

deteriorated shamble covered in ripped plastic tarps bordering a swamp. Likewise, in 2010 they staged a series of performances, also at Kate Werble Gallery, about self-help speakers and the subgenre of management workshops that use mantric repetition and hypnosis to compel clients to “direct-response” action (e.g., “Write the check NOW!”).

Their performances exhibit scarily persuasive acting, with tag-team patter familiar from all sorts of get-rich-quick audience manipulations, from time-share resort schemes to “going fast” QVC-product sales. *Black Diamond* features a basic rags-to-riches narrative of overcoming personal adversity by internalizing marketing slogans, coupled with a mesmerizing light-and-sound show and hyperbolic testimonials from former losers moving their way up the Ponzi ladder to “Black Diamond” status. The show begins with a meet and greet, the business-suited actors giving confident handshakes and upper-arm squeezes to the assembling “guests” while providing cocktails from a delicious “Amazon Blend” that the audience soon learns has life-altering properties. As the lights dim and audience members take their seats before a projection of a huge rotating diamond casting glittery shards of light through the space, the two artists present a narrative—the story of “you,” first at rock-bottom and broke, then moving through an epiphany of your “unlimited income potential,” and, finally, crowned king of the world when you’re on “the private jet to Bora-Bora.” Rancourt and Yatsuk stage a kind of gonzo aesthetics, an immersive environment that demonstrates the total absorption the culture of the “Omega Club” demands. But beyond immersion lies faith: the blind faith of the desperate ready to believe that self-actualization through financial success is the miracle that will allow them to overcome social determinants such as poverty or a lack of education. Rancourt, as Buddy Budansky, the head promoter/CEO of Omega Club, performs the condescending familiarity of the rich to the plebes, a kind of “Don’t you hate it when your limo is late?” blather of privilege. But Rancourt’s Svengali-like exertions as the charismatic face of the brand, and Yatsuk’s convincing take as a recent convert willing to bet it all to be in the “Omega Family,” reveals just how hard entrepreneurial stratagems in capitalist economies must work to part the poor or the feckless from their cash.

—Eva Díaz

## Manfred Mohr

### BITFORMS GALLERY

Though he is one of the pioneers of digital art, Manfred Mohr has remained on the margins of its histories. This compact exhibition—a retrospective in nuce—goes some way in bringing him to the fore. Roughly forty years have passed since “*Une esthétique programmée*” (A Programmed Aesthetic), 1971, Mohr’s landmark exhibition of computer-generated art. Held at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, the show featured a magnetic tape drive and computer plotter machine—programmed by Mohr—that executed algorithmically determined drawings in real time. Long before the computer had been rendered personal, Mohr’s practice wrested it to new ends.

“What do you think about aesthetic research carried out with the aid of a computer?” prompted a large placard installed in that show, on which viewers were encouraged to record their reactions. The palimpsest of witticisms and quips (on view here) ranges from the bemused to the outraged. The transformation of the French query—“*Que pensez-vous de la recherche esthétique faite à l’aide d’un(e) ordina(i)teur(e)*”—speaks volumes in its own right; if no rendering in English quite translates the mordant elision of *ordinateur* (computer) to *ordinaire* (ordinary), the curt crossing-out of “aesthetic” gets the

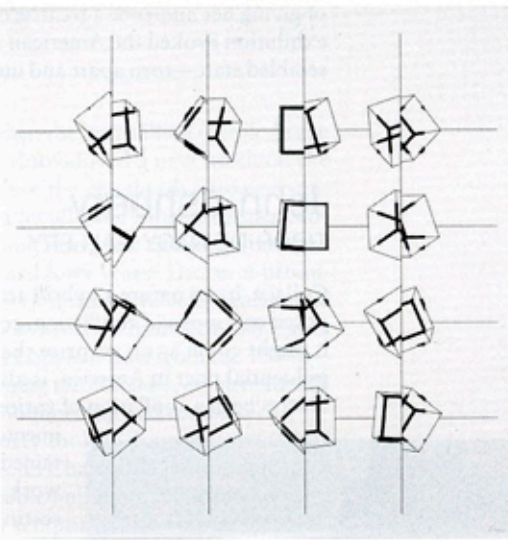
point across. The puns and proclamations are not all negative, however; they register everything from apprehension at the prospect of the human’s eclipse to neo-Dada salvos welcoming the perceived de-skilling entailed in Mohr’s work. Like many of these statements, the panel’s frayed, sprocket-hole-riddled computer paper—a material that decades ago seemed coldly, even threateningly, official—appears quaint with the patina of the outmoded.

This sprawling register provided an auspicious touchstone for the work on display, from Mohr’s early sequential line drawings to his hypercube and graph-theory work to more recent experiments using pigment ink and LCD. In a divided room tightly packed but not cluttered, the scope of media and materials was nothing less than stunning: plotter drawings, etchings, lithographs, collage, sculpture, computer installation, laser-cut steel sculptures, silk screens, and—rounding things out—a few canvases in acrylic. That one of the earliest works on display should be a tempera painting—*Schriftbild*, 1964—seemed fitting. Its gestural improvisations suggest a kind of exorcism of the spontaneity that, in Mohr’s subsequent efforts, seems to have been absent entirely. But to this day, Mohr—who began, in fact, as an action painter and jazz musician—claims more of an affinity with Pollock than with Donald Judd. This is true even at the height of his programmed aesthetics. Resembling a musical score sprouting errant filaments, *P-159-A*, 1974, is a plotter drawing sewn with thread. Its mix of linear exactitude and spindly effervescence recalls something of Eva Hesse’s *Metronomic Irregularity*, 1966, which formed a playful, tacit critique of Minimalist dogma.

For the artist, numerical code is no less an inexorable convention than verbal language itself, and hence mined with the same arbitrariness, even potential lyricisms. His work derives not from the outright suppression of artistic agency but from its filtration through algorithmic code. In this regard, he highlights the necessary distance of representation—the metaphorical dimension of language itself. Rather than short-circuiting signifying capacity, the artist’s *Cubic Limit* works, produced between 1973 and 1978, bring it to a higher mathematics, in which extremes touch: A cold dissection of the cube into infinitely variable dimensions coalesces into a dense visual pattern at the center of the field. More recent, animated works, such as *P-1411-e*, 2010, use software to picture the eleven-dimensional hypercube and other complex geometric analogues, with elements of the representations randomized. The play between the aleatory and the inexorable—a play manifested in colored, formal facets—brings these latest efforts back to Mohr’s early interest in gestural procedures.

Mohr’s imagery most often recalls contemporaneous experiments by Hélio Oiticica and his Neo-concrete colleagues, though it is perhaps closer in process to Gyorgy Kepes’s prints from the 1950s—works arbitrated by various automated apparatuses, from the X-ray and stroboscopic photography to sonar and radar. By foregrounding the position of an intermediary device, Mohr’s method, however outwardly anonymous or machinelike, likewise underscores the mediation of language in aesthetic production. The fruits of that method are as strikingly and compellingly formal as they are conceptual—revealing a dual nature written into the system from the start.

—Ara H. Merjian



Manfred Mohr,  
*P-197pz*,  
1977–87, ink on  
paper, 29 x 29".