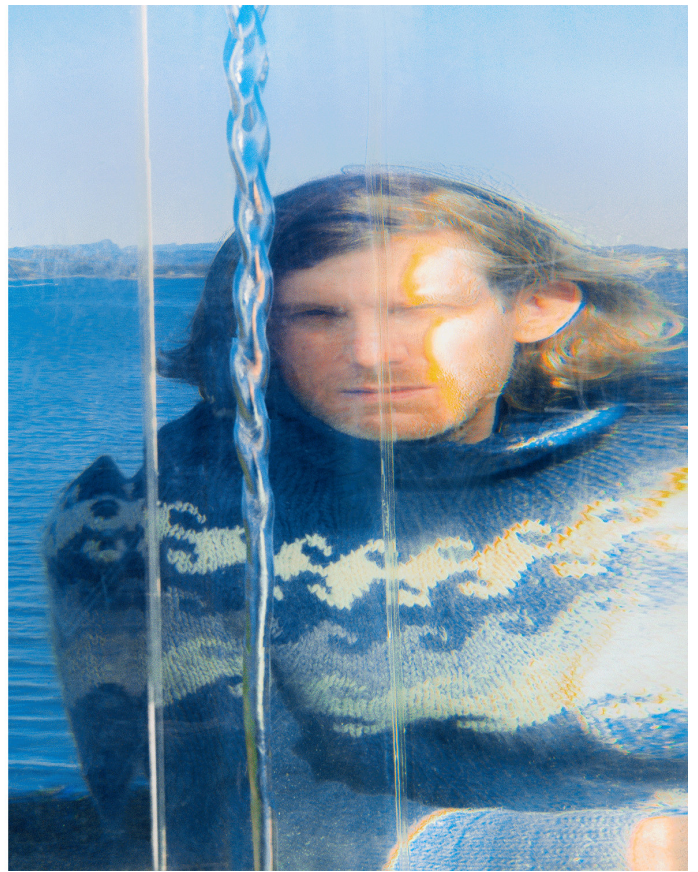


Caroline Busta & Lil Internet

## Cory Arcangel talks bots and YouTube channels gone rogue

'You asked for an avant-garde video? Well, I got some for you right here'

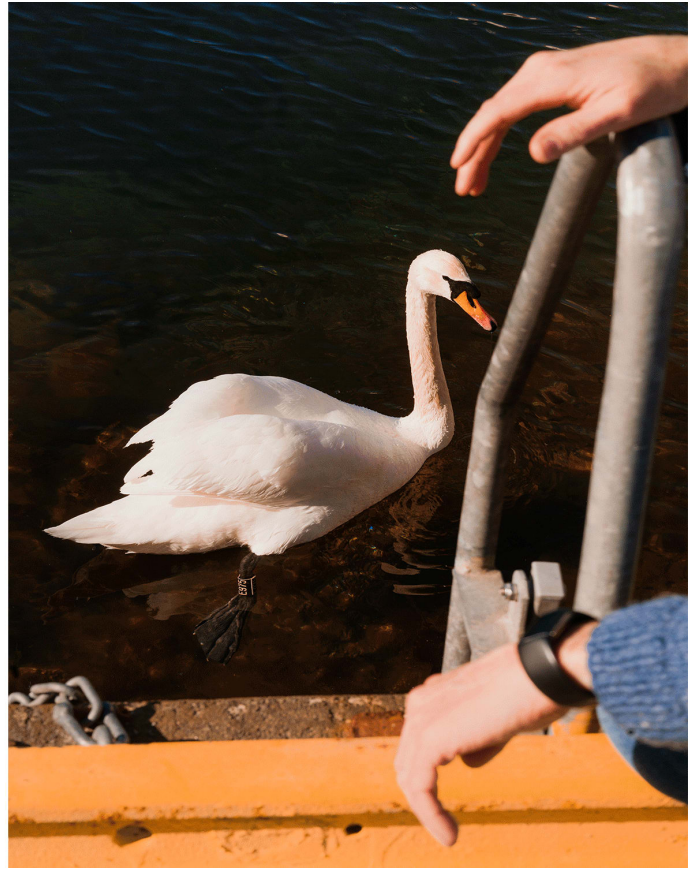
When we chat with **Cory Arcangel** about his upcoming work for **Art Basel Unlimited**, he dials in from Stavanger, Norway, where he's lived and worked since 2015. It's fitting that Arcangel, who grew up in Buffalo, New York – with the likes of Tony Conrad and other experimental video and sound artists who would appear on local access TV – would settle in a place like Stavanger, which is the onshore epicenter of Norway's offshore oil industry. Since his first forays into art as a teenager in the 1990s, the artist and composer has sought to highlight the invisible systems that cause things to run the way they do – the programs, code, and protocols that, for most people, remain unseen. But it is at this software-level that most of Arcangel's works begin. Take, for instance, his 2002 *Super Mario Clouds*, for which he modified a Nintendo cartridge to omit all of the game's graphic content, except for the iconic white clouds, which scroll ad infinitum across a blue-sky void; or his 2008 installation *Permanent Vacation*, in which he condemned the mail clients of two iMacs to an eternal out-of-office email loop.



In June, Arcangel will show a new work in Art Basel's Unlimited sector that likewise reaches beyond the screen to reprogram how things work. 'Do you remember Elsagate?', Arcangel asks. 'It was this thing that happened to YouTube six or seven years ago, where people noticed that their kids [after watching some *Frozen*-themed content] were being served weird videos of like a 3D finger going into 3D marbles. I figured somebody built a



If you're wondering how such a channel is made, the answer is with the help of bots. 'Using the Diffbot API,' Arcangel explains, 'we could send the bot to a website, ask it to figure out what content was important, figure out the tags, and even identify key themes. In a way, Diffbot could "understand" a webpage.' Of course, even intelligent bots are only as good as their source material and Arcangel had a very specific kind of source in mind. 'We had this list of spammy, gossipy websites from the 2010s – the kind that could have been made by bots or humans. It wasn't clear.' Arcangel lays out the process for us: 'Diffbot would pick two sites from that list at random and then one article from each. From there, it would assign tags – whatever it thought the articles were talking about – and use Google Images to search those terms. We then asked it to combine the content from both sources, using Google Voice to read the new gibberish text and then smash that audio together with a slideshow using the results of its image search, as if weaving the sites together. Finally, it would post the video to YouTube and it did all of this without my..., ' Arcangel trails off. 'There was no curating. It just happened.'



The resulting videos are profoundly weird. Mash-ups of high-profile celebrities, pop cultural touchstones, and tabloid-y catch phrases bear titles such as *25 How Popular Much Is Ruth's Martha Stewart Chris Worth?* and *Inside the Best R. Dogs Kelly's Life in in Prison Video Games in August 2021*. Syntactically, the video voice-overs are more intelligible than the titles even if the overall narration is completely confounding. 'What's happening there,' Arcangel discloses, 'is that with each sentence, the video is toggling between two different articles. The language will seem to have some natural flow but it actually makes no sense.' Yet human viewers of this work – which Arcangel will present at Unlimited as a nonstop, single-channel projection of all 844 bot-generated YouTube videos – may find they cannot help but *try* to make the content make sense even if it's futile and will only make them feel insane. 'It's a little bit of a leap of faith to show *Related to Your Interests* at Art Basel,' he hedges. 'But it's like, you asked for art? You asked for an avant-garde video? Well, I got some for you right here. Yes, this is what it looks like today... deal with it!'

We ask Arcangel if he thinks apophenia, the tendency to see patterns in random information, is key to how humans and the Internet have coevolved. 'I don't know anything about that but it sounds like something we had to learn in order to not get eaten by a predator. And the Internet does kind of prey on people.' But Arcangel's outlook is ultimately positive, predicting that as AI-generated content grows more sophisticated, so too will our ability to differentiate automated noise from authentic signals – even *simulating* automation as a form of human expression. 'I saw Caroline Polachek on a talk show yesterday singing Auto-Tune style without Auto-Tune. She had trained herself to perfectly step-up notes and it made me think about how Auto-Tune has become a language that everybody now understands and some have even learned to reproduce. Ultimately, all of these things are feedback systems.'



Drawing an analogy to art as a cybernetic process – and the slog of recent clickbait headlines warning of AI's threat to the role of the artist – Arcangel offers up a working thesis: 'My thoughts are that art doesn't have much to do with the thing; it's everything that surrounds the thing.' He then intimates that, in part, this is why he is interested in his *RTYI* content existing as art. As such, the videos 'will be subject to a different timescale,' he notes. They will live on YouTube as junk content while also testifying, in the form of art, to the runaway 'amalgamations of people and algorithms' enabled by early-2020s tech, long after that tech's novelty has faded and YouTube's cloud centers have gone dark.

One might wonder if the march of digital innovation over the past several decades has altered Arcangel's approach to artmaking. 'On a large scale, it hasn't,' he states, 'because for me, my work is rooted in a feeling. And that hasn't really changed since I was a kid.' We agree that tech may change what art looks like, and what tools artists consider primary, but that ultimately art is of a different order to tech. 'The two have always evolved in tandem,' we offer, thinking about how changes in infrastructure alter surface effects but not the human spirit. 'Yeah, it's gonna be cool,' Cory replies, signing off, 'I think it's going to be a wonderful mess.'

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**Cory Arcangel** is represented by **Lisson Gallery** (London, New York, Shanghai, Beijing, Los Angeles), which will present his work in the Unlimited sector of Art Basel in Basel 2023. The artist is also represented by **Thaddaeus Ropac** (London, Paris, Salzburg, Seoul) and **Greene Naftali** (New York). In October 2023, Arcangel will co-curate an exhibition at Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen with Giovanni Carmine, director of Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen and curator of Art Basel's Unlimited sector.

Caroline Busta and Lil Internet are cofounders of **New Models**, a media platform and community addressing the emergent effects of networked technology on culture. Busta was previously editor-in-chief of *Texte zur Kunst*, and an associate editor of *Artforum*. Lil Internet has worked as a video director (Beyoncé, Diplo, Vogue, Adidas), music producer (Azealia Banks), and pop media theorist. They are both based in Berlin.

All photos by Tonje Thilesen for Art Basel.

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