FUTURISM

Cory Arcangel plays around with technology.

BY ANDREA K. SCOTT

Cory Arcangel was making a drawing, but he wasn't holding a pen. In a small, high-ceilinged studio in Industry City, a warehouse-lined wedge of Brooklyn between New York Harbor and the Gowanus Expressway, he was sitting at the keyboard of a Macintosh computer. Arcangel had bought an old printer on eBay—a pen plotter manufactured in 1983, when he was five—and hacked together the code for it. As he typed, a mechanical arm across the room whirred around a piece of paper, making linked acute angles, in black ink. It was abstraction on demand: the digital heir to a century of instruction-based art, from Dada to Sol LeWitt.

On May 26th, a day after his thirty-third birthday, an exhibition of Arcangel's work will open at the Whitney Museum. Although he has no formal art training—he studied classical guitar and electronic music at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music—his work is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Smithsonian, and the Tate. In addition to drawings, he makes sculptures, videos, and photographs, most of them digitally generated, but he is best known for sly modifications of video games. The centerpiece at the Whitney is a series of room-size projections of bowling games, all of which have been tweaked to throw only gutter balls. Earlier this year, when the installation premièred, at the Barbican, in London, Charles Darwent, an art critic at the *Independent*, called it "complex and funny and moving."

In his studio, Arcangel was sitting at a large worktable strewn with digital paraphernalia (four Macs, one P.C., one kitten mouse pad). He wore a Buffalo Sabres sweatshirt with cutoff sleeves—Buffalo is his home town—and a black T-shirt with a Google logo on its left arm. He smiled sheepishly and explained, "It's my last clean shirt." Arcangel, who is just under six feet tall, was affably unshaven, with shaggy blond hair and pale-green eyes. Every time I met him, he was wearing the same black Polo cap.

Arcangel had invited me over that day to see a "demo" of the plotter in action. (He has a penchant for marketing lingo; his Whitney show is titled "Pro Tools," for a brand of audio-editing software.) When I began asking him about his programming skills, he demurred, saying that the lines he had written for the plotter were no big deal. "I was literally just hacking around," he said. His voice is still inflected with the flat-"A" accent of Buffalo. "It's a few lines of Perl script, the first language I learned. You can make a mistake and it doesn't bark back at you."

The arm of the plotter stopped. Arcangel leaped from his chair, took the sheet from the printer, and said, "I'll make another one! It's randomized, so they're never the same." His delight in the drawing was evident, and I realized that fixating on his Perl code was like grilling Jackson Pollock about why he used house paint.

Arcangel finds an abject beauty in the way that modern technology is doomed to obsolescence. In another project, Arcangel had connected, via computer, a digital drawing tablet to a second, larger plotter, which was resting on a makeshift sawhorse. His sketches were translated into digital bits with 2011 technology, then transformed into pencil on paper using mid-nineties technology. The result: a picture of a palm tree. The plotter was something that most people would consider junk, but in Arcangel's hands it was a time machine. "It's a relic from the days before ink-jet printers," he said. "In the nineties, it was state-of-the-art. But by the time I found one on eBay—which took more than a year—the price was so cheap that it cost more to ship it."

His assistant, Bennett Williamson—a twenty-five-year-old artist and d.j. with the confidence of an athlete—was sitting across the table. "It came without a stand," Williamson noted. "So we tracked down

the company that made it originally and called to find out about ordering one."

"They just laughed," Arcangel said.

Until recently, Arcangel didn't have a studio, let alone a full-time assistant. Later, he told me that Williamson helps him stay calm when things get off track, adding, "My mother always says I'm not happy if I'm not worried." When I visited the apartment, in Brooklyn's Boerum Hill, that Arcangel shares with his wife—a soft-spoken but steely Norwegian curator named Hanne Mugaas—she teased him by telling me, "This is where Cory comes to stress out."

On one wall of the studio, Arcangel cued up the bowling projections, which Whitney visitors will see immediately after stepping off the elevator. The six projections present a history of the bowling-game genre, starting in 1977, with the Atari 2600's rudimentary 8-bit imagery, and ending in 2001, with the Nintendo GameCube's humanoid avatars, which are somehow more off-putting than their primitive precursors. "What's more bizarre than virtual bowling?" Arcangel said. "Well, maybe those fishing games—that might be my next project. But throwing a gutter ball is just humiliating. That's what makes the piece so ridiculous, but also sad and even oppressive. The failure seems funny at first—then it flips." He was right; the repeating animations of frustration instill a rising sense of discomfort. The bowlers are virtual kin to Bruce Nauman, who, in his iconic 1968 video "Stamping in the Studio," clomped around an empty room for an hour—a ritual of isolation and futility.

A figurine of Mario, the classic Nintendo character, sat on a bookshelf. "People have been giving those to me since 'Clouds,'" he said. He was referring to "Super Mario Clouds v2k3," the video installation that made his name in the art world, when it was shown at the 2004 Whitney Biennial. "I was a kid, but I knew it was a great idea," he said of the work. "When your intuitive sense overwhelms your critical voice, you have to give in." The idea was as simple as silkscreening soup cans: take the code to the classic 1985 Nintendo cartridge and erase everything but the clouds, which typically drift behind the action. At the Whitney, the clouds were projected onto the walls of a room, suggesting a wry reboot of John Constable's cloud paintings. A tele-

Arcangel finds abject beauty in obsolete machines. Photograph by Robbie Fimmano.

vision monitor, complete with tangled cords, was also placed in the room—a reminder of the imagery's origins. Though the pixellated clouds triggered memories of rec-room joystick battles, the installation itself was spare and silent, the clouds' progression eerily slow. The project, which bathed the room in a celestial blue glow, made one think less of a boardwalk arcade than of James Turrell's skylit Quaker meetinghouse.

"Super Mario Clouds" was a classic before the Whitney installed it. In 2002, Arcangel uploaded a video of the clouds to the Internet, along with his source code and a tutorial on hacking the game cartridge. Like many programmers, he believes that coding should be "open source"—transparent to all. He posted a cleaner version of the code in 2003, and

again in 2009, when a British graduate student in mathematics alerted him, by e-mail, to a few stray pixels. Arcangel puts the number of bootlegs of "Clouds" at roughly "a gazillion," but the video never became a viral meme of mainstream proportions—its YouTube views number in the tens of thousands, not in the millions. Nevertheless, for an underground art project its reach was unprecedented. The high regard for Arcangel in digital circles was confirmed in 2008, when he received an invitation to Foo Camp, an élite tech conference. "Foo" stands for "friends of O'Reilly"; Tim O'Reilly is the author of the books that Arcangel used to teach himself coding.

Although gaming is one of Arcangel's key subjects, he isn't a gamer, any more than Édouard Manet was a matador or

George Bellows a boxer. Arcangel says of his family in Buffalo, "We had an Atari early on, but we never had a Nintendo. I'd watch my friends play when I went to their houses, but that's it. I think that's why my pieces are about watching, not interacting." Although his bowlers are icons of absurdist alienation, in real life he doesn't take a dark view of digital culture. One evening, as we walked through Boerum Hill, he suddenly stopped and said, "Take a few steps back and look at that guy!" Framed in a parlor-floor window, an obese man in headphones and an undershirt sat before a screen, absorbed in a game, his back to the warm April night. I found the image depressing. "You're seeing it too superficially," Arcangel said. "It's a hopeful scene. He seems really happy. He's entertaining himself. He probably has a lot of friends in that world."

Growing up in Buffalo, Arcangel says, all he wanted to do was "to shred on the electric guitar." A 1991 home video—posted on the "Things I Made" section of his Web site—shows him jamming in the basement, wearing a backward baseball cap and a goalie mask, while his younger sister, Jamie, cavorts in a polka-dot ensemble and a brown wig. The name of their band was Insectiside. "I'm Death," the boy in the mask says. "I'm Pestilence," his sister says, then warns him, "You better not call me 'retard' again."

Arcangel told me that by the time he had turned seventeen he was practicing the guitar eight hours a day. His life wasn't, perhaps, quite as single-minded as that. Although he didn't mention this to me—Williamson, his assistant, did—Arcangel was a star lacrosse goalie at the Nichols School, a private academy in Buffalo. Arcangel recalls that the school hosted workshops by Squeaky Wheel, a local media-arts center. Through Squeaky Wheel, which also airs a public-access television show in Buffalo, he was exposed to experimental video work by seminal figures like Nam June Paik.
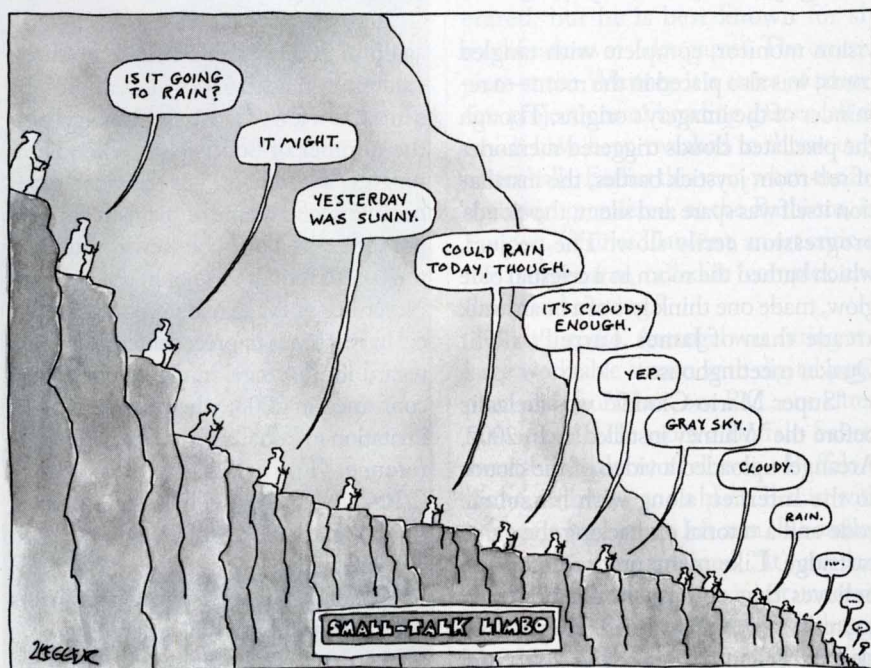
In 1996, he was accepted to Oberlin, as a classical-guitar major. Soon after arriving in Ohio, he encountered his first high-speed Internet connection. "I started to spend all my time in the basement computer lab," he recalls. "By senior year, all my friends had moved off campus, but I wouldn't leave the T-1 line in the dorms." He switched to a new major: technology of music. He says of his musical aspirations, "Basically, I burned out. At a certain point, you have to ask yourself, 'Do I really want to be a classical guitarist?' It was amazing how much energy I had when I wasn't sitting alone in a room with a metronome all day." Arcangel and his friends frequently staged performance-like stunts. Once, they put two turntables in an elevator and replaced the light fixtures with colored bulbs. When the doors opened, students stepped, unaware, into the world's smallest rave.

In the computer lab, he met two people who became early collaborators: Jacob Ciocci, who went on to co-found Paper Rad, an art collective that played with the D.I.Y. ethos of digital culture, and Paul B. Davis, now a London-based artist, who taught Arcangel how to hack game cartridges. In 2000, Arcangel and Davis co-founded Beige Programming Ensemble, and they soon released "The 8-Bit Construction Set," a record of abrasively bright music that they made with two friends using old Atari and Commodore computer games as instruments. When the quartet performed in 2001, the *Times* ran a review with the headline "SOUNDS LIKE NERD HEAVEN."

His first real break in New York came in the avant-garde film and video scene, when Ed Halter, a curator and the author of the book "From Sun Tzu to Xbox: War and Videogames," included Arcangel in the 2002 New York Underground Film Festival. Halter says, "I have a very strong memory of Cory coming to my office, on Chrystie Street, with all this equipment and saying, 'This is what I do!' I realized that he was onto something amazing. Most important, he was the first artist I saw who fully understood that a game console was really a video synthesizer."

Arcangel says that his fascination with finding artistic inspiration in unlikely machines can be traced to a composition class he took at Oberlin with Pauline Oliveros, the electronic-music pioneer, who is now seventy-eight. "I was kind of a punk back then, but Pauline transcends authority," he recalls. "She told us about a piece she did in the sixties, when she hooked up sine-wave oscillators to speakers and tuned them to the resonant frequency of the concert hall. The waves match up and amplify each other, so the sound gets louder and louder inside the hall. That's when it clicked for me. I'd learned about Stockhausen. I'd learned about Schoenberg. But Pauline made it all come alive and I finally could see that this history really did have an edge."

In 2009, he revisited Schoenberg, constructing a video performance of the atonal milestone "Drei Klavierstücke" by rapidly splicing YouTube clips of cats jumping on pianos. (For accuracy, Arcangel matched the feline audio track with a 1958 recording by Glenn Gould.) The work succeeds as an experimental homage to both high-modernist music and the lowbrow Inter-

SMALL-TALK LIMBO

IS IT GOING TO RAIN?

IT MIGHT.

YESTERDAY WAS SUNNY.

COULD RAIN TODAY, THOUGH.

IT'S CLOUDY ENOUGH.

YEP.

GRAY SKY.

CLOUDY.

RAIN.

net phenomenon of LOLcats. Such radical equanimity, no doubt, would have outraged the art critic Clement Greenberg, who, in 1939, famously defined the avant-garde as a safeguard against kitsch. But Arcangel's sensibility is insistently open. One day, as I was leaving his studio, he handed me a flow chart that he had made of his influences; the connections ranged from Steve Reich to Tiger Woods to "Weekend at Bernie's."

If you watch Arcangel's Schoenberg video, it's not evident how much technical expertise it required. In fact, no editing software existed to make a sufficiently fast-paced result, so Arcangel compiled the code himself. He mentioned this accomplishment to me more than once. "The code is sloppy and it barely works and it gives me a headache when I use it," he said. "But it does something pretty incredible." He recently used the software to make a new video for the Whitney exhibition—a few hundred heavy-metal guitarists performing Paganini's Fifth Caprice, a showpiece that Arcangel used to play at Oberlin. An obvious touchstone for Arcangel's mashups is Christian Marclay, the composer and artist, whose installation "The Clock"—a twenty-four-hour collage of one-minute film clips that have been synchronized to correspond to the actual time of day—caused a sensation in London and New York last winter. Arcangel acknowledges an affinity with Marclay, and says of his work, "Christian goes entirely at his own pace, and his work is super-tight as a result." (Marclay's partner, Lydia Yee, curated the London installation of Arcangel's bowling games.)

There's no denying that the Schoenberg cats are, on one level, a joke. Arcangel likes to pull you in with a punch line before deeper meanings unfold. In their epigrammatic structure, Arcangel's looped one-liners recall Samuel Beckett—"Try again. Fail again. Fail better"—with a little Borscht Belt thrown in. As with Beckett, or Bruce Nauman, his humor has an existential spark. In Arcangel's modification of the classic Atari game Space Invaders, only a single, hapless invader remains. Arcangel has a Web site that automatically updates every time someone tweets the phrase "follow my other Twitter," and a compulsively readable blog, Sorry I Haven't Posted, that re-posts other people's apologies for not blogging. Both

projects have clever conceits, but over time they become bittersweet commentaries on aspiration and failure.

One afternoon in April, Arcangel and I visited the Greene Naftali gallery, in Chelsea, to see an exhibition about entertainment and conceptual art. Afterward, as we walked along Tenth Avenue, the conversation turned to painting. "I've been on a Keith Haring kick lately," Arcangel said. "But I wonder—and I know it's an old question—where can painting go after so many hundreds of years? I think the best artists acknowledge the joke. I really admire Roy Lichtenstein for bringing comics into the art industry." (Arcangel avoids the phrase "art world" with assiduous self-consciousness, though it's not clear how much longer he can play the outsider.) He went on, "I know that art-funny isn't funny-funny, but don't you think Warhol's 'Triple Elvis' must have seemed hilarious when it was made?"

Andy Warhol is the default reference when curators and collectors bring up Arcangel's work. Anointing a young artist "the new Warhol" is as clichéd as calling a color "the new black," and it's perhaps telling that, in 2002, Arcangel modified the video game Hogan's Alley so that players shoot at an avatar of Warhol instead of at gangsters. I asked Arcangel how he felt about the comparison. Predictably, he cracked wise. "Forget about Warhol," he said. "I want someone to compare me to Seinfeld!"

Three years ago, Arcangel gave a lecture titled "Continuous Partial Awareness" to a packed house at the New Museum. For nearly an hour, he recited from a dizzying list of art projects: "make spray-tan monochromes"; "make atonal twelve-tone ring tones"; "go to a comedy club and re-do Seinfeld routines from memory." He had recently tried out the Seinfeld one, at an open-mike night on the Lower East Side, and he had bombed. "It was all young comedians testing out their material," he recalls. "They were pretty hostile. I felt like a gate-crasher." The museum talk could be seen as a parody of the lecture in the age of attention-deficit disorder, and the Seinfeld imitation a comment on how thoroughly people's brains have

been colonized by pop culture. But neither the museum audience nor the unwelcoming comics were aware of a bleak inside joke: Arcangel had recently been given a diagnosis of thyroid cancer and was undergoing treatments that compromised both his memory and his ability to concentrate. In 2009, the cancer recurred and his lymph nodes were removed. Though he now has a long scar on his neck, he is free of the disease.
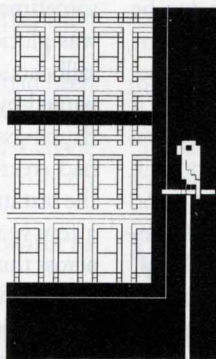
The subject of cancer came up when we met for a late Sunday lunch at a Mexican restaurant in Sunset Park, near his studio. When his tacos arrived, he examined them and genially observed, "There's nothing whole grain about this tortilla." Before he fell ill, he often ate at Wendy's several times a day; now he and his wife receive weekly shipments of organic produce from a local farm. He spoke of discovering his tumor: "There was a bump on my neck. Hanne noticed it first. She'd been saying that I seemed tired for months, so that made me finally go to the doctor. Getting sick doesn't compute in the same way that another new task does. It's amazing how fast your brain can shift modes."

A few nights later, I joined the couple in downtown Manhattan, at a dinner hosted by José Freire, the owner of the Team gallery, which represents Arcangel. After drinking one glass of red wine— "doctor's orders"—Arcangel politely abstained from a second, as well as from a plate of salmon in teriyaki sauce. "It negates my medication," he explained to me. He downplayed his illness, which was never life-threatening, but conceded that the treatment was tough. "I couldn't hold a real conversation," he said. "My short-term memory was completely wiped out. And my work got really strange. I was making things that were hyper-structuralist or that just didn't have any real content. Now I see them as endgames." At one point, he went online and paid three hundred dollars for a pair of sneakers—vintage Nike Quantum Force high-tops—then wore them while undergoing radiation therapy. He promptly threw the shoes out, and documented the process on video.

After his first bout with cancer, he seemed to find a new enthusiasm for conventional forms of visual art, while retaining his interest in the outmoded. One gal-

lery at the Whitney will be devoted to ravishing photographs that Arcangel made using Photoshop's gradient tool, which creates seamless transitions between colors. Printed as large as nine feet tall, they're computerized variations on color-field abstractions. And, like an actual color-field painting, they balance seductive beauty with my-kid-could-do-that simplicity. Each image in the series is unique—an absurdity, given that a digital file can be printed countless times—and was conceived after only a few clicks of the mouse. Arcangel's titles double as instructions: if you copy the wall label at the Whitney, you can go home and make the image yourself. For example, "Photoshop CS: 84 by 66 inches. 300 DPI, RGB, square pixels, default gradient 'Yellow, Blue, Red, Green,' mousedown y=3000 x=16700, mouseup y=0 x=12600" is a recipe that results in a rectangle whose upper-right corner is tipped in lemon and violet, above a field of crimson that shifts to green. Arcangel's creations will thrive as beautiful pictures for decades, if not centuries. But, as examples of cutting-edge design technology, their demise is inevitable.

At one point, Arcangel proposed a thought experiment to me. He said, "If art is a playing field, at one end there are the people who like art but don't know too much about it. At the other end, there are the people who are obsessed with it, maybe to an unhealthy degree. What if the same piece was recognized as art by the people who like going to museums but was considered blasphemous to the insiders?" I asked him if creating such work was his goal. He responded, "Not my goal—just something to think about." But Arcangel's Photoshop gradients might come close to pulling this off. In 2009, Jerry Saltz, the art critic for *New York,* took note of one such photograph that had been included in a survey of young artists at the New Museum: "Cory Arcangel is a good artist, but his chromogenic print of a color spectrum is a decorative one-liner. It's tenth-generation art about art about the monochrome." When I mentioned the review to Arcangel, he wasn't ruffled. "I've been hearing that 'one-liner' comment from people for years," he said. "The thing is, I'm all for it. I think the same joke over and over becomes something eternal."

We were sitting again in his studio, this time near a shelf containing a small bust of Mozart, National Hockey League trading cards, a catalogue of conceptual video art, and a life-size plush toy of the horse's head from "The Godfather." Arcangel wanted to show me a piece of his that exists only online. "This might be the best thing I've ever made," he said. He says that a lot.

His main computer screen displayed what appeared to be a fan site, in Arabic, devoted to the adult-contemporary singer Christopher Cross, whose career tanked sometime around 1983. The site's design was gloriously cheesy: pastel images of sailboats at sunset; song snippets accompanied by animated piano keys; a wing-flapping seagull. Arcangel, it turned out, had created the site and then translated the text into Arabic. He observed that, "in a few years, someone will just stumble across this and have no idea that it's art." I asked him if he was being ironic, and for the first time he appeared offended. "Irony doesn't produce anything," he said. "It takes the air out of the world and I can't imagine taking any pleasure in that. I'm trying to find something hopeful, some kind of truth." His intent was not to mock but, rather, to celebrate the amateur aesthetic of the early Internet—a frontier that is being paved over by the homogenized tools of "advanced" Web design.

Arcangel's embracing attitude is a welcome riposte to the circled-wagon mentality of so much recent art. At the Team gallery dinner, Eileen Cohen, a collector with the intense air of an early adopter, asked Arcangel if he would consider joining the board of Triple Canopy, an online art journal. He said yes on the spot—and soon agreed to attend a board meeting, even though he was consumed with final preparations for the Whitney show, which was only a few weeks away. In 2008, when the organizers of London's Frieze Art Fair invited Arcangel to participate, he decided to intervene in its selection process. In a move straight out of "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory," he hid a golden ticket inside one of hundreds of chocolate bars that were mailed to gallery owners who had applied to the fair and been rejected. The lucky winner was in Milan.

At the Whitney, Arcangel plans to spring another surprise: in a piece called "Real Talk," the wireless reception inside the galleries has been enhanced, thanks to temporarily installed signal repeaters. He told me, "I love the thought that people will, just out of sheer force of habit, do this"—he stared into the palm of his hand—"and get the best reception they've had all day long." He is also reversing the museum's no-photography policy, in a work titled "777"—Unix code for unrestricted access to a file. These gestures echo the California conceptualist Michael Asher, whose contribution to the Whitney's 2010 Biennial was to have the museum stay open for seventy-two hours straight.

One morning in mid-April, I met Arcangel—his black Polo cap paired this time with a red Benetton sweatshirt—at the museum, where he was taking some measurements of the room where he planned to install ten Photoshop-gradient photographs. He had initially intended to cover the floor in Astro-Turf, but he was scrapping the idea. "I realized that this isn't just any floor," he explained. "It's the floor of a modernist icon. If I'm going to engage with modernism, I have to use it, not cover it up." He knelt down with a tape measure, below a series of prints by Jasper Johns, which move through a spectrum of colors; they suddenly seemed like the ancestors of the very images that Arcangel was preparing to display. He followed my gaze and laughed, saying, "Those are beautiful, but they're not really helping." It's not lost on him that the bar is set high: he is the youngest artist ever to have a show on an entire floor of the Whitney.

He walked over and joined me on a bench facing a row of canvases by Ed Ruscha—one of the artists on Arcangel's flow chart of influences. We talked about the enhanced-wireless project. I asked him why the exchange between artist and audience wasn't enough for him. Why increase the likelihood of distraction? "To heighten the flow," he said. "I want the environment to be just like it would be anywhere else in the outside world. I'm envisioning a visitor who's just a little too preoccupied with modern communication to entirely invest their time where they're standing. It's almost as if people just physically aren't wired for it anymore. I'm not encouraging it. I'm just making it silently possible." In one of the Ruscha works before us, a 1965 painting titled "Give Him Anything and He'll Sign It," a bird's beak has turned into a pencil, which is drawing a line. It felt like an uncanny prequel to Arcangel's plotter art. He smiled when he saw it and asked me, "Isn't it the whole job of art to let new things in the door?" ♦