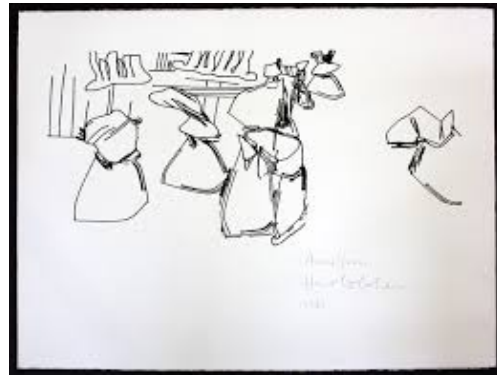# HAROLD COHEN
UNIQUE

For the opening of the exhibition "Harold Cohen"
DAM Gallery Berlin, 25 January, 2019

Frieder Nake

Harold Cohen, for Arnolfini Gallery Bristol 1983

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Would not each and everyone of us, who are trying to express ourselves artistically, want to be represented at documenta in Kassel and, in addition, at the Venice Biennale?

Harold Cohen was represented at documenta 3 (1964) and shortly after at the 33rd Venice Biennale (1966). Born in 1928, he was then in his mid-thirties. He came to those shows as a painter representing the United Kingdom.

But Harold Cohen reappeared at documenta yet again: at the 6th edition in 1977. He now came as companion of a turtle called "Turtle", a funny output device for computer drawings that did not have much in common with the sea-dwelling reptile of the same name. It scuttled the floors, rough and ready, led on a long leash giving the Turtle signals and thereby leading its way. The signals came from a computer, and the Turtle, steadily following the signals, left drawn traces on the large sheet of paper placed underneath it. Those traces became drawings that the master himself put up on the walls of the exhibition space. He actually colored them by hand, according to his taste and will.

As far as I know, the drawings generated by Cohen's automatic paintbox, the bespoke Turtle, were not recorded during the 100 days of documenta 6 in 1977. He told me that he was not extremely happy with the way things went in Kassel. Too many technical difficulties had to be overcome. The big show took place between June 24th and October 2nd. After that, Cohen collected his belongings and machines and proceeded to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam – a place of pilgrimage for humans to marvel at the art of Rembrandt, outlasting several hundreds of years. There, in Amsterdam, people were invited to watch good old Turtle back in action, starting November 25th, 1977, and keep going until January 8th of the following year. Cohen preferred Amsterdam over Kassel.

But after that, Cohen had had enough of the Turtle and began ridding himself of it. He had noticed that the public interest was focused more on the drawing reptile than the drawn outcome. The movement that leaves traces seemed to be more fascinating than the configurations of the traces themselves.
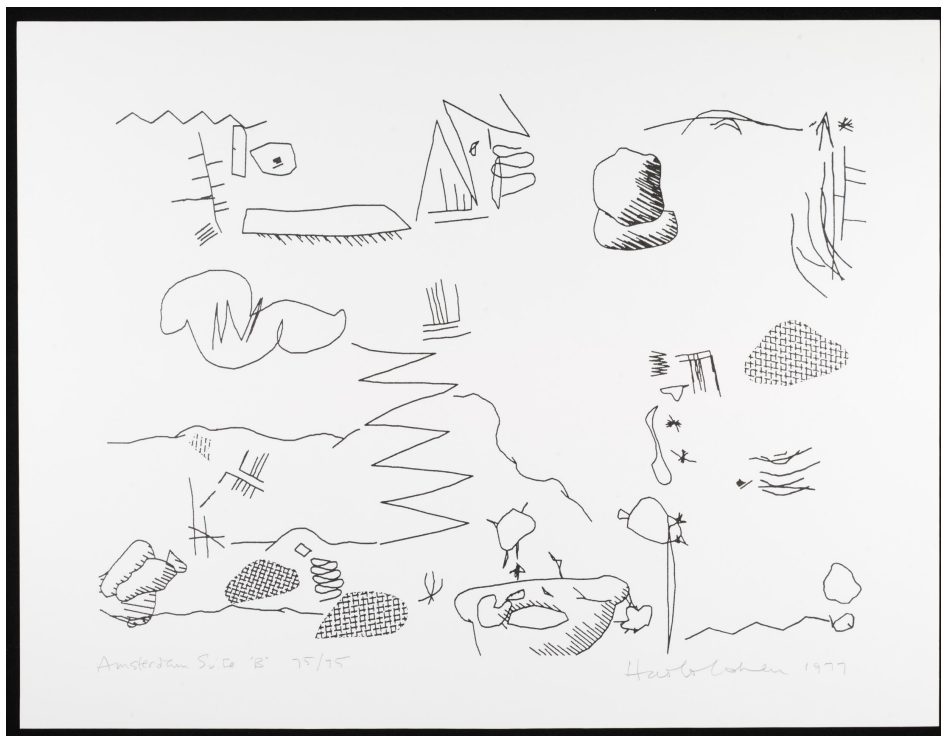
Harold Cohen, Drawing by his system, AARON, Amsterdam 1977.
Courtsy Victoria & Albert Museum, London

Years later, Cohen made a similar experience, leading him to reconsider his techniques and methods. The program AARON, that he had been developing since his stay as a visiting scholar at the Artificial Intelligence Lab at Stanford University (1973 to 1975), had reached a level that, since the mid-1990s, enabled Cohen to automatically produce portrait paintings. His concern was not to automatically paint portraits of living persons, as we can see robotic devices nowadays occasionally do. Cohen's approach was quite different. His system consisted of rules that AARON had to obey when it was autonomously painting and drawing. Those rules had meanwhile reached a level that allowed for images of the genre ''Portrait'': imagined portraits, if you will.

No one had attempted to do such before, and no one had defined a system of formal rules being capable of such results. So-called expert systems were once a highly praised blossom from the sick

swamp of computer science. It withered away, because the propagandists had neglected a decisive aspect: the expert's knowledge cannot simply be extracted by smart, semi-skilled lads and easily presented as handy data. Expertise is mostly tacit knowledge. It lives inside the expert and thereby makes him to be one.

With Harold Cohen though, we have an expert questioning himself and trying to formalize in sets of rules that he himself knows they matter to him. This is what made his expert-system (that he himself did not stylize as one) to become a success. But now, as a great surprise, Cohen turned off the system! He did it for very different reasons: He had come to consider what he was doing at such a high level of expertise, as insignificant for the Arts. A unique process in both its developmemt and its termination!

 "Think the image, don't make it!" has become my favorite advice to activists of algorithmic art. Harold Cohen's way of thinking was entirely different, but with the same result: "Think the image and, possibly, do not make it at all!"

Cohen was always eager to introduce AARON to audiences live and in action, just like his audiences were happy watching the machine paint. By this time, the machine utilized a tool similar to a paintbrush, that snuck up to the paint pots to target a particular one of them, dipped into the paint, allowing the excess to drip off, removed the surplus and, unerringly, painted with a style that did not at all resemble Photoshop's smooth surfaces – fascinating everyone witnessing it! Another fact underlining the genius of this artist-constructor: His drawing- and later on painting-machines were all designed by himself (first painting-machine in 1995).

Alas, such facts turned into his problem: Watching the machine in action – designed by the master himself – fascinated people. Was, what they saw, the painting and the art of the future? Was the machine taking over? Well, not necessarily. The process of production was more thrilling than the result. (I may inject the remark that I had published an essay in 1985, asking the question: "What is more relevant: process or product?" With it, I addressed algorithmic art.)

Harold Cohen took a radical step: in the early 2000s he aborted his fling with figurative art and returned to lines and forms which had always abstractly – or maybe, genuinely – interested him most. He found himself lost at a dead end. He put aside his system of rules and broke it down into algorithms again!

Volume 3 of the extensive documentation of the works on view at documenta 6 is dedicated to drawings by hand, utopian design, and books. When I open it, it cracks and crinkles: The big folio volume of 42 years of age literally falls apart into pieces, which, given the lousy binding quality of the book, cannot cause much surprise. Lose pages fall down on me, and the petty font tries to persuade me to go and buy stronger reading glasses. I do not want to do that.

The section "hand-drawings" is divided into nine sub-sections. They seem more or less curated, some contain several images, thers only a few. The ninth sub-section announces: "drawing-machines". Only three artistic positions appear. It seems to be no more than a small cabinet de curiosité: Harold Cohen, Rebecca Horn, and Jean Tinguely. They're given a mere four pages. Horn has strapped a spikey pencil-hedgehog to her head and face and fidgets with it on a piece of paper close to the wall, pretending to be a machine. That may be what we're supposed to think, hence her categorization as a drawing machine.

Tinguely is represented with one of his early, funny-looking machines, welded and screwed together from scrap metal, happily doodling on a wee piece of paper. It does so since 1955.

Quite different, Harold Cohen! He has enclosed a wide area on the floor with a low fence, a considerably large paper surface laid out ready. The photograph (below) already shows various drawn elements, we see a computer located in the corner. Five adults,and three children in the room, rather timid, a scenery that is just too tame for my taste today. A young man leans over a monitor on which we can

suspect notes from the active computer. A slim gentleman leaves the room. Outside, on the opposing wall, he is awaited by some of AARON's drawings, hand-colored by Cohen. If the young man above the monitor attempted to explain something back then – would people understand him in 1977? The young do not necessarily want to be understood.

AARON then is yet to mature. Harold Cohen has been working on it for four years now, determined to grasp both categories of open and closed form. The pieces on display at DAM Gallery show: he succeeds in it. A rich treasure of such shapes results as trails from the turtle on its long leash. Fascination comes up, and the persistent question: how does it work, how does it do this? We do not know the answer. And we still don't know today, 42 years later! Isn't this a shame? Do we not learn anything new? Do we not need to understand anything?

Exhibition Harold Cohen at Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam 1977, view of his installation

Rumor had it that Harold Cohen would become the first artist who, even after his death, would still issue new works that have never been seen before. For the system can work on without him. What a nice idea, isn't it? Cohen claimed this statement not to be entirely serious. That he shouldn't have said. Because, undoubtedly, technically speaking, new works could show up posthumously.

While flipping through my chaos I accidentally got hold of a piece of paper with perforated pages, indicating the teletypewriter as their origin. On it, a similar message about the new, posthumous works (only in German and in slightly different words). In the summer of 1964, I had put up drawings of the computer SEL ER56 and the drawing machine Zuse Graphomat Z64 at the Computing Center of Technische Hochschule Stuttgart. Among these drawings was the thesis about art after the artist's death. If we, the people in the algorithmic world, think the images and do not make them, that's what happens as a result, necessarily.

When Harold Cohen realized that he could no longer understand all the effects an addition of new rules to the system of rules (then about 300 of them) would create, he put the rules aside and focussed on the algorithms only that generate the shapes. In his view, color was not maneagable algorithmically unless only superficially. He left shape generation to the machine, and, in his last years, he himself focussed on color decisions. Thus, he returned to his true profession and artistic interest.

When Cohen's physical condition did not allow him any more to stand and paint in front of easel or wall, he got himself a huge touch-screen. Together with assistant Tom Machlik, he managed to install a system that allowed him to select a color from a smaller screen that he then applied with his finger to areas and lines on the large touch-screen. It displayed fantastic lines generated by Cohen's algorithm while he, sitting in the wheelchair, was interactively operating the coloring system. The selected paint, digitally and invisibly, stuck to his finger. He arrived back to finger-painting like a child.

The circle closed for Cohen towards the end of his life. At age of 38, he had been at an early height of his career as a traditional painter loving color. From 43 onwards he attended to the tension between algorithmics and aesthetics. When around 70 years old, he had achieved much more than anyone else, but turned his back to the computer system he had created. He did not withdraw from computable images. He rather returned to the simplicity of complex algorithms. Years before, in Stanford, he had devoted his creativity to Artificial Intelligence. As far as I know, he never entirely laid it to rest.

Exceptional and unique is what we can learn from Harold. He was always thinking and acting radically, an erratic rock at the coast of the pacific ocean. Always pleasant was he and radical. Did we not want to be just like him?

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The exhibition "Harold Cohen – Aaron" contains drawings he had previously exhibited at Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol, UK. At that time, Aaron had not yet begun with figurations. The drawings are on view from January 26th to March 16th, 2019 at DAM Gallery, Berlin.

Postscript: When I finally and with a considerable delay of five weeks sat down to frame the promised text based on the notes for the opening speech in Berlin, these notes had disappeared without a trace along with the black notebook that contained them. Those of you who use such notebooks for themselves know just what it means to lose the notes of six months. The feelings of loss cannot be explained. I can only guess that the traces of half a year of my existence might have rushed off on a train after I had got off. I want to warn the reader reading this current text that he or she should be aware of the fact that nearly none of the words I had found during the gallery speech on the 25th of January, 2019, is contained here. However, I am sure that there are worse things under the blue skies.
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