

WEBBED OUT

Cory Arcangel Goes Old School

by *Allese Thomson Baker*

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On any given weekday, hacker turned artist Cory Arcangel—famous for burning the videogame aesthetic into the contemporary art canon—can be found hunched over a long table in his Brooklyn studio, staring into one of his three massive computer screens. The screens sit alongside three laptops and one printer, and, unlike the other dozen computers and half dozen printers in his studio, they are used daily. The others are buried amid a collection of hundreds of video games, VCRs, cartridges, consoles, extension cords, tape cassettes, printers, and remote controls. Arcangel began the collection in the early '90s when he was working as a computer programmer and making Internet art on the side. As he gained prominence as a digital media artist, showing at institutions like the Guggenheim and Tate Modern, the collection grew and today occupies a full wall of industrial shelves.

While most would look at these objects and see function—a printer is for printing, a VCR is for playing videotapes—Arcangel sees an object's form, its technological makeup, and its capacity to do things it was not intended to do. He uses gadgets, gizmos, and other technological paraphernalia as artistic tools, hacking into their systems and reassembling them with a code-monkey's wit: for example, "Permanent Vacation" (2008), where two computers bounce out-of-the-office replies back and forth until their systems crash, or "Sorry I Haven't Posted" (2011), which Arcangel describes as one of his "newest and most favorite works," a blog that reposts blogger's posts apologizing for not posting. While his work appears exuberant and bright—colorful installations of video games, big, glossy prints depicting segments of Photoshop's color-wheel—the content is often bitterly ironic: "My art is anti-technology," says Arcangel softly, his flecked blue eyes fixed over his computer, as he clicks out of his Twitter feed and into one of his 15 websites. "Even though I spend almost all my waking hours on the computer, I don't approve of any of it—I just can't stop doing it."

Arcangel's conflicted relationship with technology drives his artistic practice and pervades *Pro Tools*, the artist's first solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art. At 33, Arcangel will be the youngest artist ever to receive an entire floor for new work. The exhibition features product demonstrations of mostly outdated technologies Ataris, Commodores, Pen Plotter Printers, to express suspicions about contemporary digital culture. The show is conspicuously absent of the Internet, ironic given Arcangel's prolific body of web-art: no YouTube mash-ups of Lolcats playing Schoenberg, or digitally altered photographs morphing Paris Hilton into Macaulay Culkin and vice versa, or browser-based works like "Working On My Novel," (2011), a live twitter search for the phrase "working on my novel" ("obviously, if you're twittering about working on your novel, you're probably not working on your novel," says Arcangel, "I love these situations!"). This is a strategic choice: Christiane Paul, the Whitney's adjunct curator of media artists, and organizer of *Pro Tools*, said she hopes that Arcangel's use of older technologies will help a general audience see new media as just another artistic medium, like painting or sculpture.

The hallmark of the exhibition is "Self Playing Various Video Games (aka Beat the Champ)" (2011), an installation of video bowling games ranging from a 1976 Atari to a 2001 Gamecube. Each game has been rigged to play in scoreless loops, and by projecting the games from floor to ceiling over one long wall, Arcangel effectively traps the viewer in a visually tantalizing but fatalistic environment (no pin will ever be knocked down, no point will ever be scored). "I admit it's a little pessimistic. The working title was "The Failure of Western Civilization." Arcangel adds that his goal was to create a "humiliating, mind-numbing experience" but one that was "funny too—what's more ridiculous and awkward than virtual bowling!"

"Self Playing Various Video Games" recalls Arcangel's 2002 "Super Mario Clouds"—which established Arcangel as a major player within the fine art sphere. Arcangel hacked into the 1985 videogame Super Mario Brothers and eliminated everything but the iconic white clouds and blue sky. As in "Self Playing Various Videogames," the work plays in endless loops. By invoking a bygone era of pixelated videogames and their bleeping soundtracks, Arcangel underscores futilities couched within the activity of video games. In "Self Playing Various Video Games" the avatar never scores a point, just as the human player never actually bowls; in "Super Mario Clouds," the endless loops of clouds subtly point to the hours people lose to navigating digital landscapes. "Super Mario Clouds" appealed to curators and critics because it investigated what digital culture represented in the post-dot-com era while picking up on a long history of conceptual and minimalist art (you can see the playful, whimsical qualities of John Baldessari's early work, the spare, electric feel of Dan Flavin).

Over the past several years, Arcangel has increasingly applied his tech-nerd humor to art historical themes—for example, invading the 1980s first-person shooter game Hogan’s Alley and inserting Andy Warhol as a target, or building off Dadaism with his readymade CVS wireframes. The hacker explains that as he has gained exposure to the fine art world, his work has become “more conscious of itself as a work of art.” He adds that the evolution of his artistic practice over the last decade is “something I am always a little embarrassed about. I started showing my work before I was even cognizant of what fine art is.” Captions next to some of Arcangel’s earlier work—posted on his website under a section entitled “Things I Made”—possess a disclaimer quality. The description for the “Paris Hilton vs. Macaulay Culkin” work reads: “Back in the day, I would sometimes make stupid gifs and post them to my site in order for them to get copy and pasted around the net. At the time I thought this was the future of art...its turns out it wasn’t but the way everything else went.”

While Arcangel’s work still abounds with jubilation for popular culture —his Whitney show will include works featuring Kelly Clarkson, whom he loves, genuinely—his departure from web-based art signals a shift in his artistic sensibility. This might have begun back in 2008, when he created a work for the annual Frieze Art Fair called “Golden Ticket.” Arcangel sent bars of chocolates labeled “Frieze Art Fair” to every applicant whose work was rejected by the fair. Inside one bar was—Willie Wonka style—a golden ticket, granting the lucky recipient a free stand to exhibit his or her work.

“Golden Ticket” was Arcangel’s first notable foray into the non-technological world. “When the art fair asked me to do something, I thought, okay, I know how systems work now, so let’s just put all the chips on the table and make a totally site-specific work,” says Arcangel. “Instead of hacking a technological system, I decided to take apart the system of the art world.” “Golden Ticket” is one of David Velasco’s, editor of Artforum.com, favorite works by Arcangel: “Part of what is so compelling about Arcangel is that he identifies with digital media, but he doesn’t make it his exclusive purview. He knows how to hone an idea. There’s complexity, but no clutter.”

By repurposing technologies that may today seem archaic, Arcangel creates critical distance between the viewer and art object, enabling one to plug into contradictions that play out not only in *ProTools* but, as Arcangel suggests, within our day-to-day lives: We twitter about writing a novel instead of writing a novel (“Working On My Novel,” 2011); apologize for not blogging instead of blogging (“Sorry I Haven’t Posted,” 2011); or play virtual bowling games instead of bowling at all (“Self Playing Various Videogames,” 2011). Technology may triumphantly hurtle forward but, as Arcangel makes palpably clear, it is not without human consequence.

“I’ve been thinking about making ‘Self Playing Various Video Games’ my whole life. But it was only until now—when I finally had the technology to create a computer chip that allows video games to play themselves—that I could do it,” says Arcangel. “I could do anything now. I could have a self-playing fishing video game. I like the idea about a guy who can never catch a fish, who just stands out on a boat forever or a football game where the guy gets sacked over and over again into eternity. I could see this series never ending—there are so many possibilities, it’s crazy. All these sad scenarios that could play out forever.”