Cory Arcangel
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The Joys of Obsolescence

When high-tech products become old and awkward, that's when artist Cory Arcangel gets excited.

By Miranda Siegel Published May 15, 2011 ShareThis

(Photo: Andreas Laszlo Konrath)

Walk into Cory Arcangel's studio space, and you're confronted with one ludicrous product after another. Here's a Sanyo V-Cord, a monstrously heavy portable video recorder from 1974 that accepts only one impossible-to-find tape format. Nearby, there's a Mutoh XP-300 plotter, a computer printer that worked by actually drawing with miniaturized pens and pencils on paper; not far away lies a - Polaroid instant-movie camera, a notorious flop of the late seventies, complete with film that expired in July 1979. On his computer, there's an iTunes mix based entirely on Kelly Clarkson's "Since U Been Gone," which he plays constantly. There's even a bottle of Crystal Pepsi, a relic of the early-nineties clear-is-pure school of marketing. "And look," says Arcangel, gleefully holding up the container. "It still has soda in it!"

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What Cory Arcangel Is Listening to in His Studio

Cory Arcangel's art—not to mention his studio—is a celebration of this kind of forlorn, funny-sad cultural detritus. Like a cheery, hyperdriven Wall-E, Arcangel collects this stuff from friends, scavenges it online, or just stumbles upon it. He is ravenous when it comes to pop culture, but he approaches it without ironic distance; there's no wink-wink. He really *likes* Kelly Clarkson. He loves playing with the Mutoh, originally made to produce architectural drawings, by using it to, say, write out the lyrics to Miley Cyrus's "Party in the U.S.A."

"I wait for culture to swim by me, and then I snap it up," says Arcangel, whose exhibition "Pro Tools" opens at the Whitney on May 26. "Then I point at things and I say, 'Hey, this thing that you're ignoring, that you forgot about ... this thing says something about us.' "

Especially if it spoke loudest in the eighties. Arcangel, who turns 33 next week, is best known for his 2004 Whitney Biennial piece *Super Mario Clouds*, in which the busy graphics of Super Mario Bros. were reduced to a minimalist sequence of blocky clouds drifting across a blue sky. To make it, Arcangel had hacked a 1985 Nintendo cartridge, reprogramming its code to make its crummy eight-bit graphics into something otherworldly and serene. From an aesthetic standpoint, it was hypnotic; from an art-historical standpoint, it was layered with references. But for a generation of young adults, *Super Mario Clouds* was also incredibly, implausibly evocative. If you spent thousands of childhood hours thumb-jiggering your way through Mario's world, this piece had the ability to take you into an altered state. "It's not just that he's obsessed with technological

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products," says Christiane Paul, who curated "Pro Tools." "Ultimately he's interested in the human factor, how we express ourselves through these objects in highly creative or very embarrassing ways. He's interested in how our relationships with these tools and products change, when the always-newest-hottest-latest becomes the epitome of bad taste."

You can see that in *Various Self Playing Bowling Games (aka Beat the Champ)*, a new work that's at the center of the Whitney show. It's another set of video-game hacks, projected on a wall. Starting with a crude Atari version and ending several product cycles later with the hyperreal GameCube, the technology evolves—but each controller has been custom-reworked to allow gutter balls and only gutter balls. "Bowling is very awkward. Literally, in the real world, as a sport," he explains. "Then 'virtual bowling' adds a level of absurdness. I mean, you're staring at a box full of lights, playing a little version of yourself." The graphics and sound get better and better, but the player keeps losing—in part because he's sitting in his living room, fake-bowling.

Not that everything in the show is obsolete. For the series "Photoshop Gradient Demonstrations,"Arcangel took the titular computer files—rectangles of color, fading from one tone into the next, intended as guides for graphic artists—and ordered them made into the enormous, gallery-quality color photographs known as C-prints. You might mistake them for Ellsworth Kelly–ish paintings until you realize that the gradients are standard-issue with the software, with no inherent artistic content. "I realized that it doesn't make sense to only use old stuff, because everything's gonna be old at a certain point," says Arcangel. "In twenty years, my C-prints might look tacky. In 40 years, they might be kitschy."

Arcangel is just old enough to have seen the full sweep of the dot-com boom-and-bust. In the late nineties, he was a classical-guitar major at Oberlin, spending eight hours a day in practice rooms. But Oberlin was one of relatively few schools back then that offered high-speed Internet connectivity, and he and his friends—"guys who wore button-downs and khakis and were really into IBM"—would also hang out in the school's media lab, swapping links to what was being called "browser art."José Freire, the owner of Team Gallery, who was among the first to exhibit Arcangel's work, remembers when another artist sent him a link to Arcangel's website. "You could tell that it was someone who really knew every aesthetic abomination about homepages, and managed to put them all on the same page," says Freire. "Spinning GIFs. The vulgarity of the color. The dweebishness. He was someone with a savage and discerning eye who at the same time could celebrate all of this ugliness."

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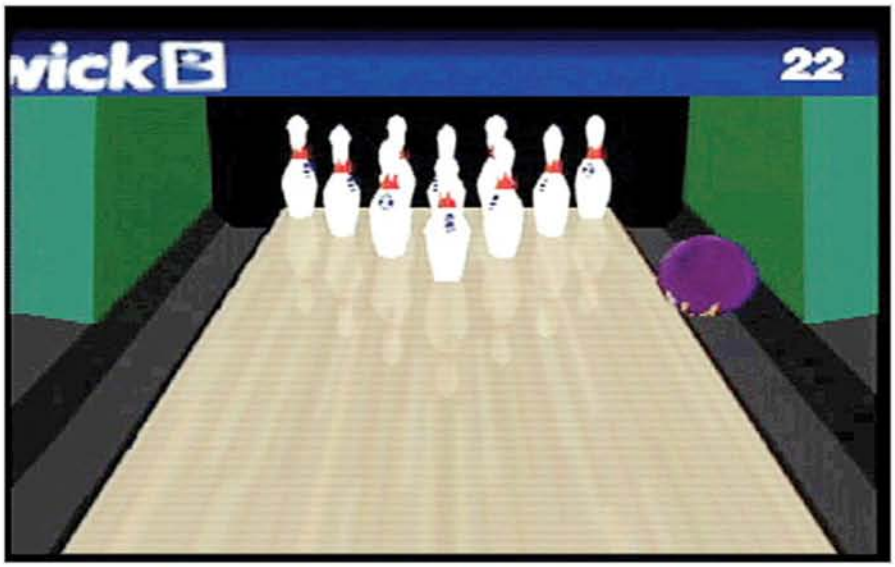

From Arcangel's *Various Self Playing Bowling Games (aka Beat the Champ)*, at the Whitney.
(Photo: Eliot Wyman/Courtesy of Barbican Art Gallery, London)

By the time he finished college, Arcangel had found a major called Technology in Music and Related Arts, in which he studied electronic music, avant-garde composition, and theory, and honed an ability to pick apart musical structure with Pandora-like precision. The Whitney show includes a piece called *Since U Been Gone*, laying out a family tree leading to the sound and texture of Kelly Clarkson's hit, beginning with Tommy James and the Shondells' "I Think We're Alone Now" and moving through Joan Jett and the Bay City Rollers before arriving at Blink-182 and Avril Lavigne.

That's an Arcangel hallmark: breaking down some ostensibly shallow cultural artifact relentlessly, digging in and creating a taxonomy of how it came to be. "It's something I wish I could turn off, so I could just listen. I can't hear a song without analyzing it from every possible angle." It's not just music, either. Near the entrance to his studio, Arcangel has laid out promising items on a table, creating a visual to-do list of sorts. "I walk by every day, so I don't forget about them," he says. "I say, 'These are the ones that will definitely make it into a work.' Then I just wait." Currently on the table is a wastebasket filled with crushed, empty cans of Coke Zero—"of which Crystal Pepsi is a predecessor," he reminds me—and an oversize Old Navy Techno Hoodie.

The Techno Hoodie is a blue zip-up sweatshirt with headphones wired into the drawstrings; the wearer plugs an iPod into the kangaroo pocket, and jams. Arcangel heard about the sweatshirt through a friend, discovered that Old Navy had discontinued it, and became hell-bent on finding one. (Inevitably, the search ended on eBay.) "I'd known that techno hoodies, with crap for your iPods and phones and stuff, have existed," he says. "So then somebody tells me that Old Navy has one. And all of a sudden I'm very interested because it's Old Navy—a store that had a little bit of a moment, but it's culturally ambiguous right now. So we have an object loaded with two different interests of mine, combined. And I'm like, *now we're talking!*"