

Ger van Elk | September 2017

OTTERLO, THE NETHERLANDS
KRÖLLER-MÜLLER MUSEUM

One of the first pieces visitors encounter when approaching the KröllerMüller Museum is by Ger van Elk (1941-2014), though it can easily be trampled underfoot without notice. Replacement Piece, 1969/2011, is a permanently installed square meter of pavement that has been removed and cleanly substituted with a digital print of itself to scale. This slight tweak in the fabric of normality, this unnecessary embellishment, is classic Van Elk. The piece was first realized outside the Kunsthalle Bern, in Switzerland, for Harald Szeemann's 1969 post-Minimal buffet "Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form," for which this artist was a catalytic figure.

Van Elk's legacy has recently been coming back into view, and this past spring witnessed not only this special exhibition at the Kröller-Müller but a double-venue show at Grimm Gallery in Amsterdam, while a full retrospective is being prepared for 2019 at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Most of the sixteen works shown at the Kröller-Müller, dating from the 1970s through the early 2000s, were drawn from a 2013 gift by Van Elk's late dealer, Adriaan van Ravesteijn of Art 8c Project gallery. This may sound like unsold inventory, but some of the inclusions here were key works, and in any case the distinction seems irrelevant to begin with for these unfiltered, ludic statements. One room featured the slide-show sculpture Paul Klee- Um den Fisch (Paul Klee-Around the Fish), 1970, which recomposes moma's Paul Klee painting using wilted flowers and awkward scraps arranged on a tabletop around a gradually eaten fish carcass. Here, it was paired with two works from the 2000s, Birds over Seurat, 2004, and Birds flying Henri Cross, 2006/2007, for which Van Elk matted and framed LCD screens playing pixelated animations of bird flocks over pointillist landscapes. Such juxtapositions of old and new made clear Van Elk's unprecious yet umbilical relation to art history and his continual, almost reckless poking at the question of what constitutes a work of art.

In his output from Los Angeles in the 1970s we see the artist soaking up the West Coast vernacular of the time: It's me twice as flat as I can be, 1973, mimics a macrame or tiki-themed wall hanging. Here, a bamboo and elastic construction supports two cutouts-one upside down-of the artist's head. His eyes and mouth are shut as if he is trying to flatten himself into the format. The piece is lightweight and collapsible, and its title gives us a clue: If the humor falls flat or seems too literal, so much the better. The elastic is actually men's suspenders- old-world accoutrements, like the wooden canes of the nearby Los Angeles freeway flyer, 1973, which are wrapped with aerial views of cars on a highway.

Optical skew and physical jut are married in many of Van Elk's works-see his signature exaggeratedly shaped frames. And in a piece of his from the permanent collection, not the exhibition, Hoe hoeker hoe platter (The Wider the Flatter), 1972/2007, ten thin strips of mounted photographs protruded from the corner of the room at eye level, showing reproductions of the wall behind them. Van Elk would often translate from three to two dimensions and back again. Rarely content, as many of his Conceptual peers were, to employ photography simply as a document, he liked to work between perceptual realms of sight (photography) and spatial awareness (sculpture), folding them back onto each other in the space of the gallery.

Painting was an important warping tool for him as well, and here it took on various forms. Paint adorned triangular flaps layered on the ground like a rug (Tarn sculpture, 1980), conjured something stored in the attic of cultural memory (Parliament of the mind, 1992), and was sprinkled atop stylish 1980s photographs of flower bouquets or fruit arrangements. Three works from 1979 were made of linen cinched on lengths of string and tethered to the wall, with retouched photographic images and acrylic paint flourishes on their surfaces.

These recall Van Elk's early tent sculptures-low-lying canvas shelters pulled taut and staked to the floor-as well as his recurrent imagery of drawn curtains and starched tablecloths. The faux-luxurious motifs signal the deliberately theatrical, staged element behind all of the work, a characteristic shared with the Hollywood aesthetic of his friend William Leavitt, or with Van Elk's earlier collaborator turned comic actor Wim T. Schippers, and perhaps with a whole generation of cutups and jesters from which Van Elk emerged and amid whose ranks his shifting perspectives still stand out.

-Annie Ochmanek