VERA MOLNAR | MACHINE IMAGINAIRE

Solo exhibition

January 28 - April 01, 2023

The famous concept of the “Machine Imaginaire”, meaning the imaginary computer by Vera Molnar from the 1960s, provides access to her entire oeuvre, consisting of drawings, paintings, collages and later also many computer drawings or prints. The basis was always her vision, her concept, which she often developed further in series. In the beginning, she only imagined the computer, but from 1968 onwards it enabled an important expansion of her creative work. Vera Molnar has already gone down in the history of digital art as an important pioneer. However, to reduce her merits to her use of the computer would not do justice to her work of over 70 years.

Vera Molnar celebrated her 99th birthday in January and we are taking this as an opportunity to provide an insight into her work alongside the plotter drawings that have helped shape her work over the decades. DAM Projects will show examples of various phases of her work, including drawings, collages, mixed media and paintings, as well as computer works from the last 40 years.

The art historian Zsofi Valyi-Nagy, who extensively researched her life’s work, wrote:

“Familiar viewers will recognize Molnar’s visual language: her geometric forms, her variations on a theme, and her minimalistic lines, which, whether drawn by hand or with a plotter, are unmistakably hers. In her artist’s statement for the 1981 Berlin show, Molnar wrote that she uses geometric shapes not because she finds them more beautiful or “better” than other shapes, but because they resist subjective interpretations. From a practical perspective, they are also easier to describe and manipulate. Indeed, in early vector graphics systems, circles, squares, and lines were the simplest forms one could ‘draw’ with a computer.”

An Error in the System: Vera Molnar's Experimental Computer Graphics

When Paul Klee wrote "Kunst ist ein Fehler im System," he surely did not anticipate the resonance this statement would have for early computer artists. Vera Molnar chose this quote to accompany her first solo exhibition in West Berlin in March of 1981, organized by Herbert W. Franke at the Freie Universität, Universitätsklinikum Steglitz, as part of a computer graphics exhibition series. In the context of computing, Fehler came to mean errors, which, as any programmer knows, occur far more frequently than successes. Art is an error in the system. What did Molnar mean by this? An error is not a grave mistake or major failure, but rather a small disruption, a slight divergence from the norm or what is expected. It captures our attention, making us pause to look. This is precisely what Vera Molnar's pictures do. They invite us to pause, reflect, and reconsider.

Machine Imaginaire offers a first look at little-known works on paper from the artist's studio in Paris on the occasion of her 99th birthday. Familiar viewers will recognize Molnar's visual language: her geometric forms, her variations on a theme, and her minimalistic lines, which, whether drawn by hand or with a plotter, are unmistakably hers. In her artist's statement for the 1981 Berlin show, Molnar wrote that she uses geometric shapes not because she finds them more beautiful or "better" than other shapes, but because they resist subjective interpretations. From a practical perspective, they are also easier to describe and manipulate. Indeed, in early vector graphics systems, circles, squares, and lines were the simplest forms one could 'draw' with a computer.

There was another reason for using geometric forms that Molnar does not explicitly mention: their use in studies of perceptual psychology. Molnar was not only interested in using computers to make pictures. She was equally interested in the process of making pictures. For her, working with the computer was also about aesthetic experimentation: she wanted to study the role that aesthetic preference played in the creative process. In other words, what aspects of making art were fundamentally human? What are those steps that cannot be taken by a computer or an algorithm? To do this, she had to follow a scientific method. Manipulating only one variable at a time, she used the computer screen to study her reactions to one small change at a time. Moving through several iterations, she would eventually come upon a composition that looked 'right.' She called this "a Gestalt event (ein Gestaltisches Ereignis)," in reference to the early twentieth-century theory of visual perception that continued to influence artists long after it was scientifically disproved. We might say that finding this aesthetic "event" was like detecting an error in the system.

Molnar has always worked in series, but she writes that not every successive image of a series is a work of art; they are "nothing but steps, proposals that one must compare (nichts als Etappen, Vorschläge, die man vergleichen muß). She edits the series ,discarding and reordering images to create a sequence that does not necessarily match the order in which she made them. As we look at her serial works, such as Mont St. Victoire in the show, we, too, are invited to participate in our own process of comparison: going back and forth between images, between iterations, to look for small differences and the effects these changes have on us as viewers.

While Molnar learned Fortran and BASIC to write her own computer programs in the 1970s and 1980s, her interest has always lied more in the parameters than in the program. Her collaborations with more technologically savvy assistants and partners, from Pierre Braun to Erwin Steller, have led critics to question her role as a ‘true’ pioneer of algorithmic art. And yet, it is precisely her commitment to human intervention in computing, to tinkering with parameters and the results of a program, that has been so influential on younger generations of generative artists. As they work to strike a balance between the program and their own hand, between artificial intelligence and their own subjective input, they continue to ask: what is fundamentally human about creativity?

Zsofi Valyi-Nagy, January 2022