

Thayer, Katheryn 'Going Once, Going Twice. Phillips And Tumblr Put GIFs On Auction', Forbes, (October 2013)

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/katherynthayer/2013/10/22/going-once-going-twice-phillips-puts-gifs-on-auction/#4fc1fb6558ff>

# Going Once, Going Twice: Phillips And Tumblr Put GIFs On Auction

Katheryn Thayer **FORBES STAFF**

What does a high-profile digital art auction say about our emerging relationship with new media? Earlier this month, [Phillips](#), a prestigious art auction house, partnered with [Tumblr](#), one of the largest repositories of freely-shared GIFs, to showcase GIFs, webcam selfies, video game screenshots and other experiments in screen-based pieces and physical objects derived from digital tools. The exhibition, auction and related [Tumblr site](#) were called [Paddles ON!](#). The show brought new attention to digital art and 20% of the proceeds went to [Rhizome](#), a New York City non-profit dedicated to new media.

Though digital art is shared, liked, retweeted and embedded free-of-charge all over the web, the [20 pieces](#) Lindsay Howard selected for this exhibition demonstrate a new level of comfort with bringing digital art offline and traditional media online. And, unlike the digital art shared and spread online, these pieces pulled in prices of \$800 to \$16,000 each.

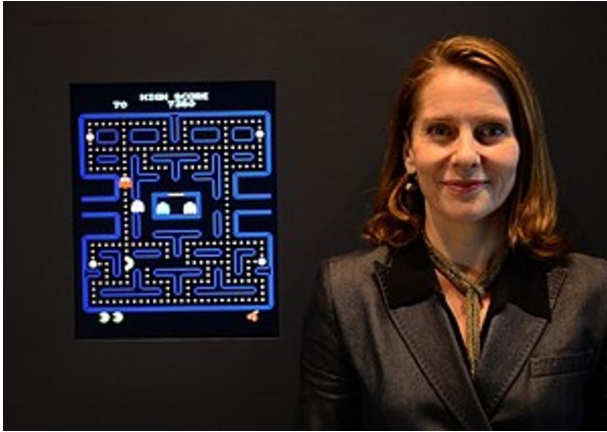
Paddles ON! forces online art and physical, offline art into a complicated dialogue. The pieces range from Rafael Rozendaal's interactive HTML and Javascript website [ifnoyes.com](#) to Molly Soda reading emails into a webcam for 8 hours straight, "[performing her online celebrity as a mirror that reflects Internet culture](#)". Rozendaal's site sold for a final price of \$3,500 and bidding on Soda's video closed at \$1,500. The collection includes [bizarre digital distortions](#) Clement Valla pulls straight from [Google](#) ngIf: ticker GOOG -0.18% ngIf: show\_card end ngIf: ticker Earth images as well as Mark Tribe's [hauntingly realistic landscapes](#), screenshots he takes in first-person shooter video games. Each sold for \$2,800-well below the auction house's projected selling price of \$12,000-\$15,000 for Valla's *Postcards From Google Earth* and projected selling price of \$4,000-\$6,000 for Mark Tribe's *Black Creek*. The final sale of 16 of the 20 pieces totaled \$90,600, a modest sum for fine art auctions. Regardless, the inclusion of digital art in a fine art auction shows changing attitudes towards new media that are so often found for free online.

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This auction put a price on media that haven't been highly valued before, but also demonstrated digital art's place beyond the online galleries of [Tumblr](#) and the [Digital Art Museum](#). Digital art has a physical side that also deserves recognition, and Paddles ON! bridges that gap. Silvia Bianchi and Ricardo Juarez's pieces include *clay\_def.jpg*, which the pair painted, uploaded, digitally manipulated and then printed on silk, as well as *Turning The World Upside Down*, a yoga swing hand-sewn from digitally printed fabric. The Phillips/Tumblr/Rhizome collaboration behind Paddles ON! finds comfort in the obvious online platforms (there's a [Tumblr site](#) and an [online auction page](#)), but is also consciously pushing digital art into the traditional art world.

The Phillips auction house was founded in London in 1796, and has a long, luxury-packed history behind it. Early patrons include Marie Antoinette and Napoleon Bonaparte. Bernard Arnault, the chairman of [Louis Vuitton](#) ngIf: ticker Moet Hennessey, owned the auction house until 2003. Under the leadership of Simon de Pury and Daniela Luxembourg, the auction house has shifted from Impressionist, American, and Modern art to Contemporary Art, Design, Jewelry, Photography, and Editions. With Phillips's new focus in functional design and novel presentations of space, online digital artwork has found an appreciative niche.

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*The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) Senior Curator of Architecture and Design Paola Antonelli poses next to the video game Pac-Man during a preview of the MoMa's exhibition featuring 14 acquired video games in New York, March 1, 2013. (Image credit: AFP/Getty Images via @daylife)*

It's not just Phillips that is bringing the new medium of digital art out of the blogosphere and into traditional venues. Lauren Cornell, former executive director of [Rhizome](#), sold animated GIF files at the 2011 New York Armory Show and MoMA is still adding to its new collection of video games. Exhibitions of GIFs and video games facilitates a reflection on the digital world we exist in. Pulled out of the arcade, we can see Pac-Man (1980) and Tetris (1984) are aesthetically valuable, but also present a virtually architected world and elicit particular behaviors in that world. GIFs, encountered in a gallery instead of our PC, allow us to consider how frequently we encounter digital design and how rarely we formally appreciate it.