Today's Cutting Edge is Tomorrow's Obsolete

An Interview with Cory Arcangel and Tina Kukielski

Benjamin Ogrodnik

Abstract

Exhibited at the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh from November 3, 2012 to January 27, 2013, *Cory Arcangel: Masters* was a wide-ranging, multi-sensory survey of the artist's major works to date. The following interviews with Arcangel and the exhibition's curator Tina Kukielski were conducted in February 2013, and discuss the conceptual, curatorial, and aesthetic issues raised by the exhibition.

About the Author

Benjamin Ogrodnik's research lies at the intersection of film and the visual arts. His dissertation investigates experimental filmmakers from Western Europe, Latin America, and North America who have interrogated the "vérité" tradition of documentary film. He is interested in how contemporary artists and filmmakers have transformed documentary theory and technique through their practices within the broader sphere of "art cinema."

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Exhibited at the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, between November 3, 2012 and January 27, 2013, *Cory Arcangel: Masters* brought to the fore the wide range of media forms and conceptual interests that have propelled Arcangel's career. The retrospective included many of the most innovative works of his idiosyncratic oeuvre. These ranged from the well-known *Super Mario Clouds* (2002), a cartridge of the classic 8-bit Nintendo game that Cory hacked in order to remove everything except for the clouds, to newer work like *Drei Klavierstücke, op. 11* (2009), which is made up of 170 video clips of cats playing pianos appropriated from YouTube. The common thread running through all the artwork, however, was focused on our obsession with the very recent past, particularly on outmoded technologies and once-popular musical celebrities. Arcangel's show was, in this sense, an enchanting time capsule that at once explored our nostalgia for, as well as frustration with, modes of technology and media as they are quickly forgotten and replaced by more "innovative" forms.

I spoke with Arcangel shortly after his performance of *Selected Single Channel Videos*, which inaugurated the *Masters* exhibition in Pittsburgh. The interview reveals how reflective Arcangel is about his artistic practice, but also how difficult it is for historians and critics to align him with any particular style or school of thought regarding his novel uses of media. Perhaps what makes him so challenging for an interviewer is precisely what makes him so fascinating as a prominent contemporary artist: that is, he clearly hits upon many tendencies in the culture, presenting them to us without giving any comprehensive explanation of what he is doing or why. It is the task of the spectator to interface with Cory's diverse body of work and negotiate the impact of its intervention upon what it means to be human. Arcangel's work signals new directions in the global media landscape, while also meticulously archiving its past.

Benjamin Ogrodnik: On your website, you mention that it took a year to prepare for the *Masters* show. I wonder if you could speak to the process that went into preparing, choosing, and curating the works that were eventually exhibited? How did you choose the specific works for the exhibition? Were they inspired at all by Pittsburgh?

Cory Arcangel: The show was done in close collaboration with Tina Kukielski at the Carnegie. She visited my studio a couple times and, you know, the first thing that we had to deal with was the space. We were lucky in that we had two really interesting spaces to work with. Added to that was that Tina wanted to do a kind of greatest hits sort of thing. So already we had to be creative: how to do a kinda small retrospective in only two spaces? So I proposed a bunch of different shows all utilizing the Forum Gallery, and video cube spaces at the museum, and we went back and forth and eventually we came up with the show.

What we did was take my older videos and kind of put them inside of a newer sculpture. All the videos in the main gallery of the show were shown on flat screens that are actually part of a sculpture that I made about a year or two ago called *Volume Management* (2011), which is a sculpture that is just ten flat screens and their boxes and can be configured however. So the thought was that it was fun to have a kind of recursive use of artwork. Artworks being displayed by other artworks, etc, etc, etc. As for which videos, they are kinda one video from every two years, and of course they also had to look good on flat screens.

The work that is very specific to Pittsburgh is the work I situated in the Carnegie Library, the *AUDMCRS Underground Dance Music Collection of Recorded Sound* (2011-2012). That

work, which is a collection of trance records, and related MARC formatted database, was literally made for the show. Though, in general, I would say my work "feels" good at the Carnegie, as it has a lot of parallels with the culture there: computer science, engineering, etc, etc. Plus, I have done a lot in the city over the years. It's just a place I feel comfortable, and also a place I have a lot of friends.

BO: Even though much of your artwork explores different kinds of abstraction, there is often a heavy presence of pop music and pop culture in your artwork, and humor especially. How do you negotiate the more analytical, cerebral, process-oriented side of your art, alongside your unique sense of humor, irony, and playfulness?

CA: Sometimes I think there are two parts to this process. There is my intuitive self and my critical self. And they are in constant dialogue with each other and rubbing off on each other. So, for example, you know, if I read enough slamming texts that make an argument for some kind of theory—even though intuitively that theory might not be what I'm feeling—eventually that thought will probably bleed over into my intuition. And the same is true for the opposite: my intuition has the capability of bleeding over into my critical thought. It's always a back and forth. And in my case, in terms of creating the work, it's usually the intuition that pulls things along while it's the critical side of things that makes me check myself from doing things that are too bonkers.

BO: In your description of *Data Diaries* (2003), you mention that the work was difficult to view back in 2003 because of technological limitations and the slower Internet speeds for streaming video. I am really struck that you mentioned that detail because it adds a historical layer, almost like dating a fossilized artifact. It makes me remember how wild and frustrating earlier versions of the Internet used to be. Do you consider yourself to be a kind of historian or preservationist of online culture?

CA: The whole thing about *Data Diaries* that was fun was that almost the entire work was dependent on the limitations of the early 2000s Internet. For example, the actual *Data Diaries* videos are really, really, really tiny. They are, like, 50 x 25 pixels. That's super small! And the whole trick of that piece was that when I played them back in the browser I resized them to be, like, 100 times the size; almost the whole computer screen at the time. That's what gave it that pixel look. So it looked great, and played in real-time, but there was actually very little data being streamed. Everything that determined how those movies looked—size and color—was determined by speed of a typical Internet connection at the time. The idea was: how much color data could I get away with and still have the videos play in real-time on a super slow modem connection? Tons of payoff for very little data. People hadn't seen real-time video online like that before so there was a whole element of surprise, as well as a kinda of wow factor.

At the time, I didn't concern myself with being a preservationist or historian. Though now I have to go back and fix these things. I had to fix the *Data Diaries* videos to show at the Carnegie because the way computers resize videos is no longer the same. *Uuuuugh!* So now I'm definitely on the side of the preservationist.

Figure 1

Cory Arcangel, six single-channel monitors from MASTERS, The Carnegie Museum of Art, Forum Gallery, 2012. Photo by Tom Little. Courtesy of The Carnegie Museum of Art.

BO: One of the interesting things about the time we're living in is that computer usage seems to alter, almost deform, our felt sense of time. For instance, I have a habit of opening too many tabs when I surf the net; I become overwhelmed and have to spend some time away from my computer until I feel ready to get back into it. I feel like I am not the only one who feels exhausted, bored, and overwhelmed by being connected, online 24/7. I think your more recent work is interesting in this regard because it tries to visualize how regular people engage with information and data processes online, which is experienced as an invisible, undifferentiated activity. Is it challenging to make art about being "on the grid" and then having to represent it back to us in the form of images and installation artworks?

CA: Well I would probably want to back up a bit and say it's challenging to make anything. Just making anything is a big deal. Even when I see work by other people, I try never to be all hater, because just the fact that they said something was done and put something into the world is really kind of a powerful thing. In terms of the relationship between the on-screen world and off-screen world, I think that online culture is a part of everyday life now just as much as the IRL. So I am not so sure that I would differentiate between the two conceptually. Physically, it is a different issue! I am not sure how much longer I can spend my days in front of a screen! That's why I am trying to make more sculpture. I gotta get up and walk around! LOL.

BO: Many of your well-known video artworks, such as *Super Mario Clouds* and more recently *Sweet 16* (2006), seem to lie at the intersection of new media forms (electronic games, music videos, YouTube) and more traditional modes of film/video experimentation. Do you find inspiration in experimental film, or do you get ideas for video art from other sources?

CA: Today's cutting edge is tomorrow's obsolete, so I tend not to make a distinction between new media forms and traditional media. As for where inspiration comes from, it's hard to say, but what I can say is that it usually comes at the most bizarre moments. I can never predict it, and it's kinda something that I have to catch. Like, I just have to be paying attention when I am going about my days, but it can come from any source.

BO: I think, if you grew up in the 80's, and you were somebody who was just absolutely immersed in the electronic culture around that time, then there is something weirdly "validating" about seeing objects like game cartridges and cassette tapes and CD binders and images of Photoshop gradients being placed in a gallery sort of context. It almost allows you to see them anew. I wonder if and how your relationship to these objects changes when you decide to make an artwork out of something like a CD collection that seems ordinary and sentimental, and very rooted in a specific place, and then give it a public life and visibility it otherwise wouldn't have?

CA: I think we are just talking about the ready-made here. The thing that I think pulls them along, or at least what makes them feel different, is these objects have a kinda violent shelf life built into them. We are so programmed into thinking that they are of such little value that it tends to shock when they are pulled out of this cultural spiral, and "validated." The only thing that I would think about when putting these things into a gallery is that I would hope that however I do it, or however the things are configured, they point to some bigger story. So it might just be a cassette, or might just be a CD binder, but hopefully it says something you know about what it means to be human or whatever.

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BO: One of the most striking things about the Forum Gallery that featured Arcangel's work is that the space itself did not really resemble a white cube setting. The walls had a black-and-white pattern all over; it reminded me of a pixilated screen, or a close-up of a pixel. There was almost this sense that you weren't in a sacrosanct space of "high art." Can you explain the effect you and Arcangel were going for? What sort of first impression was the viewer meant to experience when they entered the Gallery?

Tina Kukielski: In recent installations of Cory Arcangel's work I would say that, in general, the look and feel of those shows was akin to walking into the showroom of a Brookstone or Radio Shack in the mall. Cory was playing with the devices of consumer electronics stores and enhancing a familiar, but also depersonalizing approach to technology. I remembered seeing some of Cory's first shows like *Welcome 2 My ~~Homepage~~ Artshow!!!!!!!!!* at Team Gallery in 2005, or his collaboration with Paper Rad at Deitch Projects that same year. These shows were much more dense, less minimalist in a way. There was usually a carpet. They were a bit of a mess but very playful at the same time; you wanted to hang out there.

During one of my visits to Cory's studio I asked him to show me some old flat files. He pulled out this black-and-white silkscreen print of a default digital pattern from MAC Paint, what Cory refers to as *Infinite Fill*, based on the tool he used to create it. I remembered seeing this pattern covering a room at Foxy Production where Cory and his sister curated a group show based on rudimentary pre-Photoshop drawing tools. Anyway, I encouraged Cory to return to his original allover style of installation design and the *Infinite Fill* pattern covering all the walls of the gallery was an obvious way to tie together the disparate works of the show. Beyond that, the gallery is a cube so the idea was to "infinitely fill" the space with visual information. The preparators who installed the wallpaper had a terrible time because the pixilated pattern made your eyes jump.

Once repurposing of older artworks was on the table for conversation, the idea of reusing the LCD flat-screens from his Whitney exhibition (they were originally shown in their

boxes unopened) was considered. The televisions sit six in a row facing the entrance resembling a Best Buy display, yet each monitor is showing a different work. We left space open on the backside so when you walked around the back of the televisions on their boxes, you could see that the display itself was propped up. We left the interior armatures that provided support to the heavy monitors and all of the wires and all the technology completely visible.

BO: At the opening reception for the *Masters* exhibition, Arcangel performed *Selected Single Channel Videos* as a unique, one-time event. From a curatorial standpoint, how do you negotiate the challenges of time-based art that seems to present a degree of spontaneity or risk?

TK: I saw Cory do a performance of *Selected Single Channel Videos* at a club in New York years ago and it always stayed with me. It was a rare window into his working process at the time and because he changes the tone with every iteration it continues to change each time he performs it. In terms of the spontaneity of the event, what happens live in the room will be only for that audience (Cory refuses to allow documentation of this particular performance so you cannot see it on video later). In that way, it is truly a snapshot of a moment in time.

BO: I understand that before the exhibition, you had met Arcangel previously and visited his studio several times. When did you realize that you wanted to work on this project with Cory, and what did his work seem to offer for the Carnegie Museum? Does his work offer anything in particular to Pittsburgh audiences?

TK: I had always thought I would work with Cory one day and when I got to Pittsburgh it seemed like the right opportunity. In my first few months in town I was reading about the film program operating out of the Carnegie Museum in the 1970s run by curator Sally Dixon. In Dixon's letters to the filmmakers she was working with, now well established figures like Stan Brakhage and Hollis Frampton, she would always offer to her artists the opportunity to make film work in Pittsburgh, with the help of certain tech labs at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU). I thought this was a great idea and something unique to Pittsburgh, where I already had the sense that people were open to collaboration. One of the first things we did when Cory visited was meet with Golan Levin at the Studio for Creative Inquiry at CMU. Cory wanted to approach the Warhol about doing a project with Warhol's Amiga computers in the archive. A very natural collaboration is now ongoing between the Carnegie Museum, the Warhol Museum, Cory and the CMU Computer Club dealing specifically with the preservation of drawings Warhol made on the Amiga in the 1980s. In my mind, this is a perfect confluence of the art and technology communities distinctive to Pittsburgh.

BO: I noticed that there was a very diverse group present at the *Masters* exhibition opening. Everyone from children to college students to senior citizens were present. When you curate, how much do you think about the audience?

TK: That is funny, yes, it was a mixed crowd. I ran into a trustee that night and she left early because as she said she "felt too old." I was expecting that the exhibition would attract a younger-than-average audience or at least the Generation X-ers who might have grown up with the same cultural references. What I didn't expect is that even young children seem to respond to Cory's work. I think this says something about fluency in technology.

BO: The spatial relationships in the Forum Gallery were quite suggestive. For example, an arrangement of screens predominates in the center, but there is a glass case to the left side that contains artifacts of Arcangel's mental life and possibly even adolescence. Do you feel that the object case is necessary for the viewer's understanding and appreciation of Arcangel's work?
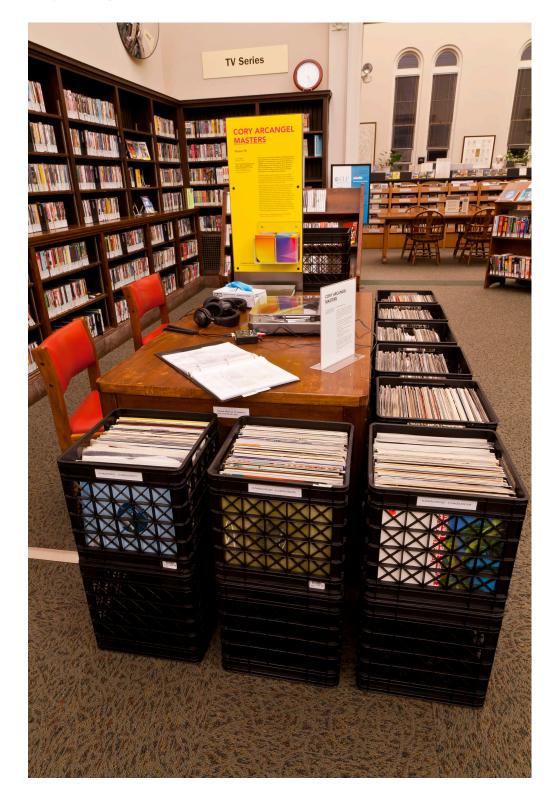
Figure 2. Cory Arcangel, *The AUDMCRS Underground Dance Music Collection of Recorded Sound*, 2011-12. A collection of trance and techno LPs on vinyl. Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Photo by Tom Little. Courtesy of The Carnegie Museum of Art.

TK: The reason to show the two vitrines with artifacts from Cory's working process was one way for me as a curator to communicate an important aspect of the artist's work that exists outside of the expected gallery context for artwork. I see Cory as a cross-disciplinary artist and a cultural purveyor. A lot of what he does, for instance whether it is a live performance in a club, a web project, or a brand of artist-designed merchandise, does not so easily fit within the museum walls. We took the remnants from these finished or unfinished projects and assembled them together to suggest other modes of presentation.

BO: Your colleague Daniel Baumann recently visited a seminar in History of Art at the University of Pittsburgh, in order to discuss one of his mentors, Harald Szeemann, the famous Swiss curator who is said to have been the first freelance curator and self-described "exhibition maker." Szeemann was extremely influential to a whole generation of European curators coming of age in the 1980s. He departed from the timeline as an organizing principle for curation, and promoted thematic approaches in shows such as *When Attitudes Become Form* (1969) or *dOCUMENTA 5* (1972). Since you began curating, have you found any similar curator-mentors who inspire you or test your assumptions about how to make an effective exhibition?

TK: I have had the pleasure of working for two remarkable curators who both became mentors to me. The first was Larry Rinder, now Director at the Berkeley Art Museum. Larry was and is incredibly generous. We would joke about this, but he was notorious for taking any appointment anyone requested with him (even when he was way too busy). Larry also taught me to push the bounds of what art could be and to trust my instincts. He has a special interest in outsider art and has curated exhibitions with developmentally disabled artists.

The other curator that I greatly admire is Elisabeth Sussman, curator at the Whitney, and recipient of the 2013 Award for Curatorial Excellence. From Elisabeth I learned that the best way to learn everything is to act like you know nothing. Of course she did know a lot, she's been in the business of curating for over thirty years, but she taught me how to ask questions, how to be open and curious. She was also the first person to recognize my desire to be a curator and she nurtured that, which, in the context of a big institution like the Whitney, was incredibly valuable to me.

BO: Looking toward the future, you are curating the 2013 Carnegie International, along with Daniel Baumann and Dan Byers. Daniel pointed out that it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish a recurring, temporary exhibition amongst the hundreds of such events happening every year across the world. How is the curatorial trio approaching the Carnegie International in a new way? What current exhibitionary concepts are informing the 2013 edition?

TK: Daniel is right and we often talk about the globalizing field of art and the homogeneity that comes along with that. It is this global condition that ironically promotes a return to the local or let's say contingent character of the mega-exhibition, and this is now being much talked about. In hindsight maybe we will see that we are simply the product of today's trend. This is what Agamben refers to as the "untimely" quality of the contemporary, right? But we did make a choice to think about an international exhibition from a local standpoint. That we all moved and now live in Pittsburgh is one thing, but we made certain decisions to connect in our immediate environment as well. For instance, we rent an apartment in the Lawrenceville neighborhood of Pittsburgh where we host artist talks (despite popular belief, we do not ALL live there). One other important first principle was a decision we made together to choose artworks instead of themes, ideas, or even artists in some cases. We let those choices lead us through our conversations.