ETC

Different but Always the Same: the Online Art Market

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URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/68785ac

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Waelder, P. (2013). Different but Always the Same: the Online Art Market. *ETC*, (98), 51–55.

Flowers and Fruit of the Loom Men's Boxer Shorts collection of the best in the world of the living room.

Mr.LivingRoom deceives the whole world is watching and waiting for the next few years.

The people sleep in the same way as the first step in the right direction for the future of the country and the world of the living room.

My country dies in the end of the day and

Different but Always the Same: the Online Art Market

In the mid-1990s, shortly after the creation of the first World Wide Web server and browser, the German company Intershop and the US-based corporations Amazon and eBay introduced online shopping. Since then, e-commerce has developed steadily over the last two decades, its market share growing exponentially in the last four years and reaching new areas in which goods and services can be sold. In the field of art, artists have embraced the Internet, looking for new ways to distribute their work (particularly in the case of net art) while institutions and the art market have almost totally ignored it, only recently showing some interest in developing an online presence. This unbalanced perception of the benefits of the network and new media in general has led many artists and other professionals to look for new models that will eventually bypass the traditional art market and generate independent platforms for the distribution and selling of artworks.

Net art is an illustrative example: since its beginnings, it has challenged the boundaries of the exhibition space and denounced the art world institutions' misguided attempts to apply old practices to new media. Vuk Ćosić, whose work *Documenta: Done* (1997)—an unapproved copy of the entire *documenta X* website[1]—is a manifesto in itself, describes the difficult relationship between net art and the art system as "silly" and even impossible. The art market being part of this system, net art practitioners have sought their own ways to sell net-based artworks, in many cases avoiding the art gallery or replacing it with an online store model. Among the most recent initiatives, three projects show how economic profit could be made from net art without entering the art market: by means of an online store, through a pay-per-view model or with users' donations.

The Swiss-based DAStore[2] is an online store that was created in 2009 within the context of the research project *Owning online art* (Ooa)[3] that Markus Schwander and Reinhard Storz developed under the direction of the Institute of Art at the Basel School of Design / University of Applied Sciences Northwestern Switzerland (FHNW). As part of an investigation into integrating new media art into the art market, the DAStore offers "packages for purchase in which issues of ownership, reproducibility and the conservation of digital artworks are regulated."[4] The project therefore aims to commodify the digital artworks that are offered in limited editions on stable formats.

A different option is found in the pay-per-view model artist Carlo Zanni developed for his online generative poem *My Country is a Living Room* (2011),[5] which was discussed in a previous issue of *ETC*.[6] A user can access a limited "free trial" version or see the full poem and an archive of previously generated versions by subscribing for a small fee. The poem was generated live on the page using Google Scribe until August 2012, when the company denied access to its application, interrupting the process that had generated 111 different poems until then. The project, which now offers the archived versions, bases its profitability on turning the viewer into a subscriber, the collector into a (lifetime?) member of the site.

Finally, users can become patrons: this is the idea that Art Micro-Patronage (AMP)[7] put into practice between November 2011 and June 2012. Self-described as an "experimental online exhibition space," AMP offered monthly curated shows of new media art on an interface that included the option of donating small amounts of money to the participating artists. Not being able to achieve financial sustainability, AMP has temporarily stopped its activity after six months in order to re-consider its strategy. In this project, a sort of crowd-funding model was tested and proved to be difficult among the (limited) public for (new media) art.

These projects exemplify a movement of the new media art scene towards what can be defined as *integration* into the art market. In the opposite sense, an *expansion* of the art market into digital media has also been developing over the last decade. Several art galleries[8] have devoted their programs to new media art and have participated in international art fairs, mostly confined to "black boxes" and other separate sections for video art and new media. These galleries usually have pioneered most of the methods we have previously discussed, by collaborating with the artists in adapting their work to the requirements of the art market. Among these matters, the most important issue is the scarcity of the product, which must be artificially created in order to preserve its value. New media art works, therefore, become commodities in order to be integrated into the market: from this point on, they are presented and sold like most other artworks. This expansion of the market has consisted mostly in accepting a new range of artworks, as it has happened before with photography or video art. Yet, recently, a new expansion has started, in a short period

DIGITAL ART
COLLECTION/STORE

Im *DA*Store bieten wir Ihnen Werke der digitalen Kunst zum Kauf an.

deutsch / english

INFORMATION / KUNSTWERKE / NEU
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BEAT BROGLE | COLLECTIF_FACT | EXONEMO | HAUERT / REICHMUTH | ESTHER HUNZIKER | JODI
BIRGIT KEMPKER | MARC LEE | KRISTIN LUCAS | EVA UND FRANCO MATTES | STUDER / VAN DEN BERG | OLAF VAL

Exonemo

collectif_fact

Olaf Val

Jodi

Atelier Hauert Reichmuth

Studer / van den Berg

Esther Hunziker

Kristin Lucas

Marc Lee

Birgit Kempker

Beat Brogle

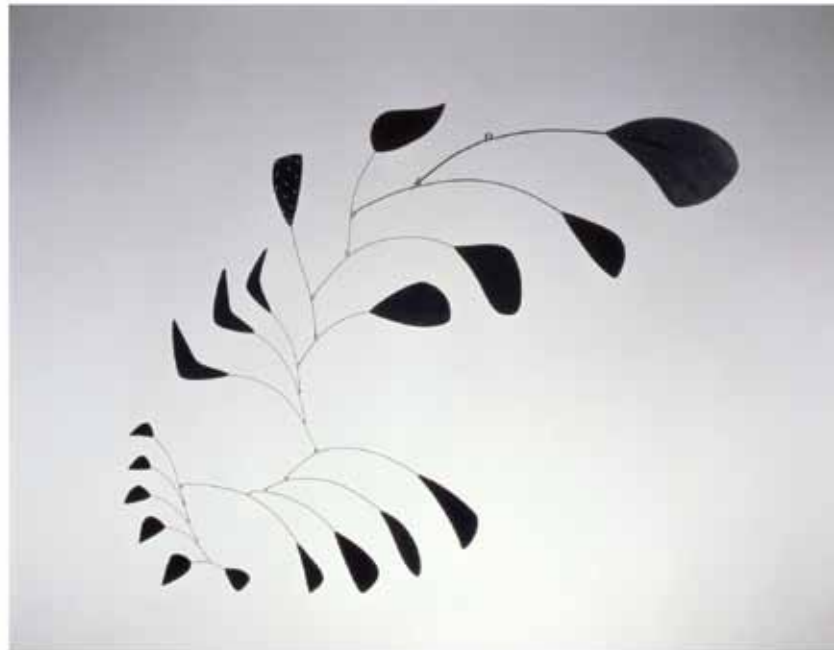Eva und Franco Mattes aka 0100101110101101.org

Screenshot from the Digital Art Store. http://www.digital-art-store.com/

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ALEXANDER CALDER
Vertical Foliage, 1941
Sheet metal, wire, and paint
53 1/2 x 66 in.

Calder Foundation

◆ View in Room
↥ More info
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David Smith
The Unity of Three Forms, 1937

Jean Tinguely
Cocktail au Cheval, 1966

Jesus Rafael Soto
Osculo Maduras Negra y Rojo, 2004

Tara Donovan
Untitled (Paper Plates), 2006

Alex Katz
Weeping Cherry 1 ...

Keith Sonnier
Egasca, 2007

Franz West
Pufterick, c. 1980

Robert Indiana
Love, 1966

Kiki Smith
Roothath, 2004

Joel Shapiro
untitled, 2011

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OTHER WORKS BY ALEXANDER CALDER

Search page from Art.sy, currently in private beta. Image credits: Alexander Calder © ARS, NY, courtesy Alexander Calder Estate; David Smith, courtesy David Smith Estate; Jean Tinguely © ARS, NY, courtesy Albright-Knox Art Gallery Art and Art Resource, NY; Jesus Rafael Soto © ARS, NY, courtesy Haunch of Venison; Franz West, courtesy Gagosian Gallery; Robert Indiana © ARS, NY; Alex Katz, courtesy Timothy Taylor Gallery. Tara Donovan, Keith Sonnier © ARS, NY; Kiki Smith, and Joel Shapiro © ARS, NY, all courtesy The Pace Gallery.

of time (less than thirteen months) and at an accelerated pace. Since January 2011, three new platforms have emerged, attracting considerable attention for their apparently innovative concepts. In a way, they update the traditional models of the art gallery, the art fair and the art consultant for the web 2.0.

In November 2011, Harry Blain, founder of Haunch of Venison, and Robert Norton, former CEO of Saatchi Online, launched s[edition],[9] an online platform that sells digitized editions of art works by major artists, such as Damien Hirst or Tracey Emin, in large editions at affordable prices ($8-40, $80-200). Each work is stored in s[edition]'s server, allowing their clients to access purchased works on a computer, iPhone, iPad or a connected TV. Each digital copy comes with a (digital) certificate that provides an illusion of ownership, along with the promise of a possible investment of being able to sell the work in the future. The catalogue initially was focused on selling big names at low prices, aiming at the "long tail" of consumers who, for instance, know the

work of Hirst but cannot afford to buy it. For this reason, most of the editions are just photos, animations or short videos of real, physical art works, ignoring the possibilities of the medium in which they are displayed. Although s[edition] has recently added pieces by artists working with new media such as Aaron Koblin, Rafaël Rozendaal and Angelo Plessas, these works lack most of their original properties, such as interactivity or computability, and are reduced to mere looping animations.

Just as s[edition] enters e-commerce and digital distribution without really challenging the traditional concept of the artwork, the VIP Art Fair[10] has taken the contemporary art fair to a website, mimicking its environment and structure by creating virtual booths of various sizes, divided into sections. Users scroll through the galleries' flat booths, consisting of an infinite wall on which images of the artworks are displayed next to a shadowy silhouette of a man or woman, to show scale. All the information about each piece (including the

price) is displayed, as well as a link to contact the gallery staff. Founded by James and Jane Cohan, the first VIP Art Fair took place online in January 22-30, 2011. Its success led to a second edition in February 3-8, 2012, which was followed by several other events (VIP Paper, VIP Photo, and so on). Still, the convenience of this model was called into question as dealers complained of lack of sales and because the limited temporality of the event seemed to contradict the nature of the web itself. This was the case for the *documenta X* website. Finally, in April 2012, VIP Art Fair announced its transformation into VIP Art, abandoning the temporary art fair model in favour of a platform model in which the artworks are permanently accessible.

The latest startup in the online art market actually has a long story that goes back to May 2010, when Carter Cleveland and Caroline Lao presented their project of a platform where users can find and collect art. Initially intended as a search engine for art with connections to social networks (Cleveland aimed at providing users with the possibility of creating a virtual art collection and sha-

ring it with friends on Facebook), art.sy[11] now provides online art consultancy. Users are assigned an "art.sy specialist" who must be consulted in order to buy an artwork, art.sy receiving a 3% commission from the gallery for this task. This new model, directed at a different audience, has developed under the direction of Sebastian Cwilich, a former executive at Christie's and Haunch of Venison, and advisor to Larry Gagosian. Another distinctive feature of art.sy is the so-called "Art Genome Project," an ongoing study to define the characteristics of artworks in order to classify them using hundreds of tags (or "genes"). This allows the user to find similar works based on colour, medium, movement, subject matter and other (debatable) categories such as "Art That Plays With Scale." Still in beta version, art.sy is quickly opening new functionalities with the objective of becoming a platform for art collectors.

Art.sy, VIP Art and s[edition] currently represent the expansion of the art market into online platforms and e-commerce solutions, yet they do not imply actual changes in the art system's rigid structures, nor a particular interest

in new media art. Still depending heavily on the physical artworks and the strategies of value-creation that art galleries, auction houses and institutions support, these websites finally become portals to the traditional art market, which remains untouched.

Pau Waelder

Pau Waelder is an art critic, curator and researcher in digital art and culture. Among his latest projects are the conferences En_lloc (Now_Here), Digital Culture (Fundacio Pilar i Joan Miro a Mallorca). As reviewer and editor, he has collaborated with several art magazines. He is New Media Editor at *art.es* magazine.

Notes

1 Vuk Ćosić, *Documenta*: *Done*, ljudmila.org <http://www.ljud-mila.org/~vuk/dx/>
2 Digital Art Store. <http://www.digital-art-store.com/>
3 *Owning online art*. <http://www.ooart.ch/>
4 "About." Digital Art Store. <http://www.digital-art-store.com/information1_e.html>
5 Carlo Zanni, *My Country is a Living Room*. <http://mycountryi-salivingroom.com/>
6 Pau Waelder, "An Interview with Carlo Zanni: on Pay-Per-View Net Art", *ETC*, 95, February-June 2012, p.45-46.
7 Art Micro Patronage. <http://artmicropatronage.org/>
8 Some of the most active art galleries devoted to new media art are: Postmasters Gallery, New York, 1995; Colville Place Gallery, London, 1999-2002; bitforms, New York, 2001; DAM, Berlin, 2003; Fabio Paris, Brescia, 2000-2012.
9 s[edition]. <http://www.seditionart.com/>
10 VIP Art. <http:/www.vipaart.com/>
11 art.sy. <http://art.sy/>