

Excerpts from article:

# Net Gains

As interactive, computer-based works are collected and commissioned, are they losing their edge or gaining an audience?

BY CARLY BERWICK

The very existence of a market for digital work, with pieces priced as high as \$150,000, is creating conflict among practitioners in a medium that was, until recently, a proud part of the artistic fringe. The ability to “objectify” digital art and make it as palpable, and salable, as a sculpture or painting is raising questions as to whether a genre based on the community-focused ethics of open-source computer programmers has lost the edge that made it exciting in the first place. “Open-source” means that the code that makes the computer or program run is available somewhere (for instance, under the “view source” menu option in a browser) within the software for anyone to read, copy, or improve upon.



COURTESY SANDRA GERING GALLERY

One of the first Net artists to have a gallery was John F. Simon, Jr. (Sandra Gering has represented him since 1994). He has also offered his work for sale online, encouraging visitors to his Web site, [www.numeral.com](http://www.numeral.com), to pay \$20 for a downloadable copy of *Every Icon* (1997). Simon believes the code he writes is as personal as a painterly gesture on canvas, and he tries to make it as accessible to collectors. Pieces such as *Color Panel v.1.0* (1999) or *Swarms* (2002), on carefully designed monitors that are removed from the bulky casing of desktop models, sell best, at prices ranging from \$5,000 to \$20,000. Simon thinks their appeal lies in part in their looking like paintings. “I tried for a long time to sell work on the Internet—just as software,” he explains, “but it’s not as commercially successful. Somehow having it encapsulated as an object makes a difference.”

Following a solo show at SITE Santa Fe last spring, he has been finishing a large commission for the University of Iowa’s new medical-research building and participating in shows in New Orleans; Ridgefield, Connecticut; Malmö, Sweden; and Seoul. The Iowa piece (titled *Channels*) covers a long wall in a hallway with a series of bright, laser-cut Formica tiles in shapes generated by a computer program. Six four-foot-high plasma monitors set into the tiles show constantly changing abstract images. The effect is of a Mondrian in motion—if Mondrian were from Malibu.

“There’s the political stance that software should be free or something. I have to pay rent,” says Simon. He adds, “I don’t think people value things they get for free, and that bothers me.” He does make his source code available for some works, but for others, “it would be like giving away the negatives,” he says, comparing it to photography. “It’s a struggle because you want the code to be appreciated in text form, but you need to protect it.”



SISAN MOCHILLEN

RIGHT A screen still from the nonrepeating images embedded in *Channels*, 2002, by John F. Simon, Jr., in front of the work, installed at the University of Iowa.