

# ARTFORUM

April 2019

## Ger van Elk GRIMM GALLERY

The art of Dutch Conceptualist Ger van Elk (1941–2014) arrived stateside for a solo outing, the artist's first in America since the dealer Marian Goodman, organizer of fellow jokester Marcel Broodthaers's inaugural US exhibition, showed his work back in 1986. Though the two men share many poetic and intellectual concerns—most notably an affinity for Duchampian wit—Van Elk's exploration of the life of images centers on the photograph, which he called his “faithful friend and basis.” In order to reintroduce Americans to Van Elk in advance of a 2021 retrospective at Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum, Grimm Gallery, itself a Dutch enterprise, played host to a wide-ranging selection of works from his decades-long career, via painting, photography, sculpture, video, and more.

*A Piece for Increased Security*, 1986, conjured the artist's absence. Suspended between the ceiling and the floor via linen and elastic bands was a perspectivally warped photograph of a man. He is dressed in a black suit jacket and white button-down, which are rendered in thick strokes of acrylic paint. The semiformal clothing nearly swallows up the figure—only his unadorned hands and left ear suggest the picture beneath. Given Van Elk's propensity to play with self-portraiture—mixed in with a soupçon of gallows humor—*A Piece for Increased Security* is easy to see as an image of the artist having hung himself.

The earliest works here, two low-lying tents titled *Camping Art I* and *II*, 1967 and 1968, respectively, date to the years immediately preceding Van Elk's inclusion in “Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form,” curator Harald Szeemann's 1969 survey of new art practices at the Kunsthalle Bern in Switzerland. These rigorously composed sculptures suggest not only the rise of post-Minimalism but also the concurrent deepening of the Vietnam War. As Thomas Crow mentioned in this magazine in 2011, Van Elk studied with Sister Corita Kent, a noted antiwar activist and artist, when he attended Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles from 1961 to 1963. *Camping Art I*—a white tent constructed out of canvas, lace, and gauze, tethered to the gallery's concrete floor with an elaborate array of guy ropes and tent poles—rises less than three feet high. Any attempt to use the delicate construction for shelter would result in its immediate annihilation. *Camping Art II* retains the former's basic structure, but trades in the gossamer for thick, greenish-gray canvas of the type used in pup tents employed by soldiers in Vietnam. These prostrate emblems of the conflict became familiar to civilians due to their omnipresence in newspapers and on television. Van Elk's ineffectual tents prompted the viewer to imagine a foreign landscape while they called into question the utility of the Western tools of war.



Along with self-portraiture and landscape, still life was yet another genre of Dutch painting that Van Elk liked to toy with. This exhibition's namesake, *The Rose more Beautiful than Art, but Difficult, therefore Art is Splendid*, 1972, consists of a framed oval watercolor depicting three roses in a white vase. A projector layers onto this scene an animation featuring the artist's hand arranging a spectral fourth flower. By introducing movement to the tableau, Van Elk parodies his Netherlandish artistic forbearers while discreetly honoring his father, whose virtuosity as an animator brought the Van Elk family to Hollywood back in 1961. An LCD screen handsomely mounted in an oak frame comprised *The Waterfall—Eternal Family Piece*, 2002. It plays a video of cascading rapids intercut with black-and-white family photographs of unknown origin, demonstrating the artist's interest in personal and art-historical genealogy. The spirit of Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés*, 1946–66, purposefully haunts the piece. Van Elk does away with the work's painstakingly constructed illusion of depth by isolating the kinetic element of the background landscape, the waterfall, and bringing it to the foreground. Is an LCD screen as eternal a technology as the motorized rotating discs Duchamp used to animate his aquatic feature? Only time will tell.

—Canada Choate

View of “Ger van Elk,” 2019. On wall, from left: *Sandwich Study ‘Tombe’ (C de X)*, 1994; *Cloudy Conscience (C de X)*, 1994; *Los Angeles Freeway Flyer*, 1973–2003. On floor: *Camping Art II*, 1968. Photo: Max Yawney.