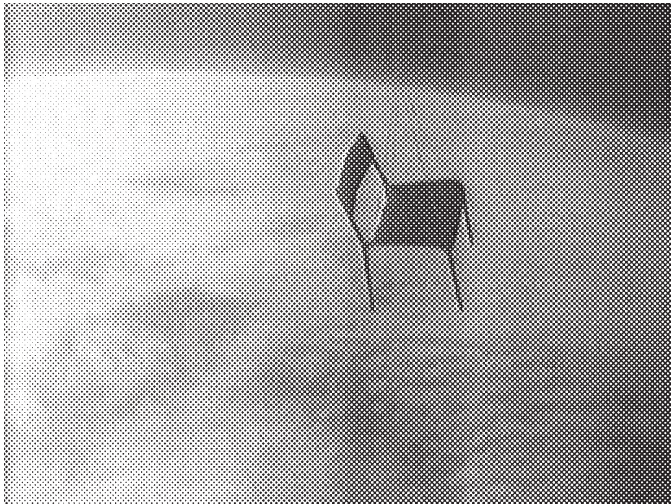


# GRAVITATION



An exploration into the physical,  
metaphorical, and communicative uses of  
the flying, floating, and falling

**“The universe is not required to be in perfect  
harmony with human ambition.”**

– [Carl Sagan]

**GRAVITATION: AN  
EXPLORATION INTO THE  
PHYSICAL, METAPHORICAL,  
AND COMMUNICATIVE  
USES OF THE FLYING,  
FLOATING, AND FALLING**

**Words by George Hill-Baker**

**Design by Felix Garside**

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## **SYNOPSIS**

**As one of the four Fundamental Interactions or forces of our perceivable reality, gravity has been a subject matter, medium and tool that has proved hard to resist for historical and contemporary thinkers, story tellers and artists alike. Throughout history, various cultural mythologies have used gravity symbolically.**

**Robert Graves's book 'The Greek Myths' explores Greek mythology's utilisation of the concepts of flying and falling in the story of Icarus and Daedalus. The effect of gravity was clearly being used as a metaphor for the consequences of careless youthfulness. Within the myth of Sisyphus, Sisyphus is condemned for eternity to push a boulder uphill only to let it roll back to the bottom once reaching the top. This is commonly understood to have used the force of gravity as symbolic of the futility of human endeavours. Separated from myth, the will of theorists and inventors to highlight or defy its limitations have led to the development of world changing ideas and machines. Reflection upon its governing nature over our lives have been made since the time of Aristotle in the 4th century BC. Examination and re-examination of its physical nature, along with thought of how its restrictions may be overcome have taken place throughout history. From Isaac Newton's famous moment under the apple tree which led to his Universal Law of Gravitation published in 'Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica' to its reconsideration by Albert**

Einstein leading to his theory of General Relativity published in 'On the Relativity Principle and the Conclusions Drawn from It'. From the Wright brother's first aeronautical flight in 1903 to Apollo 11 making its landing in 1966. From Galileo and his experiments dropping objects of different mass from the Leaning Tower of Pisa in 1589, to Apollo 15 astronaut David Scott and his recreation of the experiment with a hammer and feather on the moon in 1971; these examples of theories and historical events have inspired generations of artists. They may not have the means to study gravity in a conventional scientific way but are very capable of doing so artistically. This essay will analyse and compare the works of three artists working in different mediums who have used gravity as a method of creation in three different ways, flying, floating and falling.

While examining the notion of 'flying', exploration will be made into selected works from the series 'Gravity Sucks' by Simon Faithfull, which he described as

**"a body of work that mourns  
the human condition of  
being a three-dimensional  
object that is stuck to a two-  
dimensional surface"** – [Simon Faithfull]

Faithfull created what he refers to as 'Escape vehicles', using helium balloons and rockets to fly momentarily in what can be

described as fearless catastrophes but in one case successfully ascending to heights of 30 kilometres and this will be examined especially. He also spent two months with the British Antarctic Survey on a journey to Antarctica where he created 'Escape Vehicle No.7' successfully releasing a helium based work through the hole in the Ozone layer.

While investigating the concept of floating, examination of the work of James Turrell will be made, looking into his ability to create the illusion of levitation. Hovering geometric forms, made solely through the medium of light, trick the viewer's perception as they masquerade as substantial objects while being literally weightless. As an artist who works with perception his signature works are his 'Skyspace' observatories. Located around the world these structures invite the viewer to sit inside them. The horizon of the sky is covered leaving only his desired portion of the sky on show and this has been known to induce an unsettling illusion that the sky is floating level with the ceiling.

Finally, while contemplating 'falling', investigation into three of the 'Falls' of Bas Jan Ader will be made, an artist who within these works adopted gravity as his medium of choice. The works consist of a series of brief black and white videos documenting Ader's exploration into the submission and capitulation objects and humans alike owe to gravity. Within the video 'Broken Fall (organic)' Ader is seen hanging from a tree over a stream until he can no longer resist the pull of gravity causing him to plummet into the water. In 'Fall I' Ader is sat atop of his Californian home in a chair momentarily, before leaning

forward and falling off the roof into the bushes below. In 'Fall II' Ader is seen riding a bicycle along an Amsterdam canal. He rides his bicycle towards the edge and fearlessly drops himself and his bicycle into the water once more.

Most people rarely give gravity a conscious thought but they know that if they drop a glass it is likely to smash on the floor and that water falls out of an open tap, yet it physically shapes the world that we live in and how we perceive it. These three artists are among scientists, philosophers and others who have been fascinated with and have acknowledged the challenge brought to us by gravity.

**FLYING — SIMON  
FAITHFULL 'ESCAPE  
VEHICLES' NO.1, NO.2, NO.6**

**"On the surface Faithfull's experiments are attempting a similar quest to Armstrong et al., though they actually have more in common with the work — both comic and heart-breaking — of homespun inventors or amateur stuntmen. Many of the 'Escape Vehicles' are glorious in their inadequacy."** – [Eliza Williams]

Simon Faithfull found his successes within his 'Escape Vehicles' through his ability to summon a sense of unification with the observer. His mission was to ascend 'beyond the sky'. His playful use of material and method highlight the matching capability of the artist and an ordinary individual,

even though these feats are mostly rather extraordinary. The very first ‘Escape Vehicle’ was created in Berlin in 1996<sup>[fig. 1]</sup>.

**“It was a chair, fitted with rockets and designed to be a heroic failure. But I wasn’t prepared for how anticlimactic it was when the chair just turned upside down and exploded”** – [Simon Faithfull]

The chair sits outside in a field with a vast expanse of space both around and above it, stressing its underdog standing within its mission of flight. The rockets ignite and the chair takes off, defying gravity only momentarily. Rather darkly lit due to the time of day it is filmed and the quality of camera, interesting coloration occurs within the clouded sky as it fades from pixelated pinks to lighter blues. Filmed in a clunky slow motion, the documentation and the actual instruments used gives Faithfull the facade of the loveable amateur. The very humble domesticity of these materials, the chair in particular, emphasizes Faithfull’s intent on conjuring the realization of the magnitude of the challenge that is being faced. Yet their familiarity extends a friendly reassurance that Faithfull’s process is anything but remote from the viewer.



[FIG. 1]

**“Even though you know the chair — looking so lonely against a wide, pink sunrise — will fail to leave our planet’s atmosphere (possibly even the ground) it’s hard to suppress that little flutter of irrational hope that perches in the soul.”** – [Helen Brown]

That child-like optimism that Helen Brown is referring to when viewing the video is present due to the selected naivety Faithfull must acquire

to enact such an event. This almost pointless disobedience of gravity and the absurdity of what he has done becomes rich with symbolism of hopefulness, noncompliance and playful disdain.

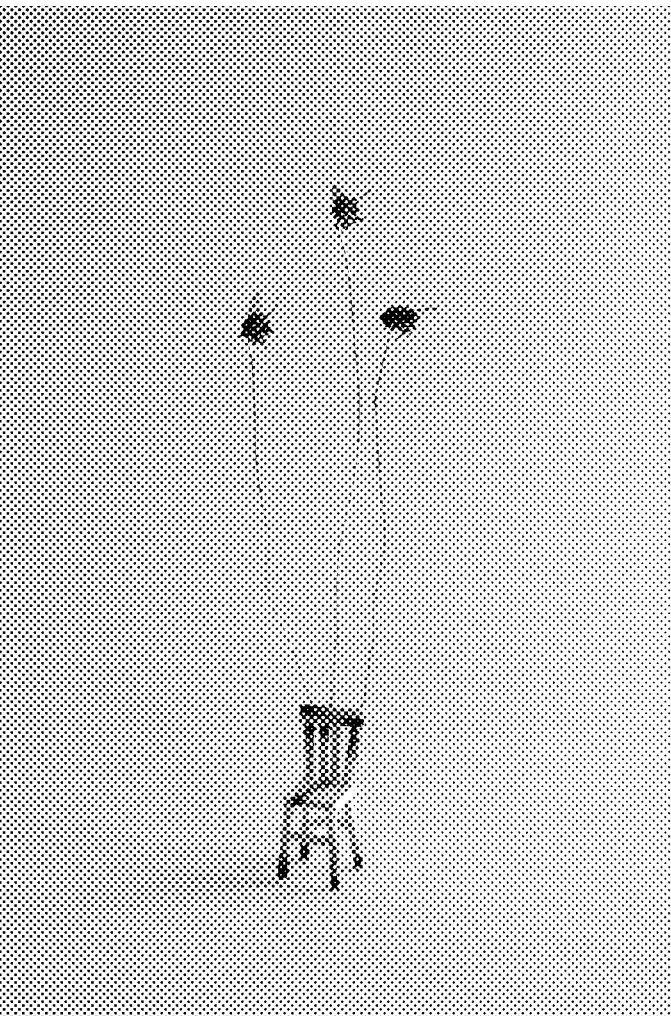
‘Escape Vehicle No.2’, a much smaller, immobile object with no literal intention of movement is Faithfull’s next piece in the series<sup>[fig. II]</sup>. The work consists of what can be thought of as a small-scale model of a fantasy vehicle, parallel to a child’s drawing manifested in three dimensions. Three dead flies bound by wire, statically hover above a wooden chair made from a handful of expended matches. Once again Faithfull chooses

a seat or a depiction of one as a prime focal point of the work, inducing a sense of potential passengerhood.

The materials used by Faithfull, in common with ‘Escape Vehicle No.1’<sup>[fig. I]</sup>, do indeed as he describes add a streak of the melancholy within its characteristics. The dream-like, persistent, and lively optimism of the creation is surrounded by the despondent reality that it is not functional, placing the viewer in an odd nostalgic state of childhood imagination or make-believe. The use of flies within ‘No.2’ is perhaps a direct reference to Faithfull’s childhood observation.

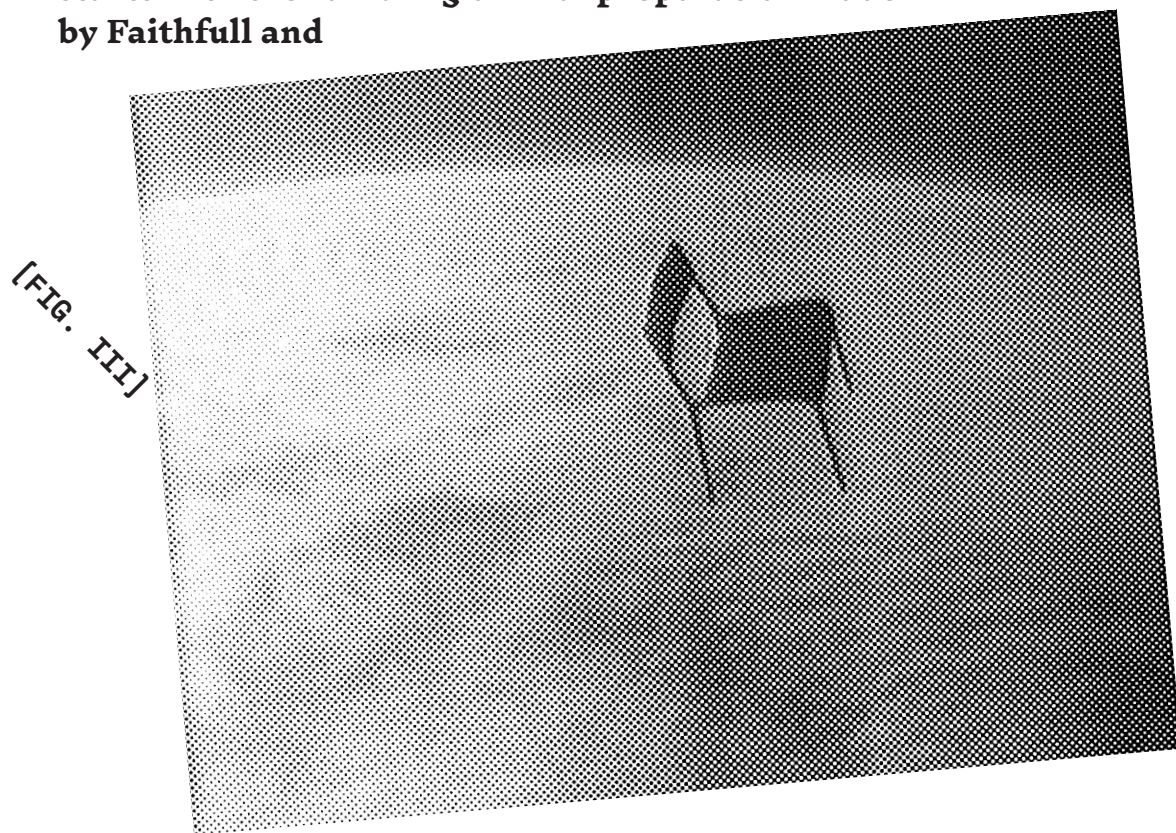
**“Like many young boys I  
was annoyed to find out that  
other things could fly and  
I couldn’t. Flies could even  
walk on ceilings!”** – [Simon Faithfull]

Faithfull’s use of chairs within his ‘vehicles’ are a reoccurring tool used to place the perspective of the viewer on board with imaginary, unsuccessful or successful flights. In the work ‘Escape Vehicle No.6’<sup>[fig. III]</sup>, in which a chair is again a vital component, ascension was the physically most effective within the series and therefore it became the core work. This was a progression from a previous work by Faithfull, ‘30km’. ‘Escape Vehicle No.6’ consisted of a household chair suspended underneath a weather balloon and a video camera filming the ascent live.



[FIG. II]

An audience of spectators were present at the launch and they watched the live video of 'Escape Vehicle No.6's' trajectory to the edge of the atmosphere after it was no longer visible with the naked eye. The weather balloon was designed to reach an altitude of around 30 kilometres before bursting and did so successfully. Within the documentation of the event the video starts with the fumbling of final preparation made by Faithfull and



[FIG. III]

others before the chair is revealed and seen swiftly leaving the surface of the earth as it spins and soars above fields, then houses, roads and towns. It is seen slowly drifting further through the clouds until the land below is obscured beyond view and the curvature of the earth is visible. The signals sent back produce what resembles a timeworn television set with a routine and uncomfortable

ringing noise that echoes throughout the video. Towards the final minutes of the shortened documentation the balloon bursts amongst the blackness of space and the chair and camera dance in a dizzying and violent descent back to earth. The chair begins to fall apart in its last moments in sight before the camera and chair part ways, both destroyed in the process. Faithfull's use of the empty chair in this piece works particularly effectively due to the environment he places it in, asking the viewer to imaginatively sit in the middle of the video, highlighting not only the desire for ascension but also the undertaking of doing so through our bodily limitations. At altitudes where breathing is an impossibility and temperatures drop to minus 60° the work brings the viewer to the realisation that the space we exist in is very confined.

**"Simon Faithfull's 'Escape Vehicle No.6' invoked this turn-of-the century rough-and-ready mechanics; a time before the computational rationale of the perfect man-made machine began to make flawless accents into the aerial beyond"** – [Rachel Steward]

Faithfull had intended the materials used and methods undertaken to have the significance that

Steward and many others found during analysis of the work. Faithfull's ability to capture the hopes of the viewer is prevalent within his work, as an observer the desire for his creations to work and be functional is what makes the work effective. Unlike 'Escape Vehicles No.1' and 'Escape Vehicles No.2', 'Escape Vehicle No.6' was for the most part a complete success. Faithfull has described sending the apparatus for this work on a 'suicide mission' never to be recovered — it was his intention that they would meet their end. When discussing the works' inevitable fall after the flight in an interview, Faithfull held that the final moments are 'Icarus like'. The characteristic of youthful naivety that Faithfull has used to his advantage so well is comparable to the myth of Icarus. Yet the myth seems to be a warning not to over-extend oneself or become carried away and Faithfull's work cries out the complete opposite. He has used concepts of flight to draw attention to absurd, fantastical ambition and the continuation of attempts ignoring the consequence. His work in this light, becomes a friendly nudge of encouragement when contemplating physical ability in physical reality and begs us not to let the wonderfully juvenile longing to fly, fade away with age.

## FLOATING — JAMES TURRELL SELECTED WORKS

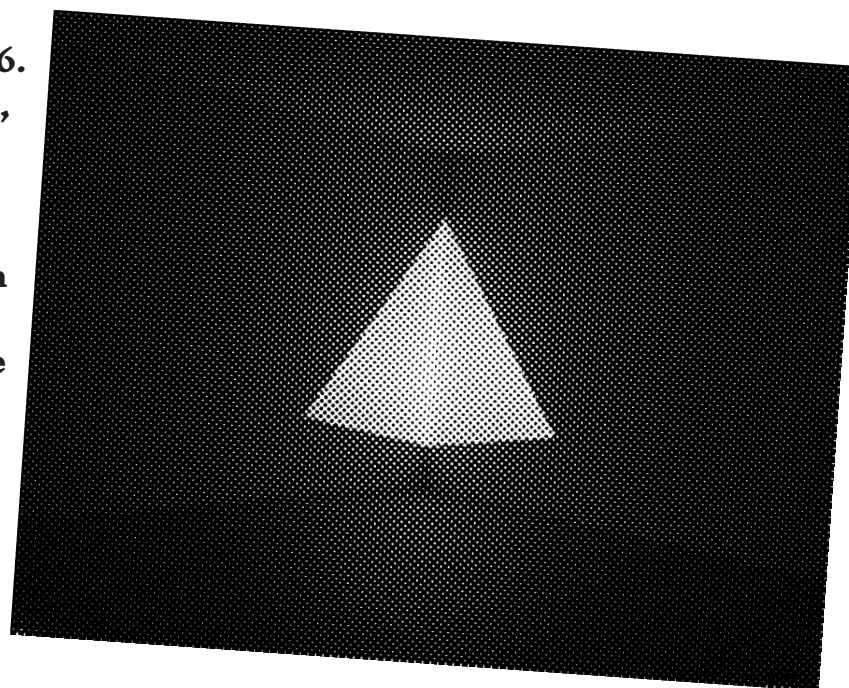
In contrast to the charismatically Lo-Fi working process of Simon Faithfull, the work of James Turrell is far more mature in its approach. A far less clear working process is adopted by the artist, allowing the impression of levitation or 'floating' to be an element of his practice. James Turrell is something closer to an unblemished illusionist than the humble hopeful that Faithfull is.

**"His works do not just defy gravity; rather, they make physical earthen weight evaporate into the energy of light."** – [Matthew Kolodziej]

Turrell creates luminous colourful forms, floating segments of light that seem at first to be touchable objects but on closer examination are a mirage made from practically a void. Along with gravity, light is also a natural phenomenon intensely studied, most famously by Thomas Young with the original 'double slit experiment' in 1801 in which Young attempted to discover whether light behaved like a wave or a particle. The light Turrell employs is intensely projected into his chosen space and the work emerges. Within his work 'Raethro Pink'<sup>[fig. IV]</sup> as an example, an ethereal slice of light is projected into the corner of the

room, creating a hovering triangle of luminous pink. Ultramodern in its appearance, Turrell uses deception to pull something from nothing and induce the magic of levity. Turrell's ability to use what is already here is what is so striking. By manipulating the elements of reality into a realm of unfamiliarity, he draws the viewer towards a realisation that the nature of things are always peculiar no matter how familiar. 'Raethro Pink' is just one in an abundance of projected floating forms crafted by Turrell, his earliest arriving 1966. Starting with mostly rectangular forms and cubes, he explored his medium ranging in colour from regular white light to glowing reds and ambient blues. Used in such a way that when viewed from a far, Turrell creates three dimensional forms of a seemingly physical quality. When walked around reverse perspective induces this facade-like state further. But when approached directly the curtain of mystery is pulled back revealing what they really are, light, flat on the wall in the space. The illusionary trick that Turrell uses within these works has a scientific name — 'Dichotomous Perceptual Decisions' studied by researchers such as Benjamin T. Backus in his article 'The Mixture of Bernoulli Experts: A theory to quantify reliance on cues in Dichotomous Perceptual Decisions'. This occurs when the brain is confronted with more than one possible way of viewing something, in this case flat light or a floating three-dimensional object. This cognitive shift that Turrell brings about within the viewer allows him to show an individual what he pleases, whether this is creating objects that are not there at all or obscuring the way objects behave that we are accustomed to. He uses light to generate the impression of flotation upon the

room itself. In many of his installations light was used behind the walls or partitions of the space, so that when viewed directly light surrounds its rectangular edges, resulting in the wall emerging as a suspended/floating form itself. Turrell takes a solid form and seemingly alters its state from the material to an ethereal and floating alternate through lighting alone. The precise lighting confronts the observer's depth perception as



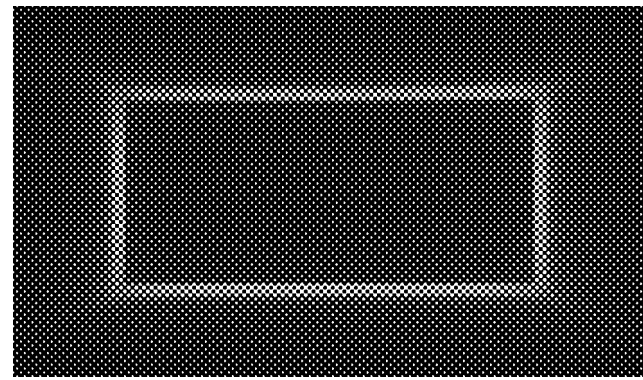
[FIG. IV]

works are usually seen from the end of a sizeable space. These subtle changes within the room have a dramatic impact, challenging the viewer to realize the absurdity of perception itself. In a far more meditative style than the gravity defying works of Faithfull, Turrell chooses to defy gravity through perceived flotation as a means of placing the viewer in a realm of unfamiliarity. It is undemanding to see how a sense of uneasiness may be conjured by the work as objects, tangible and non-existent, seem to shift in and out of reality, floating then flattened,

swaying back and forth. Yet the usual discomfort that is the accomplice of unfamiliarity that you would expect when the room around oneself is dematerializing seems not to be always present. Perhaps this is due to the calming character of the colour and composition used. Or the fact that no matter how convincing the illusion the viewer will always remember that it is just that, an illusion. Yet there is an undeniably soothing quality to Turrell's work that seems almost therapeutic in nature as a healthy reminder that first observation is not definite.

**"...the space dealt with was not hypothetical but actual... Light emanated from behind the partition on more than one side, seeming to visually cause the partition to float, or turn inward or outward."** – [James Turrell]

Throughout art history, artists have attempted to portray light and its consequence on the viewer's perception of space through mediums that can only represent it. Turrell realizes this task by using physical light itself to adapt the viewer's perception of the actual space to trick the eye to see what is not there and hide what is present. The most ambitious work by James Turrell is his current work in progress, 'Roden Crater'.



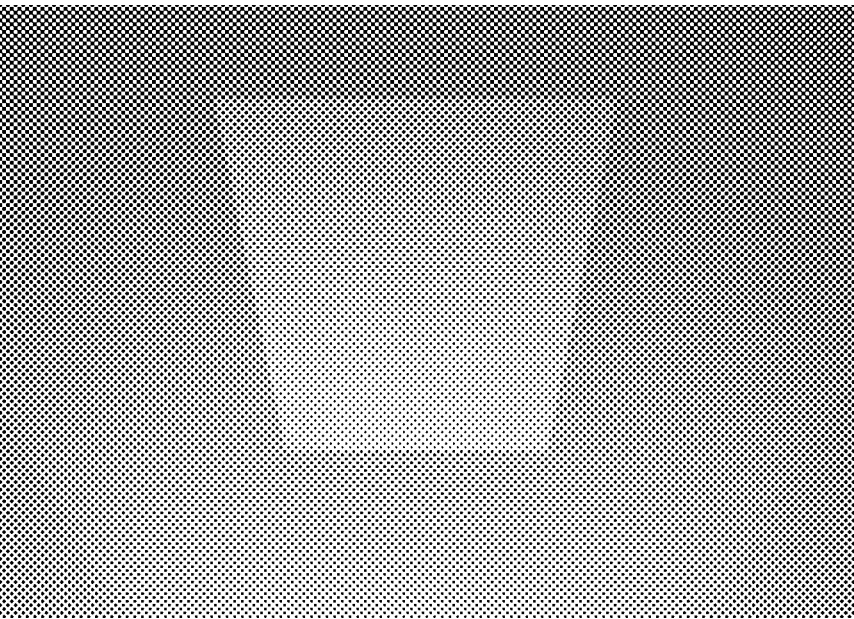
[FIG. V]

A dormant volcanic cinder cone is being excavated into an unparalleled work. As an accumulation of Turrell's career, the crater consists of spaces, tunnels and overhead openings to the skies specially designed as an immersive experience of reflection on time, light, space and perspective.

Within 'Roden Crater', specially designed apertures allow the viewer to experience portions of the sky at both night and day. Not only situated at the 'crater', the works that Turrell calls 'Sky Spaces'<sup>[fig. VI]</sup> are located around the world. The light highlighted by these creations is what Turrell is referencing. These structures are often built into the ground and cover the horizon of the sky above. They induce an odd sensation of the sky no longer being an expanse of empty space above but something closer to a two dimensional sheet that is floating level with the ceiling.

**"These pieces deal with the juncture of the interior space and the space outside by bringing the space of the sky down to the plane**

**of the ceiling, they create a space that is completely open to the sky yet seems enclosed.”** – [James Turrell]



[FIG. VI]

Through these works, Turrell has engineered how we experience the sky. Bringing a practically empty space into the realm of the material balanced above the viewers head. The notion of turning the sky into a illusionary material form imbues it with an odd sense of flatness. Turrell stops us looking upwards and seeing ‘through’ the sky and switches our perspective to looking ‘at’ it. In doing so the work obtains a nothingness and once again makes it something appearing tangible, flat, and levitating. The ceiling around is crucial to induce such a perspective, but its purpose can only begin to work once its presence is forgotten. It starts to disappear when attention is given to the aperture.

These works compress the distance between far and near, balancing it within the plane of the ceiling, a floating, ever-changing emptiness that Turrell has captured and made his own.

**“Part of what makes Turrell’s work so salient is that, on a basic level, he’s playing with the science of how we perceive the world, using his knowledge of our retinal structure and visual system to upend what we think ‘seeing’ really means”** – [Shaunacy Ferro]

In contrast to the physical act of flight that Faithfull uses within his work, Turrell induces the appearance of flotation in a solely cognitive state. The floating characteristics of his work seems to be a by-product of his successful taming of light itself as Turrell’s manipulation of the external world directly effects the internal world of perception. The works highlight that all that there is to be seen is constructed by ones brain and that you never truly ‘see’ anything, a second-hand image that is forever uncertain drawing upon Cartesian themes of existentialism present in ‘Discours de la méthode’.

## **FALLING — BAS JAN ADER** **SELECTED WORKS**

In contrast to the unblemished masquerades of Turrell's work, the artist Bas Jan Ader adopts an approach to examining gravity more similar to Simon Faithfull's practice. All three artists use the natural realm as a medium, yet Turrell seems to be more concentrated on cognitive manipulation while Bas Jan Ader and Simon Faithfull focus on attempt and action. The act of falling is the key focus within the works of Ader that will be discussed in this essay.

'Fall I'<sup>[fig. VII]</sup>, has been documented in a variety of black and white photographs along with the short 24 second original video. The artist himself is shown atop of his Los Angeles bungalow home, sat on a ordinary looking chair. Filmed in black and white, the artist is seen to slowly shift his weight to his right falling from the chair then continuing to roll down the roof of his home before coming to the edge and toppling into the bushes below.

'Fall II'<sup>[fig. XII]</sup> is again documented in black and white photographs and accompanied by an even shorter 19 second video. The video finds the artist swiftly entering the into frame riding a bicycle alongside an Amsterdam canal on an empty street before purposely swerving to his left and plunging into the waters below. The video ends before Ader resurfaces. 'Broken fall (organic)'<sup>[fig. VIII]</sup> also ends with Ader plummeting into waters below in another black and white video, lasting a full one minute and forty-four seconds. The artist is shown holding onto a branch for as long as his limbs let him before

falling into the river below. Abnormally reserved when asked about the motives behind his 'falls' Ader left much unanswered, but one clear influence is gravity. When asked about the role of his body as a focal point in his video replied,

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

When the medium of gravity is utilised in a manner such as this (not dissimilar to the escape attempts of Faithfull's work) much is left to chance. Both artists are allowing the consequences of the events to enter the realm of the unknown and embrace the notion of failure with open arms. But in comparison to Faithfull's self given mission of defying gravity, Ader's motives are less obvious. Rather than bluntly attempting to confront this force, he chooses to exhibit it by challenging it to a battle he has no intention of winning.

By allowing it to defeat him before the fight has begun, he chooses to fail thereby paradoxically succeeding in showing its governing nature through his own ineptitude.

[FIG. VII]



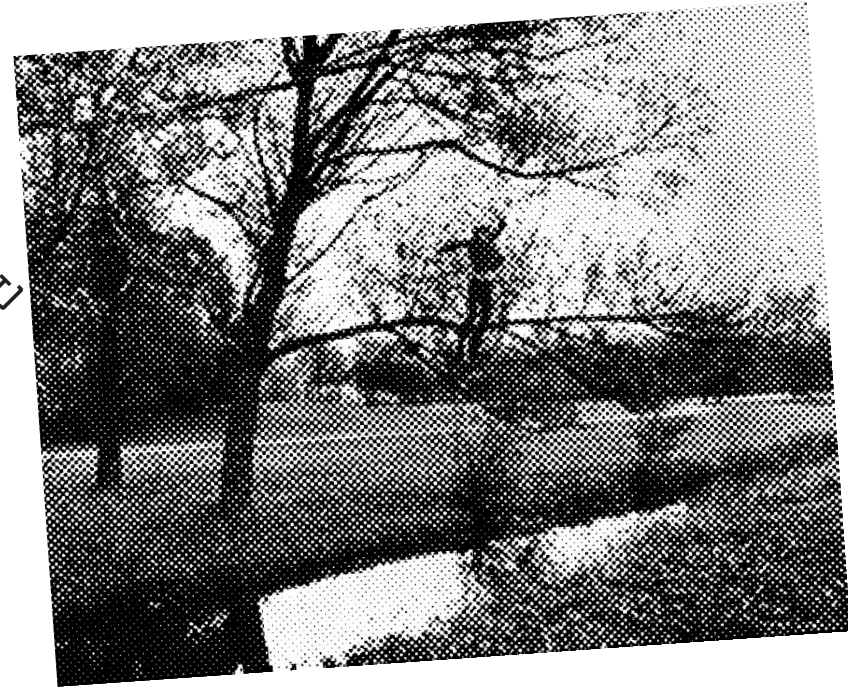
**“Thematically, Ader sets himself up for failure in these works, presenting himself as hopelessly incompetent, unable to hold on, to keep his balance, or to stand upright — the artistic heir to Buster Keaton.”**

– [Richard Dorment]

Through this process Ader emits a fusion of opposing themes, a quite clear melancholy admittance of bodily limitation but also something more humorous and close to slapstick comedy popularised by the likes of Harold Lloyd. The genuine peril Ader places himself in to enact these works is comparable to the same peril that Faithfull subjects upon his

‘Escape Vehicles’. This danger places Ader’s practice in a more daring or reckless realm. Abandoning care for wellbeing and developing an indifference to the results of the action, much like the indifference gravity has over what it effects. It is the absurdity of placing ones safety on the line for an unidentified consequence that stirs a slender humour into the theme.

[FIG. VIII]



For ‘Broken Fall (Organic)’<sup>[fig. VIII]</sup> there is a different element of the video to consider. Unlike in ‘Fall I’<sup>[fig. VII]</sup>, Ader attempts to resist gravity’s pull. Holding onto a branch above the stream the artist exhibits gravity’s strength like in previous works, yet this time it is done so alongside his own by highlighting the feebleness of his say in the matter of what happens to him. As Ader enters this momentary battle with gravity he brings a hint of purpose to his purposeless actions, to draw consideration to the concept of an attempt and persistence.

Yet again, to do so Ader has placed himself in considerable danger.

**“Did Ader feel protected because he was making a work of art? Protected in his pursuit of the sublime, which suspends all truth and postpones the realisation that we are, in fact, duly mortal? More than anyone, he played with this engagement — laid himself open to the possibility of death. Taunted it. Provoked it. Fell for it.”** – [Tacita Dean]

It is easy to see how one may believe that Ader felt protected by his purpose when creating these works by partaking in actions that seem foolishly perilous, yet this conclusion is not entirely clear. The ‘Fall’ works have resulted in a variety of interpretations in relation to the relinquishment of control, yet others believe this is only a part of the intended symbolism. Ader perhaps only utilised gravity as a tool to highlight other subject matter. By using gravity as a parallel to other unavoidable eventualities, Ader may have been demonstrating

the natural inevitability of death. Just as he will eventually fall from the branch, plunge into the canal or land in the bushes in front of his home, so life will come to an end at some point.

While trying to cross the Atlantic for his work ‘In Search of the Miraculous’ in the smallest boat ever attempted, Bas Jan Ader died at sea and his body was never found. When contemplating possible concepts of death within artist’s motives in the ‘Fall’ series one cannot help but see a foreshadowing of this event.

**“In some sense, falling, as a forced union of mind and matter, could be seen as a rehearsal for the more immutable event of dying. This analogy is palpable in Ader’s short film Nightfall, 1971... Here the film abruptly ends with the irrevocable logic of consciousness extinguished.”** – [Brad Spence]

‘Nightfall’<sup>[fig. IX]</sup> consists of a four minute and sixteen second video, presented again in black and white format. Ader is shown centred in the frame of the

video between two wired lights on the ground. The artist then lifts a boulder from the ground in front of him and attempts to hold it above each light consecutively. The inevitable happens when his strength is expended and the boulder crushes the first light, repeating the action for the second light he again cannot hold on and plunges the video into darkness followed rapidly by the end of the film.

[FIG. IX]



In contrast to the elegance of Turrell's utilisation of the medium of light, Ader's is far more raw in its characteristic, held on notions of expectation rather than those of illusion and the nature of light itself. The light is there to eventually be there no more, perhaps as symbolism for the ephemeral nature of life itself. In this case Ader is using an object to embark on the fall instead of himself, a shared feature with work of Faithfull. Yet Ader

still enters this momentary conflict with the force of gravity, resisting the fall of the object as long as he can, creating anticipation that is present in all of the 'Fall' works. Whether Ader really just intended, like he said, just to show how

**"gravity made itself  
master"** – [Bas Jan Ader]

or not isn't definite but it is clear to observe Ader's successful use of gravity and the action of falling to highlight themes of abandoning of control to powers greater than oneself and mortality.

## **COMPARATIVE** **ANALYSIS**

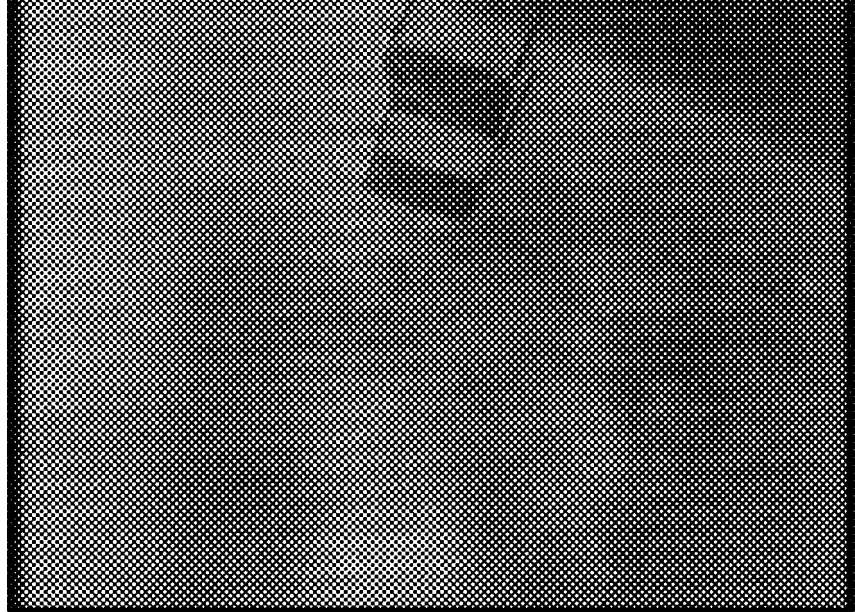
The common theme, present in the work of all three artists is the use of gravity. However, it is not simply the study of gravity in itself but the weaving of gravity into the fabric of their work that is critical in this analysis. For Faithfull, is it the frustrated angst of incapability stemming from the inability to break gravity's grasp through ascension. The methods by which he attempts to do so with his 'Escape Vehicles' highlight the true magnitude of this undertaking, one he is bound to fail. Using the act of flight in this way illustrates the longing for escapism without the certainty of a known destination. For Turrell, deception of the viewers observations illustrate that not all is as it seems and that the mind can be manipulated by counter-intuitive representations of levitation. Turrell uses gravity as a tool in his execution of illusion as these works seek to eliminate the expected effects of the force of gravity. It can be argued that Ader used the notion of falling as symbolic of the inexorable passing of time towards death or the relinquishment of control to powers higher than one's self, highlighting the futility of resistance. His exploration was multi-faceted embracing gravity, mortality and the absurd. Yet despite the different standings of the three artists within this field, there are noticeable similarities between them. When contemplating these similarities, the works of Ader and Faithfull appear more directly linked in influence than the works of James Turrell. In conversation with Faithfull and in response to a question about this link he stated,

**"I think that the impulses behind my work are not actually that dissimilar to Bas Jan Ader's. It's true that the Escape Vehicles were conceived as a series of experiments in defying gravity, rather than 'submitting to it', and that some of these vehicles did indeed get airborne. However, all the pieces in this series share a similar melancholic tone — all sharing a slightly desperate, homespun aesthetic and all being touched by failure."**

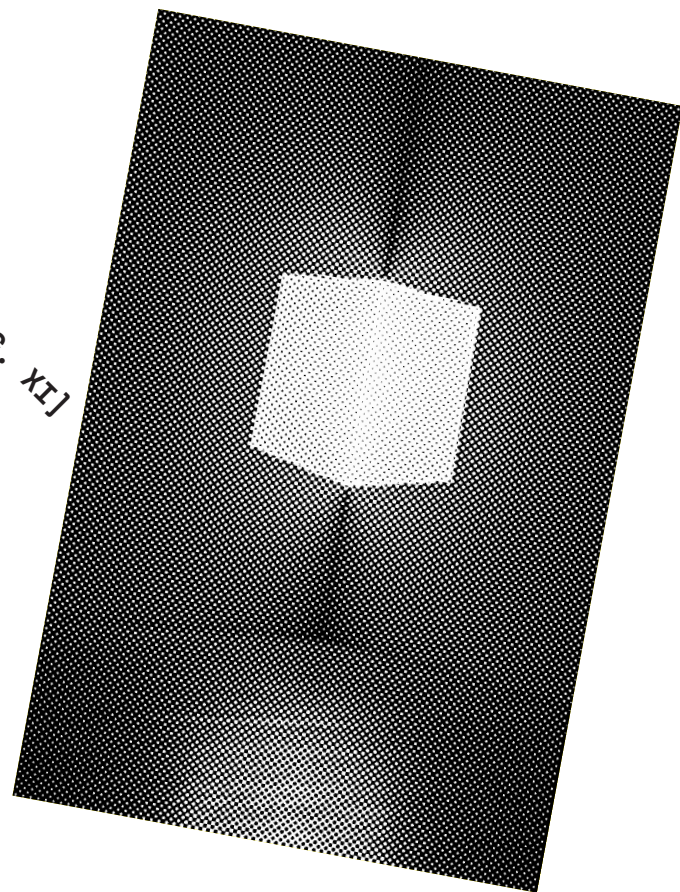
— [Simon Faithfull]

The sense of desperation that Faithfull refers to seems to be a consequence of such exceptional absurdity that the actions of both artists share. The events that unfold during the enactment of these works are unknown to the artists and it is this leap into the unknown that seems absurd and therefore desperate. Perhaps Faithfull's 'desperation' is slightly less obvious than that of Ader's as he places his 'Escape Vehicles' in jeopardy, rather than himself.

One could consider that the 'homespun aesthetic' shared between the artists is the result of a sensation of urgency and that what they wish to make known is too important to reveal slowly or slickly. Faithfull's reference to both his own works and those of Ader being 'touched by failure' is a clear connection also. It is the inadequacy of their attempts that draws out melancholic themes along with slightly humorous ones too, and one could argue that it is this failure and inadequacy that successfully communicates the intended premise. Both artists are searching, for what they seem unsure. Connections between specific works by both artists as well as general themes can also be identified and a case in point is Ader's work 'Fall II'<sup>[fig. XII]</sup> and Faithfull's 'Escape Vehicles'. In the case of 'Fall II' the vehicle is a bicycle, yet unlike Faithfull's 'vehicles' a physical passenger is aboard and not a hypothetical one. But, like several of Faithfull's 'vehicles' within his series, Ader is lost from view by the end of the documentation of the event. He plunges under the water and escapes from our view and also, in essence, the external world. This is akin to the efforts of Faithfull's 'Escape Vehicle No. 6'<sup>[fig. X]</sup>, particularly as the chair reaches its ultimate height before breaking apart



[FIG. X]



[FIG. XI]



[FIG. XII]

and escaping its own existence. As Faithfull's work disappears into the environment of the skies, Ader's also disappears but under the surface of the waters on the ground. Both artists are seemingly trying frantically to disappear/escape using the force of gravity as a medium while simultaneously conjuring up thoughts on transience and perhaps the bizarreness of existence all together.

The work of James Turrell appears less obviously connected to that of Faithfull and Ader. Both Faithfull's and Ader's practices consist of actions within reality while Turrell's practice consists of altering its appearance. Where Faithfull defies gravity and Ader submits to it, Turrell rather captures it. Ader and Faithfull spent their efforts in using gravity as a metaphorical tool to reflect on forces more powerful than themselves and Turrell seems to be doing something similar. Instead of using gravity directly, he is using light. Along with gravity, light is an equally if not more powerful and mysterious force. It is almost as old as the Universe itself and travels faster than anything currently known to science. By holding this light in floating forms that are physical in appearance, Turrell unlocks the ability to resist gravity. The medium of light that he uses does not need to abide by the laws of gravity on earth as physical objects like Ader's body or Faithfull's 'vehicles' do. In essence Turrell achieves the aspirations of Faithfull with these powers themselves. Yet the melancholic tone that resonates within Faithfull's work seems present somewhat within what Turrell has done. The functionality of Faithfull's 'Escape Vehicles' require the would be passenger to be left behind, comparable with the ability of levitation that Turrell has revealed. He uses the

mass-less substance of light to defy gravity and as we are creatures of mass this ability is prohibited to us, yet exhibited in front of our very eyes. The 'Sky Space' works at Roden Crater seek to achieve a similar task to Faithfull's 'Escape Vehicles' but using different means of doing so. When asked about his influences, Faithfull revealed that as a child he was

**"spellbound by the thought of footsteps newly left behind on the surface of the moon."** – [Simon Faithfull]

This childhood desire is clearly highlighted within his practice, attempting to 'escape' the Earth and reach places such as this. In contrast, Turrell's efforts do not reside in taking himself to places such as the Moon, rather bringing its qualities to us, on earth.

**"I wanted to shape space, to use the light that was here naturally. Also, I wanted to use the very fine qualities of light. First of all, moonlight."** – [James Turrell]

Using the methods described earlier in this essay, Turrell has the ability to appear as if he has brought

these celestial objects into the same spaces as the viewer. Appearing to dwell on a flattened plane that floats level with the ceiling, their light engulfs the observer and the space. However, the slight hint of perhaps unintentional melancholy still lingers as the work remains simply an illusion. Just as Faithfull's 'Escape Vehicles' never truly escape, Turrell can only induce the mirage of bringing the skies to us. The work of Faithfull has clear similarities to the work of Ader and Turrell, but the connections between the work of Ader and Turrell themselves is subtler. Both artists use the nature of reality as a tool to manifest their work, exhibiting its characteristics to communicate varied symbolism. A shared semi-spiritual/transient approach to the production of these works is present in both their practices, comparable to an abstract integration of the inconceivable nature of nature and using the characteristics of physical reality to reflect upon itself. What connects all three of these artistic practices is the recognition that perhaps the only medium sufficient in exploring the laws of nature are the laws of nature themselves. Their creative exploration of the qualities of gravity and what can be conveyed by challenging, exhibiting or submitting to it appears to belong to a spectrum of human aspiration. The same aspiration to explore and explain, can also be found in the Greek mythologies that Robert Graves and countless others studied throughout the world and history. It can also be found in the religious doctrines that attempted to explain reality with the human senses alone and also in the current studies of contemporary science that use machines to broaden those senses vastly and which led to the discovery of gravitational waves predicted

by Einstein's theory of General Relativity over a hundred years ago. When reflecting on the progression of humanity in explaining the reality we dwell in and discussing this ardent need to explore and explain, whether that be, religious, scientific, philosophical, or artistic, the scientist Brian Cox put into words what appears to be the crucial first step in doing so. A first step that Faithfull, Turrell, and Ader all made that connects their practices.

**“To notice that there  
is something worth  
explaining, notice that  
the world is beautiful  
and then you proceed  
from there.”**

– [Brian Cox]

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## **LIST OF WORKS**

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