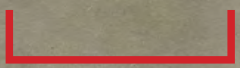


INTERVIEW



## VERA MOLNAR, FROM "THE IMAGINARY MACHINE" TO THE COMPUTER

**B**orn in 1924 in Budapest, Vera Molnar moved to France at the end of her studies. Since that time she has remained loyal to geometric abstraction while also becoming one of the first visual artists to use computers in art. After the Galerie Torri and The Kitchen, her work is now being shown at Whitechapel Gallery in London and the Galerie des Galeries in Paris. A city where this lively ninety-something welcomed us in her studio that proves to continue to be an experimental space.

**When you arrived in France, in 1947, you followed the geometric abstraction movement. Was this an obvious move for you given the constructivist heritage in which you basked?**

It was obvious in that it flowed from my way of thinking but it only happened after my studies in Hungary. I'd been a fine arts student during the national-socialist era, and we didn't learn anything about modern art. On the contrary, we were indoctrinated in the horror of degenerate art and the disgrace of Picasso, and paradoxically I only found about modern art and constructivism when I arrived in France. That said, we had a French teacher at art school who had been the secretary of Jean Cocteau, and who showed us reproductions of Henri Matisse, Maurice de Vlaminck and Vassily Kandinsky... He introduced us to the Surrealist Manifesto and translations of James Joyce, he played records to us... and even if didn't impart the laws of French grammar to us, he helped us a great deal.

**So you received a classic and naturalistic education that did not direct you towards the contributions of the De Stijl movement and Piet Mondrian either?**

No, but I met this painter when I arrived in Paris. And to answer your question on naturalism, as a young lady from a good family, I already produced landscapes in impressionist or post-impressionist style when I was a teenager. Then at art school, I had a teacher who still practised art after nature while incorporating construction. When I caught the cubism virus, it became a passion.

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Exhibition View

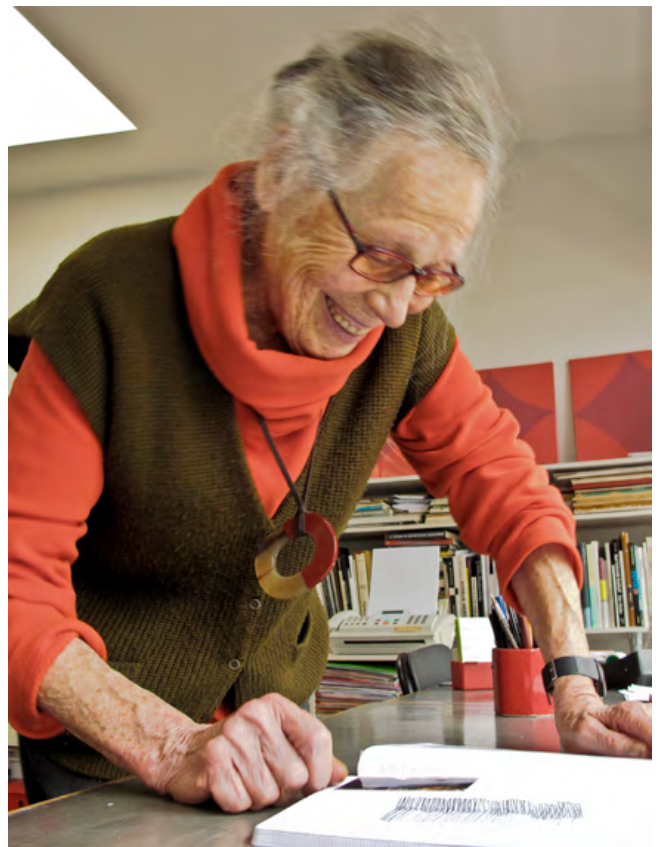
« Love Story - Paper works from 1974 »

Vera Molnar

Courtesy Galerie Torri

Vera Molnar

Courtesy Galerie Torri



Cubism was a door that opened to my future life, and I remember disagreements with Simon Hantaï, a fellow fine-arts student, who was a fervent believer in creative intuition and the sacred artist while I didn't believe in it at all. Then I left for Paris, at the time when the Seine was crossed by train, and I saw Notre-Dame. Transfixed by it, my first pencil drawings were of this church before I started looking at Pablo Picasso, Paul Cézanne, Henri Matisse, Piet Mondrian or Theo Van Doesburg.

Within my first few months, I fell into this constructivist line that I haven't left since. This only became stronger when I frequented artists such as Auguste Herbin, Constantin Brancusi, Sonia Delaunay, Georges Vantongerloo and Max Bill. And then my practice tightened around squares, rectangles, lines, rules and computers.

**Regarding Max Bill, were you interested in his relationship to mathematics and the golden ratio? Why did you show wide interest in science over those years?**

It wasn't as clear-cut and defined as one might think with today's hindsight, and someone like Max Bill did a little bit of everything. But what you should understand is that when you stop figurative painting, a joy springs up for several months and you have the impression that you can do anything. Everything is free, and then very quickly, you feel giddy because of this independence. So you look for something else to hang onto because figuration was a great guardrail, with rules to observe, like the ear that should be drawn lower than the mouth... When these bearings disappear, you could either turn towards mystics or theosophy as did a number of the surrealists or Rudolf Steiner and Aurélie Nemours, or else, on the other end of the scale, towards rationalists and those who looked towards science and calculations.

**Do you establish precise concepts like François Morellet, one of your old friends, did before producing works, or do you allow chance to intervene?**

Of course I nurture a preconceived idea at the outset, but unlike concretist artists, I let myself, even today, be disturbed by what I discover spontaneously. I have a programme but I deviate from it because there are two major sources of encounters: what we observe in nature, or the work or others discovered in museums, galleries or studios... and I think of myself a little as a deviationist in art.

**You have an atypical background as you were a director within the CNRS and in 1968 you became one of the pioneers to use computers in art ...**

I think that the computer was made for me because I have a childhood memory going back to when I was 12, when I was given a box of pastels. To paint a sunset every evening, I would always use four identical colours. But then I had the idea of increasing the range, one day towards the left, another day towards the right, methodically, and this was already a computer programme.

I then worked at the Calculation Centre of the Université Paris-Sud, in Orsay, when visualisation screens didn't yet exist. But an IBM, with a 22 x 50 cm screen, arrived in 1968 and I was fascinated by the fact that it responded straight away. I even appreciated this screen more than I did the scientists...

**The term "Computer Art" was coined a few years earlier by Edmund Berkeley and in 1971, the Musée de la Ville de Paris organised an exhibition of Manfred Mohr, showing works produced with printers. But the movement didn't really take off at the time...**

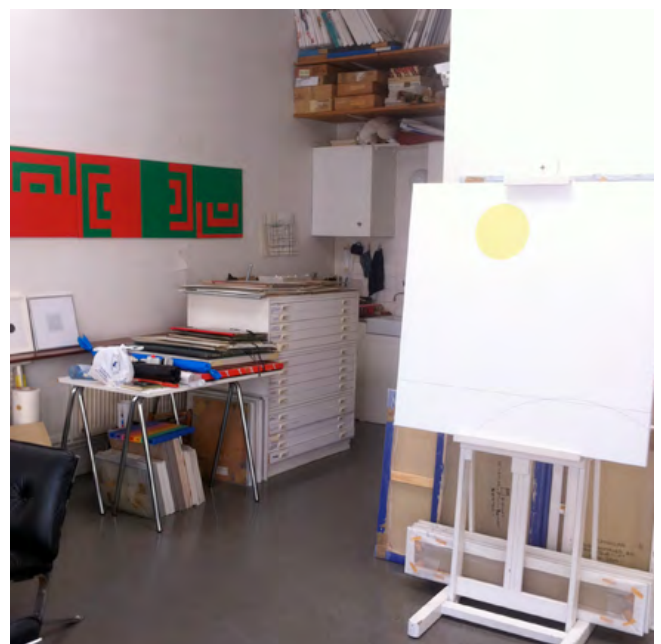
I incidentally met Manfred Mohr at the Université Paris 8, where I was invited to speak about my work, but one should bear in mind that there was unanimity in the animosity at the time! It was unheard of to tamper with sacrosanct humanity and sensitivity by means of a cold

metallic machine, and if you were not entirely anonymous, then you found yourself facing strong and permanent rejection. The public found it scandalous that scientists paid interest to what we were doing with our calculations and nonsense... So I worked from programmes, then rollers with plotters turned and created the drawing, as seen in the works presented at my exhibition at the Galerie Torri in February. Chance would offer many interesting elements, like mistakes that proved very instructive and caricatured the approach. It exaggerated, magnified or else resulted in completely unexpected results, and while this infuriated me at first, I understood what I could learn from it, and I allowed myself to be disturbed.

**What is also fascinating to me is that Computer Art came back in the 1990s, with the birth of the Internet. So your work today benefits from a new reading, as shown by your exhibition at The Kitchen, New York ("From minimalism into algorithm"), with artists such as Zoe Leonard, Mary Lucier, Donald Judd, but also the new generation including Jacob Kassay and Cheyney Thompson... And at Whitechapel Gallery, in London where, until 15 May, the exhibition Electronic Superhighway retraces the Experiments in Art & Technologie (E.A.T), starting in 1966, gathering visual artists like Jon Rafman, Hito Steyerl, Ryan Trecartin, Amalia Ulman...**

There's a certain continuity, but it's amusing that artists in these exhibitions can come from the fields of science, mathematics, technology, machines or fine arts and museums. I knew the EAT people, even if I was a bit young at the time, but from 1960 to 1968, I produced what I called "the imaginary machine" because I didn't yet have a computer while knowing that the computer existed.

Vera Molnar's studio  
Courtesy Marie Maertens



# INTERVIEW

## Vera Molnar

I invented a programme as if I had a computer to run it on, and it was a bit naïve, but a lot of fun. But the program has never been more important than the outcome. In the same way, the paintbrush is not more important than the canvas of Leonardo da Vinci or an Impressionist work, but still, the latter movement was made possible when tubes were invented and it was no longer necessary to grind paint in oil. In this way, it became possible to paint by the Seine.

**I'd also like to hear more on what you call the "plastic event". Why did you use this term?**

Because I didn't want to use the word "art", which like the word "beauty", seemed stale to me... But for me a "plastic event" means walking around in a museum or exhibition, and suddenly sensing a change in category. I learned at art school how to construct a still life, by placing on a table an apple, two pears or a plum... and at a given moment, it ceases to be such and such a fruit to become a whole or an architecture of shapes and colours. It's the same with squares, rectangles or colours. At a certain moment, the banality of the form changes and this is why I avoid using words that seem tired to me. On that note, who was it who said, "I sat Beauty on my lap – And I found it bitter". Wasn't it Arthur Rimbaud?

**Yes, and Stendhal also said "Beauty is only the promise of happiness", implying that the promise isn't always kept... Your works, on the other hand, show a rhythm and dynamism in the shapes that remind me of the work Ellsworth Kelly.**

This artist liked music, but I don't think he followed rules. He left France when I arrived, and we just crossed paths briefly, then I saw him again in

the United States where I knew the Science-Technologies group and the people at Bell Laboratories, that was the Mecca of music. Bell Telephone had a research centre that researched hearing, but also did work into the visual arts, especially under scientist Béla Julesz and what he called the "cyclopean vision".

**A text by Vincent Baby, in *Vera Molnar, une rétrospective 1942/2012*, describes "faith in this idea of art that transcends an artist's mere individuality and sometimes allows reaching creative communion". This assessment can also apply to your personal history...**

Yes, but everything in life is complicated... I joined the Communist Party the day that I came of age, and in my mind, art should have been an instrument for seeking a path or finding a community, but I was betrayed in this respect! The art chosen by this party was horrific; then followed all these political processes, so I handed in my *Little Red Book* even if this desire for communion was of course my dream. It's paradoxical that this ideal was rediscovered when computers became widespread, and the aspirations of my Communist youth are more present today in our old capitalistic societies where thoughts and ideas are democratised. At the time, I dreamed of thousands of things that were impossible, technically, manually, or even "visually". I put these aside, and today, I am more powerful in my work than 40 years ago because technology has caught up with me. In our era, we can make many more things, but we can also dream more.

Exhibition View  
« From Minimalism, Into Algorithm »

Vera Molnar  
The Kitchen, NY  
Courtesy The Kitchen

