Game Over: Why Cory Arcangel Plays to Lose in His New Whitney Survey

by Ben Davis
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There are plenty of good contemporary artists, but only a handful actually have something approaching a satisfactory theory to explain why they do what they do at this particular moment in history. Cory Arcangel is one of those artists, someone with a lucid set of ideas — in his case, about what visual art can and can't do in relation to the universe of technology that surrounds it — to justify the witty mix-master-of-culture shtick he's known for. This has made his work an important critical touchstone, and at a relatively early point in his career (he turned 33 yesterday). Why, then, does the art in his new show, just opened at the Whitney, feel so mild and merely jokey?

Coming off of his exciting 2005 turn with Paperrad at Deitch Projects, which centered on a psychedelic art film made using a hacked Super Mario Brothers Nintendo cartridge, Arcangel was pigeonholed early on as a "digital artist." The compact Whitney show, titled

"Pro Tools," puts his hacked video-game work front and center, beginning with a darkened gallery dominated by a recent commission, "Various Self Playing Bowling Games (aka Beat the Champ)" (2011), a sort of capsule history of the bowling video-game genre via giant projections, proceeding from the most primitive — a blocky, two-dimensional Atari game from 1977 — to more recent, more robustly 3-D instantiations. In each instance, the onscreen action focuses on endlessly rolling gutter balls, in effect presenting a cross-section of technological progress accompanied by demonstrations of mindless, repeated failure.

In a neighboring gallery, an indoor golf simulator is set up as part of Arcangel's 2011 work "Masters." Visitors can take up a putter to swat at a ball dangling from a little harness device. In the real version of this game, the video golfer on the screen would translate your stroke into action, more or less accurately; in Arcangel's tweaked version, your effort to play the game always fails, the onscreen ball arcing away from the hole.

Yet "Beat the Champ" and "Masters" are the only video-game-based works in the show, and "Pro Tools" embraces the breadth of Arcangel's chosen media — from abstract wire sculptures whose forms are generated at random to a montage of clips from "Seinfeld" to a display of Oakley sunglasses cast from painted bronze to a towering sculpture composed of stacked flat-screen TVs, still in their boxes — thereby emphasizing that what defines his work is not "digital" subject matter, but more a certain recurring MO.

More often than not, this method can be summed up very simply: Take some bit of consumer culture or popular technology, then put it in an art context to show how it might be thought of as identical to a theme from the avant garde. For instance, "Research in Motion (Kinetic Sculpture #6)" (2011), shown in the same room as the bowling projections, consists of a cluster of "dancing stands," open-frame podiums motorized to sway back and forth hypnotically. They are organized in a phalanx so as to evoke a Minimalist artwork — "Sol LeWitt on performance-enhancers," as exhibition curator Christiane Paul tagged them at the press opening — and yet they are readymades; you've probably seen the same stands undulating in the display windows of any number of stores, proffering up watches or jewelry. (I hear that Arcangel discovered the devices while walking around New York's Chinatown.)

Another work, titled "Jay-Z Blue," is simply a wall painted a color of blue, which, a text explains, has been patented by the rap mogul. This obviously brings to mind the conceptual artist Yves Klein, with his signature "Yves Klein Blue." The point, apparently, is that whatever mystical import this gambit once had, it has now been thoroughly colonized by the ditsier realms of media culture, just as the point of "Research in Motion" seems to be that you can get some pretty interesting kinetic sculpture off the shelf, and needn't look to professional sculptors at all for such delightful effects.

The most forceful expression of this concern comes in Arcangel's suite of giant photographic prints that reproduce various Photoshop color gradient spectra. Printed large-size, they are seductive (if inscrutable) works of abstract art, edgy rainbows and subtle cascades of color. And yet the whole point is that, save for the lavish production values, the specific patterns that they offer up have been created using really the most basic, minimal intervention into Photoshop — a single click is all it takes to make these patterns (the titles even include the

exact coordinates you could click yourself to clone the image). Technology has completely outrun the historical capacities of abstract art, draining it of whatever heroics it once had.

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All this is sometimes framed as a "critique" of technology in the literature accompanying the show, but this is to make the word critique almost meaningless. Arcangel knows this. In an Artforum dialogue with Dara Birnbaum, he spoke about his relationship to the older artist's ideas of exposing the hidden workings of media through her appropriations of TV: "I don't know whether it's so necessary to 'reveal' anything anymore. Maybe a previous era's debate has shifted over to, I don't know, 'Are you going to Twitter about what you're doing every second?'" A bit later, he explains: "The Internet makes it very hard to keep ahead. The question of who 'did' something is moot. It's just guaranteed that any idea you have has been executed by some kid somewhere. I mean, where is art left when everyone is a producer?"

Where indeed? This perspective – that technology has definitively surpassed at the center of creative life – explains why there is so little pathos or drama in Arcangel's works. Their jaded, self-effacing humor comes out of a clear-eyed belief that, in an age of unthinkable amounts of digital communication, it rings false to make grandiose claims for individual originality or expression. If the works feel minor it is because they start from the point of

view that art's place in the world today is minor (a theory I happen to agree with as a starting point, if not maybe as an end). Which is also, I think, why works like "Beat the Champ" and "Masters" – or his 2005 "Super Mario Movie," for that matter – case you into digital limbo, as if all that art can add to technology is the sense of failure. The tech-savvy artist becomes, in this way of thinking, the guy who walks into a room of people making grand claims about abstract art and says, "Uh, you guys, you have heard of Photoshop, right?"

Interventions *is a weekly column by ARTINFO deputy editor Ben Davis. He can be reached at bdavis@artinfo.com*