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Robots, Digital Dollars Lure Buyers as Internet Rocks Art

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Almar van der Krogt was surfing the Internet in 2009 when he happened upon a website featuring shifting waves of neon colors.

Its simplicity and constant motion captivated him. Over the next weeks, he returned to gaze at the site almost every day. Soon, [Van der Krogt](#), an [Internet](#) consultant and art collector, realized he wanted to own it.

"I didn't even know if it was possible to buy such a thing, but I had to try," he says. "The thought that someone might just take it offline really worried me."

The site, titled [Vai Avanti](#) (Go Ahead), is online art by [Rafael Rozendaal](#), a 31-year-old Dutchman who has sold 17 such works for \$4,000 a piece since 2008. Buyers get their name added to the title page and html source code. They cannot take the sites offline or make them private, nor can they alter the images or run advertisements. Van der Krogt bought two.

Rozendaal's other online pieces include "[Stagnation Means Decline](#)," which shows dollars stacking, and "[Love Game Set](#)," featuring a tennis match without players. His work belongs to the genre of new-media art, involving technologies like computers, robots and electronic sensors. The art form has raised several questions for collectors and museums, especially over the past decade, about how the work is reproduced or saved as technology evolves.

Computer Cubes

It's taken years for technology-based art to gain acceptance. A pioneer, [Manfred Mohr](#), started in the 1960s, when computers were the size of small houses. He convinced a French meteorology institute to let him use its cartography machine at night. He wrote algorithms to make the machine create drawings of cubes in various dimensions.

"When I showed my first drawings at a university in Paris, they got so crazy," says Mohr, who has a strong German accent even after living in Tribeca, [New York](#), for more than 20 years. "They accused me of using military equipment to destroy art and I even got a raw egg on the head!"

In 1971, the [Museum of Modern Art](#) in Paris granted him the world's first solo show for computer-based work, Mohr says.

"Science and engineer magazines all loved it," he says. The established art community continued to disregard Mohr until 2001 when [bitforms](#) gallery opened in Chelsea and asked to represent him. Bitforms says it is New York's first and only gallery dedicated exclusively to new-media art.

Today, it's no longer unusual for artists to employ technology and hire Ph.D. engineers to execute their vision.

NASA Scientists

Artist [Rafael Lozano-Hemmer](#) collaborated with NASA scientists on a 14-meter (46 foot) balloon simulating the [sun](#) that was set afloat over [Melbourne](#). In another of his pieces, 50 robotic [belts](#) suspended at waist height sense the presence of a gallery visitor and simultaneously turn to face him. The interactive nature of some new media raises questions for curators who want technology to help art, not distract from its value.

"If you have more than two interactive pieces in a room, they begin to cancel each other out," says Steve Sacks, owner of bitforms. "You want it to feel like a controlled artistic experience, not a circus."

One challenge is manufacturing an essentially false sense of uniqueness. Scarcity determines art value, and digital works can be reproduced exactly ad infinitum. Many new-media artists give buyers certificates of authenticity, a similar practice to the photography market.

"That certificate is what you put in a safe," says Lozano-Hemmer, who gives buyers software to reproduce digital works. "If your children destroy the artwork, you can just make another one. You can only sell the piece if you have the certificate."

Going Digital

New York's [Museum of Modern Art](#) owns more than 400 works with digital components, most of which were acquired in the past 10 years. [Glenn Wharton](#), a MoMA conservator, says museums are exploring ways to migrate digital works to new platforms in case the original ones become obsolete.

"The field has changed enormously in the last decade and we're really recognizing that the whole acquisition and management process is much more complex for these kinds of works," says Wharton. "The role of the art conservator is becoming increasingly technology based," he says.

Some new-media artists still prefer to stick with known formats. Luke DuBois used data from 20 dating websites to create unique prints for his piece titled "[A More Perfect Union](#)."

"These are sellable," DuBois says. "They're paper mounted on Sintra, which is like the most indestructible environment-destroying substrate known to man."

Permanent Photos

Rozendaal is unconcerned with the possible impermanence of his online work, saying he doesn't need a printed version to ensure its permanence. "When you go to a party and throw up and someone puts the photo on the Internet, that photo doesn't disappear," he says.

An Internet "invasion of the art world" was inevitable, says Rozendaal. "The [music industry](#) is in a panic, the [movie industry](#) is in a panic but the art world has felt pretty safe because it's all about objects," he says. "That's changing now and artists will have to find a way to monetize."

While Rozendaal's online works attracted 12 million unique visitors in 2010, it is unclear whether he will find more buyers, or if the value of his work will rise above \$4,000.

Peter Hirshberg, chairman of the [Reimagine Group](#) and co-founder of the [Gray Area Foundation for the Arts](#) and a longtime art collector, doesn't know if he'd buy a Web-hosted piece. Still, he is fascinated by the concept.

"He's playing with levers of scarcity and ownership," says Hirshberg. "If I bought a piece, I might be thrilled to show it internationally."

Lozano-Hemmer says: "I don't think there's anything wrong with people paying \$20,000, or whatever, for an idea. It happens all the time."

(Caroline Winter writes for Bloomberg BusinessWeek. Opinions expressed are her own.)