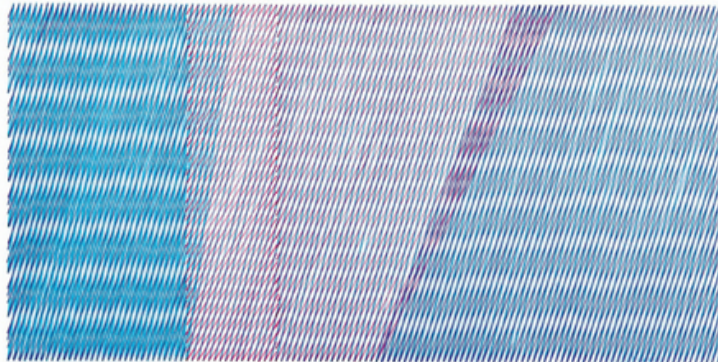


Channa Horwitz

1932–2013

CHRIS KRAUS



Channa Horwitz, *Moiré 8 different angles #9*, 1983, ink on Mylar, 22 x 30 3/8".

SURROUNDED BY FAMILY AND FRIENDS at the opening of her solo exhibition at Los Angeles's François Ghebaly Gallery this past April, Channa Horwitz watched from a bench as viewers donned slippers and entered the immersive space of her installation *Orange Grid*, 2013. To create this work, Horwitz had applied her signature pattern of gridded bright-orange lines to the gallery's walls and floor, creating a theatrically charged, vertiginous box. The effect of being inside it was dizzying, partly because of the near panic induced by enclosure within such an optically disorienting, implacably repetitive pattern, but also because the pattern itself was hand-drawn. The resulting marks displayed a slight, trembling unevenness that made *Orange Grid* pulse like a strange biomorphic chamber. With no more than the addition of a network of lines, the cold whitewashed space was rendered surprisingly animate.

Horwitz, who passed away at the age of eighty on April 29, two weeks after the opening, discovered what would become a lifelong preoccupation with pattern and shape five decades ago after attending the art program at California State University, Northridge in the early 1960s. In 1964, retroactively defying a teacher who had exhorted his students to "be as free as you can . . . throw the paint," she devised a tightly controlled pictorial language comprising eight parallelograms of differing proportions and sizes, which she arranged into "stories," like messages in Morse code. In 2005, Horwitz told me she had realized that "if I wanted to experience freedom, I needed to reduce all of my choices down to the least amount. . . . I chose the circle and the square to represent all shapes, and black and white to present all colors." Horwitz's mid-'60s experiments were contemporaneous with the early work of the Oulipo group, but it would take decades for critics to make the connection between her work and that literary movement's pioneering use of pattern as a generative device. Nor was her work typically considered alongside the numerous practices of the '60s and '70s that engaged seriality and systems, recursion and permutation. A *Los Angeles Times* review of her work, Horwitz was to recall, was headlined "Pretty Notations by Valley Housewife."

In 1968, Horwitz submitted an ambitious proposal for a kinetic sculpture to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's "Art and Technology" exhibition. The work was never realized (indeed, notoriously, no work by a female artist was executed for the show). But Horwitz's efforts to diagram the sculpture's motion led to her invention of Sonakinatography, a notation system that actually scored sound and movement and that would inform her subsequent work. Describing the system in *Flash Art* in 1976, Horwitz declared: "I have created a visual philosophy by working with deductive logic. I had a need to control and compose time . . . To do this, I chose a graph as the basis for the visual description of time. . . . Using this graph, I made compositions that depicted rhythm visually."

Sonakinatography was premised on the numbers one through eight. Subjecting these integers to various mathematical operations, Horwitz generated numerical sequences; in drawings, the resulting "data sets" were expressed as intricate geometric patterns graphed onto a gridded matrix. Each number corresponded not only to a specific color but also to a specific duration, expressed in terms of "beats." The two-dimensional works could and often did function as instructions for music or dance.

Horwitz studied with John Baldessari and Allan Kaprow, among others, at CalArts in the early '70s, but most of her work was pursued in relative isolation from the art world. Until recently, the reception of her oeuvre has been obstructed by its singularity. Her algorithmic experiments had no explicit feminist subject matter, nor were they convincingly Minimalist. As is so breathtakingly apparent in *Orange Grid*—in which the orange lines act simultaneously as systemic propositions and as artifacts, documents of a process—Horwitz's art is defined by the collision of pure concept and human presence.

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The absurd disparity between the high seriousness of Horwitz's work and its initially trivialized reception has defined her career narrative until very recently. In the past two years, her work has been shown in museums from Los Angeles to Dresden, Germany. She reprised her 1978 performance *Poem/Opera, the Divided Person* (based on the 1968 work *Sonakinatography Composition III*) in New York and LA last year. She received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2013, and this past summer was featured in the Venice Biennale and was appropriately grouped with Guy de Cointet and Henri Chopin at Kunsthalle Düsseldorf's Georges Perec-inspired exhibition "The Void." It is becoming ever more apparent that Horwitz's simultaneous pursuit of extreme mathematical rigor and utter aleatory openness—when most artists of her generation chose one of the above—constitutes a unique vision, a multilevel map charting the mysteriously coextensive realities of abstract rule and concrete instance, empirical law and lived experience. Or, as she put it, "The world plays out in an apparent chance that is really a structure."

Chris Kraus is a writer and critic based in Los Angeles.