HYPERALLERGIC
Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Is the World Now Ready for Computer Art Pioneer Manfred Mohr?
by Mark Sheerin, December 5, 2012.

BRIGHTON, UK — The difficulties facing post-war German artists can seem insurmountable. And it may not be fair to the likes of Beuys, Kiefer, or Richter to look for an adequate response to the worst atrocities of World War II; we should surely share the guilt around. But a lesser-known artist from Pforzheim has apparently cracked the worst dilemmas facing his countrymen. His name is Manfred Mohr and he has maneuvered German art out of its cul-de-sac with a healthy dose of logic and a working knowledge of early computer technology.

In a career spanning more than 45 years, Mohr has created work with strictly limited self expression, little overt passion, and next to no irrationalism. In other words, he has neutralized the emotive rhetoric of the far right and offered a panacea to a continent which, in the mid-20th century, was still scarred by war. He did so by removing human agency, with all its flaws, and handing control of his art to one of the most powerful mainframe computers in the world.

Manfred Mohr at Gallery Carroll / Fletcher (All photos courtesy author for Hyperallergic)

It was 1969. The CDC 6400 was the size of a proverbial room. And it was housed in a meteorological institute in Paris. Mohr learned to keypunch Hollerith cards and program using FORTRAN IV. These were rare skills in the history of art, and the results emerged from an elaborate printer, the Benson 1286 flatbed plotter. The printer took a line for a rigid, meandering, and compelling walk across a wide sheet of paper. The results were impossible to predict or decipher, but suggestive of a new and elevated order in human relations.

That may be a bold claim for an art form in its infancy, but Mohr's endeavors were backed up with well-reasoned German philosophy. There was renewed interest in his homeland in a two-century-old project to develop mathematical rules for beauty. And at the Technische Hochschule in Stuttgart, a lecturer in aesthetics, Max Bense, staged the first ever exhibition of 'computer art' in a 1965 seminar.

Manfred Mohr, "P522d" (1997)

Two months later, the Howard Wise gallery in New York put on a similar show, also said to be the first of its kind. The four contributors to these two shows all came from science backgrounds. It took a bona-fide artist to realize the world's first solo show of generative art. This was, of course, Mohr, avid reader of Bense and now a purposeful expert in computing. His computer graphics-driven "Une Esthétique Programmée" took place at the Musee d'art Modern in Paris in 1971 — and the art world wasn't ready.

"In the '70s it was more like a no-no whenever you used the word computer," Mohr reveals via a glitchy Skype connection. "People got angry with you. It was like talking about pornography or something. People got very intimidated because they didn't even know what a computer is, so whenever I showed my work somewhere, or I talked computers, there was complete aggression all the time." Although the situation improved towards the eighties, he still detects an underlying negativity towards computers in the arts.

But the New York-based artist was an unlikely convert to the cause of technology. Mohr started out his career as a free-wheeling abstract expressionist and successful jazz musician playing oboe, clarinet, and tenor saxophone. It was music that convinced him to pursue a hyper-rational form of art. He says: "Music is full of rules. You can't say 'I don't like this, I don't like that.' You have to follow the rules."
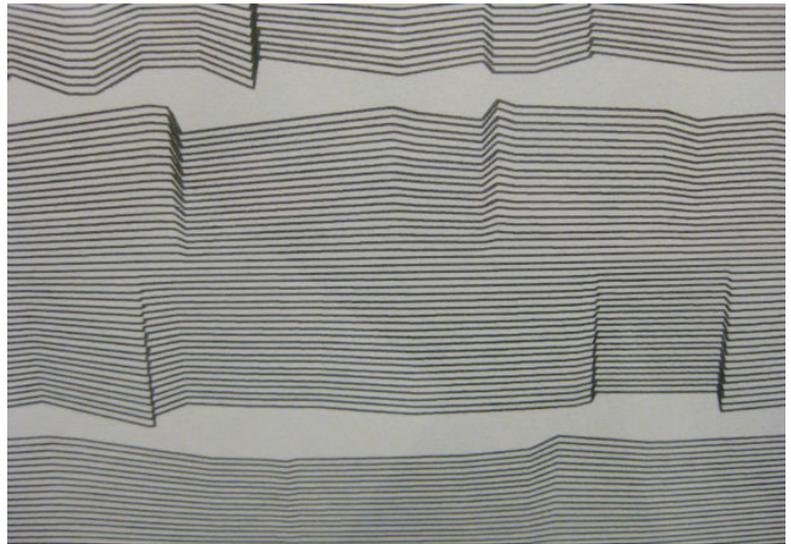
Manfred Mohr, plotter drawing (detail)

Along with Bense, the artist was influenced by an intellectual friendship with French composer Pierre Barbaud, who also followed algorithms in his work. "The content of my work is the algorithm," Mohr says unambiguously. This self-taught programmer may decide what he wants and how he wants it, but once he has a visual idea, "That's where I start working slowly on the algorithm and at the end when I decide okay, that's it. Then everything else that comes out from this algorithm I accept, even though sometimes I might not like it. But it's in itself correct." As he says, you have to follow the rules.

It took some six or seven years between reading Bense and discovering computers for Mohr to figure out what form his work would take. The philospher's positivism may have been out of step with the post-structuralist thinking of the time, but it resounded with the technically minded Mohr: "Entropy means that all order will eventually end up in disorder, and [Bense] turned it around and made negative entropy: we start with disorder and the highest form of getting to something good is through the order."
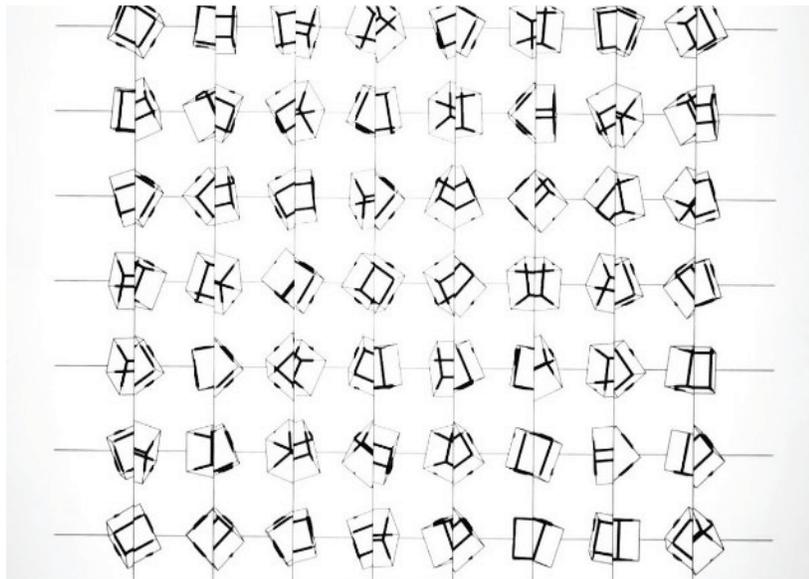
Many years later, in the West End of London, Mohr is bringing order to his first solo show in the UK. Gallery Carroll / Fletcher has pulled together recent work upstairs and historic pieces in its bunker-like basement. Upstairs, one encounters a dozen letters from a seeming alien alphabet rendered in lacquered steel. P-499aa (1993) cries out for decipherment — but good luck with that. Other recent works include hypnotic screen-based animations that defy all predictions and fractious black and white patterns on canvas stretched over wildly irregular frames. On all sides there appears to be evidence of a higher intelligence.

This may be proven when you descend the concrete stairs into a space housing some of Mohr's seminal drawings and prints. Here you are confronted with close ups of circuitry from as early as the late 1960s: "Bild-1968 [26/768]" and "Bild-1968 [24/768]." These put us right inside the motherboard, from which vantage point we can't but wonder at the endless riffs on cuboid shapes, angular scribbles, and beautiful, undulating, stave-like bands, as if this computer might even have a musical heart. What comes across most strongly from this display is the infinite patience and precision of the works' creators, both Mohr and his machine.

Manfred Mohr, "P-499aa" (1993)

More warmth is suggested by a 16mm film in which a grid of spinning cubes build up line by line and then dismantle at a similar pace. With sepia tones and a clattering projector, "Cubic Limit (1973-74)" feels a little like nostalgia in this high-tech context. Unlike a looped film, human progress is irreversible. So those ideals of the late sixties and early seventies, embodied by the plotter drawings on this floor, look as daring and as doomed as any failed project of modernism. Computers have not rid humankind of emotive politics, if anything, they have fostered it (as any time spent on Twitter should ably demonstrate).

Manfred Mohr, "Cubic Limit" (1972-77) (Image via cmuems.edu)

But there is still a weight to Mohr's work and a virtue in the slowness with which he took up computer science. New media moves quick these days. Game hacker Cory Arcangel has completed five major projects in the last half dozen years. Wade Guyton, together with his Epson printers, has gone from a near standing start to a Whitney retrospective in just over the same amount of time.

This may be art for our times, but our times surely have less purpose. "I know those names," says Mohr, when I ask about these young Turks, "but I'm not aware of what they're doing." It doesn't seem worth pressing, but nevertheless, you'd hope today's new media artists, more than 100 of which have their own pages on Wikipedia, are all well aware of their trailblazing colleague Mohr. You'd hope they're well aware of what he's doing and, with the fascist threat still alive in Europe and beyond, one reason why he does it.

Manfred Mohr's one and zero runs at Gallery Carroll/Fletcher (56/57 Eastcastle Street, London) through December 20.