



Vera Molnar, *Carambolage rouge* (Red Pileup), 2016, acrylic on canvas, 31 1/2 × 31 1/2".

## Vera Molnar

### DAM GALLERY

"My computer-aided procedure is simply a systematization of [an artist's] traditional approach," Vera Molnar wrote about her algorithm-based pen-plotter drawings in 1975. In 1960, the Hungarian-born, Paris-based artist cofounded the Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV) with Julio Le Parc, François Morellet, and others; their idea was to rethink the relation between object and beholder by means of kinetic-aesthetic experiments. Molnar was given access to a computer at the Bull Information Systems research center in Paris in 1968, and the new technology seemed to be the key to solving a long-standing problem: It allowed the artist to automate her procedure of generating series of works by modifying selected parameters and balancing formal rigor with flights of aleatoric fancy.

Molnar's recent exhibition "*Spielerisch, Minimal*" (Playful, Minimal) presented new paintings as well as several of the artist's early plotter drawings. Molnar's early interest in systematizing her creative processes reflects the spirit of the time in which they were made. The mechanical arm holding a pen and tracing lines on the paper fixed on the plotter's bed was the epitome of an artist's hand in automation: a cybernetic body remotely controlled via an algorithm. But whereas GRAV colleague Morellet's mathematical combinatorics was meant to circumvent not only the cult of the handmade but *any* romantic notion of subjectivity, Molnar did not necessarily see the use of the computer as an assault on authorship. A detailed discussion of her technique concludes with this emphatic assertion: "In spite of their advantages, computers, no more than other simpler tools, do not guarantee that a work of art of good quality will result, for it is an artist's skill that is the decisive factor."

Molnar is often lionized as a "pioneer of computer art," and her practice speaks of the determination with which she pursued a new methodology—she taught herself several programming languages and wrote her own software.

The finished works, however, bear no trace of the computer, the underlying algorithms are never revealed, and the titles give no clue as to how the pieces were made. So is digital technology no more than a means to the end of generating a cogent form? Molnar always places emphasis on the minor flaw marring the system, the “one percent disorder,” as she calls it. Hints of motion and the rhythmic quality of the combined lines are central; Molnar’s austere designs are characterized by slight tilts and displacements. Her work allows for the fallibility of algorithmic form itself, integrating elements of physical motion, dislocation, and disharmony into her system.

The same discrepancies are evident in the more recent paintings in acrylic on canvas. Mostly produced by an assistant—the ninety-three-year-old artist remains utterly uninterested in the mystical transmission of subjectivity by way of the hand—the medium- to large-format pictures reinterpret earlier designs in bold colors, with masking tape used to translate the plotter’s lines into thick bands of color on the canvas. A diptych (*Orthogonal*, 2016) presents two variations generated by the same algorithm: The code injects a random element to produce different aesthetic outcomes. In *Carambolage rouge* (Red Pileup), 2016, two blocks of red horseshoe shapes, one of them slightly tilted, abut in a static collision. These paintings contemplate the line—the unvarying focus of Molnar’s aesthetic basic research—in its materiality, widening it until it consolidates in surfaces, yet avoiding the straitjacket of overly symmetrical composition.

In a long history of science fiction, the *semblance* of human imperfection and deviation, programmed by human coders, has ultimately enabled software to attain a kind of autonomy. And deviation—from the rigor of concretism, from the aridity of pure “computer art”—emerges early on as the true theme of Molnar’s work. As some of her contemporaries pursued scientific transparency in art through the use of graph paper, for Molnar the path opened up by automation and systematization was, on the contrary, to chart a world of shaky lines and tilted shapes, of impure colors and illegibility amid the white noise of overlapping forms.

—Hanna Maquar