

Exhibition: *Coded: Art Enters the Computer Age, 1952–1982*

Dates: February 12–July 2, 2023

Location: BCAM, Level 2



(Image captions on page 4)

(Los Angeles, CA—January, 10, 2023) The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) presents *Coded: Art Enters the Computer Age, 1952–1982*, an exhibition that explores artistic practices in relation to the rise of computer technology and consciousness in the age of the mainframe, a period when computers evolved from elite military machines used to calculate missile projections and decrypt code into central operating fixtures in governmental, corporate, and educational institutions around the world. The exhibition’s chronological parameters begin in 1952, the date of the earliest purely aesthetic image made on a computer (analog), and end in 1982, when the personal computer took center stage and replaced the mainframe as the machine of the future.

International and interdisciplinary in scope, *Coded* examines the origins of what we now call digital art, created by artists, writers, musicians, choreographers, and filmmakers working directly with computers as well as those using algorithms and other systems to produce their work. Works by artists associated with mainstream art movements like Op and Conceptual art provide a context to reconsider the work of under-recognized computer artists in a new light. Whether computer-generated or not, the many artworks considered in the exhibition reflect the simultaneous wonder and alienation that was characteristic of the 1960s and '70s, along with the utopian and dystopian possibilities of these new machines. *Coded’s* examination of the years leading up to the advent of the personal computer is relevant, even imperative, to fully appreciating art and culture in the age of the computer—both then and now.

Coded includes over 100 objects made by 75 artists—many of whom are being exhibited at LACMA for the first time—with many drawn from the museum’s permanent collection.

“*Coded* brings to light early digital or ‘computer art’ that has long been overlooked, recontextualizing it to encourage a new way of looking at mainstream art of the

period,” said Leslie Jones, Curator, Prints and Drawings. “There are interesting parallels between computer art and contemporaneous mainstream art movements like Minimal, Conceptual, and Op art, notably in their mutual embrace of systematic and algorithmic approaches to art making.”

“As an institution with a longstanding commitment to exploring the intersection of art and technology ever since the founding of the Art and Technology Program in 1967, LACMA is excited to present this innovative exhibition,” said Michael Govan, LACMA CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director.

Alongside *Coded*, LACMA's Art + Technology Lab will be presenting a new two-part digital work by Casey Reas: an homage and a response to Victor Vasarely's unrealized proposal for LACMA's Art and Technology Program (1967–71). *Casey Reas: METAVASARELY*, an interactive work, will be presented virtually on lacma.org during the run of the exhibition (February 12–July 2). *Casey Reas: An Empty Room*, a new digital work by Reas, will also be on view on BCAM, Level 2, from April 9 through July 2.

Exhibition Organization and Highlights

Coded is organized into six thematic and roughly chronological sections: The Computer and Popular Consciousness; Mathematics and the Beginning of Computational Aesthetics; Algorithms and Generative Text; Encoding Art; Information as Art/Art as Information; and The Computer and Politics/Open Scores. Exhibition highlights include:

Edward Kienholz's *The Friendly Grey Computer—Star Gauge Model #54 (1965)* anticipated the coming age of personal computing. The work is assembled largely with found industrial parts and evokes early mechanical mainframe computers, yet as a small device and human in scale. Kienholz anthropomorphized the work by adding bodily elements (including doll legs and a pair of dials resembling eyes) and provided it with a rocking chair, because, as the artist advised, “Computers sometimes get fatigued and have nervous break-downs . . . Remember that if you treat your computer well, it will treat you well.”

Vera Molnár's *À la recherche de Paul Klee (1970)* is a plotter drawing (inspired by a 1927 painting by Paul Klee) for which the artist programmed a computer to “place parallel lines within a square grid and vary the alignment (horizontal, vertical, diagonal) and the weight of lines as well as their closeness.” Numerous variations could be produced, which allowed her to “bring to light and to realize images . . . which only preexisted in a vague, uncertain way in my imagination.”

Frederick Hammersley's “computer drawings” (1969) were made using Art1, one of the earliest computer programs designed for artists, and output with a line/impact printer using the limited alphanumeric characters available at the time. The program was prepared on punch cards to make shapes and exponential curves.

Additionally, characters could be printed on top of one another. Hammersley created 1,200 computer drawings, all with playful titles (like *SCALLOP POTATOES*) that offset the systematic process and mechanical appearance with humor.

Stan VanDerBeek's film Poemfield No. 1 (Blue Version) (1967) centers on a poem (written by VanDerBeek) that was transferred to code and animated using a program called BEFLIX (short for Bell Labs Flicks) developed by Bell Labs engineer Kenneth Knowlton. VanDerBeek, keenly interested in communication, saw the expansive and liberating potential of computer technology in this regard. He believed that working with computers could lead, in his words, to "new structures of thought; new ways of communicating that involve the artist in a larger matrix of machines and other people."

Publication

Coded: Art Enters the Computer Age, 1952–1982 is accompanied by a catalogue edited by Leslie Jones, with a foreword by Michael Govan, preface by Hannah B. Higgins, and texts by Bronač Ferran, Patrick Frank, Tiffany Funk, Meredith Hoy, Leslie Jones, Jennifer King, Lisa Gabrielle Mark, Joel McKim, Britt Salvesen, Edward Shanken, Staci Steinberger, Grant D. Taylor, Bobbye Tigerman, and Debora Wood. It is published by DelMonico Books/LACMA.

Credit

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The Art + Technology Lab is presented by



The Art + Technology Lab is made possible by Snap Inc.

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The Lab is part of The Hyundai Project: Art + Technology at LACMA, a joint initiative exploring the convergence of art and technology.

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About LACMA

Located on the Pacific Rim, LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection of more than 149,000 objects that illuminate 6,000 years of artistic expression across the globe. Committed to showcasing a multitude of art histories, LACMA exhibits and interprets works of art from new and unexpected points of view that are informed by the region's rich cultural heritage and diverse population. LACMA's spirit of experimentation is reflected in its work with artists, technologists, and thought leaders as well as in its regional, national, and global partnerships to share collections and programs, create pioneering initiatives, and engage new audiences.

Location: 5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA, 90036. Lacma.org

Image captions: Edward Kienholz, *The Friendly Grey Computer—Star Gauge Model #54*, 1965, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of Jean and Howard Lipman, © Estate of Nancy Reddin Kienholz, courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, California, digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY; Vera Molnár, *À la recherche de Paul Klee*, 1970, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds from the Prints and Drawings Council, © Vera Molnár, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA; Frederick Hammersley, *SCALLOP POTATOES, #50*, 1969, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Frederick Hammersley Foundation, © New Mexico Museum of Art, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA; Stan VanDerBeek, 1967, realized with Kenneth C. Knowlton, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Ralph M. Parsons Fund, © Estate of Stan VanDerBeek, all rights reserved, digital images courtesy of The Box, Los Angeles

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