

Open Source Art

Two recent exhibitions provided an introduction to the videos and altered software projections of computer artist Cory Arcangel, who makes his work with various collaborators.

BY SARAH VALDEZ



Most artists would consider opening two prominent gallery exhibitions in Manhattan within the same month—especially solo debuts—at least a little daunting. But not Cory Arcangel, the prolific, unassuming 27-year-old computer geek who, despite the fact that he never set out to make art at all, has been captivating audiences by showing off his witty hacks on the biennial circuit and elsewhere for the past couple of years. (He has accomplished such feats, for instance, as writing binary code to transform Nintendo's once-popular gun game Hogan's Alley into *I Shot Andy Warhol*, which gives gamers points for picking off a pixilated likeness of the famous artist, as opposed to the Pope or Colonel Sanders; for a live performance at the Whitney last year, Arcangel had pepperoni pizza from Domino's delivered to the museum, using his Pizza Party software—anyone can download it for free.) His latest offerings included a slick installation involving a projection of a hacked Mario Bros. video game at Deitch Projects and a sloppily displayed but nonetheless very clever assortment of projects at Team.

Arcangel received his undergraduate degree from Oberlin, where he initially studied classical guitar and music composition, but switched to computer science at the last minute, figuring that was more likely to help him earn a living. While in school, he befriended the likeminded souls Paul B. Davis, Joe Bonn and Joe Beuckman; the

four banded together to form the record label/programming ensemble Beige, which collaborated on both recent exhibitions—if not in actual deed, then at least as conspirators in developing and promoting a zany esthetic based on fondness for old-school technology (think DJ battles with cassette tapes). Also contributing resources for the Deitch exhibition was Paper Rad, the Providence, R.I., music/programming/art collective consisting of Benjamin Jones, Jacob Ciocci and Jessica Ciocci. They made the “set” for the Deitch show and assisted in its programming. (Alexander Galloway, the essayist for a catalogue published for the Deitch show—which consists of 136 pages of microscopic, mostly numerical text that is the code for the Mario Bros. projection—compares programming to sculpture and describes the motivation for collaboration: “[Beige and Paper Rad] work in collectives for the same reason that punks play in bands: it’s funner [*sic*] that way, and it’s easier to make more noise.”)

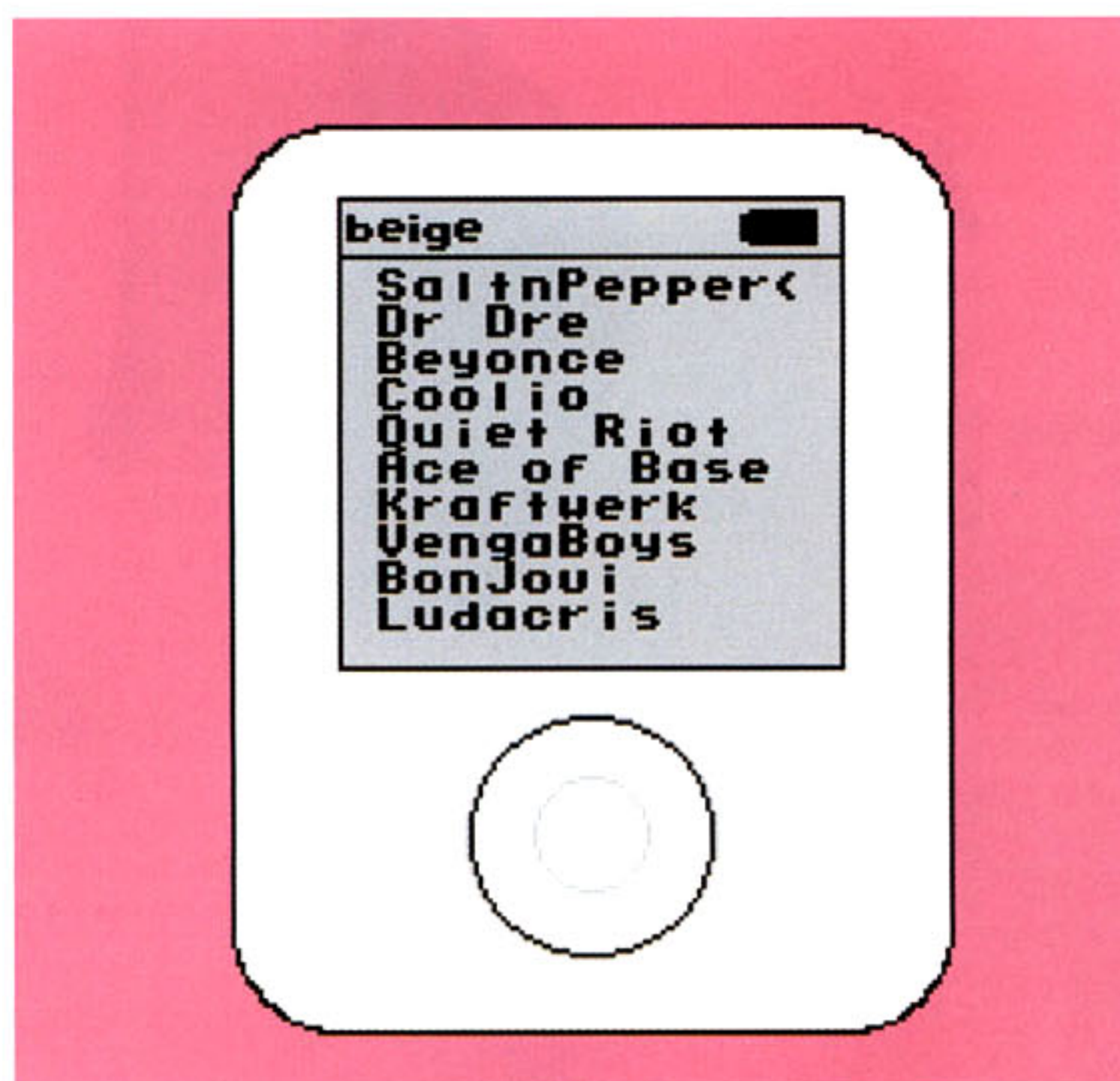
Arcangel plastered the code for *Super Mario Movie*, which was littered with handwritten notes, on the walls of the small front gallery at Deitch, making sure nobody missed out on seeing the vast amount of work his project took. (“F.U. you fake-ass pixel biters,” read a scrawled note at the beginning.) The main event, in the larger gallery, involved big sculptural cubes upon which viewers could sit and watch what appeared to be a video but in fact was a 15-minute projection from an altered 8-bit computer chip. From the original, factory-soldered graphics ROM, Arcangel coaxed something new, a story of sorts about how the life of Mario (the main red-overall-wearing protagonist of the game) falls apart, as if he were on a bad acid trip. Title screens with Dada-esque nonsense (“you are confronting your energy” or “minutes pass a punk band minutes centuries”) flash between rainbow-colored clouds, psychedelic graphics, floating mushrooms, fireball flicker patterns and “rave scapes”

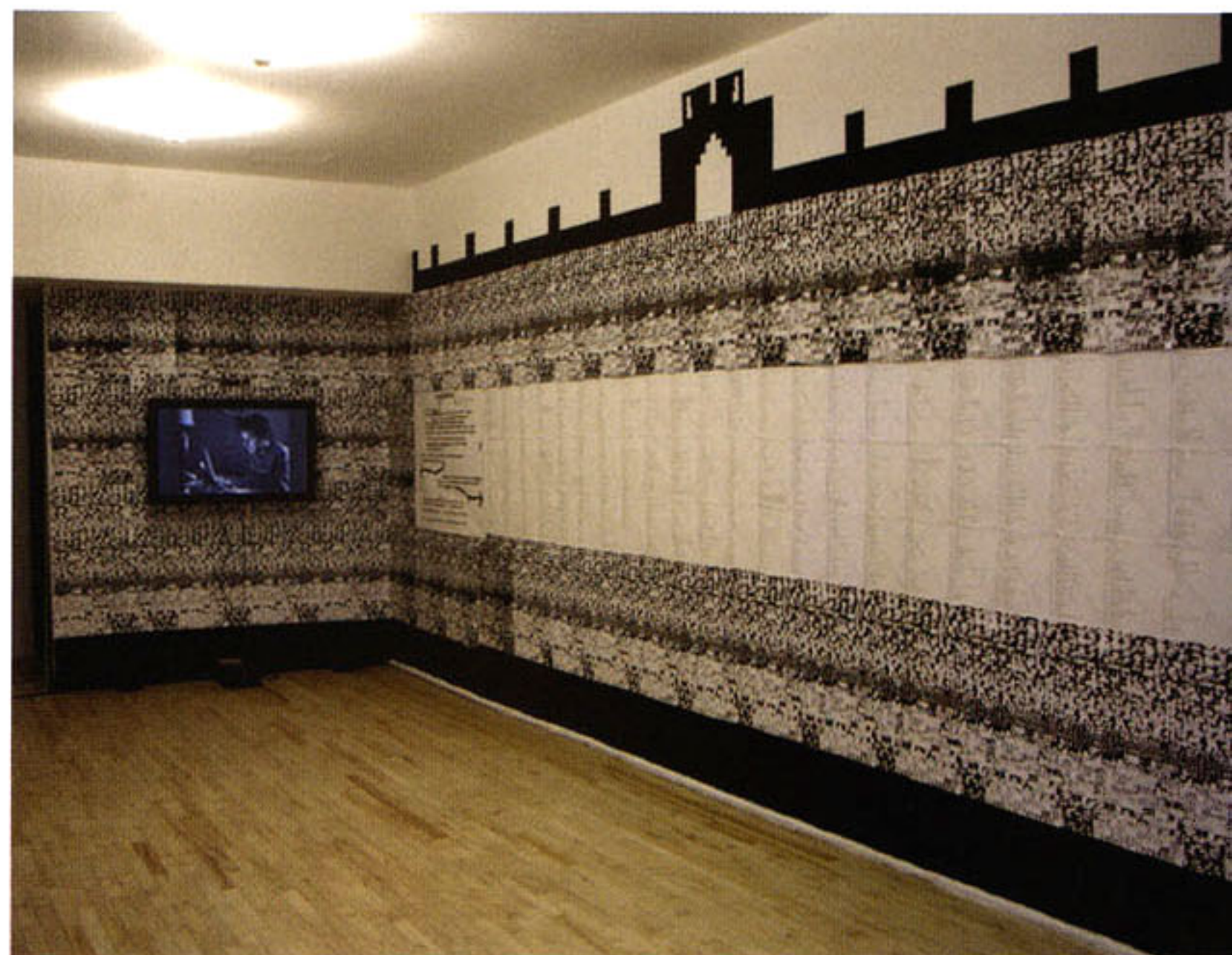
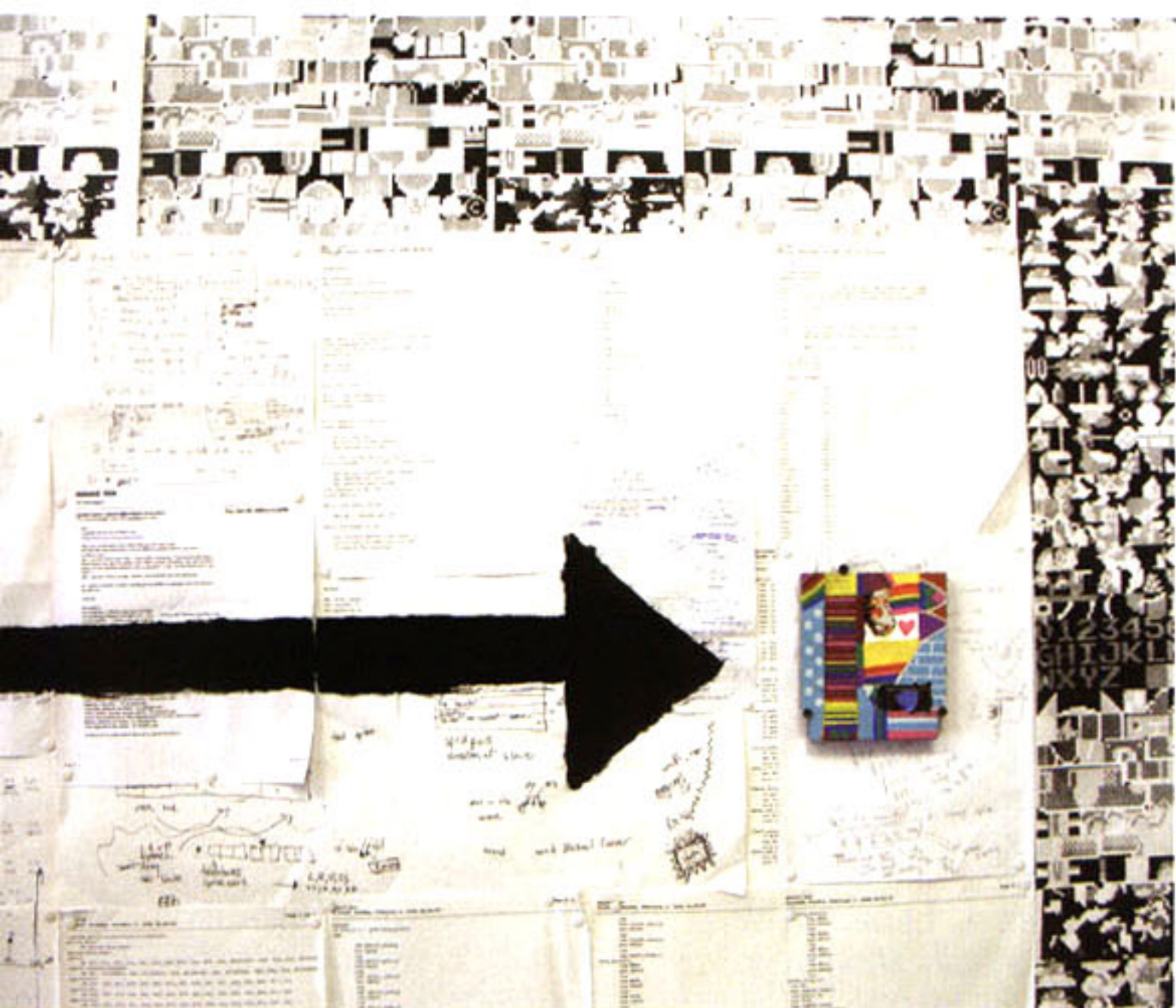
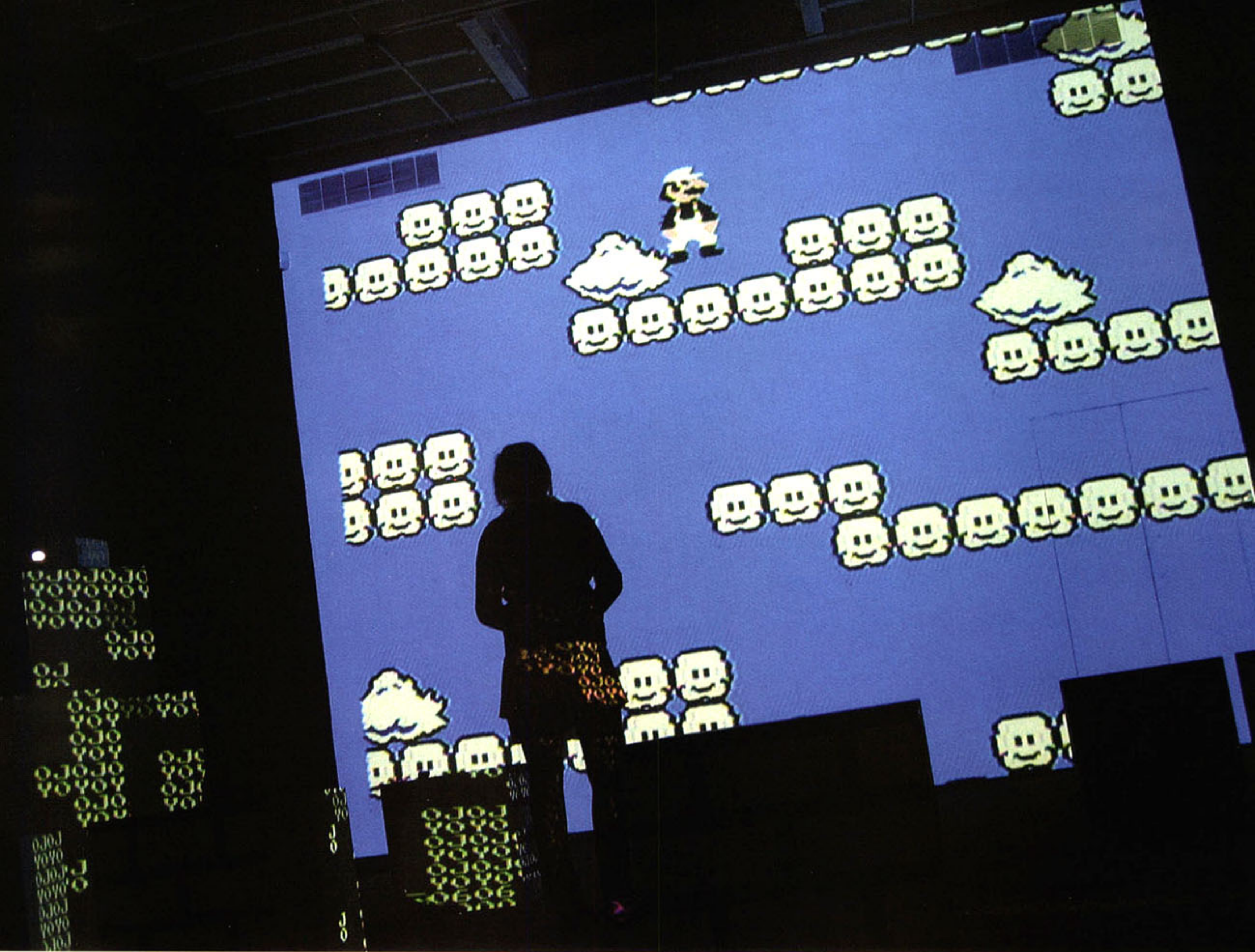
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Left, Cory Arcangel: Sans Simon, 2004, video projection. Images this page courtesy Team, New York.

Opposite, three views of the exhibition “Super Mario Movie,” 2005, by Arcangel and Paper Rad, showing (top) projection of Super Mario Movie, (bottom left) computer-code collage and (bottom right) collaged walls with monitor displaying documentary on the making of Super Mario Movie. Courtesy Deitch Projects, New York.

Below, projection from Arcangel’s Nipod, 2004, interactive hacked Nintendo game cartridge, dimensions variable.





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meticulously synched up with lysergic music composed by Arcangel. What it's about, exactly, Arcangel doesn't deign to say. But he ends his self-written press release by declaring his show "Awesome!!!!!!!!!!," which is spot on, even if one might wish for the extremely innovative artist to articulate further.

There was a lot more noise at the Team exhibition, "Welcome to my **Homepage** Artshow!!!!!!!!!!," which crammed in enough ingenious work to fill a small museum. One of the best pieces here required viewers to queue up songs with a remote control on a Nintendo that projected an image of a simplified iPod on the wall. The rejiggered machine allowed people to play an array of popular songs by artists including Eminem, Jay-Z, Bobby Brown and New Edition, among many others, speeding them up or slowing them down to sound warped. The lyric-free tunes, composed according to the extremely limited sonic mandates of Nintendo, clearly took, like *Super Mario Movie*, an almost unbelievable amount of ingenuity and time to program. Sadly, most gallerygoers seemed not to get the *Nipod*—either because the technology took some figuring out, or because lack of familiarity with the Nintendo and/or iPod stymied interest.

Arcangel's musical and technical talents were also brought to bear on a piece that set two music videos by groups with vastly different cultural roots, the Geto Boys and the Beach Boys, next to one another. Arcangel painstakingly synched the music so that the layering of the songs actually sounds good. Proving himself capable of extremely low-tech means of production, he also videotaped a television screen showing Simon and Garfunkel singing "The Sound of Silence"; every

time Simon turns up on screen, Arcangel places his hand over Simon's face: *Sans Simon*. Arcangel consistently goes for the most ridiculous production choices—not only making fun of the constant desire for the latest, fastest, most entertaining new thing, but calling attention to the fact that, even though few among us know how the devices we depend on function, we have certain expectations of technology. In this spirit, Arcangel also presented hacked Tetris and Space Invader cartridges slowed down to such an annoying degree that one could argue that they're no longer games. Fleshing out his messy, DIY, anti-pretentious esthetic was *message my brother Justin left me on my cell from the Slayer concert he went to last week*, a crackly recording of what the title suggests.

Total Asshole Compression, an unlimited-edition program available at the front desk at Team for \$5, functions to expand rather than compress any file dropped into it. Given a big enough file, *TAC* has the capacity to crash a Microsoft machine. Which is right up Arcangel's alley: subversive of any Bill Gates-esque notions that ideas can be owned by big, slick corporations that advance their omnipresent equipment faster than our pocketbooks or souls can keep up. Indeed, Arcangel casts his lot among a LINUX-minded, open-source-code crew, who are interested in sharing ideas in order to make the most excellent, accessible and frequently backward creations possible. He and his kind go against the grain of the market and work without prefabricated categories in mind—but, perhaps even more importantly, they stake out a warm-blooded community within the increasingly alienating realm of computer technology. □

"Welcome to my **Homepage** Artshow!!!!!!!!!!" was on view at Team, New York [Jan. 13-Feb. 12]. "Super Mario Movie" was at Deitch Projects, New York [Jan. 15-Feb. 26].

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