In his 1951 essay *Towards a Theory of Romanticism*, English and comparative literature scholar Morse Peckham discusses the existing scholarship about romantic literature and adds his own thoughts on the world view that inspired much of that work. His central metaphor is “dynamic organicism”\(^1\) and its relation to the positive attitude romantic writers had toward change, imperfection and an interactive contributory place in the universe. Pekham’s ideas will be discussed and then related to the philosophies and practice of Dutch conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader (1942-9175) especially in relation to his “Fall” performances, focusing on *Broken Fall (organic)* from 1970. Ader was comfortable with failure, vulnerability and with the idea of “becoming” through performance. I will consider these qualities in Ader’s practice and explore how Peckham’s text explains the contributions that romantic writers made to the philosophies that inform his art. The fact that conceptual art in general and in Ader’s art specifically relied heavily on implied narratives and language (including the art historical context of Mondrian in his work *On the road to a new Neo Plasticism* and the literal inclusion of text in works such as *Please Don’t Leave Me*, 1969), make literary criticism’s examination of romanticism as appropriate to his work as that of art criticism or art

\(^1\) Morse Peckham, *Toward a Theory of Romanticism* in PMLA, Vol. 66, No. 2 (March, 1951), p. 11
history. The fact that Peckham emphasizes the romantics’ positive valuation of change and imperfection as well as their blurring of genre and belief in the artist’s ability to infuse the world with genuine novelty make Peckham’s text particularly helpful in discussing Ader’s work as it relates to romanticism.

In the beginning of his essay *Toward a Theory of Romanticism* Peckham summarizes and clarifies the primary contributions to the study of romanticism by Arthur O. Lovejoy, René Wellek and others. He then adds his own insights on the topic, using the central metaphor of dynamic organism, which focuses on the world view of the universe as an organism versus a machine. Early in the essay (before the text we are discussing), Peckham sets the scene for the scholarship that has come before by enumerating some of the definitions of romanticism collected by Jacques Barzun:

In his *Romanticism and the Modern Ego* (1943) Jacques Barzun has made a good collection of some of the definitions that have been more or less widely used in the past fifty years: a return to the Middle ages, a love of the exotic, the revolt from Reason, a vindication of the individual, a liberation of the unconscious, a reaction against scientific method, a revival of pantheism, a revival of idealism, a revival of Catholicism, a rejection of artistic conventions, a return to emotionalism, a return to nature – and so on.2

Peckham then frankly concludes that these definitions exhibit that “The utmost confusion reigns in the whole field.”3 He adds that recent contributions have made him more optimistic, writing, “In the last few years there have been signs that some scholars at least are moving toward a common concept of romanticism.” 4

---

2 Peckham, p. 6
3 ibid
4 Peckham, p. 7
Peckham then leads the reader toward the common conception of which he speaks and uses it to support the metaphor that drives this paper. He accomplishes this by quoting scholars from the 1930s and 1940s whose definitions of romanticism in literature have overlapped, citing two writers who acknowledge the romantic writers’ positive attitude toward the qualities of change, growth and evolution.\(^5\) Lovejoy and Wellek, however, are Peckham’s primary scholarly sources in the text, and he builds and enriches his argument primarily through their work. Before the paragraphs analyzed here, Peckham discusses Wellek’s criteria of “imagination for the view of poetry, an organic concept of nature for the view of the world, and symbol and myth for poetic style”\(^6\) as an introduction and foundation for his own theories. After the text in question, he folds Lovejoy’s ideas about romanticism’s “organicism, dynamism and diversitarianism”\(^7\) into his theory. Immediately before the paragraphs on pages ten and eleven, Peckham outlines Lovejoy’s conception of the previous mindset and how it changed with romanticism in the late eighteenth century, writing, “Briefly the shift in European thought was a shift from conceiving the cosmos as a static mechanism to conceiving it as a dynamic organism….”\(^8\)

The central argument of Peckham’s essay is the romantic writers’ rejection of thinking that “everything in the universe as fitting perfectly into a machine,”\(^9\) mentioning the popular image of a watch. Disillusioned with inconsistencies of this mechanistic philosophy, which failed to create the perfect society after the French Revolution,

\(^{5}\) ibid  
\(^{6}\) ibid  
\(^{7}\) Peckham, p. 11  
\(^{8}\) Peckham, p. 9  
\(^{9}\) ibid
Peckham writes that the “finer minds”\(^{10}\) of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries turned away from “perfection, changelessness, uniformity, [and] rationalism”\(^{11}\) and toward the new metaphor of the organism. This metaphor of the organism is the foundation of Peckham’s essay and the branches of his argument extend from this idea. Like the continuously occurring image of the tree in nineteenth century literature Peckham mentions, his essay does not take the form of a finished product or a resolution, but as something that is “being made or growing.”\(^{12}\) In contrasting the mechanical and organic mindsets, Peckham articulates the rejection of past human/artistic attributes and the adoption of new ones. In this paragraph, Peckham shows his skill for logically moving from one idea to the next, each thought props up another layer of information; one branch grows from another.

Peckham’s gains momentum by bouncing between these opposite theories, using an opposite or foil to help explain the romantic writers’ philosophy as he sees it. Bringing in the metaphor of the tree for the organic universe (as he had brought in the metaphor of the watch for the mechanical), Peckham emphasizes that an organism is “not something made, [but] it is something being made or growing. We have a philosophy of becoming, not a philosophy of being.”\(^{13}\) He then makes his second point about an organic universe, “The universe is alive. It is not something made, a perfect machine; it grows. Therefore change becomes a positive value, not a negative value….”\(^{14}\) It follows, writes Peckham, that “Anything that continues to grow or change qualitatively, is not perfect, can perhaps,

\(^{10}\) Peckham, p. 10  
\(^{11}\) ibid  
\(^{12}\) ibid  
\(^{13}\) Peckham, p. 10  
\(^{14}\) ibid
never be perfect. Perfection ceases to be a positive value. Imperfection becomes a positive value.”  

The next, large branch, however, has a little twist. Or, perhaps we have to twist to see it in its entirety. At this point in the paragraph, Penkham’s argument for a “universe of emergents” requires a little bit of a leap from the reader – jumping from ideas of imperfection and change to the absence of “pre-existent patterns.” He states that “Since the universe is changing and growing, there is consequently a positive and radical intrusion of novelty in the world. That is, with the intrusion of each novelty, the fundamental character of the universe itself changes. We have a universe of emergents.” Now, we not only have a universe filled with imperfection and change but begin to explore how these qualities affect relationships (or the perception of relationships) in that universe. If there are no pre-existent patterns, then, writes Penkham, “every work of art … creates a new pattern.” One could conclude from this, that romantics saw the artist as a force of change in the universe as he or she is a “novelty” that “intrudes” on it and is, consequently, able to alter the universe’s “fundamental character.” The artist is no longer a product of the universe or a piece in its machinery but is interwoven with and working to produce its ongoing creation.

According to Peckham, two additional “derivative ideas” branch out from this universe of emergents, including an embrace of “diversitarianism” (including the abandonment of

---

15 Peckham, pp. 10 - 11
16 Peckham, p. 11
17 ibid
18 ibid
19 Peckham, p. 11
genres) and originality.\textsuperscript{20} He qualifies his phrase, adding, “True, the idea of originality has existed before, but in a different sense. Now the artist is original because he is the instrument whereby genuine novelty, an emergent, is introduced into the world, not because he has come with the aid of genius a little closer to previously existent pattern, natural and divine.”\textsuperscript{21} Peckham then brings God into the mix, writing, “In its radical form, dynamic organicism results in the idea that the history of the universe is the history of God creating himself.”\textsuperscript{22}

This last quote ends the segment of text under consideration and is an appropriate point for beginning a discussion of conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader and his work. A man who created himself through his art, Ader transformed from troubled teen to a successful, working (but, perhaps still troubled) artist through his “intrusion on” and participation in a universe that is continuously “becoming.” Known as a conceptual artist influenced by romanticism, Ader blurred genres in a small body of performances, films and photographs during his short career. The works are most likely inspired by Ader’s personal experiences, but his aim is not diaristic. Instead the artist’s goal is to evoke the universal existence of tragedy through the exhibition of (physical and emotional) vulnerability, failure, intense emotions, experiences of failing and the related phenomenon of falling.\textsuperscript{23} Ader, consequently, resisted the one-dimensional theory that his art was about the tragedy of his father being shot in a concentration camp during World War II, claiming that was a far too anecdotal reading. He explained in a 1972

\textsuperscript{20} ibid
\textsuperscript{21} ibid
\textsuperscript{22} Peckham, p. 11
\textsuperscript{23} Rachel Kent, Pun to Paradox: Bas Jan Ader Revisited in Parkett magazine, no. 76 (Switzerland: Parkett-Verlag AG, 2005), p. 177
interview, “Everything is tragic because people always lose control of processes, of matter of their feelings. That is a much more universal tragedy and that cannot be visualized from an anecdote.”

By paring down these imperfect and constantly changing human relationships to the world, Ader converts the specific into the universal. At one point, he implies that these seemingly simple acts are not so simple, writing, “I make modest work. In the films I silently elucidate everything concerning falling. It is a great task, which demands much difficult thought. It becomes poignant, which pleases me. I am a Dutch Master.”

Curator Jörg Heiser adds that the influence of silent movies in Ader’s work create an unusual phenomenon in conceptual art, writing that the slapstick and the melodrama combine to destabilize “the (then relatively new) stereotype of the Conceptual artist as a stern hero of critique who never embarrasses himself.”

This destabilizing of the artist as a hero of critique could be seen as a reflection of Ader’s romantic impulse. The performances where he falls are perhaps the most overt examples of physical embarrassment and this sort of destabilization. Ader, like the romantics Peckham describes, has an organic perception of the universe. He sees change and imperfection as positive values. In his art, Ader has brought himself to tears, fallen from buildings and trees, a well as wandered around a city at night and chartered a boat to look for the miraculous. He creates multiple variations on each theme, which could be seen as an expression of his organic approach to change. A handful of ideas inform his work, but

---

24 Erik Beenker, “The man who wanted to look beyond the horizon” in Bas Jan Ader: Please Don’t Leave Me (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen), p 14
25 Beenker, p. 18
26 Jörg Heiser, “Bas Jan Ader’s slapstick in Bas Jan Ader: Please Don’t Leave Me (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen), p 28
they shift and alter as a body of water does with the wind. Within the single idea of falling, he manages to evoke everything from the tragic, to historic, to comic. Most importantly, Ader’s exploration of these themes are not in search of answers but in search of what vulnerability and imperfection can be expressed through the search itself. A successful piece for Ader is by its nature a human failure wrought with imperfection and emotion.

Ader’s performances and acts also align the artist with Peckham’s theory of a universe of emergents. This is particularly important in the falling works where his partnership with nature includes a literal collaboration with gravity, earth, water and the like. Ader repeats the fall paradigm the most frequently, which implies an importance in his ouvre. Journalist Erik Beenker elaborates on Ader’s fall performances, writing that they “… are of an existential nature, his surrender to gravity is philosophically underpinned and stems from his personal experience. It is, as such, not simply an artistic statement, but an intrinsic and deeply felt urge.”27 The context of each fall varies from piece to piece.

With the 1971 works On the Road to Neo Plasticism, Pitfall on the way to a new Neo Plasticism, Broken Fall (geometric) and Broken fall (geometric; blue-yellow-red), Ader is photographed falling onto a sawhorse or is shown lying prone on the sidewalk with the lighthouse Piet Mondrian famously painted as his backdrop. These falls, which sometimes include squares of primary colors around Ader, allude to Mondrian’s introduction of primary colors and his rejection of the diagonal, which caused a “falling out” with fellow De Stijl member Theo van Doesburg.28 Other fall pieces are less loaded

27 Beenker, p. 20
28 Heiser, p. 25
with history, but are equally, if not more, effective. These include the 1970 works *Fall 1 Los Angeles* where Ader was filmed falling off his roof and *Fall 2, Amsterdam* where he was filmed holding flowers as he rides a bicycle into a canal. The fall performance I will focus on was performed in 1971 in Amsterdamse Bos, Holland and is called *Broken Fall (organic)*.

Having little sense of a specific place – this sort of landscape could appear in a myriad of European and American landscapes – *Broken Fall (organic)*, in a way, seems the most universal due to its setting’s familiarity. The performance or action was recorded on 16 mm film. A film still was printed posthumously and is considered an editioned artwork by the estate. During Ader’s lifetime the same still was used on a poster promoting Ader’s 1971 exhibition at Kabinett fur Aktuelle Kunst, Bremerhaven.  

For the performance, Ader hangs from a tree branch. When he becomes weak and can no longer hold on, he falls into a watery ditch. The film stops when the artist crawls out of the ditch. In the black and white film still Ader is in mid-fall. He wears a button up shirt and what appear to be jeans. His arms are akimbo but seem resigned and his body is long and straight. He looks down. The figure is slightly blurred, indicating the actual motion of falling. The ditch contains some water, but does not inspire comfort. While it makes this a “broken” fall, the situation could be compared to jumping off a diving board into the shallow end of the pool. Someone is filming Ader, but we see no other human presence, giving the act has a sense of solitude. I will discuss the film still from the performance in relation to Peckham’s text.

---

29 Alexandria Blätler and Rein Wolfs, “The works of Bas Jan Ader” in *Bas Jan Ader: Please Don’t Leave Me* (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen), p 50
Ader’s work often incorporates romantic symbolism, including sunsets, flowers, trees/forests, weeping and maritime themes. In Broken Fall (organic), 1971, a tree, the very model Peckham cites for the romantic idea of an organic universe, is the focus of the frame. For Peckham, the tree represents the philosophy of “becoming” versus “being.” He elaborates on this metaphor, writing, “Furthermore, the relation of [the tree’s] component parts is not that of parts of a machine which have been made separately, i.e., separate entities of the mind of the deity, but the relations of leaves to stem to trunk to root to earth. Entities are an organic part of that which produced them.”

There is evidence that Ader might agree. In his MFA exhibition proposal, for instance, he writes, “Distinctions as to separate pieces can be made, but the interfusion of all pieces in one greater entity is also an objective (as in a family or nation). In all of this, relationships become of primary importance… I like to call this spanning of a vacuum (of spatial or mental order) as it takes place in the spectator’s mind: implosion.” While Ader admits to separate elements created by the artist, his hope is for them to be experience as one organic unit via cognition.

Perhaps most dramatically and most significantly, Broken Fall (organic) mirrors Peckham’s interest in the ability of the artist to create what Peckham describes as “a positive and radical intrusion of novelty into the world.” Just as Peckham makes claims for the work of art to intrude into the universe changing the “character of the universe”

30 Peckham, p. 10
31 Alexandria Blätler and Rein Wolfs, “The works of Bas Jan Ader” in Bas Jan Ader: Please Don’t Leave Me (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen), p 150
itself, Ader participates in a similar exchange with the universe via his interaction with nature. And, although, gravity is invisible except for its effects on him, Ader enlists it, as well as the tree and the stream, in his project. He works with elements of the universe not as separate pieces in an additive process (as with earth art), but as a singular unit of time and space where all of the elements (including his act) combine. In the image, despite the calculations that have led him there, Ader is as much a part of the landscape as the tree, grass and stream. He is becoming an element of the landscape and is subjecting himself to nature’s universal laws. Through this act “genuine novelty” is introduced to the world. The fact that he sees the uncontrollable state of change (falling) as an opportunity and uses it to create an imperfect situation that simultaneously expresses harmony with and vulnerability within the universe exemplifies Ader’s affinity with Peckham’s literary romantics and their philosophy of dynamic organicism.