

Wadsworth Atheneum
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Ger van Elk
MATRIX 76

Campo Monte Bianco, 1977



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Dutch artist Ger van Elk sees the world in terms of dualities, repeatedly playing illusion and reality, representation and abstraction against one another. In the group of works being shown in MATRIX, the artist examines these dualities by juxtaposing two types of image-making--painting and photography. Landscape, an historically Dutch genre, is the unifying subject matter through which van Elk questions reality and the codes that represent it.

By definition, art is a fiction. A natural scene, whether depicted photographically or through the medium of paint on a two-dimensional surface is still an illusion. All of van Elk's works in the MATRIX exhibition underscore this point. In Mont Blanc, for example, the artist crops a color photograph of the snowcapped mountain range in a zig-zag line that mimics the jagged contour of the peaks. The blue sky with clouds is painted in by the artist. Conversely, in the adjoining panel, van Elk portrays the sky photographically and the mountains with vigorous daubs of white, grey and ochre paint. Van Elk wittily asks the viewer which is closer to the reality of a landscape--the color photograph or the painting.

In Mountain Lake (not in the Atheneum exhibition), van Elk takes the reality/illusion dichotomy a step further: the mountain is painted and its reflection is photographed. The painterly mountain assumes the position of reality normally accorded the photograph. The artist also allows the subject--the mountain and its reflection--to determine the diamond shape of the work. Tarn Mountain and Forest Lane are other examples of the artist's use of eccentric shape. The shape of Tarn Mountain is defined by the

direction of the surface markings on the face of the rocks. Forest Lane is an eight-foot long, one and one-half-inch high strip of brass lined with ninety postage stamp-size photographs of trees documenting a journey the artist took from Spain to Holland. Each photograph is paired with a corresponding miniature painting on a shelf hung along the lower edge of the wall strip.

An acute commentator on the history of art, van Elk enjoys poking fun at stylistic conventions. He paints in an impressionistic style (Mountain Lake), with abstract expressionist verve (Roquebrune II) (not in the Atheneum exhibition) and with geometric regularity (Tarn Mountain and Roquebrune). The styles of paint application he chooses are determined by the visual qualities of the corresponding photograph. In Tarn Mountain, for example, the natural markings in the photograph suggested to the artist the parallel, rectangular bands of black paint.

During the late sixties, van Elk was one of an international group of artists who, disenchanted with art as a decorative commodity, developed alternative ways of working. Many artists completely abandoned the art object. Michael Heizer and other land artists carved out colossal forms in the earth; others, like Vito Acconci and Bruce Nauman, used their own bodies as the subject in such temporal media as videotape, film, and performance; still other artists, Lawrence Weiner and Joseph Kosuth among them, presented their ideas in the form of pure language. All were reassessing the function and definition of art in the way that Marcel Duchamp, their spiritual forefather, had done half a century earlier. When

Duchamp made his first ready-made in 1915, a bicycle wheel mounted on a stool, he changed the focus of art from form to function, from appearance to conception, establishing an attitude which these young conceptual artists embraced.

At the beginning of his career, van Elk explored unconventional materials in his painting and sculpture and experimented with film and environmental works. He still enjoys the freedom of moving from one medium to another. In the catalogue for Documenta 7, the international contemporary art exhibition held in Kassel, West Germany last summer, he said, "Every language, every material seems to me to be legitimate for speaking and imagining." Photography played a major role in his works of the seventies. In common with his fellow countryman and conceptual artist, Jan Dibbets, van Elk found photography the most direct means of representing and analyzing the structures of reality. For the past few years, van Elk has been especially interested in painting. His paintings incorporating double self-portraits were included in Documenta 7.

Van Elk lives in Amsterdam, where he was born in 1942. He was a student of art history at Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles from 1961 to 1963, and he also lived in that city for a time during the seventies. It is probably not coincidental that van Elk shares a certain ironic viewpoint with such southern California artists as Bruce Nauman, Ed Ruscha and Al Ruppersburg.

Constance Lewallen
Curator of MATRIX Berkeley

NOTE:

Two works in this exhibition which were not included in the MATRIX Berkeley installation and are, therefore, not mentioned in Connie Lewallen's above essay, are Mont Blanc Chamonix (1977) and Campo Monte Bianco (1977). In these two large works Ger van Elk explores the delicate balance between reality and the various codes which art traditionally uses to refer to that reality. As in all other works in this installation, van Elk juxtaposes differing materials, shapes, images and ideas to prod the viewer to question and analyze our understanding about representation in art. The distinctions between painting and photography are presented to point up their similarities. Neither, in fact, represents truth. Both offer illusion.

The traditions of Dutch landscape painting surely come to mind. But more assertive, less incidental are the constructivist elements in van Elk's work. Usually diagrammatic, they intend to explain rather than represent. The works are often symmetric, geometric and programmatic. The viewer's awareness of the physical structure of the work -how the artist has organized the parts- keeps the viewer outside the work, thinking not dreaming. These objects use the structure of nature in order to elucidate the structure of art. Reciprocally, they use the structure of art to elucidate the structure of nature. The entire elegant dialogue concludes in an agreement that truth is elusive.

Andrea Miller-Keller
Curator of MATRIX

Works in MATRIX:

Mont Blanc, Chamonix, 1977, acrylic paint and color photograph, 48 1/2" x 95 2/3". Lent by The BOC Group, Inc., Montevale, NJ.

Campo Monte Bianco, 1977, acrylic paint and color photographs, 32 3/8" x 96 3/4". Lent by The Prudential Insurance Company of America, Newark, NJ.

Mont Blanc, 1977, acrylic paint and color photographs, 29" x 9 7/16". Lent by Marian Goodman Gallery, NYC.

Tarn Mountain, 1978, acrylic paint and color photograph 44" x 48" irregular. Lent by Marian Goodman Gallery, NYC.

Forest Lane, 1979, acrylic paint on paper and color photographs mounted on brass, 1 1/4" X 96". Lent by Marian Goodman Gallery, NYC.

Roquebrune, 1980, color photograph and silkscreen print, 35 1/2" x 67", edition of 30. Lent by Multiples, Inc., NYC.

Selected one-person exhibitions: Galerie Swart, Amsterdam, '66, '68; Art & Project, Amsterdam '70, '71, '72, '74, '77, '79; Claire Copley Gallery, LA, '74; Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Holland, '73, '74 (cats. pub.); Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, '74, '78, '79, '81, '83; Museum of Modern Art, NYC, Projects, '75; Palais des Beaux Arts, Brussels, '75; Kunsthalle, Basel, '80 (traveling exhibition, cat. pub.) Venice Biennale (Dutch Pavilion) '80; Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam '81; University Art Museum, Ger van Elk, MATRIX 58, Berkeley, CA, '83.

Selected exhibitions:

Dilexi Gallery, LA, '62; Kunsthalle, Bern, Switzerland, When Attitudes Become Form, '69; Kunsthalle, Dusseldorf, Prospect '71; Kassel, Documenta 5, 6, 7, '72, '77, '82 (cats. pub.); The Art Institute of Chicago, Europe in the Seventies: Aspects of Recent Art, '79.

Selected bibliography:

Celant, Germano. Art Povera, (NY: Praeger, '69).

Reise, Barbara. "The Return of Pierre Bonnard, 1917-1971," Studio International, vol. 185, no. 955 (May '73), p. 226.

Bourdon, David. "The Dutch Touch," The Village Voice, NYC, (April 21, '75.)

Crichton, Fenella. "Ger van Elk at Nigel Greenwood," Art International, vol. XX, no. 1, (January/February '76), p. 53+.

Van Tuyl, Gijs. Reflection & Reality, 1976 Visual Arts Office for Abroad of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Amsterdam (1976).

Foster, Hal. "Reviews: NY" Artforum, vol. XVI, no. 10, (June '78) p. 67+.

Ellenzweig, Allen. "Ger van Elk," Arts Magazine, vol. 52, no. 5 (January '78), p. 36.

Nadelman, Cynthia. "New Editions/Ger van Elk," Art News, vol. 79, no. 7 (September '80), p. 49+.

Puliafito, Isabella. "The Venice Biennale 1980: Ger van Elk," Artforum, vol. XIX, no. 3 (November '80), p. 97.

Francis, Richard. "Ger van Elk at the Boymans Museum," The Burlington Magazine, vol. CXXIII, no. 937 (April '81), p. 261+.

Linker, Kate. "Ger van Elk," Artforum, vol. XX, no. 5, (January '82), p. 83+.

Kuspit, Donald. "Ger van Elk at Marian Goodman," Art In America, vol. 70, no. 2 (February '82), p. 144+.