

VAN DOREN
WAXTER

FRIEZE

Vera Molnar

By Adam Jasper In Reviews | 16 MAR 15



Vera Molnar, *Shall we take a walk?* (detail), 1998/2015, black light, yarn, nails, dimensions variable

Some artistic movements, such as futurism, are baptized with manifestos and official rituals. Then there are those that are retrospectively named, either by art historians seeking to fill gaps, or by artists trying to reclaim a little fame. 'Algorithm' is an example of the latter. Pioneers of computer-based art in the late 1960s, algorists were coders who employed algorithms as tools for artistic production. They made works with punch cards, plotters and grid paper, wrote essays for art/science crossover journals like *Leonardo*, and joined groups that invariably had acronyms for names to make op art, kinetic sculptures or systems art.

Vera Molnar has been counted as one of Algorithm's patron saints since the movement was granted a history in the 1990s. A living pioneer of computer art, she began experimenting with numerically based art after moving from her native Hungary to Paris in the desolate postwar years of the late 1940s. There, she began performing manual calculations of iterative steps with an imaginary computer (her 'machine imaginaire') and creating minimal, patterned works that teeter on the edge of disruptive organicism. Molnar's early work has been branded as visionary by algorist hagiographers, both for her attempts to discern the new aesthetic language that computational art would produce, and for her fundamental

ambivalence (or indifference?) about the authorship of the work: was made by it the artist, the code or the computer itself?

Zürich's Haus Konstruktiv, well known for its exhibitions of art concrète and, in particular, the work of Max Bill, is currently showing a major retrospective of Molnar's work entitled '(Un)Ordnung. (Dés)Ordre.' ([Dis]Order). The show consists mainly of plotter drawings, geometric abstraction, typographic collages, as well as sketches and studies for the same. The lineage is clear: Bill presciently curated Molnar's work into a survey of art concrète at the Helmhaus in Zürich in 1960. The stylistic connection is also clear: Molnar's art is constructivist to its abstract bones. Each shape, line and colour appears subjugated to a clear decision tree, and the manifest aesthetic quality of the work seems almost a surprise, even for the artist. In Molnar's work, beauty is an unexpected but persistent property, a harmless kind of error that consistently re-emerges.

The art-historical agenda of the exhibition is a little less clear. The show's publications breathlessly claim that when Molnar began making plotter drawings in 1968, she was a lone pioneer, the first to treat the computer as an artistic medium. This is humbug. By 1968, both London and Paris were already awash with technology-driven art exhibitions: Jasia Reichardt's 'Cybernetic Serendipity' opened in London and Gordon Pask was building robot homages to Marcel Duchamp. Molnar's work was very much of its time, part of an extended family that would include Bridget Riley and Manfred Mohr, and it's a disservice to sever her so much from her context.

Perhaps the most compelling series of Molnar's iterative works, 'Hommage à Dürer' (1948–92), is oddly biographical in the face of all its numerical coldness. In the background of Albrecht Dürer's *Melancholia* woodcut of 1514, Molnar created a magic square, a grid of numbers in which every row and every column add up to the same sum. The rules are both generative and a kind of iron cage. Molnar used the magic square in Dürer's allegory about science and sadness to provide the mathematical starting blocks for a series of topological tangles, one leading to the next, until the possibilities seem slowly exhausted. The work presents a path that turns into a labyrinth: Ariadne's thread becomes a knot that can't be untied. It's impossible not to read this work as being about exile and the impossibility of return that was a constant melancholic theme in all the hyperactive cultural production of Molnar's circle of Hungarian exiles.