

## **Mark Wilson: Code Matrix 1985-2012**

### **[Introduction to the exhibition catalogue, Galerie [DAM] Cologne, 2012]**

The exhibition's title – Code Matrix - may sound like something from a sci-fi movie, but it also draws attention to the underlying structure and complexity of Mark Wilson's algorithmic art. At a fundamental level, the artist uses computer code to create his highly distinctive and complex artworks. The software is absolutely essential, of course, and it also determines the appearance of the finished work. In addition, each digitally produced image is made up of many individual elements that appear to be laid out on an elaborate matrix or grid. Thus, Code Matrix is a particularly appropriate title to employ.

The more you study Mark Wilson's art, the more you realize that it operates on so many different physical, intellectual and aesthetic levels. In mathematics, a matrix is a rectangular grid of numbers, symbols or expressions. In printmaking or typography, a matrix is the physical object that provides the framework for the print. In Mark Wilson's case, the computer program utilises a virtual matrix that provides the structure in which the individual elements can be organized and presented. His software also employs mathematical matrices to carry out the geometrical transformations of the lines and vectors that make up the final image. In fact, it often seems like the artist is adopting multiple matrices (or matrix multiplication, to probably misuse a mathematical expression) in order to achieve the complex layering that remains a distinctive feature of his work.

The two words in the exhibition's title could also have been reversed and still have real meaning – Matrix Code, rather than Code Matrix. In mathematics a matrix code is a complex way of generating and decoding secret messages. Simple codes change the letters one at a time, whereas in matrix code, the letters are transformed in groups. Matrix codes are also very difficult to decode, which is the whole point of using them. Wilson's art may seem entirely abstract at first sight, but the richness and layering of the imagery - the underlying meaning, if you like – is certainly there to be found. Indeed, the iconography in the artworks appears to function as some sort of elaborate code, the significance of which becomes more apparent the more you study it. The images often incorporate a complex arrangement of circles, squares and lines that seem to echo the appearance of circuit diagrams, computer chips or other electronic devices – the fundamental ingredients of the machines that enable him to produce his art. In some cases the digitally produced artworks also include various simple shapes that are reminiscent of analogue drawing tools – straightedges, protractors, set squares and various other seemingly obsolete examples of the traditional draughtsman's trade.

Although Wilson's art is undoubtedly situated in the contemporary world, it also builds upon the past, absorbing the methodology and machine aesthetic of other artists and designers who were active from the 1960s onwards, such as Eduardo Paolozzi and Archigram, the avant-garde architectural practice. Even before he started to use computers, Mark Wilson's paintings and drawings made extensive reference to technology, often incorporating charts, diagrams or circuit boards. As the artist himself has stated, "the pictures began to look like some kind of indecipherable engineering plan." Ironically, they were also made with the physical tools that sometimes feature in the iconography of his later digital work – the protractors, rulers and so on. His plotter drawings and inkjet prints also depend on the algorithms, or sets of instructions, that make up the computer program. As such, they also refer back to earlier procedural methods of artmaking, from Jackson Pollock's drip paintings to Sol Lewitt's instructions for producing wall drawings.

The current exhibition includes a wide range of Wilson's artworks from the 1980s to the present, thus providing an opportunity to explore the changes in his digital artistic practice over time. The early plotter drawings, for example, are made up of lines rather than large blocks of colour and they tend to portray flat surfaces rather than complex three-dimensional spaces. Later, the artist acquired a more sophisticated plotter that allowed him to skew some or all of the constituent parts of the image, creating satisfying three-dimensional effects. As a result, some of the artworks from this period look even more like technical drawings or architectural plans. In addition to two dimensional planar images, he also began to make more and more use of the cylinders, cones and polar surfaces that characterize so much of his later work. He also experimented with using different materials, producing monochrome plotter drawings on opaque white Mylar paper.

Until the beginning of the new millennium the bulk of his work was still created using pen plotters, devices that produced unique results but were nevertheless inherently limited in their capabilities. In 2001, however, Wilson acquired a large format inkjet printer, and had to rewrite his software as a result. Unlike a pen plotter, the inkjet printer produces its output from a single finished image file. The astonishing visual complexity of the later images would not have been possible without the inkjet machine, but it also meant that he had to develop new ways of assembling the images before sending them to the printer. The vibrantly coloured circles, squares and converging or diverging lines create surprisingly subtle effects, the product of a lifetime's experience of using technology to create instantly recognizable art that remains distinctly of its time.

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