

Interview Cory Arcangel

by Petra Heck

interview questions: Petra Heck, curator NIMk

answers: Cory Arcangel, (new media) artist, musician, performer

PH: Is Cory Arcangel your real name? I came across this definition for instance: 'Arcangel is a jack effect for arctan distortion. Sounds nice and grungy without clipping at high levels, and sounds nice at lower levels.' Or what about this: 'Developed in 1999 for Windows 95 PC's, Arcangel was the first PC game by Cornutopia Software.' It sounds pretty related to your work...

CA: Yes, actually. I know a lot of people don't believe it, but Cory Arcangel is my real birth name. Anyone who's in Buffalo and has ever looked in the A's section of the phone book knows that there are quite a few Arcangel's in Buffalo(!). Though of course I'm not sure why anyone would ever do that ... The name comes from the Italian D'Arcangelo. Though I am impressed by your diligent research, it all sounds good to me.

PH: Looking back on all the older interviews you've done ;-), what were the best and worst questions you've ever been asked, and which question was never asked that you've been dying to answer?

CA: This is the best question I have ever been asked (wink wink). I'd hate to talk about the worst, cause I don't like to spread negative vibes, plus I teach also, and through that I realized all questions are relevant I think. Especially in art which is this strange game people play where the goals, rules and even who's playing are unclear. I think the question that was never asked and that I am dying to answer is ... something like, "Do you have any idea what you're talking about?" Which of course the answer would be, "No". Basically it would be great to leave a space in interviews for uncertainty, which naturally arises because this is a creative process and there are no answers. So it would be nice to talk about and make light of that more

often.

PH: Seeing your work with the modified games, the software related computer and video installations, there's always a technical aspect to your work. Now I wonder what you were like as a kid, were you very interested as a kid in technology, constantly playing video games, or making music a lot, since that is also a recurring thing?

CA: Well, as a kid I never took apart radios or anything like that. I didn't even play video games that much. I was interested in computers a little, but I didn't learn how to program until college, so I wasn't even that into computers. I was interested in playing guitar though, as I started when I was about ten. That's pretty much all I did till I was about 20. I was seriously into shredding. And so I guess I was always interested in technique, or the idea of technique, but not necessarily things that are technical – it's a tongue-twister.

PH: You went to The Oberlin Conservatory of Music in Ohio. In high school did you want to become a composer or musician?

CA: In high school I would love to have been the guitar player for Ozzy Osborne or something like that. I didn't want to be a composer because I didn't even know what that meant, but I did want to be in a heavy metal band and play riffs all day long. I still do.

PH: Perhaps you can also explain a little about the different fields you are working in and how they co-exist in your artistic practice? You started for instance the programming collective BEIGE with friends from the Conservatory in 1998. Do you consider yourself an artist, or even a new media/digital artist, a composer, a musician, a performer, or perhaps everything depending on the stage or context? And how did you come to each?

CA: Well, I guess sometimes I will make music, sometimes I might do performances, sometimes I might make things for galleries, I have several blogs I am working and collecting information for, sometimes I do stand-up comedy, so I do a lot of things. I wouldn't label myself – I know it's cliché to say this – but I wouldn't label myself any one thing or the other.

How did I come to each? Well, I went to school for classical guitar. And in a conservatory you learn about being a musician, a composer, and also about being a performer. So in terms of my schooling those are the few things that I actually consider myself competent in. In

terms of art and things like that, I'm still making it up as I go. And video was always my interest since being a kid. I can't explain how I came to that, I just liked to make videos when I was younger and luckily I grew up in Buffalo, a city that is quite advanced in its knowledge and in the culture of video art. So, yeah, I like to do everything and I hope in the future I'll do more things that I haven't even thought of yet. I really want to get into sitcoms.

PH: And how did your work end up in museums and galleries, can you tell something about this development specifically?

CA: Well I guess if I wanted to self-mythologize I could answer this the easy way. In New York I show at a gallery called Team Gallery. I was given a show at Team Gallery simply because the director of gallery saw my website many years ago and gave me show based off of that. So that's kind of the funny answer, which is true. Of course, back then not many artists had websites, plus my website of course was done in a particular style, which was, referencing vernacular web design of the mid- and late-nineties. So the website itself was an art project ... But anyway, point being, that's the quick and easy answer. The longer answer is that when I graduated from school, I investigated all the different outlets for my work and participated in them all. That included underground film festivals, performance spaces, non-profits, museums, galleries, the web, and even self-organized tours. So I pretty much made work for any context that existed and still do to this day.

PH: We have a big video collection here at NIMk /the Netherlands Media Art Institute. I was wondering how you relate to older video works, do you have favorites for instance? There is this tendency in your work towards conceptualism and performance present in early video works. And another thing that crosses my mind is the conversation you had with video artist Dara Birnbaum for Artforum, perhaps you could refer to this discussion too?

CA: I'd love to talk about my favorite videos. I guess, you know, I'll say older video works as being anything that was not made by this year, but "The Possible Fog of Heaven" by John Knecht, I love. It was a huge influence on me, I first saw it in high school and it turned me upside down. "Mayday Realtime," is a video that I love by Videofreex. "Flow Rounds the Corner" by Ken Jacobs is also a big influence and one of my all-time favorites. Also I shouldn't forget Robert Ashley,

“Perfect Lives”. I remember when I saw that in college I just couldn’t even believe it, it’s so complicated and amazing all at the same time. Plus I think it’s aging really well, it’s just amazing to look at. And Dara, of course, it was such an honor to have a chance to talk to her in Artforum, because she is a huge influence on me and, I would argue, on anybody making video today. And her “Pop-Pop Video” especially is a kind of high-water mark for anyone making any kind of cultural anything, art or whatever. It’s just a beautiful work. And in regards to why my work often references early forms of conceptual or performance practice, well I think that for whatever reason I’m someone who appropriates things and I often find it convenient to not only appropriate footage or content but to also appropriate genre or style. Especially when genre and style are determined by a particular technological era. All of that kind of stuff kind of gets mixed together in my work.

PH: In this show you have a pastiche on Nam June Paik's “Zen for Film”. Perhaps you can explain something about this specific work and your working method here? You work a lot with popular images, with mass-media, but this is a very much high brow, pioneering work of art. Could you tell us more about the different hi and low art inspiration sources? And then there is the variety in your work of different fields of interest, like music (pop, or modern), games, art historical references, and technology itself what exactly interests you in all these 'different' sources of inspiration?

CA: The name of the piece you’re referring to is “Structural Film” and it is a kind of fake iMovie film dust that’s been transferred to film and then shown in the gallery on a looping 16mm projector. It is certainly a pastiche of Nam June Paik’s “Zen for Film” but also a pastiche of the many tendencies at or around that time of structural filmmakers. So, I’m thinking of “Zen for Film” or maybe even Owen Land's 'Film in Which There Appear Edge Lettering, Sprocket Holes, Dirt Particles, Etc'. The original idea was to make a piece where you couldn’t tell if it was real dust or fake dust. Although, I'd like to say, I thought the idea was a bit 'thin,' but luckily at the transfer house the print got screwed up somehow, and all these colored dots got added. I was happy with that, which is why I decided to show the work. So it's a kind of half-assed conceptual piece with a bit of a randomness attached.

More about the different high and low inspirations, I guess all my

work, or one of the things I always like to do is combine them. I think sometimes I get a kick out of pulling the boundaries of the high and the low and just seeing how they mix, especially I think now because of the internet whatever boundaries we once knew have now disintegrated. So maybe my video “Sweet 16,” which is Guns’n’Roses edited in the style of 60’s and 70’s minimal composition, or the Schönberg done with the cats are good examples. So I guess in one way this Paik film was not necessarily so standout-ish. And why I come with all these sources? I don’t know, I can’t tell. Some of it’s my education, some of it’s my interests, and some of it’s the things that are before me aka the Internet.

PH: Some works really deal with complex disrupting techniques, whereas some new works respond to a non-expert approach, like the Photoshop Gradients. Could you elaborate on the Photoshop Gradients, and this shift visible in some of your recent pieces?

Well, I think maybe its easier to look at this as not necessarily a shift, but as simultaneous interests that have always pulled and pushed in my work. I’ve always been interested in all uses of technology, whether they are vernacular or expert. So for example my lecture series, “Dirtstyle Design” which I think I did in 2002 was a lecture and class I taught about vernacular web design from the 'early web'. In other words it was about how HTML affects expression. And of course at the same time I was doing the Nintendo things which were 'complex'. Though to make this more confusing, we must remember game mods are also a popular form of online vernacular expression. There were many people modifying 8-bit games then there are many many more today with sites like hackaday and Make Magazine. So, I guess my answer is a little bit more complicated. I’m interested in all ways that people use technology to express themselves and my work is many times a mirror to culture at large.

PH: A lot of your work deals with obsolete technologies. Can you tell us why this fascinates you so much and if your approach to it changed over the years? And can you explain the title of the show at the same time here?

CA: Yes, a lot of my work does deal with obsolete technologies. Let me give you an example and I’ll try to explain from the example. Recently I bought a pen-plotter on eBay. This is pre-ink jet technology. A pen-plotter is like an ink jet printer instead of it shooting out ink from a

cartridge it has a little pen that goes down on the paper when it wants to write – it's basically like a mechanical arm. I was interested in it mainly cause it was cheap. Since it wasn't such a big investment, I don't feel any pressure when playing around with it. Also it represents an entire era and aesthetic that no longer exists therefore it becomes easy to examine it culturally. Last but not least, it is just fun to me to try to get this old junk working again. Even getting some of this stuff to turn on is a minor feat of research, and I have made many artworks which are basically elaborate 'hello worlds' from old technology. As for the title of the show, in software “depreciated” means something should be avoided and is no longer being updated or supported. In short, something depreciated has been replaced by something newer, but still continues to exist in a sort of state of suspense. This very much comes into play in my work. A lot of these ideas we're talking about – structuralism, phasing, atonality – were once the vanguard of creative practice, but are no longer being 'supported', so to speak.

PH: You share a lot of techniques, code cracks and formulas for your work. Can you explain your reason for doing this?

CA: Putting the codes and stuff online allows other people to take the work and modify it further, or make it better. It is destabilizing and this is interesting.

In space number 5 there are the famous cloud pieces (2002-) in which you altered a version of the Nintendo game Super Mario Brothers in such a way that only an iconic, bright blue sky with clouds slowly drifting by remained. This work is combined with 'Japanese Driving Game' from 2004 that only shows a moving road. You combined this with your latest work called 'Drei Klavierstücke, op. 11' (2009). In this video you brought together short YouTube fragments of cats walking on pianos. You edited all the separate fragments one note at a time, so that the cats collectively play Schönberg's 'op. 11', a pioneering work of 'atonal' music. Why did you want to combine these works? Do you perhaps see them all as part of an evolution? What interested you back then and has that changed a lot?

Well, first I thought that they were the simplest of the works, simple meaning most accessible in terms of their appropriated content. And in all the cases this accessibility was part of the concept ... So to put it

bluntly, a cloud landscape and kittens go well together(!). Plus they are kinda bookend pieces for me.

How has my work evolved? I think back then I was much more interested in technical stuff and I was really strict about code and process, and now I suppose coding doesn't interest me as much as it once did only because I find that my thoughts are changing faster than I am able to learn new programming languages. Also I think I may be a little bit more knowledgeable about what type of things the art context projects onto a work. And this helps greatly with me deciding what works I'll put in a gallery and what I'll put online, because for many years the ability to draw that distinction was very difficult for me. And this then in turn effects the work I make.

PH: To continue with your last work 'Drei Klavierstucke, op. 11', what interests you particularly about YouTube fragments and the whole web 2.0 era and the way it has changed production and consumption?

CA: I find that if I search enough on YouTube, sometimes I can find videos that are almost the same as some of my favorite avant-garde videos. For example I saw a great video the other day of 'paint drying', which also happens to be the subject of one of my favorite all time video series by the artist Burt Barr. I love this idea that creative expression or the modes that were once primarily the domain of the avant-garde are now creeping up on YouTube, of course with very little views, but that's the point and that's what's great about it. That is really my main interest on YouTube. And of course consumption is an interest. We're now able to put video online right away and that was not possible even four or five years ago, nobody watched videos online then cause it wasn't technically possible. For art this changes everything and nothing at the same time.

PH: One question you pose within the conversation with Dara Birnbaum in Artforum is where art is left when everyone is a producer on the Internet. Do you have an answer yet? How do you respond to this development with your work?

CA: Do I have an answer? Well certainly not. Every time I thought I had an answer over the past ten years it turned out I was wrong. Maybe at this point I'm a little wary of answers for anything, because to be honest, I have no idea what's going on. How do I respond to this development in my work? I think the Schönberg piece is a response,

or me trying to grapple with an answer. It's not trying to say anything about it, it's just simply more about the metaprocess. But it's wonderful now that everyone is a producer. I don't think that anything more interesting could possibly have happened.

PH: In an interview on humor in your work and that of others you mention the importance within the internet nowadays of fun. How do you deal with this development in your work? I know there is always a humorous element to your work; perhaps you can tell a bit about this humor aspect and if this has effected your way of working?

CA: Humor is a large part of my work because it's a large part of my personality. Humor in my work is generally based off of the context in which it will be placed in, and this is often defined by the audience. So if I'm making something for the internet, I think, who is it for? Is it for the few people who follow my work intently and will visit my various weblogs everyday? Or am I going to try to make it a meme and get one million views? And both those situations require a different kind of humor. Or I might think, is it for the gallery context? If so, is it then for the person off the street, or the MFA student, or the PhD candidate writing his thesis on whatever? Again, each of those audiences would respond to a different set of 'jokes'. These 'jokes' tend to be pretty easy to figure out thereafter. It's mostly intuitive.

PH: What are you currently working on, or thinking of doing next?
The pen plotter stuff I mentioned earlier, I'm trying to do some drawing with that. I'm working on my Photoshop gradient series, I'm working on a sitcom ... I've got a blog I'm working on about people blogging about apologizing for not blogging. Also, right now I'm literally working on the website for the Schoenberg piece which is in the show. I'm gonna put it up on YouTube and try to make it not look like art. Sometimes it's important when you put things online that they don't look like art because then nobody will look at them.