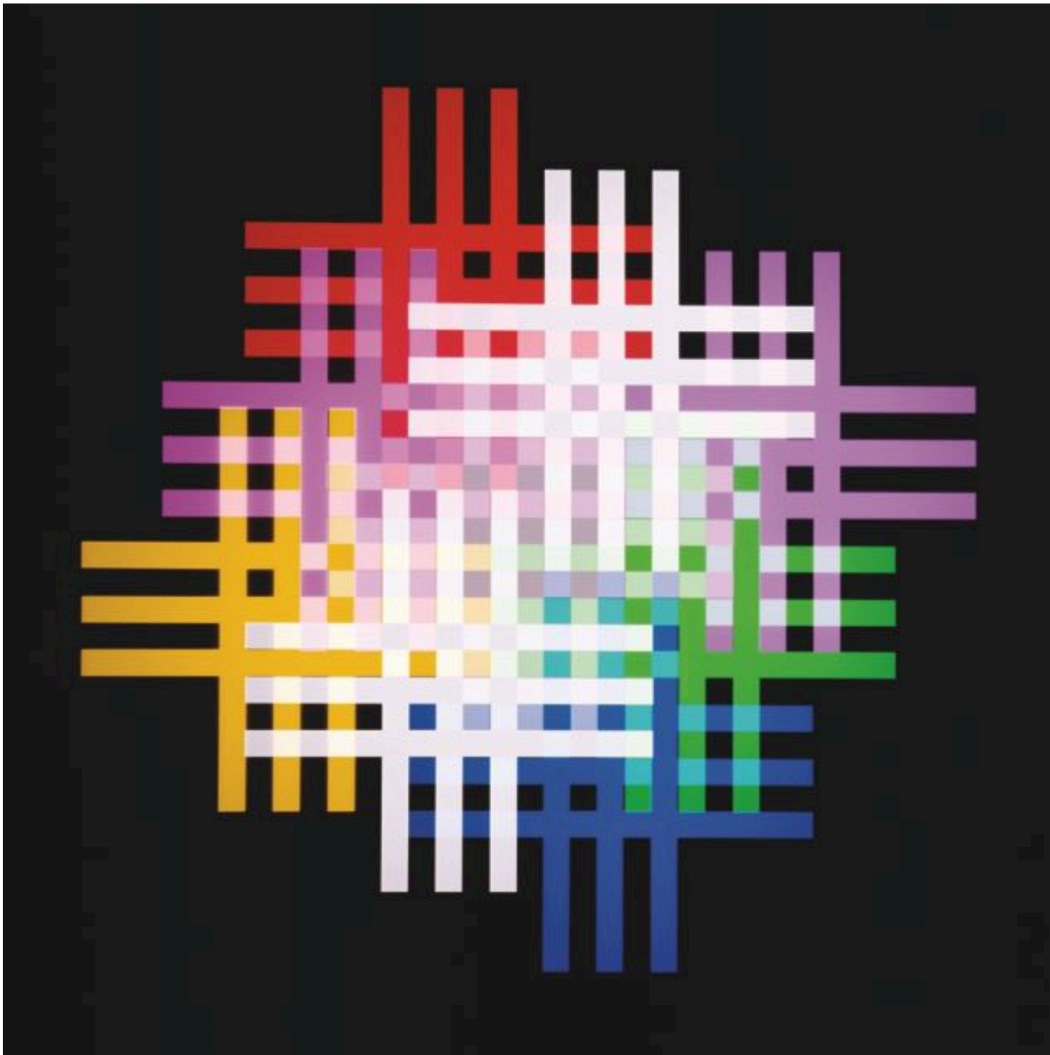


photograph

GENERATIVE COLOR, PHOTOGRAPHS: GOTTFRIED JÄGER AT SOUS LES ETOILES GALLERY

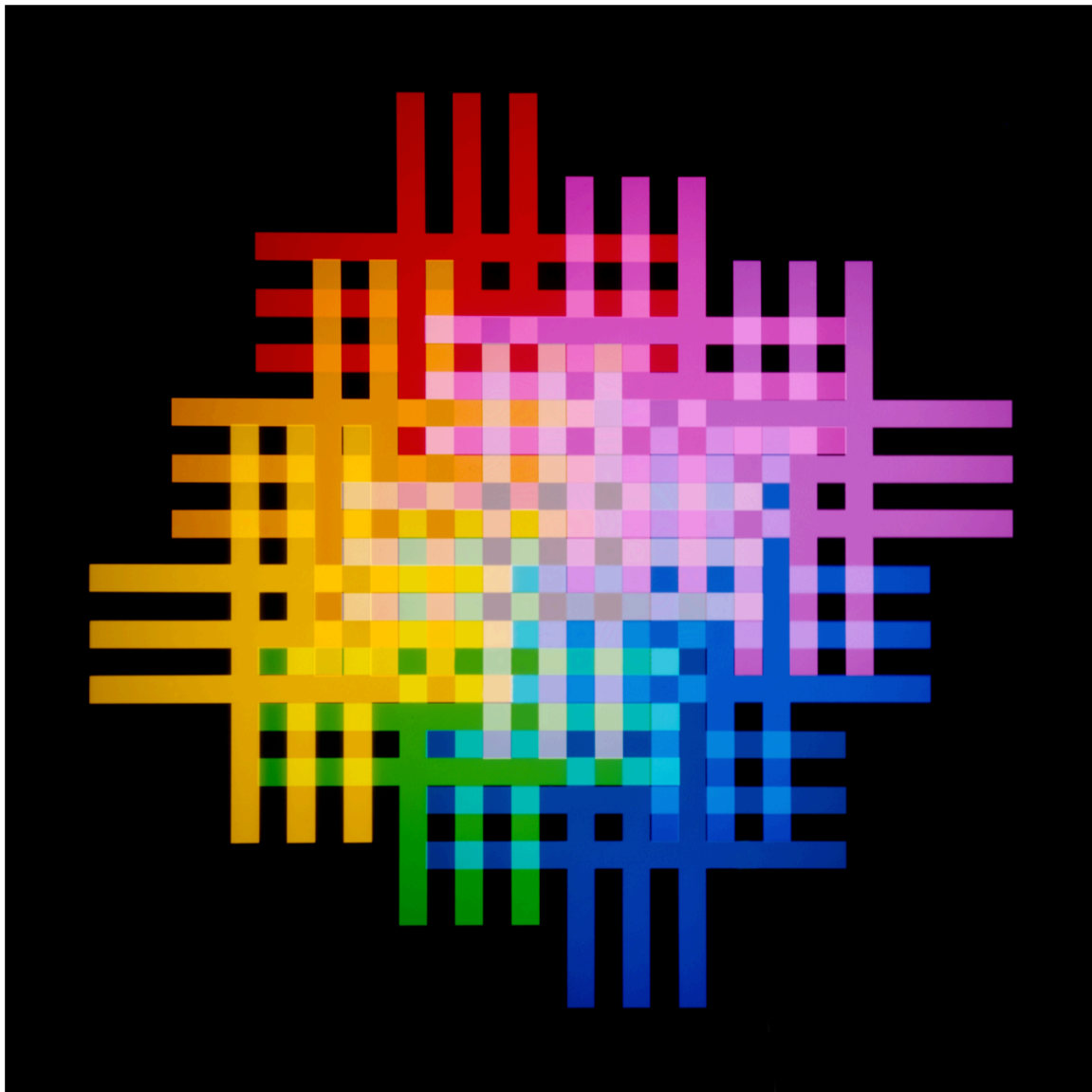
By Lyle Rexer



Gottfried Jäger, *Multiple Optics 4-54-3*, 1980. Courtesy Sous Les Etoiles Gallery

In this mini-mini retrospective of color photography made between 1965 and 2000 by the experimental formalist Gottfried Jäger, I was entranced by a 1995 computer-generated video Jäger produced with his frequent collaborator, the artist and photographer Karl Martin Holzhäuser. The video animated the elements of a geometric painting by László Moholy-Nagy from the 1920s. It feels a little cubbish now, after so many technological advances, but Moholy would surely have done something similar had he lived into the digital age, and Jäger channeled it.

Which makes perfect sense. Jäger is by far the most important, systematic, and committed of Moholy's inheritors. Over more than five decades, spent mostly at the University of Applied Sciences, in Bielefeld, Germany, Jäger has developed a practice that he terms generative photography. With aesthetic roots in the various movements of geometric abstraction (constructivism, concrete art, neoplasticism, op art, etc.), this approach involves finding ways to generate imagery from photo-based processes and systems without making reference to antecedent reality. The theoretical ground for such abstraction had been mapped and remapped many times since the Russian Revolution, mostly by painters. The broad goal was to change society by changing the way people see. To an even greater degree than Moholy, Jäger disarmed that social radicalism in favor of a deep dive into processes and outputs.



Gottfried Jäger, *Multiple Optics 4-54-4*, 1980. Courtesy Sous Les Etoiles Gallery

The result, on at [Sous Les Etoiles Gallery](#) view through June 16, is an exhibition of several colorfully patterned series, each based on a different set of techniques and technologies, systematically pursued. For example, *Polarizations* from 1965 (which now seem remarkably prescient) used cellophane to investigate color translucency and texture. The surprising variety of *Multiple Optics*, made between 1973 and 1980, was the designed result of combining multiple lenses. As perhaps hinted at in the exhibition, Jäger has in the last decade more or less left cameras (even digital ones) and lenses behind for algorithms and the images they can generate.

American critics have largely ignored Jäger's work as a kind of formalist apostasy- decorative, socially and rhetorically untheoretical, indifferent to the politics of images. Jäger doesn't seem to care. With youthful energy, he continues to analyze and explore how technology can be harnessed to produce images that put chance and programmed order in dialogue. That provocative play is likely for him the essence of aesthetic experience. Those same critics need to explain why such work (and that of Moholy, too) looks so relevant to a generation of young artists growing up in the contemporary "post-photographic" world.