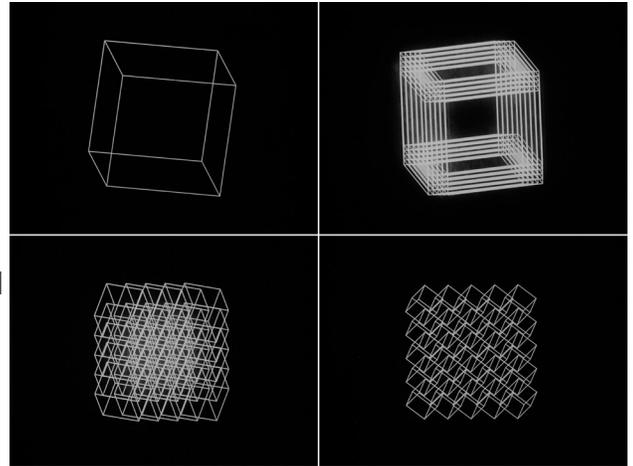


Manfred Mohr: *A Formal Language*

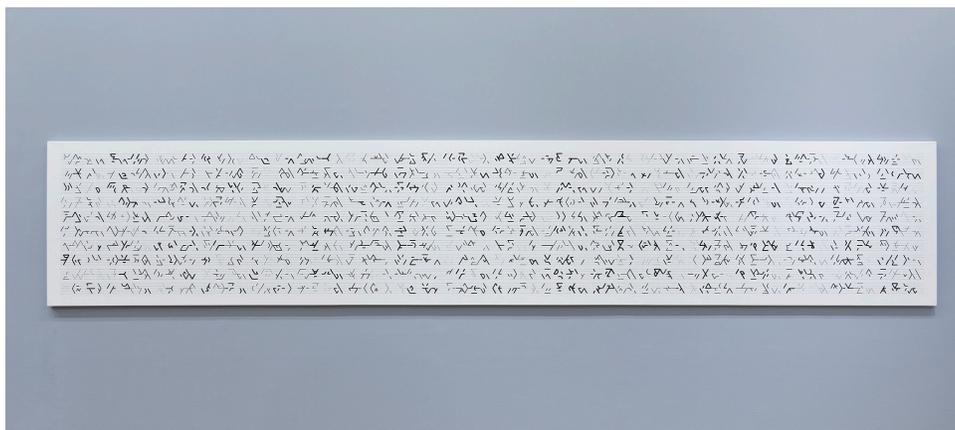
By Charlotte Kent

"Computer graphics is a young and new way of aesthetic communication; it integrates human thinking, mechanical handling, logic, new possibilities of drawing, and incorruptible precision of drawing—a new DUKTUS!" So wrote Manfred Mohr in 1971 celebrating this "duktus," the Latin term for handwriting, also used in German to acknowledge the individual peculiarities of a medium or someone's style. Mohr's distinctive approach to art is well demonstrated by *A Formal Language* at Bitforms Gallery, a 50-year retrospective of this key figure in the history of art and technology. His works present a dialogue about and between human and machine, and they highlight the beauty of mathematics. A knowledge of math, however, is not necessary to enjoy them.



Manfred Mohr, *Cubic Limit*, 1973–1974. 16mm film, black and white, silent, with digital transfer, 4 min. Courtesy bitforms gallery, New York.

The exhibition opens with an early work, *Cubic Limit* (1973–1974). This four-minute film provides an introduction to Mohr's interest in the visual appeal of line and cube. The work is displayed in its original 16mm format, and the old projector that Bitforms uses for this purpose rumbles and clacks as Mohr's film generates cubes within cubes, lines upon lines, creating a hypnotic effect that helps the mind shift into the systems of these works. *P2400-299_714*, originally from 1977 but here shown as an inkjet print on canvas from 2018, stretches across one of the walls of the gallery. It is the largest piece, with a gravitational force that gathers people to try to "read" the algorithm that generates the image. This work is based on a diagonal pathway through a six-dimensional hypercube; diagonal paths connect two opposite points through a hypercube network, but they only pass through each dimension once. For those interested in better understanding the mathematics underlying any of these pieces, the gallery provides helpful descriptions in a binder at the front of the gallery. Three pieces placed next to *P2400-299_714* are from the same series, developed from the same algorithmic base. Comparing one with the next helps to reveal the "steps" of the algorithm, and helps introduce viewers to the systematic logic of Mohr's work.



Manfred Mohr, *P2400-299_714_large_4*, 2018 (1977). Pigment ink on canvas

Mohr's interests, however, go beyond the geometric. The influence of music is also crucial: in the 1960s he played the tenor saxophone and oboe in jazz clubs across Europe and was a member of the rock-n-roll band Rocky Volcano. This important aspect of Mohr's background is manifested in different ways. Some works have marks plotted on paper seeming much like staph paper. The five lines of the staph and the breaks in bars make the algorithm's markings appear like musical notations. The role of music becomes obvious in a series executed between 2006 and 2010 that was inspired by Klangfarben: a German composition technique that uses different instruments to play the same note. Although Mohr's works are made using complex algorithms necessitating a computer, they are not best seen online. The latest series, *Algorithmic Modulations*, consists of a custom software that generates a time-based work, *P2610_A* (2019), which is shown on an LCD screen. Four related works on paper are also on display. Though all of these are individual works, they speak to one another as a set of forms seen in different aesthetic configurations. Their human scale reinforces how much Mohr's project relies on relationship. The works are beautifully laid out in the gallery, guiding viewers one to the next. You will want to lean in to Mohr's images, and make sense of the changing positions of a line as it moves down the staph. You don't need to understand why things change—the boldness of the line or morphing shapes, as in *P2610_A*—to appreciate some underlying affiliation. And yet, they seem to inspire a plethora of creative associations in those who take time with them. These works are not “about” time and space or the cycles of nature and human experience, as some viewers commented, but they do encourage a thoughtful response in viewers.

A vitrine in the center of the gallery provides historic documentation about Mohr's process, such as Fortran manuals, punch cards, a print out of his first algorithm from 1969, and past catalogs. It also includes a reproduction of the wall panel at his 1971 exhibition where he asked visitors to respond to the question: “What do you think about aesthetic research that is assisted by a computer?” People's views then sound familiar, despite the ubiquity of computers today:

“L'esprit commande, la machine execute.”

“A frighteningly beautiful (stainless steel) step in the wrong direction.”

“It bores me.”

“Everything the machine knows to do, it does better than man.”

Looking at the three dozen works by Mohr from the last 50 years provides a sense that we still don't quite know how to accept, let alone navigate, the human-machine dynamic, especially as it presents in art. *A Formal Language* continues to encourage a dialogue about its possibilities.



Installation view: Manfred Mohr: *A Formal Language*, bitforms gallery, New York, 2019. Courtesy bitforms gallery, New York.

Photo: Emile Askey

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