

Manfred Mohr
NEW YORK CITY, USA
bitforms gallery

Germany played a key role in the early history of computer art. In 1969, Manfred Mohr began his foray in the field and quickly established himself as a central figure alongside earlier pioneers like Frieder Nake and Georg Nees. While one of the first documented exhibitions of computer art 'Generative Computergrafik' took place at the Technische Hochschule in Stuttgart in 1965, Mohr's first solo museum show in 1971 – 'Computer Graphics. Une esthétique programmée' (A programmed aesthetic) at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris – is considered one of the earliest major exhibitions of computer art in the world.



Manfred Mohr, *P-159-A*, 1974

The French title of Mohr's retrospective at bitforms – 'Manfred Mohr: 1964–2011, Réflexions sur une esthétique programmée' (Reflections on a programmed aesthetic) – paid homage to this history. The exhibition, organized by Laura Blereau, encompassed 38 works from Mohr's career along with documentation from the 1971 show, including a wall panel with visitors' reactions to the question 'What do you think of creative research assisted by computers?' (Responses, most of them negative, ranged from 'The computer will not be the paintbrush of the 20th century.' to 'Awful, it hurts my eyes.')

Computer art had a different meaning in the 1960s and early 1970s, before the advent of personal computers; it is impressive to see the range of expression that Mohr coaxed out of the limited tools of that era. Back then, one had to transfer a code onto punch cards, feed the cards into a computer, run the program, transfer the data to magnetic tape and, finally, transfer the tape to a pen plotter – a massive, finicky machine which slowly executed the drawing with a single pen.

In *P-021* (1970–83), the thin, jagged lines – drawn by the plotter – get thicker, tangle with each other and unwind before joining again. Works like *P-190a* (1976) – a series of line drawings of cubes in various states of unravelling – look like studies for a unique visual language. At times, the lines resemble the structure of DNA or a musical score, which should come as no surprise. Before delving into computer art, Mohr was an action painter and a jazz musician. The furious scribbles, smudges and whorls of his early paintings, such as *Schrift-Bild* (Writing-Picture, 1964), stand in contrast to the clean, stark lines of his computer-based work from the 1970s to the present. But it would be too easy to classify his early computer art as rigid. In *P-159-A* and *P-159-B* (both 1974), Mohr augments plotter drawings with tangles of black thread, stitching darting and curved lines into the geometric patterns.

Mohr found inspiration in the German philosopher Max Bense's writings on information aesthetics and the French composer Pierre Barbaud's work in computer music. This pairing was no accident, as computer art owes a great debt to computer music. Pioneering research in computer music in the 1950s demonstrated the computer's potential as a creative tool, offering concrete technical steps for early artists. In the United States, groundbreaking computer music research by Max Mathews and others at Bell Labs, beginning in 1957, paved the way for experiments in computer art by Ken Knowlton, A. Michael Noll and others in the early 1960s. For Mohr, Bense provided a conceptual framework; Barbaud, the technical framework. There was no music to be heard in this intriguing exhibition, but the link between computer music and Mohr's art could be felt – not only in the technical implementation but also in the unique 'programmed aesthetic' of the works themselves.

—by Geeta Dayal