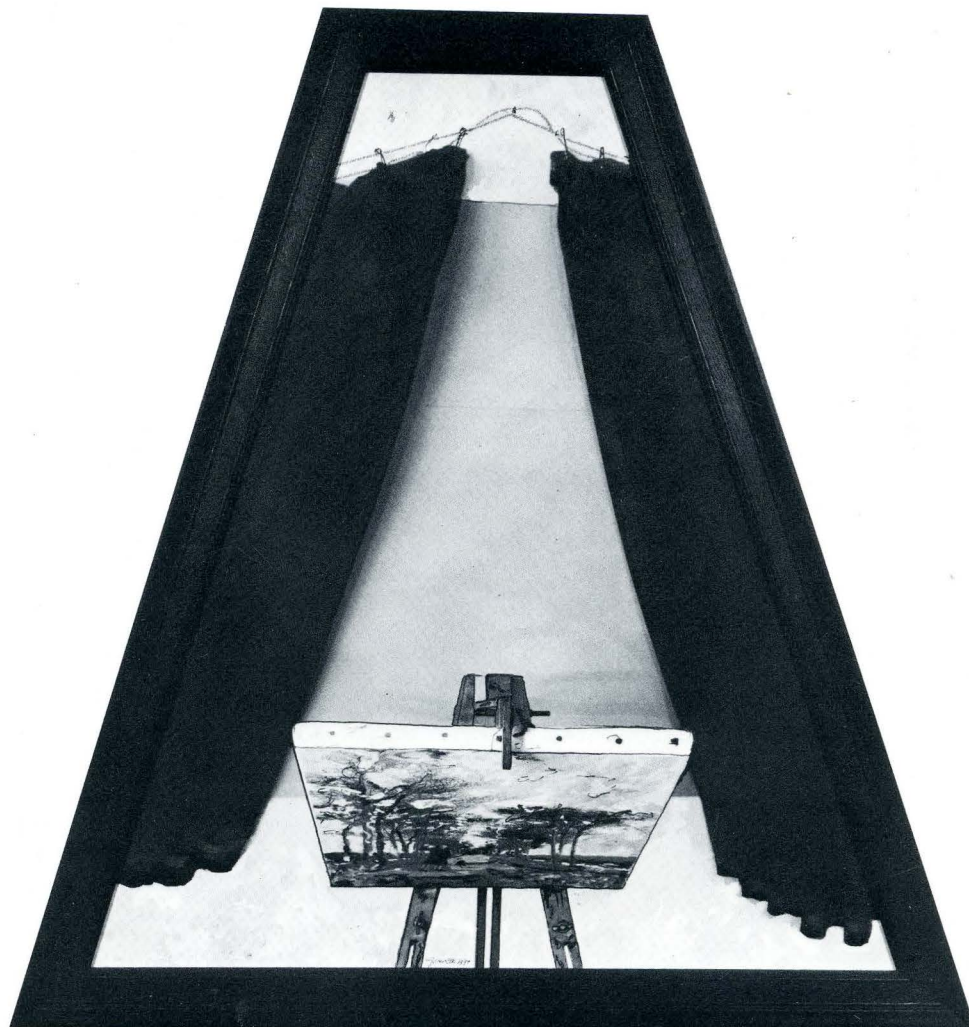


**39th Exhibition of the Society for Contemporary Art**  
**GER VAN ELK**



**June 20-July 29, 1984**  
**The Art Institute of Chicago**

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### *Biographical Note*

Ger van Elk was born in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, in 1941. He studied at the Applied Arts School in Amsterdam from 1959 to 1961. From 1961 to 1963 he studied art and art history at Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles, California, and from 1965 to 1966 he studied art history at the State University of Groningen in The Netherlands. Van Elk taught at Ateliers 63 in Haarlem from 1972 to 1981. The most recent and comprehensive publication to date on his work is the catalogue for the exhibition *Ger van Elk*, held in 1980/81 at the Kunsthalle Basel, Switzerland; the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, France; and the Museum Boymans- van-Beuningen, Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

Cover: *The Adieu III*, 1974. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Hedwig van Amerigen Foundation Fund

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Special thanks to A. James Speyer, Curator of 20th-Century Painting and Sculpture; Anne Rorimer, Associate Curator; and the staff of the 20th-Century Department for their help during the organization of this exhibition.

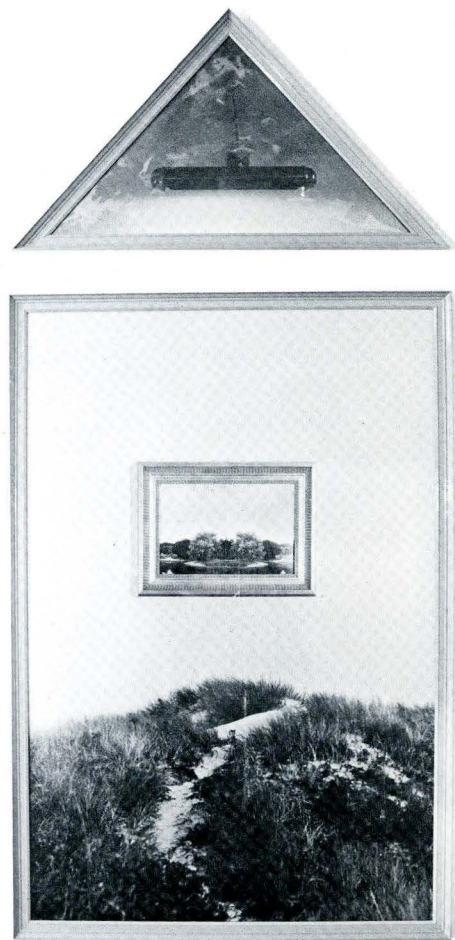
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**G**er van Elk (b. 1941) is one of the pre-eminent artists of the last two decades who has sought new approaches to traditional painting and sculpture. Since the late 1960s, photography has played a major role in these explorations on the part of both European and American artists. Among this group of innovators, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Gilbert and George, and John Baldessari are represented in the collections of The Art Institute of Chicago.

In his effort to discover new modes of pictorial representation, van Elk has relied on photographic images and has continually varied his method of presentation. His work of the last decade, surveyed in this exhibition, falls into four chronological groupings and, like his earlier work, reveals his underlying premise that art is sustained by the constant renewal of artistic invention.

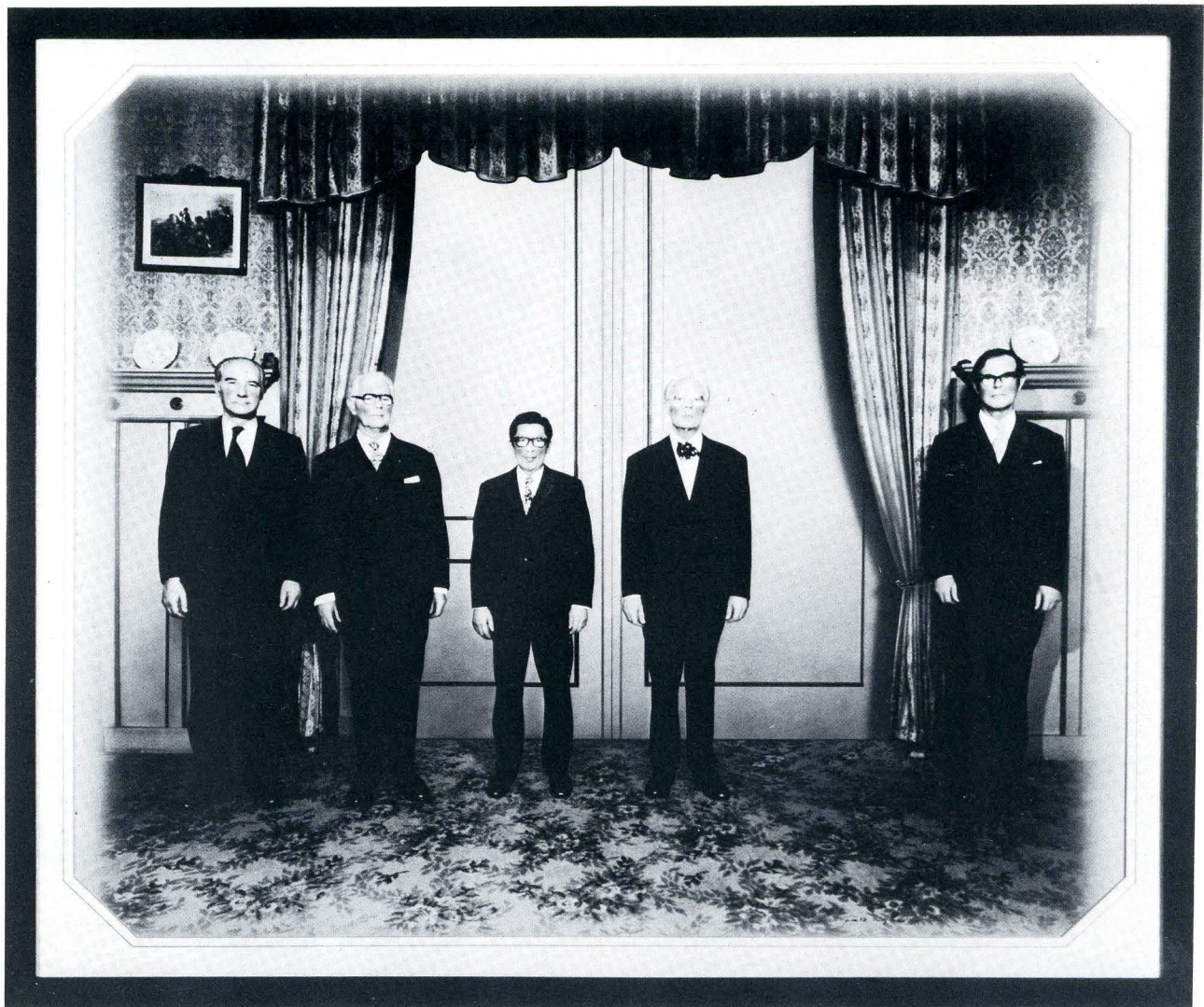
**I.** *The Adieu III* (1974)—one of a series of five paintings done, with gouache and ink on color photograph—is the earliest work presented in the exhibition. The paintings in the series are not conventionally rectangular; rather, each is contained within a differently proportioned, trapezoidal frame. This work's irregular shape contrasts with its subject matter—a traditional landscape painting, on its easel, set before a painted curtain and illusionistically tipped forward. A figure within the landscape waves, perhaps gesturing farewell, signaling an end to that earlier, illusionistic tradition to which the work refers. If the literal content of *The Adieu* series is the depiction of a painting within a painting on a stage, the thematic content must be read “in view of” the fictional nature of painted perspective. While the trapezoidal frame reinforces the fact that a painting is an object in its own right, the scene itself reminds the viewer that art, in fact, is merely staged and therefore is a fiction subject to the artist's manipulation.

In his subsequent *Symmetrical Landscapes Series* (1975) of which *La Tempesta*, shown in the exhibition, is one of four, van Elk once again turns the tradition of landscape painting to his own ends. In this piece, several stages of photography also are involved, starting with a photograph taken by van Elk of an actual



*At the Top of the White Dunes (Symmetrical Landscapes Series)*, 1975  
Dr. Rolf Krauss Collection, Stuttgart, Germany

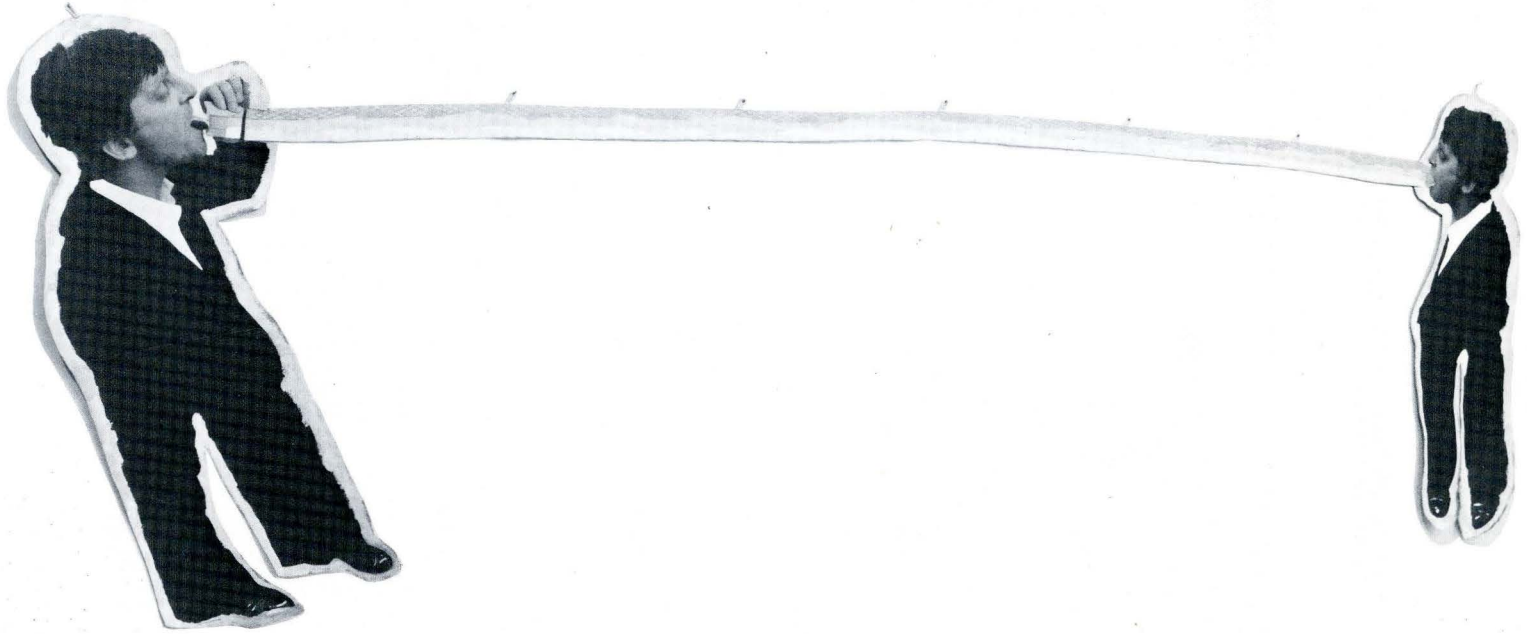
landscape. Having symmetrically collaged this photograph within a gold frame and then centered it within a larger, non-symmetrical photograph of sand dunes, he rephotographed the two together. A triangular-shaped photograph of the type of lamp traditionally attached to the frames of paintings hangs above this rectangular landscape within a landscape. The lighting fixture emits the semblance of colored light in the form of actual paint, which drips onto the landscape below. Within the fictional context of the work as a whole, van Elk raises questions about reality and artificiality. Painterly abstraction and photographic realism interrelate to produce a work of art which is not about nature, but about art as a vehicle of visual communication *in and of itself*.



*The Missing Persons—The Group*, 1976. The Morton G. Neumann Family Collection, Chicago

**II.** *The Missing Persons* (1976)—a series of six color photographs—refers indirectly to the long artistic tradition of group portraiture as well as to recent journalistic portraiture of diplomats and executives. In the work on view, as in each one of this series of posed individuals, the artist has removed—airbrushed out—one of the participating members. Aware that a significant element of the assembled company is missing—which affects the composition of the work as a whole—the viewer must accept the given scene as

seen. Van Elk subjects the given reality to his own artifice, indicating that art reflects the creative process and is not merely about empirical reality. By utilizing the laws of symmetry and composition, he succeeds in revoking the authority of these stolid figures. The humorous fact that one of these seemingly immutable pillars of convention has simply vanished may be understood as a metaphor for the artist's power to abolish previous artistic convention.

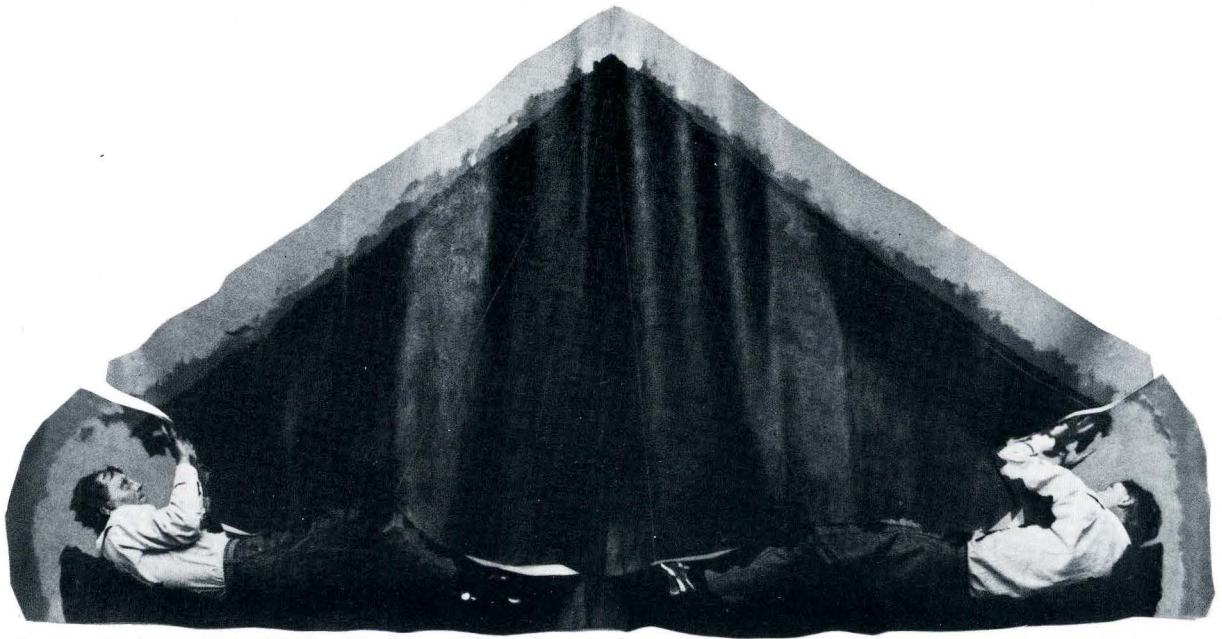


*OahwilliwhaO (Wall's Ice Cream)*, 1979. M. Sanders. Amsterdam

**III.** If earlier works by van Elk imply the process of artistic manipulation, such works as *OahwilliwhaO (Wall's Ice Cream)* (1979), *Les deux-moi* (1970), *Pulling Babies* (1980), *Pushing Sculpture* (1981), and *Sportive Sculpture* (1981) make the point by actually embodying the artist within their literal and thematic content. These works refer directly to the physicality of art and its creation. In *OahwilliwhaO* for example, the artist—shown in profile from two opposite sides—licks an absurdly long stick of ice cream. He confronts himself while performing a kind of miraculous stunt and wittily suggests that the artist is simultaneously depleted and nourished by his own resources. Van Elk considers *Les deux-moi* a discussion with himself.<sup>1</sup> The work employs photographic images of the artist

adhered to a piece of canvas, suspended on a cord. Two intersecting, cone-shaped wizard hats project from the nose of the artist, whose face is represented twice. In each case, the points of the hats have “dented”<sup>2</sup> his nose. The curtain-like work is both backdrop and veil, displaying what appears to be a double portrait of the artist, who in some manner is connected with sorcery.

In *Pulling Babies*, an image of the artist dives down from the ceiling to touch a grouping of babies. For van Elk, the babies—taken from old postcard images—signify history; and the artist quite literally reaches for, and extends from, these symbols of youth and innocence.



*Pushing Sculpture*, 1981. Marian Goodman Gallery, New York

Two works from 1981, *Pushing Sculpture* and *Sportive Sculpture*, portray specific physical activity on the part of the artist. From the two sides of *Pushing Sculpture* the artist lifts a mountain of paint resembling a curtain. The work intimates the artist's continuous struggle. As van Elk himself has pointed out, one can hide behind a mountain or a curtain, but a mountain cannot be moved. In *Sportive Sculpture*, van Elk seeks to translate the need for balance in sports into visual art, where balance also performs an essential function.<sup>3</sup> One observes an image of the artist performing a balancing act with bamboo poles on his nose. A colorful burst of paint, like a spark of inspiration or a completed connection, appears where the bamboo poles meet.

**IV.** During the last several years, van Elk's interest in the relationship between the abstraction of painting and the realism of photography has intensified. In 1982 he exhibited a series of numerous multi-colored flower still-lives called *Modern Flowers*; and in 1983-84 he showed a series of polar and tropical landscapes. In all of these works, van Elk freely applies, and often drips, high-gloss enamel paint—with direct reference to

Abstract Expressionism—integrating paint and photographic imagery. For the still-life pieces, he photographed his own flower arrangements; and for the landscapes, he took photographs on site. The close-up shots of the polar landscapes suggest distance, while the tropical landscapes create a sense of immediate contact with jungle flora and fauna. Each work is essentially differentiated, however, by the effect of its overall color. The polar landscapes are different shades of white; the tropical ones vary in their greens. Van Elk juxtaposes brushwork and photographic elements, as he did in earlier works such as *Mont Blanc* (1977) and *Mountain Lake* (1977). Neither painting nor photography takes precedence and, in the end, one simply experiences an artificial totality—the work of art.

Anne Rorimer, Associate Curator, Department of  
20th-Century Painting and Sculpture

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Footnotes—

1. Conversation between Anne Rorimer and Ger van Elk, May 9, 1984.
2. The French word *deux* in Dutch, van Elk's native language, resembles a word which means "dent" in English.
3. Conversation between Anne Rorimer and Ger van Elk, May 9, 1984.

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## Exhibition Checklist

1. *The Adieu III*, 1974  
Gouache and ink on color photograph in trapezoid frame  
39 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 36 $\frac{3}{8}$  inches  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York  
Hedwig van Amerigen Foundation Fund
2. *La Tempesta (from The Symmetrical Landscape Series)*, 1975  
Acrylic paint on color photograph  
94 x 47 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches  
The Gilman Paper Company Collection
3. *The Missing Persons—The Group*, 1976  
Retouched color photograph  
42 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 49 $\frac{5}{8}$  inches  
The Morton G. Neumann Family Collection, Chicago
4. *Mont Blanc*, 1977  
Acrylic paint on linen, color photographs on aluminum  
10 x 60 inches  
Marian Goodman Gallery, New York
5. *Mountain Lake*, 1977  
Acrylic paint on linen, color photographs on aluminum  
41 $\frac{5}{8}$  x 68 inches  
Collection of the R.S.M. Company, Cincinnati
6. *The Forest Lane II*, 1979  
Color photographs and acrylic paint on brass  
2 x 96 inches  
Marian Goodman Gallery, New York
7. *Forest Hill II*, 1979  
Color photographs and acrylic paint on brass  
55 x 106 inches  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. David C. Ruttenberg, Chicago
8. *OahwilliwhaO (Wall's Ice Cream)*, 1979  
Acrylic paint and color photographs on canvas  
41 x 137 $\frac{7}{8}$  inches  
Collection of M. Sanders, Amsterdam
9. *Les deux-moi*, 1979  
Acrylic paint and color photographs on canvas  
59 x 61 inches  
Art and Project, Amsterdam
10. *Midnight Babies*, 1980  
Color photographs and acrylic paint on canvas  
37 x 125 inches  
Nigel Greenwood Inc. Ltd., London
11. *Pulling Babies*, 1980  
Photographs and acrylic paint on canvas, elastic cord  
102 x 72 inches  
Marian Goodman Gallery, New York
12. *Pushing Sculpture*, 1981  
Photographs and acrylic paint on canvas  
60 x 108 inches  
Marian Goodman Gallery, New York
13. *Sportive Sculpture*, 1981  
Photographs and acrylic paint on canvas  
108 x 108 inches  
Marian Goodman Gallery, New York
14. *White Lilies on Glitter Cloth*, 1982  
Enamel paint on photograph  
53 x 42 inches  
Collection of Arthur and Carol Goldberg
15. *Splash Reed Tulips*, 1982  
Enamel paint on photograph  
41 $\frac{1}{2}$  X 41 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches  
Marian Goodman Gallery, New York
16. *Uninorth*, 1983  
Enamel paint on photograph  
66 x 66 inches  
Marian Goodman Gallery, New York
17. *Stereotropical*, 1983-4  
Enamel paint on photograph and map  
66 x 66 inches  
Marian Goodman Gallery, New York
18. *Amazon Waters*, 1983-4  
Enamel paint on photograph  
39 x 62 inches  
Marian Goodman Gallery, New York

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## *Society for Contemporary Art*

The Society for Contemporary Art is an independent group of friends of The Art Institute of Chicago who share a special interest in the museum's contemporary collections, exhibitions, and programs. Each year members of the Society organize an exhibition from which works of art are selected as gifts for the museum; and in this way, the Society has been responsible for some of the Art Institute's most outstanding acquisitions of contemporary art.

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