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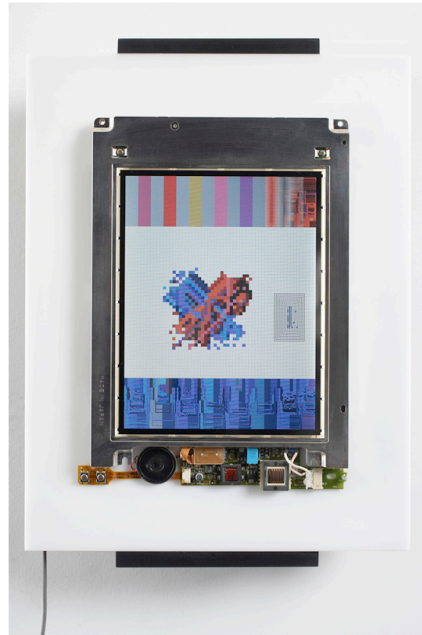CLUSTER_BLOG   CLUSTER_THEMES   CLUSTER_EDITIONS   CLUSTER_MUSIC   CLUSTER_PROFILES

'Outside In' - Interview With John F. Simon Jr.

Written by Cluster on 10 Marzo 2009 – 12:38 -

CPU (1999) Software, Macintosh 280c, and acrylic plastic Runs Continuously, Never Repeats
Courtesy of Collezione Maramotti

Interview by Marcia Caines

On Saturday 7th March the Collezione Maramotti of Reggio Emilia opened the first Italian exhibition of the American software artist John F. Simon Jr. 'Outside In' displays 5 of the artist's artworks from 1999 to 2009, exploring ten years of research in software art. John F. Simon Jr., born in Louisiana, lives and works in New York, during his artistic career his works have been exhibited in China, France, Israel, Korea, New Zealand, The Netherlands, Spain, Taiwan, Yugoslavia and in 13 states of America, his works are in several museum collections, including the *Museum of Modern Art, The Guggenheim Museum, and Los Angeles County Museum*. In 2000 he was awarded the *Trustees Award for an Emerging Artist by The Aldrich Museum for Contemporary Art*.

He also has a series of works that are accessible and downloadable on the Internet from his website, http://www.numeral.com. John F. Simon Jr., starts by drawing on paper. He then transfers his creations to code by writing his own software, this way bringing his pictures in motion creating patterns whose sequences are never repeated and endless, thus investigating the nature and structure of systems, and the possibilities and limitations of automation in image.

MC: **The exhibition shows ten years 1999 – 2009 of your work as a visual artist and computer programmer how has the technological revolution influenced the nature of your work in this period? Has it assisted and developed your creative process or ran parallel to it?**

JSFJr: The relationship between my visual art and technology is a positive feedback loop. Persistent ideas from my drawing practice get implemented in code. Improvisations with the infinite possibilities of code suggest new starting points for drawing. More computer power does not necessarily mean better art but the stunning improvements in graphics have allowed me to choose more ambitious drawings to start from. The adoption of openGL as a standard was probably the most noticeable boost that technology gave to my approach in programming.

MC: **Despite the rule based system of computer programming there's a constant element of 'surprise' in your artwork due to the unpredictable behaviour of the elements within them, the imagery itself creates 'emergent patterns'. Do you believe these emergent patterns inherent to all systems, I mean even in the human experience?**

JSFJr: Yes. Systems are even called systems because they exhibit some kind of regular behaviour – that is their emergent pattern - even if it is a simple pendular motion.

When I wrote *CPU* to investigate emergent behaviours - especially patterns - I didn't know the trouble I was getting into. The concept of emergence is as dependent on the observer as it is on the system. Like the classic question, 'Does a system form a pattern if there is no one there to recognize it?'

My software tries to set a context with certain static design elements so other elements may vary against them and one can recognize the evolution of that pattern.

MC: **From earlier works like 'CPU' in 1999 to 'Endless Bounty' in 2005 there is a visible shift from abstract content such as colour, form and movement, to more specific social and political elements, was this a natural evolution or an intentional transition?**

JSFJr: Again, the positive feedback moves things along together.

From 1994 when *CPU*'s processor was released computing power changed radically. Instead of having a limit of 32 moving elements in CPU, by the time I wrote *Bounty* nine years later I could have images and 3D models galore.

At the same time the new power gave me a 'larger voice' I could speak about things more specifically and in more detail. *CPU* is mostly about emergence in a minimal form – isolated – and *Endless Bounty* takes advantage of the bounty of imagery online – the bounty of power now possible - to speak about consumerist excess.

Endless Bounty (2005)
Software, Macintosh 17" G4 PowerBook, acrylic plastic Runs Continuously, Never Repeats
Courtesy of Collezione Maramotti

MC: 'Complex City' is obviously reminiscent of *Mondrian's Broadway Boogie Woogie*, (1942/1943) but as a New York resident we can assume that this artwork is also derived from a strong personal relationship with the city in which you live. The constant motion of varied elements run by different systems in 'Complex City' causes spontaneous behaviours, for example, traffic jams form and cars crash. Considering that 'emergent patterns' change the flux and liveability of a city, do you not think this could be a useful problem-solving tool for designers, or city planners?

JSFJr: Actually my code was derived from professional papers on traffic engineering and from existing software of this kind that is used by traffic engineers to study flow. I love these simulations and from some very simple rules you get surprisingly complex and very realistic behaviour. My favourite is the spontaneous slowdown – a slowdown caused by no apparent reason- no accident or merge or traffic light – that happens on the highway – really due mostly to volume but also some momentary hesitation by one driver that propagates backward. I still get stuck in them but now I don't feel so frustrated.

MC: **In a certain sense your artworks last forever, inasmuch as it is impossible for viewers to see all the imagery/patterns in a single lifetime, but the lifespan of technological instruments is limited, how does this effect the durability of your artwork? For example if a machine breaks, or ceases to function, can the code be programmed into new technological models or not?**

JSFJr: Yes – the work is based on the writing – on the code – and when the particular hardware wears out new parts are installed. And when there are no more parts, a new kind of computer is installed. I have ported several pieces this way with great success. There was a show at the Guggenheim Museum called "Seeing Double" that addressed this issue of obsolescence, not just in computer work, but also concerning plastic that cracks, felt that crumbles, and Dan Flavin fluorescent tubes that burn out and can't be replaced. I contributed an old and a new version of my piece 'Color Panel v1.0' to show what 'Color Panel v2.0' might look like in the future. Because the core of the pieces is a programming language text the piece itself is firstly a kind of conceptual art and later made physical.

MC: **In 'Visions' 2009, your most recent work, commissioned by Collezione Maramotti, most forms are hidden inside the cabinets with mirrors reflecting the source of imagery, so what about the future? Can technology and the virtual world continue to satisfy your creative appetite? Have you witnessed scientific or technological advancement, or experienced any limitations, capable of affecting your creative process?**

JSFJr: My work has always started with my regular drawing practice and I still sit with pencil and paper everyday and improvise. There are more ideas in my 10 years of accumulated drawing cards than I can hope to implement in code and sometimes it is enough just to have the idea without struggling to realize it in code. My interest lately is to explore how the screen can be understood in ways other than seeing it as a picture window or a TV for animations. The new cabinets re-contextualize the screen and place it next to other physical materials or take advantage of it's light emitting qualities to speak about visual art issues.

Visions (2009)
Custom Software, Wood, Plastic Laminate, Acrylic Paint, Mirrored Plastic, LCD Screen, Mac Mini Computer
Courtesy of Collezione Maramotti

As screens get thinner, lighter, more flexible and of course higher resolution there will be many more things possible to do with them. I very much look forward to that. I feel like we are just at the doorstep of what technology and art can do together.

MC: **Do you prefer drawing or programming?**

JSFJr: I enjoy visualization in any form it chooses to manifest.

MC: **How does the software of your pieces affect their own hardware, i.e the frame that you design to display them in 'real' venues?**

JSFJr: One clear example of the software influencing the hardware is when I watch one of my programs running and it makes an interesting shape on the screen. I will capture this shape and turn it into a vector drawing in Adobe Illustrator. Then I take it to my laser and cut the shape in Formica or Plexiglas. The cabinets often have these elements attached to the surface or built in as part of the structure. This element resonates well with the software that created it running inside. As within, so without.

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