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# this is tomorrow

## Manfred Mohr: one and zero

by Catherine Spencer, December 11, 2012.

At the start of his career as a visual artist, the German-born Manfred Mohr also moonlighted as a jazz musician. While the analogy between abstraction and music might be feeling a little tired, in terms of Mohr's practice it is still productive – specifically the musical idea of potentially infinite variation in modulation and tone, but within the parameters of a set score. In 'One and Zero' at Carroll/Fletcher this is particularly evident in Mohr's predilection for working in series and pairs, which allows him to push the same compositional elements of line, shape and colour through related but constantly changing modulations.

The musical analogy also has a more direct root here, in that an early encounter with the music of French composer Pierre Barbaud revolutionised Mohr's practice. Prior to this Mohr had worked in a primarily abstract-expressionist vein: Barbaud alerted Mohr to the possibility of using algorithms to create works, and set him on the path of radical computer art in which he has experimented ever since. Barbaud's influence intersected with that of the philosopher Max Bense, whose writings confirmed Mohr's emergent conviction that creativity could be explained as the result of logical process, rather than ineffable terms such as imagination or genius. In 1969, Mohr got his hands on a plotter – an automated drawing machine programmed to make marks – and put these ideas to the test.

These initial plotter drawings are compellingly graceful and calligraphic. 'P-52' (1970) is composed of a series of finely drawn waves, which take on a sculptural, almost geological quality, their op-art flicker creating pleats and folds. In this work the plotter lines mimic those of both the musical score and the seismograph; elsewhere, in 'P-196' (1977) Mohr uses the plotter to work through the skeleton of a cube, according to the addition and subtraction of its various planes, resulting in a sheet covered with protean, shifting forms. These drawings are infused with a utopian zeal of endless invention and potentiality, rather than the associations of cold, clinical or repetitive that the term 'computer art' might evoke. That this potentiality springs from pre-established terms is, paradoxically enough, reminiscent of the Blakean adage of seeing the world in a grain of sand.

In a 2011 interview with Pau Waelder, Mohr remarked that 'an abstract content of a work is the purest form of transmitting information. It excludes unnecessary associations and brings interpretation to a new level of communication.' Mohr's austere, geometric forms can be powerfully engrossing at a formal level, as in an early short film entitled 'Cubic Square' (1973-4) which begins with the four bounded sides of a square and then moves through mesmeric permutations of the cubic form. 'Cubic Square' provides an aesthetic and conceptual bridge with Mohr's recent use of LCD screens in his work and his re-introduction of colour, having worked predominantly in black and white since the 1960s. 'P-1441c' (2010) consists of a small monitor softly glowing with rectangular shapes morphing into each other, while 'P-777f' (2004) is an extremely complex array of colours and cats-cradle lines through which shapes are continually formulated and reformulated, moving dizzily in and out of flatness and depth. The jointed metal constructions on show in 'One and Zero' share this sense of indeterminate, potentially infinite movement, clinging to the walls like crystallisations of one particular moment in a continual train of thought, apparently random yet carefully calibrated.

Mohr's work confounds simple distinctions between artificial and natural, programming and improvisation, tacitly underlining that the human and electronic are intertwined rather than binary opposites. Artists have of course had recourse to many machines throughout history, from camera obscura and drawing machines, to the airbrush and industrial fabrication processes. The labour in Mohr's work is of a different kind to that of the Minimalist object, however: rather than the issue of an object's making, his concern seems to be more with mental generation, with tracing out the patterns of neural synapses and pathways. This, as Ara Merjian recently suggested in 'Artforum', brings Mohr's work into suggestive alignment with the Neo-Concretism of Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark; it also marks affinities with kinetic sculptural experimentation. It's a testament to the forward-thinking and radical nature of Mohr's oeuvre that the works on show at Carroll/Fletcher from the later 1960s and '70s feel as challenging and fresh as the recent pieces from the 2000s. Exhibitions such as 'One and Zero', together with others like the 2011 show of Darrell Viner's computer drawings from the 1970s at Leeds Art Gallery, are an important reminder that computer art has a rich and varied lineage stretching back over several decades.



"Manfred Mohr, one and zero Carroll / Fletcher, 2012  
Photo credit: Julian Abrams"