

Interview with Cory Arcangel

Cory Arcangel is an artist, computer programmer, and web designer based in Brooklyn, New York.

July 7, 2013

Interviewers: Crystal Sanchez and Claire Eckert

Please tell us about your background and your current work.

I'm a fine artist. My work ranges from video to performance to Internet stuff to composition. I work all over the spectrum. A substantial portion of my work is born digital; it does not exist outside of a computer.

I have no training in fine art. My education is more in music, specifically classical guitar, and electronic composition—which may be relevant, because a composition is really a set of instructions that are realized by a third party. That's a pretty good metaphor for digital media.

How do you think about preservation issues in the work you do every day?

That's a great question. I know this is a horrible thing to say when you are talking about standards and best practices, but it changes. The way I have dealt with it has changed over the years. But I can start by talking about my most recent experience.

I recently reorganized the way I work internally within my studio. When I make a file, I think about where it goes, how it is filed, how it is named, whether it is tied into a database, and maybe, if I have any energy left after considering the preceding items, what is the plan for preservation. I went from just having a laptop full of files that were a complete mess to a real system to file everything. I had to, because I just couldn't find anything anymore. When you work on the computer, you might make 100 files a day; over ten years, that's just hundreds of thousands of files. What a headache/nightmare!

So what I've been working on lately is just getting organized. In that way, I'm thinking about the future. If I can't find something, it's as good as lost.

I also finally went through the whole thing of getting a real back-up plan—offsite, onsite, and in the Cloud, with daily back-ups. I have a mirrored raid, which has a hot copy workable copy that gets re-copied every night. Then that mirrored raid gets sent up both to the Cloud and to my house. Once a year, I take a copy to my parents' house. That's my current system.

Do you feel that's sufficient?

I hope so! But these things are really for emergencies. I did have one data emergency, during Hurricane Sandy, and it came through for me then. But I can't say for sure it's sufficient, because I don't know what's around the corner and I don't want to jinx myself.

What process do you go through when a collector acquires your work? What do you feel you need to give them? What kind of relationship do you maintain after it has been acquired?

It all depends; there's no one-size-fits-all. Museums will ask for certain stuff, and everyone asks for something different. Usually I just give them what they ask for. Some people want an uncompressed video file at a certain resolution; other people want a DigiBeta, and so on. The best way I can answer that is to say that I don't have a real standard. It's just done on a case-by-case basis.

Do you think that is something that could be standardized?

Unfortunately, I'd say that would be really difficult, because each new series of works could be completely different. This one thing might be software; the next might be video; the next thing could be a performance. It might be possible—but that's thinking at a level that is so abstract that I don't have any leads.

How did you get the knowledge or expertise that you needed to take care of your own archive?

I would say about 10 percent of it was just me being a computer nerd. Beyond that, I worked with a gentleman named Walter Forsberg. Many years ago he came to do a project with me as a conservation student and he blew my mind with the knowledge he dropped on me. His project was to come and do a collection assessment. This was when I was working in my apartment, and it was just a mess. He took a very small sliver of my collection of media and did an assessment, and said "This is what you should do." It was totally theoretical, but over time, I started to slowly piece together some of the things he had suggested.

I also worked with Ben Fino-Radin and a few other archivists, who came to my studio and helped me to put together the raid.

It's interesting how you seem to have gone from not considering preservation too much in the beginning to making it somewhat of a priority in your process.

Well, it was always a priority in the sense that if I made something that was really good, I knew it was really good because I would be saving it all the time to as many hard drives as I could and hiding them all over my apartment. So I always had that kind of anxiety in me, and that was always the most accurate way for me to know when I was working on

something really good—I would start to get really nervous that my computer would crash and I would lose it. So that had always been there. But it wasn't until I worked with all these wonderful people that I really tried to get some kind of action plan.

Do you always keep certain kinds of files in your archive?

I try to keep everything, but I suppose there's a kind of hierarchy. In every project folder, I have a folder called "originals" that is working stuff—unorganized files that I don't really care about. If it's something, it goes in the "master" folder, which is stuff I really care about. So I try to keep everything, but there is a hierarchy with respect to how much attention I actually pay to different things.

Do think other artists are doing this—working with archivists and digital preservationists to come up with plans for archiving their own work? Is it the artist's job to think about that?

I'm not an outlying case. Everyone is on their computer all day now, no matter what you make. I don't know whose job it is, but I do think most artists are at least as savvy as I am. They might not have naming conventions, but certainly they take care of their files. It's just a part of life now, right? You have your laptop and it might have some MP3s that you really don't want to lose, so you take care of them. Digital maintenance is just becoming part of life. It's so boring, but it's just a part of life. I know artists are thinking about it because I get emails and phone calls from my artist friends asking me about hard drives and stuff like that all the time. They might not be working formally with preservationists and thinking specifically about standards, but everyone is thinking about it.

I'm working on a project now on a grant from the Creative Capital Foundation to print out all my source code—to make little books of printouts for each project. It's called "The Source." It's a long-term archival project. So if everything else gets destroyed and we don't have electricity anymore, there will probably be a couple of these books lying around somewhere.

That's an interesting approach; do you think printing out the source code could help in re-creating the work later?

In theory. But it doesn't really matter, because printing out the source code is interesting in itself as another manifestation of the work. It could stand next to the work itself on equal footing. But that's just me as an artist talking, and an artist doesn't have to make sense.

After your work has been collected, are you ever asked to help in migrating the work forward for future installations?

Again, it's case-by-case, and it really depends on the institution. But I do like to be involved if I can. I have a work in the Whitney collection called *Super Mario Clouds*; they installed it a few years ago in a show, and yes, they had me come and help to install it. It is always installed a little differently. Also, when I do survey shows of my work, I tend to install older works in new ways. It keeps them fresh.

The Super Mario Clouds piece is heavily tied to specific hardware [video game console]. How do you think about a piece like that over the long term?

I tend to think of all this stuff as performance, really. It's software being executed in real time. Yeah, the hardware is important now; but who knows if the hardware is going to work in 100 years? You might have to think about other ways to run it. That's similar to performance. Do you re-create a performance? Do you just show documentation? I think it's a similar kind of question.

So that's how I think about these things now; as a kind of performance with systems and structures. People don't expect a performance to be happening always, and in the same way forever. They realize it's a temporary thing and when it does happen again, you have to approach it with maybe some different variables—different people, different machines, different software, etc.

Who makes those decisions? Do you define them? Or do you let others make them?

This is an abstract question. I would love to be involved as much as I can, as long as I'm around I guess.

Do you ever think about where your works will be in 150 years?

Yeah, it will probably just be one of my source code zines sitting in your library. Ha! And maybe somewhere there will be some correspondence related to it. Something like that. Then it will be up to [people at the time] to tackle it. But who knows really.

I remember in school when I first learned that if you hear Bach played on the kind of instruments that existed in his own time, it sounds completely different than it does today. If you hear Bach played on a period organ, the sharps and flats are totally different than what we hear now. I heard Bach on a period organ once. OMG! It was nuts. Really frantic stuff. With media art, I think you'll have a similar situation, where things get skewed over time. It's a similar situation; Bach's scores are instructions that need to be executed on a machine. That's how I think about it. So maybe you can think about it in terms of a "historically informed performance," or something like that.

I suspect in 200 years—if, God willing, someone actually wants to see my work—it might be a little bit different, maybe because of something that people have totally forgotten about. Like they totally forget that electricity was 60 hertz, so it will be played at the wrong speed or something. That’s just what happens. And it happens with everything; paintings fade. It doesn’t bother me. It’s actually kind of interesting. Tony Conrad’s *Yellow Movies* are masterworks, in regards to these kinds of concerns.

You mentioned that museums ask you for certain things when they collect your work. Do you ever recommend particular things to them?

Sure. Sometimes I’ll say, “Well, it doesn’t make sense in this format, because it has to be 30 frames per second, not 29.97.” Things like that. If something would be detrimental to the work, yes of course I’ll speak up.

Some artists create “packages” when their work is collected—with all the documentation and components and things like that. Is that something you would consider- or would be appropriate?

If someone asked for that, I’d be willing to put something together. I don’t think anyone has ever asked, but it sounds interesting. I do think about this stuff a lot, so I really don’t have any answers.

I would like to see more of this kind of work collected, and I don’t just mean my works. I think the net should be cast as wide as possible in collecting this stuff, because the more you have, the more information you have to work with in the future. It’s like the archive.org model - Just ask people to throw you as much as they can, with as much information as they can. Don’t even worry about organizing it; you can deal with that later. You can try to fake your way through the homework. Get as much as you can from as many different kinds of artists as you can—professional, amateur, whatever.

You mentioned working with digital preservationists; do you think that is the best way for artists to acquire this kind of knowledge?

Well, I found it really helpful and illuminating and awesome. So yeah, I think that model is good. Or maybe something like a seminar would work, because archivists are going to throw down some knowledge that you never would have thought about. They are working at a level that is so much different from what I was ordinarily doing with my laptop. Walter would tell me “You need to have this many back-ups,” and I would think that it seemed excessive. But he was right of course.

Is there any source other than people—say, an online source—where artists like you who want to know about preservation can go?

There probably is, but I don't know about it. I haven't used anything like that, but that does not mean it doesn't exist.

Do you encounter professional standards in your work?

Not really. There were a lot of things on your question sheet I had never even heard of. I never knew SMPTE stood for "Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers." That is a very cool-sounding Society. I didn't know about AAM or AIC. I just don't know about this stuff. ... Do you guys work at all with preserving performance art?

Yes, some of the SI Museums collect performance works.

I feel it's all very similar. Just because I'm a computer guy doesn't make much difference. A lot of other contemporary artists have totally similar problems, and that's what makes it interesting sometimes. It's like I was saying earlier, the keys on the piano change at some point.

A lot of the debate is about how much you can change a work from the way it was originally presented and still consider it authentic...

I'd like to say leave that up to each individual artist. Each artist has their own individual vibe. Anything could be possible.

What I would have said 10 years ago is probably different from what I'm saying now. I did an interview back then with the Guggenheim, and I don't quite remember what I said, but I can imagine some of it was different.

I was researching the composer Bruckner recently and there is something called the "Bruckner Problem"—which is that nobody really knows what the final versions of his symphonies were, because he kept updating them throughout his life. At different points in his life, he had different ideas about each symphony. So now people are arguing about which ones are the right ones. I would say that the story is *the* story; but most people still want to know which one is The One. It's a very human thing. It's all a performance. It's not real. It's a temporary manifestation of information. None of it is going to be around in the future.