



## Abstract

“Text” and “textile” share the same Latin root—*textus*, or “woven.” In the 1960s and 1970s a digital form of amateur text-based art known as “ASCII (pronounced *AS-kee*) art,” began to flourish—images created with letters and other typographic symbols on the computer keyboard. Since the advent of Windows 95, participants in certain “channels” (chatrooms) on IRC (Internet Relay Chat) have developed a brilliantly colored form of text-based art, an elaboration of ASCII art. This art contains much play with ornament, pattern, and symmetry, and may be either abstract or figurative. In a highly ritualized mode of playful

communication, images are displayed on the screen in real time to greet other participants. Thus, images are both “art” and “communication.” Despite its intangibility, this art has many affinities with traditional weaving, embroidery and especially quilting. It is a form of “quilting in time” rather than space. Figurative images also partially resemble paper greeting cards. This article focuses on an IRC group called “rainbow,” that has communicated mainly via images since May 1997. The analysis draws on a database of some 5,000 images. Seven distinctive features of this art are discussed.

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## Pixel Patchwork: “Quilting in Time” Online

This article is about a novel form of online visual expression that I call “*pixel patchwork*.”<sup>1</sup> Instead of typing words, as is usual in verbal chat, participants in certain “channels” or chatrooms on IRC (Internet Relay Chat), one of the world’s most popular online chat modes, interact primarily via the display of brilliantly colored images created with letters and other typographic symbols on the computer keyboard. Text-based images have been featured on a number of IRC channels since 1996–7, but have particularly flourished on *#mirc\_rainbow*, *rainbow* for short, a channel on the Undernet, a major network of IRC servers.<sup>2</sup> “*mIRC*” is the Windows-based program players use to communicate and display images.<sup>3</sup>

Participants engage in everyday, spontaneous communication via images, and also hold scheduled events such as art shows, channel anniversary celebrations, and birthday parties, again primarily featuring images rather than words. Though dependent on Windows 95+ and in some respects on rather advanced computer literacy, artists employ very simple, even “primitive” digital techniques, when compared with cutting-edge computer graphics.<sup>4</sup> Borrowing a term from world music, I call this art “*avant-folk*,” because it strikingly juxtaposes considerable skill using computers with naive, group-based artistic expression resembling traditional folk art in important

respects—despite two main, apparent anomalies, the lack of tangibility and of face-to-face contact between participants. “Folk-like” aspects of the art will be debated in the concluding section of the article.

Figure 1 is an excellent introduction to *rainbow* art and communication. As is typical of many forms of online chat, the players use nicknames, called “nicks” on IRC. Three players have deployed five different images to greet one another. The nick of each player appears at the left of each line of an image, just as if a person typed ordinary text.

First, <rebel^>, a Texas housewife and Web page designer, greets me as I enter the channel—my nick is <doremi>.<sup>5</sup> Next, <Steakie^>, a male signage installer from Pennsylvania, greets <swt1^> and <aisa>, who types “hello” followed by eight inverted exclamation points, giving away her Spanish origins. Then <swt1^> acknowledges <Steakie>, who greets her a second time, adding the words, “how ya been?” All have mobilized ready-made files from collections stored on their hard disks, incorporating the recipient’s nick just before displaying them.

Visual images composed from the elements of writing have a long history. Antecedents include pattern, concrete or visual poetry, Islamic calligraphy, micrography, typewriter art, and teletype art.<sup>6</sup> The most recent antecedent is ASCII (*AS-kee*) art—images created using



and acknowledging one another via images, never saying much in the conventional sense. Usually, there is not even much small talk. What, then, can be the fascination? Surely, the sheer novelty of the phenomenon must wear off.

The goal of this article is to identify the distinctive features of this novel art, and to explain how it also serves as a language of communication. I will attempt to do so in a manner comprehensible to readers not necessarily familiar with the Internet or with this specific phenomenon. I aspire both to

identify affinities with traditional, material-based arts and crafts, and to illuminate novel aspects of this digital phenomenon. My descriptions and analyses draw on a database of approximately 5,000 images captured and saved over a period of five and a half years, using Paint Shop Pro, a graphics program.<sup>8</sup> In the conclusion to the article I will allude to some of the directions that my analysis of this art and communication have taken. In addition, I will attempt to make a case for viewing this art as an incipient form of digital folk art.

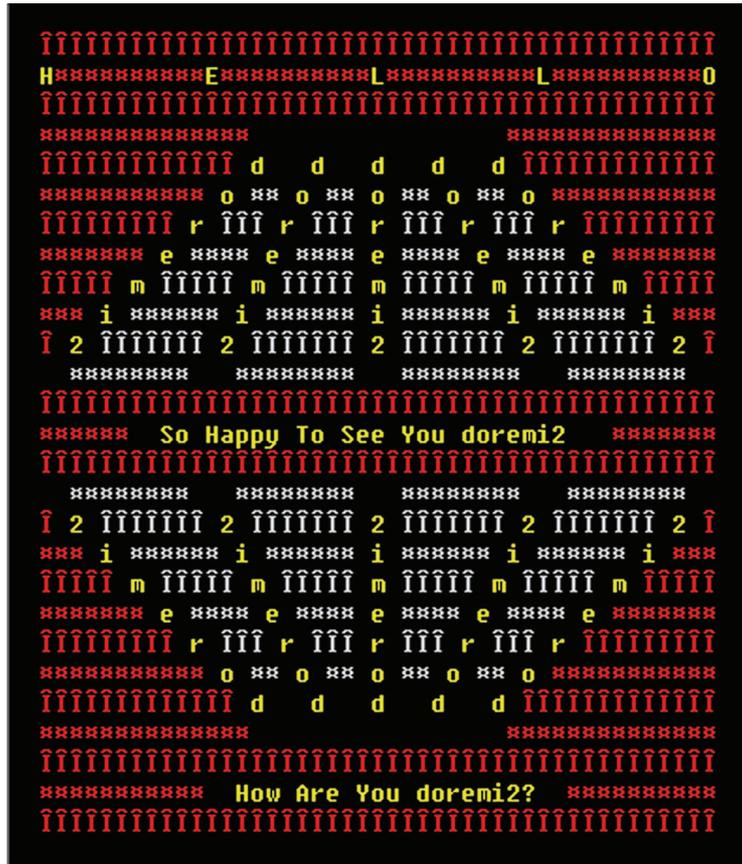


Figure 2  
An abstract image by <nuffers>.

## Introduction

The words "text," "texture," and "textile" all have the same root—the Latin *textus*, "woven." While carpets are usually knotted or woven from the bottom up, this digital art is "woven" from the top down, left to right, as in knitting and ordinary word-processing. When creating an IRC image, one "knits" each "stitch" from left to right, determining whether it will contain a typographic symbol or not, what color it will be,

and what color the background will be. While shortcuts of various kinds can be used to make the process less tedious, the fundamental process remains the same.

### ***Types of rainbow art and links to traditional folk art***

*Rainbow art* may be either abstract or figurative; both are about equally common. In abstract images, typographic symbols are typically repeated in patterned ways, though

not always as elaborately as in Figure 2. Figurative images are "drawn" with typographic symbols, either in so-called "solid style" (Figure 3), or "line style" (Figure 4), as has been true also of ASCII art.

While abstract images are almost without exception original works by IRC artists, many, perhaps most figurative images incorporate and adapt works taken from ASCII art collections on the Web, as in the instances noted in Figure 1, and as

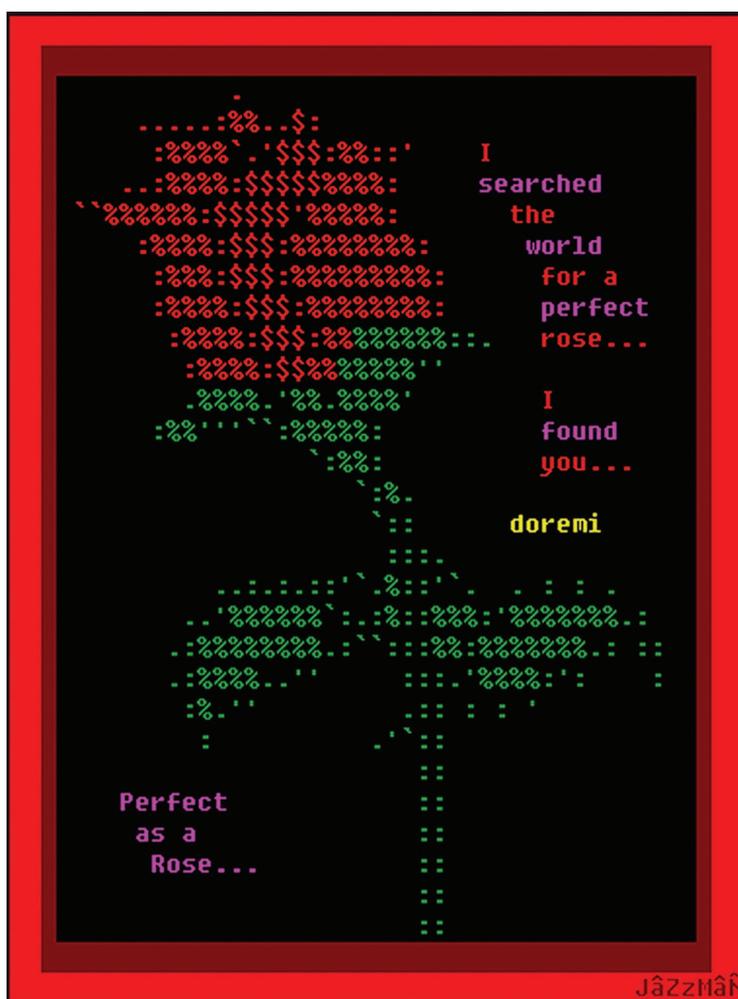


Figure 3  
A figurative image by <jazzman>, incorporating an ASCII rose by Normand Veilleux, <http://www.afn.org/~afn39695/veilleux.htm>.

is also the case for the rose in Figure 3, originally by Normand Veilleux.<sup>9</sup> The arrangement of cats in Figure 4 is again based on a design of a single cat by Joan Stark, but now transformed considerably because of the carefully planned repetitions of the basic design element.<sup>10</sup>

These examples suggest that figurative images are generally two-dimensional, non-illusionistic, stylized, seemingly frozen in time and space, like those in many types of traditional folk art. Similarly, abstract designs often resemble geometric designs in carpets, weavings, cross-stitch embroidery, needlepoint, and patchwork quilts.<sup>11</sup> *Rainbow* images resemble works in these crafts primarily because they too are created on a grid, not necessarily visible to the eye.

### **From material to digital quilting**

*Rainbow* art is a form of “quilting in time,” rather than space, in which the “patches” consist only of bits and bytes. The display of images in social context partially resembles traditional North American quilting bees, in which women met not only to combine the layers of a quilt, but also to socialize. The women chatted while working, and after the quilting the men joined them for socializing and dancing (Dewhurst *et al.* 1979: 51–2; Yabsley 1984: 56). While social aspects of quilting were certainly important, traditional quilts were primarily functional domestic objects in poor homes, made from scraps of old clothing to keep people warm as bedcovers.

*Rainbow* images do not have such utilitarian functions. However,



Figure 4

A stylized figurative image by <dale^>, adapted from an ASCII design by Joan Stark, <http://web.archive.org/web/20010411185704/www.geocities.com/SoHo/7373/pets.htm>.

displays of images do serve an important function of a different kind: they facilitate the cultivation of group ties, not just in a brief, scheduled event, as is true of quiltings, but over an extended period of time—weeks, months, even years. Behind the façade of group activity, I have learned, many individuals come to cultivate private relationships, in two-party online conversations, parallel to the group's channel and not visible to others, and in subsidiary channels the players have created. These include a second channel where

some players go to receive technical help, to rehearse displays, and to chat in verbal text mode. There is poignancy in this form of online quilting: whereas a cloth quilt persists over time, long after the social relationships surrounding its creation and use no longer exist, this art is entirely ephemeral—just how ephemeral is explained below.

Despite the analogy to quilting, *rainbow* players do not use terms associated with it. They speak of "coloring" and "drawing" "art," in rather child-like fashion. Still, the

analogy is salient for some. A woman nicknamed <patches> was webmistress for the channel website and channel "owner" or leader from 1999 to 2002. As her nickname hints, she is an experienced quilter, who claims to have sold commissioned quilts for thousands of dollars. In a private chat in 1997 I asked her if she saw a resemblance between IRC art and quilting. She immediately displayed for me three quilt patterns she had transformed into IRC images. One of these, "Trip Around the World," is shown in Figure 5.

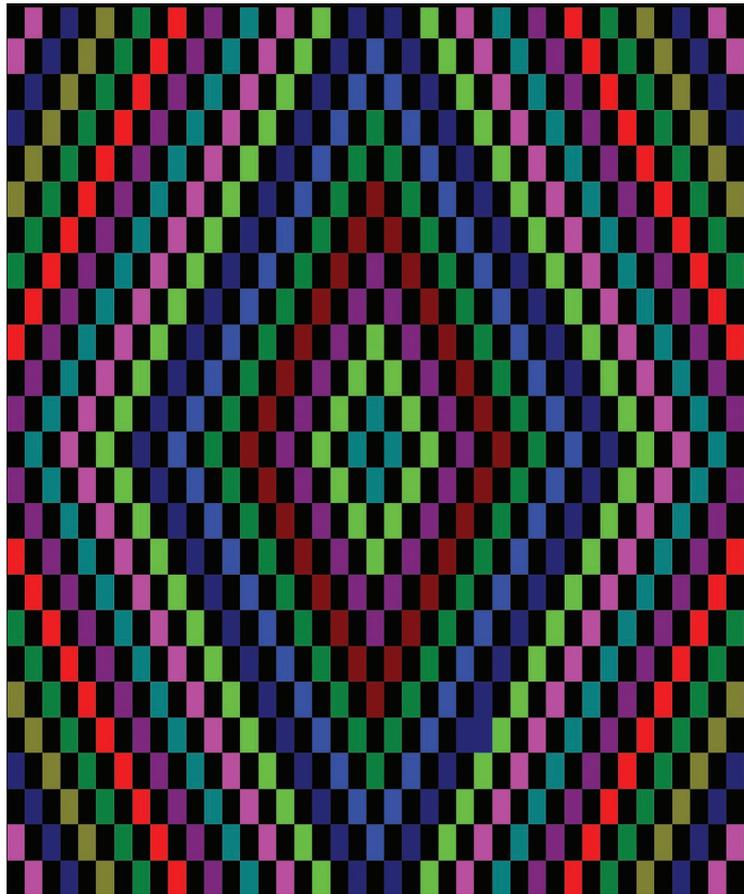


Figure 5  
"Trip Around the World," an IRC version of a traditional American quilt pattern, by <patches>.

### **Social History of rainbow**

*Rainbow* came into existence in May 1997, when, unhappy about the autocratic and tension-laden atmosphere in another Undernet channel featuring images and called “#mirc\_colors,” three members defected to create a new channel with a more egalitarian, freer atmosphere. Since then, *rainbow* has flourished, despite quite high turnover among participants. A fairly stable core of regulars and a well-organized set of ongoing artistic and social practices have crystallized. Hundreds of people have participated over the years, though just how many is impossible to determine. Some drop in just once, never to return; others participate regularly for months and even years at a time. At the present time, some seventy-five individuals are members of the “in-group,” serving as “ops,” operators in IRC lingo—participants with administrative duties and privileges, who help run the channel. Many are also artists.

I estimate that over time, some 150 artists have contributed to the pool of images shared by all. Non-artists regularly use images created by others as “tokens for interaction.” Some sets of images are devoted to the work of individual artists. In these instances, the work of a single artist is honored in a scheduled show, and then the file is immediately released for all to use in ordinary interaction.

Other sets of files combine the work of many different artists, grouped by theme, such as “winterfun,” “Christmas,” or “jokes.” These files, too, are shared by all. On 30 December, 2002 there

were no less than 248 sets of files available for downloading from the channel website, the large majority of which had been created by *rainbow* artists. If one estimates 100 images per set (too low in my experience, in many instances), this is an output of some 25,000 images.

The players are of lower-middle-class to lower-class background, and generally have had some high-school education, or are high-school graduates; some have post-high-school vocational training. Few are professionals. About 60% are women and 40% men; most are in their thirties, forties, and fifties, though there are also teenagers and people in their sixties and seventies. Most are Americans concentrated in the West, Southwest, and South, with a smattering of people from many other countries. Some channel leaders have had higher levels of education than rank-and-file players. <sher^>, the current leader, is a housewife married to a coal miner. Not surprisingly, a fair number of artists have previous experience with materially based crafts such as quilting, sewing, and embroidery. I know of only one professionally trained artist with an MFA among currently active artists.

### **Features of *Rainbow* Art**

I turn now to a discussion of seven distinctive features of *rainbow* art (Figure 6).

#### ***Interactivity***

The first, fundamental feature of this art listed in Figure 6 is *interactivity*. This term means many things to many people.<sup>12</sup> Here, it

**Figure 6**  
Seven features of *rainbow* art.

1. Interactivity
2. Ephemerality
3. Use of brilliant color
4. Sound clips: trend toward multimedia performance
5. Prominence of ornament, pattern, and symmetry
6. Eccentric typography: extended ASCII characters
7. Prefabricated utterances in figurative images

means that people interact directly with other people in real time, and not just with computers or with Web pages. This contrasts sharply with two other online "quilting" phenomena, both on the World Wide Web.

Since approximately 2001, digital "friendship quilts," Web-based assemblages of "patches" contributed by various individuals, generally women, can be found on the Web. They are an adaptation of the idea of traditional American friendship quilts, which were "made up of a one-block pattern repeated throughout the entire quilt . . . many, or all, of the blocks in a quilt have names on them, either inscribed in ink or embroidered in silk thread or cotton floss" (Lipsett 1997: 16).<sup>13</sup> Friends and relatives each contributed a block with their names on them.

Figure 7 is an excellent example of a traditional friendship quilt. Made about 1888 in Cayuga County, upstate New York, it was presented to Reverend Cordello C. Herrick and his wife Emily Elizabeth Taylor Herrick. It now hangs in the family room of Brian Wells Galusha and his wife, the great-granddaughter of this couple.<sup>14</sup>

The size of the patches in digital friendship quilts (Figure 8)

crystallized at 130 × 130 pixels, perfect squares. Typically, there are four or five patches in a row, and five or more rows. Many patches are *live*: clicking on them leads directly to the Website of the person contributing them. Some are also animated. Patches are usually figurative, greeting-card-like in imagery and accompanying mini-texts, as in Figure 8, the upper portion of a digital friendship quilt by Suzie Radant, a Michigan resident, who calls her site "Suzie's Cyber Cloud Quilts: Quilts with Meaning."

Most digital quilters offer downloadable patches to others. Sharing is a way of being in touch with others and making friends. The links between sites constitute a social network of sorts, and some sites are organized into webring. Suzie Radant manages a Webring called "Quilting Circle of Friends." Compared to *rainbow*, whose participants interact in real time, social ties among these digital quilters seem weak, and are, at the least, invisible to the casual visitor to their sites.<sup>15</sup>

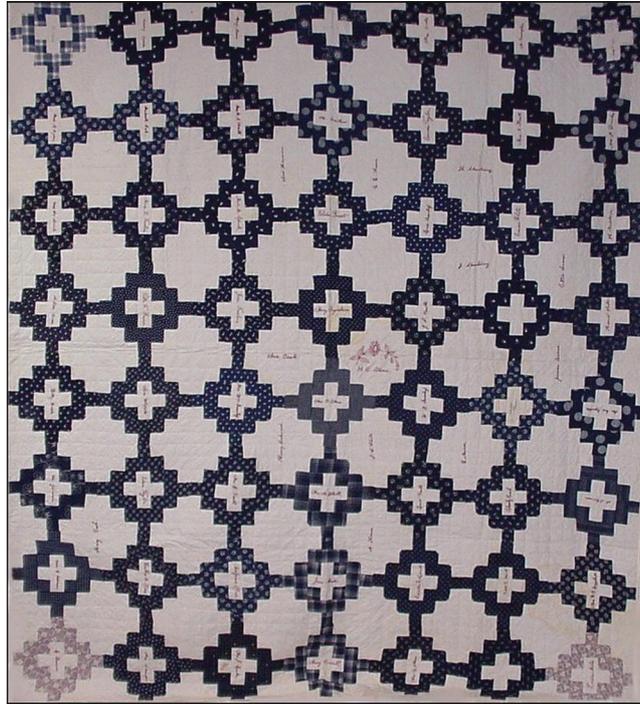
Another, very different subculture of digital quilting, online since November 2000, is a branch of the computer underground art scene, located at Tiles.ice.org. Until

recently, the iconography of these mainly male groups of teenagers and young adults was lurid, transgressive, often violent, drawing on comics, science fiction, horror films, and other elements in popular culture. While these trends are still in evidence, changes are also afoot. Surprisingly, some artists are now creating large, generally surrealistic images they too call "quilts."<sup>16</sup> Participants work on "tiles"—their term for patches—of huge figurative, high-resolution images, done by individuals who do not know much about what is adjacent. Jon Shirin, *aka* "slothy," the enterprising promoter of this form of amateur art and manager of the site, writes:

*Tiles.ice.org is iCE's answer to the old-fashioned quilt party, minus the gathering of elderly women. It's a unique opportunity for collaborative [sic] artwork on the net. A huge image, composed of individual 'tiles' is created, one piece at a time. The goal when making a tile is to mesh your work as smoothly as possible with the surrounding tiles, while creating something cool, artistic, and if applicable, on-topic.*

**Figure 7**

A traditional American friendship quilt, presented to Reverend Cordello C. Herrick and his wife Emily Elizabeth Taylor Herrick, Cayuga County, upstate New York, c. 1888 (full view, detail). <http://www.rootsweb.com/~nycayuga/quilt/#quilt>. Photos courtesy of Brian Wells Galusha.



**Figure 8**  
Upper portion of a digital friendship quilt by Suzie Radant (upper portion), "Suzie's Cyber Cloud Quilts: Quilts with Meaning," <http://suzieque.net/friendshipquilt.htm>.



Participation resembles working together on a giant puzzle—but in this case *creating* it, not putting known parts together. Artists are given just a fifteen-pixel border of adjacent material, so they can align their creation with the rest of the design. "Signing out" a given tile, they must complete it in twenty-four hours; if not, it becomes available to others. Holding the cursor over these works, visitors can temporarily reveal information about the creators of individual tiles.

A quilt in progress as of January 2002 (Figure 9) was called "Knots." Knots and ropes of endless varieties of texture, color and shape were "braided" together. Participants in these digital quilts are primarily creating collective artworks, not cultivating social ties or expressing group solidarity, as I shall argue is the case for *rainbow* players, although they do tend to think of themselves as a community. Revisiting the site in January 2003, I learned that "Knots" was one of no less than ninety-seven completed

quilts. Twenty-two individuals had contributed to it.<sup>17</sup>

### **Ephemerality**

A second distinctive feature of *rainbow* art (Figure 6) is that it is truly *ephemeral*, even more so than ASCII art, even though both consist of bits and bytes. Whereas ASCII art can be viewed offline on a computer in any text-editing program, ordinarily *rainbow* art can be viewed only when (1) one is logged on to the Internet; (2) the *mIRC* program is open; (3) one has connected

**Figure 9**  
 "Knots," detail from a computer  
 underground "quilt" in progress,  
 January 2002. <http://Tiles.ice.org>.



successfully to an IRC server; and (4) one has joined a channel.<sup>18</sup> Also, while one can print ASCII art, IRC images can be printed only if they are first transformed into regular graphic images, as I have done, both in my research generally, and in the case of all illustrations for this article. Similarly, IRC images must be transformed into graphic images for display on the Web.

#### ***Brilliant color***

Another important characteristic of IRC art is the burst into brilliant color, not visible in the print version of the illustrations for this article. Its predecessor, ASCII art, is usually shown white on black, or black on a white background. On early computer screens it was displayed in phosphorescent green or amber pixels on a dark screen.

The sixteen colors that may be used in *mIRC*, as in any Windows-based program, include the three primary colors, red, yellow, and blue, as well many other shades, along with black, gray, and white. One can choose the color both of the typographic symbol in a given "slot" in an image and of its background. One can also create images consisting of just solid colors, though this is much rarer. Although one can not mix colors, via careful control of adjacent colors one can create three-dimensional effects, and modify the appearance of a given color. The diamond-shaped image in Figure 10 appears to have depth because of the controlled use of black, blue-black, bright blue, gray, and white. The effect resembles some 1960s Op Art (Parola 1996).

The players' love of bright color is sometimes quite explicit. One image included the mini-text, "Hey! Look! They've added colors to this black and white world." Love for the juxtaposition of many bright colors is also reflected in the channel name, *rainbow*.

What Hans and Shulamith Kreitler have written about the love of color characterizes *rainbow* players too:

*The love of color is especially prominent in childhood and in pre-literate societies, as well as in adults who undergo a loosening of conscious control due to autism, regression, or psychosis or to a poisonous delirium or a drug-induced*

*intoxication . . . color [is] a factor appealing to the deeper nonrational layers of personality (Kreitler and Kreitler 1972: 54–5).*

Especially when alternated, gaudy colors are perceived to ward off evil in many cultures (Paine 1990: 148).

David Batchelor (2001: 31–2) notes that there is an old relationship between drugs and color. Aristotle "called color a drug—*pharmakon* . . . to . . . Plato . . . a painter was merely 'a grinder and mixer of multi-colour drugs'" (Batchelor 2001), citing Lichtenstein (1993: 54) and Riley (1995: 20). Of more recent times, Batchelor notes:

*During the 1960s . . . drugs were commonly . . . associated . . .*

*with the intensification of colour . . . Think of psychedelia; think of the album covers, the posters, the lyrics . . .*

*—Ecstasy . . . is the name given to a widely used psychotropic stimulant, but it is also a synonym for Roland Barthes' remarkable description of colour . . . Bliss, jouissance, ecstasy . . . "Colour . . . is a kind of bliss . . . like a closing eyelid, a tiny fainting spell" (Batchelor 2001: 31–2).*

The color red is particularly prominent in *rainbow* imagery of both figurative and abstract kinds, not just in images conventionally associated with Christmas, Valentine's Day, or the Fourth of

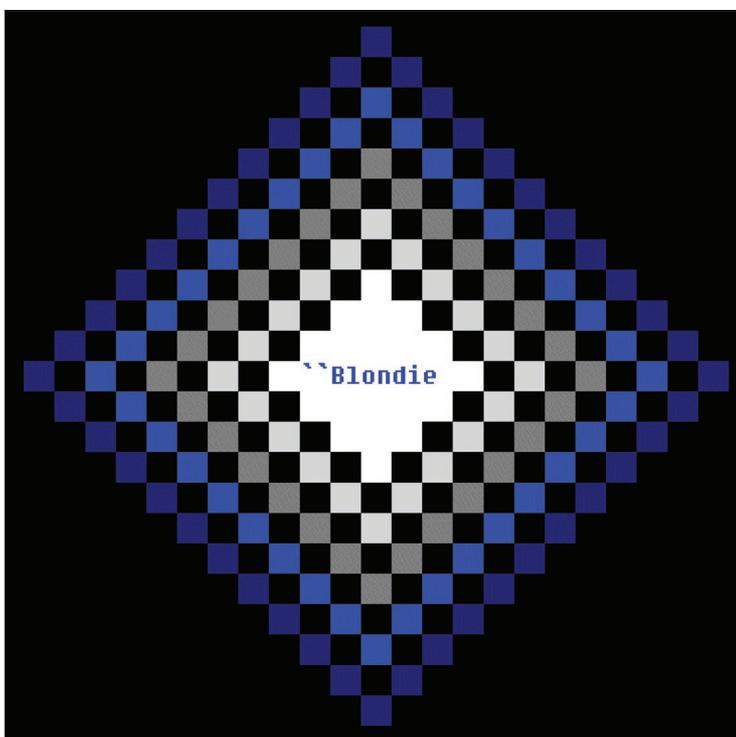


Figure 10  
A three-dimensional design by  
<nightrose>.

July, but in everyday ones too. The Kreitlers (1972: 69) suggest that red is “the most meaning-laden color,” carrying associations both to life and birth and to danger and death. “More than any other, the color red is perceived as a carrier of force” (Varichon, 2000: 69; my translation). In many cultures it is associated with magic and ritual (Hibi 2000; Varichon 2000). Sheila Paine sums up many of these themes:

*Red is the most powerful, the most vibrant, the most exhilarating of colors; it is the blood of life and of death . . . it is also ambiguous: life, fire, the sun and power are counterbalanced by sacrifice and death. Red threads and fabrics are associated with spirit worship and demons, with youth and marriage, with talismanic charms and secret powers. It is the predominant colour in all tribal and peasant embroidery, but is used in two entirely different ways—to protect and to mark (Paine 1990: 148).*

Black is also very prominent in *rainbow* art, primarily as filled background, for both abstract and figurative images. While the Kreitlers summarize research indicating that black “implies death, night, anxiety, defeat, and depression” (Kreitler and Kreitler 1972: 69), it is also often associated with magic and mystery. This association is relevant here too, as in the black of the darkened theater enhancing the magic of a performance. Black helps to conjure up a protected, magical space, set off from the potentially ominous

messiness of the physical world. More pragmatically, a black background also contrasts well with the use of bright colors; when images are backlit on the computer screen, the colors seem to glow.

### ***Sound clips: the trend toward multimedia performance***

Fourth, *rainbow* images are often displayed together with a brief sound clip, either of songs or, less commonly, of real-life sounds such as something crashing, or laughter. The players create and collect sounds, to a lesser extent than they create and collect images. Many scheduled shows have sets of sound files to go with them. Players must download and install the sound files in advance. Only if sounds are already on players’ hard disks will they be able to hear them when activated in context. A special genre developed for shows is “timed texts,” extended sequences of large images accompanied by longer sound clips, even whole songs.

### ***Prominence of ornament, pattern, and symmetry***

Fifth, and perhaps most important for my research agenda, *rainbow* art features prominent ornament, pattern, and symmetry, as is abundantly clear in Figures 2 and 4. James Trilling (2001: 6) defines ornament as “the elaboration of functionally complete objects for the sake of visual pleasure.” The *Grove Dictionary of Art* offers a broader definition; ornament and pattern are:

*decorative devices applied or incorporated as embellishment.*

[They] are not generally essential to the structure of an object, but they can . . . emphasize or disguise structural elements, particularly in architecture, and they can fulfil an iconographic role . . .<sup>19</sup>

The creation of pattern relies on three characteristics, a unit, repetition of that unit, and a system of organization.

A pattern can be defined as a design composed of one or more motifs, multiplied and arranged in an orderly sequence, and a single motif as a unit with which the designer composes a pattern by repeating it at regular intervals over a surface. The motif itself is not a pattern, but it is used to create patterns (Phillips and Bunce 1993: 7).

In theory, *rainbow* players could create images consisting just of one block of solid color, inserting the recipient's nick before displaying them. In terms of communicative function narrowly construed, such "plain" images would be adequate. In fact, participants never play such images. *In five and a half years of following the channel, I have never seen a single image without either a figurative component or some play with color or typography or both, creating some kind of pattern or symmetry.*

"Symmetry . . . is one idea by which man through the ages has tried to comprehend and create order, beauty, and perfection" (Weyl 1952: 5). It pertains to "the correspondence in size, form and arrangement of parts on opposite sides of a plane, line, or point," or to "regularity of form or

arrangement with reference to corresponding parts."<sup>20</sup> My analyses suggest that the turn to pattern and symmetry in *rainbow* art has deep psychological and social roots, and that vertical bilateral symmetry in particular serves as a visual metaphor for *communitas* (Pocius 1979; Danet in preparation).

It is intriguing that there is little evidence of concern with pattern and symmetry in the earlier ASCII art, which is almost entirely figurative. In contrast, pattern and symmetry abound in *rainbow* art, not only in all-over abstract designs like Figure 2, but also in the fields of figurative designs (Figure 4),<sup>21</sup> and particularly in the borders surrounding many images, whether abstract or figurative. In Figure 11 the border is especially elaborate, far more so, in fact, than the field.

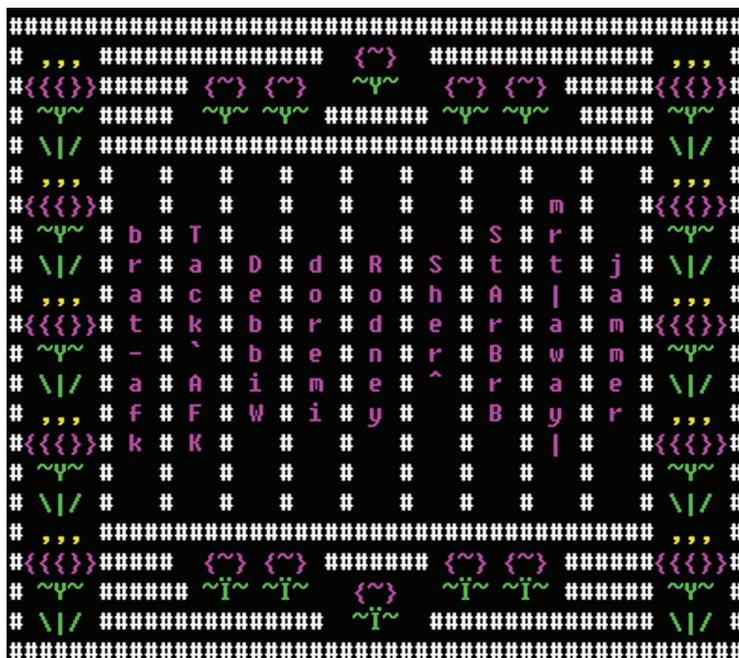


Figure 11  
Pattern and symmetry in the border of a "multiple," by <sher^>.

This is an example of a “multiple,” a subgenre of images the players developed in which it is possible to honor or acknowledge two or more individuals by nick at the same time. Here, nine players are honored, including me.

***Eccentric typography: extended ASCII characters***

Very frequently, pattern and symmetry feature unfamiliar, so-called extended ASCII characters, as in Figure 2, typographic symbols that require eight bits to code them,



Figure 12  
A selection of extended ASCII characters  
and their codes.

not seven. Therefore they are not used in plain text such as e-mail. Symbols such as the Japanese Yen sign ¥ and the š of Slavic languages are appreciated for their interesting graphic shapes and potential as design elements, both within image fields and in borders.

Figure 12 displays some extended ASCII characters with the codes for creating them manually. We can see that systematic repetition creates interesting visual patterns. Evidently, because many symbols are exotic to artists, mostly native English speakers, they can more easily pay attention to their graphic possibilities than if symbols are very familiar. Symbols from everyday English usage not used in plain text are also popular, including the British £ symbol, as well as those for "copyright" and "registered"—© and ®. In Figure 2 a rich sense of texture was created

with just two extended ASCII symbols.

Occasionally, *rainbow* artists also use exotic typographic symbols to enhance the words in short texts; they call this practice the use of "fancy letters." Originally, it was hackers who used eccentric typographic characters in plain text, intentionally reducing legibility. They did so in order to annoy, to be outrageous and transgressive, and to signal membership in an elitist in-group. It is ironic that IRC players have domesticated and democratized this practice. For them, eccentric typography in meaningful verbal texts is merely decorative and ceremonial.

#### ***Pre-fabricated utterances in figurative images***

A final distinctive feature of *rainbow* art is the inclusion of a short text in

figurative images, as in traditional paper greeting cards. The mini-text in Figure 3 is typical: "I searched the world for a perfect rose . . . I found you . . . perfect as a rose." *Rainbow* artists no doubt draw on their experience with paper greeting cards when designing figurative works and composing the mini-texts to go with them. These mini-texts transform images from "just art" into usable potential tokens for interaction. They are a variety of "pre-fabricated utterances" (Herrnstein-Smith 1978: 59), verbal structures pre-assembled for later use as natural utterances. The function of a greeting-card message is "not to *represent* a natural utterance but to *become* one" (Herrnstein-Smith 1978: 60).

Some mini-texts are sentimental, like the one in Figure 3; others are humorous and light-hearted, like the punning example



Figure 13

A humorous figurative image, by <glint>, adapted from a work by Joan Stark, <http://web.archive.org/web/20010411185704/www.geocities.com/SoHo/7373/pets.htm>.

in Figure 13: Hey there . . . did you hear? Fedex and UPS are buying out the US Postal Service . . . They are going to call it ‘FEDUP.’” Some are metaphoric or non-executable in nature, as in the invitation, “Sail away with me,” combined with an image of a sailboat. This mixture of serious, even sentimental elements and humorous ones points to the hybrid nature of *rainbow* art and communication as paradoxically both mock and serious.<sup>22</sup>

### Discussion

This overview of *rainbow* art has shown that it shares many features with traditional arts and crafts, yet in other respects is a unique digital, online phenomenon. The most novel features are its intangibility and ephemerality, and its role as a language of communication in real time, among people who mostly have never met in the physical world.

### ***Appropriation versus creativity***

I have noted that *rainbow* artists frequently appropriate ASCII works from collections on the Web when designing figurative images. Therefore, some might conclude that there is little creativity in the figurative varieties of this art. They might claim that all artists are doing is recoding and coloring images for use on IRC—mere technical exercises. On the contrary, I would argue, there is considerable creativity in choosing an image, determining a demarcated space for it and locating it in that space,<sup>23</sup> choosing the colors to be used, designing a complementary border, often with some of the same, or at least coordinated colors, and

preparing a suitable mini-text to bring it to life as a potential communicative act, as in Figures 3 and 13.

Some artists specialize in creating figurative images. Others are very skilled in creating original, pleasing patterns and types of symmetry, including some that are difficult to execute in this medium. Indeed, the artists enjoy the challenge of creating ever-new and striking effects and genres of images, pushing this very restricted medium to its limits.

### ***Striving for good gestalts***

This article has been primarily descriptive. In further work on *rainbow* art, only hinted at here, I examine evidence for the hypothesis that creating, playing, and viewing images are all means for the players to strive for a sense of closure, completion, or perfection—in other words, for “good gestalts”—for forms that are characterized by “regularity, symmetry, inclusiveness, unity, harmony, maximal simplicity, and conciseness” (Kreitler and Kreitler 1972: 83). The notion of gestalt pertains to our tendency to perceive a stimulus as “whole” even if some portion of it is absent, or to prefer “wholes” to stimuli that are less than whole. A basic assumption of gestalt theory is that people naturally strive for good gestalts, for stimuli that are organized. The theory contends that unorganized stimuli are experienced as tension producing, whereas organized stimuli are experienced as tension reducing.<sup>24</sup>

Thinking primarily of primitive or ethnographic art, Hans and Shulamith Kreitler noted that:

*The art of primitive peoples consists mainly of good gestalts, characterized by simplicity, closure, regularity and symmetry . . . it is this function of the visual arts—the presentation of good gestalts—which lends meaning to the image of the artist as a god or magician who lures order out of chaos and vanquishes the formless by forms (Kreitler and Kreitler 1972: 91–2; italics added).*

My research suggests that *rainbow* participants have a strong need for closure, for good gestalts.

Because the pursuit of closure in *rainbow* art occurs in a social context, I believe that formal aspects of images are not just of psychological significance, but also have important connections with the social nature of communication online. That is, a case can be made that creating, playing, and viewing images with certain formal characteristics are also a means to strive for *enclosure*—for a sense of belonging, for *communitas* (Turner 1969, 1974). In this context, the connection between the terms “closure” and “enclosure” is not merely etymological, but *empirical*. The many forms of repetition in images serve as metaphors for togetherness. Indeed, one could almost reduce this thesis to a formula:

*(Visual) twoness = (social) togetherness.*

One striking type of evidence for the claim that *rainbow* artists and players strive for good gestalts pertains to emergent norms about the use of ASCII art in their work,

and acceptable forms of credit for accomplishment. Surprisingly, most *rainbow* artists embed the name, initials or nickname of the ASCII artist whose work has been appropriated, along with their own nick, in the hidden coding of the image, making credit for the artists *invisible* when the image is displayed online in full color. Those “in the know” are aware that hidden initials, nicks, or names of artists may be viewed (generally after the fact) in black and white channel logs, or, more conveniently, when one sweeps the cursor briefly over an image currently displayed. This depletes the image of color temporarily and reveals hidden material. However, those not aware of these options would never learn the identities of artists via either of them.<sup>25</sup>

Obviously, this practice is radically different from the convention of the artist’s signature on a work, which overtly claims credit for achievement, and asserts intellectual property rights regarding its disposition. In a query addressed to *rainbow* ops and artists on their Yahoo group forum, I asked if this practice did not deprive artists of full credit. To my great surprise, several artists replied that making names and initials visible would spoil the image: thus, creating and viewing good gestalts are, evidently, more important to them than intellectual property rights.

Avoiding extraneous material that would “spoil” an image is just one of eight strategies that I have identified that players and artists use in pursuit of good gestalts. Unfortunately, for lack of space, details of other strategies and

accompanying examples could not be included here, except for several hints that the concern with pattern and symmetry is critical.<sup>26</sup> Contrary to Trilling’s (2001) view of ornament as nonfunctional embellishment purely for visual pleasure, ornament, pattern, and symmetry—along with certain aspects of the iconography of figurative images—are not merely decorative. Rather, they reflect and express profound psychological and social needs and aspirations among *rainbow* players and artists.

### ***Rainbow art as digital folk art***

As suggested at the beginning of this article, I believe that *rainbow* art may be viewed as an incipient form of digital folk art. On the face of it, several glaringly anomalous aspects of this art make such a claim seem foolhardy.

First, the art is hardly “traditional,” since it has been in existence only since the advent of Windows 95 and the Windows version of the IRC software. In contrast, for folklorists, tradition involves entire generations of individuals, families, groups, handing down certain practices, and, no less important, primarily in face-to-face interaction. Most *rainbow* participants, on the other hand, have never met in the physical world. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, there has been considerable turnover among the players, despite a devoted core of regulars.

Finally, unlike traditional folk art as we know it today, there is no market for this art, which circulates in a gift economy, rather than one based on money. Not monetary value, but reputation among the

players and other artists, within the group and on IRC generally, and the aesthetic satisfactions of creating the art are what motivates artists.

Despite these anomalies, two main features of this art justify viewing it as a form of digital folk art, in my opinion. Contemporary formulations of the field of folklore make these anomalies far less glaring than they appear on first sight. Henry Glassie has written, "Today we think of folklore not as a kind of material but as a kind of *action*" (Glassie 1989: 34, italics added). A particularly influential definition is that of Dan Ben Amos, for whom folklore is "artistic communication in small groups" (Ben Amos 1971). While the focus on this definition is on communication, the smallness of the group is certainly a potential issue in the present context.

*Rainbow* players can be said to be creating an instant tradition. It is unsettling that the Internet speeds up social processes that in the past we expected to take years, decades, generations. Despite the turnover among participants to which I have alluded, there are remarkable continuities over the last five years in channel practices. Moreover, the players have domesticated the medium of computer text art, formerly the domain of transgressive hackers, in a manner that reinforces traditional values of family and friendship, social acceptance and support. Figurative images are very often "sweet," often cute, heartwarming, sometimes gushingly sentimental, or, less commonly, tension-reducing through humor, as in Figure 13. In online interviews with ops, many characterized *rainbow* as "a family."

The folklorist John Michael Vlach (1992: 19) has pointed out that "The concept of group art implies, indeed requires, that artists acquire their abilities, both manual and intellectual, at least in part from communication with others." Certainly, this is true for *rainbow* artists and players. The primary duty of ops is to teach others how to create and display the art. And we have seen that some forms of the art are the focus of scheduled shows, which scores of players and even casual visitors to the channel attend. The art is a means to celebrate holidays as well as some players' birthdays. Most of all, as this article has shown in countless ways, the art is itself a form of communication: one experiences it, either while displaying or viewing it, primarily in real-time communication with others. The players have a strong sense of "co-presence," despite the mediated nature of their interaction (Biocca 1997; Lombard and Ditton 1997; Jacobson 2002).

In recent discussions of folk art, we sometimes encounter ostensibly alternative terms such as "naïve art" and "outsider art" (Zolberg and Cherbo 1997; Fine, in preparation). In fact, whereas individuals labeled naïve or outsider artists typically work alone, folk artists work in a group context. "Folk art says 'We are,' but the works of [naïve artists] cry 'I am'" (Crease and Mann 1983: 91, cited in Dubin 1997: 39). In this sense *rainbow* art is quintessentially folk!

What of the craft aspects of *rainbow* imagery? Here too there are glaring anomalies, at first sight. As I wrote in *Cyberpl@y* (Danet 2001),

. . . prima facie, the case for this form of expression as craft seems lost. Craft involves the demonstration of skill in the manipulation of material with one's hands and careful eye-hand coordination. Not only did this art lack physicality, but our traditional notion of the "handmade" seems totally inapplicable. Surely, a machine—the computer—has taken over the work of the hand and therefore one may no longer speak of craft (Danet 2001: 253).

Many would argue, even vehemently, that *rainbow* "quilting" lacks the satisfactions of traditional quilting. Judy Elsley beautifully articulated some of these satisfactions for quilters:

*Quilting is quiet, slow, meditative work. The quilter centers on the regular, rocking movement of the needle, feeling the subtle ridges of cotton form under her fingers. She focuses on her needle, her fingers, her thread, her breathing, and the detail of her quilt. Quilting is tactile, sensual, spiritual work (Elsley 1996: 53).*

Henry Lucie-Smith divided the history of craft into three stages: the time when all was craft; the period from the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution, when craft became differentiated from fine art; and the period since the Industrial Revolution, during which craft objects became differentiated from industrial products made by machines (Lucie-Smith 1981: 11). Malcolm McCullough (1996) has suggested that in the digital era we

should add a new stage to the history of craft:

*In digital production, craft refers to the condition where people apply standard technological means to unanticipated or indescribable ends. Works of computer animation, geometric modeling, and spatial databases get "crafted" when experts use limited software capacities resourcefully, imaginatively, and in compensation for the inadequacies of prepackaged, hard-coded operations . . . To craft is to care . . . to craft implies working at a personal scale—acting locally in reaction to anonymous, globalized, industrial production (McCullough 1996: 21–2, italics added).*

Careful eye-hand coordination is important in the creation of *rainbow* art too. Moreover, the players even occasionally use the term "handmade:" like some ASCII artists, *rainbow* artists sometimes speak of their creations as "handmade" if "drawn" or even edited in a word-processing program like Notepad, rather than using a conversion program that automatically transforms a conventional graphic image into a text-based one.<sup>27</sup> Most forms of handwork involve the use of some kind of tool; ultimately it is meaningless to ask what is truly made by hand. What is critical is the matter of control: "Continuous control of process is at the heart of tool usage and craft practice" (McCullough 1996: 66).

In 2001 the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe,

New Mexico, sponsored a pioneering exhibition entitled "Cyber Arte: Tradition Meets Technology." The exhibition was described as containing works of tangible substance by four contemporary Hispana/Chicana/Latina artists who combine elements traditionally defined as "folk" with current computer technology. This was the first public presentation by this museum (or any other, as far as I know) of digitally produced phenomena that museum staff members called "folk." Note, however, that in this case computers were used to create tangible objects. While this exhibition was important for setting a precedent—recognition of the possibility of "folk" art created with computers—institutional legitimation should not be a substitute for direct evidence about the art itself. This article has attempted to provide such evidence.<sup>28</sup>

## Notes

1. This article is based on portions of a manuscript in progress, tentatively titled *Pixel Patchwork: An Online Folk Art Community and Its Art* (Danet in preparation). For an earlier report on this topic, see *Cyberpl@y: Communicating Online* (Danet 2001), Chapter 6, also available online as the sample chapter at the book's companion website, <http://atar.msc.huji.ac.il/~msdanet/cyberpl@y/>. The Internet Explorer version also contains all illustrations; the Netscape version is text only.
2. The channel has long had its own website. In June 2002 a

- previous website was removed, when its webmistress and channel leader, <patches>, left IRC. Various versions of this website, 1998–2002, can still be viewed at the Internet Archive, at [http://web.archive.org/web/\\*/http://www.mirc-rainbow.com/](http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://www.mirc-rainbow.com/). In Fall 2002 a new website was created, though still in a rather preliminary stage, at <http://www.mirc-rainbow.net/index.html>.
3. This shareware program was developed by Khaled Mardam-Bey. See <http://www.mirc.co.uk/>. He transformed a previously text-only program, that had been in existence since 1988, into a Windows-based one that could accommodate use of color, though he did not anticipate that this would lead to an art form. He merely intended color to be available to enhance verbal text.
  4. There is no substitute for viewing this phenomenon in real time online. To do so, download and install mIRC for Windows from <http://www.mirc.co.uk/> or linked sites. Once the program is activated, choose an Undernet server, and when logged onto it, type `/join #mirc_rainbow` in the main window.
  5. All nicks are presented in angle brackets, just as they appear online.
  6. For an overview of these varieties of text art, together with illustrations, see Danet (2001: 197–207).
  7. ASCII is an acronym for American Standard Code for Information Interchange; it specified the set of ninety-five typographic characters than can be used in plain text across all platforms online, as in e-mail. An unintended consequence of decision-making regarding this issue is that because the developers of these technologies were largely American, the code favors the writing system of English. On the history of ASCII art, see Danet (2001), Chapter 5. See also my discussion below about the so-called extended ASCII characters, e.g. those unique to specific languages and not usable in ordinary e-mail.
  8. Images are stored in a database, created with a program called Image AXS Pro.
  9. See <http://www.afn.org/~afn39695/veilleux.htm>.
  10. Stark's ASCII art gallery is not currently accessible, but may still be viewed at the Internet Archive [http://web.archive.org/web/\\*/http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/7373/](http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/7373/). See also Danet (2001: 228–30). Because her work is so often adapted by *rainbow* artists, many have downloaded her collections for their private use, thus relieving them of dependence on the website.
  11. See Glassie (1989); Paine (1990); Pellman (1984); Purdon (1996); von Gwinner (1988).
  12. See, e.g. Laurel (1991); McMillan (2002); Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1998); Schultz (2000).
  13. "From 1840 to 1875, friendship quilts were made in staggering numbers by a broad cross section of American women" (Lipsett 1997: 19). See also Clark (1986); von Gwinner (1988: 133–9).

14. I am grateful to Brian Wells Galusha, who created the page at <http://www.rootsworld.com/~nycayuga/quilt/#quilt>, where I learned of this quilt, for providing the images in Figure 7 and for granting permission to reproduce them in this article. For further information, see this URL.
15. The URL for this webbing is <http://suzieque.net/quiltingcircle.htm>. Some digital quilters are creating secondary "quilts" composed of their own photographs. See <http://www.grammyj.com/QCOFFriends.html>.
16. The site is self-described as "devoted to pushing the limits of collaborative artwork." See <http://ice.tiles.org/>. On earlier computer underground art, see Danet (2001: 233–4).
17. Personal e-mail communication from Jon Shirin, 3 January 2003. One can see in Figure 9 where tiles were still missing, marked by the expression "coming soon."
18. If unexpectedly one is disconnected, images recently displayed remain visible as long as the program is open and the buffer contains them. The size of the buffer can also be increased beyond the default setting, but it is not infinite.
19. Source: *The Grove Dictionary of Art*, <http://www.groveart.com/>.
20. These are dictionary definitions.
21. Figure 4 is an unusually elaborate example of heraldic symmetry, a special case of bilateral or mirror symmetry, in *rainbow* art. Known from ancient times, in heraldic arrangements, "paired animals [are] arranged symmetrically to either side of an intervening central element" (Riegl 1992 [1893]: 41). Sometimes, pairs of human beings are displayed this way too. Typically, the head of the animal is portrayed frontally, while the body is shown in profile, as in Figure 4. My database includes perhaps a dozen examples of simpler heraldic symmetry, just one pair of animals portrayed this way.
22. The mixing of serious and playful elements is by no means unique to *rainbow* art and communication, and may be emerging as a feature of online ritual generally, including religious ritual. See Danet (in press) for a discussion of *rainbow* art and communication as a form of secular, ritualized play.
23. ASCII images seemingly "float" in undefined space, and are usually strung together one after the other in large files, stored on the Web. See Danet (in preparation), Chapter 4, for a discussion of the significance of demarcation of the surrounding space in *rainbow* art.
24. For a fuller exposition of the notion of good gestalt, see Kreidler and Kreidler (1972), Chapter 4. On gestalt theory generally and processes in the perception of art, see Arnheim (1974); Gombrich (1984); Herrnstein-Smith (1968); Koffka (1935); Kohler (1929); Solso (1996), Chapter 4.
25. Members of the "in group," on the other hand, hardly need to sweep the cursor over an image to identify it. They tend to know and collect each others' work, and to recognize the style of the ASCII artist whose work has been appropriated.
26. In earlier research I had identified only five strategies. See Danet 2001: 258–69 and Figure 6.5.
27. Joan Stark noted on her ASCII art website that she "draws" her creations by hand, rather than using a conversion program. Cf. the creations of Allen Mullen, another ASCII artist, who openly used such a conversion program extensively, and consequently called them "pictures" rather than "art." See <http://www.inetw.net/~mullen/index.html>.
28. Ironically, while the website of this museum continues to offer online versions of past shows of physical objects, there was never an online version of the "Cyber Arte" exhibit, except for a temporary general introduction to it, which is no longer available. See <http://www.moifa.org/>.

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