

HERBERT W. FRANKE

ILLUMINATING THE INVISIBLE

KÖNIG GALERIE | CHAPEL
5 JULY – 1 SEPTEMBER 2024

KÖNIG GALERIE is pleased to present an exhibition of the work of the late science fiction author, computer art pioneer, and general polymath, Herbert W. Franke (1927–2022). Born and educated in Vienna as a theoretical physicist, Franke was involved in an incredible range of endeavors, as an accomplished and accoladed writer, as well as a scientist, and not least of all, an artist whose career trajectory began in the early 1950s with experimental photography and later moved into print and computer-generated artworks. ILLUMINATING THE INVISIBLE focuses exclusively on Franke's artistic endeavors, providing a curated selection of works from all his major groups and periods of activity: Generative Photography (1953–63), Computer Systems (1967–1979), Math Art (1979–95), and PC Works (1979–2022).

ILLUMINATING THE INVISIBLE pays tribute to Franke's unique combination of creative and scientific pursuits, each informing the other. Indeed, the impulse toward aesthetic innovation guided Franke much more than any consideration of traditional notions of artistic beauty. As early as 1953, Franke put the photographic camera to groundbreaking ends, using the device to record forms and structures that exist in the world as such, but are "invisible" to the human eye – they can be detected solely with the aid of technology. By employing scientific equipment – x-rays, microscopes, oscilloscopes, among others – Franke essentially turned the medium away from its traditional application as a method for depicting things that were already there. As early as 1957, Franke published a visionary book "Kunst und Konstruktion" already in pursuit of "the fusion between technical and artistic processes". He wrote: "I firmly believe that a process does not lose its ability to instill wonder when we succeed in uncovering some of the laws and connections that determine it. Not wanting to know the explanation of something even though it can easily be learned amounts to willfully deceiving oneself." With his photographic artworks, he not only wanted to shed light on the fantastic, but invisible structures in nature as well, uncovering the underlying, hidden beauty of mathematics and algorithms.

The invention of digital computers in the 1960s gave Franke the ultimate technology for his work. With the advent of more advanced computer systems and color screen technologies, Franke focused on the changing coordinates of aesthetic observation. Working with the latest inventions in the Siemens laboratories, Franke made use of code as a method for quantifying information, later developing his own ideas on a new information-aesthetic model, which integrated the artist and recipient into an overall system with the help of perception. During this early period, Franke realized one of his most famous works of early computer art, "Quadrate." The Serigraphy was subsequently shown at the Venice Biennale in 1970.

With the MONDRIAN program for the TI 99/4A, Franke founded his personal computer work group, which then continued from 1980 with the purchase of an Apple II, allowing Franke to write programs himself for the first time. Artists like Piet Mondrian and Paul Klee had worked with analytic algorithms decades prior, and pioneering computer artists like Herbert W. Franke, Frieder Nake, Georg Nees, and Vera Molnár were able to transform those earlier ideas of concrete art into abstract digital code. ZENTRUM by Franke, coded in 1982, was translated for the blockchain in 2023 so that it can also be viewed and collected on the web today. The computer – called a "universal art machine" by Franke – also opened up new artistic possibilities for interactive multimedia works. As early as 1983, Franke experimented with programs that could be controlled by music via a MIDI interface.

The term Math Art summarizes the results of a series of experiments conducted over fifteen years at the Institute for Communications Engineering at the former Aerospace Research and Test Facility, now DLR Oberpfaffenhofen. In the course of the work, not only was the aesthetic dimension of formulas and functions explored (e.g. Fourier transformations,

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algebra, stochastics, complex numbers, fields), but a whole series of new graphical programs were also developed and integrated into the DIBIAS software (for Digital Image Analysis System). 100 of these Math Art images – selected by the artist some months before he passed away – were sold as NFTs on the occasion of his 95th birthday in an outstanding thirty-second sale that paved the way for establishing the Foundation Herbert W. Franke.

Additionally, Franke began organizing and curating exhibitions of generative art beginning in the 1960s, for example in 1968 at a joint event between MIT and the Technical University of Berlin on the subject of "The Computer in the University." Together with the Goethe Institute, Franke presented the first worldwide overview of digital art in more than 200 countries starting in 1972, the same year that also saw the publication of "Computer Graphics – Computer Art", widely regarded as the first comprehensive compendium of digital art.

ILLUMINATING THE INVISIBLE marks a powerful moment in the genealogy of art forms that Franke himself detected and presents select works for the first time for a public audience in Germany.

Today works by Franke can be found (among others) in the collections of the Centre Pompidou, Paris; the Victoria & Albert Museum, London; the Museum für Moderne Kunst Sammlung Ludwig, Vienna; the Belvedere, Vienna; the Prussian Cultural Heritage; the Kunsthalle Bremen; and ZKM | Karlsruhe, presenting the Archive Herbert W. Franke.

The exhibition is also presented within the larger program of the Generative Art Summit Berlin, which is hosted by the art meets science – Foundation Herbert W. Franke.

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