Technology | **CYBERTIMES**   *The New York Times* ON THE WEB

Home | Site Index | Site Search | Forums | Archives | Marketplace

April 17, 1997

@**arts** large

CYBER TIMES EXTRA

reload

By MATTHEW MIRAPAUL   BIO

In John Simon's Art, Everything Is Possible

Here's the rub: the newest work by John F. Simon Jr. will not be finished until long after we have shuffled off this mortal coil.

Simon is the creator of <u>"Every Icon,"</u> a thought-provoking work of computer-based conceptual art that was unveiled last month on the World Wide Web.

When first viewed, "Every Icon" looks deceptively plain, a seemingly simple square that has been partitioned into 1,024 smaller squares, 32 to a side. The monochromatic grid that results takes up about one-tenth of a monitor screen, a miniaturist's delight.

John F. Simon Jr.

Credit: Carrie Boretz

Loading a Web page displaying "Every Icon" launches a Java applet that, as it runs, begins to explore successively every combination of black and white squares that could occur within the confines of the grid's tightly circumscribed space.

As the tiny squares change from light to dark and back again, the black boxes appear to hop progressively toward the right. Over time, the grid will fill up and recognizable shapes, familiar images and perhaps even a little art are destined to materialize -- however briefly -- from the visual noise of the jitterbugging boxes.

Don't expect that to happen anytime soon, though.

CREATE YOUR ICON

John Simon's "Every Icon" generates every possible permutation of black-and-white squares in a 32-by-32

On a reasonably fast Pentium-powered PC that can flash 100 different combinations per second, Simon estimated, it would take about 16 months to display all of the 4.3 billion variations on the top line of the grid. Because the number of possibilities literally expands

matrix. CyberTimes invites readers to submit their scaled-down versions of an icon, this time using a seven-by-seven matrix. While less exhaustive than Simon's work, "Create Your Icon" offers 2 to the 49th power, or 562,949,953,421,312, possible permutations of black and white boxes.

If you submit your icon to the arts@large gallery, your New York Times on the Web logon and registered email address will be posted with your artwork.

Note: This feature requires Netscape 3.0
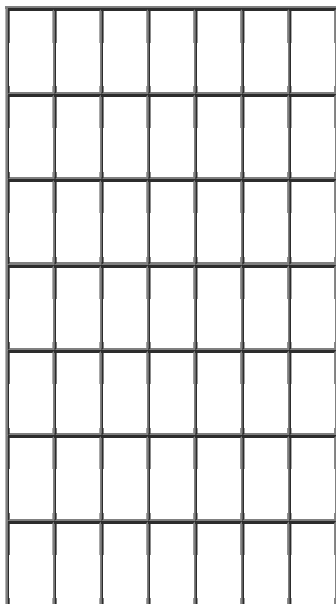
[Clear the Canvas]

Click on the squares to create your black-and-white icon. When you are done, you can submit your masterpiece to the gallery by clicking on the "Save As" button below.

Post your creation in the arts@large Gallery

[Save As:] [untitled]

[View the Create Your Icon gallery](http://numeral.com/articles/041797mirapaul/041797mirapaul.html)

exponentially, the second line would be completed in roughly 6 billion years.

Rounded off and expressed mathematically, the total number of conceivable variations within the grid is 1.8 multiplied by 10 to the 308th power (for purposes of comparison, 1 billion is a measly 10 to the 9th). For the grid to become totally black, the last "icon" that the applet is programmed to exhibit, Simon calculated that it would merely take several hundred trillion years.

"Because there's no word for that amount of time and no word for that large a number, several hundred trillion years is my way of making you think about a very, very long time," the 34-year-old artist said in a telephone interview from his Manhattan home.

"But in several trillion years, you might start to see something that looks like an arrow, or a square. You would arrive at something that was a skewed square, and then a few trillion years later it would be straight, and then a few trillion years later it would be crooked," Simon said.

While more computing power would hasten the process, it might also make the work impossible to see. "What does it mean to look at something that changes a billion times a second? It becomes a human perceptual limit," Simon said.

Given the cramped space, two-tone palette and strict rectilinearity of "Every Icon," anything resembling a late-period Monet is unlikely to wash over a retina anytime soon.

Even within these rigorously defined parameters, "Every Icon" will automatically generate more images than could possibly be assimilated in a lifetime.

"There was a lot of talk at the end of the 80's when post-modernism was emerging about how we've reached the end of imaging," he said, "and I wanted to show that even in a simple 32-by-32 space, the possibilities for imaging were vast."

Most of the images will have no value, a realization which in turn deepens one's appreciation for the range of choices that artists must confront and discard daily.

Simon asserted that today's trash could become tomorrow's iconic treasure. For example, a broken line might evolve in 150 generations to signify an international symbol of distress. "We could be looking at something that has meaning, but because of who we are and what we are now, we might not recognize it," he said.

"An autonomous image has lost its authority in a lot of ways these days," he continued. "A photograph can be manipulated, and we see *so* many images. Maybe I want to present the conditions in which an image can happen, as opposed to saying this is my image."

Musing on "Every Icon" as it flickers away in a browser window, one begins to sense that Simon's creation is much more than a cleverly constructed mathematical exercise or a modest electronic meditation on the eternal nature of the creative urge.

Indeed, the work is suggestive of the efforts of such well-known students of the square as Josef Albers and Paul Klee. Its closest affinity is to the kinetic colored compositions of Piet Mondrian, as found in "Broadway Boogie Woogie."

Sandra Gering, who will present a show of Simon's art in her Soho gallery next year, agreed. "I'm attracted to John's work because he is constantly looking back to go forward," she said. "For instance, he looks at artists such as Klee and then applies some of their principles to his own work. This brings a sense of art history to his pieces, even though they are technologically based."

"John is not caught in the trap of making work that is cold and removed, as so often happens with computer art," she remarked. "He is able to make especially powerful work using the new media because this is the tool that is most comfortable and natural for him."

Simon is a native of Louisiana, where his mother is a mathematician and his father is a judge. He learned to program while earning a master's degree in earth and planetary science at Washington University in St. Louis. He also holds a master's degree from the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan, where he later taught.

As a programmer, he has collaborated on the development of such high-profile Web-art projects as Jenny Holzer's "Please Change Beliefs," Lawrence Weiner's "Homeport," and Kolmar and Melamid's notorious The Most Wanted Paintings.

reload

Updated Web Site for Arts Endowment

quick hits

JAZZ ARRIVES

So, jazz has finally been recognized as music by the Pulitzer Prize Board, which last week announced that its honored composition for 1997 is "Blood on the Fields," a three-hour oratorio by the trumpeter Wynton Marsalis that follows a slave couple's journey from Africa and struggle for freedom. Since cigarette smoking inevitably leads to heroin addiction, expect the 1998 award to go to the rock star O(+> for "Emancipation," a 3-CD celebration of The Artist's journey away from the Warner

Now, Simon is working full time on his own projects. "You get to an age when you're just going to try as best you can or you're not going to do it," he said. "I've made about $500 so far, which is more than I've made (as an artist) any other year. And I'm still going."

Simon is selling numbered, registered editions of "Every Icon" for $20, with the applet distributed via e-mail as a file attachment. Adhering to the economics of the Web, the cost is relatively low and the edition is unlimited. To date, there have been 16 buyers.

Because Java runs on multiple computing platforms, Simon also has installed a copy on his Pilot personal organizer. "I go to a party sometimes and people say, 'What do you do?' and I pull out my Pilot and say, 'This is my artwork,'" Simon related. "Some people go 'Oh, wow, that's incredible' and some people go 'When do I see a picture?'"

Simon acknowledged that "Every Icon" is a computer-based restatement of an idea that has been around a long time. He cited "The Library of Babel," as envisioned in the Jorge Luis Borges short story, an institution that contains every written word.

And there is the as-yet unfulfilled prospect that a cage of monkeys with typewriters and an infinite amount of time will someday pound out the complete works of Shakespeare.

Is "Every Icon" Shakespeare or, for that matter, Rembrandt? Let's hang out for several hundred trillion years and find out.

---

reload

John Simon's new work is a weighty one.

"Color Balance", the first Web-art acquisition by the Robert J. Shiffler Collection, lets its viewers measure the relative weights of different tints on a Java-powered scale.

Inspired by the writings of the artist Paul Klee, who described a theoretical

Brothers record label and his newly won artistic freedom. Which, of course, would make the composer the Pulitzer Prince.

Although Marsalis and his Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra took the work on tour this winter, "Blood on the Fields" will not be released on CD until late May. Until then, listeners seeking the Marsalis spirit must content themselves with tonight's tribute to Count Basie and next month's evening of Ellington. A preview came last Saturday in a Chicago-area concert by a crew of Marsalis associates billed as the LCJO Sextet. With the exception of the sensational pianist Eric Reed, the group's youthful exuberance and flashy technique did not disguise the dearth of emotion or structure in their solos.

NEW TERRA-TORY

The most fully realized album yet from Chris Whitley is his new "Terra Incognita," which melds the dark, moody blues-rock of his debut with the odd aural explorations of his sophomore outing. As a sonic contrast, the full-length videos found in the enhanced CD's multimedia section offer stripped-down acoustic renditions of four songs from the album. Whitley also benefits from a terrific fan site New Machine, whose virtues include complete performances of three rare songs and a guide to his unusual tunings.

```
model for understanding color based on balance, Simon has
constructed a digital equivalent that functions on screen. Blend
blocks of color to determine if fuschia and aquamarine are
"heavier" than cyan and ocher.

First featured in "arts@large" in April, Simon is still waiting
for the copy of "Every Icon" running on his personal organizer to
reach the third row of squares.
```

‹ *MATTHEW MIRAPAUL*
November 19, 1997

arts@large is published weekly, on Thursdays. Click here for a list of links to other columns in the series.

Related Sites

Following are links to the external Web sites mentioned in this article. These sites are not part of The New York Times on the Web, and The Times has no control over their content or availability. When you have finished visiting any of these sites, you will be able to return to this page by clicking on your Web browser's "Back" button or icon until this page reappears.

- Two versions of "Every Icon" can be found on the Web, one on John F. Simon Jr.'s home page and the other in stadium, an online art gallery. Simon's site also provides links to some of his other works and collaborations, including Jenny Holzer's "Please Change Beliefs," Lawrence Weiner's "Homeport," and Kolmar and Melamid's "The Most Wanted Paintings."

- Piet Mondrian's Broadway Boogie Woogie is part of the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

- Mondrimat, by Stephen Linhart, a Web designer, is one of a number of Web sites that allow visitors to create their own Mondrian-like art works.

- The Library of Babel by Jorge Luis Borges

Matthew Mirapaul at mirapaul@nytimes.com welcomes your comments and suggestions.

Home | **Site Index** | **Site Search** | **Forums** | **Archives** | **Marketplace**

Quick News | Page One Plus | International | National/N.Y. | Business | Technology |
Science | Sports | Weather | Editorial | Op-Ed | Arts | Automobiles | Books | Diversions |
Job Market | Real Estate | Travel

http://numeral.com/articles/041797mirapaul/041797mirapaul.html   5/6

Help/Feedback | Classifieds | Services | New York Today

Copyright 1997 The New York Times Company

Help/Feedback | Classifieds | Services | New York Today

Copyright 1997 The New York Times Company