



# Eryk Salvaggio

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## American Internet

Traditionally, the history of art has been approached via movements and trends in artistic production, as they progress through time. If we examine Net art with the same traditional approach, we can properly place it too as an artistic movement. Like all movements, Net art began as an attempt to break away from previously established patterns, as something that has never been seen before, as avant-garde. The longevity and endurance of this digital movement depends on whether or not it will be surpassed by another, leaving the Net art of today dated and belonging to a specific period of time. Since, despite its relatively short life span, Net art has already developed its own characteristics, trends, and language as a medium, Net art must now reinterpret its own position as an art medium, in order to not become dated. Eryk Salvaggio's online art piece entitled *American Internet* will be considered here as one such attempt to reinterpret Net art as an art medium. *American Internet* can be seen as avant-garde, since it goes against many conventions and currents of Net art, thus proposing a new direction for Net art to follow. However, despite the work's status as avant-garde, as the Net art medium takes on yet another new direction and as the relevancy of the work to contemporary issues declines, *American Internet* will need to undergo the test of time, in order to locate itself within a specific historical context and be reflective of a specific stage in the progress of artistic production.

To begin with, it is best to provide some reasons for the consideration of *American Internet* as avant-garde throughout this essay. In comparison with traditional ASCII art and typical Net art,

*American Internet* is reaching new grounds. As ASCII art, the piece is moving away from traditional forms. According to Salvaggio, he "use(s) ASCII to reflect "life" - as a metaphor for the distinction between the real world and how we process the information of the real world."\* Salvaggio claims to use ASCII as a partial element in his work, not the entire basis. Furthermore, the use of colour and HTML coding renders his work an impure form of ASCII art, thereby bringing the form of ASCII art from an amateur status to a status of High Art. He is part of a very small, elite group of ASCII artists, like Vuk Cosic, who are attempting to elevate ASCII from a craft to a fine art form.

However, while Salvaggio is moderately reinterpreting the ASCII style, the main issue that defines this work as avant-garde is its difference from traditional Net art, and thus the direction it provides for the future of Net art. *American Internet* can be seen to fulfill specific guidelines for Net art, which Salvaggio himself has put forth for the Net art community on [www.rhizome.org](http://www.rhizome.org) under the title "Six Rules Towards a New Internet Art." The rules were derived as a warning for net artists about common and somewhat tiresome trends they tend to follow with their art. The rules are: no Flash, no introduction pages, no more art for the sake of error, images must be unique to the site-maker, technology and the Internet are not subjects, and the work stands alone. Although it can be seen that *American Internet* is not wholly compliant with the six rules, Salvaggio still claims "it does follow the spirit of the rules."\* The inclusion of the explanation in the body of the piece can be seen as a rule breaker, as does the strong commentary on the globalization of the Internet. However, the explanation can be interpreted as an attempt to steer away from a work too esoteric and conceptual, while the Internet is not the sole receptor of criticism within the work, as it is only a sub-topic in the artwork. Furthermore, Salvaggio is to be commended on his incorporation of the medium to give a stronger message to the work. In other words, the international spread of the Internet and the use of HTML, the browser's own language, works with the meaning and commentary of the work itself. What *American Internet* therefore proposes to the Net art community is an art that is aware of its own unique language, an art that is aware of its distribution process and audience, and an art that stays away from popular commercial trends. The piece participates in the discourse about contemporary art practice and the Internet by attempting "to redefine the "structural integrity" of the browser and the web itself."\*

**Footnotes:**

\* Exerts from interview with Eryk Salvaggio, March 2003.

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**Site:** <http://www.turbulence.org/Works/Eryk/ai/index.html>