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An Interview With Carlo Zanni : On Pay-per-view Net-Art

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[See table of contents](#)

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N INTERVIEW WITH CARLO ZANNI: ON PAY-PER-VIEW NET ART

In the mid-1990s, when artists first started to explore what could be done on the World Wide Web, they soon realized that it would not be just a canvas but a medium in itself. Internet art was born as a sort of neo-avant-garde movement, in which the name incorporates the famous dot that denotes its allegiance to computer culture instead of art history. Consequently, when artists Natalie Bookchin and Alexei Shulgin wrote the manifesto *Introduction to net.art (1994-1999)*, they declared this art independent of any institution and saw the Internet as “a medium for production, publication, distribution, promotion, dialogue, consumption and critique.”¹ It seemed, then, that it would be possible for an artist to break free from the traditional art system, bypass the gallery and the museum and directly reach his or her audience and, eventually, collectors.

The dot-com bubble burst and many utopian ideas about the Internet came to an abrupt end, and some years later, the initial interest that museums and collectors had for this new kind of art faded away; however, neither the Internet nor net art had lost any of its potential. The web 2.0 introduced new ways of distributing and consuming content online, and new forms of artistic creation began to emerge, along with new ideas about selling net-based artworks. One of the most prolific artists to create Internet art while exploring ways of selling his work in the art market is Carlo Zanni (La Spezia, Italy, 1975).² Early in his career, he initiated research on creating a market for net art by organizing a three-day chat-based discussion under the title *P2P_\$: Peer to Peer Selling Processes for net_things* (2002), with the participation of a large number of artists and curators. Later on, he created *Altarboy* (2003), “a portable server-sculpture containing a network-based artwork that can be sold.” Since then, he has developed a series of net-based art projects in which he has maintained an interesting balance between object and process, public and private, owning and sharing. His latest work, *My Country is a Living Room* (2011),³ is a short poem generated online using Google Scribe that takes the form of a print-on-demand book and a pay-per-view net art piece. Is this the end of net art for free?

In the following interview, Carlo Zanni expresses his thoughts about selling net art to the people and outlines some of his strategies for developing a market for an art that once claimed its own temporary autonomous zone.

Paul Waelde: *You have been exploring different ways of selling net-based artworks for around a decade. In your opinion, is the market (or the collectors) ready to acquire net-based artworks?*

Carlo Zanni: Not really. The biggest problem right now, as I see it, is video art. Video art has been around for decades and blew up in the last 10-15 years but still doesn't sell well. There aren't that many collectors who are happy to pay 4000 € or more for a video in an edition of 7 by an emerging artist. Until dealers and galleries adopt the proper business model to market video art, net-based projects (technically much more hardcore and much more ephemeral) won't see the light of the day. Pretentious uniqueness was the advantage on which the art market was built, but now, this has created a blind spot, a deception, and it doesn't make sense to market video art and net-based art like you would a marble sculpture or an oil painting.

Artworks based on a certain media that, since its inception is unconcerned with the difference between original and copy, should be sold like books, music and films. The trick is to understand the following: you can say that you have seen a painting by Pollock (in a book for instance) and also that you have seen it “for real,” the actual painting in a gallery. There's a big difference between the two. These are two totally different experiences. But can you watch a movie “for real”? It doesn't make sense. You watch it on TV, at a theatre, on an iPad or on a tiny screen in front of your seat on an airplane: different formats, different light and colours, different audio and sometimes different editing too, which one is the original? You still feel you have watched it. And you did in fact. This is because video and net-based art are pervasive, viral and ubiquitous and they pollinate our life with their immateriality. Put simply, I think videos should go for 100€ and should be available for download and streaming too. In this way, you open up the audience, and you start selling to collectors and to the people as well. A small new economy starts, and this, with time, can build a new market.

P.W.: *You once stated that you consider the file containing an artwork a “flexible spatial concept” that could be visualized in different ways. Does that mean collectors are free to choose the way they experience the work?*

C.Z.: Yes exactly. It works like Aladdin and the lamp, as you swipe the lamp to see the genie, you load the file to see the artwork. The art world is notorious for creating absurd rules and limitations on what one can do. This, again, could be interesting at the beginning or until it becomes counterproductive. The only limitation I put is that it's for private use only. What I mean is that YES, you can make a copy for your best friend, but galleries, museums and festivals cannot display the work for free or buy it online for just 99 cents.

P.W.: *Altarboy, which you consider “a theory platform and an artwork” is probably the most balanced form, combining a net-based artwork and a physical object. Do you think that it's necessary to turn the artwork into an object to be able to sell it?*

C.Z.: No, it's not. It depends on the artist and on the project. And it must add something to the work itself. When I did the first *Altarboy* in 2003, it was a time when the most widespread comment about net art was that it couldn't be sold and so was largely absent from galleries and art fairs. My projects, in particular, take a long time to make. This is because they are a little bit complicated but also because I don't have big budgets. This means I work on the same subject for quite a while and my mind evolves along with the project. So frequently I start with a seed in my mind and I end with a forest three years later. For instance, *Iterating My Way to Oblivion* (2010)⁴ is a video and it existed as a video on YouTube for about 6 months, then I decided to sell it, 1000 copies at 90€, and I used the noodle cup that you can frequently spot in the project itself as packaging, it has a role in the video. So, when you put it on a desk in front of you, you are in a situation that is very similar to the one in the video. This way, you understand that the packaging is not only a box to sell you a disk, but also a link to stimulate your mind and emotions.

I think the most interesting part of being an artist is to try to play the world as

you see it in the moment you see it. I really want to feel my art being generated and distributed in the world as it's spinning right now. I also want to sell my art: it's an incredible honour for me when someone buys a project of mine. I don't see any conflict between the art and the market if when you sell your art you are honest about your ethics and the true nature of your work.

P.W.: *The output of your net-based artworks usually have a certain number of automatically generated versions of the same piece, which are slightly different according to the data gathered at a particular time. How do you treat these versions: as editions, as copies or as originals?*

C.Z.: I did a couple of projects that lasted one year and produced almost 360 movies for each. I think they have the characteristic of both a unique piece and an edition. Again I think we should get rid of this notion, stop thinking in terms of unique vs. edition vs. unlimited, etc. This is another story, another world. In my case (for instance), for the first 5 months, I sell *The Possible Ties* embedded in a small sculpture featuring a screen with a metal shape in front holding a tiny stereolithographic sculpture representing the last scene of the movie. The next 3 months, it is available as an edition of 20 embedded in a reproduction on a 1:1 scale of the Donald Judd yellow book you can spot in the movie on the bedside table. Others will go probably in digital download or pay per view. In another case, *The Fifth Day* (2009)⁵ for instance, the project is still up and running, while it keeps archiving a version each week. I hope this work can stay on longer. The reason why the other two had to stop is because the servers behind them were too expensive for me to maintain. It would be



beautiful to set up the live generation process again, perhaps this time without the archiving feature.

P.W.: *My Country is a Living Room is probably the first pay-per-view net art piece, with a clearly defined subscription method that seems to be aimed at any Internet user and not just to art collectors. What, in your opinion, will be the reaction of the users?*

C.Z.: I have no idea: we still need to create an audience. It takes time. The project was just launched online but I'm having some good feedback. I hear people telling me: AT LAST!!! Doing it this way is a bit risky. You're almost jumping off the high end of the gallery system, and you're probably getting banned from art fairs and auctions too. So from this point of view it could seem like suicide. I see this as an incredible opportunity that could redefine some aspects of the art world. It's up to the artist to decide what to do. For sure we now have the tools. No excuses. I don't believe in artists acting as rioters or revolutionaries while they are being fed by the dark side of the market. Of course we'll hardly make big numbers in the short run because the fruition of art is different from literature and music. But I'm sure that there's a public for art out there, wider than the circle of super collectors.

P.W.: *Do you consider the pay-per-view model the future of net art? Do you think that asking the user to pay may affect the distribution of the artwork?*

C.Z.: Net art is a pretty complex world and many different projects could fit in it. I think pay-per-view could definitely be a possible, fair answer, but not the only one. I put the entry-level access at 0,99€ so that anyone can pay for it.

P.W.: *Have you considered other modes of distribution, such as creating an iPhone app or selling archive versions?*

C.Z.: I think the iPhone apps have several restrictions in their terms of service: this could be a problem when you make art. I'm talking about very strict copyrights laws and prohibited use of third party data and so on. But for sure, it's a highly valid option to take into consideration.

P.W.: *When you create an artwork that is displayed on a particular device, such as an iPod, what do you do, when these devices become obsolete?*

C.Z.: If they go off the market I buy them on eBay. But it's important to state that using an iPod or another device, for me at least, is just a matter of convenience. In case of the iPod, they've sold millions of them so it's much easier to get a new one. Despite this, the artwork doesn't rely on the iPod because it's an iPod. In the worst scenario (and with some extra work), I could replace it with another player.

P.W.: *Do you think that the art market can become a network in which artworks are accessed instead of owned?*

C.Z.: If the art market wants to deal with video and net art in a productive and right way, it should. But where simple objects are concerned, it will remain the same. I think that young video artists and young galleries should somehow become partners in "cultural hubs" in which galleries accept many more video and net artists than now, and artists collaborate with more galleries at the same time as well as going online on their own in various ways. The art crowd shouldn't be afraid to admit that uniqueness and high prices (or of course, cheap prices and high numbers) don't automatically stand for quality. These are just ways to sell artwork, respecting the buyers and being in tune with the times.

P.W.: *You work with the flow of data but also with the archive, by storing versions of an ever-changing online artwork. Is this motivated by a desire to keep a memory of the work's mutability? Do you already consider marketing options when creating these works?*

C.Z.: True, it's because I'm scared by death perhaps, but it's also a paradigm of how I see life: the relationship between present, future and the past, the history of time. What I can tell you is that no archive gives me the same ecstasy and dizziness as a live piece does. The uncertainty of events drives me crazy. This perpetual and anxious emptiness (that I see as the very common everyday life) is counter balanced by an awareness of the past, by its presence. I like to create hand-made works out of my Internet projects sometimes. I did small paintings of *eBay Landscape* (2004)⁶ for instance, and ink drawings from *The Possible Ties Between Illness and Success* (2006).⁷ It's interesting to me because it's like painting an ever-changing landscape. I have a background in traditional media, when I studied the Internet still wasn't available for the masses. So my interest in painting comes from that period.

Artworks are often produced in a completely abstract way, it's pure thought and they tend to escape any possible formalism (at least in my case). Of course when you start working on a project, many issues arise and among them, one can be the way to market it. Despite this, a drawing from a net-based piece has the same probability of being sold as the net project itself. This is my experience. If people don't get the magical spirit of the whole, they don't even see the drawing. And when they just like the aesthetics, this doesn't work either because they don't want to be bothered by all the other subtle layers. I think it's all about education and being open to the fragility of the unexpected.

Pau Waelder

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

Notes

- 1 Natalie Bookchin and Alexei Shulgin, *Introduction to net.art* (1994-1999). <<http://www.easylife.org/netart/>>
- 2 Carlo Zanni. <<http://zanni.org/>>
- 3 Carlo Zanni. *My Country is a Living Room*. <<http://mycountryi-salivingroom.com/>>
- 4 Carlo Zanni. *Iterating My Way Into Oblivion*. <<http://www.iteratingmywayintooblivion.com/>>
- 5 Carlo Zanni. *The Fifth Day*. <<http://www.the5fifthday.com/>>
- 6 Carlo Zanni. *eBay Landscape*. <<http://www.zanni.org/ebaylandscape/>>
- 7 Carlo Zanni. *The Possible Ties Between Illness and Success*. <<http://www.thepossibleties.com/>>