

From the exhibition catalogue «A Void: Henri Chopin; Guy de Cointet; Channa Horwitz»  
Kunsthalle Düsseldorf  
Published by Spector Books, Leipzig, 2013.

## Rules of the Game

By  
Chris Kraus

In fall 1964, a young woman sat at her drafting table in her Tarzana studio, sketching on index cards. Her painting instructor at CalState Northridge had admonished her, "Never paint and drink at the same time ... Be as free as you can, throw the paint." But the artist didn't want to be free. She preferred line over mass. On the first index card, she drew a series of eight pictograms composed of square and rectangular shapes. It was only years later that Channa Horwitz realized she'd invented a language.

On a subsequent series of unlined 6 x 8 cards, Horwitz drafted a series of 'stories' derived from this new alphabet. The stories were based on repetitive patterns. It occurred to her that these pictograms could be grouped into series of twos and threes, determined by sequential numbering (e. g., 1-2, 1-3, 1-4, and so on). "It was at that time that I came to realize," Horwitz says, "that if I wanted to experience freedom, I needed to reduce all of my choices ... I chose to use the circle and the square to represent all shapes, and black and white to represent all colors."

Horwitz put the cards aside. Later that year, she began the first series that would define a lifelong body of work. In *Window Shades* (1964), she made a series of architectural interior renderings for a fictitious couple named Mr. and Mrs. McGillicutty. Each work contained the following elements: a window, a window shade, floral-patterned swatches of fabric, stencil, and tape. As the series progressed, Horwitz's greatest interest became the window blinds, whose position could be altered vertically from painting to painting, the tableaux growing smaller. To an almost infinite degree (the degree to which a line can be parsed into points) the shade could be up, the shade could be down. The casual viewer might compare this early Horwitz work to the work of Louise Bourgeois during the same period; a lithographed series of houses on ladders and stilts. Both artists, the viewer might reason, were mothers of young children with one foot in an intensely male art world, one foot in the domestic realm. But the casual viewer would, in this case, be wrong. By 1966 Horwitz had dispensed completely with all cute conceits like the McGillicuttys, and radically reduced her graphic vocabulary to just two shapes: the circle and the square. The sixteen paintings of the elegant series *Circle and Square* (1966) were composed following four simple rules regarding the placement and shading of the two shapes upon the canvas. In this way, Horwitz arrived at the essence of minimalism. It was only years later that she would meet her contemporary, Sol LeWitt.

In 1968, Horwitz submitted a proposal called "Suspension of Vertical Beams Moving in Space" to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's *Art and Technology* show. Opened in 1969, *Art and Technology* was an important, cutting-edge show that drew unexpected attention for its total exclusion of female participants. Horwitz's explorations had already ventured into three and sometimes four dimensions. "I knew that if I presented a proposal to the museum, it would have to be something that would be of interest to industry," Horwitz recalls. Already involved in the materiality of time as an element in much of her work, the artist proposed an installation of eight lightweight Plexiglas beams, suspended in mid-air by magnetism, illuminated by thirty-two lights, and with programmed movements.

A graph accompanying the project, which looks a bit like Morse code, or an electrocardiogram printout, visually depicts the possible movement of light over time. Although Horwitz's project description and graph appeared in the catalog, the sculpture was never built. Horwitz would go on to develop this systemology in her yet more complex "Sonokinotography" compositions 1-23 (1968–2004). Presented as paintings, the sonokinotography graphs represent time and (with color) motion. These compositions also became choreographic scores, which have been interpreted in multimedia. "Through structure," Horwitz says, "comes apparent chance." But chance is no coincidence: her works are repetitive games grounded in simple logic, spun out to dizzying heights. No matter how nearly ungraspably complex and numerous the variations become, almost all of her work can be traced back to the grid. But in art-historical terms, how can we say what this is?

It is tempting to place Horwitz's work within the realm of optical art, a visual form that gained hold in the late 1950s as a reaction against abstract expressionism, and briefly resurged in the late 1990s in opposition to neo-expressionism. After all, her grids look a great deal like Bridget Riley's spiraling black and white forms, or the complex patternings made by Francois Morellet. Yet Horwitz's process does not share op art's social agenda. "Our aim," wrote op art theorist Karl Gerstner in 1964, "is to make you a partner ... Our art depends on your active participation." None of Horwitz's works are conceived in this way; they are artifacts, documents of a process, not manifestos. She uses numbers, geometry and patterning in a conceptual manner, as methodical answers to the perennial, childlike question of the savant—*what if?* In this regard, her work has much more in common with the work of conceptualists Sol LeWitt, Richard Kostelanetz, and Mel Bochner; and still more in common with the algorithmic language experiments conducted by Georges Perec, Harry Matthews, and other members of the famed French writing group, Oulipo.

Like the Oulipians, Horwitz's oeuvre transcends art-historical movements and fashions. It is ongoing. Take, for example, Jean Lescure's classic Oulipo



procedure, N+7: *replace every noun in a text with the word that falls 7 places ahead of it in the dictionary*. “Call me Ishmael” becomes “Call me islander.” More startling is Georges Perec’s lipogrammatic novel, *A Void* (1969), a three-hundred-page mock noir written entirely without using the letter e. Perec and Horwitz share not just formalist strategies—extrapolating from simple constraints into complex, vertiginous realms—but more importantly, bring a shared spirit of excitement and adventure to these exercises.

Forty years after the nouveau-roman, the Oulipo group continues its work with palindromes, lipodromes, and other strategies. Timeless, elastic, Horwitz’s work has continuing appeal and can be adorned with multiple stories to narrate the present. Thinking one’s way out of a box; freedom found through constraint. The rules of the game may be preordained; what matters is what we read into the results. Forty-one years after that day in her Tarzana studio, Horwitz’s work has evolved in dizzying, highly elaborate ways that evoke schizophrenia, cybernetics, states of multiple consciousness, and the infinite patterning found in biology.

“The world plays out,” Horwitz notes, “in an apparent chance that is really a structure.” Her work makes structure visible. The rules of the game leave nothing to chance. —