

# **Cory Arcangel (Beige) and Paper Rad's *The Mario Movie* Deitch Projects**

**ALEX GALLOWAY, RSG**

This is a group effort, so let me first introduce the principle actors. Paper Rad: Benjamin Jones, Jacob Ciocci, and Jessica Ciocci. Beige: Cory Arcangel, Paul B. Davis, Joe Bonn, and Joe Beuckman. They work in collectives for the same reason that punks play in bands: it's funner that way, and it's easier to make more noise. There is the Lennon/McCartney question of who is responsible for what, and I can't make head nor tails of it. But from what I know Ben and the Paper Rad kids have a shameless affection for dirt-style, fan fiction comics about Garfield and Howard the Duck. And then there's Paul who I am told once entered the DMC turntable competition under the DJ name "Spin Laden." (He advanced through the opening heats, a challenge in itself, before being thrown off for scratching in the Notorious B.I.G. lyric "Time to get paid / blow up like the World Trade.") The clothes that the Paper Rad kids wear they sew themselves. Cory wears them too, I think, when he's not wearing pizza-shaped animal pullovers knit at home with his other chums. And on more than one occasion, I've been present when, sauntering past a stray guitar, in a Kmart aisle or friend's house party it doesn't matter which, Cory has spontaneously tapped out the full arpeggios of Eddie Van Halen's "Eruption" with ten fingers at full frills. Then there was the music performance in Brooklyn when the Paper Rad three sat cross-legged on the floor performing a pretend recital on some Sony "My First Laptops," while the music was droning on prerecorded throughout. I thought electronic music was the one thing you didn't have to lip-sync? Oh well. Here's how I understand it: I've done way more ecstasy than Beige and Paper Rad put together, but they've done way more acid. And that makes all the difference. As Ben scribbled in a comic once, "Can one be tanned at night by stars?"

But it gets weirder: "The Mario Movie," Deitch Projects, New York City, January 2005. There is not much a rational person can say about a psychedelic rave fantasy, with messed up graphics, with castles floating on rainbow colored clouds, with dance parties and raves in underwater dungeons, all starring Mario the plumber who does little more than weep through the tumult. And the whole thing plays live off a hand-soldered video game cartridge. Gosh. But if I may observe one thing it would be merely the following: this is the real deal. Which is to say that it's not the real deal. This is computer code. But what you see is not what you get. To watch the code itself would bore to distraction. Instead this code runs on a video game console that converts it into sound and image.

The game console is the Nintendo Entertainment System, known affectionately as "the NES" to every youngster lucky enough to receive one for Christmas in 1985. (Raised by hippies in Oregon, we were not so fortunate.) The NES is a magical device, for given the proper code it can synthesize any sort of video signal from scratch. This is not the sort of video made with a camera and edited on a computer, mind you. How do we know? First, the compiled Mario Movie is 32 kilobytes in size, or about twice as long as the few paragraphs you are reading now. Even compressed, a ten minute video is roughly a thousand times larger. Second, the movie runs directly off the customized game cartridge pushed into the socket of the NES console—without, Cory is keen to observe, altering the factory-soldered graphics chip shipped on the original '80s cartridges. "Yo sound the bells / school is in sucker," MC Hammer would come to say a few years later. "U can't touch this." This is the real deal.

Because of this, computer art is more like sculpture than like painting or video. In making the work computer artists actually fabricate the substrate of the medium, they don't apply things to surfaces or use prefab tools to move images on a screen. The code is the medium. So in writing code, and running it, the computer artist builds the work from the ground up. It's all math and electricity. To engineer the soundtrack, Cory pokes the audio registers on the NES's chip in specific frequencies. When he does they chirp. To get the video, he writes hundreds of lines of code, code like "lda \$2002" (translation: load the value from memory position 2002 into the "a" register in the processor), or like "jsr vwait" (translation: jump ahead to the subroutine called "vwait" to stall for a few milliseconds while the television's electron beam repositions itself). What appears on the screen is the image of pure data. It is, in a manner of speaking, what numbers look like (if they could). Translation: this is not video art. Maybe call it math art, geek art, whatever. The Mario Movie makes tedium profound, and the other way around.

They say everything becomes interesting in the long run. Super Mario Bros might be nostalgia to you. But it's not to them. All media is dead media, that's what Paper Rad and Cory understand. It's all garbage from the beginning—so don't yearn for a time when it was otherwise. When you understand media as trash then there is no nostalgia. If there is any shred of longing that remains in the work, it's not for our childhood friend Mario. It's for an acid high, for a simulated hiatus in a far off land that no one has ever been to. It's for watching a cartoon schmuck trip rather than you. It's nostalgia for raves sucked from the fevered brains of raver-haters. Everything is as new as it is old. Everything is as sucky as it is good. This is the movie.

— Alex Galloway, January 12, 2005 3:08:50 PM EST