

I Sing the Gadget Electronic



Cory Arcangel's "Various Self Playing Bowling Games" (a k a "Beat the Champ"), from 2011. Eliot Wymann/Barbican Art Gallery, London.

By DOROTHY SPEARS
Published: May 19, 2011

ON a rainy April morning in what looked more like a makeshift office than an art studio, Cory Arcangel was deciding what drawings to produce for his survey show "Cory Arcangel: Pro Tools," which opens Thursday at the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#). Of two possible contenders, one would present the lyrics of the Miley Cyrus song "Party in the U.S.A." in playful, loopy lettering; the other would be an intricately rendered tree. Both images would feature delicate lines laid down by a steady hand, though not Mr. Arcangel's: the drawings would in fact be the product of a 1990s pen plotter machine, until recently defunct, which Mr. Arcangel had rerigged and reprogrammed.

"I like to get old stuff working again," Mr. Arcangel said with a nod toward the ungainly machine, which occupied a long table by a dusty boom box and a basket filled with smashed soda cans. This particular pen plotter had given him trouble, he said. Searching in vain for discontinued parts, he'd lobbed a last-ditch call at the product's manufacturer. "They just laughed at me," he said.

Mr. Arcangel typed a code into his keyboard and pressed "enter." The pen plotter hiccupped, then started printing. At the sight of the tree trunk, Mr. Arcangel clasped his hands together and said, "Cool, huh?"

Mr. Arcangel, 32, is known for work that imports a sense of humanity into the technological realm, in part by making sure the technology it uses is never too slick. Unlike electronic media artists who rely on state-of-the-art equipment to make their work, Mr. Arcangel collects outmoded computer games, decrepit turntables and similar castoffs that pile up in Dumpsters and thrift stores or are posted on eBay whenever a fresh crop of gadgets has rendered them obsolete. Through a bit of ingenious meddling, he reboots this detritus to produce witty, and touchingly homemade, video and art installations.

At the 2004 Whitney Biennial, he hacked into Nintendo's decades-old Super Mario Bros. game, removing its characters and leaving only its signature cartoon clouds edging across the horizon, to the accompaniment of its

bleeping music. For a 2008 piece, "The Bruce Springsteen Born to Run Glockenspiel Addendum," Mr. Arcangel taught himself to play the glockenspiel, then re-recorded Mr. Springsteen's "Born to Run" LP onto vinyl, adding an original glockenspiel track to songs on the album that didn't already include the instrument. In yet another witty ploy, he dubbed one of his favorite films, "Dazed and Confused," with Indian-accented voices, using a recorded script reading he'd outsourced to a call center in Bangalore.

"Cory is one of the first in a young generation of digital hackers to really enter the art world," said Barbara London, associate curator of media and performance art at the Museum of Modern Art, who has included Mr. Arcangel's video works in several shows. "Now the boundaries between art forms are dissolving, and working digitally is just normal practice. But Cory was among the first. I think that's really important."

"There's definitely no progress here," she said, referring to Mr. Arcangel's gutter balls. In almost all of Mr. Arcangel's work, she added, we see "the hopes and ambition and marketing we put into products that are supposed to enhance our life, repeatedly undermined or questioned."

Mr. Arcangel agreed. "There's something inherently absurd about people sitting in front of their TVs and controlling a virtual 3-D representation of themselves bowling

a ball down a lane," he said. In modifying his games so that their characters are destined to fail, he said, he's used advanced technology to unspectacular ends, so "all you're left with is a repeated, infinite letdown."

Born in Buffalo in 1978, Mr. Arcangel picked up the electric guitar at an early age ("like other kids from the suburbs," he said) while also fooling around with VHS camcorders and other 1980s home video equipment. By the time he was a teenager, he said, he was playing heavy metal. And in high school, while studying classical guitar, he began "making strange videos, doing what I was taught," he said, by teachers from his school, who would often invite visitors from an artist-run nonprofit media art center, [Squeaky Wheel](#), to give talks in class and show videos.

A public access television show produced by Squeaky Wheel, "Axle Grease," was also an influence, he said.

"I remember sitting in my living room and seeing art come through my TV," he said. "It looked totally different than anything that had ever come out of my TV before." In the days before the Internet, the show had a tremendous impact, he said. Enrolling in the Oberlin Conservatory of Music in 1996, Mr. Arcangel continued to study classical music while making videos in his spare time. Eventually, he suffered what he laughingly called a "classic conservatory breakdown" and switched his focus to electronic music composition and technology in music and the related arts.

His new course of study involved programming, and playful hacking was encouraged, he said. Having long used computers to write papers, make videos and even build 3-D characters, he said, he suddenly became aware that they are malleable and that "instead of just buying a drawing program, and making a drawing, you could write your own program."

Mr. Arcangel eventually moved to New York, where he found a group of like-minded souls at [Rhizome](#), "a kind of hub for media arts," as well as curators in his field, like Ms. London and Ms. Paul.

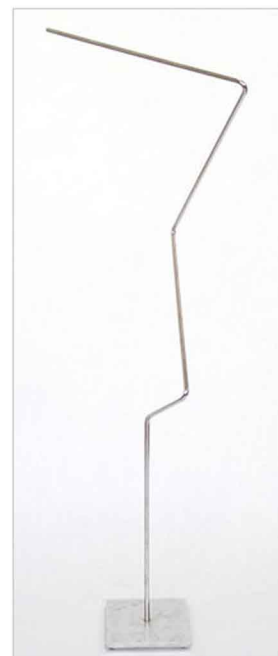
With his videos and installations in group shows at the American Museum of the Moving Image in 2002 and the New Museum of Contemporary Art in 2003, it was only a matter of time before his Super Mario Bros. game at the 2004 Whitney Biennial gained him wider attention.

"The art world just went freaky," recalled Ms. London, describing the piece as "electronic, funny, abstract, but also like a Warhol, in that Cory was riffing on a game that's so much a part of culture."

In 2006, the New York advocacy group Creative Capital offered Mr. Arcangel a grant to construct what he called "an online archive of all of the computer programming code I've ever written." Like a vastly expanded version of his current [Web site](#), the archive, which is still in development, will eventually become an active location, he said, "where visitors can take what I've written and then modify it for their own purposes."

Yet for all of his exuberance, and for the support he feels from the various fellow hackers, digital artists, curators and groups like Creative Capital, he said it's hard to escape one inevitable fact: "When you're an artist you're kind of alone in the wilderness. It's stressful and strange."

By way of example, he described a six-month period in 2009 spent editing together YouTube clips of cats playing piano keys, until together they produced Arnold Schoenberg's Opus 11, from 1909. "That was a stress fest," he said, adding that often it took several days to find the right note. The piece, "Drei Klavierstücke Op. 11," was named after what is widely considered the first atonal piano composition, Mr. Arcangel said, adding that after all that struggle, he could claim that "the cat video sounds pretty much exactly the same."



Team Gallery, New York



Todd Heister/The New York Times

Cory Arcangel, who has a show coming to the Whitney Museum of American Art, specializes in modifying old videogames and other electronic detritus into statements about the role of technology.