



Cory Arcangel
Artforum
March 2009

ARTFORUM

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L



CORY ARCANGEL AND DARA BIRNBAUM
IN CONVERSATION
MUSIC VIDEO
JACQUES VILLEGLE



\$10.00





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Do It 2

IF CERTAIN CRITICAL OPERATIONS first explored by artists during the 1970s and '80s have since become nearly ubiquitous in visual culture—with, for example, the isolation and manipulation of popular imagery, once the purview of avant-garde practice, now common among homemade videos placed online—then what are the most significant obstacles, opportunities, and shifts in attitude for artists working in these modes now? *Artforum* invited **DARA BIRNBAUM**—pioneering video artist and subject of a pivotal retrospective next month at the Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent, Belgium (April 4–August 2)—to sit down with media artist and programmer **CORY ARCANGEL** and compare notes on art in light of widespread appropriation, outmoded applications, and increasingly divergent audiences.

CORY ARCANGEL: Recently I read an interview in which you said clubs provided one of the first outlets for your videos. In other words, you felt you could make videos to be projected in clubs at the same time you made videos that were to be shown in art spaces. Was that specific to the time? It made me wonder how the context for video has changed over the past thirty years or so.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Well, to clarify just a bit, I was saying that whenever I made a work, I believed it could be inserted into different contexts. It wasn't that I was actually making different work for a specific venue. You see, when I started, video was a very bastardized medium, mainly separated out from the arts. The only video I knew of within the arts in the 1970s consisted mostly of extensions of performance art, body art, or Earth art. Video was understood almost as an expanded documentary

format, whereas I thought that it had a great capacity for different applications. I was excited when, for instance, the Guerrilla Girls asked me to show *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* [1978–79] at a special evening in their honor at Palladium, which had these massive video walls, or when I could show *Pop-Pop Video: Kojak/Wang* [1980] in another club that had forty monitors around the room, so we could stand within this shootout, truly encircled by the action on-screen, which never resolves itself. But my excitement was more about the change of context than about changing the content.

CA: Yet all these different things were possible only because the clubs suddenly had the technology. It was the classic era of the New York club, right?

DB: Clubs had fantastic architecture and decor at that time. Places like Area had a different interior

Opposite page: Dara Birnbaum, *PM Magazine/Acid Rock*, 1982, still from a color video, 4 minutes 20 seconds. This page: Cory Arcangel, *The Bruce Springsteen "Born to Run" Glockenspiel Addendum*, 2006. Performance view, Light Industry, New York, August 5, 2008. Photo: Damien Crisp.



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This page: Dara Birnbaum, *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman, 1978-79*, color video. Installation view, H-Hair Salon de Coiffure, New York, 1980. Photo: Dara Birnbaum. Opposite page: Cory Arcangel, *Super Mario Clouds v2k3, 2002*, modified Nintendo game system and cartridge. Installation view, Liverpool, UK, 2004.

design every month. But when it came to video, I honestly think they were just looking for a new kind of light show. Studio 54 was using lights in an effective way, and the next club had to ask, “What can we do?” Video was perfect for them, because it presented a whole new dynamic of audiovisual stimulus. The Ritz had this enormous screen, and I had never seen anything like that. I mean, the thing was a couple of stories high.

CA: It was called the Eidophor. NASA had that a decade earlier in its first central-command rooms. Now you see it only in movie renditions of NASA.

DB: I know that your work often deals with technology that’s practically obsolete. I guess the Eidophor, given its original use, was also obsolete in a sense. So if it no longer serviced NASA and those applications, it then seemed to have made its way to the clubs. And the clubs would call me. At that time, I was very hot, since I was seen as somebody who edited really fast, utilizing a multiplicity of images and sound.

CA: This was years before MTV, right? I swear I saw your MTV “Art Break” when I was a kid. I was glued to MTV.

DB: You had to be glued to see it, it went by so fast. But I think what’s more significant in all these examples is that one is getting inside popular culture as opposed to the frameworks of institutional art spaces. I used to talk about how Bertolt Brecht would refer to mediums such as the newspaper, radio, or television and how they had the tendency to fulfill themselves and then become overinflated. All of a sudden there are holes within their structures, and then other substances could penetrate. That’s what happened with cable, for instance. Artists believed that they had finally found a spot

within which they could operate; holes opened up and they inserted work into them.

CA: I think I’m definitely in a parallel situation today when it comes to the question of context. You made videos and found it interesting to place them in clubs; my videos go on view in galleries, but I’ll also put them online. And just as the galleries weren’t interested in your video work because they thought it was just TV, they weren’t so interested in my work at the beginning. They just didn’t see it as art.

DB: I initially avoided galleries like the plague. I didn’t want to translate popular imagery from television and film into painting and photography. I wanted to use video on video; I wanted to use television on television. A lot of us who went into video at the beginning did so because we thought art shouldn’t be made in limited editions, and in video we finally had an eminently reproducible medium that could get out into the hands of many. It was a populist form, and our great hope was to do something that made it to Kim’s Video store. You know? I didn’t want to be collected. I wanted to talk. Looking back, there were different test runs to promote this way of distribution for artists, but nothing ever truly supported that vision.

“I initially avoided galleries like the plague. I didn’t want to translate popular imagery from television and film into painting and photography. I wanted to use video on video; I wanted to use television on television.” —Dara Birnbaum

CA: But that last assertion makes me wonder: Is there even such a thing as a bastardized medium today? Sure, if you’re talking specifically about the art context and its inevitable waves of style. In larger culture, however, you now have to consider all the developments in distribution. The fact is that you can put anything up on the Internet and there will be five people who want it, no matter how weird or obscure the information. The niche exists; someone’s going to find you, period. That means there can’t ever be, in terms of expression and audience, a wrong move. Now, for me, this creates a dilemma I’m still dealing with. On the one hand, it’s great, because I’m conceivably able to just chase my wildest, weirdest dreams. But it’s also completely paralyzing; if I were to make just what I “liked,” it could just as well be all about hockey or something like that. So I use the art context to bring me back.

DB: How does that dilemma unfold with your video games? Aren’t they bastardized? As much as we want to let go, there is, I think, still contradiction in art and culture along the lines of, for example, the Museum of Modern Art’s exhibition “High and Low” [1990]. Such exhibits have supposedly come together to allow for comparative views, but this actually only reinforces a “low,” bastardized component in the art world—until, that is, the art world can see a gateway into it. And that gateway is usually a reinforcement of art-historical values and views. And then come those critical interrogations where people make something of it, saying, “Oh, how interesting that he uses these video games that are obsolete.” Because that’s a cool word in the art world: *obsolete*. [laughter]

CA: Well, you’re right to some extent. I can put a video game online and the core audience will be drawn like a magnet to it, while in the art context, some people just won’t even go there—although, as I get older, I find that more people are willing to accept it, because everyone else is getting older, too. There’s a generational shift. I guess I tried to address the problem with *I Shot Andy Warhol* [2002] and *Super Mario Clouds* [2002], which were meant to be blind to both audiences, meaning that art people would see the work one way and like it while Internet people would see it another way and like it. I wanted these parallel rails on the train track. *I Shot Andy Warhol* doesn’t totally work online, though, because your average computer dork doesn’t care about Warhol. The *Clouds* really worked, on the other hand, for the reasons you describe. In the art context, it brings to mind the history of landscape and video installation.

DB: Another of your videos, *Japanese Driving Game* [2004], features an endless road, which for me reflects this parallax between the rails of art



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and popular culture. In the video, you're looking out endlessly, and it's as if the two sides reach toward each other—there is that promise held out—but they never really come together, and the road stays empty.

CA: That work was also about how video games convey space. Structurally, video games, and especially the ones from the '80s, are different from television because they assume there is land to the left and right of the screen. Your perception is of an endless, horizontal, scrolling plane. So my work is dealing with the structural concerns of the medium, just like some of your early *Pop-Pop Video* work was dealing with the editing techniques found in, say, soap operas.

DB: The piece still seems very reflective of a kind of hopelessness in its endlessness, manifested for me in the empty road that goes on forever. That's my feeling of what's going on, in a larger sense, between popular culture and art—the latter of which is steeped in attempts to reinforce its own history now more than ever before.

CA: But that kind of separation is only going to be more pronounced given the rise of the Internet, I think. Art is bound to become more and more specialized, because that's what *everything* is going to have to do; there won't be mixing even within popular culture, simply because of the way information travels. Each person goes his or her own way. Already, we don't have superstars like Michael Jackson anymore, because people aren't "watching the same channel" the way they used to.

DB: It's funny you say that, because I recently viewed your *Bruce Springsteen "Born to Run" Glockenspiel Addendum* [2006] online. Springsteen has maintained a certain stardom level—and with some integrity—and yet you make him into an obsolete background figure by playing this "dumb" glockenspiel live against a recording of his music. This is humorous enough, but what's most interesting to me is that you're performing in New York at the Museum of Modern Art, of all places, and you're almost like a star yourself.

CA: Well, MOMA has a "Pop" night. But that project works in every setting. I mean, it's ridiculous. I use a spotlight sometimes. I dress all heavy metal. I create a cultural mixture that doesn't make any sense.

DB: But my point is that the audience is screaming before you even start playing. I asked myself, What the fuck is this, where an art audience is cheering like that, giving you star status? It made me think about how odd it is, as when the arts seem to demand that someone's got to "crack the code" of popular culture. I remember feeling like people in the '80s wanted me to crack the code of television. I did that, but then I never found the next model.

But here, I thought a generation was clearly looking for that in you—waiting for a superhero to crack the codes of newer mediums, like video games and the Internet.

CA: Well, I'm no superhero. I would say that you did crack the code of the Internet, though. You anticipated the way people would express themselves today through technology. In fact, if you look on YouTube, one of the most popular genres is called "super cuts"—where people take a television show and edit together all the similar parts. It's so common now, because every ten-year-old kid has iMovie, but the format—even when it comes to mash-ups—is predicted by your work. I certainly know that I use the repetition and isolation of certain cuts in order to highlight and extract visual elements in video, as you do.

DB: That's true. What I liked about another work of yours, *Sweet 16* [2006], was that even though it has a very formal concept behind it—relating to Steve Reich's compositional strategies, as you've said elsewhere—a mesmerizing drone takes over, which releases me to see some very specific aspects of the image. Like how Axl Rose enters the frame, brief moments that reveal his exact position—

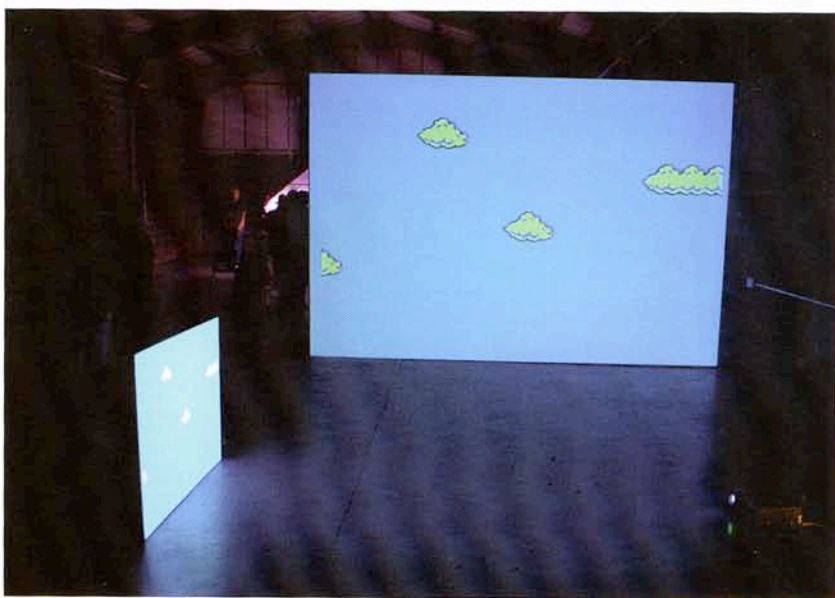
CA: The way he snakes in, yeah. It's very similar in technique, without a doubt, to your *Pop-Pop Video*.

DB: Iconography starts to emerge through a formalist device; repetition allows certain things to surface. In my work, it was the hidden agenda of what was really being said on TV. I think you reach a point where these hidden agendas are also made visible.

CA: But it's important to note that the whole media landscape has changed in just the past couple years. Media is no longer a one-way street. It's participatory. People just make things. And so 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?

DB: What is Twittering?

CA: I'm sorry. This is embarrassing. I'm going to tell the editors not to print the word *Twitter*. Twitter is this new website. People use their cell phones to text what they're doing—"I'm eating lunch" or "I'm in the Artforum offices having a conversation"—to their website, where other people can read about it. I do have my own audience online, in this sense, because I surf the Internet all day long and leave a bread-crum trail so people can see what I've been





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looking at. And when I'm "leaving bread crumbs" for my audience, I'm Twittering, basically. It's like production itself has become consumption.

DB: That sounds to me almost like when artists first got hold of the Porta-Pak. They would just turn it on, not really knowing what to say with this new device. I remember a tape by Howard Fried called *Fuck You, Purdue* [1972]. It was just him in his studio, pacing and recording every word: "Fuck you. Fuck you, Purdue."

CA: I *have* to see that.

DB: There was a genuine amazement about the technology, and artists were as amazed as anyone else, with the hope that they would look into the new aspects of the medium's potential. But you merely got people turning on that Porta-Pak and recording every moment of what they did. This doesn't say a hell of a lot. Rather, what this says is that the potential is there, and we're kind of stuttering instead of Twittering, trying to figure out what this space is all about. In other words, in trying to fill vacuous space, which has been opened up as a potential area for communication, you end up filling it with such garbage that you're almost stuttering: "I j-j-just had l-l-lunch now." This fills twice the space you did with just "I had lunch now."

CA: I've seen some of those early artist satellite broadcasts where people finally get a link from around the world and all they do is wave at each other.

DB: But this situation you describe today, where everyone has to know the other person's life, is like reality TV gone berserk. Who has the time to Twitter away their life, really? You're focusing on an image that you think is there, which represents a



"reality," but the truth is it's the whole production mechanism around it—what you don't see—that's really being activated.

CA: Actually, this relates to how I prepare incredibly elaborate demonstrations of technology that in the end have no purpose—either misusing the technology or just employing it in a way that makes no sense. I'll spend six months programming something that doesn't actually do anything. Or I'll get Photoshop, open it, leave it on a default setting, click one button to print out something huge, and that gets circulated as a work by Cory Arcangel—even though anyone who knows Photoshop knows it's just Photoshop. Eventually, people will forget Photoshop. And then more people will recognize the image as mine than will recognize it as the software's. Or maybe not. Who cares? The point is that the aesthetic produced by those things becomes my work, which is just basically exploiting the way the whole art system works.

DB: The question of time's effect here is interesting. Your video-game work, for example, is not only about obsolescence but also about bringing forward those things in previous eras' games that are then echoed in contemporary games. That's the importance of them.

CA: Using the older video games was partly a practical decision. Those computers were so cheap, and they come from the time when one person could manipulate that technology; new systems like PS3 require so much production work now that every video game is comparable to a Hollywood movie. Beyond that, I was interested in how a given technology's time might be over. I fill a gap in the history of technology and culture, doing things people didn't actually do when these systems were in use.

DB: But what is relevant here is that these were actually prototypes for games to come. Maybe it's intuitive, but you've removed those elements that once seemed essential but were not, and you're left with the endless road or the clouds. In fact, as your work makes clear with that precise scrolling space, it's the very backgrounds that set the atmospheric dimension of these games and created their sense of being. This is what Roy Lichtenstein did in Pop art; this is why the work becomes art. What I personally don't like is that people can get so invested in art-historical perspectives that they then miss out on the contemporary perspective—like capturing the Photoshop chart with the one hit and then blowing it up. I wonder if there now exists any real depth of understanding regarding media arts, video arts, arts that reach out into the landscape of the Internet—and I'm concerned that the arts seek to recognize them for the depth of what they have, rather than for the surface of what they give.

CA: In my last show, I was kind of playing with this idea. My works were like litmus tests to see whether people would accept them.

DB: Audiences might get upset, like they used to. When I was growing up, my favorite thing in the world was to visit Malevich's *Supremacist Composition: White on White* [1918] at MOMA and



This page, from top: Cory Arcangel, *Sweet 16*, 2006, two-channel video installation, dimensions variable. Dara Birnbaum, *Pop-Pop Video: General Hospital/Olympic Woman Speed Skating*, 1980, still from a color video, 6 minutes. Opposite page: View of Cory Arcangel, "Adult Contemporary," 2008, Team Gallery, New York. From left: Photoshop CS: 110 by 72 inches, 300 DPI, RGB, square pixels, default gradient "Spectrum", mousedown y=1098 x=1749.9, mouseup y=0 x=4160, 2008; Personal Film, 2008; Video Painting, 2008.



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see the crowd of people discussing whether or not this is art. Years later, I tried to buy a slide of it, and MOMA said it wasn't reproducible and no slide existed. For me, this was an amazing awakening—an excellent painting that wasn't reproducible.

But now, your work is eminently reproducible. I don't know what that means for the arts of the future. In an era of dominant media flow, we are trying to utilize the very tools of it—and yet the question remains, What does one say with it? If everything becomes data flow, and dominant culture is all there is, then we risk losing our ability to question that culture and further the possibilities for humankind. In this regard, I do see art as creating a reflective space for people to question the very aspects of where and who they are, thus expanding their perspective. It's one reason I stopped only appropriating—that I still believe in what images can do—and why I don't think everything can or should be translated on the Web. I don't believe what Sherrie Levine said decades ago, that no stone has been left unturned. I'm still hoping there are

images yet to be made, and I think the resonance of what Malevich was attempting to do lives on in that painting. In fact, in 2001 I turned to Schönberg's opera *Erwartung* [1909] with that in mind, experimenting with his music and the opera's libretto. I wanted to reinvest in what was presented at the turn of the previous century and ask, "What meaning do those words and music have now?"

CA: Why Schönberg? When you talk about *White on White*, Schönberg created a comparable moment in music. People just threw up their hands and asked, "Is this music?"

"I am interested in how a given technology's time might be over. I fill a gap in the history of technology and culture, doing things people didn't actually do when these systems were in use."

—Cory Arcangel

DB: Well, that piece was written in the year of my mother's birth, so some personal factors are involved. But basically I utilized it because *Erwartung* is a one-act opera with only one person in it, a woman—I'm still concerned with the stereotyping of women—and the libretto was written at Schönberg's invitation by Marie Pappenheim, a twenty-seven-year-old medical student. Very few librettos are written by women, so I was interested in taking that as a way to address the dominant structure of Schönberg's opera, which was known for its fragmentation.

CA: And was it of interest to you that music has built into it a DNA, this idea that there is a score to be interpreted? Other mediums don't have that, but in music, every composer is basically inviting you to reinterpret his composition.

So, for example, I have a video interpretation of one of the *Goldberg Variations* that features images of different people—and a few animals, like cats—that I downloaded from the Internet, each one playing an individual note. I'd been trying to figure



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out something to do with YouTube, and I settled on this kind of flicker video. There is literally a new frame for every note; I wanted to push the editing software and take that MTV thing to the final limit. But this piece is also about how, for some reason, people always go back to Bach when they want to show off what technology can do. Think of Wendy Carlos's *Switched-On Bach* [1968], in which Bach's music was used to demonstrate new synthesizers. Now, why is this? Well, he's the most mathematically complex composer, but also listenable. In fact, anybody can understand Bach—and feel it, too—because he was the one who codified Western harmony. We're still living by the rules he put down.

If someone asks me why I make art, or what I think it will do for people, I will probably draw a blank. But I can say that, to me, there are these rules within technology that run our entire life, and yet they leave whole other spaces wide open to be played with. I mean, why do people always use tech-

“Isn't this what your work with Photoshop or Bach is? You've pasted image onto sound—exactly as MTV does—but you've done so to the nth degree. It's as if a society has so swallowed its own double that you're vomiting it back again: the loading of images beyond the point of total saturation.” —DB

nology in a particular way? Why don't you ever just see an ugly Photoshop gradient straight up on a bus sign, for example? What might happen if you overused technology, or if you underused it? There are always holes open at either end of the spectrum. And filling these holes creates experiences that are somehow, I think, worthy.

DB: This makes me recall an introduction to a catalogue once published by Mary Boone and Michael Werner on Barbara Kruger—who, of course, employed much of what she learned as an art director in commercial advertising. They got Jean Baudrillard to write an essay, and he argued in it that Kruger's works could operate at any scale. In other words, whereas *White on White* can't operate at just any scale—it works as it works for what it is—Kruger's work can extend itself, take on multiple scales and permeate culture, just as media does. And in a line I really appreciated—they bought him well—Baudrillard said that, when it comes to her work, it's as if a society had so swallowed its own double that it vomits it back again.

Now, isn't that what your work with Photoshop or Bach is? You've pasted image onto sound—exactly as MTV does—but you've done so to the nth degree. It's as if a society has so swallowed its own double that you're vomiting it back again: the loading of images beyond the point of total saturation. Maybe this leads to what I think art should be—a critical dialogue, where people intuitively start turning other people away from that screen, no longer living out their lives in sheer alienation and loneliness. Maybe you're filling the holes in a way that people can finally say, “Oh, I get it. That's the most flattened chocolate cake I've ever seen. I think I'll eat some fruit.”

CA: I would love to think that my work is that—dark chocolate on dark chocolate on dark chocolate. I guess I was pointing at a hole in YouTube with the *Variations* piece. I thought, No one is seeing the big picture here, which is what everyone is doing with it.

DB: I've started a new work utilizing YouTube; it's based on a piano piece by Robert Schumann. My idea is to place in a gallery setting different images of people playing this one composition, as seen on YouTube. People would grasp both the urgency of trying to express a masterpiece and the different interpretations such a work is subject to. But the real point is that there are so many people on YouTube playing this piece, from Horowitz to an unknown fourteen-year-old.

CA: It also shows how 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?

DB: This is a good question. Having grown up reading a fair amount of Marxist theory, I recall that Walter Benjamin's idealistic hope was that people would become involved in production. Society would be better off if it wasn't only about producing products for the general populace as the con-

This page: Dara Birnbaum, *MTV Networks, Inc.*, 1987, still from a color video, 30 seconds.
Opposite page, from top: Cory Arcangel, *Pizza Party* (detail), 2004, computer program, dimensions variable. Cory Arcangel, *a couple thousand short films about Glenn Gould*, 2007, two-channel video installation, dimensions variable.





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sumer, but rather about people remaining directly engaged by being their own producers. I wonder if this is a very failed vision.

CA: If everyone is a producer now, then we have a data-archiving problem—meaning that we do not know where, or how, to look for accurate information. I don't want to speak in favor of heavily edited, manicured media, because obviously that has its own problems. But the Internet is full of half-truths; you can find a "factual basis" for anything. With things like Wikipedia, you're forced to ask, "What is the real version of history?" Or, more precisely, "What's the real history now that people are in control of it?"

DB: I think Benjamin was interested in the way in which people might change their ideologies, in other words, by participating, since then they are less capable of being simply consumers. Of course, as you're suggesting, the problem now revolves around the questions, What are you producing? Is the simple act of production by itself worthwhile? Where do you look for any value structure or affect that this can have? And does it say, ultimately, that anyone can be an artist—this dream of the Internet, that there is no hierarchy?

It all brings to mind an ongoing project by Hans Ulrich Obrist [launched in 1993], called "Do It," which has included both a book and a traveling exhibition. Here, the basic concept seemed like a—perhaps false—utopian fulfillment of Lawrence Weiner's project *Statements* [1968]: The artist issues a set of instructions that have or do not have to be executed by the receiver of the statements. But I think Hans Ulrich became infatuated with seeing work disperse widely into culture. And who gets eliminated from that system? Well, the artist. I mean, there was a sense of freedom in Weiner's saying that artists can, or need not, be present to enact work themselves or, as is the case with early Michael Asher works, the artist can then hire someone else to execute the work. But in the case of "Do It," perhaps this is more like what T. J. Clark called a false utopia of images. In your work, you come to this schema much differently, right? You present or enact a set of instructions, too, but it's democratic in the sense that you say, "It's 'art,' but don't take it too seriously as art, because anyone can get at the essence of what this game is about."

CA: Yeah. When I put instructions or code online, it is really intended for use by people who don't know anything about art. This makes it slightly weird when people in the art context get excited about the work—particularly given that conceptual art, as well as the kinds of work that were in "Do It," is slowly becoming a kind of vernacular on the Net. One is always encountering a cool new project someone is doing and explaining.

DB: But in an old-fashioned way, you're setting up a dialectic. That's very important. And so, I ask, do we have to question this now? Is it a time to let art permeate throughout culture, or is it a time for artists to reclaim their own space?

CA: When I was growing up, "do it" was supplanted by DIY.

DB: What does that mean?

CA: DIY, like "do it yourself." The punk movement was actually fractured into the indie-rock movement, which was like, "Make your own cassettes." DIY blew apart once indie-rock networks got bought up by the major labels; I don't know what the new DIY is. Who is encouraging people to do that now? Or maybe everyone is doing that now.

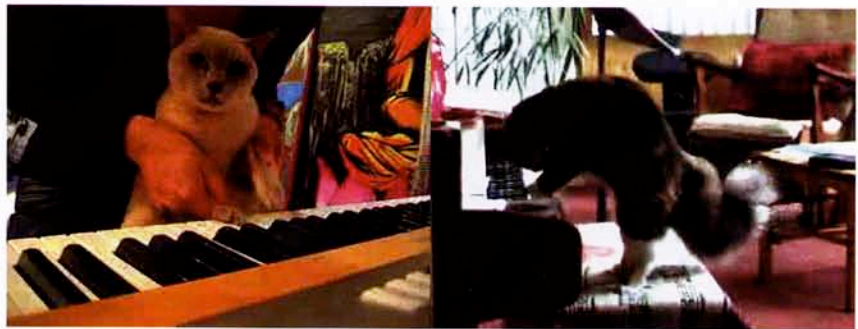
DB: For my generation, "do it" was a leftist remark aligned with Yippie freedom, whereas by the '90s, I think, Nike is yelling at you, "Just Do It," implying that everyone can do something, be active. Those are two very different things. In fact, when Hans Ulrich asked me to contribute some instructions to his book, *I*, as a child of the '60s, just submitted imperatives from Jerry Rubin, who was saying things like, "Be an American, eat hamburgers every day." My decision to use that phrase in its original, obsolescent form, relates to the way you pick up an old computer-game cartridge: Maybe I keep reaching backward because I, too, see things that are laid aside—almost like they have an obsolescence, when, in fact, they don't. There is a reason they existed, and they can be reactivated. The work doesn't have to be seen as nostalgic, but can be understood as a fertile gesture of reframing things laid aside by a society.

CA: The nostalgia question is difficult to elude because technological time is so fast. If I have a



first-generation iPod, it's just a few years old, but people laugh at it now. If, on the other hand, I'm wearing a Polo sweater from twenty years ago, nobody laughs at all. And culture runs in technological time, while the art context runs in whatever warp time it runs in. When you implant technological time with art time, people don't know what is nostalgic and what isn't.

But you know, this goes back to the fact that I have different audiences that are totally unaware of each other. For example, most people online know my work *Pizza Party* [2004], which I wrote with the programmer Michael Frumin at Eyebeam Atelier. It's a program that allows you to order Domino's Pizza using a command line: You just





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type “pizza,” hit a button, and some guy delivers. In terms of sheer eyeballs, a thousand times more people have seen that than the *Clouds* piece, but I never hear about it, because these are random people I don’t know.

DB: But this is interesting because of the art world’s framing of things in terms of whether they have critical value or not. One could imagine this as the next step after Rirkrit Tiravanija’s work involving cooking to develop a—again perhaps idealized—social grouping within the arts. In fact, I could almost see a slippage of Hans Ulrich’s “Do It” here—you know, where we all begin ordering pizza and consider that within art terminology as a kind of new work. And then you really have to ask, “Where does that take you? If this is your most populist piece, what does it do in terms of the art-historical value of such shows?” And one can mirror “Do It,” within the framework of art, by ordering a pizza. This becomes a kind of “Do It 2.” But is this not, then, the mirror darkly, Baudrillard’s swallowing one’s double and spitting it out again, where all the things we use to define the dimensions of an artwork are nonexistent? What’s existent is simply the vomiting of the things we’ve consumed too much of, and that includes artwork itself.

CA: Too much pizza. It’s funny because I got in trouble for that piece, because apparently Domino’s is owned by a Christian conservative. Though I read at one point that somebody outside the art world eventually downloaded the program and modified it to order from Pizza Hut.

DB: Do *Pizza Party* and some of your other works

“Maybe this is the real difference between our generations. In pirating, there was no way to talk back to the media. The stuff was coming one way at you and there was no way to arrest it, stop the action, divert it, alter the vocabulary, or change the syntax. Your hacking, on the other hand, is coming from almost total accessibility.” —DB

qualify as a kind of hacking? Do you use that term to describe your work?

CA: I get in a lot of trouble with that term. I’m not some hooded figure breaking into banks and doing covert political stuff. I’m closer to the older meaning of *hacker* as somebody who just does clever things with software; there was a connotation of it being a kind of joke, technically cool. That is the kind of hacker I am. I modify things, and they will be technically cool or just interesting, and then I’ll redistribute them.

DB: We used to say “pirating.” I mean, the term *pirating* was used for my early work.

CA: Was it really?

DB: Yeah. For example, when I started, there were no home-recording units. There was no TiVo. There was nothing like that.

CA: It must have been very difficult for you to get that footage.

DB: It was. There was no way to get the footage I needed directly. I had to find people inside the industry who believed in my artwork and were willing to get images out to me. So they called me a “pirate” of imagery. That had a very romantic sound to it: “Oh, she’s the one who pirates imagery from television.”

Maybe this is the real difference between our generations. In pirating, originally, there was no way to talk back to the media. That’s why I did it. The stuff was coming one way at you, and there was no way to arrest it, stop the action, divert it, alter the vocabulary, or change the syntax. So I had to go in there pretty much illegally, take the footage from TV programs, and reassemble it. Your hacking, on the other hand, is coming from almost total accessibility—and you’re able to reframe things, frequently obsolete images and objects, quite readily. What we wish to achieve as artists is probably similar, but the implications are different, as are our definitions. Also, our political scenarios seem to differ. After all, people who said I was pirating in the ’70s would say, in the next decade, “Oh, she’s appropriating. She’s deconstructing.” Later, people started using the phrase “She takes images from . . .” After a while, I started thinking that people would eventually just call me someone who steals stuff. [laughter]

CA: I don’t know what they would say now.

DB: Whatever it is, I’m doing it. But I think that the important thing for me was to use the most common vocabulary of the time, and the most common vocabulary was television. The most common vocabulary for you is the Internet.

CA: Definitely. I only came to art from the Internet; what I am doing still comes from general online culture. And lately I have felt that some of these clever projects work best online and shouldn’t appear in the art context. They work better when open to a live audience online.

DB: That goes back to those parallel tracks and the question of whether they will ever meet. They might give a promise that’s never fulfilled, but you choose to jump between them. In fact, maybe the most important thing is that you are active in both spheres. Maybe by jumping between the tracks, you’ve become a conduit for the question of whether they can meet or not. Maybe that’s a very important thing to do. I think many people of my own generation, in the late ’70s, were attempting the same thing by changing contexts. Maybe we have come full circle in the more than forty years since video’s appearance in the arts. By moving between these tracks, we might prevent a collision from happening or prevent them from ever meeting—but we show a potential for what can exist; we show the double-sided coin. □



This page: Dara Birnbaum, *Pop-Pop Video: Kojak/Wang*, 1980, still from a color video, 3 minutes 20 seconds.
Opposite page: Cory Arcangel, *Japanese Driving Game*, 2004, modified Nintendo Famicom cartridge and game system, dimensions variable.



Cory Arcangel
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