograph specimen of the reason for that fame – an exceptional painting technique'.<sup>22</sup>

Only later, around the beginning of the nineteenth century, the self-portrait was assigned with a new belief, namely that it could capture and give insight into the 'soul', the essence, inner self or identity of the portrayed subject. It became a tool for experimentation and expression. These concepts of inwardness, subjectivity and expressivity correspond to Vincent van Gogh's (1853-1890) statements about his artistic practice of making self-portraits. Firstly, the self-portrait was a means to examine the possibilities of painting and an exercise in model painting for which Van Gogh was his own cheap model.<sup>23</sup> According to Van Gogh, 'painted portraits have a life of their own that comes from deep in the soul of the painter and where the machine can't go'.<sup>24</sup> A picture always remained dead, while the painter could freely manipulate his practice to express a deeper meaning than only visual resemblance. Secondly, in his letters Van Gogh explained that portraiture should express 'the essential being' or self of the portrayed.<sup>25</sup> Art historians, like Juleke van Lindert, have interpreted Van Gogh's self-portraits by connecting them to psycho-autobiographical writings.<sup>26</sup> On circa 22 June 1888, Van Gogh wrote a letter, in which he comments on his *Self-portrait in front of the Easel* (Figure 4), from the beginning of that year. In this self-portrait Van Gogh is dressed in a blue blouson of the Parisian working class. He stands before his easel holding his palette. Van Gogh described that his face might well be considered as the face of death.<sup>27</sup> The conception of the self-portrait, as giving access to the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, p. 10, 18-19.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, p. 26-27.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 28, pp. 30-31.

<sup>23</sup> Van Lindert and Uitert, 1990, pp. 121-125.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, p. 47. See also: Hall, 2014, p. 205.

<sup>25</sup> Van Lindert and Uitert, 1990, p. 35.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, p. 111.

<sup>27</sup> Hulsker, 1980, catalogue number JH 1356. In a letter to his sister Willemijn from circa 22 juni 1888 Van Gogh writes: 'Ik ben nu toch zo over mijn eigen bezig, nu wil ik ook eens kijken of ik me mijn eigen portret er niet in kan schrijven. Vooreerst stel ik op de voorgrond dat eenzelfde persoon mijns inziens stof tot erg uiteenlopende portretten oplevert. Zie hier een

artist's self, was widely supported in Van Gogh's lifetime. The outer appearance of a person represented the character of the one portrayed; 'the human face was the mirror of the interior'.<sup>28</sup>

This change in the genre of self-portraiture probably coincides with the change in the conception of the self during the transition of these two stages; from humankind that did not question its own self during Rembrandt's lifetime to one that started to question the inner self and its emotions during Van Gogh's lifetime. It was exactly this self-centrality, or *Ich-bezogenheit*, of the romantic artist that was opposed and dissolved in the late 1960s. Conceptual artists rejected the aesthetics of mimesis, narrative, personal expression and authenticity. Likewise, Van Elk's and Ader's works are not idealistic, pointing to a true representation of the artist, nor are they psychological or expressive means to gain self-knowledge, or to release a deep emotion. Still, Gen Doy claims that the expectation that a portrait 'shows us the subject, the self, of another person, is actually a historically and socially constructed belief', which persists well into the postmodern period.<sup>29</sup> The self-portrait thus continues to exist, though in another form, containing a different conception of the self, as well as a new artistic mentality, both of which are more appropriate to the modern or even postmodern era.

In his essay 'The Dehumanization of Art', originally published in 1925 in Spanish, José Ortega y Gasset sought to explain modern art's escape from realism and romanticism.<sup>30</sup> Contrary to these popular art forms, which give rise to aesthetic pleasure by involving man emotionally in human affairs, the aesthetic process of modernist art was one of inversion; the artist turns his back on alleged reality, and directs his attention to the realization of the ideas of reality.<sup>31</sup> It is by means of ideas that we see the world, and it is through our

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opvatting van het mijne, die 't resultaat is van een portret dat ik in de spiegel schilderde en dat Theo heeft. Een roze-grijs gelaat met groene ogen, askleurig haar, rimpels in voorhoofd en om de mond, stijf, houterig, een zeer rode baard, vrij ongeredderd en triest, maar de lippen zijn vol, een blauwe kiel van grof linnen en een palet met citroengeel, vermiljoen, veronees-groen, kobalt-blauw, enfin, alle kleuren behalve de oranje baard op het palet, de enige hele kleuren echter. De figuur tegen een grauwwitte muur. Gij zult zeggen dat dit ietwat lijkt op b.v. het gezicht van – de dood, in het boek van V. Eeden of zoiets, goed, maar enfin, is zo'n figuur – en 't is niet makkelijk zichzelf te schilderen – niet in alle geval iets anders dan een fotografie. En ziet ge – dit heeft het impressionisme m.i. vóór boven de rest, het is niet banaal en men zoekt een diepere gelijkenis dan die van de fotograaf'.

<sup>28</sup> Van Lindert and Uitert, 1990, p. 18, p. 21, p. 50. This belief was grounded in pseudo-sciences, such as characterology, physiognomy and phrenology, with which Van Gogh was familiarized.

<sup>29</sup> Doy, 2004, p. 22.

<sup>30</sup> Ortega, 1968, p. 3-6.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, p. 14, p. 33, p. 37. In analysing the new style, Ortega finds that it contains certain closely connected tendencies. It tends (1) to dehumanize art, (2) to avoid living forms, (3) to see to it that the work of art is nothing but a work of art, (4) to consider art as play and nothing else, (5) to be essentially ironic, (6) to beware of sham and hence to aspire to scrupulous realization, (7) to regard art as a thing of no transcending consequence. The modern artist does not point towards the human object and fails to render the natural or human thing because he deviates from it, going against reality. Rather, he is 'dehumanizing it' (Ortega, 1968, p. 21).

employment of ideas that we try and grasp reality.<sup>32</sup> Thus, in the case of a portrait, a traditional painter

[c]laims to have got hold of the real person when, in truth and at best, he has set down on the canvas a schematic selection, arbitrarily decided on by his mind, from the innumerable traits that make a living person. What if the painter changed his mind and decided to paint not the real person but his own idea, his pattern of the person? Indeed, in that case the portrait would be the truth and nothing but the truth, and failure would no longer be inevitable. In foregoing to emulate reality the painting becomes what it authentically is: an image, an unreality.<sup>33</sup>

The modernist painter shuts his eyes to the outer world and repudiates reality, as it is impossible to duplicate it. Instead, he concentrates on painting ideas. Ortega calls this turn away from representing reality the 'dehumanization of art', as ideas are, really, unreal.<sup>34</sup> It is by means of ideas that we see the world, and it is through our employment of ideas that we try and grasp reality. Thanks to this 'suicidal gesture', art continues to be art, 'its self-negation miraculously bringing about its preservation (...)'.<sup>35</sup> Modernist art, as a counterpart to the naturalistic form, is of an ambiguous nature; it ridicules art itself. Modernist artists are, according to Ortega, 'doomed to irony' to make art triumph as a farce and to laugh off art as serious affair.<sup>36</sup>

This type of irony cannot simply be understood as a rhetorical device for saying the opposite of what one means, but includes the ironic reflection of art upon itself. Ortega refers to the idea of irony, as described by the German Romanticists under leadership of Karl Wilhelm Friedrich (after 1814: von) Schlegel (1772-1829), usually cited as Friedrich Schlegel. This irony is the foremost aesthetic category of modern art from the twentieth century and distinguishes it from early nineteenth century romantic art. According to curator Jörg Heiser, the concept of irony as developed by Schlegel, generally referred to as romantic irony, still resonates surprisingly well with

[c]onceptual art-making of the 1960s onwards, in that both testify to a realization of a sense of disjunction between inevitably fragmentary attempts to describe the world and the infinite world itself, of a need to resolve that disjunction not by presenting an ideal of epic, synthetic unity, but by way of a scattered practice that reflects on its own character of reflection.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibidem, p. 33, 37.

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem, p. 38.

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem, p. 38-39, p. 44.

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem, p. 48.

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem, p. 46.

<sup>37</sup> Heiser, 2011, p. 12. (Web 28 April 2016). Though, seemingly antithetical, Heiser detects some parallels between the German Romantics of the early nineteenth century and artists working in the realm of international conceptualism since

In particular, and following the writings of Walter Benjamin, Heiser points to Schlegel's concern with 'reflective thinking', which refers to 'that limitless capacity by which it makes every prior reflection into the subject of a subsequent reflection' as useful.<sup>38</sup>

Van Elk's and Ader's works of art are compatible with conceptual art as they start from the formation of an idea. The methodology of conceptual art seems consistent with Ortega's concept of the 'dehumanization of art'; modernist art's turn away from representing reality in order to concentrate on realizing ideas. Apart from this focus on the formation of ideas, irony is integrally linked to this inversion, and plays an important role in both Van Elk's and Ader's works of art. On the one hand, the works represent the artists' reflexive strive toward transcending the naturalistic and romantic forms of art. On the other hand, as counterparts to these forms, the works trivialize the historical forms and conventions of earlier, particularly romantic, art, including claims of authenticity and transcendence. Van Elk's and Ader's works of art are ambiguous and come with a dash of irony.

This thesis aims to further address Van Elk's and Ader's works of art in the development of the genre of self-portraiture. The research question central to this thesis can be understood as follows: In what way do Van Elk's and Ader's 'self-portraits' reflect the historical stage of the 1970s, taking into account both the memory of the artistic mentality of the artists and the mediums employed in the creation of their works of art? The duality of the self-portrait, consisting of both a memory of the individual represented and a medium, reflected in the research question, is based on the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1900-2002) understanding of portraiture as described in his book *Truth and Method*, originally published in German in 1960. Gadamer states that portraiture is based on the model of representation; it depends on the ontological inseparability or non-differentiation of the picture and the pictured. In this case the self-portraits contain a relation to either Van Elk or Ader.<sup>39</sup> According to Gadamer a portrait is

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the 1960s. According to Heiser Romanticism should also be understood as the ironic counterpart to the rationalistic conception of reason. He traces certain parallels between Sol LeWitt's theoretization on conceptual art ('Paragraphs on Conceptual Art' from 1967 and 'Sentences on Conceptual Art' from 1969) and Walter Benjamin's view on romanticism's inclusion of critical reflection. After Boris Groys, Heiser uses the term Romantic Conceptualism to refer to works of art in which he sees the coexistence of conceptualism and romanticism. In an interview Heiser explains his belief that emotions and conceptual art do not have to exclude one another: conceptualist art making "a) doesn't have to neglect emotion to make a 'depersonalised', i.e. anti-narcissist statement and b) that that is the case because emotions themselves have a 'conceptual' side to them: they are cultural techniques of coming to terms with ones environment, whether productively or destructively (Heiser, 2008, np. Web, 28 January, 2016). However, to substitute romanticism simply for the emotional counterpart of rationalism is too limited.

<sup>38</sup> Heiser, 2002, np. (Web 21 February 2016).

<sup>39</sup> Gadamer, 2004, pp. 134-135.

[n]ot just an image and certainly not just a copy; it belongs to the present or to the present memory of the man represented. This is its real nature. To that extent the portrait is a special case of the general ontological valence that we have assigned to the picture as such. What comes into being in it is not contained in what acquaintances can already see in the person portrayed.<sup>40</sup>

Besides the representation of the outer appearance of the artist, the portrait contains an essential quality in its connection to the relevant time and the present memory of the individual represented. Furthermore, whereas a mirror image has a fleeting existence, the portrait has its own being. It not only exists as a representation, but also as a presentation referring to the portrait's preservation of its being, or presence through history.<sup>41</sup>

In order to address the main research question, this thesis is divided into several sub-questions that follow Gadamer's dual understanding of the portrait. The sub-question central to the first chapter therefore reads: How can one describe the artistic mentality of Van Elk and Ader, which is reflected in their self-portraits in relation to conceptual art and irony? This chapter aims to retrace the memory of both artists' mentalities in relation to conceptual art and irony. Firstly, it will question why Van Elk and Ader are often described as conceptual artists. In order to come to an understanding of this categorization, an overview will be given of Van Elk's and Ader's involvement in the historical context of conceptual art. Particularly, it will focus on their participation in representative exhibitions of conceptual art in the Netherlands, and to a lesser extent their involvement in the conceptual art scene in Los Angeles. After making these connections, the following question remains: What is conceptual art? In order to answer this question, the second section of the first chapter aims to delineate the methodology of conceptual art, using Jörg Heiser's text 'Moscow, Romantic, Conceptualism and After', published online by *E-Flux* in 2011. Subsequently, Heiser's characterisation will be brought into connection with other texts from Wim Beeren on the 'new art', from Piero Gilardi on 'primary energy' and the 'microemotive Artists', and from Regina Cornwell on 'structural film', in order to address theoretisations on conceptual art, particularly for the Netherlands. The third section of the first chapter will then question how the idea of irony is reflected in both Van Elk's and Ader's artistic attitude. It will outline this essential quality on the basis of the reception of the artists' mentality by various art historians and critics. The chapter will conclude with a visual analysis of two selected works: Van Elk's series *The Adieu* (1974-1975) (Figure 5a-f) and Ader's unfinished trilogy *In Search of the Miraculous* (1973-1975) (Figure 6a-e). In both

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<sup>40</sup> Ibidem, p. 142.

<sup>41</sup> Ibidem, pp. 134-135.

works the artist is present and plays a central role, through which they directly address the beholder, by either declaring a goodbye or performing a search. This latter section works towards the idea that these works of art can be understood as self-portraits within allegories that embody a modern form of authenticity, which in Van Elk's case can be understood as a form of ironic self-reflection, and in Ader's case as a tragic form of self-irony. Both works will serve as a base throughout the remainder of this thesis.

The sub-question to the second chapter reads: How do Van Elk's and Ader's forms of authenticity, reflected in their self-portraits, resonate with the historical stage of modernity, characterized by the aesthetic concept of romantic irony? This chapter mainly focuses on making a connection between Ader's and Van Elk's presence in their works of art to a wider *Zeitgeist* of modernity, particularly to Friedrich Schlegel's concept of irony, as described in his unpublished series of aphoristic fragments: *Lyceumfragmente* (1799), *Athenäumfragmente* (1798) and *Ideen* (1800). It particularly aims to use the concept of romantic irony in order to provide a deeper understanding of the artists' presence. The second chapter will, firstly, give an insight into the preconditions that gave rise to Schlegel's concept of irony, which will be related to conceptual art. Secondly, this chapter will give an explanation of Schlegel's aesthetic understanding of irony. He characterises ironic poetry as *Transzendentalpoesie* and *progressive Universalpoesie*. This type of art should not only include a reflection on tradition, but also a self-reflection by the artists on himself and his work of art. Schlegel names two artistic techniques, *permanente Parekbase* and *Transzendente Buffonerie*, by which the artist actually includes (a representation of) himself in the work of art in order to disrupt the artistic illusion and create a moment of ironic self-reflection, thereby disclosing a consciousness that his work of art is limited and temporary. In the last section of the second chapter, the reception of Schlegel's theory will be discussed. Particularly, Paul de Man's reception of Schlegel's concept of irony as a dialectic self as a reflexive structure will be examined using his text 'The Rhetoric of Temporality' (1969).

Since, according to Gadamer, the self-portrait has to be understood in a twofold manner; not only as a memory of an artistic mentality, but also as a presence, the last chapter focuses on the medium of Ader's and Van Elk's 'self-portraits'. The sub-questions central to this section read: How can one describe the mediums employed in Van Elk's and Ader's conceptual self-portraits? How do Van Elk's and Ader's use of said mediums in their self-portraits empower their artistic practice and leverage their work's possibility of meaning? Lastly, how do their mediums relate to the memory of their artistic mentality as

romantic ironists? Ader's and Van Elk's works of art are made via the use of various technical means and commercial apparatuses. Van Elk mixed painting and photography, whereas Ader made use of various reproducible objects and technical means, including photography, postcards, a projector, slides, an audiotape, and other recording equipment. This mixing of mediums is distinctive of the postmodern era, and particularly connected to art from the 1970s, which is characterized by a pluralism of concepts and artistic mediums. In order to provide an understanding of their mediums, the final chapter will focus on the art historian-critic Rosalind Krauss, whose work from the last three decades focuses on the importance of the medium in what she calls the post-medium condition. This term describes the situation in artistic practice, from the 1970s, after the abandonment of the traditional division of the medium, which is characterized by the use of a plurality of mediums that have become general; simply means to articulate meaning or signs for underlying market value. The final chapter, therefore, starts with an explanation of Krauss's meaning of the post-medium condition and how conceptual art caused this situation. The second section of the third chapter will discuss modernist theories on medium specificity, in chronological order, it will explain Clement Greenberg's insistence on the medium as essence, Michael Fried's understanding of the medium as shape and instantaneousness and Stanley Cavell's concept of the medium as an automatism. The third section will research Krauss's turn away from modernist and formalist theories on medium specificity and question what to Krauss counts as a sincere aesthetic medium that leverages the work's capacity for meaning in the post-medium condition. In order to do this, the third section, will focus on Krauss's concept of the medium, it will give an analysis Krauss's semiotic square of 'the medium in the expanded field', explained in her book *Under Blue Cup* (2011), including technical support, kitsch, medium and installation (Appendix 2). Conclusively, Krauss's model will be used to analyse Van Elk's and Ader's works of art according to their medium.

# Chapter 1. The 'self-portraits' of Dutch artists Bas Jan Ader and Ger van Elk

## 1.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to retrace the memory of the artistic mentality of the artists Ger van Elk and Bas Jan Ader that is reflected through their presence in their works of art, particularly in Van Elk's series *The Adieu* (1974-1975) (Figure 5a-f) and Ader's unfinished trilogy *In search of the miraculous* (1973-1975) (Figure 6a-e). Ader's and Van Elk's artistic mentalities and practices will be examined from different viewpoints. The first section will give an overview of Van Elk's and Ader's involvement in the historical context of conceptual art; subsequently, it will attempt to delineate the methodology of conceptual art. The third section will examine the idea of irony: an essential component in both van Elk's and Ader's works of art, which will be developed from the reception of their attitudes and practices by various art historians and critics. This chapter will conclude with a visual analysis of the two selected 'self-portraits': Van Elk's series *The Adieu* and Ader's unfinished trilogy *In search of the miraculous*, aiming to address the meaning of the presence of the artists in their works. Finally, this chapter will work towards the hypothesis that these works of art can be understood as self-portraits within allegories, in which the artists' presence embodies a modern form of authenticity, which, in Van Elk's case, can be understood as an ironic form of self-reflection, and, in Ader's, as a form of tragic self-irony.

## 1.2 The historical contextualisation of conceptual art with references to the work of Van Elk and Ader

The first questions that need to be posed are: How are Ger van Elk and Bas Jan Ader related to conceptual art? And: Why are they often described as conceptual artists? The exhibition catalogue *Conceptuele kunst in Nederland en België 1965-1975*, published by the Stedelijk Museum in 2002, provides a diagram (Appendix 1) that includes Van Elk and Ader as participants in exhibitions and galleries in the Netherlands that focus on conceptual art. This diagram serves as a starting point to investigate the links between conceptual art in the Netherlands and both artists.

The diagram indicates the period between 1968 and 1975 as the pinnacle of conceptual art in the Netherlands; these were the first years to bring into view the rise of

the new art, or what is now called conceptual art. Hence, Van Elk and Ader belong to this first generation of conceptual artists. Only later, in the mid-1970s, despite conceptual art's opposition against it, institutionalization and the market mechanism were put into motion.<sup>42</sup>

Van Elk participated in the first landmark exhibition of conceptual art, called *Op losse schroeven: Situaties en Cryptosculpturen*, which aimed to exhibit the new tendencies in European and American art in the Netherlands.<sup>43</sup> Wim Beeren organised the exhibition that took place at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam from March 15 to April 27, 1969.<sup>44</sup> This year marked a paradigm shift towards a new art, according to Carel Blotkamp.<sup>45</sup> Beeren also writes in the exhibition catalogue that 'the old concept of art, in the sense of order and sublimation' was in the process of being 'shaken and undermined' and that the 'new art' produced a 'conflict within static relationships'.<sup>46</sup>

For the exhibition, Van Elk made various interventions in direct response to the site, which altered the experience for the museum visitors. For example, outside the museum, Van Elk replaced the brickwork on the street corner, adjacent to the museum, with glazed bricks. Like the title *Luxurious Street Corner* (1969) (Figure 7) suggests, van Elk created a more 'luxurious' rectangular corner to a rounded pavement edge.<sup>47</sup> The work may be seen as an ironic, subtle critique of the aloofness between the museum and reality, as a secluded, canonising institution for only 'high art', and as a comment on the role of public art as mere urban adornment. Inside the museum, Van Elk installed two works: *Apparatus Scalas Dividens* (1968) (Figure 8) and *Hanging Wall* (1968) (Figure 9), which both humorously disrupted the interaction of visitors within the museum, by making situations uncommunicative.<sup>48</sup>

Later, in 1971, Van Elk, as well as Ader, took part in the film programme *Sonsbeek '71*, which was part of the exhibition *Sonsbeek buiten Perken* in Arnhem, also curated by

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<sup>42</sup> Blotkamp, 2002, p. 26.

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem, p. 17. The exhibition *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form – Works, Concepts, Processes, Situations, Information*, curated by Harald Schzeemann at the Kunsthalle in Bern, also opened in 1969, is often described as the more important and popular counterpart of the exhibition in Amsterdam. Christian Rattemeyer gives an extensive comparison of the two exhibitions in his book *Exhibiting the New Art 'Op Losse Schroeven' and 'When Attitudes Become Form' 1969*, published in 2010.

<sup>44</sup> Rattemeyer, 2010, p. 28. The exhibition has become known in English as *Square Pegs in Round Holes*, a title proposed by museum director Edy de Wilde (Cherix (ed.), 2009, p.38).

<sup>45</sup> Blotkamp, 2002, p. 17.

<sup>46</sup> Beeren, 1969, np. The title, derived from a Dutch idiomatic expression, indicates a state of uncertainty or instability. Beeren explains it, as follows: '[C]onnectors tie an assembly of parts together into one united whole. As the screws come loose, the connections may not break, but disturb the whole' (Beeren, 1969, np. See also: Cherix (ed.), 2009, p. 38.).

<sup>47</sup> Rattemeyer, 2010, p. 29, p. 68.

<sup>48</sup> Ibidem, pp. 29-30, p. 68, p. 77, p. 102.

Beeren.<sup>49</sup> The programme was on display in the garden of the Gemeentemuseum in Arnhem.<sup>50</sup> Van Elk's project *La Pièce* (1971) (Figure 10), in which he painted a small cube during a journey on the Arctic Ocean, where the air is free of dirt and dust, was shown.<sup>51</sup> The work was a commentary on the megalomania of Minimalism and Land Art, as Van Elk reverses their values: putting in maximum effort to result in a diminutive, minimal work. This dichotomy gives the project an ironic cachet.<sup>52</sup> Van Elk's film *some natural aspects of painting and sculpture* (1970-1971) (Figure 1) was also displayed, which already is described in the introduction of this thesis.<sup>53</sup>

Two silent black-and-white 16-millimetre films by Ader were on view during the same exhibition, namely *Fall, Los Angeles 1970, no. 4* (1970) ("24") (Figure 11) and *Fall, Amsterdam 1970, no. 3* (1970) ("19") (Figure 12).<sup>54</sup> In the first film Ader falls from the roof of his house; in the second he bicycles into a canal.<sup>55</sup> The exhibition catalogue includes the sentence: 'The artist's body as gravity makes itself its master' to describe these works.<sup>56</sup> The films come across as visual aphorisms; they seem paradoxical and ludicrous because they exhibit a tension between Ader's subjection to a deterministic power and his denial of every subjective influence in the process of each work.<sup>57</sup>

The diagram (Appendix 1) also indicates both Van Elk and Ader to be involved with the Amsterdam based gallery Art & Project. This gallery was founded in 1968 by Geert van Beijeren and Adriaan Ravesteijn, who turned their focus to conceptual art in 1969.<sup>58</sup> Van Elk exhibited there every year from 1970 to 1974, and Ader exhibited there in 1971, 1972, 1974, and 1975. Additionally, the gallery published a series of 156 bulletins between 1968 and 1989, which were distributed worldwide.<sup>59</sup> Several of the bulletins present Van Elk's works. For example, Bulletin 33 announces the presentation of *Paul-Klee um den Fisch, 1926* (Figure 13) at his second solo-exhibition at the gallery in January 1971. It was a slide-based

<sup>49</sup> Boomgaard, 2001, p. 17, p. 23. See also: Van Beijeren, 1971, p. 112.1. The title of the exhibition roughly translated to English reads: *Sonsbeek Beyond Lawn and Order*. The phrase 'beyond lawn' refers to this spatial extension, but as Dutch adage, also to a crossing of the traditional curatorial practise.

<sup>50</sup> Van Beijeren, 1971, pp. 15-16. See also: Rattemeyer (ed.), 2010, p. 34, p. 51. Cherix (ed.), 2009, p. 39. Blotkamp, 2002, pp. 21-22.

<sup>51</sup> Van Beijeren, 1971, p. 107, p. 109. See also: Boomgaard, 2001, p. 22. Kaal, 2009, p. 24. Hartog, 2004, pp. 83-84. Van Elk realised the project on the Arctic Ocean on January 16, 1971. The work was exhibited on a crimson velvet cushion in the Tropenmuseum.

<sup>52</sup> Blotkamp, 2009, p. 106. See also: Kaal, 2009, p. 24.

<sup>53</sup> Van Beijeren, 1971, p. 112.14.

<sup>54</sup> Ibidem, p. 112.11. The 16 mm film is transferred to DVD (in the courtesy of Grimm Gallery, Amsterdam).

<sup>55</sup> Ibidem, p. 112.11. See also: Dumbadze, 2013, pp. 3-4, pp. 18-22.

<sup>56</sup> Van Beijeren, 1971, p. 112.11.

<sup>57</sup> Dumbadze, 2013, p. 3, p. 5, p. 28.

<sup>58</sup> Cherix (ed.), 2009, p. 18, pp. 31-32.

<sup>59</sup> Ibidem, pp. 25-26, p. 29.

projection onto a tilted, cloth-covered table, which showed the various stages of the artist's consumption of a fish dinner, modelled after a painting of Paul Klee. In Bulletin 55, Van Elk presents his work *about the reality of g. morandi*. This work shows a photographic reconstruction of the Italian painter's still life.<sup>60</sup> Both works refer to works from art history in an ironic manner.

Ader had his first solo exhibition at the gallery in 1972, where he performed his work *The Boy Who Fell Over Niagara Falls* (Figure 14). For the duration of this exhibition Ader would, twice daily, read aloud an article published in the *Reader's Digest*, titled 'The Boy Who Fell Over Niagara Falls'. This article describes the story of a boat excursion that unintentionally carries the captain and a seven-year-old passenger over the Niagara Falls. This true story is tragic as the captain perishes, while the boy miraculously survives. Ader stoically read the story about bravery and luck with a stern face and at certain points he paused and drank from a glass of water.<sup>61</sup> Ader's manner of communication contrasts with the exiting and adventurous tale. This work typifies Ader's deadpan or dry humour: the act of deliberately displaying a lack of or no emotion. Bulletin 89 is dedicated to Ader's work *In Search of the miraculous* (Figure 6e), which will be analysed in the final section of this chapter.<sup>62</sup>

Apart from Ader's and Van Elk's presence in the Netherlands, they were also integrated into the conceptual art scene of the American West Coast, specifically in Los Angeles, where artists such as John Baldessari, William Leavitt and Allen Ruppersberg led the scene.<sup>63</sup> The exhibition catalogue *In & Out of Amsterdam: Travels in Conceptual Art 1960-1976* (2009), edited by Christophe Cherix, focuses on the trajectories of Van Elk and Ader. The catalogue, for example, discusses Ader's cooperation with Leavitt on the mimeographed magazine *Landslide*. In 1969 and 1970 seven issues were published, in which the art world was satirized by pranks, like interviews with fictitious artists, such as: 'Dove Feeler, a proto-Polke dot artist; John Grover, a lumber-obsessed minimalist; and a young sculptor (...) by the name of Brian Shitart'.<sup>64</sup> Leavitt states that 'the intent was purely satirical'; *Landslide*

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<sup>60</sup> Ibidem, pp. 50-52.

<sup>61</sup> Ibidem, p. 54.

<sup>62</sup> *Bas Jan Ader*, ex. cat. 2006, p. 130.

<sup>63</sup> Cherix (ed.), 2009, p. 82. Both met again at the Immaculate Heart College. However, Van Elk returned shortly after graduating back to the Netherlands to pursue studies in art history in Groningen.

<sup>64</sup> Ibidem, pp. 48-49. See also: Bluhm, 2005, pp. 14-16. Some issues contained food, for example Issue six was an actual McDonald's hamburger in a cardboard box. The fifth issue includes the work *AAAARRGH!: An at Home Happening in Five Fragments*, which provided instruction to stage a happening at home to make Avant-garde available to every home in America. The artists encouraged readers to perform acts, like smearing the plastic sheeting with margarine.

was 'a kind of ironic, slacker West Coast cousin, conveying a sense of entropic collapse'.<sup>65</sup> The magazine was a parody on authoritative art forms and styles, including Minimalism and Land Art and a subversion of the magazines that established these styles, such as *Avalanche* and *Artforum*.

Both Van Elk and Ader can conclusively be placed within the niche of conceptual art for having participated in various exhibitions aligned with this type of art. Nonetheless, their works are very diverse: varying from performances and site-specific works of art to publications. Conceptual art, therefore, cannot simply be described according to outer appearances or stylistic characteristics. Rather, the idea that the artist wants to convey gives rise to the medium and form of the work of art. In Van Elk's works there are, remarkably, various direct references to works of other artists or to art historical conventions in general, often causing irony by subverting them. He addresses the status of the museum, the megalomania of Land Art and Minimalism, and various works of art of Morandi and Klee. Ader mainly satirizes the popular contemporary art scene, including Minimalism and Land Art in *Landslide*, while his other works are humorous in a different way: less explicit and more commentary-oriented. They are more like visual aphorisms, for instance, by willingly bringing oneself into a dangerous situation. This is where Ader internalizes the irony through the paradoxical or ludic tension brought forth by his actions and statements in his performances. Both Van Elk and Ader are humorous and seem to subvert the authoritative status of various artistic styles and conventions, including their own status. They each appear highly, though distinctly, aware that the context of their work is created through a continuous dialogue with art history itself. This dialogue and their use of humour will be addressed more extensively in the third section of this chapter. The aim of the next section is to begin to describe various characteristics of conceptual art.

### **1.3 Conceptual art**

Having described several connections between conceptual art and the artists Van Elk and Ader, the question arises: What is conceptual art? First of all, it is important to notice that conceptual art is not a specific art-movement, nor can it be captured in a singular characteristic style; it rather functions as an umbrella term used to cover a wide variety of artistic practices, movements and styles, including Land Art, Process Art, Arte Povera, and others. Conceptual art could best be described as a methodology or set of strategies that are

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<sup>65</sup> Allen, 2011, appendix. See also: Bluhm, 2005, pp. 14-15.

open and can be carried out in various ways. The following paragraph will first outline the methodologies according to the art critic Jörg Heiser. In the second section, these will serve as a benchmark to describe theories on conceptual art in the Netherlands, using texts by Wim Beeren, Piero Gilardi, and Regina Cornwell.

### 1.3.1. The methodology of conceptual art

In the article 'Moscow, Romantic, Conceptualism and After', published online by *E-Flux* in their November 2011 issue #29, Heiser distinguishes three methodological characteristics of conceptual art. The first methodological characteristic of conceptual art, Heiser explains, is that it 'radically shifts the emphasis from representation to indexicalization (...); rather than reproducing or illustrating the appearance of something, that "something" is evoked through a gesture or language, or other indexical means (including, literally, signs and measures).'<sup>66</sup> According to Heiser, the main objective is 'to move away from the visual and the phenomenological (...) toward the indexical, toward pointing to things in an idea-driven way (...)'.<sup>67</sup>

Heiser distinguishes, as the second methodology, that 'conceptual art usually adheres to a fairly strict, reductivist ethos of economy of means. (...) In other words, the idea is that for indexicalization to be most effective, it needs to be realized with as many elements as are necessary but as few as possible'.<sup>68</sup> The aim of this methodology, Heiser states, is 'at the service of either strictly securing or "closing" the meaning, or, to the contrary, of allowing the work to become a kind of springboard that (...) opens up meaning - for better or worse - to the viewer's perceptive response and intellectual continuation.'<sup>69</sup>

Thirdly, Heiser elaborates on the tendency towards dematerialization in conceptual art, which means to do away with the cohesiveness of the artwork in terms of where it 'resides'. In other words, Heiser explains:

[E]ven if an object is involved (...) or if the artist's or anyone else's body enacts a gesture (...) the work may still be constituted by neither a particular object nor a particular body. A relationship between things in the world is stated without necessitating a physical realization of that relationship to constitute the artwork. Rather, it may simply be constituted by the proposition of the artist (immaterial

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<sup>66</sup> Heiser, 2011, pp. 1-2. <<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/29/68122/moscow-romantic-conceptualism-and-after/>> Web. 06 April 2016. This may imply a devaluation of virtuosic skill and originality or distinctive authenticity.

<sup>67</sup> Ibidem, pp. 1-2.

<sup>68</sup> Ibidem, p. 2.

<sup>69</sup> Ibidem, p. 2.

production); it may reside in the particular way something is situated or conveyed through, for example, its position in a space or publicized through press releases, invitation cards, catalogues, and so forth (distribution or circulation); it may reside in the way the viewers “fulfil” the work through their use of or response to it (“consumption” or reception); or, indeed, it may be a mixture of all three of these parameters of production, distribution, and consumption. The shorthand term for the specificities of this particular mixture is “context.”<sup>70</sup>

Dematerialization, according to Heiser, leads to a formal reduction, but, more importantly, continues ‘questioning the way things are made, disseminated, and perceived - with obvious social and political implications’.<sup>71</sup> Heiser’s three methodologies of conceptual art can be summarized as follows: a) indexicalization b) reductivism c) context; the artwork resides in (or in a combination of) the immaterial production, distribution and circulation, consumption and reception.

### **1.3.2. Conceptual art in the Netherlands: Beeren, Gilardi and Cornwell**

Heiser’s set of methodologies can be related to various statements from the catalogues accompanying the exhibitions on conceptual art, as discussed in the first section of this chapter. These primary texts can serve to further explicate and contextualize the methodologies of conceptual art in the Netherlands. This section will focus on texts by Wim Beeren, Piero Gilardi, and Regina Cornwell.

Firstly, two texts by Beeren will be used to highlight Heiser’s distinctions, namely his text in the catalogue of *Op Losse Schroeven* (1969), and later his memorabilia in the catalogue of the exhibition *'60 '80 attitudes/concepts/images* (1982).<sup>72</sup> Concerning indexicalization, Beeren refers to art’s detachment of traditional forms and the aspect of crafts, and he points to the new possibilities in art, such as the use of unconventional materials (neon, mirrors and latex) and abstract measuring systems.<sup>73</sup> Beeren identifies a ‘new reality’ as a collective principle in conceptual art, which he finds most succinctly embodied in Richard Long’s art, made by walking in the landscape.<sup>74</sup> With this, he points to works that are bilateral. They exist as ideas that are developed through empirical

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<sup>70</sup> Ibidem, pp. 2-4.

<sup>71</sup> Ibidem, p. 4.

<sup>72</sup> This exhibition looked back at two decades of programming of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

<sup>73</sup> Beeren, [1969] 2010, p. 123.

<sup>74</sup> Cherix (ed.), p. 38, p. 44.

investigations and physical experiences: in an immediate connection between the artist and reality, as Beeren adds: 'the human form as sculptural material', or as 'a registering measuring organism' in art.<sup>75</sup> Subsequently, the works are included in the museum, where they exist as either indexical spheres of reality, using photographs, maps; or as objects collected outdoors and taken indoors, changing their environment and placing them in another context. By this indexicalization, visitors have the opportunity to empathize with the artist's process and to, even imaginarily, move into the landscape.<sup>76</sup>

Regarding the reductivist ethos of conceptual art, Beeren mentions the modesty of means and materials and the 'minimum of personal intervention' with which the artists worked.<sup>77</sup> Following Beeren:

[T]he most exact formulations are sought and placed in accentuated space and emptiness. Every serviceable medium is withdrawn from its ordinary usage and employed in a highly concentrated form: language, photography, film, sound, the geographical map, the floor plan, the drawing.<sup>78</sup>

He emphasizes conceptual art's manifestation in the 'purification to the essence of things', in conclusion, art has 'produced a new language of analysis; a concentrated, conceptual approach to exegesis and understanding (...)'.<sup>79</sup>

Lastly, for an explanation of the importance of context, Beeren refers to Robert Morris' concept of 'Anti-Form', explained in the synonymous essay published in *Artforum* in April 1968. In his rejection of Minimalist art, Morris proposed a new art, emphasizing the process of the formation of art. In this so-called 'process art' material qualities, procedural concerns (gathering, stacking, piling, etc.), and unplanned events all add up to the end result.<sup>80</sup> Beeren refers to works that are subject to external influences, change, and

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<sup>75</sup> Beeren, 1982, p. 51. Rattemeyer (ed.), 2010, p. 51, p. 59.

<sup>76</sup> Beeren, [1969] 2010, pp. 123-124.

<sup>77</sup> Ibidem, p. 79, pp. 119-120.

<sup>78</sup> Beeren, 1982, p. 52.

<sup>79</sup> Ibidem, p. 51. See also: Rattemeyer (ed.), 2010, p. 58.

<sup>80</sup> Robert Morris in: Rattemeyer (ed.), 2010, p. 35, pp. 44-45. Instead of focusing on the physical and its relations, Morris emphasizes the process of making art. An artist should investigate the properties of the materials in progress. Morris: 'Recently, materials other than rigid industrial ones have begun to show up. (...) A direct investigation of the properties of these materials is in progress. This involves a reconsideration of tools in relation to material. In some cases these investigations move from the making of things to the making of material itself. Sometimes a direct manipulation of a given material without the use of any tool is made. In these cases considerations of gravity become as important as those of space. The focus on matter and gravity as means results in forms, which were not projected in advance. Considerations of ordering are necessarily casual and imprecise and unemphasized. Random piling, loose stacking, hanging, give passing form to the material. Chance is accepted and indeterminacy is implied since replacing will result in another configuration. Disengagement with preconceived enduring forms and orders for things is a positive assertion. It is part of the work's refusal to continue aestheticizing form by dealing with it as a prescribed end' (Morris, 1993, p. 46).

transience. Furthermore, Beeren includes artworks that force the beholder to take a position. Through the most concentrated formulations in unconventional materials, the new art affects the beholder and leads the viewer to rethink reality.<sup>81</sup>

The Italian art critic Piero Gilardi, who served as an advisor in the exhibition *Op Losse Schroeven* (1969), inspired Beeren's statements.<sup>82</sup> Beeren writes:

Gilardi coined the term 'Mircoemotive Art' to describe this environment, while others forged different descriptions, such as the 'Arte Povera' of the critic [Germano] Celant, Lucy Lippard's 'Eccentric Emotion', or what Robert Morris called 'Anti-Form'.<sup>83</sup>

Gilardi's essay 'Primary Energy and the "Microemotive Artists"', published in Dutch in *Museumjournaal* in September 1968, was particularly influential.<sup>84</sup>

In opposition to 'primary structures', referring to Minimal art, Gilardi proposed the terms 'primary energy' and 'microemotive'.<sup>85</sup> These terms refer to the immaterial production of the work. Gilardi defined the terms as the 'attention to the "floatingness" of intentions and observation; the object of the micro-emotive artist is primary energy'.<sup>86</sup> The artist should create works from both a flowing intentionality: an open free creative mentality that was no longer based on the conventions of traditional art, and a contemplative or perceptive attitude. The artist should have a 'new "open" mental perception of weightless energy', according to Rattemeyer.<sup>87</sup>

Furthermore, Gilardi emphasizes the 'psycho-physical time' of the artist and the 'sensorial perception' of the viewer, which can be aligned to Heiser's statement about the immaterial production and consumption and reception of the work. In addition, the changeable conditions of events and the atmospheric space that could influence the artist

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<sup>81</sup> Beeren, 1982, pp. 52-53.

<sup>82</sup> Rattemeyer (ed.), 2010, p. 48. See also: Blotkamp, 2002, p. 20. Beeren and the director of the Stedelijk Museum Edy de Wilde thank Piero Gilardi for his contributions in the foreword and introduction of the catalogue. Gilardi contributed with his essay 'Politics and the Avant-Garde' to the exhibition catalogue.

<sup>83</sup> Beeren [1969] 2010, pp. 124-125.

<sup>84</sup> Rattemeyer (ed.), 2010, p. 46. See also: Cherix (ed.), 2009, p. 39, p. 44. Gilardi's work was known in the Netherlands through an exhibition of his foam sculptures at Mickery Gallery in Loenersloot (October 8- November 6, 1967). The article was first published in English as 'Primary Energy and the "Microemotive artists"' in *Arts Magazine*, vol. 43, September/October, 1968, pp. 48-52. A related text appeared simultaneously in Dutch as 'Microemotive art' in *Museumjournaal* 13, no. 4 (1968), pp. 198-202. Ger van Elk wrote the introduction to the Dutch text. The first draft of the exhibition concept submitted to de Wilde by Beeren explicitly refers to this essay written by Gilardi in the title 'Cryptosculpturen en Microemoties' ('Cryptostructures and Microemotions'), dated 25 December 1968.

<sup>85</sup> Gilardi refers to the term and title for curator Kynaston McShine's exhibition of Minimal art in the Jewish Museum in New York in 1966.

<sup>86</sup> Gilardi in: Bijvoet (ed.), 1995, p. 53.

<sup>87</sup> Rattemeyer (ed.), 2010, p. 46.

and his work were key aspects.<sup>88</sup> Instead of a structure of fixed objects, time and energy were thus of principle importance.

Lastly, regarding the use of film for indexicalisation, Regina Cornwell describes some interesting characteristics that adhere to the reductivist methodology of conceptual art in her essay 'introduction to structural film' in the exhibition catalogue of *Sonsbeek '71*. The concept of 'structural film', originally developed by the film critic P. Adams Sitney, corresponds to the films shown at the Sonsbeek exhibition, including those by Van Elk and Ader. In quoting Sitney, Cornwell states that structural film is characterized by:

[a] fixed camera position (fixed frame from the viewer's perceptive), the flicker effect, and loop printing (the immediate repetition of shots, exactly without variation). Very seldom will one find all three characteristics in a single film, and there are structural films, which avoid these usual elements.<sup>89</sup>

Through these 'acts of honing down the materials involved and often through revealing the process of making, through the rejection of metaphor, symbol, myth, narrative and illusion' the attention shifts to the ontology of film.<sup>90</sup> Simultaneously, the perceptual demands for the viewer increase; he is forced to question the film's material, processing sensuously and analytically. The film thus resides in its context, how it is produced and perceived. It resides in its ontology, instead of in the narrative.<sup>91</sup>

### 1.3.3. A synthesis

To conclude: the methodologies of conceptual art as described by Heiser coincide with various perceptions by Beeren, Gilardi and Cornwell. The artistic practice is unhinged from representation of the phenomenological world. Indexing reality or relationships between things in the world, including experiences, emotions, conventions, or nature, in an idea driven way, is the new artistic methodology. The artist can use various indexes, ranging from all different materials and mediums, to carry out his ideas. Then, conceptual art follows a reductivist principle; mediums and materials are used in a minimal and modest way, and personal intervention is avoided as much as possible. Likewise, structural film implies a reduction of the technological and formal options, and avoids narrative and illusion.

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<sup>88</sup> Ibidem, p. 48. See also: Cherix (ed.), 2009, p. 39.

<sup>89</sup> Van Beijeren, 1971, pp. 112.6-112.8.

<sup>90</sup> Ibidem, p. 112.6

<sup>91</sup> Ibidem, pp. 112.6-112.8.

Subsequently, both methodologies result in a 'dematerialization' of the artwork. Instead of its physical realisation, the work of art resides in its context, which consists of the immaterial production, the distribution and circulation, and the consumption and reception. Immaterial production coincides with the 'primary energy' of the artist; his psychophysical state, influenced by the time and place in which he operates, which influences and informs his sensorial perception and inventiveness, as described by Gilardi. The second aspect refers to the way a work is produced: in what medium, how it is situated, and the external conditions that influence the processes of the work. The reception refers to the way a work of art affects the beholder's experience, imagination, or perception. Thus, the work actually resides in its ontology, instead of its physical being. By which is meant that the work is not the fixed object, not inside the narrative of the object, but rather in the intention or ideas of the artist, in its manner of production, or in its reception by the viewer.

These different methodologies can help to analyse Van Elk's and Ader's self-portraits in the last section of this chapter. Apart from this understanding of the methodologies of conceptual art, Van Elk's and Ader's reflectivity on their position within art history and their ironic or subversive attitude, as described in the first section of this chapter, has not yet been taken into account. Therefore, the next section aims to address the presence of irony that both artists demonstrate in their works of art.

### ***1.4 Reception: irony***

In this section a closer examination of the reception of irony in Van Elk's and Ader's artistic attitudes and practices will be given. This section will focus on their conscious stance of their position within art history, and their ironic or subversive attitudes towards other works of art and its historical conventions. According to Heiser, the conceptual artist is either 'a kind of trickster who subverts the authority of cultural tradition by suspending the parameters by which it is perpetuated (e.g. skill, composition, preciousness of the object, and so forth)', or 'an intellectual master, who much like a philosopher, successively unfolds a system of analysis that enlightens us with respect to the historical obsolescence of these traditions'.<sup>92</sup> The central question in this section is: How are Ader's and Van Elk's authorship or artistic attitude understood and described by various art historians and art critics? Can they be described as tricksters, do they indeed lean towards the intellectual master type, or

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<sup>92</sup> Heiser, 2011, p. 4. <<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/29/68122/moscow-romantic-conceptualism-and-after/>> Web. 06 April 2016.

maybe a mixture of both? The next section will first focus on the reception of Van Elk's artistic attitude and practice. Subsequently, it will turn to the way in which critics approach Ader's artistic mentality and practice.

#### 1.4.1. Ger van Elk: ironic self-reflection

At the heart of Van Elk's authorship is an ambiguity between seriousness, or even melancholy, and humour. The art historian Rudi Fuchs remarks on this paradox by stating that the visual humour in van Elk's work is:

[s]ubject to a deeply serious artistic intent. This gives rise to a curious paradox which is not without significance for Van Elks ambivalent attitude towards art. His ideas about art are extremely traditional, even conventional (...) But at the same time he also feels that every work must come across as a surprising, intriguing, effortless *bon mot*.<sup>93</sup>

Fuchs does not elaborate on the coexistence of these contradictory attitudes of Van Elk towards art, which are important for an understanding of his work.<sup>94</sup>

A more serious attitude can be found in Van Elk's referents to, and thus knowledge of, art itself.<sup>95</sup> Carel Blotkamp explains that Van Elk's oeuvre is 'riveted on the visual foundations of the phenomenon of art, on pictorial traditions and conventions (...). Van Elk contemplates the notions of style and genre (...)'.<sup>96</sup> Wim Beeren also addresses this reflexive attitude, when he explains that Van Elk made the history and methodology of art the starting point for his works of art.<sup>97</sup> Van Elk revisits, investigates, and converts these art historical conventions, aesthetic views, and methodologies (forms, styles, genres, and themes) into a new form or visual sign.<sup>98</sup> His work, therefore, can be described as 'a provocation and continuation of the artistic tradition'.<sup>99</sup> Jean-Christophe Ammann, following Erwin Panofsky, directs this artistic practice of using different layers and recognizable codes under the heading of 'symmetry' or 'symmetrical tradition'.<sup>100</sup> Van Elk's artistic attitude thus consists

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<sup>93</sup> Fuchs, 'On Semantics, Ger van Elk, Structure and other Difficult Terms', in: *Ger van Elk*, ex. cat. 1974, p. 49.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 54.

<sup>95</sup> Blotkamp, 1985, pp. 104-105.

<sup>96</sup> Blotkamp, 2009, p. 104, p. 106. Blotkamp refers to Van Elk's knowledge of historical concepts and the phenomenon of style, which he had gained by his study in art history at the University of Groningen in 1965-66.

<sup>97</sup> Beeren, 'Ger van Elk' in: *Ger van Elk*, ex. cat. 1980, p. 19.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 16-17, p. 21, p. 33. Kaal, 2009, p. 22, pp. 24-26.

<sup>99</sup> Kaal, 2009, p. 28, p. 30, p. 34.

<sup>100</sup> Ammann, 'A Few Ideas About Symmetry in the Work of Ger van Elk' in: *Ger van Elk*, ex. cat. 1980, pp. 6-9.

of a high level of reasoning and conscious selective attitude. However, this serious artistic intent is recognizable only, Beeren explains, when someone is accustomed to, and recognizes, the 'codes of a collective recognizable reality'.<sup>101</sup>

Van Elk himself and various art historians explain the intent of Van Elk's symmetrical methodology as one of humour and subversion. Van Elk is often called a 'Spaßvogel' and 'Witzmacher', likewise, he states that 'nichts ist bei mir ernst gemeint'.<sup>102</sup> In an interview from 1977, Van Elk explains his laconic attitude towards art, as he considers the degradation of former artistic practices and styles into clichés. He tries to connect conventions and clichés to one another, in order to subvert them.<sup>103</sup> By enlarging, exalting, or minimizing, Van Elk, according to Hans den Hartog Jager, demythologises codes and conventions of the past.<sup>104</sup> Michael Schwarz elaborates on this methodology and designates Van Elk's work as 'Lehrstücke über die Lächerlichkeit von Konventionen'.<sup>105</sup> He explains that

Ger van Elk inszeniert Klischees, Mythen, um sie im gleichen Augenblick ironisch zu durchbrechen(...). Dadurch entmythologisiert Ger van Elk den etablierten Wert von Konvention. Sicherlich ist gesellschaftliches Leben ohne Absprachen und Übereinkünfte nicht möglich.<sup>106</sup>

Van Elk ridicules the belief in artificial conventions of (art) historical periods, because he does not believe in absolute truths, which can be subject to adjustment and manipulation. Van Elk aims to reveal artificial conventions out of which reality is constructed in order to draw attention to these normally obvious structures.<sup>107</sup> Blotkamp also mentions that Van Elk's symmetry is not just a 'simple parody in which the re-use of existing art usually strands', rather, Van Elk challenges and undermines the historical classical values of art and the

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<sup>101</sup> Beeren, 'Ger van Elk' in: *Ger van Elk*, ex. cat. 1980, p. 15.

<sup>102</sup> 'Ger van Elk antwortet auf fragen, die Antje von Graevetniz stellte' in: *Ger van Elk*, ex. cat. 1977, p. 20, p. 30, p. 46.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 20. Particularly German Romanticism, Van Elk explains: 'Die deutsche Romantik ist für mich der Höhepunkt des vorigen Jahrhunderts. Aber ich finde es eine der schlimmsten Klischees, wenn Leute heute eine romantische Haltung annehmen, sobald sie über die Vergänglichkeit der Dinge sprechen' (Van Elk in: *Ger van Elk*, ex. cat. 1977, p. 31.).

<sup>104</sup> Jager, 2004, p. 88.

<sup>105</sup> Schwarz, 'The missing persons oder wie lustig ist die Manipulation' in: *Ger van Elk*, ex. cat. 1977, p. 60.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 60.

<sup>107</sup> In Van Elk's acceptance speech, for winning the J.C. van Lanschot Prize for the Visual Arts at the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo on 15 June 1996, Van Elk recalls the moment, when he had to change from being Catholic to Protestant and 'reject everything he taught to believe was sacred' and belief in the opposite as new truth. This moment he realized, as a child, that 'nothing is true' and that 'one theory is always interchangeable with another' (Kaal, 2009, pp. 20-22).

conventions of art; for example, he addresses the illusionism of former styles by paradoxically accentuating 'the artificiality of the world presented (...)'.<sup>108</sup>

Van Elk's use of symmetry goes beyond just the subversion of (art historical) conventions and uncovers the conventional framework, which results in a form of ironic self-reflection. Implicit in his working method (apart from providing a commentary on conventions in art history) is his fixed position within these structures of conventions, as 'he cannot do so without these conventions' or collective recognizable codes.<sup>109</sup> Van Elk's heightened awareness of - and undermining response to - the conventions of art history are the basis for his subversive attitude. His reflexive consciousness forces him to take a position within the art-historical tradition, but, at the same time, this is the foundation from which he conveys, rather than reveals, an artificial layer that causes these conventions to reflect upon themselves. This results, in accordance with Jacinto Lageira as well, in a self-reflective irony. Van Elk's reflection on his position as an artist and his work of art as part of the art historical tradition will be subject to later reflection.<sup>110</sup>

#### **1.4.2. Bas Jan Ader: tragic self-irony**

Ader's artistic attitude requires a different approach, as it differs significantly from that of Van Elk's. However, like Van Elk's attitude, Paul Andriessse also remarks a paradox or ambiguity between seriousness and humour in Ader's practice, when he states that 'serious ideas were mixed with ironic detachment'.<sup>111</sup> Specifically, Andriessse evidences ironic undertones with a poetic humour about being an artist.

Ader's seriousness can be found in his referents to art historical conventions and philosophical concepts. Like Van Elk, Ader seems to adhere to a symmetrical tradition, because he uses these concepts as a starting point for many of his works. For an understanding of the initial concept, Andriessse points to the title of the work of art, as it indicates a *fait accompli*, meaning that the title completely describes the work.<sup>112</sup> Ader's works, particularly, incorporate ideas or clichés from Dutch tradition, like bicycling, or make allusions to De Stijl and works of Piet Mondriaan and Theo van Doesburg. Others show more

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<sup>108</sup> Blotkamp, 2009, p. 104.

<sup>109</sup> Jager, 2004, pp. 82-83.

<sup>110</sup> Lageira, 'The Dividing Line' in: *Ger van Elk* ex. cat. 1999, pp. 13-15.

<sup>111</sup> Andriessse, 1988, p. 73.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 72, p. 75.

romantic qualities, which are reminiscent to certain paintings of Caspar David Friedrich.<sup>113</sup> According to Jörg Heiser, these works underline a 'highly formalized concern with the attributes of romanticism (...): feelings of alienation, solitude, unfulfilled longing, self-mutilation and melancholia.'<sup>114</sup> Similarly, Jan Verwoert mentions that Ader restages 'motifs from the repertoire of romantic culture', in particular 'the sublime' and melancholia.<sup>115</sup> Ader's artistic attitude is received as one of reflection, rationalism, seriousness, and a high level of reasoning, for example 'to search for the understanding and structuring of life in its totality'.<sup>116</sup>

Ader's artistic method is one of performativity combined with humour. He re-enacts or restages artistic and philosophical concepts, using of his own physical body as an artistic means.<sup>117</sup> Ader's works can be categorised as existential and autobiographical, dealing with the artist's experiences and emotions.<sup>118</sup> A certain type of humour features these systematic performances, which Verwoert categorizes as 'slapstick comedy': a style of humour involving exaggerated physical activity that exceeds the boundaries of normal physical comedy.<sup>119</sup> In a way, Ader ironizes concepts from the past in his performances, by executing them in an exaggerated and foolish manner. In this play, Ader seems to test the limits of their authenticity or credibility, and - in the process - he sometimes accentuates their artificiality.

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<sup>113</sup> Ibidem, 1988, pp. 76-79. Ader is of the opinion that any self-given explanation of his work should be avoided. The references to the De Stijl group can be found, according to Andriessse, in the works: *On the road to a New Neo-Plasticism, Westkappelle Holland* (1971); *Pitfall on the way to a new Neo-Plasticism, Westkappelle Holland* (1977) and *Broken Fall (Geometric), Westkappelle Holland* (1971). I would like to add the film *Primary Time* (1974), in which Ader gradually rearranges a vase of flowers so that the assortment changes from entirely red to yellow and finally to blue. The romantic qualities can be found in works, including *I'm too sad to tell you* (1970), *Farewell to Faraway Friends* (1971) and *Untitled (Swedish fall)* (1971). See also: Beenker, 'De man die achter de horizon wilde kijken', in: *Bas Jan Ader*, ex. cat. 2006, pp. 16-18.

<sup>114</sup> Heiser, 2002, np. <[http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/emotional\\_rescue/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/emotional_rescue/)> Web. 22 February 2016. See also: Heiser, 'Curb your romanticism: Bas Jan Aders slapstick', in: *Bas Jan Ader*, ex. cat. 2006, pp. 25-28. Heiser mainly refers to the works *In search of the miraculous* (1973-1975) and *I'm too sad to tell you* (1971).

<sup>115</sup> Verwoert, 2006, pp. 10-14. Ader was inspired by theories of the philosopher Georg Hegel (1770-1883), particularly in his work *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807). Beenker refers to an undated (estimated from 1974) excerpt of a text by Ader, in which he writes: 'Ik zal moeten toegeven gefascineerd te zijn door de tomeloze bedreiging die de natuur hier boven ons houdt. Ik houd van deze wilde romantische wereldstad [Los Angeles] van uitersten' (Ader in: *Bas Jan Ader*, ex. cat. 2006, p. 23).

<sup>116</sup> Beenker completely rejects any ironic interpretation of Ader's work. He dismisses irony as an important aspect of Ader's work and thinks that such an interpretation, in particular with regard to the *Fall* films, is a misconception of earlier critics, writing that: 'Toen leken films (...) naar de geest van de tijd vooral ironisch bedoeld. Nu weten we beter. Zijn vallen is existentieel van aard, zijn overgave aan de zwaartekracht filosofisch onderbouwd en bovendien komt het voort uit zijn persoonlijke leven' (Beenker, 'De man die achter de horizon wilde kijken', in: *Bas Jan Ader*, ex. cat. 2006, p. 20, p. 23.). See also: Verwoert, 2006, p. 10.

<sup>117</sup> Beenker, 'De man die achter de horizon wilde kijken', in: *Bas Jan Ader*, ex. cat. 2006, p. 19, p. 21.

<sup>118</sup> Andriessse, 1988, p. 72, p. 75. Verwoert, 2006, p. 9.

<sup>119</sup> In particular Verwoert refers to Ader's films *Fall 1* and *Fall 2*. Verwoert characterizes Ader's works, as 'existential conceptual art' (Verwoert, 2006, p. 10).

Elsewhere, this slapstick methodology blends with mere tragedy. Heiser takes his lead from Verwoert, when contemplating Ader's use of the comedian's methodology, focussing on the tension between the comic incident and the tragic fate. According to Heiser, Ader acts like the tragic hero, rather than a comedian, when his performances are pushed 'to the point of crisis in the enactment of existential drama'.<sup>120</sup> Ader consciously and purposefully carries out a plan that will inevitably lead to his downfall, tragedy, or failure.<sup>121</sup> Failure itself is turned into the ultimate act, in which Ader can become the victim. This brings forth a short circuit between the heroic act, which is to be found in Ader's serious intent and determined performances, and its collapse into failure.<sup>122</sup> Ader's slapstick, comic performances turn into tragic self-irony, when he is confronted with the limits of his body and the laws of nature.

### 1.4.3. Conclusion

Van Elk's artistic attitude seems to adhere to that of the 'trickster'. He uses cultural tradition and the conventions of art history as a starting point for his work. By paraphrasing, exalting, enlarging, or minimalizing the characteristics of these traditions, including medium, style, genre, theme, methodology, etcetera, he puts them in a different context, aiming to subvert and demythologise them. The intent of his reflexive attitude and practice is didactic, because, in a humorous way, he aims to raise awareness of the artificiality inherent in, and the authority of, a conventional framework. He aims to break one's trust in these conventions as absolute truths, and portrays them rather as illusions or artificialities. Ader's artistic attitude seems to adhere to the intellectual master type. His practice consists of a system of analysis, instrumenting his own body as an artistic means to register, investigate, comment on, or experience philosophical concepts or art historical conventions. Like a comedian, Ader exaggerates or exceeds boundaries in his play, by which he internalizes a form of irony. In these performances he seems to ridicule conventional concepts, by which he breaks the authenticity or credibility of these concepts.

Both Van Elk's and Ader's artistic attitude consists of a reflexive consciousness, heightened awareness of -and a high level of reasoning towards- their position as artists in relation to art history and philosophy. This attitude is combined with humour and subversion of the authority of former conventions in art history. However, their practices

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<sup>120</sup> Verwoert, 2006, p. 10.

<sup>121</sup> Heiser, 'Curb your romanticism: Bas Jan Aders slapstick', in: *Bas Jan Ader*, ex. cat. 2006, pp. 26-27.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 27-28.

explicitly or implicitly turn into different forms of humour. Van Elk's practices turn into a form of ironic self-reflection, whereas Ader's practices result in a form of tragic self-irony. Van Elk's aim to break the conventional framework of collective recognizable codes means, paradoxically, his dependence on similar codes. Van Elk cannot do without these conventions and shows the impossibility of a reality without this framework of conventions and arrangements. His reflexive attitude results in an ironic self-reflection, as his works in the end will also be subject to reflection. Ader's performances morph from the comic to the tragic, where he becomes the victim of his own joke and foolishness. Ader uses his own body in a methodologically slapstick manner, often resulting in a form of existential drama. The performances almost always lead, consciously, to failure and tragedy. Ader is subjected to the laws of nature and is confronted with the limits imposed upon his being, by which his performances lead into a tragic self-irony.

Conclusively, both Ader and Van Elk show a reflexive and ironic attitude towards the authoritative conventions of art history. In their aim to ironize the speciousness of these conventions, they appoint themselves an authoritative status. Simultaneously, their irony turns against themselves. Therefore, the essential element in Van Elk's attitude is a type of ironic self-reflection, whilst that of Ader's is more a tragic self-irony. The artists are conscious about their autonomous position to reflect on and ironize the past, and their subjection to the laws of nature and time and a conventional framework. This double form of reflection or irony, onto both the concepts of tradition and their authoritative position, is rooted in the construction of modern authenticity. The next section aims to delineate this essential element of modern authenticity in Van Elk's series *The Adieu* and Ader's unfinished trilogy *In search of the Miraculous*.

### **1.5 Visual analysis**

In order to come to a more concrete understanding of this double form of irony or modern form of authenticity, consisting of a dual consciousness of reflection and subjection, this section will give a visual analysis of two 'self-portraits' of Van Elk and Ader. The aim of these analyses is to retrace this modern form of authenticity or subjectivity in their self-portraits. This section is bilateral; firstly, it will give a visual analysis and interpretation of Van Elk's series *The Adieu* (1974-1975) (Figure 5a-f), secondly, it will focus on Ader's trilogy *In search of the miraculous* (1973-1975) (Figure 6a-e).

### 1.5.1. Ger van Elk - *The Adieu*

Between 1974 and 1975, Van Elk made a series of works under the collective title *The Adieu*. In 1974, he created the first part of the series - *The Adieu I* (Collection Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam) (Figure 5a); *The Adieu II* (Collection Max de Jong, Naarden) (Figure 5b); *The Adieu III* (The Museum of Modern Art, New York) (Figure 5c); *The Adieu IV* (Collection Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven) (Figure 5d). In 1975 Van Elk made more variants of these works under the same title - *The Adieu V* (Private Collection, Paris) (Figure 5e)<sup>123</sup>; *Adieu* (Collection Cultural Heritage Agency, Amersfoort) (Figure 5f). The watercolour sketch from 1974 gives us an indication of Van Elk's idea about the works in the series, and the way they are supposed to be exhibited (Figure 5g). However, in 1980, Van Elk participated with several works of the series in the Dutch pavilion at the Venice Biennale, among them, *The Adieu IV*, *The Adieu I* and *The Adieu V* (Figure 5h). The works were not exhibited according to the sketch, or to their successive number in the series. Nowadays, the series is no longer exhibited together. This analysis will particularly focus on *The Adieu I* and *The Adieu IV*.

Both of these works are chromogenic Kodak prints with a silkscreened surface, which show a painting on an easel in a theatrical setting. Van Elk enhanced the enlarged photographs with a felt-tip pen, diluted acrylics, and painterly brushwork in strong strokes with dark, glowing colours, like purple and green.<sup>124</sup> In this painterly result it is difficult to ascertain where the painted image ends and the photographic image begins. In the late 1990's, *The Adieu I* became part of a reproduction project led by the Stedelijk Museum and Sanneke Stigter with the participation of Van Elk. Light caused the chromogenic print to discolour. A digital scan of the work was made, however the reproduction differs from its original, showing a glossy surface of the Cibachrome. Except for the curtain, Van Elk painted some of the originally painted parts anew.<sup>125</sup> The original work is kept in the same frame behind the new version.

The small canvas staged on the easel in the photographic series appears in different settings or positions. In *The Adieu I* the painting is staged in front of dark blue velvet curtains, which hang on a white wall. *The Adieu IV* shows the painting in between bay-like coloured velvet curtains hanging from a yellow wall. The canvas in the works is a

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<sup>123</sup> The photographs of *The Adieu V* is included in *Ger Van Elk*, the exhibition catalogue from 1980, however, comparing the picture in the catalogue with the photograph of the exhibition view at the Venice Biennale, it should be argued that the photograph in the exhibition catalogue is included in mirrored display. Sanneke Stigter confirms this erroneous inclusion of the mirrored photograph of *The Adieu V* (Appendix 3).

<sup>124</sup> Stigter, 2004, p. 106.

<sup>125</sup> Ibidem, p. 106.

conventional rectangle, however, it is shown from different viewpoints or placed at a sharp angle to the surface, which makes the image on the front of the canvas hardly visible by its foreshortened appearance. *The Adieu I* shows the canvas slightly turned away from the spectator, whereas in *The Adieu IV* it is almost totally turned away.

The overall shapes of the pieces in the series differ. *The Adieu I* is an irregular quadrilateral, whereas *The Adieu IV* is an irregular trapezoidal-shape. The wide black frames emphasize these peculiar shapes. The photograph of Van Elk's exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 1980 indicates how the works should have to be installed. In this ordering the curtains hang properly and, although the paintings on the easel are shown from different angles, they consistently function as point of orientation, or 'as reality in a world of illusion: the real thing that can be looked at in a normal ordinary way'.<sup>126</sup> The painting on the easel and the curtains serve as 'reality', which is disturbed because of the converging and diverging lines of the irregular shapes and frames, the bearers of the illusion or 'reality'.

The image on the canvas in the photographs shows a lane bordered by wintry-looking trees. Here we can find the representation of the artist. He is standing on this lane with his left hand raised, as in a gesture of waving goodbye ('adieu') to the spectator. It seems as if he is about to turn around and walk away to the vanishing point. Regarding, Van Elk's gesture and the title of the series *The Adieu*, it offers us the indication that the content of the series deals with a farewell. The language in which the title is formulated, a combination of English and French, increases the complexity of the work.<sup>127</sup>

Various art critics interpret the works according to the symmetrical tradition, by giving references to other art historical styles or works. Stigter, for example, relates the curtains to those in seventeenth century *genre* paintings.<sup>128</sup> The canvas and the easel literally refer to the materials of painting itself. The image on this canvas is often linked with cliché romantic aspects of seventeenth century landscape painting; in particular, it is often equated to Meindert Hobbema's painting *The avenue of Middelharnis* (1689) (Figure 15).<sup>129</sup> The irregular image sizes and frames are brought in comparison with the American artist Frank Stella's concept of shaped canvases, exemplified in his *Irregular Polygon* series (1965-1966) (Figure 16). Deviating from Stella's formalist rules, Van Elk's works show frivol and naturalistic images on these shapes. In conclusion, Van Elk's references to other art

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<sup>126</sup> Fuchs, 'On Semantics, Ger van Elk, Structure and other Difficult Terms', in: *Ger van Elk*, ex. cat. 1974, pp. 70-71.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 65, pp. 69-70.

<sup>128</sup> Stigter, 2004, p. 106.

<sup>129</sup> Beeren, 'Ger van Elk', in: *Ger van Elk*, ex. cat., 1980, pp. 37-39.

historical periods and styles, particularly romanticism and modernism, are used to show, or reflect on, the development in the tradition of painting.

In conclusion, the series could be understood as an allegory of painting, since all the aspects of the series point to the historical tradition of painting. Van Elk shows his reflexive attitude towards past aesthetic formulas and traditions in painting. By introducing these conventions in his works, Van Elk is able to artistically and intellectually transcend and subvert them into clichés. Furthermore, by the work's title and Van Elk's gesture, it can be said that he is proclaiming/announcing a theatrical goodbye in the context of painting. Also, the changing perspectives make the canvases appear as if they were disappearing, which underlines this interpretation. Then again, the works were made during a time when the discussion of 'the death of painting' was raging. Van Elk claims a superior position by declaring a farewell to this tradition. However, the work goes beyond a simple farewell to painting because Van Elk confronts the norms and truths in the arts, and contradicts his 'goodbye to painting' by painting over a photograph of a painting. Through his process he seems to ironize his statement of a definite goodbye to painting. He thus connects a goodbye to the terms of time and shows that tradition is a continuation, and that multiple traditions can exist next to each other.

By the inclusion of all these different indexes pointing to painting, he shows that each change in time is also a change in perspective. Van Elk visually transposed this alternation in perspective into the work; it is simultaneously a goodbye to all the forms of painting and aesthetic concepts of the past, and a re-experiencing of the past in the present. In these works, Van Elk shows a conscious view and a reflexive attitude about the changes in art historical conventions, technical means, aesthetic schemes, themes, and mediums. However, apart from his reflexive and ironic attitude on the gradual disappearance of painting, he is also implicitly conscious about his own enclosed position within the limits of his position.<sup>130</sup> In the future his work will be subject to reflection and part of tradition and history. New views, aesthetics standards, and technical means will become the standard to represent reality. Van Elk already shows his awareness of this future development, by using new, more advanced, applications of photography, in the reproduction of *The Adieu I*.

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<sup>130</sup> Lageira, 'The Dividing Line' in: *Ger van Elk* ex. cat. 1999, p. 15.

### 1.5.2. Bas Jan Ader - *In search of the miraculous*

Ader originally intended *In search of the miraculous* to be a trilogy, but it was never completed. Paul Andriessse refers to Ader's notebook to explain the concept of the trilogy:

Think of: 'In search of the miraculous' as beginning in L.A. and at end of night ending up at Ocean's edge. (continuing across US to EU coast) continuing in boat voyage, and later in night in Amsterdam night in search.

1 In search of the miraculous (Los Angeles I night), 2 In search of the miraculous (Atlantic Ocean...days...nights), 3 In search of the miraculous (Amsterdam I night) Possible to continue

Show at C In search of the miraculous  
Photos and song of sea,  
From land to sea – to land etc.<sup>131</sup>

The subtitle of the first part is *One Night in Los Angeles* (Figure 6a). On the one hand it consists of a night-time walk by Ader through Los Angeles, from the Hollywood hills down to the Pacific Ocean, in the fall of 1973, and on the other hand, the work exists as a documentation of this walk in a series of fourteen or eighteen photographs (there are two versions).<sup>132</sup>

The selected series of fourteen black-and-white photographs are very dark, and what they depict is therefore hardly visible. This is due to the time when the pictures were taken, starting at dusk and ending at night. In some pictures the sky is lit up by moonlight, in others artificial lighting is present, including traffic lights, lampposts, and car headlamps. Barely distinguishable in each of the frames is the small figure of the artist dressed in black: sometimes only his silhouette is visible, often represented in a dorsal pose, by which he seems to disappear from sight. He is repeatedly presented in the dark from a distance, never reveals his face. Ader does carry a flashlight while he walks through an urban surrounding, characterised by freeways, road signs, a viaduct, or an underpass. In others, Ader is in alleys,

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<sup>131</sup> Andriessse, 1988, p. 56. See also: Dumbadze, 2013, p. 93. Verwoert, 2006, p 1.

<sup>132</sup> *Bas Jan Ader*, ex. cat. 2006, catalogue number 16 and 17. The series show various differences. The series of eighteen photographs is smaller; each photograph is 20.3 x 25.4 cm, and is part of the collection Philip Aarons and Shelley Fox Aarons in New York. Whereas, the series of fourteen is bigger in size, each photograph is 27.4 x 34.5 cm. Furthermore, the series of eighteen photographs shows a different sequence of photographs; the same photographs in both series contain different sentences of the text of the Coaster's song; finally, some words in the two series are spelled in different way, furthermore there is an inconsequent use in apostrophes and capitalization; however the handwriting is identical in both series. In this thesis only the smaller version of fourteen photographs will be discussed, as Ader decided to exhibit this version during the show at Claire Copley Gallery in 1975. The negatives of the photographs no longer exist.

on sidewalks, or near suburban houses or flats on a mountain. The pictures also show the artist at a parking lot, surrounded by palm trees. In the last photograph Ader stands alone near the shore with his feet about to be washed by the incoming tide, and his flashlight turned off.

Various sentences of the lyrics of the song *Searchin'* (1957), written by Jerome Leibner and Mike Stoller and recorded by The Coasters, are inscribed with Ader's distinctive handwriting in white ink at the bottom of every photograph. In chronological order the text states:

[1] 'yeh I've been searchin' ah ah searchin' / [2] oh yeh searchin every which way / [3] oh yeh Searchin' ah ah searchin' / [4] searchin' every which way / [5] but I'm like that North West Mountie / [6] you know I'll bring her in someday / [7] Well now if I have to swim a river you know I will / [8] and if I have to climb a mountain you know I will / [9] and if she's hiding up on Blueberry Hill / [10] am I gonna find her child you know I will / [11] 'cause I've been searchin' oh yeh searchin' / [12] my goodness searchin' every which way / [13] but I'm like that North West Mountie / [14] you know I'll bring her in someday.<sup>133</sup>

The song revolves around the singer's determination to find his love, even if he must resort to detective work. The inclusion of these sentences emphasizes Ader's continuous search, chartered through the chronological order of the pictures.

Dumbadze discusses the outtakes of this series of photographs, which fill about seven contact sheets (Figure 6b). Dumbadze writes that:

[a] literalism haunts the outtakes: Ader is seen lying on the street, looking down at the ground, among police caution signs. In one he beams his light into an obstructed doorway; in another he peers into a hole in a low-rise building's wall.<sup>134</sup>

In the outtakes of the series, Ader has a more prominent presence, which in the end he chose to exclude. Most of these clear photographs did not make the cut, by which the photographic series actually came alive in Ader's editing. Apart from this editing, the camera captures Ader's appearance as a solitary wanderer, however, the use of photography implies the presence of a second person that operated the device and took the pictures. Ader and his wife, Marie Sue Ader-Andersen, drove around the city looking for ideal locations, and she took the pictures during a single night.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> *Bas Jan Ader* ex. cat. 2006, catalogue number 16.

<sup>134</sup> Dumbadze, 2013, p. 97.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 94. See also: *Bas Jan Ader* ex. cat. 2006, catalogue number 16.

Ader, as an investigator, is stalked by photography, which, in turn, allows the beholder to trace Ader in the photographic documentation. The beholder takes the position of the photographer, by which he searches along with Ader through the dark photographs. The chronological order makes the eye of the beholder, picture by picture, wander through the various landscapes through which Ader travelled, from the hills to the coastline. The beholder becomes a voyeur of Ader's seemingly solitary search. The handwritten sentences on the photographs emphasize the search as an investigation. Again, the beholder is directed to read the loose sentences in this chronological order and to connect with Ader's position. Both the photographs and the sentences emphasize the journey of going from one point to another.

As the series of photographs seemed to come to a conclusion, Ader decided, two years later, to start with the second part of the work. His intent was to cross the Atlantic, from Cape Cod to Falmouth in England, in a small one-man yacht (only 13 feet, circa 4 meters).<sup>136</sup> The proclaimed end of the search expressed in the last photographs was only provisional, suggesting an opening for the second segment of the search. This part was also bilateral: on the one hand it exists as an performance: Ader's voyage from Cape Cod, departing on the 9th of July 1975; on the other hand it exists as an indexicalisation of his performance, which can be distinguished amongst an exhibition in Claire S. Copley gallery (Figure 6d), an invitation to the exhibition (Figure 6c), a publication in bulletin 89 (Figure 6e), and film footage and photographs of the beginning of his sail.

The exhibition, 'In search of the Miraculous', took place at the Claire S. Copley gallery in Los Angeles and ran from April 22 to May 17, 1975.<sup>137</sup> It was set up as a prelude to Ader's Atlantic crossing. At first glance, the invitation card for Ader's exhibition shows a person (Ader?) hanging on the right side of a sailboat, struggling with the violent wild sea (Figure 6c). However, the photograph is rather vague, so one cannot make out with certainty that it is an actual human being. On the left side of the photograph one can see the boat and on the right side the rough sea. Centred at the bottom, divided over two lines, in a white, kitschy and curvy font reads the text: 'Bas Jan Ader / "In Search of the Miraculous"'. On the backside of the card at the top left is written: 'Tuesday Evening / April 22, 8-10 p.m.' and on the left bottom: 'Claire S. Copley Gallery / 918 N. La Cienega Blvd. / Los Angeles California 90069 / April 22 - May 17, 1975'.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Verwoert, 2006, p. 1.

<sup>137</sup> Dumbadze, 2013, p. 116. See also: *Bas Jan Ader*, ex. cat. 2006, Catalogue Number 33.

<sup>138</sup> *Bas Jan Ader*, ex. cat. 2006, Catalogue number 33. The exhibition catalogue suggests that the picture was taken during Ader's first sail (1962/'63).

In the front of the exhibition space, along the left wall, the smaller iteration, the series of fourteen photographs from the first part of the trilogy, was exhibited, chronologically, in one row (Figure 6d).<sup>139</sup> On the right wall, sheet music and lyrics to nineteenth century sea shanties were on display. During the opening, a choir of nine UC Irvine students sang these traditional shanties, accompanied by a piano (Figure 6d). Dumbadze emphasizes that they maintained the light-dark opposition evident in the photographs: they stood in front of a white wall, facing the pianist, and were dressed all in black; the singers either held white sheet music or rested it on black music stands.<sup>140</sup> The nine students sang of sailors bidding goodbye to and their desire and excitement to spend their life at sea, among which the songs: ‘What are the wild waves saying?’ and ‘Good-bye my lover, good-bye’. The signal song was ‘A Life on the Ocean Wave’ by Epes Sargent, published in 1838, set to music by Henry Russell.<sup>141</sup> It is an easy-going folk-song, which describes a relief to leave the dullness of land, and the excitement of freedom, like that experienced by an ocean bird, far out at sea.

During the remainder of the exhibition the documentation and recordings replaced the choir’s performance (Figure 6d). Photographs of the choir’s performance were taken straight on and were turned into slides. A projector was used to project about eighty, slightly different, slides on the wall. The machine worked on a timer, advancing through the images at a regulated pace. So the beholder would see the replacement of one film frame by another, witnessing the subtle movement as the slides changed, while listening to an audio recording of the choir’s performance. In this way, the apparatuses Ader used reproduced the memory of the original event in two ways: in visual slides and sound.<sup>142</sup> Dumbadze refers to one reviewer of the show, William Wilson, who writes about how the ‘slides of the black garbed students projected almost life-size look like New Realist paintings of a church choir’, and mentions that ‘it all becomes a kind of sentimental rococo kitsch.’<sup>143</sup>

Secondly, ‘bulletin 89’, published by the Art & Project gallery in association with Claire S. Copley gallery, announced Ader’s Atlantic crossing (Figure 6e).<sup>144</sup> The inside shows a black-and-white photograph in A3 format of Ader sailing away in his small boat called

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<sup>139</sup> In the exhibition catalogue *Bas Jan Ader* (2006) it is claimed that the series of eighteen photographs was shown during the exhibition (*Bas Jan Ader*, ex. cat. 2006, catalogue number 16 and 17). However, in the exhibition catalogue edited by Christophe Cherix, *In & Out of Amsterdam* (2009) it is argued that the smaller iteration was on view (Cherix, 2009, p. 54). Following the latter publication and by comparing the smaller photographic series (Figure 6a) with photograph of the exhibition view (Figure 6d) I advocate that the smaller version was on view.

<sup>140</sup> Dumbadze, 2013, p. 117.

<sup>141</sup> Ibidem, p. 113.

<sup>142</sup> Ibidem, p. 118.

<sup>143</sup> William Wilson in Dumbadze, 2013, p. 118.

<sup>144</sup> *Bas Jan Ader*, ex. cat. 2006, catalogue number 46. The photograph was taken by Marie Sue Ader-Andersen.

*Ocean Wave*. The photo bears the written text 'In search of the miraculous' in a similar kitschy font as the invitation card. On the backside of the edition, the music score and text are printed from the poem-turned-song 'A Life On The Ocean Wave', referring back to the sea song played during the exhibition.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of July, 1975, Ader actually set sail from Cape Cod and expected to arrive in Europe in sixty to ninety days. Ader had a small battery-powered radio receiver but not a two-way radio. He also brought a camera and an audio recorder.<sup>145</sup> This part differs from the first because, once at sea, the essential element was Ader's absolute singularity, as he was now a solitary and isolated adventurer or researcher in ascetic austerity.<sup>146</sup> After three weeks at sea, radio-contact with Ader's boat was lost. On April 18<sup>th</sup> the following year, Spanish fishermen only found the remnants of his boat, in a half sunken state, near the coast of Ireland. They found some spoiled food tins, a paraffin stove, a plastic sextant, sunglasses, six pairs of socks, a sweater, three pairs of slacks, a driver's license, a health insurance card, a University of California Irvine ID card, and a damaged Dutch passport belonging to Bastiaan Johan Christiaan Ader in the cabin.<sup>147</sup> Ader's body was missing and never recovered. The camera and tape recorder disappeared as well.<sup>148</sup>

The concept of the third part was supposed to close the project with a walk through Amsterdam at night and to exhibit the complete project in the fall of 1975 in the Groninger museum. Apart from *One night in Los Angeles*, photographs from an Amsterdam night walk, designed to be comparable in composition, would be on view. There might also have been photographs and audio recordings from the voyage, and Dutch performers to sing sea shanties at the opening.<sup>149</sup> The exhibition was never realised, therefore, it is unknown how or which of these elements would have been presented.

*In search of the miraculous* could be regarded as an allegory of the romantic quest for the miraculous, as it is about the idea and the experience of this concept.<sup>150</sup> Ader's work seems to emphasize the rift between personal and secondary experiences, by combining various motifs from popular and folk culture, with photographs and other technical means that directly indicate a first-hand experience. The work's title as a 'faith accompli', discloses

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<sup>145</sup> Dumbadze, 2013, p. 123. Verwoert, 2006, p. 2.

<sup>146</sup> Dumbadze, 2013, p. 140. It seems he had no contact with any other vessel, and because he lacked a two way radio he was unable to communicate with people on land.

<sup>147</sup> Ibidem, pp. 129-130.

<sup>148</sup> Ibidem, p. 131.

<sup>149</sup> Ibidem, p. 129.

<sup>150</sup> Verwoert, 2006, p. 9.

Ader's intention to search for the miraculous: a surprise, wonder, supernatural occurrences, unusualness, or sensation. According to Verwoert, the work frames a key motif from the culture of Romanticism, namely 'that of the wandering tragic hero on a quest for the sublime.'<sup>151</sup> However, Verwoert confuses the sublime with the miraculous, which are not the same. Ader uses his own body with which he performs the quest for the miraculous, which consists of walking through the landscape with an oversized flashlight at night and sailing the ocean in an undersized boat. The voyage most nearly approaches the romantic ideal, as it was open to contingency, unforeseen processes and executed in absolute singularity and seclusion, while the walk suggested the presence of a second person and was staged.

This performance, carrying out a search, was materialized and exists in various indexes, including the distributed postcards, the publication in bulletin 89, the series of photographs and music sheets. The visual language of these images is similar to the iconography of the romantic age, such as the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich and William Turner. They present the archetype of romantic culture, by depicting a lonely wanderer looking out on a landscape from the top of a mountain, or a small boat on an overwhelmingly rough ocean. Both return to the human having faced the grandeur of nature. Contrary, to this sincere romantic ideal represented in paintings, the works of Ader are mostly reproducible and distributable images with a kitschy appearance. In the visual part of his trilogy Ader overthrows the historic visual idiom of romanticism and reveals its clichés, by using reproductions and the simple phrases of folk- and pop songs. He undermines high art with low and folk culture.<sup>152</sup>

Ader's work seems to be a re-examination of the concept of the miraculous from the past. As the title points to a search, it should be left open whether he was actually convinced that he would find the miraculous, which is, after all, not a physical and fixed object one can circumscribe, but something metaphysical. Ader therefore contradicts his serious attitude with a slight hint at humour. The laden, exciting and analytic performance of Ader, carried out with rationalism and determination, is turned into comedy by the use of certain attributes, in this case the big flashlight and the very small boat. By exaggerating, Ader's performance adheres to a degree of slapstick comedy. Ader thus ironizes the existence and the tension of the concept of the miraculous, which is mostly passively experienced or accessed by secondary artificial motifs nowadays.

Ader shows an intellectual attitude in which he transcends the tradition of romanticism by ironizing it, firstly by using second hand motif from popular and folk

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<sup>151</sup> Ibidem, pp. 3-4.

<sup>152</sup> Verwoert, 2006, p. 4.

culture, secondly by exaggerating the performance. He attests an authoritative, autonomous, and reflexive consciousness. However, this irony morphs into a certain tragic self-irony on two levels. The search was too intense and ended in tragedy, as Ader disappeared at sea. He was confronted with the limits of the body when the laws of nature mastered over him. Ader's disappearance should be read as an inextricable part of his work because it was open to unexpected occurrences or situations. His disappearance, not by fate but by chance, is a characteristic element of Ader's work. Because of his death, Ader's voyage remains irretrievable, which causes a gap between the representational and actual quality of the work. Ader's death is the absolute truth in the work, which defies representation. Through this tragedy the concept of the miraculous remains an ideology of romanticism, which emphasizes its non-existence in the present. His test to search for the truth of the emotional intensity of this romantic idea will always remain a search. Ader shows a chronological indexicalisation of his journey, but never reaches a conclusion.<sup>153</sup> Thus, the work is an acknowledgement of the existence of this concept, known only from second-hand motifs, and it reveals a sceptical attitude of a true, first-hand experience of this metaphysical concept from the past in the present. Ader's authoritative and reflexive attitude is subjected to the laws of the universe, including time and nature, by which his work ends in a tragic self-irony.

### 1.5.3. Summary

In conclusion, it can be said that both works are real allegories: representations of abstract concepts that the artists use to clearly voice their position on these concepts through their presence in the works of art. *The Adieu* can be regarded as an allegory of the historical tradition of painting. *In search of the miraculous* can be seen as an allegory of the romantic idea of the miraculous. All aspects and motifs in the works variously index, or point to, the subject of the work of art, to indicate a bigger abstract idea outside the phenomenological world. All aspects of the work are used to concretize the abstract conceptual components or to provide a form for the content of the work.

The form of the allegory must include a character or a personification because it gives the artist the opportunity to insert an opinion or to reflect on the relevant abstract idea. In both allegories, the artists are present and their appearance serves as a character through which, with gestures or performances, they can communicate about subjects (the

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<sup>153</sup> Verwoert, 2006, p. 6.

tradition of painting or the miraculous) in the present. Van Elk waves goodbye, by which he explicitly declares a farewell to the tradition of painting during his age. Ader's aim was to grasp the miraculous by a practical logic of setting off across the Atlantic, searching for an experience of the miraculous. Both artists show a reflexive attitude as they mentally stepped, or more accurately, meandered back to history. By this regression they aimed to re-experience these art historical traditions, aesthetic formulas and standards, principles, and concepts. By reintroducing these concepts, which knowingly belong to the past, they usurp part of the tradition of art history and philosophy and assimilate them to the present in modern times. Both artists transcend tradition, and, subsequently, they emphasize their authoritative position by opening up a new perspective to share their opinion on the status of these concepts in modern times.

However, Van Elk's and Ader's serious reflexive and authoritative attitude is relativized and contradicted by the use of humour. Van Elk's statement on the end of painting is subverted by actually painting on the photograph. He reveals a relativistic attitude against this definite goodbye in the present. Ader subverts the seriousness of his determined and courageous search for an experience of the miraculous by exaggerating it and the use various attributes that give the work an ironic cachet. He pushed his search to an existential tragedy in real life, at which the truth-value or an encounter with the miraculous was to be decided. He reveals a sceptical attitude on actually 'finding' a first-hand experience of the miraculous, which is only known from second hand motifs and clichéd images.

When the links are made between the past and the present, both works disclose an observation on the essential element of history and time. Van Elk shows in *The Adieu* that history is a development, in which each time has its own beliefs, perspective, norms, values, images, technical means, and possibilities. Ader makes a statement about the historical obsolescence of the miraculous in modern times. He shows time is changing and the past cannot be re-experienced the same way in the present. Old beliefs lose their credibility and become artificial clichés in kitschy second-hand images. Both Van Elk and Ader transpose their views on historical process, into their works. Van Elk shows a visualisation of changing perspectives, by literally disturbing the perspectives in the work. Ader shows a chronological indexicalisation of his journey, but never reaches a conclusion, by which we are left with only some new second hand experiences of a search for the miraculous and combines these with ready-mades from popular and folk culture. In conclusion, both artists show that the universe is not fixed or comprehensible.

Van Elk and Ader appointed themselves a central and autonomous presence in their work to ironize absolute truths in the tradition and history of art. Both artists reflect, ironically, on the gradual disappearance of a subject, which comes apart over a distance, while remaining aware of the temporality of their autonomous position: they are enclosed within the limits of the present and their body. The artists are aware of their position as a reflective subject that can only react on the history of art from a temporarily and limited position in the present. Their works of art disclose in Van Elk's case an ironic self-reflection, as his work will become subject to reflection and will be undermined by new techniques and standards. Ader's work, fundamentally different from that of Van Elk by his direct use of his body in his work of art, comes down to a tragic form of self-irony. This dual attitude of reflection and subversion can be understood as the modern form of authenticity that is the essential element disclosed in their self-portraits, or rather, in their presence within the allegories.

## **1.6 Conclusion**

This chapter aimed to retrace the memory of the artistic mentality and underlying meaning of the presence of the artists in their self-portraits, particularly of Van Elk in his series *The Adieu* and Ader in his unfinished trilogy *In search of the miraculous*. Firstly, Van Elk and Ader are described as conceptual artists because of their contextualization in the scene of conceptual art, in both the Netherlands and Los Angeles. Although their works of art differ, they both start with the formation of an idea that they want to convey and realise. Mostly, they used art historical or philosophical concepts as the starting point for their works of art. Another common aspect is their use of humour, in order to subvert the authoritative status of various conventions.

Conceptual art should be understood as a methodology, which can be distinguished in three different principles: a) indexicalisation; the artist should index or point to his ideas or statements about reality, b) reductivism; the mediums and materials should be used in a minimal and essential way, c) dematerialization; the artwork resides in the immaterial production, the distribution and circulation, and the consumption and reception. A conceptual work of art thus resides in its ontology, instead of its physical being. However, this exposition of the methodologies of conceptual did not take into account the aspects of humour or irony, which prevails in Van Elk's and Ader's works of art.

In researching the reception of Ader's and Van Elk's artistic attitude by various art historians and critics this humorous aspect was clarified. Both artists were apparently aware of their position within art history, and have an ironic stance towards it. Van Elk, like a trickster, used codes of history in order to subvert them into clichés. Ader, following the intellectual master type, used his body, often in a slapstick comedic manner, to investigate and comment on, or even ridicule, various concepts of the past. In this process the artists regressed into history and reflected on the meaning, or influence, of past conventions on the present. In the end their reflexive consciousness, combined with irony, turns upon their own autonomous position. Van Elk's work discloses an awareness of humanity's dependence on an artificial and authoritative framework of conventions and his subjection to it, by which his work results in a type of ironic self-reflection. Ader's slapstick comic performance morphs into a tragic form of self-irony, when he exaggerates them to the point of failure and tragedy.

The last section of this chapter the reception of the memory of both artists was synced with their 'self-portraits' through two visual analyses. Firstly, these self-portraits are part of an allegory, in which the presence of the artist is used to articulate their stance towards concept of the past in the present. Van Elk's presence in his series *The Adieu* discloses a farewell in the context of the tradition of painting. Ader's presence in *In search of the miraculous*, like the title suggests, revolves around a quest, in the context of the romantic concept of the miraculous. However, in their works, a deep-rooted irony can be found as they contradict their own purported intention. Van Elk's goodbye to painting is contradicted as the whole work is based on indexes that point to the tradition of painting; he even subverts the declaration of a farewell as he paints over the photograph. Ader ironizes his search, by performing in a slapstick comedy way and by indexing it in a kitschy manner. In conclusion Van Elk reveals a relativistic attitude against this definite goodbye in the present. Ader shows a sceptical attitude towards the existence of the miraculous.

Both Ader and Van Elk mentally regressed in history and reflected, ironically, on authoritative concepts of the past in the present. Their ironic attitudes, represented in the works, reveal a reflective or transcendental attitude about the past, but also about the present and future. When the links are made between the past and the present, both works disclose an observation on the essential element of history and time. Van Elk shows that history is a development, in which each period has its own conventional framework of collective recognizable codes, beliefs, norms, and values. Ader makes a statement about the historical obsolescence of concepts in modern times. Both observe that history is like a

complex, chaotic infrastructure that, with an infinite number of non-parallel lanes, interchange, overlap and cross each other, always moving forward in time, never backwards. Both research their position, as artists, in relation to the history of art in the present. Their irony turns against their own authoritative position. Once they mentally take a step ahead in the future, they become aware of the fact that they are part of a discourse in humanity, which is both dependant on changeable authoritative frameworks of artificial codes and subject to laws of nature and time.

They made themselves a central presence in their work to underline their autonomy and their reflective, ironic stance towards tradition and history. Simultaneously, their historical-philosophical perspective includes an awareness of the limits and temporality of their work, as well as their position as artists and human beings. Van Elk's work will be subjected to reflection and - part of - tradition; it is a provocation and continuation of tradition. His authoritative attitude results in ironic self-reflection. Ader's search for the miraculous confronts him with the laws of nature and time, and the limits imposed upon his being. During this confrontation, which might be the miraculous moment, his work turned into a tragic form of self-irony. This double ironic attitude, first on the history of art, and second on their own authoritative position, is rooted in a more general concern with the construction of modern authenticity, which will be explained on the basis of the concept of irony, as described by Friedrich Schlegel in the next chapter.

## Chapter 2. Romantic irony; the self-conscious and self-deconstructive artist

### 2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter demonstrated how Van Elk's and Ader's allegories represent a dual reflective and ironic mentality. Van Elk and Ader show an authoritative and intellectual status, by transcending and reflecting on the restrictions of the traditional discourse of art history. Furthermore, both artists show a self-conscious attitude of their position within this discourse via their presence, gestures, and actions in their works of art. They ironically subvert the tradition of art history and simultaneously show an ironic attitude towards their own authoritative position and declarations. Ader's and Van Elk's presence is necessary to arrive at this point of self-consciousness and second level of irony. This chapter aims to give a deeper understanding of this modern form of authenticity, consisting of both reflection and subjection, by relating it to the concept of romantic irony.

Romantic irony refers to the fundamental shift of irony from its restricted use as rhetorical device to its study within the discipline of philosophy in the Romantic era.<sup>154</sup> Until the late eighteenth century, the word irony had retained its traditional, or classical, meaning as an established figure of speech, defined in Samuel Johnson's dictionary of 1755 as 'a mode of speech in which the meaning is contrary to the words'.<sup>155</sup> The traditional ironist, 'in saying the opposite to what he means, (...) [is] seeking to establish the truth by an argumentation *per contrarium*'.<sup>156</sup> At the end of the eighteenth century, the German literary theorist Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829) designates philosophy as the real home of irony and expresses its new features in his *Lyceumfragmente* (1797), *Athenäumsfragmente* (1798) and *Ideen* (1800).<sup>157</sup> Romantic irony has nothing to do with ordinary satiric or comic irony. However, Schlegel's loosely connected fragments are not clear; they vary at length and sometimes contradict each other.<sup>158</sup> Therefore, romantic irony is enigmatic and difficult to conceptualize by means of a definition.

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<sup>154</sup> Kolb, 2005, pp. 382. Mellor, 1999, p. 12-13. Behler, 1990, p. 73-74. Behler, 1988, p. 47.

<sup>155</sup> Muecke, [1969] 1980, p. 8, 181, 187. See also: Furst, 1984, p. 23, 236. Furst, 1981, p. 32. Behler, 1990, p. 76.

<sup>156</sup> Furst, 1984, p. 227.

<sup>157</sup> Quendler, 2001, p. 15. See also: Cater, 1998, pp. 59-60, pp. 286-287. Dane, 1991, p. 107. Although other romanticists, such as Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand Solger (1780-1819), Adam Müller (1779-1829) and Johann Ludwig Tieck (1773-1853) were also influential, Schlegel is seen as the 'father' of German romantic irony. Only a dozen fragments refer explicitly to irony, appearing only four times in the *Lyceumfragmente* (fragments 7, 42, 48 and 108), seven times in the *Athenäumfragmente* (fragments 51, 121, 253, 305, 344, 362, 431) and once in *Ideen* (fragment 69).

<sup>158</sup> Kolb, 2005, p. 378. Muecke, [1969] 1980, p. 183. Behler, 1988, p. 48.

According to expert and editor of the critical Schlegel-edition Ernst Behler, in his book *Klassische Ironie, Romantische Ironie, Tragische Ironie* (1972), Schlegel's, concept of irony manifests itself

[i]n dem literarische Verhältnis zwischen Autor und Leser, wobei der Autor die Rolle der Verstellung übernimmt, ironische Wendungen äußert und sich darüber hinaus in einer spielerischen subjektiven, scheinbar unverpflichteten, schwebenden und skeptischen Pose gefällt (...).<sup>159</sup>

Behler refers to a certain modern mentality of the author, which is understood as an adjustable, seemingly sceptical pose that expresses ironic twists. Lilian Furst, in her book *Fictions of Romantic Irony* (1984), also characterizes the romantic ironist as someone who is in continuous doubt. She writes:

[A]lert to the plurality of all meaning and the relativity of every position, the romantic ironist probes an open-ended series of contradictions, which bound into a chaos of contingencies instead of coming to rest in a state of resolution or comprehension. In the context of a changing, disjointed world of shifting values, his quest is for transcendental certainty, even while he may question its existence. His irony is therefore pervasive and infinite, absorbing everything in its exponential progression. It is not a perspective on a situation, but a presence within each situation.<sup>160</sup>

Both definitions share similarities with the artistic mentality present in Van Elk's and Ader's works of art, as described in the former chapter. Both artists directly address the beholder via their presence in their works of art and assume a role with ironic twists. Van Elk waves goodbye to the tradition of painting while painting over the picture. Ader aims with second-hand samples and his performance to grasp that what is precisely incomprehensible and unimaginable: the miraculous. He is on a quest for transcendental certainty but is confronted with his own existence. Neither artist discloses nor proclaims absolute, definitive truths, instead each expresses an open-ended series of contradictions or continuous doubt.

Although the writings of Schlegel and his concept of irony have a historical constraint and did not directly influence Ader and Van Elk, the concept surpasses its historical boundary and anticipates certain problems of modern art. By this capacity it demonstrates

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<sup>159</sup> Behler, 1972, p. 16.

<sup>160</sup> Furst, 1984, p. 228.

to be a fundamental, modern concept.<sup>161</sup> Douglas Muecke notes that to study 'Romantic Irony is to discover how modern Romanticism could be, or, if you like how Romantic Modernism is.'<sup>162</sup> Jörg Heiser underlines that the concept of romantic irony is useful to make sense of conceptual works of art from the 1960s onwards.<sup>163</sup> Behler's and Furst's explanations, along with the previous statements, refute the argument that romantic irony is predominantly a historical phenomenon. Rather, Schlegel's concept is still relevant. An analysis of romantic irony is valuable to understand the predicaments of the modern authenticity, a quality that resonates in both Van Elk's and Ader's works of art.

In order to connect Van Elk's and Ader's artistic mentality that is woven into their self-portraits to a larger *Zeitgeist*, this chapter will examine the concept of romantic irony and its implications on Van Elk's and Ader's works of art. Firstly, it will give an insight into the preconditions that gave rise to Schlegel's concept of irony, and these preconditions will be linked to conceptual art. Secondly, this chapter will focus on the Schlegel's aesthetic understanding of irony; he characterises ironic poetry as *Transzendentalpoesie* and *progressive Universalpoesie*. The principles of this type of poetry will be brought into connection with Van Elk's and Ader's work of art. Subsequently, the focus will shift to Schlegel's description of irony as the *permanente Parekbasse* and *Transzendente Buffonerie*, and these techniques will be used to create a deeper understanding of Ader's and Van Elk's presence in the allegorical core of their work. Finally, the reception of Schlegel's concept of irony, which designates a dialectic self as a reflexive structure, will be examined using Paul de Man's 'The Rhetoric of Temporality' (1969).

## **2.2. The ironic, aesthetic, and reflexive turn**

The preconditions that gave rise to Schlegel's concept of irony may be succinctly characterized as: a) the recognition and acceptance of the universe as one of chaos and infinite becoming, along with the impossibility of coming to terms with it, b) the transcendence of the classic aesthetics of mimesis in order to reach the autonomy of art, and c) the evolution towards a self-reflective consciousness. These preconditions gave rise to the 'ironic turn' or the 'reflexive turn'.<sup>164</sup> The rationale behind these characteristics can be explained as follows.

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<sup>161</sup> Strohschneider-Kors in: Furst, 1984, p. 236.

<sup>162</sup> Muecke in Furst, 1984, p. 236.

<sup>163</sup> Heiser, 2011, p. 5-6.

<sup>164</sup> Quendler, 2001, pp. 15-16, p. 39.

Firstly, romantic theory and its concept of irony emerged as a critique on absolute idealism.<sup>165</sup> The development of the universe was not teleological, but founded in chaos and incomprehensibility.<sup>166</sup> Schlegel regards the concept of change as abundantly fertile (*Fülle*), as an infinite and unpredictable development, bringing forth new creations with no comprehensible pattern or purpose.<sup>167</sup> Every period is governed by its own laws and should be understood as a transitory stage. Peter Szondi emphasizes Schlegel's notion of time as 'einer Zwischenzeit, eines Nicht-mehr und Noch-Nicht'.<sup>168</sup> Because of its unpredictability, human reason can never completely ascertain absolute truths. Contradictions and paradoxes are central in the nature of existence. A theoretical formulation could only be 'an approximation' that must ultimately be transcended and rejected.<sup>169</sup>

Secondly, the rejection of absolute idealism in the romantic era caused the repudiation of the classical aesthetics of *mimesis*, which implies a supposition of ideal and self-sufficient entities. According to Christian Quendler, early romantic theory broke 'with the mimetic conception of art and the notion of truth as a relation of representation, and replace[d] them by an aesthetics of *poiesis* and the corresponding theory of truth as process of becoming'.<sup>170</sup> This new aesthetics 'refers to its poetic force (*poiesis*) as an original and creative opening that presupposes philosophical understanding'.<sup>171</sup> Art became autonomous. Thus, it relies on aesthetic reflexivity - by which it reflects on itself, its artistic nature - and seeks its meaning in aesthetics itself. Art was no longer a secondary form based on the phenomenological world and inferior to philosophy. Rather art and philosophy became mutual and complementary.<sup>172</sup>

Thirdly, irony is inseparable from the evolution of a heightened, reflective (self-)consciousness. Through this development, the mind turns upon itself, resulting in a duality between mind and world.<sup>173</sup> This *Ich-Welt-Spaltung* and reflection on it were unknown before the romantic period and should be understood as distinct from the perspective of the early romantic *Ich-form*, which is exemplified in Van Gogh's self-

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<sup>165</sup> Ibidem, p. 40.

<sup>166</sup> Mellor, 1999, p. viii.

<sup>167</sup> Ibidem, pp. 4-7.

<sup>168</sup> Szondi, 1964, p. 6.

<sup>169</sup> Mellor, 1999, p. 8.

<sup>170</sup> Quendler, 2001, p. 40.

<sup>171</sup> Ibidem, p. 14.

<sup>172</sup> Ibidem, p. 39-45. Quendler quotes Manfred Frank, who describes a paradigm shift from the 'ontological notion of truth as a relation of representation'. He names Immanuel Kant's *ästhetische Idee*, as described in his *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* and especially his *Kritik der Urteilskraft* as influential for the aesthetic turn of early romanticism.

<sup>173</sup> Muecke, [1969] 1980, p. 189.

portraits.<sup>174</sup> The subject in this period was an 'isolierte, auf sich zurückgeworfene, sich selber Gegenstand gewordene Ich. Sein Schicksal heißt Bewußtsein (...)'.<sup>175</sup> This isolated subject is primarily conscious of his own being. However, in the romantic period, one should have a 'Selbstbewusstsein, Selbstbezogenheit, Selbstbespiegelung', which is an awareness of the self 'as a permanent subject of successive and varying states of consciousness'.<sup>176</sup> The essence of the modernist artist is the desire to overcome these oppositions between ideal and real, the objective and subjective, and to unify or communicate the separation between mind and reality.

The core of conceptual art can be related to these three preconditions, and, although it does not proclaim a philosophical view on the universe, its methodology, as described in the former chapters, connects with the aesthetics of *poiesis* and the idea of the self-conscious artist. First of all, conceptual art rejects representation and narrative. By indexing reality it focuses not on the phenomenological world, but rather on philosophy, where ideas and concepts about reality are connected. Secondly, in this immaterial production the artist's psychophysical state is central, for he creates ideas and is simultaneously influenced by the world (time and place) in which he resides. The conceptual artist is conscious about his position in this duality between mind and reality.

### **2.3 Friedrich Schlegel: irony as aesthetic phenomenon**

After having traced the various preconditions in relation to conceptual art, this section will discuss Schlegel's concept of irony in relation to aesthetics. Firstly, it will provide a general understanding of the principles an ironic work of art has to meet in order to represent the historical-philosophical understanding of the universe as one of chaos and incomprehensibility. Schlegel characterises this art as *Transzendentalpoesie* and *progressive Universalpoesie*. The principles Schlegel describes in his characterisations will be connected to Van Elk's and Ader's works of art. Subsequently, it will focus on the manner in which the romantic ironic artist could indicate a self-reflective awareness of his own position as an artist by including his own presence in his work of art. In this section particular attention will be given to Schlegel's description of two aesthetic techniques or artistic devices that focus on the inclusion of the artist in the artistic work, namely the *permanente Parekbase*

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<sup>174</sup> Szondi, 1964, p. 12.

<sup>175</sup> Ibidem, p. 10.

<sup>176</sup> Muecke, [1969] 1980, p. 189. See also: Szondi, 1964, p. 8-10.

and *Transzendente Buffonerie*. Lastly, these techniques will be related to Van Elk and Ader's presence in their works of art.

### 2.3.1 *Progressive Universalpoesie and Transzendentalpoesie*

With regard to aesthetics, Schlegel describes a form of poetry that represents a transcendental view of the universe as a non-synthetic dialectic, which he alternately calls *progressive Universalpoesie* and *Transzendentalpoesie*.

In *Athenäumfragment* 116 Schlegel describes romantic poetry as *eine progressive Universalpoesie*. In the first section of this fragment, Schlegel emphasizes that this poetry is above all a *Mischgedicht* because it tends to unite various types of poetry. Resulting in a fragmentary structure that includes various ambiguities. It unites hitherto dissociated concepts or seemingly incongruous thoughts, in order to create new concepts and to reflect on the validity of orders and existing beliefs of the past. This method brings art in conjunction with philosophy and allows the ironist to manifest 'two opposed voices or personae, or two contradictory ideas or themes'.<sup>177</sup>

Schlegel continues to outline this reflection model in the same fragment, stating:

Nur sie kann gleich dem Epos ein Spiegel der ganzen umgebenden Welt, ein Bild des Zeitalters werden. Und doch kann auch sie am meisten zwischen dem Dargestellten und dem Darstellenden, frei von allem realen und idealen Interesse auf den Flügeln der poetischen Reflexion in der Mitte schweben, diese Reflexion immer wieder potenzieren und wie in einer endlosen Reihe von Spiegeln vervielfachen. Sie ist der höchsten und der allseitigsten Bildung fähig; nicht bloß von innen heraus, sondern auch von außen hinein; indem sie jedem, was ein Ganzes in ihren Produkten sein soll, alle Teile ähnlich organisiert, wodurch ihr die Aussicht auf eine grenzenlos wachsende Klassizität eröffnet wird.<sup>178</sup>

Schlegel compares the work of art to a mirror of the absolute surrounding. Art finds itself hovering between the portrayer [the philosopher] and the portrayed [reality]. The artist not only ponders the phenomenological world but also other reflections in this world. Art floats free amongst all real and ideal interests, on the wings of poetic reflection, as Schlegel describes. This way the artist reflects on what there is in the world and, more importantly,

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<sup>177</sup> Mellor, 1999, p. 18, p. 23. See also: Kolb, 2005, p. 380-381. Schlegel, [1798] 1967, pp. 182-183.

<sup>178</sup> Schlegel, [1798] 1967, pp. 182-183.

'how what there is in the world is represented in the first place'.<sup>179</sup> Subsequently, his rumination on an existing reflection and the world will be subjected to other further reflections. This succession of reflections continues ad infinitum. Art includes both reflections on the ideal and the real, and becomes an autonomous process of reflection on art itself, its history, its own status as art, and its manner of production.

In the remainder of fragment 116 Schlegel states:

Andre Dichtarten sind fertig, und können nun vollständig zergliedert werden. Die romantische Dichtart ist noch im Werden; ja das ist ihr eigentliches Wesen, daß sie ewig nur werden, nie vollendet sein kann. Sie kann durch keine Theorie erschöpft werden, und nur eine divinatorische Kritik dürfte es wagen, ihr Ideal charakterisieren zu wollen. Sie allein ist unendlich, wie sie allein frei ist, und das als ihr erstes Gesetz anerkennt, daß die Willkür des Dichters kein Gesetz über sich leide. Die romantische Dichtart ist die einzige, die mehr als Art, und gleichsam die Dichtkunst selbst ist: denn in einem gewissen Sinn ist oder soll alle Poesie romantisch sein.<sup>180</sup>

According to Schlegel, art is always already finished and constantly in a state of becoming. It is finite because art presents a fragmentary, provisional, and limited perspective. It is infinite in that the works of art remain fragmentary in the perspective they open up and in their opposition to other fragments, which causes an infinite range of possible perspectives and reflections.<sup>181</sup> This modern aesthetic theory displaces 'das Schönen' by 'das Interessante'.<sup>182</sup> This penchant for the interesting has its basis in the loss of a finite reality, in the disruption of the notion of perfect form, and in the striving for infinite reality.<sup>183</sup>

In *Athenäumfragment 238* Schlegel identifies *Transzendentalpoesie*, as follows:

Es gibt eine Poesie, deren eins und alles das Verhältnis des Idealen und des Realen ist, und die also nach der Analogie der philosophischen Kunstsprache Transzendentalpoesie heißen müßte. Sie beginnt als Satire mit der absoluten Verschiedenheit des Idealen und Realen, schwebt als Elegie in der Mitte, und endigt als Idylle mit der absoluten Identität beider. So wie man aber wenig Wert auf eine Transzendentalphilosophie legen würde, die nicht kritisch wäre, nicht auch das Produzierende mit dem Produkt darstellte, und im System der transzendentalen Gedanken zugleich eine Charakteristik des transzendentalen Denkens enthielte: so sollte wohl auch jene Poesie die in modernen Dichtern

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<sup>179</sup> Millán, 2007, pp. 170-171.

<sup>180</sup> Schlegel, [1798] 1967, p. 183.

<sup>181</sup> Elleström, 2002, pp. 39-40.

<sup>182</sup> Szondi, 1964, p. 6.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 7.

nicht selten transzendentalen Materialien und Vorübungen zu einer poetischen Theorie des Dichtungsvermögens mit der künstlerischen Reflexion und schönen Selbstbespiegelung, die sich im Pindar, den lyrischen Fragmenten der Griechen, und der alten Elegie, unter den Neuern aber in Goethe findet, vereinigen, und in jeder ihrer Darstellungen sich selbst mit darstellen, und überall zugleich Poesie und Poesie der Poesie sein.<sup>184</sup>

Schlegel uses transcendental philosophy to define poetry. The work of art begins as a satire of the absolute difference between the ideal and the real, hovering between both, but ends as an idyll with an absolute identity of both. Transcendental poesy must be poetry and poetry of poetry: on the one hand it should be realistic in its description of reality and it should reflect upon the progressive, infinite world. On the other hand it should be idealistic in describing the process of production itself and it should point to its provisional nature, which is above and independent of the material universe.<sup>185</sup> The word *zugleich* points to this simultaneity or co-presence of the ideal and the real, according to Quendler, 'it describes the quality or potential of poetic (artistic) communication to do both – make an affirmative statement of the world, and point to its illusory nature.'<sup>186</sup> This reflection is included within the work itself; therefore, art becomes pure internality. The transcendence thus lies in the 'autopoietic' (i.e., self-referential and self-sustaining) process. In this process, the work of art contains a confirmation of the artist's capacity to think transcendently and to reflect upon his position as an artist, and the work of art as a work of art.<sup>187</sup>

### 2.3.2. Reflection

Schlegel's descriptions of transcendental poesy and progressive universal poesy can be used to analyse Van Elk's and Ader's works of art. First of all, both works of art consist of a mixture of fragments and include ambiguities. In Van Elk's *The Adieu* various incongruous concepts are brought together to index various stages in the aesthetics of painting; from Stella's aesthetic formula of the shaped canvas to landscape painting. The latter adheres to naturalism and a figurative method of painting, whereas Stella's method emphasizes the abstract shape of the canvas. Van Elk also lets two different languages collide in the title of the work and combines painting with photography in his artistic method. Lastly, he contradicts himself by disclosing a goodbye in the context of the tradition of painting, while

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<sup>184</sup> Schlegel, [1798] 1967, p. 204.

<sup>185</sup> Mellor, 1999, pp. 16-17.

<sup>186</sup> Quendler, 2001, p. 19.

<sup>187</sup> Friese, 2001, pp. 149-150.

painting over his photograph. Ader's *In search of the miraculous* combines a first-hand experience with fragments from low and high culture, which all index the miraculous. Most importantly, the incongruity in his work is to be found in his attempt to assign the inexplicable, or that which is beyond the comprehensible or intelligible. He literally searches for a first-hand experience of the Romantic and metaphysical concept of the miraculous, subsequently this literalness is emphasized by exaggeration and the use of attributes: the small boat and big flashlight.

Both works of art focus on both the ideal and the real. They represent something from the world (realism), and at the same time reflect their view upon it (idealism). Van Elk reflects on different stadia in the tradition of painting; the various materials and techniques, as well as how man has attributed and constructed various aesthetic ideals to it throughout history. Ader reflects on the existence of the miraculous and how man tries to capture and translate this incomprehensible concept in language and image.

Van Elk's and Ader's works of art can be characterised as both finite and infinite. The works are infinite because they do not disclose any absolute truths, and keep incongruities alive. In their fragmentary and ambiguous state the works of art are only approximations to the meaning of the aesthetics of painting and the miraculous. The allegories speculate about subjects that are not accessible through physical experience. Therefore, they are merely a finite opening towards an infinite range of possible perspectives and reflections in the future. By putting into play various antinomies, the artists show an awareness of aesthetic concepts and an understanding of the miraculous as part of an infinitely teeming and chaotic universe.

In order to show an awareness of their own works of art, as provisional, finite, and fragmentary, Schlegel states in *Athenäumfragment* 238 that the work should represent the co-presence of the creator (*das Produzierende*) and the product (*Produkt*).<sup>188</sup> Schlegel explains that the artist must transcend his own work of art and his status as an artist, which can be done by being present in the work of art itself. This way the artist is not present in order to create a realistic representation of his outer appearance or to express his inner self. Rather, the presence of the artist functions within the reflection model, in which the artist's presence emphasizes the limited perspective of the work of art. The next section will provide insight into the techniques that Schlegel discusses in order to establish this second mode of reflection.

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<sup>188</sup> Schlegel, [1798] 1967, p. 204.

### 2.3.3. Aesthetic techniques: the presence of the artist in the work

Schlegel calls for a form of art with a critical moment of reflection in order to synthesize the objective and the subjective; a critical form of art 'die mit dem Objekt auch sich selber mit dichtet, die auch sich selbst zum Gegenstand hat und in dieser inneren Spaltung in Subjekt und Objekt sich potenziert (...)'.<sup>189</sup> As described in the former section, the artists are absorbed in their reflection on tradition and their expression of a particular subject in their allegories. However, they should also subject themselves and their own works of art to reflection. Here it is important for an artist to keep in mind his temporary position and limited perspective, in order to remain critical of 'the work of art' and to self-reflect on the role he plays as an artist. In this moment the artist brings up the divide between the objective and subjective, which he ponders again. Reflection is thus set in a temporal framework, and, through this self-mirroring process, the subject comes to be temporally ahead of himself.<sup>190</sup>

To attain this level of self-reflection Schlegel names two formal possibilities, namely, the *permanente Parekbase* and *Transzendente Buffonerie*. In the first, the artist mimics the parabasis, in which the comic playwright interposed himself within the drama or illusion itself. In the second, the artist attains the role of the Italian *buffo* or clown who disrupts the spectator's narrative illusion. The artist can use these techniques to show his reflexive stance upon his work as artifice and illusion in the work itself.<sup>191</sup> In the next section these techniques, or moments of ironic interposition, will be described and related to Van Elk's and Ader's presence in their works of art.

#### 2.3.3.1. Permanente Parekbase

In *Philosophische Lehrjahre*, Schlegel writes in fragment 668 that 'Ironie ist eine permanente Parekbase'.<sup>192</sup> This statement brings two incongruous concepts together as it refers both to something permanent and to a disruption, which can only be temporary. The term *Parekbase*, or 'parabasis' in English, namely refers to the Greek word *para-* + *bainein*, which means 'to step forward', or 'to step out'.<sup>193</sup> Schlegel describes the parabasis as follows:

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<sup>189</sup> Szondi, 1964, p. 11.

<sup>190</sup> Ibidem, pp. 12-13.

<sup>191</sup> Muecke, [1969] 1980, p. 198.

<sup>192</sup> Schlegel, 1971, p. 85.

<sup>193</sup> Hubbard, 1991, p. 17. Although, strictly speaking there is a subtle difference in meaning between 'parekbasis' and 'parabasis', the by Schlegel devised 'Parekbasis' is generally considered to be synonymous with 'parabasis' (Behler, 1988, p. 61.).

[E]ine Rede, die in der Mitte des Stücks vom Chor in Namen des Dichters an das Volk gehalten wurde. Ja, es war eine gänzliche Unterbrechung und Aufhebung des Stückes, in welcher, wie in diesem, die größte Zügellosigkeit herrschte und dem Volk von dem bis an die äußerste Grenze des Proszeniums heraustretenden Chor die größten Grobheiten gesagt wurden. Von diesem Heraustreten (*ek-basis*) kommt auch der Name.<sup>194</sup>

The parabasis refers to the moment when the play is halted and all of the actors leave the stage. Subsequently, the leader of the choir (the coryphaeus) is left on stage to address the public directly in the name of the poet; sometimes the poet himself acted as coryphaeus. At that moment, the poet could directly and reasonably address the audience. For example, he could berate the 'audience for its inconsistency, for its lack of loyalty and sophistication, or for its failure to give the poet his due; the audience may also be criticized for its political failures (...).'<sup>195</sup> This parabasis allowed the artist to express self-defence or self-satire, to comment on social issues, or to satirize his contemporaries. The poet, thus, temporarily destroys the artistic illusion in order to make his voice heard.

Thomas Hubbard investigates the parabasis in the Old Comedies by Aristophanes in his book *The mask of comedy: Aristophanes and the intertextual parabasis* (1991). Hubbard distinguishes three essential characteristics of the parabasis, which, in turn, explain different functions. The parabasis is a) extra-dramatic b) self-critical c) intertextual.<sup>196</sup> The first characteristic refers to the destruction of the dramatic illusion. Hubbard explains it as 'estrangement from the surrounding dramatic spectacle. Its independence from the drama is to be regarded (...) as an opportunity for mediating language which stands between the mimetic discourse of drama and the external world of signifiers, and thus helps the audience to connect the world of drama and reality (...).'<sup>197</sup> Muecke elaborates on this extra-dramatic characteristic, for it shows 'the double nature of art'.<sup>198</sup> The artist 'will break into the artistic illusion with a reminder to his public (not necessarily an explicit one) that what they have before them is only a painting, a play, or a novel and not the reality it purports to be'.<sup>199</sup> This way the parabasis has a paradoxical power: the destruction of the artistic illusion confirms or emphasizes its existence. It brings about a distinction and confusion between fiction and

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<sup>194</sup> Schlegel, 1971, p. 85.

<sup>195</sup> Hubbard, 1991, pp. 14-15.

<sup>196</sup> Ibidem, pp. 27-30.

<sup>197</sup> Ibidem, p. 28.

<sup>198</sup> Muecke, [1969] 1980, p. 164. See also: Man [1977] 1996, pp. 178-179.

<sup>199</sup> Muecke [1969] 1980, p. 164

reality, or the world inside and the world outside the play. By bringing 'reality' into the play, the two worlds interfere and the world of reality becomes a fiction as well.

The second characteristic concentrates on the exploration of identities, in the form of self-advertisement but also as a form of self-satire. The artist can berate his public for failing to appreciate his cleverness, or critique his own practice. Most importantly, it is the moment of self-criticism, in which the artist can create a comic persona for himself. However, the moment the poet is revealed to be a comedian the public itself becomes a comic spectacle, and the target of (the poet-comedian's) satire. Hubbard explains that in the end, when the serious interests of poet and audience are aligned, all take their share in the universal fact of human folly.<sup>200</sup>

Lastly, Hubbard expands on the third characteristic of the parabasis as being intertextual. The parabasis seems to depend upon interaction with other texts for its full actualization of meaning. Therefore, Hubbard calls the parabasis internally cross-textual, in its arrangement and composition. It serves as a critical nexus-point that ties together many strands of textual cross-references 'to tragic and lyric poets, to comic competitors, to the poet's own previous plays and career, and most significantly, to the surrounding drama itself.'<sup>201</sup>

According to Hubbard the function of the parabasis is to serve as

[a] crucial nexus-point for the multiplication of spectator-spectacle relationships among poet, audience, chorus, and (indirectly) comic characters. All are bonded together in the humor of the comic event, sharing in the fallibility, vulnerability, and imperfect self-knowledge characteristic of all mortals. To laugh is to be human, and it is equally human to be laughed at. By including himself in the spectacle along with the spectators of the audience, the comic poet makes himself part of the broader community and thus makes his social criticism more palatable. (...).<sup>202</sup>

By using the concept of the *Parekbase*, Schlegel incorporates the interactive context of romantic irony; he centralizes the relation between the audience and the poet. The artist namely puts himself into the work to enter a direct connection with the beholder and with the work of art itself. By doing so, the artist involves the public in the comic event and positions them alongside the work, as part of the comic spectacle. Hence, the artist is not the

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<sup>200</sup> Hubbard, 1991, p. 29.

<sup>201</sup> Ibidem, p. 30.

<sup>202</sup> Ibidem, pp. 14-15.

only subject to be laughed at, instead the beholder shares his human fallibility, vulnerability, and imperfect knowledge, as Hubbard describes.

Hubbard continues by stating that the self-deconstructing parabasis is:

[i]nstrumental in implicating the poet himself in the human condition – not only a spectator but also a spectacle; (...) not only superego but also ego; not only the omniscient creator of comic discourse but himself, like all his creations, caught up seemingly unaware in the inescapable web of that discourse.<sup>203</sup>

By using the parabasis the artist emphasizes his human condition, not as a superior creator, but like other human beings caught up, seemingly unaware, in the web of discourse.

### **2.3.3.2. Transzendente Buffonerie**

Secondly, Schlegel characterizes romantic ironic poetry as a *Transzendente Buffonerie*. He describes this phrase in his *Lyceumfragment 42* as follows:

Es lebt in ihnen eine wirklich transzendente Buffonerie. Im Innern, die Stimmung, welche alles übersieht, und sich über alles Bedingte unendlich erhebt, auch über eigne Kunst, Tugend, oder Genialität: im Äußern, in der Ausführung die mimische Manier eines gewöhnlichen guten italienischen Buffo.<sup>204</sup>

Schlegel characterises it as a transcendental mood that overlooks everything and infinitely rises above all conditions and limitations. To attain or express this state Schlegel mentions that the work of art should create the same impression as the Italian *buffo*. Schlegel thus renders a mutual dependency of the transcendental mood or self-reflection and buffoonery.<sup>205</sup> In the first, the artist reflects internally on his position as an artist and the tradition of art history. In the second, the artist deconstructs his identity into the character of the clown.

The artist should act like the buffo, which refers to the harlequin figure in the plays of the Italian *Commedia dell' arte*. It is the comic, dramatic servant both controls the plot and mocks the play.<sup>206</sup> Mellor gives the example of the character Arlecchino from Carlo Gozzi's *The Love of Three Oranges*. She describes him as follows:

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<sup>203</sup> Ibidem, p. 15.

<sup>204</sup> Schlegel, [1797] 1967, p. 152.

<sup>205</sup> Quendler, 2001, p. 52.

<sup>206</sup> Mellor, 1999, p. 17.

[A]n intriguer who manipulates the action, even interrupting it to speak directly to the audience and to comment wittily upon the plot and the other actors. He frequently mimics gestures and parodies the language of the other characters. But even as he undermines the credibility of the play as a dramatic illusion, he enables the plot to go forward and engineers the play's denouement. He thus simultaneously creates and de-creates the play and does so with zest and wit.<sup>207</sup>

Muecke explains this characterization as follows:

[T]he ironist is like the circus clown on the tightrope. (...) [He] pretends to fall, perhaps falls, but the wire catches him by one of his enormous buttons, recovers himself and runs the rest of the way so as to get across quickly; but all the time he is much more skilful than his fellow acrobat. (...) He has raised tight-rope walking to a higher power, in that he is performing at two levels simultaneously – as a clown and as tightrope walker. And demonstrating at the same time both the possibility and the impossibility of tightrope walking.<sup>208</sup>

From these two characterisations, it is clear that the romantic ironist plays a dual role as transcendental buffoon. On one hand, he externally acts like a clown, who mocks, de-creates, and interrupts the illusion of the dramatic action by jokes or parodies of the work itself. On the other hand, he is internally self-reflective and holds a transcendental position, from which he controls and creates the play. In this way the romantic ironist establishes his presence in the work itself, but simultaneously indicates his detachment from it, in order to be able to reflect on it.

By his reflective stance the artist can also be described as the philosopher. Schlegel mentions this position of the artist in *Athenäumfragment* 255:

Je mehr die Poesie Wissenschaft wird, je mehr wird sie auch Kunst. Soll die Poesie Kunst werden, soll der Künstler von seinen Mitteln und seinen Zwecken, ihren Hindernissen und ihren Gegenständen gründliche Einsicht und Wissenschaft haben, so muß der Dichter über seine Kunst philosophieren. Soll er nicht bloß Erfinder und Arbeiter sondern auch Kenner in seinem Fache sein, und seine Mitbürger im Reiche der Kunst verstehen können, so muß er auch Philolog werden.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> Ibidem, p. 17.

<sup>208</sup> Muecke, [1969] 1980, p. 199.

<sup>209</sup> Schlegel, [1798] 1967, pp. 208-209.

The artist is not only a creator or an inventor anymore; he also must philosophize about his art and understand his contemporaries in the realm of art.<sup>210</sup> In *Lyceumfragment* 117, Schlegel describes that 'Poesie nur durch Poesie kritisiert werden. Ein Kunsturteil, welches nicht selbst ein Kunstwerk ist, entweder im Stoff (...).'<sup>211</sup> The artist is a philosopher with a transcendental view, who speaks in poetry about poetry. He shows a high self-awareness by this dual position, both transcendent and immanent.

### 2.3.3.3. Reflection

Both concepts, the *permanente Parekbase* and *Transzendente Buffonerie*, are useful to give a deeper understanding of Van Elk's and Ader's presence in their works of art and their artistic mentalities. The concept of transcendental buffoonery shares various similarities with Hubbard's distinction because it is also extra-dramatic and self-critical. Hubbard's framework, therefore, will serve as a benchmark to describe Van Elk's and Ader's presence in their works of art. However, the category of intertextuality is left aside, although, as it may be clear by now, both artists rely on fragments of other cultural and artistic traditions for the contextualization of their work.

Van Elk's presence in his work *The Adieu* is extra-dramatic; it destroys the visual illusion. Structurally speaking, he shows various conventional concepts regarding the aesthetic tradition of painting. Simultaneously, he includes, although small, a representation of himself, which is, next to the painting on the easel, a phenomenological aspect in the work of art that exists outside of fiction. By doing so, Van Elk breaks through the illusion and acts as a mediator between fiction (the aesthetic rules and codes) and the external world of signifiers. The latter refers to his non-verbal gesture of goodbye, by which he directly addresses the beholder. However, his presence in the work is inextricably part of the fiction as well; therefore, fiction and reality are played out against each other.

Van Elk adopts a dual attitude; he is self-critical and deconstructs his position as an artist, or philosopher, into a trickster. Here the characterisation of the transcendental buffo applies. On the one hand Van Elk discloses a self-reflective view of his practice as an artist within art history, as he declares a goodbye to the tradition of painting and satirizes other artists in this tradition. However, by his intrusion in the fiction he becomes an integral part of it. Van Elk, thus, externally represents the fictive, comic persona that does not play according to any rules of art, or the tradition of painting, but plays with, and mockingly

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<sup>210</sup> Schlegel, [1797] 1967, p. 162.

<sup>211</sup> Muecke, [1969] 1980, p. 198-199.

reflects on, the rules of art itself. His declarative goodbye does not have to be taken seriously. As an artist he is conscious of the tradition of art, but he cannot declare a farewell to this tradition, because this lucidity would make the artistic undertaking cynical. He therefore conceals the truth of his statement and plays a clown declaring a demystification, or end, while internally conscious that tradition will proceed. His work of art sets a new chain of reflections into motion.

Ader does not put himself into the artistic illusion, but rather absorbs the dramatic illusion altogether. He establishes and plays an ingenious game with fiction and reality. The fiction, in this case, should be understood as the miraculous, which he analyses in a structural way by including various second hand motifs and reproducing the romantic visual idiom regarding the miraculous. Simultaneously, he absorbs this romantic tradition in a phenomenological and existential way in his performance. Ader, like Van Elk, plays a mediator between the mimetic discourse of drama and the external world, but in the opposite direction. He breaks the illusion of the miraculous by actually searching for it, which causes an estrangement by pulling the fiction out of the illusion and connecting it to reality.

Ader can also be described as a transcendental buffo. Internally, he transcends the tradition of the miraculous, well-known by second hand motives. Externally, he deconstructs his position as a transcendental artist by creating a comic persona for himself, who directly tells the beholder that he is going to search for the miraculous. By doing this, he seems to criticise the inadequate practices of other artists. However, he attains the role of the buffo, who also satirizes his own quest for the miraculous by exaggerating it. His search is ambiguous, as he makes the miraculous sensible and something physical, something to be found, while it is fictive and metaphysical concept. Ader manipulates people into believing that the miraculous is actually something to be found. In the end, Ader's performance turns into tragedy, when the 'clown' turns back to reality and the performance failed: he disappeared at sea. However, Ader's performance does succeed in continuing meditation on the miraculous.

In conclusion, both artists ironize the cultural or artistic discourse in which they are caught. They come up with ready-made ideas or clichés regarding this tradition during their time. Van Elk proclaims a farewell to the tradition of painting; Ader searches for a first-hand experience of the miraculous. In doing so, they reveal an ironic self-deprecation. Van Elk cannot proclaim an end to the tradition of painting, and Ader's quest for something incomprehensible is doomed to fail. When it is uncovered that they actually deconstructed

their transcendental position into comic personae, the beholder comes to understand that he has been fooled and is, himself, the ultimate target of their satire. However, only the conscious beholder will get to this point of understanding that he is part of a joke inside the cultural discourse: an inside joke.

In the undisguised artists' presence, thus lies a slothful irony. With this, they confuse the oppositions of reality and fiction, subjectivism and objectivism, structuralism and existentialism. In their undisguised appearances (existentialism), they place themselves outside fiction, so it looks as if the real, concrete artists directly address the beholder with information about the position of art in historical tradition. The rest of the work, existing out of fragments, indicates the tradition and processes and conventions within this tradition that the artists observed and analysed (structuralism). Their works are simultaneously products of the tradition of art history and reactions to it. What is really at stake is that they ironize the cultural discourse, or art world, in which they are caught. They question and aim to break through the collective belief in these conventions within the discourse. Instead of breaking through the illusion, their works ensure the continuity of this same discourse. As artists, they cannot escape from the influence of this tradition and discourse; therefore, they actually aimed to conceal their sceptic attitude towards the tradition. By exchanging reality for the world of fiction and introducing themselves as naïve clowns, they deconstruct their conscious, transcendental autonomous position that allows them to openly question and reflect on the discourse.

#### ***2.4 Reception: romantic irony as laughter at the human condition and the discourse of art***

Various critics from the late nineteenth and twentieth century took up Schlegel's concept and continually refigured the meaning of it.<sup>212</sup> Upon the beginning of the twentieth century, after a negative reception by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) and Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), the concept has been successfully revised and the phrase became firmly established, particularly due to Walter Benjamin's (1892-1940) doctoral dissertation 'The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism', published in 1920. From 1960 onwards more studies aiming to delineate the concept appeared. Quendler refers to the so-called 'actualizations' of early romantic theory that discuss romantic irony. The heightened awareness and knowledge of the concept was probably caused by the publication of the

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<sup>212</sup> Furst examined the parentage and usage of the phrase and the reception of romantic irony in literary criticism in her article 'Who created Romantische Ironie?' (1981).

authoritative study *Die Romantische Ironie in Theorie und Gestaltung* by Ingrid Strohschneider-Kohrs (1922-2014) in 1960. Since the 1980's, more and more studies occurred that discuss romantic irony with regard to contemporary theoretical issues.<sup>213</sup> Various critics, including Ernst Behler, Lilian Furst, and Linda Hutcheon have taken the concept as a historically shifting trope and have been preoccupied with defining the concept beyond romantic and modern times to poststructuralist theorists.

The contentious literary critic Paul de Man (1919-1983) categorizes the reception of the concept in his lecture 'The Concept of Irony' in 1977. He states that Schlegel 'is being defused by reducing irony to three things, by coping with irony in terms of three strategies which are related to, not independent of, each other'.<sup>214</sup> The second strategy describes irony as 'a dialectic of the self as a reflexive structure'.<sup>215</sup> From this perspective irony is equated with reflexion, as it 'is the same distance within a self, duplications of a self, specular structures within the self, within which the self looks at itself from a certain distance. It sets up reflexive structures, and irony can be described as a moment in a dialectic of the self.'<sup>216</sup> This understanding of irony will be the focus of the next section, using De Man's article 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', originally published in 1969.

#### **2.4.1. Paul de Man – a dialectic of the self as a reflexive structure**

In his 1969 essay 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', part of the collection *Blindness and Insight*, De Man questions Romanticism in a theoretical way. De Man first challenges the main interpretative efforts of English and American historians of Romanticism that view, as essential characteristics of Romanticism, the dialectic relationship between mind-nature or subject-object in thought, and the supremacy of the symbol in poetic language.<sup>217</sup> De Man adduces Goethe's *Dauer im Wechsel*, to explain that the self and nature cannot be mutually

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<sup>213</sup> Quendler, 2001, p. 17.

<sup>214</sup> De Man [1977] 1996, pp. 169-170. The first one reduces irony to an aesthetic practice or artistic device, a *Kunstmittel*. Irony is understood as an artistic effect, used to heighten the aesthetic appeal of a text. Irony, in this sense, allows one to say dreadful things because it says them by means of aesthetic devices, achieving a playful distance to what is being said. De Man names Strohschneider-Kohrs' study (1960) as exemplary for this understanding of irony. This study gives an account of the development of the concept of romantic Irony among German theorists; from Friedrich Schlegel to Kierkegaard. Subsequently, she applies this concept on literature of romantics, such as Schelling, Tieck, Bretano and Hoffmann. The third way of dealing with irony is to insert ironic moments or structures into a dialectic of historical development. In this context De Man mentions Hegel and Kierkegaard as theorists, who were 'concerned with dialectical patterns of history, and, somewhat symmetrically to the way it can be absorbed in a dialectic of the self.

<sup>215</sup> De Man [1977] 1996, p. 169.

<sup>216</sup> Ibidem, pp. 169-170.

<sup>217</sup> De Man, [1969] 1983, p. 193.

dependent, because a self is completely caught up in mutability, he is both nature and mind, which gives selfhood a sense of inauthenticity towards nature.<sup>218</sup>

Rather, De Man comes up with a totally different historical scheme, which he explains as follows:

The dialectical relationship between subject and object is no longer the central statement of romantic thought, but this dialectic is now located entirely in the temporal relationships that exist within a system of allegorical signs. It becomes a conflict between a conception of the self seen in its authentically temporal predicament and a defensive strategy that tries to hide from this negative self-knowledge. On the level of language the asserted superiority of the symbol over the allegory, so frequent during the nineteenth century, is one of the forms taken by this tenacious self-mystification.<sup>219</sup>

De Man privileges the mode of allegory to express this dual experience between the 'authentically temporal destiny' (the consciousness that one's being is only temporal) and its denial, referring to a desire for authenticity (the will or desire for the discovery of truth, achieving freedom, making life meaningful and comprehensible).<sup>220</sup> It is in the use of allegory that De Man views the essential movement of Romanticism.

After drawing parallels in the structures between allegory and irony, De Man finds in irony a way to express the confrontation between our temporality and the desire for, or doubt of, the survivability of our intellectual creations.<sup>221</sup> In order to describe the traits of ironic consciousness, De Man focuses on Baudelaire's text 'De l'essence du rire' (1855), in which an experience of laughing at oneself after falling down in the street is described. According to De Man, this activity designates an act of self-duplication, or in following Baudelaire of *dédoublement*.<sup>222</sup> This accident causes a reflective activity in the self, apart from everyday concerns.<sup>223</sup> It 'designates the activity of a consciousness by which a man differentiates himself from the non-human world.'<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> De Man, [1969] 1983, 197. Mileur, 1986, p. 329.

<sup>219</sup> Ibidem, p. 208.

<sup>220</sup> Mileur, 1986, p. 330.

<sup>221</sup> De Man, [1969] 1983, p. 209. This definition points to a structure shared by irony and allegory in that, in both cases, the relationship between sign and meaning is discontinuous, involving an extraneous principle that determines the point and the manner at and in which the relationship is articulated. In both cases, the sign points to something that differs from its literal meaning and has for its function the thematization of this difference.

<sup>222</sup> De Man, [1969] 1983, p. 213.

<sup>223</sup> Ibidem, p. 212.

<sup>224</sup> Ibidem, p. 213. See also Mileur, 1986, p. 331.

The capacity for such duplication belongs specifically to those who deal with language, like poets or philosophers. During the reflective disjunction, the self is transferred into a world constituted out of and in language.<sup>225</sup> It divides the subject into an empirical self, immersed in the world, and a self that becomes like a sign in its attempt at differentiation and self-definition.<sup>226</sup> De Man goes a step further when he describes ironic language as a double structure and uses the idea of the fall as an ironic ingredient. Firstly, the empirical self creates a self that only exists in language and asserts knowledge from his authentic self; secondly this language-determined self is conscious of the inauthenticity and mortality of his empirical. Therefore, the self creates a third comic self, through which he is able to laugh at the mistaken assumption that he was making. De Man explains:

When we speak, then, of irony originating at the cost of the empirical self, the statement has to be taken seriously enough to be carried to the extreme: absolute irony is a consciousness of madness, itself the end of all consciousness; it is a consciousness of a non-consciousness, a reflection on madness from the inside of madness itself. But this reflection is made possible only by the double structure of ironic language; the ironist invents a form of himself that is 'mad' but that does not know its own madness; he then proceeds to reflect on his madness thus objectified.<sup>227</sup>

De Man uses a hyperbole when he talks about madness, but the structure of this argument is very complex, as it contains an affirmation in a denial.

De Man continues the act of the ironic subject in absolute comedy, since he has to

[i]ronize its own predicament and observe in turn, with the detachment and disinterestedness that Baudelaire demands of this kind of spectator, the temptation to which it is about to succumb. It does so precisely by avoiding the return to the world (...), by reasserting the purely fictional nature of its own universe and by carefully maintaining the radical difference that separates fiction from the world of empirical reality.<sup>228</sup>

De Man comes up with an example from Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffman's (1776-1822) *Prinzessin Brambilla*, which is about a couple deceived into believing that the characters they play give them an superb stage in life. They are cured from this delusion by the discovery of irony, manifested in their shift from a tragic to a comic repertory. Near the end

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<sup>225</sup> De Man, [1969] 1983, p. 212. See also Mileur, 1986, p. 332.

<sup>226</sup> De Man, [1969] 1983, p. 213.

<sup>227</sup> Ibidem, p. 216.

<sup>228</sup> Ibidem, p. 217.

of the story, they exist in a state of belief that art and the world have been reconciled by the right kind of art. However, far from having returned to their natural selves, they are more than ever playing the artificial parts of the happy couple. 'Never have art and life been farther apart than at the moment they seem to be reconciled', De Man concludes.<sup>229</sup> The irony to the second power, absolute irony, or as De Man calls it 'irony of irony' asserts and maintains its fictional character by stating the impossibility of reconciling the world of fiction with the actual world. This type of irony, therefore, is not a movement toward a recovered unity, a reconciliation of the self with the world, by means of art.<sup>230</sup>

In conclusion, De Man quotes a section of Peter Szondi's essay, 'Friedrich Schlegel und die romantische Ironie' (1964), where Szondi describes the function or the ironic conscious in Schlegel as follows:

The subject of romantic irony is the isolated, alienated man who has become the object of his own reflection and whose consciousness has deprived him of his ability to act. He nostalgically aspires toward unity and infinity; the world appears to him divided and finite. What he calls irony is his attempt to bear up under his critical predicament, to change his situation by achieving distance toward it. In an ever-expanding act of reflection he tries to establish a point of view beyond himself and to resolve the tension between himself and the world on the level of fiction [*des Scheins*]. He cannot overcome the negativity of his situation by means of an act in which the reconciliation of finite achievement with infinite longing could take place; through prefiguration of a future unity, in which he believes, the negative is described as temporary [*vorläufig*] and, by the same token, it is kept in check and reversed. This reversal makes it appear tolerable and allows the subject to dwell in the subjective region of fiction. Because irony designates and checks the power of negativity, it becomes itself, although originally conceived as the overcoming of negativity, the power of the negative. Irony allows for fulfilment only in the past and in the future; it measures whatever it encounters in the present by the yardstick of infinity and thus destroys it. The knowledge of his own impotence prevents the ironist from respecting his achievements: therein resides his danger. Making this assumption about himself, he closes off the way to his fulfilment. Each achievement becomes in turn inadequate and finally leads into a void: therein resides his tragedy.<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> Ibidem, p. 218

<sup>230</sup> Ibidem, p. 219. By this statement De Man refers to Schlegel's definition of irony as the *permanente Parekbase*, as discussed in the former section of this chapter. The effect of this technique is to prevent the reader from confusing fact and fiction.

<sup>231</sup> Szondi in Man, [1969] 1983, p. 220. See also: Szondi, 1964, pp. 17-18.

The ironic mind is in an endless process that leads to no synthesis, because it is unwilling to accept any stage in its progression as definitive. Irony therefore should not be understood as temporary, as Szondi argues, but as repetitive, like De Man asserts. The act of irony reveals the existence of a temporality; it relates to its source only in terms of distance and difference, and allows for no end, for no totality. De Man also calls this irony of irony meta-ironical, as having transcended irony.<sup>232</sup>

#### **2.4.2 Reflection**

Both Van Elk's and Ader's presence in their works of art give evidence to a self, which exists as a dialectic and in a reflexive structure. Initially, they effectuate a self-duplication, by including their presence in the work of art, although in fundamentally different ways. Van Elk includes a picture of himself in the work of art, whereas Ader, himself, performs in his work of art. They exist as temporal empirical beings with fragmentary and particular knowledge of the aesthetics of painting and the concept of the miraculous. In their language-determined self, or, in these cases, art-determined self, they are still bound to this empirical self and extract knowledge from it, by which they are conscious that they are not fully able to be authentic or conscious of the truth of these concepts. These inventions or fictions have been shifting throughout history and are hard to pin down. They understand that the self has no access to a stable and unmediated (self-)knowledge. Rather, it points to a fundamental instability and liminality of knowledge of these aesthetics concepts.

This threat causes a defensive strategy that both artists seem to use in order to hide this negative self-knowledge. This strategy takes the form of self-mystification, which is reflected in their personas in their works of art. Both create a second persona for themselves, to observe and laugh at the predicaments of the aesthetic conventions of painting and the never-ending quest for the miraculous. Instead of disclosing this ironic view, they mystify their understanding. They avoid returning to the world, but reassert the purely fictional nature of these concepts. Van Elk claims a goodbye to the aesthetic tradition of painting, as if photography would actually take over painting. The modernist belief that painting was out-dated or surpassed and would be replaced by a new medium is a fiction or a cliché in the terms of the history of photography. This belief is absurd, as Van Elk does not

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<sup>232</sup> De Man, [1969] 1983, pp. 222-223.

have the power to displace painting. And Ader's quest for the miraculous allows one to believe in the physical existence of the miraculous. Ader's aim to find the true experience, or valence, of the idea of the miraculous seems lucid. He acts as if he were blind to the metaphysical nature of the miraculous. Even in assuming that he encountered the miraculous, he would not be able to give an account of this experience, because his testimony would not be able to move between the actual physical reality and the fictional. His experience would still exist as a work of art in the sphere of fiction, and a second-hand motif to the beholder. Ader's disappearance became one of the great mysteries in art history, as there was no witness and no documentation material or testimony, therefore his performance was labelled as thoroughly tragic while, however, missing the irony behind it.

Both Van Elk and Ader invented a self that they could laugh at, ironize, and reflect on their conscious art-determined self: their position as an artist. This ultimately triggers laughter of liberation, as the self is reconstituted in the mirror of laughter. De Man points to this moment as meta-irony or absolute irony: the consciousness of madness, or the consciousness of non-consciousness. It points to our belief in fictional concepts and in our own inventions in the universe, by which we aim to create meaning and try to avert ourselves from our miserable temporal inauthentic existence. This mentality emphasises the fiction of our intellectual inventions, which have grown out of control. We cannot go back to reality, because we cannot give up these fictive constructions that have become an intrinsic part of life and who we are. They will only become more substantive and complex as time progresses.

By this duplication of a self within the self, in order to bring forth a form of meta-irony, Ader and Van Elk underline the impossibility of reconciling the world of fiction with reality. They can only restate and repeat the aesthetic conventions on an increasingly conscious level and therefore dwell in the subjective region of fiction, in a spiral of aesthetic signs that become more and more distant from their meaning. They became entangled within this sphere of fiction, powerless or impotent to overcome them. Their achievements only turn to another repetitive action of reflection, which all move towards a void, a negative spiral. Whereas Van Elk was unable to escape this spiral, Ader escaped it by the tragedy of death.

## 2.5 Conclusion

This chapter questioned how Van Elk's and Ader's form of authenticity, reflected in their self-portraits, resonates with the concept of romantic irony. Ironically, the concept is quite effective to analyse Van Elk's and Ader's works of art, and to provide an understanding of the essence and function of their presence. The first section analysed the preconditions to this form of irony, which share various similarities with conceptual art. Both centralize on the importance of the aesthetics of *poiesis*; art turns away from representing reality to the formation of ideas on art itself, which places art on the level of philosophy. The artist in this phase is self-conscious and focuses on his relation to reality and the broader context of tradition.

Schlegel's aesthetic understanding of irony, articulated by his characterisation of poetry as *Transzendentalpoesie* and *progressive Universalpoesie*, can be connected to Van Elk's and Ader's works of art. Both works consist of fragments and include various ambiguities. The works represent and reflect on how and what there is in the world, by which the works enter in a connection with both the real and the ideal. Furthermore, the works should be seen as a finite, fragmentary, limited, or provisional opening towards an infinite range of possible perspectives and reflections. In line with this analysis, Ader and Van Elk could be described as romantic ironists, who recognise the universe as one of chaos and infinite becoming, and accept the impossibility of coming to terms with it.

Then, the focus shifted from the general understanding of the content to the presence of the artists in their works of art, which serves as a critical moment of reflection. In order for the artist to show an awareness of his work of art as finite and fragmentary, and to transcend his status, the artist can include himself in the work of art. Schlegel describes two techniques: *permanente Parekbase* and *Transzendente Buffonerie*, which proved to be meaningful to give an understanding of Van Elk's and Ader's inclusion of their presence in their work of art as being, following Hubbard, intertextual, extra-dramatic and self-critical.

Van Elk's presence is extra-dramatic because it breaks the artistic illusion. His presence signifies his status as a mediator between the structural analysis of the aesthetic concept of painting and his reflection upon it in his present time. By his presence, Van Elk takes a dual stance: internally he is self-reflective, but externally he deconstructs this attitude by acting like a trickster, whose statement in declaring a farewell to the tradition of painting does not need to be taken serious, knowing that tradition will endure.

Ader's work moves in the opposite direction, as he breaks the illusion of the miraculous by actually searching for it, which causes an estrangement by pulling the fiction out of the illusion and connecting it to reality. His existential performance also becomes fiction, by indexing and exhibiting it in the museum. Furthermore, he plays a dual role on the one hand he is a transcendental, self-reflective artist, on the other hand he deconstructs his position into a comic persona, who searches for the miraculous, even though Ader must have known that miracles cannot purposefully be sought, as it is something metaphysical and appears by chance.

By the inclusion of their presence in the works of art, Van Elk and Ader directly address the audience. In this direct connection, they involve the beholder in the comic event; they are fooled by Van Elk's and Ader's ironic self-deprecation as their comic characters, who come up with clichés or ludic statements regarding the cultural tradition. They make the audience part of a comic spectacle or an ironic stance towards the cultural discourse. Only the conscious beholder will get to this point of understanding that he is part of the joke, as both artists ironize the cultural discourse of the art world in which they are caught.

In the last section of this chapter, De Man's writing on the self as a dialectical and reflexive structure, as well as the concept of meta-irony was brought into connection with Van Elk's and Ader's presence in their works of art. Their awareness of the incomprehensibility of aesthetic concepts caused a form of self-mystification. Their characters, in their works of art, are used to laugh at the predicaments of aesthetic conventions. By claiming a goodbye to or a search for these concepts, they make these conventions appear as if they were absolute truths or physical realities. Their presence in the work of art claimed to find or do away with aesthetic truths, and, on the other hand, their art-determined self seemed to be conscious of the incomprehensibility and falsity of their proclamations. This is the moment they become conscious of the non-conscious, realizing the fictiveness of intellectual inventions, like the miraculous or perspective in the tradition of painting. At this point the irony turns into earnestness, as both artists are entangled within this sphere of fiction, and they arrive at a level of meta-irony.

## Chapter 3. The medium of Van Elk's and Ader's self-portraits

### 3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter examined how Van Elk's and Ader's 'self-portraits' contain a memory of the artists' mentality, as a modern form of self-reflectivity that coincides with Schlegel's description of irony. However, in following Gadamer's dual understanding of the portrait, it is also necessary to investigate the ontology of the works of art as optical presence, including the medium in which Van Elk and Ader worked. The term self-portrait has rarely been used to describe Van Elk's and Ader's works of art according to their medium: both artists do not work in the traditional medium of self-portraiture, as the works are not actually painted representations by the artists of themselves as a painters, for example holding a brush and pallet. Rather, the works of art as presence connect to a medium distinctive for the postmodern era, particularly to that of the 1970s, for example by including their representation by means of photography. Van Elk used both painting and photography, whereas Ader made use of reproducible and distributable objects and technical means, including photography, postcards, a projector, slides, an audiotape, and recording equipment.

In 1985, the art historian-critic Rosalind Krauss (1941-), professor of Modern Art and Theory at Columbia University, writes in *The originality of the avant-garde and other modernist myths* that the 1970s art is

[d]iversified, split, factionalized. Unlike the art of the last several decades, its energy does not seem to flow through a single channel for which a synthetic term, like Abstract-Expressionism, or Minimalism, might be found. (...) '70s art is proud of its own dispersal. We are asked to contemplate a great plethora of possibilities in the list that must now be used to draw a line around the art of the present: video; performance; body art; conceptual art; photorealism in painting and an associated hyper-realism in sculpture; story art; monumental abstract sculpture (earthworks); and abstract painting, characterized now, not by rigor but by a willful eclecticism. It is as though in that need for a list, or proliferating string of terms, there is prefigures an image of personal freedom, of multiple options now open to individual choice or will, whereas before these things were closed off through a restrictive notion of historical style.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> notes on the index: Part 1' in: Krauss, 1985, p. 196.

In short the 1970s are characterized by a pluralism of artistic means, challenging the traditional division of the arts in genres and specific aesthetic mediums for artists to work in; painting, sculpture or drawing. Krauss calls the situation in art history after the rejection of this traditional division 'the post-medium condition', which is characterized by a plurality of medium that have become meaningless, empty, and general. They are simply means to articulate meaning or signs for underlying market value. To Krauss the post-medium condition has abandoned the 'master narrative' of modern art, which turns on the importance of 'specific aesthetic mediums understood as simultaneously empowering artistic practice and leveraging the works' possibility of meaning'.<sup>234</sup> Krauss's work on the medium from the last three decades is a counter-move to this post-medium condition: the forgetting of the medium as empowering and meaning-bearing element in itself. To Krauss the notion of the medium per se in the post-medium condition is not obsolete, but is worthy of continued use.

This chapter aims to answer the questions: How do Van Elk's and Ader's use of mediums in their self-portraits empower their artistic practice and leverage their work's possibility of meaning? And: How do their mediums relate to the memory of their artistic mentality as romantic ironists? In order to tackle the question, this chapter will first outline Krauss's designation of conceptual art, particularly Joseph Kosuth's train of thought, as cause for the flight into the post-medium condition, or 'post-conceptual' age. Subsequently, it will focus on modernist theory on medium specificity, analysing theories by the art critics Clement Greenberg (1909-1994) and Michael Fried (1939-) and the philosopher Stanley Cavell (1926-). Originally a follower of Greenberg, Krauss broke from modernist theory and directed her attention on the medium in the 'post-medium' condition, in which we can also rank Van Elk's and Ader's works of art. The third section of this chapter will research what Krauss understands as a medium in the post-medium condition, for which it will focus on Krauss's semiotic square of 'the medium in the expanded field', also including the technical support, kitsch and installation (Appendix 2). Conclusively, Krauss's model will be used to position Van Elk's and Ader's work of art on the expanded field according to its medium. In doing so, it will become clear how the mediums used in their work set forth Ader's and Van Elk's artistic mentality as romantic ironists.

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<sup>234</sup> Krauss, 2010, p. xii.

### 3.2 Conceptual art as the causation of the post-medium condition

Krauss assigns five aspects that have brought about the flight to the post-medium condition, including post-minimalism, Marcel Duchamp's invention of the ready-made, conceptual art, post-structuralism's deconstructive theories of the self, and new media.<sup>235</sup> All these developments attacked modernism, its insistence on specific mediums and caused its obsolescence in the post-medium condition. It was foremost conceptual art that ended the narrative of medium specificity in the 1960s and early '70s.<sup>236</sup> Art as pure idea brought forth the loss of touch with the use of a specific medium. Krauss writes that:

It was conceptual art that had decreed the substitution of the visual by the textual, as in Kosuth's insistence that art should now take the form of a proposition. And in calling a halt to the visual as the mainstay of art's medium, it was also declaring the end of the disembodied viewer, the modernist spectator as nothing but a point of view, a mere vantage within the apparatus of the work's perspective.<sup>237</sup>

Krauss points to Joseph Kosuth who saw the paradoxical outcome of modernist reduction in conceptual art, not as *specific* but as *general*.<sup>238</sup> If the logic of modernism is searching for the essence or specificity of the medium, for example of painting, Kosuth claimed that it was now the task of the artist to define the essence of art itself, instead of the essence of a specific medium. Krauss quotes Kosuth's statement:

Being an artist now means to question the nature of art. If one is questioning the nature of painting, one cannot be questioning the nature of art. If an artist accepts painting (or sculpture) he is accepting the tradition that goes with it. That's because if you make paintings, you are already accepting (not

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<sup>235</sup> The first was post minimalism and its rejection of the minimalist literal object. Secondly, Krauss names conceptual art and its declaration that the object was now supplanted by the idea of art as pure idea. She refers to Lucy Lippard's book *Six Years: the dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972* (1973). Lippard was the first to recognize the dematerialization of the art object (Krauss, 2011, p. 20). Thirdly, Krauss names, Marcel Duchamp's invention of the ready-made. This 'inaugural gesture' caused 'the entry of ordinary components into the context of some form of aesthetic institution (...) – in order to ask, once again, the general question – "What makes this *art*?"' (Krauss, 2011, p. 32). Fourthly, Krauss points to the rise of post structuralism and its deconstructive theory of the self. Particularly, she names Jacques Derrida's concept of *différance*, which dismissed the idea of a stable identity or selfhood that undergirds modernism. She also refers to his idea of the always already impure, as described in Derrida's essay 'The Parergon'. Lastly, Krauss calls new media to be medium's 'false friend' as they cancel the very idea of a separation between mediums. She adduces Marshall McLuhan and Friedrich Kittler; 'for the former media are modern communications vehicles, while they are technical storage, translation, and transmission systems for the latter' (Krauss, 2011, p. 35). She rejects McLuhan's aphorism 'the medium is the message' as it exults in the non-specificity of the medium, its content or message is always referring to another, earlier medium. Secondly, Kittler's digitalization of all information into numerical streams will cancel or erase the very concepts of medium.

<sup>236</sup> Krauss, 2000, p. 9.

<sup>237</sup> Krauss, 2011, p. 62.

<sup>238</sup> Krauss, 2000, p. 10.

questioning) the nature of art.<sup>239</sup>

Krauss also takes into account Kosuth's conviction, and the methodology of a conceptual art that proclaims that artworks now merely take the form of statements. This substitution began with the work of Duchamp and his practice of the readymade. His followers, the conceptual artists, further rarefied the physical object into a condition of language and analytic philosophy. Art became the work of definition, as a verbal or linguistic construct. Where formerly art circulated in the form of things, conceptual art supplanted the object by the idea of art as pure idea or concept. By condemning the material, and producing art as a mode of theory about art flowing through the channels of commodity the artists aimed to escape from the traditional, almost industrial, production of works of art and the art market.<sup>240</sup>

Krauss points to conceptual art as the cause for the termination of the traditional divisions of art in specific mediums and the scattering of the medium into a multiplicity. The artists now had at their disposal a resource to every material support imaginable: 'from pictures to words to video to readymade objects to films'.<sup>241</sup> The end of medium-specificity passed into the post-medium condition. Krauss's problem with this multiplicity or plurality of mediums, is that 'every material support, including the site itself – whether art magazine, dealer's fair booth, or museum gallery – will now be levelled, reduced to a system of pure equivalency by the homogenizing principles of commodification, the operation of pure exchange value from which nothing can escape and for which everything is transparent to the underlying market value for which it is a sign'.<sup>242</sup> The medium becomes nothing more than a means to articulate a meaning, a mediatory element, instead of a meaning-bearing element in itself. This, for Krauss, 'implodes the idea of an aesthetic medium and turns everything equally into a readymade that collapses the difference between the aesthetic and the commodified'.<sup>243</sup> It caused the international spread of mixed media presentations and installation art, which to Krauss is a reason to state that we now inhabit the post-medium age.<sup>244</sup>

The traditional idea of a specific aesthetic medium imploded by all the new available possible technical supports. Krauss, however, still insists on the importance of the medium to underpin the very possibility of art. Krauss reasons further on this distinction of the

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<sup>239</sup> Joseph Kosuth in: Krauss, 2011, p. 31.

<sup>240</sup> Krauss, 2000, p. 11.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 20.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 20.

medium as either aesthetic object in itself, or as entity with functional, technical or monetary value. She questions how the medium in this post-medium condition persist its degraded mode of commodity and generality and can be a sincere support in the aesthetic context. In appropriating the notion of the medium for Krauss, the next section of this chapter will first turn to the modernist theories on medium specificity, which Krauss rejects, but also uses as a basis in order to form a new model on the importance of the medium in the expanded field, or post-medium era.

### **3.3 Modernist theory on medium-specificity**

To retrace the importance of the medium in the deceptive post-medium condition since the mid-1970s, Krauss takes a step back in history to focus on medium-specificity in modern theory, in which modern art of the twentieth century was rooted. By this medium-specificity is meant that the work of art has a 'recursive structure', as it is pointing-to-itself; it directs attention to its own medium, painting or sculpture, as support.<sup>245</sup> Krauss pays attention to what Foucault termed the 'discursive unity' of the medium, for which she takes into account Greenberg, Fried and Cavell.<sup>246</sup> Krauss wants to add her own voice on this discursive unity of the medium, which diverges from these theorisations of medium-specificity and its relation to modernism, as she focuses on the medium in the postmodern era.

#### **3.3.1 Clement Greenberg: the medium as essence**

Krauss references to the art critic Clement Greenberg, who according to her was the first to stabilise the medium as the locus of the discursive unity in his 1960 essay 'Modernist Painting'. Greenberg insists on 'medium specificity', as the most important characteristic of modernist painting. Krauss writes:

[F]or Greenberg, the nature of a medium was established by brute positivism: painting is flat; sculpture is three-dimensional and freestanding like an object; drawing is the cursive tracing of edges and boundaries as opposed to painting's access to color and penumbra. Greenberg's specificity is empirically tied to a physical substance'.<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> Krauss, 2011, p. 4.

<sup>246</sup> Ibidem, pp. 3-8, p. 15.

<sup>247</sup> Krauss, 2011, p. 7.

Greenberg formulated the notion that it was modern art's task to question the essence of its own medium, which for him lies 'in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence'.<sup>248</sup> The essence or specificity of the medium therefore depends upon the characteristics that the medium does not share with other art forms.<sup>249</sup> Greenberg writes: 'What had to be exhibited was not only that which was unique and irreducible in art in general, but also that which was unique and irreducible in each particular art. Each art had to determine, through its own operations and works, the effects exclusive to itself'.<sup>250</sup> Modernist art had to be pure, which Greenberg sees as self-defining, calling attention to itself.

To modernist art this means paintings should stress the flatness of the surface, for 'flatness alone was unique and exclusive to pictorial art'; it was the 'only condition that painting shared with no other art'.<sup>251</sup> Modernist painters should thus avoid the impurity of creating the vivid illusion of three-dimensional space onto a two-dimensional surface, for 'three-dimensionality is the province of sculpture'.<sup>252</sup> The historical development of painting then should be understood as a progressive commitment to call attention to its own peculiar conditions, and to slough off all norms and conventions that prove inessential. Whereas the Old Masters created a vivid illusion of three-dimensional space and depth or *trompe-l'oeil*, and permitted sculptural illusion, like shading and modelling, on the flat surface of the canvas, the modernists reversed these terms and tend to show the flatness of the picture before one sees the picture itself. Painting should become a 'purely optical experience', according to Greenberg.<sup>253</sup> He emphasizes that the modernist painter must only permit the optical illusion; it 'should confine itself exclusively to what is given in visual experience, and make no reference to anything given in any other order of experience (...)'.<sup>254</sup> Greenberg in this way considers modernist art to be subversive, but by this it takes its place in the intelligible continuity of tradition. Conclusively, to Greenberg art is foremost continuity, as it is unthinkable without it: 'Lacking the past of art, and the need and compulsion to maintain its standards of excellence, Modernist art would lack both the substance and justification'.<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> Greenberg, 1993, p. 85.

<sup>249</sup> Krauss, 2011, p. 15.

<sup>250</sup> Greenberg, 1993, p. 86.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 87.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 88.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 89.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 91.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 93.

### 3.3.2. Michael Fried: the medium as instantaneity

After Greenberg's 'reactivation' of the medium, Krauss shifts her attention to Michael Fried, who to Krauss 'might be thought of as his [Greenberg's] greatest advocates', while he actually 'holds Greenberg's notion of sculptural specificity responsible for what he dismisses as "literalism" of the minimalist art he rejects'.<sup>256</sup> Krauss quotes Fried's argument with Greenberg's theory:

Part of my argument with Clement Greenberg's reductionist, essentialist reading of the development of modernist art (...) was precisely this case history in Minimalism of what happened if one thought in those terms'.<sup>257</sup>

Fried's essay 'Art and Objecthood', published in *Artforum* in 1967, sets out his rejection of Minimalism's literal take on Greenberg's notion of medium specificity as on the one hand paintings' flatness and on the other sculptures' 'physical bulk'.<sup>258</sup> To Fried the use of *shape*, not flatness, was the medium that could prolong the agony of modernist painting and was the way of declaring the specificity of painting. Frank Stella's *Polygon Series* (1965-66) exemplified Fried's theory (Figure 16).<sup>259</sup> To Fried the success or failure of a painting depends on its ability to hold or stamp itself out as pictorial shape.<sup>260</sup>

To Fried shape not only serves as a medium of painting, but is also a fundamental property of objects.<sup>261</sup> Fried's distinction in sculpture, or in the arts in general, comes down to difference '*between work that is fundamentally theatrical and work that is not*'.<sup>262</sup> The work of art should not aim at creating a situation or experience, which necessarily includes the beholder to complete the work, and which mostly persists in time, as these aspects are part of theatre.<sup>263</sup> Rather, Fried claims that '*the success, even survival, of the arts has come*

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<sup>256</sup> Krauss, 2011, p. 8.

<sup>257</sup> Krauss, 2006, p. 56. Fried rejects to Minimalism, or what he calls literalist art, as it misinterpreted Greenberg's reductive conception of modernism. He thinks literalist art for not being art, but a plea for a new genre of theatre.

<sup>258</sup> Krauss 2011 p. 8.

<sup>259</sup> Fried, 1998, p. 149.

<sup>260</sup> Fried explains this as follows: 'Modernist painting has come to find it imperative that it defeat or suspends its own objecthood, and that the crucial factor in this undertaking is shape, but shape that must belong to *painting* – it must be pictorial, not, or not merely literal' (Fried, 1998, p. 151). Only by the use of pictorial shape the artist can defeat the collapse of all specific mediums into a general condition of 'objecthood'. By which Fried meant that all mediums would be an object existing on equal basis with other objects in three-dimensional space, and in which the medium loses its claim to specificity and turns in to generality.

<sup>261</sup> Fried, 1998, p. 149.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 157.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 153-157, pp. 164-167. To Fried literalist art is to *stage* presence, by which it *distances* the beholder, which creates a division between subject and the impassive object. Fried: 'I am suggesting, then, that a kind of latent or hidden naturalism, indeed anthropomorphism, lies at the core of literalist theory and practice. (...) what is wrong with literalist work is not that it is anthropomorphic but that the meaning and, equally, the hiddenness of its anthropomorphism are incurably theatrical.'

*increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theatre*'.<sup>264</sup> Arts should remain concerned with the conventions that constitute their respective essence. As phenomenologist Fried insists on a continuous and entire *presentness* of the work. It should arise in the beholder an experience of *instantaneousness*, meaning that an acute single instant would be enough to experience the work in all its depth and fullness. The work of art should be wholly manifest at every moment. It is in this immediate presence that modernist art defeats theatre.<sup>265</sup>

### 3.3.3. Stanley Cavell: the medium as an *automatism*

Krauss finds Greenberg's theorisation of the medium a dead-end approach that results in two dogmatic conventions: flatness and the delimitation of flatness, but also finds Fried's theory too limited.<sup>266</sup> Krauss seeks a way to establish a more complex notion of the medium, for which she turns to Cavell who seconds Fried's rejection of 'medium specificity' articulated by Greenberg, but does preserve Fried's concept the medium as instantaneousness. Apart from their dogmatic theorisations of modernist art, Greenberg's conclusive statement of art as an intelligible continuity of tradition and Fried's observation of the rise of Minimalism as an unexpected consequence of Greenberg's reductive logic seem to carry an important ingredient for Cavell's own invocation of the rules of the medium in modern art, which he calls an *automatism*.

In his essay 'A Matter of Meaning It', included in *Must we mean what we say?* (1969), Cavell already resists the reductive reflex of modernist theories on the medium, as he explains that modernist art

[i]s trying to find the limits or essence of its own procedures. And this means that it is not clear a priori what counts, or will count, as a painting, or sculpture or musical composition . . . . So we haven't got clear criteria for determining whether a given object is or is not a painting, a sculpture . . . . But this is exactly what our whole discussion has prepared us for. The task of the modernist artist, as of the contemporary critic, is to find what it is his art finally depends upon; it doesn't matter that we haven't a priori criteria for defining a painting, what matters is that we realize that the criteria are something we must discover, discover in the continuity of painting itself.<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Fried, 1998, pp. 163-164.

<sup>265</sup> Ibidem, p. 167.

<sup>266</sup> Krauss, 2000, p. 29.

<sup>267</sup> Cavell, 1976, p. 219.

To Cavell it is not relevant to question 'Why this has happened', but what is relevant is that it 'has happened at a certain moment in history'.<sup>268</sup> Cavell rather believes that the essence of a medium is a reflection of conventions on which human practice is based. Cavell defies the idea that there are a priori criteria to determine a medium, as there is no essence in the physical medium itself. The criteria should continually shift, as the medium is constantly rediscovering itself on the bases of former traditions. To Cavell the medium is a 'material-in-certain-characteristic-applications'.<sup>269</sup> The media of music, for instance, consists of 'the various ways in which various sources of sound [for example voices or instruments] (...) have characteristically been applied: the media are, for example, plain song, work song, the march, the fugue (...)'.<sup>270</sup> The discovery of such existing forms or strains of conventions makes it possible to invent new expressions. Cavell explains that the 'form' is the medium; 'it is within these that composers have been able to speak and intend to speak (...)'.<sup>271</sup> The medium thus can be distinguished according to tradition of the medium. Rather the artist has to claim a new essence in reflection or response to the tradition of the past.

In his monograph *The World Viewed*, originally published in 1971, Cavell addresses the ontology of film as a medium for art and brings into focus what seemed to him unexplained about modernist painting, namely how a modernist work of art can become autonomous.<sup>272</sup> His notion of *automatism* records the idea that the successful work of art is authentic; it is free from its maker. Cavell gives three reasons for his motivation to use the concept of *automatism* for the medium. Firstly, an automatism generates new instances and calls for new works of art, it is therefore plural and something more than only a single physical work could convey. Secondly, he continues that the notion of automatism 'codes the experience of the works of art as "happening of itself"', it happens almost spontaneously or automatically.<sup>273</sup> The third reason of this effort to call a medium an automatism is 'to free the object (...), to give new ground for its autonomy'.<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> Ibidem, p. 220.

<sup>269</sup> Ibidem, p. 221.

<sup>270</sup> Ibidem, p. 221.

<sup>271</sup> Ibidem, p. 221.

<sup>272</sup> Krauss, 2000, p. 5. The ontology of film and photography according to Cavell is located in its automatism. In this case the concept of *automatism* captures the part in film or photography 'that depends on the mechanics of a camera - is automatic' (Krauss, 2000, p. 5). The ontology of film, or photography, is its partly automatic or mechanic process; it manufactures picture of the world. Automatism is the mechanism that produces *views of the world*. Photography therefore seems to be in a more direct or objective relationship to reality, rather than a hand-made, more subjective, painting. Automaticity is the material condition (auto-focus, shutter, etc.) that curbs authority (Cavell, 1979, p. 20, 68).

<sup>273</sup> Cavell, 1979, p. 107.

<sup>274</sup> Ibidem, p. 107-108.

The concept of automatism should be understood against Cavell's distinction between traditional and modernist art. Before the modernist era the automatism is prescribed and secured by tradition to the artist. The artists could tap naturally into the power of their medium, for example the power of a portrait, was to 'stand in for the form it took and thence to invoke the power of the medium', to invoke painting as such.<sup>275</sup> In modernism these traditional forms of art have been found to be conventional and no longer sufficed as being forms of art.<sup>276</sup> Simply mastering the conventions of the medium and intensifying skill to secure the authority of the works of art belonged to the past.

In the modernist age, there are no rules for an artist on how to use a medium in order to be included in tradition, Cavell writes: '[Y]our work is all your own, there is no longer a natural relation between your work and its results, you are looking for what works (happens of itself). Only after the fact will the muse come to bless your work, or not.'<sup>277</sup> This happening out of itself refers to the artist's working method, who should 'automatically' invent something new by 'lodging and sanctioning' the question of what art is.<sup>278</sup> This way modern art can claim authenticity for itself; its status as a work of art can be invented or discovered out of itself.

By lodging what art is, the modernist artists first had to 'explore the fact of automatism itself, as if investigating what it is any time that has provided a given work of art with the power of its art as such'.<sup>279</sup> It should be self-reflective, meditating the question about the nature of art and reflect on its capacity to make meaning, by taking into account the medium's power to spiritualise matter.<sup>280</sup> A modernist work of art, Cavell writes, 'investigates its own physical basis, searching out its own conditions of existence, and rediscovers the facts that its existence as an art is not physically assured'.<sup>281</sup> To claim authenticity modern art has to imbed a reflection on the complexities of historical tradition of forms and conventions of art, consisting of 'a range of automatisms upon which the tradition maintains itself'.<sup>282</sup>

At the same time, the artist should sanction these forms as conventions of the past. It should dispense with what were thought to be the conventions constituting the possibility of art and somehow carry it on. In order to do this, Cavell explains:

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<sup>275</sup> Ibidem, p. 103.

<sup>276</sup> Ibidem, p. 117.

<sup>277</sup> Ibidem, p. 107.

<sup>278</sup> Eldridge, 2003, p. 117, pp. 120-122.

<sup>279</sup> Cavell, 1979, p. 107.

<sup>280</sup> Cavell, 1979, p. 13-14. Throughout the book Cavell uses the term 'serious' to refer to modernist art, which is to be engaged in a self-reflective thinking.

<sup>281</sup> Krauss, 2011, p. 16. See also: Cavell, 1979, p. 107.

<sup>282</sup> Cavell, 1979, p. 15, p. 104.

[I]t has become the immediate task of the artist to achieve in his art the muse of art itself- to declare, from itself, the art as a whole for which it speaks, to become a present of that art (...) [T]he task is no longer to produce another instance of an art but a new medium within it.<sup>283</sup>

It is the artist's task to convert his reflective thinking into generating new instances of the medium, by discovering or inventing new criteria to define the medium in the continuity. The artist should give access to a material's unconscious; a not yet invented possibility within the excess of everything that is thought to constitute the possibility of a medium. The artist should seek out new ways of securing value by aiming at the particularisation of an instance within the existing media. The artist then is 'extending-by-transforming' the medium on the basis of the modes of achievements within the tradition of the specific medium.<sup>284</sup>

Conclusively, Cavell's aim is 'to free the idea of a medium from its confinement in referring to the physical bases of various arts', he insists on using the word 'medium' to 'name those bases as well as to characterize modes of achievement within the arts'.<sup>285</sup> The automatism becomes both *presentness*, in direct physical connection to the viewer's optical reality, and open to innovation via a reflection on the tradition of art. By this working method modernist art almost 'automatically' secures its autonomy.<sup>286</sup> Automatism is often taken for granted, as it seems to be something happening out of itself, the work of art appears as autonomous, as if it is natural and not as a matter of mere will or decision of the artist, while it actually determines the nature of the reflective relationship between art and viewer. The development of art then consists of shifting the tension within this dynamic relationship between art and viewer, but within the specific medium, by tightening its capabilities in an accurate way.

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<sup>283</sup> Ibidem, p. 103

<sup>284</sup> Costello, 2012, p. 842.

<sup>285</sup> Cavell, 1979, p. 105. See also: Krauss, 2011, p. 19.

<sup>286</sup> Cavell addresses artists from late modernist abstraction, like Jackson Pollock and Frank Stella, as inventors of establishing a new automatism within the medium of painting, namely the dripping technique or the shaped canvas. Firstly, they reflect on the range of possibilities in the medium of painting, and 'forget' these in order to reinvent or extract a new possibility or instances afforded by the medium of painting. Their works carry on in managing to be a painting, consisting of a canvas and paint, but their works also turn out to be compelling paintings that, in advance of its demonstration, no one would have thought possible to be painting. Artists this way laid bare a new instance of what a painting is and seeks out new ways of securing value (Costello, 2012, p. 841-842).

In the preface to *“A Voyage on the North Sea”: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (2000) Krauss first describes her intention to draw a line under the word medium, as it was ‘too ideologically, too dogmatically, too discursively loaded’, referring to the modernist and formalist theories of Greenberg and Fried on medium specificity.<sup>287</sup> However, she then expresses her intention to use Cavell’s concept of *automatism* as substitute for the medium.<sup>288</sup> Cavell’s notion of the medium, as both an artistic material and the discovery of a new automatism in order to secure its autonomy, allows Krauss to circumvent the physical associations of the word medium.<sup>289</sup> Furthermore, it allows her to condemn the reductionist and essentialist, or formalist theories on the medium of modernist art. Lastly, Cavell’s concept is open-ended and includes the concept of invention and innovation; it allows for the ‘spontaneity of improvisation, which keeps (...) [art] alive’.<sup>290</sup> The next section will discuss Krauss’s model of the medium in the expanded field, which was set up by Krauss as means to reevaluate the medium as ground for aesthetic coherence in the post-medium condition.<sup>291</sup>

### **3.4 Rosalind Krauss’s semiotic square: ‘the medium in the expanded field’**

The former theorisations on the medium particularly relate to the modernist tradition of art. Krauss’s engagement and exploration is focused on works of art from the postmodern era, generally from the 1970s. In the post-medium condition the idea of a specific medium ceased to exist, and all types of technical means and commercial applications became available. Krauss explains that ‘the aesthetic option of the *medium* has been declared outmoded, cashiered, washed-up, finished. Painting is a possibility we can barely remember; sculpture is so far in the past that it seems indifferent whether we weld in steel or cast in bronze; drawing seems obviously left to computers’.<sup>292</sup> The question arises: What counts as an aesthetic medium in this post-medium condition to Krauss?

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<sup>287</sup> In her preface Krauss gives three different explanations of Cavell’s concept of automatism. The first referring to the automatism as the ontology of film and photography. Secondly, to the Surrealist use of automatism as an unconscious reflex. The latter concept of automatism as containing the connotative reference to ‘autonomy’, in the sense of the resultant work’s freedom from its maker, as described in this section on Cavell of this chapter (Krauss, 2000, p. 5.).

<sup>288</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 5.

<sup>289</sup> Costello, 2012, pp. 841-842.

<sup>290</sup> Krauss, 2011, p. 7.

<sup>291</sup> Costello, 2012, p. 1. Costello criticises Krauss’s misreading of Cavell’s ideas and in the history of debate about artistic media, Costello finds Krauss’ appeal to Cavell surprising, giving Cavell’s work has always been closely associated with the of Michael Fried, and the mutual estrangement of Fried and Krauss (Costello, 2012, pp. 276-290).

<sup>292</sup> Krauss, 1997, pp. 5-6.

The next section will give an understanding of Krauss's concept of the medium, for which it will take into account her model of the medium in the expanded field (Appendix 2), included in her book *Under Blue Cup* (2011).<sup>293</sup> Krauss uses the Greimas or semiotic square to translate the possibilities of art regarding the medium in the post-medium condition in a visual structure.<sup>294</sup> This diagram is a variant on her earlier model named 'sculpture in the expanded field', which she describes in the synonymous essay, collected in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (1985). Krauss uses the diagram to give a structural analysis of the medium by mapping the relationships between semiotic signs through the opposition of concepts. The square takes the meaning of the 'medium' (S) as initial semiotic system. This medium is 'the universe of meaning' and posits a contradiction to that system, consisting of the complex axis, mapping the relationship between the positive seme 'memory' (S<sub>1</sub>) and the negative seme 'forgetting' (S<sub>2</sub>).<sup>295</sup> The field of the medium expands outwards from this binary. Further addressing the 'technical support' (S<sub>2</sub> + ~S<sub>1</sub>) mapped on the east side axis between 'forgetting' (S<sub>2</sub>) and 'not forgetting' (~S<sub>1</sub>), and 'kitsch' (S<sub>1</sub> + ~S<sub>2</sub>) on the on west side axis consisting of the seme 'memory' (S<sub>1</sub>) implicating its counterpart 'not memory' (~S<sub>2</sub>). Conclusively, 'installation' (~S) is placed on the neuter axis of the model consisting of 'not forgetting' (~S<sub>1</sub>) and 'not memory' (~S<sub>2</sub>).

### 3.4.1. Technical support

The 'technical support' (S<sub>2</sub> + ~S<sub>1</sub>) consists of the axis of 'forgetting' (S<sub>2</sub>) implicating on its opposite side 'not forgetting' (~S<sub>1</sub>). In the post-medium era, the artists had to 'search for fresh supports, ones untainted by the stigma of an exhausted tradition. Postmodernism drove the avant-garde to turn at first to technology as the most virulent possible alternative to the natural materials of traditional mediums'.<sup>296</sup> The artists could look into near obsolete supports of various mass commercial industries or technical applications, like film, photography or video, as new resources for their artistic work. In order to ward off the idea of a specific material support for a traditional aesthetic genre, Krauss uses the term

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<sup>293</sup> Krauss, 2011, p. 127.

<sup>294</sup> The Lithuanian linguist and semiotician Algirdas Greimas (1917-1992) developed the semiotic square, which is derived from Aristotle's logical square of opposition. Greimas considered the semiotic square to be the elementary structure of meaning. The model was first presented in Greimas's *Semantique Structurale* (1966), which was later published as *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method* (1983).

<sup>295</sup> Krauss, 2011, pp. 17-18.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 18-19. See also: Krauss, 1999, p. 25.

technical support.<sup>297</sup> The technical support to Krauss, has ‘the virtue of acknowledging the recent obsolescence of most traditional aesthetic mediums (such as oil on canvas, fresco, and many sculptural material, including cast bronze or welded metal), while it also welcomes the layered mechanisms of new technologies that make a simple, unitary identification impossible (us the “support” of film the celluloid strip, the screen, the splices of the edited footage, the projector’s beam of light, the circular reels?)’.<sup>298</sup> She defines this term as ‘a structure, that is, some of the elements of which will produce the rules that generate the structure itself’.<sup>299</sup> The next question she answers is how the technical support could be deployed in the aesthetic context, as a new source of artistic value.<sup>300</sup>

Krauss elaborates on the technical support as useful medium in the aesthetic context by using Walter Benjamin’s theory of the essential ambivalence of every commodity. To Benjamin everything within capitalism exists in a dialectical condition, ‘(...) understood as invested with a double valence: negative and positive, or ‘the ambivalence between its utopian and its cynical element’.<sup>301</sup> Benjamin analysed that at the moment when a certain technology or commodity becomes outmoded, the cynical gains the upper hand, because it loses its utility and value. However, precisely at the moment of obsolescence, the commodity reveals or releases again its utopian dimension, like ‘the last gleam of a dying star’.<sup>302</sup> Krauss emphasizes the obsolescence of the commodity or technical support, since it is exactly in this moment that the support is liberated from its original function and loses its exchange value. After this disassociation, the support can be valorised anew according to its aesthetic situation.<sup>303</sup> The artist thus must ‘mine, excavate, deconstruct or reconfigure a single extant medium that is on the verge of obsolescence or collapse’.<sup>304</sup> The technical support then can serve as ground for aesthetic coherence.<sup>305</sup> The technical support as aesthetic medium is open-ended, and it is the artists’ ‘obligation to wrest from that support a new set of aesthetic conventions to which their works can then reflexively gesture, should they want to join those works to the canon of modernism’.<sup>306</sup> The artists’ task is to discover a medium, or a memory, in the face of the technical support.

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<sup>297</sup> Krauss, 2006, p. 55.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 56.

<sup>299</sup> Krauss, 2000, pp. 6-7.

<sup>300</sup> Krauss, 1997, p. 8.

<sup>301</sup> Krauss, 2000, p. 41.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 41.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 38-41.

<sup>304</sup> Adams, 2007, p. 71.

<sup>305</sup> Krauss, 2011, p. 19.

<sup>306</sup> Krauss, 2006, p. 57.

### 3.4.2. Kitsch

Kitsch ( $S_1 + \sim S_2$ ) is placed on the west side of the model; on the one hand kitsch exists as the same 'memory' ( $S_1$ ) and 'not memory' ( $\sim S_2$ ). To Krauss 'the medium is the memory', by which she means that it is its power to 'hold efforts of the forebears of a specific genre in reserve for the present'.<sup>307</sup> Contrary to the medium, kitsch operates 'the way mass-produced substances (formica) fake the artisanal originals (...) that they can only remember through the lightest of counterfeits'.<sup>308</sup> Krauss takes her definition of kitsch from Clement Greenberg's 1939 essay 'Avant-garde and Kitsch', published in *Partisan Review*, in which he claims that modernist art was a means to resist oversimplification of intellectual content in culture caused by consumerism.<sup>309</sup> Greenberg makes a distinction between the avant-garde and commercial art. Avant-garde art, to Greenberg, does encompass a memory of former art historical styles and forms, since it is the result of reflection upon the development of art itself. The beholder needs a considerable amount of conditioning to understand this quality of high art and the memory that it contains.

Greenberg defines kitsch or popular 'art', as follows: 'Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times.'<sup>310</sup> To Greenberg kitsch is equivalent to academic art: 'Self-evidently, all kitsch is academic; and conversely all that's academic is kitsch'.<sup>311</sup> Greenberg objects to kitsch and academic art, since both take advantage from art historical inventions and discoveries and derive their devices, rules of production or themes from high culture. High works of art or styles provide formulae and stock motifs, which then are imitated and drained over in low culture. Kitsch can be converted into a learnable system, and be produced mechanically, either by machines, or automatically by imitation, therefore it does not create an original memory. Rather, kitsch is an imitation and reproduction of the memory of true culture and its affects.<sup>312</sup> Since, kitsch employs imitation and repetition it becomes immediate and effortless in its identification or understanding and enjoyment.

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<sup>307</sup> Krauss, 2011, p 129.

<sup>308</sup> Ibidem, p 127-128.

<sup>309</sup> Greenberg, 1973, p. 3-21. The industrial revolution urbanized the masses of Western Europe and America and established universal literacy. The literate peasant did not obtain the comfort to engage with 'high' culture, lost their taste for folk culture, and discovered a new kind of culture fit for their consumption: 'ersatz culture, kitsch'.

<sup>310</sup> Greenberg quoted in Krauss, 2006, p. 58. See also: Greenberg, 1973, p. 10.

<sup>311</sup> Greenberg, 1973, p. 11.

<sup>312</sup> Ibidem, pp. 10-11.

### 3.4.3. Medium

The medium (S) is placed on the complex axis ( $S_1 + S_2$ ) existing as the binary of the seme 'memory' ( $S_1$ ) and the seme 'forgetting' ( $S_2$ ). Krauss bases her explanation of the medium on Cavell's concept of *automatism* and the Russian literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky's technique of 'defamiliarization'. Firstly, Cavell's notion of the medium as an *automatism* (see section 3.2.3) is particularly appealing to Krauss because a) the importance on the medium as optical presence; b) the insistence on the internal plurality of a medium: they are self-differing; c) the inclusion of an ideological claim, namely that the medium should have a reflective capacity or encompass a memory of the conventions of the medium, from which the artist can 'automatically' invent a new instance (improvisation); d) self-specification (the intensification of the possibilities in applications of a specific technological support).<sup>313</sup> The medium to Krauss is a recursive structure, like a language, developed over centuries of practice, by which it relies on the specificity of the support for a given practice, as it is by the properties of the given material that governs the ways of production, and on a memory of an aesthetic lineage.

On the one hand the medium is a specific structure, Krauss explains this as follows: '[A] medium must be a supporting structure, generative of a set of conventions, some of which, in assuming the medium itself as their subject, will be whole "specific" to it, thus producing an experience of their own necessity'.<sup>314</sup> Each invention is generated from this specific constellation of technology. On the other hand, the medium emanates from an aesthetic lineage of conventions. This aspect describes the artists' task to tap into their memory, and recall a system of making of a certain medium. Recalling a system of making that has been changed throughout the history of art for Krauss means recalling of 'who-you-are'.<sup>315</sup> By retracing this identity of the medium, the artists can invent a new instance and construct an identity; a 'who-you-are'.<sup>316</sup> Krauss wants to grasp back on this remembering as a construction of the identity of the artist.<sup>317</sup> Once discovered anew, the artist can create an original and compelling form, by which the work of art gains its autonomy and acquires a

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<sup>313</sup> Krauss, 2000, p. 5-6, 53. See also: Krauss, 2011, p. 129.

<sup>314</sup> Krauss, 2000, p. 26.

<sup>315</sup> Krauss, 2011, p. 4.

<sup>316</sup> Ibidem, p. 3-4.

<sup>317</sup> 'Rosalind Krauss with Yve Alain-Bois', in: *The Brooklyn Rail*, 2012. <[http://1\\$/www.brooklynrail.org/2012/02/art/rosalind-krauss-with-yve-alain-bois](http://1$/www.brooklynrail.org/2012/02/art/rosalind-krauss-with-yve-alain-bois)> Web. 03 November 2016. In her book *Under Bue cup*, (2011) Rosalind Krauss draws a parallel between the relation of the aesthetic medium to memory and a recalling of 'who-your-are', with her traumatic experience of being struck by aneurysm that temporarily washed away much of her short-term memory in 1999. After a coma, Krauss had to recover, for which she used flash cards as tools to reestablish her memory. Her book serves as a 'flash card' in which she advocates that contemporary art has to restore its own memory of the importance of the medium. Whereas in Krauss's case it was a failed blood vessel that caused her aneurysm, in contemporary art it was mainly Marcel Duchamp and conceptualism that caused the mnemonic condition of the medium's importance.

new place in the history of art.<sup>318</sup> This way, the artist can (re)invent and extend the life of a medium.

Secondly, Krauss invokes the aesthetic formalist critic Victor Shklovsky and his aesthetic technique of 'defamiliarization', as explained in his essay 'Art as technique' (1917) included in his book *Knight's Move* (1923).<sup>319</sup> Shklovsky uses the movement of the knight-piece in the game of chess as metaphor for the artist:

There are many reasons for the peculiarity of the knight's move, of which the first is the convention of art.... The second reason is that the knight is not free: it moves on the diagonal because the direct road is forbidden it.<sup>320</sup>

Shklovsky's knights are crusaders traversing on the grid of the chessboard according to its rules or conventions. The knight's move is unusual among chess pieces; it can move to a square that is two squares horizontally and one square vertically, or two squares vertically and one square horizontally. The artist is also reined to conventions, but simultaneously it is his task to lay bare these conventions for which it has to make an unusual move, like an act of 'defamiliarization'.<sup>321</sup>

In his essay Shklovsky explains his belief that the task of art is

[t]o impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important.*<sup>322</sup>

Shklovsky recognizes the intrinsic value of art as such. However, perception becomes habitual over time and viewers start to react properly to what they perceive with a minimum of conscious effort:

After we see an object several times, we begin to recognize it. The object is in front of us and we know about it, but we do not see it – hence we cannot say anything, significant about it (...).<sup>323</sup>

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<sup>318</sup> Costello, 2012, p. 841.

<sup>319</sup> In his essay Shklovsky attacks the view of Potebnye and his followers that art is thinking by means of images to clarify the unknown (the abstract or transcendent) by means of the known.

<sup>320</sup> Shklovsky in: Krauss, 2011, p. 101.

<sup>321</sup> Krauss, 2011, p. 101, p. 136. See also: Shklovsky, 1965, p. 3, p. 6.

<sup>322</sup> Ibidem, p. 12.

<sup>323</sup> Ibidem, p. 13.

Shklovsky then argues that the purpose of art is to remove objects from the automatism of perception by provoking a 'defamiliarizing' effect that forces viewers to notice what it is that they are reacting to.<sup>324</sup> The artist complicates forms, which attracts and holds attention and prolongs the duration of perception. Subsequently, it makes a viewer perceive things from a new point of view, out of their normal context.<sup>325</sup> The purpose of art then is to 'create a special perception of the object – *it creates a "vision" of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it.*'<sup>326</sup> Art is a way to develop techniques of viewing 'the artfulness of an object (...).'<sup>327</sup>

Krauss's uses Shklovsky's concept of 'the knight's move' in order to justify her analysis of art as a system of conventions, against which the work of art must be waged.<sup>328</sup> Krauss's knights also obey these rules, which makes

[t]he board and its conventions the *technical support* of chess. My knights of the medium are like Shklovsky's; they are in search of *technical supports* so as to extend the life of the medium.<sup>329</sup>

The technical support used by the artists thus contains an established set of conventions. In order to be inventive on the basis of this technical support the artist has to defamiliarize the conventional systems of making and invent an appropriate set of rules to individualise a working method. At the outset of her essay on James Coleman called '...And Then Turn Away', Krauss explains that

[a]rtists do not, of course, invent mediums. Carving, painting, drawing, were all in full flower before there was any socially distinguishable group to call itself artists. But mediums then individualize their practice; they intensify the skills associated with them; and, importantly, they acquire histories. For centuries it was only within and against the tradition encoded by a medium that innovation could be measured, just as it was in relation to its reservoir of meanings that new ranges of feeling could be tested.<sup>330</sup>

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<sup>324</sup> This unconscious automatic perception emphasises the perception of objects by way of recognition of their main characteristics or silhouette. We know what it is by configuration, but do not actually perceive the object.

<sup>325</sup> Ibidem, p. 5, 22. The Russian word is *ostranenie* (остранение); it means literally: 'making strange'. Shklovsky addresses in the article the similar technique in poetic language as a form of 'counter-hegemonic-de-naturalization'. The purpose of the poet is to make language appear strange by which it defers and disrupts normal cognition. This way the reader comes to realize that language is not simply a neutral medium, for the direct expression or transmission of an *a priori* truth about the world (Kester, 2013, p. 5).

<sup>326</sup> Shklovsky, 1965, p. 18.

<sup>327</sup> Ibidem, p. 12.

<sup>328</sup> Kester, 2013, p. 10.

<sup>329</sup> Krauss, 2011, p. 102.

<sup>330</sup> Krauss, 1997, p. 5.

The artist re-visits history in order to spontaneously innovate and extend the life of the medium. These works then can be judged according to perception: 'The white cube is the base we touch with our eyes, the way the edge of the pool is the surface against which we kick in order to propel ourselves back through the water'.<sup>331</sup>

### 3.4.4. Installation

On the south side of the square Krauss positioned installation (~S) on the neuter axis (~S<sub>2</sub> + ~S<sub>1</sub>) consisting of the seme 'not memory' (~S<sub>2</sub>) and its opposite seme 'not forgetting' (~S<sub>1</sub>). Krauss explicitly articulates her disgust towards 'the spectacle of meretricious art called installation'.<sup>332</sup> She writes: '*Under Blue Cup* is a polemic, adamantly shouting "fake" and "fraud" at the kitsch of installation'.<sup>333</sup> According to Krauss, the post-medium condition is characterized by installation art; hereby art is particularly engaged in

[t]he constant rehearsal of Duchamp's inaugural gesture – the entry of ordinary components into the context of some form of aesthetic institution, whether museum, gallery, or art fair – in order to ask, once again, the general question – "What makes this art?" – rather than the specific one of the medium.<sup>334</sup>

Krauss rejects installation art as she finds that it represses and does not reflect on, nor encompass a memory of a human system of making in the history of art, by which the status of the medium becomes unclear.<sup>335</sup> Furthermore, installation art often consists of technical supports that still function or are valuable in contemporary society. Conclusively, installation art, in Krauss's view, is just an assembly of items of display in spaces marked by the institution of art, by which it is completely dependent on the context to gain its status as autonomous work of art.<sup>336</sup> They just create an experience with various arbitrary objects that are used as mediatory means to channel an idea. To Krauss installation is just random 'aesthetically meaningless experimentation'.<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>331</sup> Krauss, 2011, p. 86.

<sup>332</sup> Ibidem, p. ix.

<sup>333</sup> Ibidem, p. 69. In *Under Blue Cup* (2011) Krauss particularly targets her experience with installation art, as she encountered in Kassel at *Documenta X* in 1997, organised under the direction of Catherine David. Chapter two focuses on Krauss's experience of *Documenta X* and her aversion to installation art.

<sup>334</sup> Ibidem, p. 32.

<sup>335</sup> Ibidem, p. 55, p. 69.

<sup>336</sup> Ibidem, p. 107.

<sup>337</sup> Kester, 2013, p. 10. <<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/50/59990/the-device-laid-bare-on-some-limitations-in-current-art-criticism/>> Web. 24 Nov. 2016.

### 3.4.5. Conclusion

Krauss's theorisation extends on the contradiction in the history of art between modernist's formalist theories on the medium, as promoted by Greenberg and Fried, and 'post-medium' forms of art that use a plurality of technical supports. In this generality of mediums in the post-medium condition, art is threatened to be reduced to a sign for market value, a simple formula of critique, like conceptual art, or a heightened experience for the beholder, like installation. Krauss translates her understanding of the value of the medium in the post-medium era in a semiotic square, which serves as a ground for aesthetic coherence. Whereas, installation art is meaningless, the medium to Krauss is the universe of meaning, consisting of the binary memory and forgetting. The medium should be understood in relation to kitsch and the technical support. Kitsch was analysed on the basis of Greenberg's essay, as a reproduction and faked sensation, and the technical support was explained by Benjamin's theory of the ambivalence of every commodity. The medium then, unlike kitsch, has the capacity to encompass a memory of or reflection upon the development of devices or styles in art history, from which 'automatically' a compelling structure is invented. This invention is also based on the qualities of a technical support that was on the verge of being forgotten, but opened up its utopian dimension in the aesthetic context. The qualities of the medium were explained on the basis of Cavell's concept of *automatism*, which again stresses the importance on the connection of the medium to a memory of a conventional system of making that became autonomous in the history of art. The artist is compelled to revisit the medium, to retrace back this memory of 'who-you-are' or system of making, and to analyse the aesthetic condition of the medium from within. From this memory forward, the artist can 'automatically' invent an individual way of articulating the medium anew. Secondly, using Shklovsky's technique of 'defamiliarization', Krauss explained that the artists have to invent an individual way of articulating the medium anew in a compelling way, which is indexed to no prior tradition of norms or expectations. This invention then is compelling when it disturbs the conventional system of making in the history of art and the habitual perception of the viewer. Finally, by this medium the artist creates a new identity, he individualises a new system of making on the technical support, which becomes an autonomous recursive structure in the history of art.

### **3.5 Knights of the medium: Van Elk and Ader**

Krauss's diagram laid out the structural parameters of the medium, technical support, installation and kitsch. The difference between these various structures is based on their capability to contain a memory of a system of making and to take up a technological support that has opened up its utopian dimension for the aesthetic context. The work of art can be positioned on this expanded field according to its medium. The successful artists are Krauss's 'knights of the medium', they do not engage in the international fashion of installation art, and resist the retreat into 'etiolated forms of the traditional mediums – such as painting and sculpture'.<sup>338</sup> Rather, they are 'inventors of technical supports as a new form of recursivity' and their works of art serve as 'the sides of a pool' that 'provide the swimmer with a kicking post against which to propel himself in a new direction'.<sup>339</sup>

This section will argue that both Van Elk and Ader can be regarded as knights of the medium, whose works of art contain a memory of the medium from which a compelling system of making is invented. Simply stating that Ader's unfinished trilogy *In Search of the Miraculous* (1973-1975) (Figure 6a-e) is an installation and Van Elk's series *The Adieu* (1974-1975) (Figure 5a-f) consists of mixed media does not suffice, following Krauss's rationale. This section will use Krauss's model as means to analyse the mediums in Van Elk's series *The Adieu* and Ader's unfinished trilogy *In Search of the Miraculous*.

#### **3.5.1. Ger van Elk's medium**

The medium in Van Elk's series *The Adieu* (Figure 5a-f) consists both of the technical support of painting and photography. Painting became under increasing attack in the aesthetic context of the 1970s, mainly due to its connection with the traditional aesthetic conventions of art, the rise of conceptualism and the use of photography. By using painting on photography, Van Elk invents a new way of dealing with this traditional artistic material. By using both these forms, he seems to take on the debate proclaiming the death of painting through the birth of photography. The use of both supports, more importantly, allows Van Elk to invent a new medium on the basis of the memory of perspective. The subject of these works of art, Van Elk explains, is perspective, the horizon and a vanishing point, as well as the emotion of a farewell.<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>338</sup> Krauss, 2000, p. 20, p. 56. Krauss's knights of the medium are: Ed Ruscha, William Kentridge, Sophie Calle, Harun Farocki, Christian Marclay, and James Coleman.

<sup>339</sup> Krauss, 2011, p. 25.

<sup>340</sup> Lint, 2013, p. 28.

On one level, Van Elk refers to the painterly rules of perspective. The rectangular canvas on the easel in the photograph shows a romantic naturalistic landscape, similar to Meyndert Hobbema's *The Alley at Middelharnis* (1689) (Figure 15). This image, showing a path that vanishes to one point in the distance on the horizon, makes use of what Leon Battista Alberti had termed the *legitimate construction*, his name for the geometry of perspective.<sup>341</sup> Ever since the Renaissance, this technique has served as a means to pierce the drumhead of a painting's flat surface. Van Elk invokes these rules; by doing so he recalls a memory of 'who-you-are', namely the painters' system of making from the Renaissance forward. The image shows a representation of Elk with his body facing the vanishing point, while he looks back over his shoulder and waves goodbye to the viewer. The viewer could be understood as the lens of the camera, bringing us to the second level of automatism that Van Elk invokes in his works of art.

On a second level, Van Elk adapts photography, which is described by Cavell as an automatism itself; a mechanism that produces views *of* the world in a more objective or direct relation to reality. Van Elk fits the tools to his kinetic position and photographs the painting on the easel from unusual perspectives, either from a worm's-eye view (Figure 5f), or from an extreme bird's-eye view (Figure 5c). In other works of the series, he takes photographs from the far left (Figure 5e) or from the right (Figure 5d). The difference in camera angle distorts the perception of the painting's surface for the beholder and gives the painting an object-like quality, which partly defies the illusion of depth on the canvas's surface. Furthermore, the ontology of photography, its *genius* or *noeme*, Krauss writes, following Roland Barthes, can be found in its indexical form, with its 'insistence that *that has been* (...)'.<sup>342</sup> It refers to Barthes's understanding of photography, explained in his book *Camera Lucida* (1980), as the 'extended, loaded evidence', which demonstrates that the figure of object 'indeed existed and that it has been where I see it'.<sup>343</sup> By using photography, Van Elk brings both forms of painting and photography into a dialogue, literally through his self-image waving back at the lens of the camera. The photograph captures the view of painting as an object that actually has been there.

On a third level, Van Elk invokes the automatism of 'atmospheric perspective' on the surface of the photograph. The technique of painting, a selective aesthetic styling, on top of the photograph reduces the clarity of the photograph, and its detailed direct realistic form. By painting on the picture, the result becomes more artificial and painterly and the

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<sup>341</sup> Krauss, 2011, pp. 4-5.

<sup>342</sup> Ibidem, p. 43.

<sup>343</sup> Barthes, 1981, p. 115.

reproduction fades. It refers to the effect the atmosphere has on the appearance of an object, in this case the photograph, as it is viewed from a distance. As the distance between an object and a viewer increases the contrast between the object and its background decreases, and the contrast of any details or markings also decreases. Van Elk imitates this type of perspective, by which the viewer is less able to see fine details. By using the automatism of atmospheric perspective he creates another illusion of depth.

On a fourth level, Van Elk invokes the memory of the automatism of perspective from modernism, by creating a shaped canvas surrounded by a thick black frame that emphasises this shape. Where the former automatisms of perspective in Van Elk's work of art include a creation of depth on a two-dimensional canvas, modernism denied the creation of an illusion of depth on a flat surface. In the twentieth century, Krauss explains, 'abstract art jettisoned the earlier access to a meaning staked on the space "behind" the canvas drumhead'.<sup>344</sup> Following, Fried's work optical, not literal, shape was the medium for modernist painting. Frank Stella's asymmetrical *Irregular Polygons* (1965-66) (Figure 16) exemplified Fried's theory, which explore the optical effect of advancing and receding forms. They challenge the conventional rectangular format and deny the painting's status as illusionistic window. Van Elk invokes this memory by giving the canvas and frame an irregular shape, in order to create the optical effect of perspective in the form of the canvas itself; a shape that seems to be pulled or pushed into a direction.

In the semiotic square Van Elk's work moves between the two axis of a 'memory' of perspective and the 'forgetting' of painting on the basis of technical support, photography. Approximately, Van Elk's work should be placed between the north side of the medium and the east side of the technical support in the expanded field. By photographing a painting on an easel, vice versa by painting *on* the photograph, he took painting out of its withdrawal into conventional and traditional niche. Furthermore, *The Adieu* encompasses the memory of creating perspective throughout art history, as it shows a visualisation of various forms of perspective. By imbricating the memory of the medium of perspective, Van Elk 'automatically' invents a compelling way of working, or system of making, with which he extends the life of the medium. The work is compelling, since it creates a new view of perspective with which he prolongs the duration of perception. Van Elk's medium is a meaning-bearing element, from which Van Elk spontaneously constructs a new identity, a new form of a 'who-you-are' that mirrors his mentality as a romantic ironist. He namely brings various opposing automatisms - geometrical perspective, photographic perspective,

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<sup>344</sup> Krauss, 2011, p. 4.

atmospheric perspective, and modernist anti-illusionistic perspective - into dispute. This way, his medium connects to the worldview of a romantic ironist, in which absolute truths did not exist. Rather, the universe is one of chaos, in which various opposing forms, or ambiguities can exist at the same time. Likewise, Van Elk's work is a literal reflection on the constantly changing conventions of the forms of perspective throughout history; as such he discloses that there is not simply one fixed convention of perspective.

### 3.5.2. Bas Jan Ader's medium

Whereas Dumbadze describes Ader's exhibition at Caire S. Copley Gallery in 1975 as a type of installation and 'a spectacle, a particularly apt description of a project that at its core was about the relation between presence and absence', the following analysis will give a different understanding of Ader's series *In search of the Miraculous* (Figure 6a-e) on the basis of Krauss's model.<sup>345</sup> At first glance Ader's work of art is anything but a coherent phenomenon, particularly because the artist works across various technical supports. He used photography, picture postcards, a slide projector, audio player and technical recording equipment. All these technical means are used to reproduce Ader's experience and distribute the work, in combination with objects from popular or folk culture.

The inky black-and-white photographic series of *One Night in Los Angeles*, in which Ader walks with a flashlight from freeway to coastline from dusk to dawn, evoke a popular type of travel book, 'offering photographic "tours" through world cities after dark'.<sup>346</sup> This genre originated roughly around 1930 with avant-garde photography books, appearing later in the decade, such as George Brassai's *Paris de Nuit* (1933) (Figure 17) and Bill Brandt's *A Night in London* (1938) (Figure 18).<sup>347</sup> Ader's photographic series stresses its popular appearance, because of its inscription with the lyrics from The Coasters' 1957 rhythm and blues hit *Searchin'*. It gives the photographic series a filmic quality, in which the lyrics could be seen as substitutes for subtitles, and Ader's presence as playing the key role in a popular detective movie. Whereas, the travel books often include a straightforward description about what is happening in the photograph, like 'dinner time', 'people in the suburbs enjoy their domestic life' and 'children are sent upstairs to bed', Ader's text narrates a search for

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<sup>345</sup> Dumbadze, 2013, p. 117.

<sup>346</sup> Cherix (ed.), 2009, p. 54.

<sup>347</sup> Ibidem p. 54. George Brassai, *Paris de Nuit: 60 Photos Inédite de Brassai*, Paris: Édition 'Arts et métiers graphiques' 1933. Bill Brandt and James Bone, *A Night in London: Story of a London Night in Sixty-four Photographs*, London: Country Life, 1938.

an unspecified 'her', which can also be explained as the miraculous, like the main title of the work describes. This suggests a more ambiguous interpretation of 'her'.<sup>348</sup>

The distributed invitations for his exhibition are reminiscent of sepia vintage postcards of rough seas, similar to those collected by the artist Susan Hiller in her work *Dedicated to the Unknown artists* (1972-1976) (Figure 19). This work consists of 305 'rough sea' postcards and its details, including the location, like 'Rough Sea, Brighton', and the remarks of the sender: 'We had a storm today, just like this one'.<sup>349</sup> In 1972, Marcel Broodthaers based his work *Chère Petite Soeur* on a vintage postcard of a rough sea with a text that was written on it by its sender in 1901, which reads: 'Dear little sister, this is to give you an idea of the storm which we had yesterday. I'll give you more details about it, best wishes and see you soon, Marie' (Figure 20). These types of picture postcards often represent reason's battles with the incomprehensible chaos of the universe, and indicate an encounter with the strength of the nature. Whereas Hiller's and Broodthaers works are based on ready-mades, it is argued that Ader's invitation, also showing a rough sea, with the captain 'in search of the miraculous' in a kitschy font, is based on an actual photograph of Ader during his first journey to America in 1962. In this situation Ader would again transform a first-hand experience into a commercial reproducible product, or kitsch, reiterating the miraculous.<sup>350</sup>

During the opening of the exhibition an amateur choir sang six nineteenth century sea shanties.<sup>351</sup> Thereafter, the exhibition included an audio recording and slides of the performance and the sheets of the lyrics to these shanties. Originally, these sea shanties were commonly sang to accompany labour on board of merchant sailing vessels. In contrast to the easy rolling rhythm and ballad of the songs freely song aboard, the choir dressed in black-and-white seemed rather serious and formal with their sheets on music standards and rigid emplacement. Furthermore, the music was not played synchronously with the eighty slightly different projected slides. This way Ader breaks the ontology of film down into two separate components: audio and visual. This part of the exhibition might exemplify Ader's deadpan humour, contrasting the liveliness of the original context of the songs and the Hollywood film with slides of a stiff and stationary choir that slowly move forward disrupting and slowing down perception.

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<sup>348</sup> Cherix (ed.), 2009, p.54.

<sup>349</sup> Hiller, 1996, p. 137.

<sup>350</sup> Cherix (ed.), 2009, p.54.

<sup>351</sup> The songs included: Beautiful Sea, A life on the Ocean Wave, What Are the Wild Waves Saying?, A Wet Sheet And a Flowing Sea, Come Oh Come with Me, and Good-bye My Lover Good-bye.

By taking up the memory of the travel books and postcards, Ader's work alludes to the commodification of the high art of Romanticism, its rumination into kitsch for the big masses. Romanticism arose as a reaction against the Industrial Revolution and the Age of Enlightenment, and is generally characterised by concepts such as the fascination for the grandeur of nature, escapism, intensified emotions, and a desire for the miraculous. Behind these characterisations of the Age of Romanticism lies an intellectual and historical thought, namely that

Reality was to be sought not through conscious thought but through immediate intuitive perception (...). The human spirit had to be emancipated, freed from the tyranny of everything exterior to itself, whether this was a Calvinist dogma of depravity, or a cramping rationalism, or a common-sense obsession with the pots and pans of practical life. Freed from these it might regain the sense of wonder, the bloom of the world; might dwell on the strange, the mysterious, the miraculous; might hope for a revelation here and now.<sup>352</sup>

These ideas were embodied in paintings of Caspar David Friedrich and William Turner, which show small figures in atmospheric landscapes, or small boats on rough seas. The visual idiom of such paintings, served as stock motifs that could be mechanically reproduced, in order to evoke sensations, fit for the consumption of the masses. In its immediacy, the true memory or the intellectual content of the originals was forgotten, or oversimplified.

In the kingdom of kitsch, the realm which offers immediate pleasure, effortless enjoyment and understanding, and is totalitarian (connecting the masses in their shared memory of aesthetic pleasure), Ader can be, following Milan Kundera's words in his novel *The unbearable lightness of being* (1984), described as a monster.<sup>353</sup> In the world of kitsch or commercial culture, 'whether it was horrible, beautiful, or sublime, its horror, sublimity, and beauty meant nothing'.<sup>354</sup> Once reproduced, these concepts became lighter than feathers, frightening no one, because they became part of habitual experience and viewing. Ader goes against the commonplace - that which is immediately available and easily accessible in society - by creating an individual system of analysis using his own body as research instrument. This methodology emphasises the individual experience by which it resists the totalitarianism of kitsch, as it cannot be reproduced. Ader is not a consumer, he is not devoted to kitsch, but he is its opponent, who does take effort, is passionate and asks

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<sup>352</sup> 'introduction', Alsen, 2000 pp. 4-5.

<sup>353</sup> Kundera, 1984, p. 5.

<sup>354</sup> Ibidem, p. 1.

questions, in order to pierce through the staged commonplace and familiar and to look what lies hidden behind the unintelligible truth and instantaneous sensations. In the lightness of being, of light-hearted pleasures, Ader takes up the weight and does not accept this realm of insignificance. He takes effort to search for the romantic concept of the miraculous, by existentially exploring it. This search for the truth of the miraculous, actually brought him to the real and actual dangers of nature, eventually leading to his tragic death; the extreme tragedy of life.

On the basis of Krauss's model Ader can be placed on the northwest side of the medium and kitsch. Ader's medium encompasses the memory of the romantic concept of the miraculous and its devaluation into kitsch through the means of production in modernity. Ader makes intelligent use of reproduction technologies, to reflect on the heritage of romanticism and its devaluation into kitsch; from the artisanal painted originals into mechanical reproducible goods for the masses, and combines it with ready-mades from folk culture. On the basis of this memory, Ader re-invents the concept of the miraculous; he counters the world of kitsch by using his own body. He thus defamiliarizes the degradation by acting as a researcher, dedicating himself to the unknown and taking the risk and effort to existentially search for the miraculous. Furthermore, Ader's images, though mechanically produced, cannot be described as kitsch, because they defy the simplification of information and the immediacy of pleasure. Ader complicates the process of experiencing his work, for example by exhibiting hardly visible photographs with ambiguous texts and disconnecting the synchrony of the audio and the visual in the exhibition at Claire S. Copley. The experience of stuttering images and on-going sound can be imagined as a frustration. Ader creates a compelling form that extends the perception of the beholder and challenges him to take effort, think analytically and reinvestigate the concept of the miraculous. Ader's medium reflects his status as romantic ironist. Instead of either/or, the work contains the co-existence of the fundamental oppositions in the physical world, namely lightness (kitsch, hedonism, light-hearted and instantaneous pleasure, insignificance of life, fortuity, escape of responsibility, the commonplace) and weight (responsibility, gravity, seriousness, tragedy, compassion).

### 3.5.3. Conclusion

On the basis of Krauss's model it can be argued that both artists can be described as knights of the medium; both can be placed on the north side, because they push forth the medium by creating inventive works of art. Van Elk's series grasps back on the memory of the medium of perspective, Ader's visual idiom connects to the memory of the miraculous. Throughout both reflect on systems of making in (art) history, from which they invent a new compelling structure. Van Elk investigates the systems of making regarding perspective. Ader investigates the devouring of the Romantic concept of the miraculous into kitsch.

Apart from this similarity, the works also oppose each other: Van Elk's series relates to the field of the technical support in its status of forgetting, whereas Ader's work should be placed in the field of kitsch. Van Elk mixed painting with photography as technical supports. Ader operates in the realm of kitsch, using his own body as a research instrument. Both artists use these technical or natural supports that become meaningful in the aesthetic context, when the artists imbricate them with the memory of the medium, regarding either perspective or the miraculous. By retracing a memory, both artists mend the split between the presence of a traditional specific medium before the industrial revolution, modernist's emphasis on medium specificity before conceptualism, and the absence of its importance in the post-medium era. From this system they invent a new instance of the medium, almost automatically, by which they extend the life of the medium.

The resulting mediums become new autonomous systems of making that result in compelling works of art that prolongs the duration of perception and challenges the beholder to think analytically. Van Elk's new invention of perspective complicates a view of the surface of the painting within the painting, also the irregular shapes make the viewing unstable as the work seems to recede; he creates a complex optical type of perspective. Ader's work of art complicates the concept of the miraculous, exhibiting works of art that defy its status as kitsch because they are not easily comprehensible. Furthermore, he acts in the works himself by which he ask for a certain compassion from the viewer, knowing that it was an actual event that occurred, instead of a fiction.

### 3.6 Conclusion

Since, according to Gadamer, the self-portrait also consists as a presence, this chapter focused on the medium of Ader's and Van Elk's 'self-portraits' of the 1970s. Both artists mixed various artistic materials and technical means. The postmodern era, generally from the 1970s was characterised by a pluralism of artistic means. Krauss called this situation, after the rejection of the traditional division in specific mediums, the post-medium condition. The medium had lost its importance as meaning bearing element. Krauss aims to counter this situation and attempts to restore the memory of the importance of the medium in the aesthetic context.

According to Krauss, conceptual art caused the post-medium condition. They abandoned the importance of medium specificity in modernist art, in order to question the nature of art as such, by which art turned into a practice of analytic philosophy. The traditional division of specific aesthetic mediums ceased to exist by all the new available possible technical means, which resulted in a generality of mediums that were only levelled on the basis of their monetary or functional value, instead of their aesthetic value. In order to retrieve the memory of the medium, Krauss turns to modernist theories on medium specificity from the twentieth century. She rejects Greenberg's formalist theory on the medium as essence and Fried's emphasis on the medium as instantaneousness for being too dogmatic. Rather, she adheres to Cavell's concept of the medium as an *automatism*, meaning that the medium is based on the continuity of the historical tradition of forms and conventions of human practice. On the basis of a reflection on this memory artists can 'automatically' invent a new compelling application of a material (extending-by-transforming).

Krauss structurally translates her understanding of the medium in the post-medium condition into a semiotic square called 'the medium in the expanded field', also including the technical support, installation and kitsch. The technical support was explained by Benjamin's theory of the ambivalence of every commodity. Disassociated from its original function, a technical means can be valorised anew in the aesthetic context. Kitsch was analysed, following Greenberg's essay, as a reproduction that imitates the efforts of high culture. The medium should base itself on a technical support that is on the verge of being forgotten. On the other hand, contrary to kitsch, it should encompass a memory, an aspect already stressed in Cavell's concept of *automatism* (lodging and sanctioning the conventional forms of art). Furthermore, using Shklovsky's technique of 'defamiliarization'

Krauss emphasises that the artist should create a new sensation that is unfamiliar and defeats habitual perception. To Krauss the medium is the universe of meaning, whereas installation is meaningless.

Krauss's semiotic square proved useful to analyse both Van Elk's and Ader's self-portraits. Van Elk's series mixed painting and photography, and does retrace the memory of the systems of making perspective throughout history. Ader's medium in his trilogy encompasses the memory of the miraculous - romanticism's embodiment of the concept in high art and its devaluation into kitsch, like travel books, postcards, films - using various technical supports. By recalling these systems of making, both artists construct a certain identity, and invent a compelling structure that prolongs the perception of the beholder and was not thought possible before this encounter. Van Elk defamiliarizes habitual viewing, as the viewer has to analytically deconstruct the work of art in order to understand the various compartments out of which it exists, in order to understand perspective anew. Ader also complicates his work of art, by using ambiguous language, obscure photographs, and playing a-synchronic audio-visual recordings of the choir. Moreover, these kitsch forms were based on Ader's first-hand experience by which they raise compassion for his dangerous expedition and the tragedy that happened.

Conclusively, Van Elk's and Ader's mediums mirror their artistic mentalities as romantic ironists, and leverage the work's meaning. They make intelligent artistic use of the medium, which reflects their status as romantic ironist; they are not confirming to an either/or mentality of making strict divisions between the specific mediums. Van Elk's medium brings together two incongruous means: the traditional artisanal material of painting and the technical support of photography, which both are known for their difference in ontology. Van Elk's medium includes the memory of various, sometimes incongruous, systems of creating perspective throughout the history of art. This lineage of systems of making literally shows how conventions change according to the progression of time. Ader's medium also is ambiguous, since it combines kitschy reproducible objects and his body as an existential research instrument. Ader's medium encompasses the memory of the miraculous; from the romantic ideal of conquering the unknown in order to gain transcendental knowledge to its reproduction into kitsch, providing immediate pleasure for the masses. Ader ironizes this devaluation by countering it and pursuing the metaphysical concept on his own. The medium brings together two contrasting, but fundamental drives in physical nature, namely that of the lightness and the weight or burden of man's existence.

## Chapter 4. Conclusion

The intention of this thesis has been to come to an understanding of the reason for the inclusion of Ger van Elk's and Bas Jan Ader's works of art in the exhibition on self-portraiture displayed in Museum Arnhem. The introduction gave a brief insight into the development of self-portraiture, describing the difference in the conception of the self-portrait in the seventeenth century on the basis of Rembrandt's portraits of himself, and the nineteenth century, the stage of 'sentimental subjectivity', based on Van Gogh's self-portraits. Some of Van Elk's and Ader's works of art include the presence of the artist and share a connection to the aesthetics of modern art of the twentieth century, the era of photography and video, which is characterised by Friedrich Schlegel's concept of irony. This thesis aimed to further address their works of art as reflecting a next stage in the development of the genre of self-portraiture. On the basis of Gadamer's dual understanding of portraiture, the following research question was formed: In what way do Van Elk's and Ader's 'self-portraits' reflect the historical stage of the 1970s, taking into account both the memory of the artistic mentality of the artists and the mediums employed in the creation of their works of art? In order to address the main research question, the thesis was divided into the following sub-questions: 1) How can one describe the artistic mentality of Van Elk and Ader, which is reflected in their self-portraits in relation to conceptual art and irony? 2) How do Van Elk's and Ader's forms of authenticity, reflected in their self-portraits, resonate with the historical stage of modernity, characterized by the aesthetic concept of romantic irony? 3) How do Van Elk's and Ader's use of mediums in their self-portraits empower their artistic practice and leverage their work's possibility of meaning?

Van Elk and Ader were described as conceptual artists, by their participation in various exhibitions and publications aligned with this type of art. Conceptual art is a methodology that consists of different principles, but does not include the presence of humour that was detected in their work. The artists thus are not purely conceptual artists. Various art critics rather describe the artists' mentalities as reflexive and ironic. The essential element in Van Elk's mentality is a type of ironic self-reflection, whilst that of Ader's is more tragic self-irony. The visual analyses of Van Elk's *The Adieu* and Ader's *In Search of the Miraculous* stated that the inclusion of the artists in these allegories proved to be an embodiment of this form of irony; reflecting both upon the conventions in art history, and on their authoritative position. In *The Adieu* Van Elk ironically declares a theatrical farewell to the tradition of

painting, while simultaneously his whole work is based upon this tradition. Ader performs a search towards the concept of the miraculous even though it is a metaphysical concept. He reveals an ironic attitude towards actually 'finding' this ideal, by performing in a slapstick comic way, which ended in a tragedy. Both artists contradict their own purported intention, by which they show an ironic and dual mentality, both authoritative and subversive.

Subsequently, Ader's and Van Elk's artistic mentalities were connected to Schlegel's concept of irony. The aesthetic concept of romantic irony should mirror the view of the universe as chaotic and incomprehensible, therefore it should include ambiguities, and have a fragmentary structure. Schlegel alternately describes this ultimate form of poetry as *progressive Universalpoesie* and *Transzendentalpoesie*. Furthermore, he emphasises two techniques, namely *permanente Parekbase* and *Transzendental Buffonerie*, which the artist can use in order to show his consciousness of his finite position, and his work of art as being art. Accordingly, Van Elk and Ader take the position of a mediator between the fiction and the external world. Internally, both were reflective, giving a structural analysis of the aesthetic concept. Externally, they both acted ironically, like a *buffo*: making ironic or impossible claims about the aesthetic tradition. Since Van Elk's and Ader's works satisfied Schlegel's characterization of irony, their artistic mentalities can rather be described as romantic ironists: they accept ambiguities and question their own position in the artistic discourse, while their artistic practice is conceptual. This reflexive structure of the self, as De Man describes, or its self-duplication into an ironic self is seen as a defensive strategy against the consciousness of humanity's temporal and inauthentic existence. The ironic artist is able to laugh at the mistaken assumptions he purposefully was making, since he is conscious of, and defends himself against, his non-consciousness. The self in this double reflexive structure ironizes his own claims of absolute truths, conscious that he is not able to reconcile the world of language with the actual world. This complex form of meta-irony could use further investigation. However, Van Elk's and Ader's characters in their allegories seem to demonstrate this form of irony, as they laugh at their predicaments of absolute truths, by which they seem to point to the fundamental instability of knowledge, their liminal position and the uncertain status of the continuity of tradition.

Lastly, Van Elk's and Ader's post-medium forms of art were analysed on the basis of Krauss's semiotic square of 'the medium in the expanded field'. Krauss's model laid out the structural parameters of the medium, technical support, installation and kitsch. Both artists retrieved a memory of a certain system of making, opening up various incongruities in the history of art. Van Elk's medium combines painting and photography, both known for their

difference in ontology and imbricates this support with the memory of various systems of making perspective throughout art history - from Alberti's *legitimate construction* to Frank Stella's concept of the shaped canvas. Van Elk does not play according to the rules of one system of making, but brings various, incongruous, forms of perspective together from which a new disharmonious, but compelling form of perspective is created. Van Elk's work literally shows how 'perspectives' changed according to the progression of time. Ader's medium encompasses the memory of the devaluation of the romantic ideal of the miraculous (conquering the unknown in order to gain transcendental knowledge) into kitsch, providing immediate pleasure for the masses, by using various technical supports and his body. Ader ironizes this devaluation by countering it pursuing a first-hand experience of this concept. He defamiliarizes the degradation by dedicating himself to the unknown and taking the risk and effort to existentially search for the miraculous. The medium brings two contrasting, but fundamental, drives in physical nature together, namely that of the lightness and the weight of man's existence. Both artists made intelligent use of a medium in the aesthetic context, which reflects their mentality as romantic ironists, by rejecting absolute truths and accepting ambiguities.

In conclusion Van Elk's and Ader's works of art can be described as self-portraits within allegories. Their presence serves as a critical moment of reflection upon their authoritative position in a world that encompasses change. Van Elk and Ader are romantic ironists, rather than conceptual artists, as they exhibited true presence of mind that they do not expect their works to be taken wholly seriously – and do not wish it to be. Van Elk exhibited ironic self-reflection, whilst Ader a tragic form of self-irony. The artists convey an attitude of being critically aware of the comic implication of their own seriousness. This irony might be seen as a defence against the inauthentic human condition, and doubt aimed at an underlying foundation for truth. In their medium they again established an expanding act of reflection on the history of art, which resulted in a medium with a fragmentary structure, including various ambiguities. Concretely, their mentalities disclosed a simultaneous presence of self-consciousness and self-doubt, and their post-medium works of art set forth this mentality, by enclosing ambiguities in their medium.

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## **Exhibition catalogues**

### **Ger van Elk**

1974 - *Ger Van Elk*, ex. cat. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 15.11.1974/8.1.1975. Eds. Rudolf H. Fuchs, Eliane Wilde, and Rini Dippel.

1977 - *Ger Van Elk*, ex. cat. Badischer Kunstverein Karlsruhe, 26.4.-3.6.1977 : Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Bonn, 8.6.-24.7.1977 ; Kunstverein Braunschweig, 29.7.-31.8.1977. Eds. Rudi Fuchs, Antje von Graevenitz, and Michael Schwarz.

1980 - *Ger Van Elk*, ex. cat. Kunsthalle Basel, 7.10-9.11.1980, Arc/musée D'art Moderne De La Ville Paris, 21.11.1980-4.1.1981, Museum Boymans-Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 10.4-31.5.1981. Eds. Jean C. Ammann, Wim Beeren and Suzanne Pagé.

1999 - *Ger Van Elk: De Horizon, Een Geestelijk Verschiet = the Horizon, a Mental Perspective*, ex. cat. Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven. Eds. Marente Bloemheuvel, J. Debbauts, and Jacinto Lageira.

### **Bas Jan Ader**

2006 - *Bas Jan Ader: Please Don't Leave Me*. ex. cat. Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, Ed. Rein Wolfs.

## **Films**

1986 - Ger van Elk. Dutch artist. Directed by Jeroen Visser and Ellen Laming. Produced by De Maatschap BV Filmproductie Amsterdam. (ca. 24 minutes): <https://vimeo.com/104600912>

2007 – Here is always somewhere else. Directed by René Daalder and co-produced and edited by Aaron Ohlmann. Dvd series published by Cult, 2008, 2 dvd's (ca. 78 minutes)

## 6. List of figures

Figure 1



Ger van Elk

*Some Natural Aspects of Sculpture*, 1970-2002

LCD screen

56 x 62 x 4.5 cm (incl. frame)

From original 16 mm film *Some natural aspects of painting and sculpture* (1970-1971)

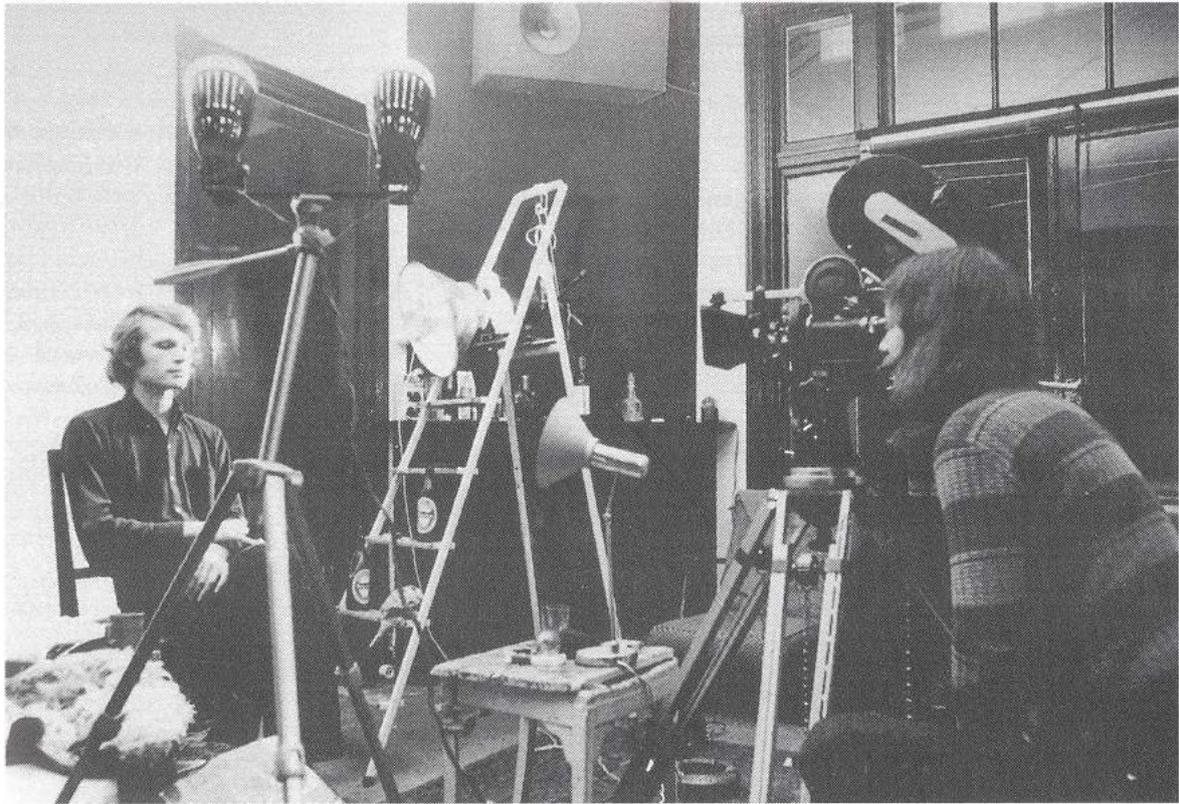
Rabo Art Collection, Utrecht.

Figure 2a



Bas Jan Ader  
*I'm too sad to tell you*, 1971  
Video 3"18  
Collection Briggs Gallery, Los Angeles.

**Figure 2b**



Filming *I'm Too Sad to Tell You*, 1971  
The Estate of Bas Jan Ader.

**Figure 3**



Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn  
*Portrait of the Artist at His Easel*, 1660  
Oil on canvas  
111 x 85 cm  
Collection Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Figure 4



Vincent van Gogh  
*Self-portrait in front of the Easel*, (January) 1888  
Oil on canvas  
65 x 51 cm  
Collection Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, Amsterdam.

Figure 5 Ger van Elk, *The Adieu* (1974-1975)

Figure 5a



Ger van Elk

*The Adieu I*, 1974.

Gouache and ink on colour photograph, in irregular quadrilateral frame.

132 x 84 cm.

Collection Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

**Figure 5b**



Ger van Elk

*The Adieu II*, 1974

Gouache and ink on colour photograph, in irregular quadrilateral frame

125 x 111 cm

Collection Max de Jong, Naarden.

In: *Ger van Elk*, ex. cat. 1980, p. 52.

**Figure 5c**



Ger van Elk

*The Adieu III*, 1974

Gouache and ink on colour photograph, in trapezoid frame.

99 x 93 cm

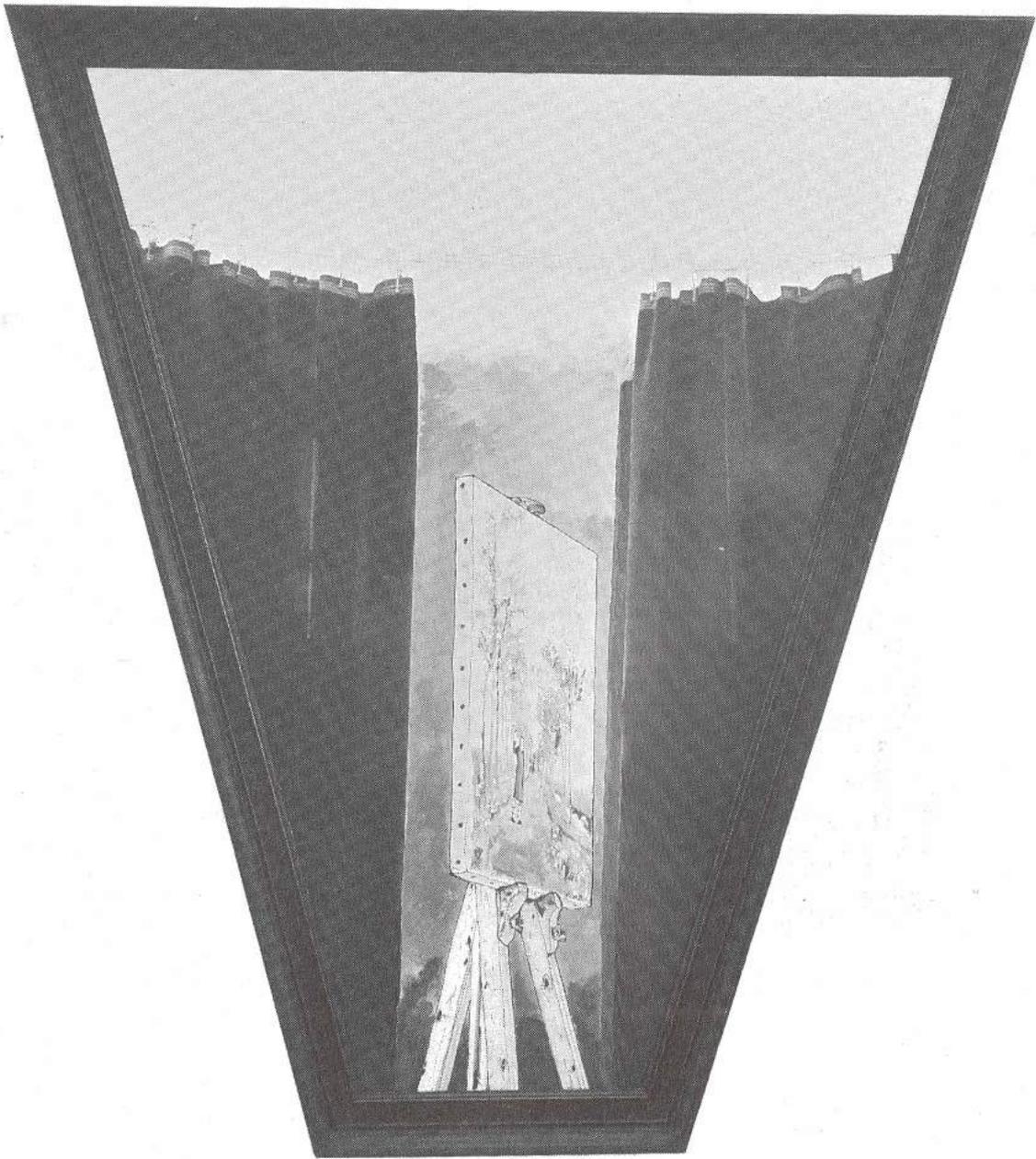
Collection the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

**Figure 5d**



Ger van Elk  
*The Adieu IV*, 1974  
Gouache and ink on colour photograph, in irregular quadrilateral frame  
120 x 94 cm  
Collection Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.

Figure 5e



Ger van Elk  
*The Adieu V*, 1975  
Gouache and ink on colour photograph in irregular quadrilateral frame  
114.5 x 101 cm  
Private collection, Paris.

**Figure 5f**



Ger van Elk

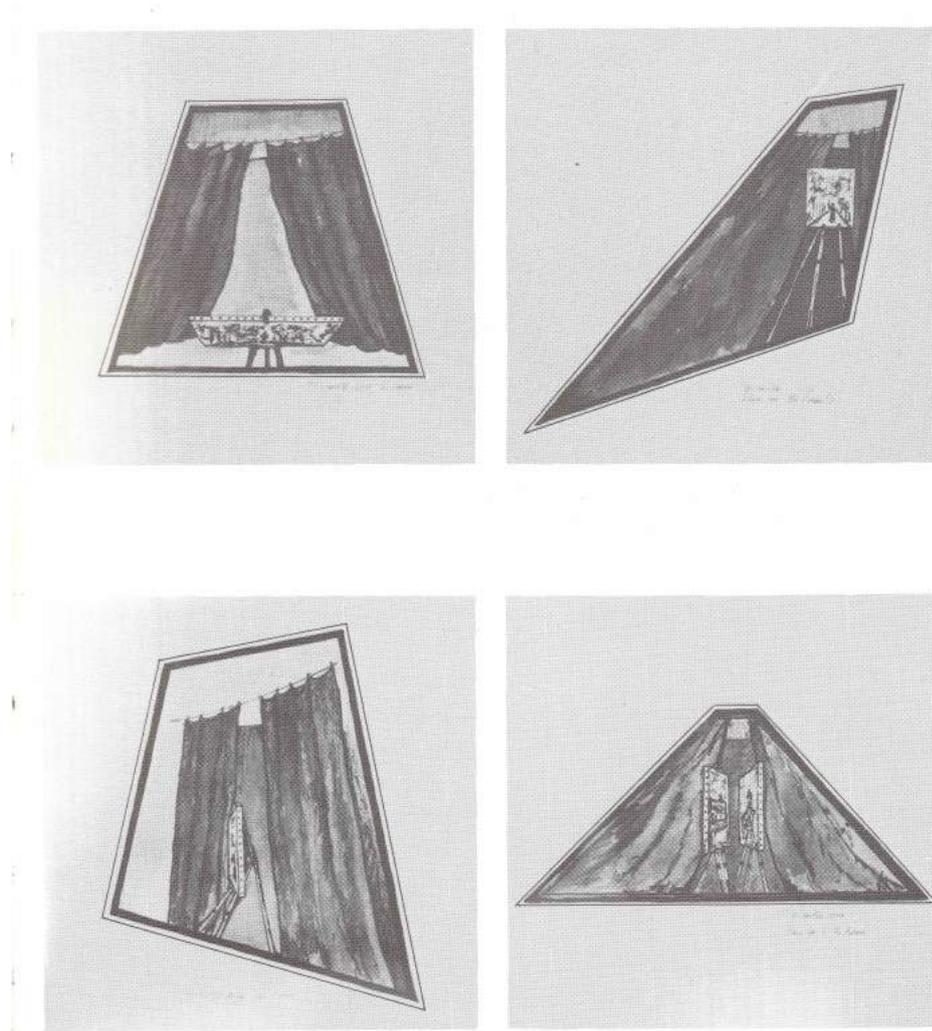
*Adieu*, 1975

Gouache and ink on colour photograph in irregular quadrilateral frame

93 x 145 cm

Collection Cultural Heritage Agency, Amersfoort.

Figure 5g



Ger van Elk

Sketches for *The Adieu*, 1974

Three sketches for *The Adieu* (the sketch bottom right is a study for Van Elk's work *The piano lesson*, 1974)

Aquarelle and pen on paper

21 x 29,7 cm

Collection Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

In: *Ger van Elk*, ex. cat. 1975, p. 47.

**Figure 5h**



Photograph of Ger van Elk's installation at the Dutch pavilion at the Venice biennale in 1980. In following order it shows the works: *The Adieu IV* (1974), *The Adieu I* (1974), *The Adieu V* (1975). The work of art on the right wall is called *C'est moi qui fait la musique* (1973). In: *Ger van Elk*, ex. cat. 1980. p. 36.

**Figure 6** Bas Jan Ader, *In search of the Miraculous* (1973-1975).

**Figure 6a**



Bas Jan Ader

*In search of the miraculous* (One Night in Los Angeles), 1973

14 black and white photographs with handwritten texts in white ink

27.5 x 34.5 cm

The Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands.

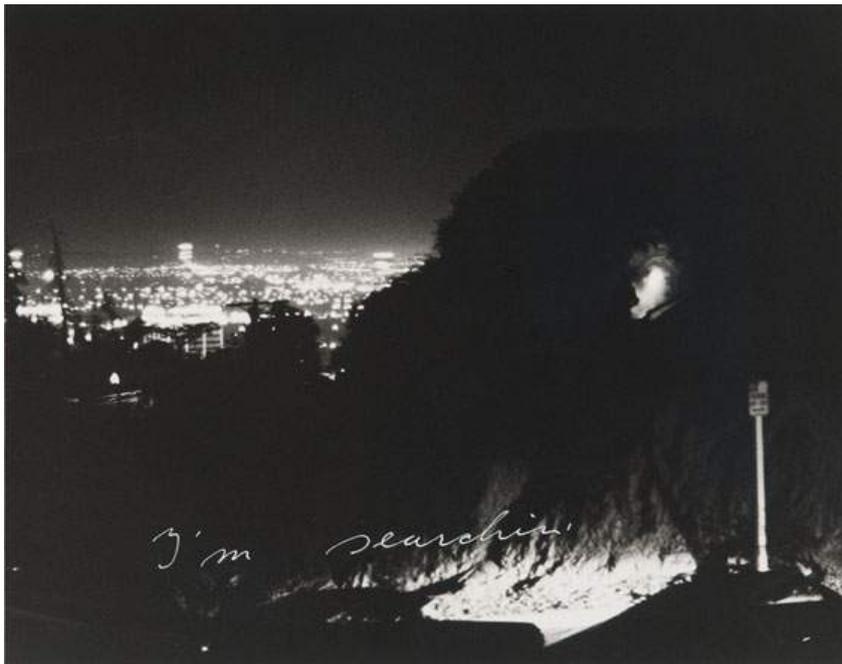


Photo 7. This photograph is taken from the series of eighteen photographs; the handwritten text is different, whereas the photo is similar. The text on the similar photograph of the series of fourteen reads: 'Well now if I have to swim a river you know I will'.



Photo 8. This photograph is taken from the series of eighteen photographs; the handwritten text is different, whereas the photo is similar. The text on this photograph of the series of fourteen reads: 'and if I have to climb a mountain you know I will'.

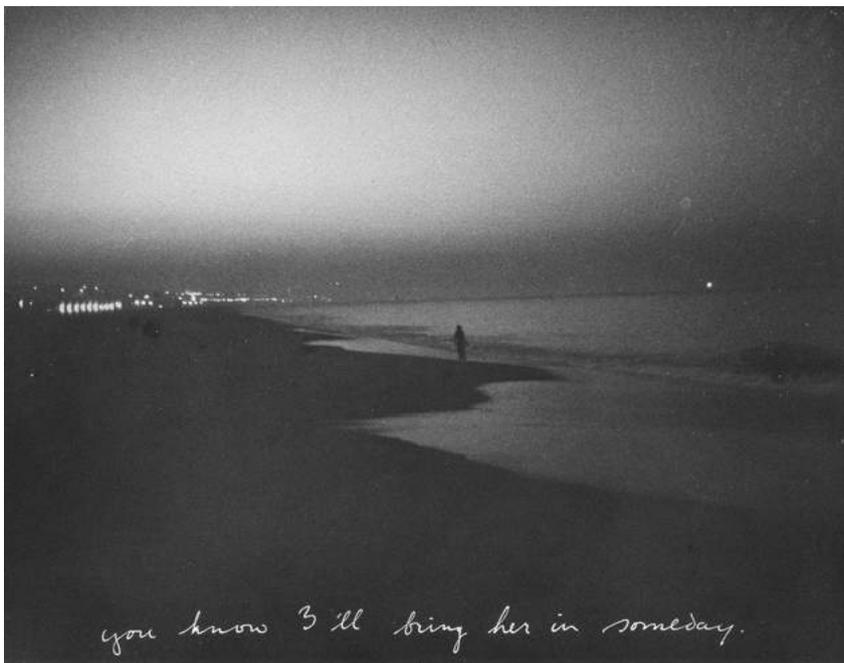


Photo 14.

Figure 6b



Bas Jan Ader  
Two outtakes of the series *One Night in Los Angeles*, 1973  
The Estate of Bas Jan Ader.

Figure 6c



Bas Jan Ader

*In search of the Miraculous*, 1973-1975

Black-and-white postcard

8.9 x 14 cm

Invitation card for Ader's exhibition at the Claire S. Copley gallery, Los Angeles.

**Figure 6d**

Bas Jan Ader

*In search of the Miraculous*, 1975

Exhibition at Claire S. Copley Gallery 22 April – 17 May 1975 and performance (unfinished)

The scores of sea shanties, projector, slides, audiotape, the photographic series *One Night in Los Angeles* (1973).



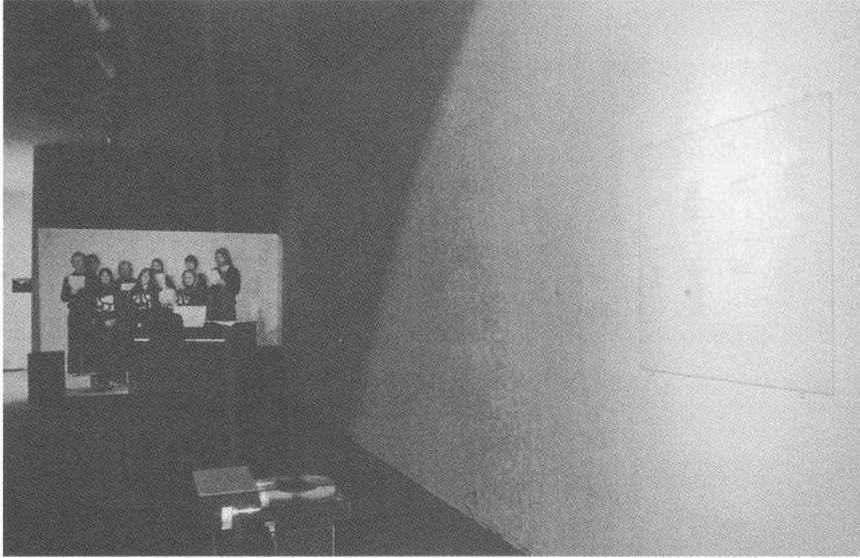


Figure 6 e



Bas Jan Ader

*In Search of the Miraculous*, 1975

Front (A4): 'art & project / 1007 amsterdam willemsparkweg 36 (020) 713991 / **bulletin 89** / drukwerk aan printed matter to museum boymans-van beuningen bibliotheek NL-3002 rotterdam mathenesserlaan 18-20 / **bas jan ader** "in search of the miraculous" (songs for the north atlantic; july 1975 - ) in cooperation with claire s. copley gallery, los angeles, usa, and the groningen museum, groningen, holland'.

Inside: (unfolded A3): photograph of Bas Jan Ader in his boath sails off from the coast.

Backside (A4): the score and text from 'A Life On The Ocean Wave' – Henry Russell.

Published by Art and Project, july 1975, Amsterdam

28.5 x 41.9 cm – edition ca. 800.

Collection Mary Sue Ader-Andersen / Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen Rotterdam.

**Figure 7**



Ger van Elk  
*Luxurious Street Corner*, 1969  
Exhibition *Op losse schroeven*, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam 1969.

**Figure 8**



Ger van Elk  
*Apparatus Scalas Dividens*, 1969  
Exhibition *Op losse schroeven*, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam 1969.

**Figure 9**



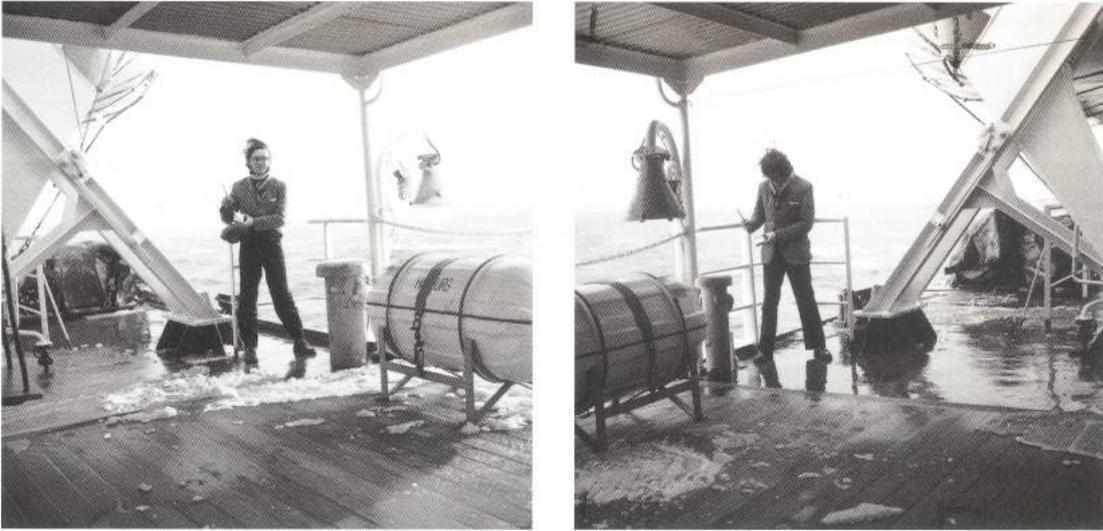
Ger van Elk

*Hanging Wall*, 1968

Brick wall hanging above a table

Exhibition *Op losse schroeven*, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam 1969.

**Figure 10**



Ger van Elk  
*La Pièce*, 1971  
White painted block of wood on wine-red cushion  
2.1 x 9.5 x 7.7 cm  
Collection Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

**Figure 11**



Bas Jan Ader  
*Fall 1, Los Angeles 1970, 1970*  
Film still  
Film: 16 mm black-and-white, silent, 24 seconds  
Collection Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam.

**Figure 12**



Bas Jan Ader  
*Fall 2, Amsterdam 1970, 1970*  
Film 16 mm, black-and-white, silent, 19 seconds  
Collection Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam.

Figure 13



Ger van Elk

*Paul Klee - Um den Fisch, 1926, 1971*

Eight colour slides projected on table with white cloth

55 x 68 x 70 cm

Collection Rijksmuseum Twente, Enschede, depot VBVR.

**Figure 14**



Bas Jan Ader  
*The Boy Who Fell Over Niagara Falls*, 1972  
Performance at Art & Project Gallery, Amsterdam  
The Estate of Bas Jan Ader.

**Figure 15**



Meyndert Hobbema  
*The Alley at Middelharnis*, 1689  
Oil on canvas  
103.5 x 141 cm  
National Gallery, London.

**Figure 16**



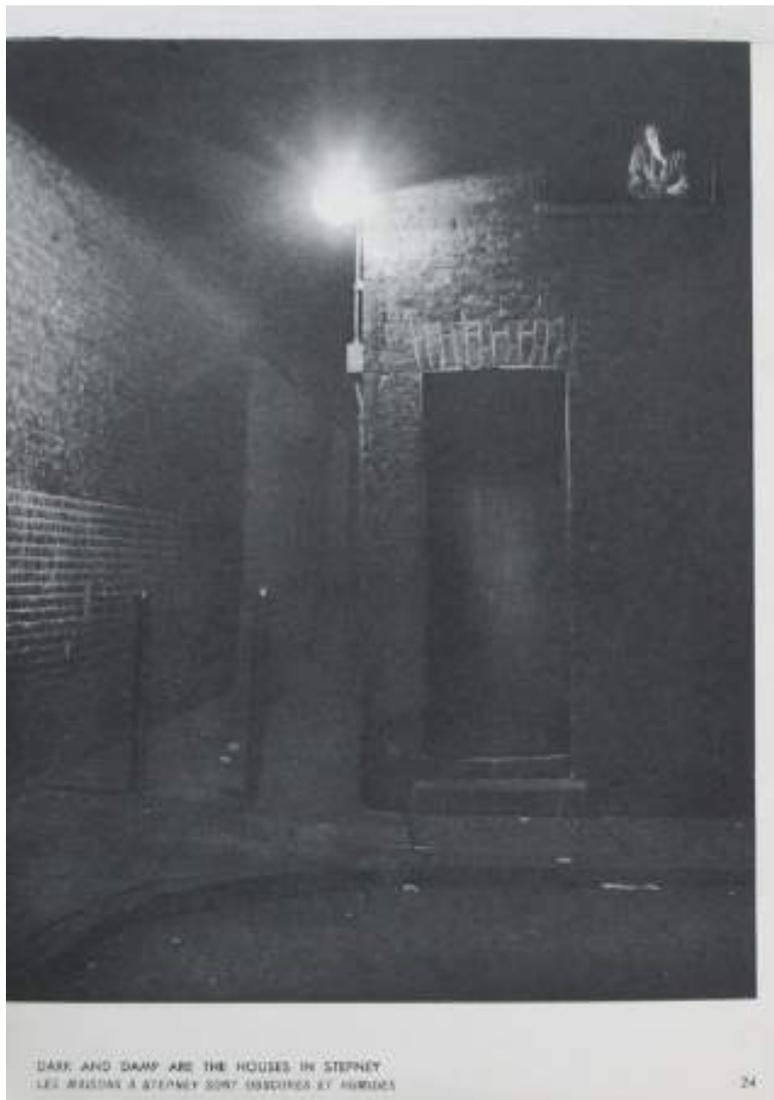
Frank Stella  
Union 1, 1966 (one of 11 *Irregular Polygon* series, 1965-66)  
Fluorescent alkyd and epoxy paint on canvas  
261 x 442 x 10.2 cm

**Figure 17**



George Brassai  
*Paris de Nuit*, 1932  
60 photographs, spiral bound stiff card wrappers  
19 x 25 cm  
Published by Arts et Métiers Graphiques, Paris.

**Figure 18**



Bill Brandt

*A Night in London*, 1938

64 photographs, 4 pages introduction by James Boyne

Description reads: 'dark and damp are the houses in Stepney / Les maisons a Stepney sont obscures et humides'. p. 24.

Published by Arts et Métiers Graphiques, Paris / Country Life, London / Charles Scribner's Sons, New York.

**Figure 19**



Susan Hiller

*Dedicated to Unknown Artists, 1972-1976*

305 postcards, sea charts and map mounted on 14 panels, books, dossiers and exhibition catalogues and 1 painted wooden bookstand support

Support, each: 66 x 104.8 cm

Collection Tate Britain.

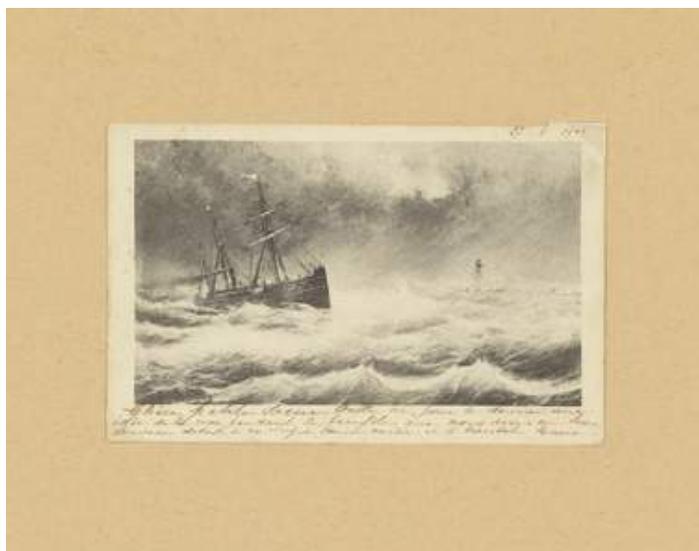
**Figure 20**

Figure 20a



Marcel Broodthaers  
*Chère Petite Sœur*, 1972  
Lithograph on paper  
15.6 x 21.0 cm  
Tate Britain.

Figure 20b



Marcel Broodthaers  
Material from *Dear Little Sister*, 1972  
Lithograph on paper  
8.7 x 13.7 cm.  
MACBA Collection.

# 7. Appendix

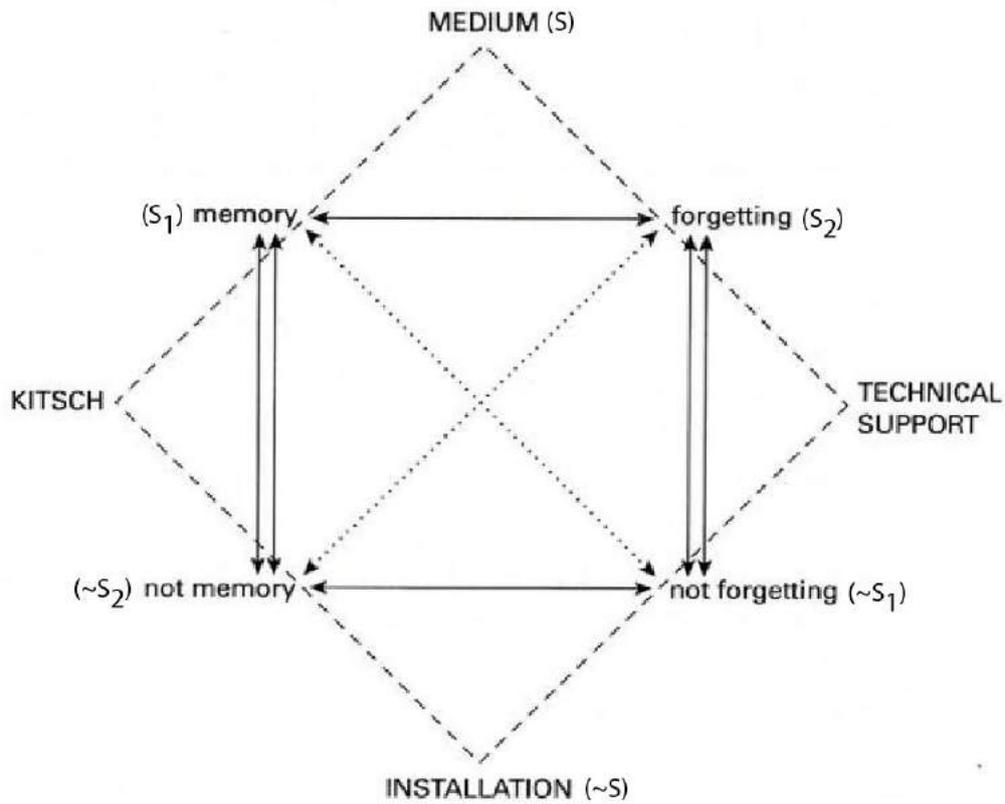
## Appendix 1 diagram

	musea		tentoonstellingen			
	Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam	Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum	Op losse schroeven, 1969	When Attitudes Become Form, 1969	Prospect, 1968	Prospect, 1968
Bas Jan Ader						
Carl Andre		1968	■	■	■	■
Art & Language						
John Baldessari	1975					
Robert Barry	1974			■		■
Marinus Boezem		1970	■	■		
Marcel Broodthaers		1968			■	
Stanley Brouwn	1971, 1973					■
Daniel Buren					■	■
André Cadere					■	
Hanne Darboven	1975	1968		■		■
Jan Dibbets	1972	1971	■	■		■
Ger van Elk	1974	1973	■	■		
Gilbert & George	1971					
Douglas Huebler				■		■
On Kawara						
Joseph Kosuth				■		■
Sol LeWitt	1974	1975		■	■	■
Richard Long	1973		■	■		■
Bruce Nauman		1969, 1973	■	■	■	
Edward Ruscha		1969				
Robert Ryman	1974		■	■		■
	galleries					
	Sonsbeek, 1971	documenta 5, 1972	Prospect, 1969	Sonsbeek, 1971	documenta 5, 1972	Art & Project
Bas Jan Ader	■			■		1971, 1972, 1974, 1975
Carl Andre	■		■	■		1975
Art & Language		■			■	
John Baldessari		■			■	1971, 1972
Robert Barry		■	■		■	1969, 1971, 1972
Marinus Boezem	■			■		1970
Marcel Broodthaers		■			■	1973
Stanley Brouwn	■	■	■	■	■	1969 — 1973, 1975
Daniel Buren	■	■	■	■	■	1971, 1974
André Cadere		■			■	
Hanne Darboven	■	■	■	■	■	1970, 1972, 1974
Jan Dibbets	■	■	■	■	■	1969, 1971 — 1973, 1975
Ger van Elk	■	■		■	■	1970 — 1974
Gilbert & George		■			■	1970 — 1972, 1974
Douglas Huebler	■	■	■	■	■	1970 — 1973
On Kawara	■			■		
Joseph Kosuth			■			1969
Sol LeWitt	■	■	■	■	■	1970 — 1972, 1975
Richard Long	■	■	■	■	■	1971, 1973, 1975
Bruce Nauman	■	■		■	■	
Edward Ruscha	■	■		■	■	
Robert Ryman		■	■		■	1973

	Galerie Swart	Konrad Fischer	Wide White Space	MTL
Bas Jan Ader				
Carl Andre		1967, 1969, 1971, 1972 — 1974		
Art & Language				
John Baldessari		1971, 1973		
Robert Barry				1972, 1973
Marinus Boezem	1968			
Marcel Broodthaers			1966 — 1975	1972, 1973
Stanley Brouwn		1970, 1973		
Daniel Buren		1969	1969 — 1974	1970, 1975
André Cadere				1973, 1975
Hanne Darboven		1968, 1970, 1971, 1975		1972, 1974
Jan Dibbets	1966 — 1969	1968, 1970, 1971, 1973, 1974		1971, 1975
Ger van Elk	1968		1973	
Gilbert & George		1970, 1972, 1974		1975
Douglas Huebler		1970, 1971, 1972, 1974		1972, 1975
On Kawara		1971, 1972, 1975		
Joseph Kosuth				
Sol LeWitt		1968, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1975	1969	1972, 1974
Richard Long		1968 — 1970, 1973, 1974	1973, 1975	
Bruce Nauman		1968, 1970, 1971, 1974, 1975	1969, 1973 — 1975	
Edward Ruscha				
Robert Ryman		1968, 1969, 1973		1975

In: Blotkamp, Carel (Ed.). *Conceptuele Kunst in Nederland En België 1965-1975: Kunstenaars, Verzamelaars, Galeriers, Documenten, Tentoonstellingen, Gebeurtenissen*. Rotterdam: NAI, 2002. Pp. 100-105.

## Appendix 2



In: Krauss, Rosalind. 'The medium in the expanded field'. *Under Blue Cup*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2011. P. 128.

## Appendix 3

Stigter, Sanneke

16 oktober 2016 23:15

SS

Aan: Charlotte Vromans

RE: Documentatie Ger van Elk - The Adieu

Beste Charlotte,

Dank je wel voor je bericht, en excuses voor vertraagde antwoord. Ik was in het buitenland.

Het is mooi om het overzicht zo te zien en het klopt ook wel. Enige aanvullingen heb ik wel. Die in het SMA is nr I en dat is ook altijd onderdeel van de titel geweest, wat voor het werk in de collectie van RCE tot nog toe onbepaald is gebleven, onbekend, dit is jouw fig 1F. Zij gebruiken geen nummer en niet 'The' wat niet hoeft te betekenen dat ze de juiste info hebben overgenomen destijds. Voor de volledigheid zou je nog achter inv nrs van de werken in openbare collecties kunnen gaan  
Dus:

The Adieu I, Stedelijk Museum

Adieu (1975), Collectie Rijksdienst Cultureel Erfgoed

Verder lijkt me dat de overzichtsfoto The Adieu uit de coll. Paris lijkt op een gespiegelde versie van die uit Parijs omdat IV en I goed worden weergegeven, dus dan zal V dat ook zijn. Overigens weet ik niet of dit zeker of dit inderdaad no. V is, maar wanneer je een goede bron daarvoor aandraagt zal het wel kloppen. Het lijkt er eerder op dat Afb 1e gespiegeld is. Wat is de bron van deze afb? Vergeet niet dat er in die tijd veel met Ektachromes of dia's werd gewerkt, en dat het verkeerd om gebruiken van beeldmateriaal aan de orde van de dag was.

Je kunt de tentoonstellingsfoto's van het SMA er nog bij pakken, van de expo in 1974.

Sketches: die rechtsonder is voorstudie van The piano lesson (1974), zie ex.cat. 1977 Badischer Kunstverein et al

Hoop dat je hier wat aan hebt.

Wat is je onderzoeksvraag over het werk? Ben benieuwd naar het resultaat. Zou het wel leuk vinden om dat te zien als dat mogelijk is.

misschien heb je nog wat aan de artikelen die ik in 2004 heb gepubliceerd, daar kun je bij komen via links vanaf mijn persoonlijke pagina, volgen het adres hieronder.

Hartelijke groet!

Sanneke

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## 8. Summary

This thesis analyses two works of art from the mid-1970s that feature the artists of the works - Ger van Elk in his series *The Adieu* (1974-1975) and Bas Jan Ader in his unfinished trilogy *In Search of the Miraculous* (1973-1975) - in relation to the genre of self-portraiture. Following Hans Georg-Gadamer's understanding of portraiture, the research question reads: In what way do Van Elk's and Ader's 'self-portraits' reflect the historical stage of the 1970s, taking into account both the memory of the artistic mentality of the artists and the mediums employed in the creation of their works of art?

Regarding the historical contextualisation of Ader's and Van Elk's work in prominent exhibitions of conceptual art, they can be defined as conceptual artists. Specifically, their methodology is conceptual, while their mentalities are characterised by humour - in Van Elk's case an ironic self-reflection, whilst in Ader's a tragic self-irony - that is expressed through the artist's presence. Van Elk declared a farewell to the tradition of painting, while his whole work is based upon this tradition. Ader was in search of the metaphysical concept of the miraculous. Both artists are authoritative and subversive, since they show an awareness of the comic implication of their purported intentions in their works of art.

Friedrich Schlegel's aesthetic concept of irony mirrors the view of the universe as chaotic and incomprehensible. He emphasises the presence of the artist, employing the *permanente Parekbase* or *Transzendente Buffonerie*, as a moment of self-reflexivity on his perception being limited and fragmentary. Van Elk's and Ader's mentalities coincides with this concept of romantic irony, since they are internally self-reflexive, and externally act like clowns, proclaiming absolute truths. This duplication into an ironic self serves, according Paul de Man, as defensive strategy against the consciousness of man's inauthentic existence.

Lastly, Rosalind Krauss's semiotic square of the medium in the post medium condition; the situation in artistic practice characterised by a plurality of mediums, generally from the 1970s, is used to analyse Van Elk's and Ader's medium. Krauss turns away from modernist and formalist theories on the medium, and gives a partly ideological concept of the aesthetic medium, consisting of a memory of an artistic practice and a technical support that is on the verge of being forgotten. Accordingly, both artists retrieved a memory of a certain system of making. Van Elk imbricated the memory of various systems of making perspective throughout art history. Ader countered the devaluation of the miraculous into kitsch by pursuing a first-hand experience of this concept. The mediums employed in the creation of their works of art open up various incongruities in artistic practice throughout history, reflecting their mentality as romantic ironists again.

## 9. Verklaring geen fraude en plagiaat

### Verklaring geen fraude en plagiaat

Ondergetekende  
[voornaam, achternaam en studentnummer],

Charlotte Vromans, 4174313

Masterstudent aan de Letterenfaculteit van de Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen,

verklaart dat de beoordeelde scriptie volledig oorspronkelijk is en uitsluitend door hem/haarzelf geschreven is. Bij alle informatie en ideeën ontleend aan andere bronnen, heeft ondergetekende expliciet en in detail verwezen naar de vindplaatsen. De erin gepresenteerde onderzoeksgegevens zijn door ondergetekende zelf verzameld op de in de scriptie beschreven wijze.

Plaats en datum:

Tilburg, 07-02-17

Handtekening:

