

ICONOGRAPHY

Critiquing the Icon

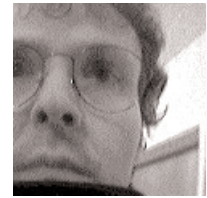
Curatorial Statement - Patrick Lichty

When conceiving this show, what had fascinated me was that idea the development of iconography in the digital signifies far deeper connections with the human construction of meaning than merely creating a mental mnemonic to represent a program, dataset, document, etc. The very fact that graphical user interfaces use iconography as such reveals a great deal about how humanity continues to interface with its world. Furthermore, the fact that the etymological similarities between the words icon and logo(gram) has such similarity begs a great deal of reflection.

Admittedly, the discussion can go forth into any number of topics, from comparative theological discussions of the *Logos*, Chomsky's discussions of grammar and language as inseparable from the human experience, sprawling analyses of semiotics, or the similarity of logos, icons, and brands, just to name a few. However, one of the most powerful examples of iconography as an expression of human identity happened thousands of years ago in Lascaux, France in that dimly lit cave. What especially comes to mind is the simple image of the hand on the wall. In my opinion, it all expands from moments like that to systems of visual grammar and syntax from which humanity has expressed its experiences and constructed its societies. Perhaps, as in certain translations of Genesis, it tells that in the beginning there was the Word, one could perhaps say that the simple creative act in that cave was an expression of that quintessential creative act - here is the primal Word, defining what it meant to merely exist in the world that we know and communicating it to others.

It is with no small irony that the examples for my reflections on how icons/iconography (of which I regard written language as a superset) derive from religious history. For example, the devotional use of the Orthodox icon and Buddhist mandala as meditative tools are of particular interest, although I will only talk at any length about the former. As I have understood the practice, although there are differences between the traditions, the use of these devices includes the loss of the self into the concentrative/contemplative process. Although I am not a historian of the church, I have always felt that the use of iconography in the early Church acted as a mnemonic to signify an entire worldview that surrounded the adherent. That hierarchy of heavenly beings symbolizes an ontological structure that created a tangible armature for the whole of reality for the devout.

Perhaps this point is being far too heavily put, and splits the representational issues of the symbolic language, but in my study of languages, the inextricable linking between cultural ontology and any language is immediately evident. Spanish has the option of a tense that elides all causality; German has its incredible regularity, and Japanese has its several cases of deference and wonderfully poetic indirectness. To expand/extrapolate from this, any symbolic system signifies the gestalt of the given culture that creates it.



-lichty



By Jody Zellen



By Mr. K.



s_kare

By Carlo Zanni



By Vincent Makowski

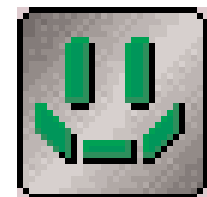


Sofia Imber

By Carlo Zanni



By Andrei Tomasz



General Icon
By Babel

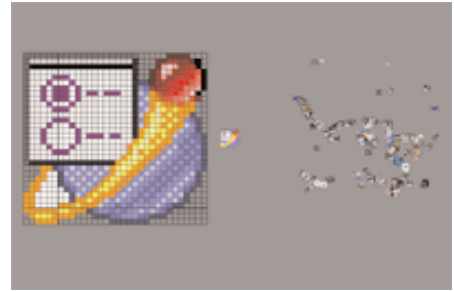
Can it be said then, that there is any wonder that the computer desktop reflects the office, with its volumes, files, folders, and waste cans? One particularly amusing reflection of cultural forms is the change of the Trash Can in Windows to the Recycle Bin. It makes perfect sense that Graphical User Interfaces from GEM to OSX reflect the working environments from which they were born. But then, it's quite amazing that this social contract of creating the symbolic metaphor of the computer environment then recontextualizes itself back into the human realm. Whenever I hear people saying that they aren't trying to 'remember' something, but to 'access' it, and that they hadn't put it in the right mental 'folder', makes me take serious pause. Does the GUI represent its own iconographic worldview, although not cosmological in scope, that reinscribes itself upon the user that inhabits it and require that user to buy into that symbolic paradigm?

Again, perhaps this might be overstating the importance of symbolic systems of representation like desktop themes and operating system icons as representing nothing less than complete systems of thought that shape the computer user's consciousness and the way that they deal with information, but perhaps not. And within that system of signs, perhaps it is also a bit of an exaggeration to draw comparisons between the cave at Lascaux and our desktops, or even the Platonic cave for that matter, with each icon representing the essence of human identity in the virtual space. Of course, there are more complex issues at hand here, such as the control issues relating to the corporate structures which generate these environments, the fact that the iconography that is used on the desktop is only occasionally created by the user, and so on, but what is important is to consider how we interact with these systems which impose meaning upon us and how we derive and thus impose our own meanings upon the systems we interact with.

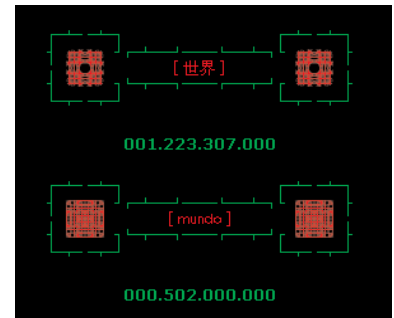
On the Work

Whenever I put forth a call for works, it reinforces a number of assertions that I have about artistic practitioners of all walks (artists, critics, curators, etc.), and some about myself. First of all, I am always amazed at the diversity of viewpoints people bring to a topic. This reiterates the fact that unless one travels extensively and has a terribly broad network, it is difficult at best to have any grasp on the wide array of approaches people are taking to their work and to New Media in general. For example, I had already been familiar with Troy Innocent's work through his various incarnations of the Iconica project and his use of beautifully, yet densely constructed symbolic 'worlds'. However, Justin Buck, with his questioning of the idea of icon as an anthropomorphic, or even anthropic construct for that matter, was an intriguing concept and quite unexpected.

This sort of diversity and sense of surprise that artists share with me almost always creates a softening of my curatorial parameters. David Rubin, Visual Arts Curator at the New Orleans Contemporary Art Center, once suggested that perhaps my personal criteria can sometimes be too restrictive to the widest possible range



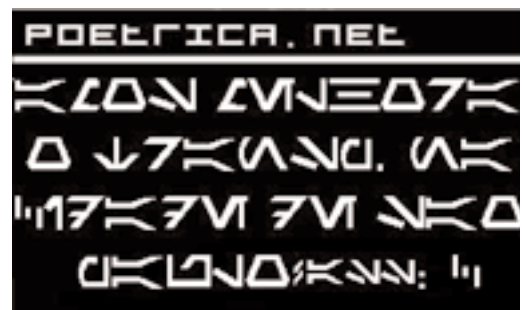
Recombinant Icon
By Simon Biggs



]world[
M. Takeo Magruder

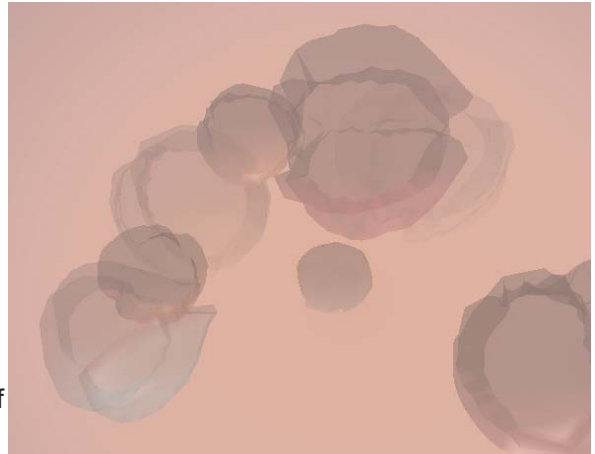


PIXLED
Johannes Blank

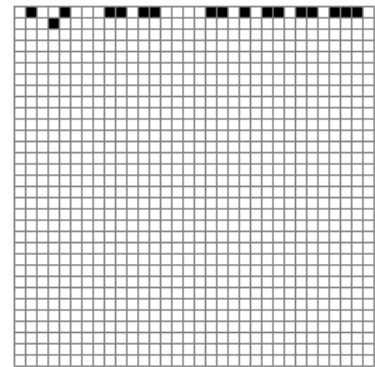


POETRICA
By Giselle Beiguelmann

of expression, bypassing some artists who are engaging with subjects I'm dealing with quite well, if possibly off my curatorial 'radar'. Of course, Vincent Makowski, Carlo Zanni (with his ICONportraits), Mr. K, and Jody Zellen created excellent works that worked with the framework of the icon proper as artwork in itself. But conversely, Simon Biggs, M. Takeo Magruder, John Simon, Johannes Blank, Judson Wright, and Carlo Zanni saw the icon space as a site of engagement for computational aesthetics and criticism, some aspects of engaging with the icon I had not considered previously. Biggs' Recombinant Icon begs the questioning of the icon as a constructed entity in its own right, and Magruder's World considers the representation of the multifaceted interpretation of the word 'world' in numerous languages through graphical translation. John Simon's work, "Every Icon", is by definition a work in progress, at least until the advent of large-scale quantum computing, as the 32x32 pixel grid grinds through every possible combination which would theoretically take longer than the span of the known universe to complete. Similarly, although not bound to combinatorics as Simon's work, Johannes Blank's PIXLED takes that 32x32 grid as a (rather large) physical space, allowing the interactor, a la Blinkenlights, to use the space of the icon as a place for motion and still representation in the space of the user. And, taking into a literal sense the human side of the icon and juxtaposing it with the parallels we ascribe to computer systems (viruses, etc) through Byoki, where the user is confronted by a 'diseased' icon. Lastly on the computational part of the show, Zanni uses search engines to create the clickable facial pixels in The Portrait of Sofia Imber, thus taking a multifaceted look at interfacing identity with computation.



Pixelated Strata
Justin Buck



Owner: John F. Simon, Jr.
Edition Number: Artist Proof
Starting Time: January 27, 1997, 09:42:30

Every Icon
By John Simon

Also part of my initial call for engagement with the icon, Beiguelmann, Zuniga, and Babel used the icon as space for social commentary. Giselle Beiguelmann's Poetrica uses the multilayered space of the world's interconnected Internetworks as a space for iconic communication through LED billboards in Brazil. Ricardo Miranda Zuniga's Daily Icon Deaths uses the icon to represent deaths reported in the New York Times on a daily basis, ironically playing on the representation of statistics by similar means in newspapers every day. Babel, rounding out these three, takes a more playful approach by creating an experience of farcical armies of icons with their floating 'generals', creating a marvelous satire on warfare and a fun poke at retro computer aesthetics.



1000 Icons/
Daily Headline Deaths
By Ricardo Miranda Zuniga

Texts

I welcome Valentina Tanni, who analyses the digitization of human identity through a look at the ICONportraits of Carlo Zanni, and Alina Serban who gives a reading of the ahistoricity of digital arts in regards to traditionalist practice. These two critics bring a welcome range of perspectives to the critical framing of the show, and especially Serban, who provides a fresh counterpoint to the historical framing of digital arts that I have just expressed earlier in this note.

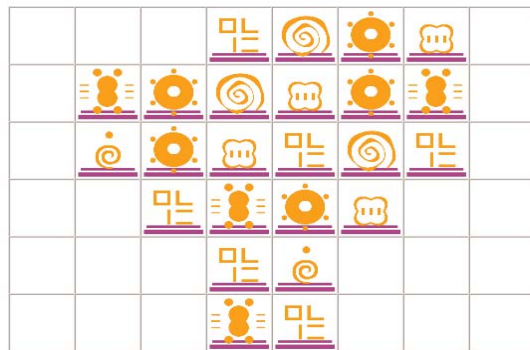
By and large, in seeing earlier exhibitions that provided me with inspiration, such as Shulgin's Desktops show, there is still a very deep body of cultural information from which to draw upon in considering the role of computer culture within a sociocultural context. Being that the computer icon is merely a very small subset of that culture, it represents a fundamental unit of communication the holds a powerful message. I thank the artists that were gracious enough to participate in this exhibition, and to Turbulence.org for their encouragement and hosting of the online form of this exhibition.

-patrick lichty
11/2003

Iconica.

Date: 3/10/99

World Time: 0/10



World Status:

● Reality : 11%
 ● Synthetic : 21%
 ● Information : 24%
 ● Abstraction : 16%
 ● Psyche : 7%
 ● Meta : 17%

Entities: 48
 Forms: 322



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Byoki
By Judson Wright
(Plasma Studii)

Iconica
By Troy Innocent