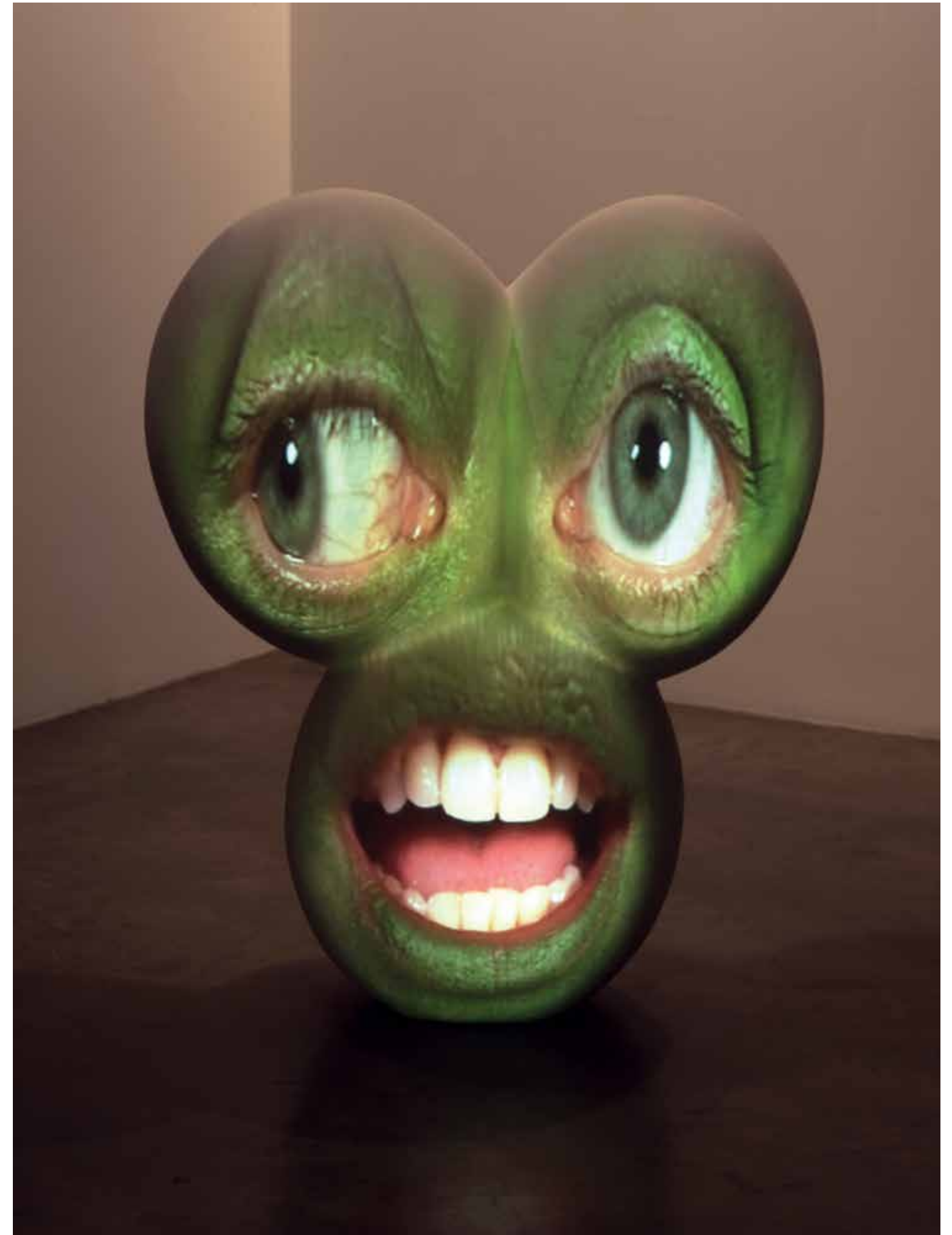


# What's Technology Got to Do with It?

Texts by Barbara London



A born-and-bred New Yorker and longtime Miami citizen, Martin Z. Margulies values the creative process, as a real estate developer and as an art collector. Fascinated by art and artists since the early 1970s, he has often noted, “I formed a collection of my external and internal experiences in my life.”

Margulies understands that artists have forever been inspired by newfangled devices. Back in the late 1960s, painters, sculptors, musicians, dancers, and poets commandeered up-to-the-minute audio-visual tools and collaborated, staking a claim in the wide-open terrain of electronic art. Pioneering figures like Andy Warhol, Nam June Paik, and Joan Jonas, using the hefty new portable video camera to examine and fire up the world around them, triggered an experimental movement. Since then, over the last fifty years video and media art have progressed beyond being considered defiantly fringe to being regarded as museum-worthy and mainstream. The acceptance of the interdisciplinary field has coincided with the steady market-driven upgrading of consumer technology. Today, user-friendly electronic devices are not only ubiquitous but fundamental to the fabric of everyday life.

The inexorable transformations of media have occurred in tandem with developments in contemporary art, especially as time-based performance and installation gained widespread acceptance. Meanwhile, art historians wrestling with how to sort out the tangled field and pin down the many influences of media art faced a convoluted endeavor. Definitions that served as handles seemed to last a nanosecond, as old terms nose-dived and more germane ones emerged. The never-ending cycle of speculative theories is still inexorably seasonal.

For decades, experts have posed the question of what contemporary art is. In a well-known photograph from the 1930s of the facade of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, a small sign beckons from the upper right-hand corner. Installed by founding director Alfred Barr (1902–1981), it announces the “ART IN OUR TIME” hosted within. As a demanding mandate for museums and contemporary collectors, the phrase persists along with the mission of keeping pace with new technologies and developments in art and in conservation. Barr understood that if just ten percent of his acquisition choices were considered “spot on” decades later, he would be deemed prescient. The acquisition of contemporary art will always be a gamble. Discerning curators and trustees at MoMA taught me that the best results grow out of the acumen and fervor of an acquisitive champion, driven by the purview and context of his or her own collection. Such impassioned mavericks are rare.

In 1998 I was heading to Miami for a visit with family when a colleague suggested that I meet an unusual person while I was there. She described Martin Margulies as a nonconformist with a keen eye, an inquisitive collector who enthusiastically beat the bushes for new discoveries and marched to the beat of his own drum. I resolved to meet this singular-sounding art aficionado, who lived in an elegant condominium complex that he had developed.

Shortly after I shot off an email to introduce myself, my inbox pinged with an invitation to stop by his home in Key Biscayne. A few days later, when I knocked at the front door, an energetic, witty man welcomed me inside. I found myself in a spacious apartment, beautifully appointed with serious artwork by twentieth-century masters—Joan Miró, Alberto Giacometti,

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**Tony Oursler**, *Coo*, 2003, fiberglass sculpture, Sony VPL CS5 projector, DVD, DVD player, video (color, sound), 43 x 35 x 20 in., 8:41 min.

and Louise Nevelson, among many others. This go-getter was clearly astute. As I moved around the central living room to study the great art on view, I had to circumnavigate the mountains of artist’s monographs and oversize exhibition catalogues that covered tabletops and some of the floor. During my animated conversation with Margulies, I discovered that he had read each and every book.

I learned that he studies long and hard before he sets out to sleuth, decidedly more in the manner of a gumshoe detective than an art enthusiast. He follows his instincts and step by step unearths clues that lead him to figure out the motivations behind artists and their work. It is his persistent research, coupled with a terrific eye, that gives him a clear head as he decides what to acquire, decisions he makes entirely on his own. Once he has secured a work, he becomes an elated owner who champions his new and often surprising discoveries.

That afternoon as I toured Margulies’s apartment, I noticed a tiny, humble-looking Donald Judd sculpture installed on the master-bedroom wall. I asked Margulies how on earth he had found this little wooden treasure. In the early 1960s, Judd had collaborated with his carpenter father to craft the small, geometric maquette, which was the prototype for just about everything the artist made thereafter. Margulies explained that years ago he had acquired the piece from Jennifer Licht, an old friend and mentor of mine. This was a serendipitous surprise.

At the time of my first visit, Margulies’s most recent acquisitions were nearly all photographs, both contemporary and historical. He took delight in telling me about the twists and turns of his art-collecting odyssey. It was back in the mid-1980s that he first dipped into photography, when he was suddenly smitten by work of the German artist Thomas Struth. Following that acquisition, Margulies looked further back in time. After some investigation, he started to collect the work of Struth’s professors at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, Hilla and Bernd Becher. It made perfect sense that the Bechers’ work—typological photographs of industrial buildings and other structures that are generally organized on the wall in grid-like arrangements—would appeal to this scholarly building developer, who appreciated the elegance and beauty that can be discerned in logistical systems. Margulies told me that he had traveled even deeper into the past as he investigated the Bechers’ own preoccupation with August Sander, especially that German artist’s encyclopedic photographic project, *People of the 20th Century*. I realized that Sander’s respect for ordinary people could also be found in Margulies. I had rarely encountered a private collector like this passionate and compassionate man. He reminded me of the avid New York collector Agnes Gund, who similarly follows her intuition and has equally wide-ranging interests. Both are advocates for arts education and direct their philanthropic activities in the direction of civic mindedness.

Fig. 396-397

Peter Fischli (born 1953) and David Weiss (1946–2012)

As we toured other the art-filled rooms of his spacious home, I picked up on Margulies’s joie de vivre. His eyes sparkled when he described how his first acquisition of media art had sent him over the moon. In the

late 1980s, he was in Switzerland traveling around the countryside on a post–Art Basel tour with the gallerist Ghislaine Hussenot. They stopped for a performance by the Swiss artist duo Peter Fischli and David Weiss, who had not yet been discovered by collectors. When Margulies saw their *Der Lauf der Dinge (The Way Things Go)* (1985–87), a film transferred to video, he simply had to own it. He returned home with the tape tucked under his arm. He and his two young sons then spent hours watching the video over and over as they lay on the family-room rug. They took delight in the seemingly uninterrupted pan of a chain of reactions that transpired in no particular order along a line of carefully assembled objects. They watched as rubber tires, balloons, steaming teakettles, ladders, tables, and chairs seesawed and made whimsical flips and unpredictable turns and occasionally exploded, feeling the mysterious empathy evoked by the flights of fancy in the video.

That day I realized that *Der Lauf der Dinge* could easily have been inspired by the work of the enchanting, older Swiss performance artist Roman Signer, who had had a large exhibition at the Kunsthaus Zürich in 1981. At the time, Fischli and Weiss were young art students and presumably would have seen Signer’s show. They could well have absorbed the way Signer beguiled and drew viewers into his magical ruminations on the more mundane aspects of life. Later I came to see that the childlike sense of wonder that *Der Lauf der Dinge* evokes in viewers could be discerned in other artworks in the Margulies Collection, including several photographs by William Wegman.

Fig. 400

Matthew McCaslin (born 1957)

Following his first moving-image acquisition, Margulies gravitated toward other media artists who were adroitly distilling the simple profundities of life into their art. In 1998, when he came across McCaslin’s *Junction Blvd* (1998), he pounced and acquired the installation. McCaslin had elegantly joined TV sets showing natural phenomena, which he juxtaposed with other electrical apparatuses, such as wiring, junction boxes, and construction lights. Using these ordinary electronic materials, he found a way to conjure up the disorder that exists in everyday life and coupled this with the formalism and minimalism that were so much a part of late-twentieth-century art-making. McCaslin’s intention is to prod viewers to reflect on their daily dependence on technological support systems. He once noted, “These seemingly disparate pieces are a playful reflection on the objects we live with and environments we live in. By mixing materials, gesture, and locations, I hope to evoke feelings in the viewer of the world around them that are deeply rooted but can’t be simply placed.”

Figs. 394-395

Tony Oursler (born 1957)

Another artist who knocked the socks off Margulies as well as other collectors and curators is Tony Oursler, who in the early 1990s took a fancy to the inexpensive little LCD video projector that had just appeared on the consumer market. Using the pint-sized projector, Oursler was able to transition from his earlier idiosyncratic and long stream-of-consciousness narratives intended for viewing on boxy

monitors to the creation of succinct short stories that took a physical form in the gallery. Oursler converted a familiar Raggedy Ann–like doll from a soothing children’s toy to a rowdy, contemporary art collectable. He fashioned the diminutive bodies of his dolls out of calico scraps that he bought at tag sales, and used white fabric to make the heads. He set an unobtrusive projector on a tiny tripod on the floor directly in front of his doll-like figures. In Margulies’s acquisition, *Colors* (1995), Oursler brought the little character to life by projecting a video face onto the blank white fabric. The figure is lying on the floor, trapped under a mattress, and its face appears scrunched and grotesque, almost desperate. The empathetic little firebrand delivers a wild and crazy monologue, loudly declaiming in an extreme mental state that appears to stem from a disastrous childhood experience. Balancing his art between humor and madness, reason and psychosis, the artist gives viewers *Aha!* moments in which they are grateful that the dire situation is in Oursler’s art rather than life itself.

As the market for postwar art skyrocketed, Miami, where Margulies had lived for nearly fifty years, was becoming a hub with a surfeit of art fairs convening every December. Larger and larger hordes of snowbirds began sweeping in to visit the fairs and check out the surging number of private art spaces and the expanding public museums. Margulies decided to make public his quickly expanding contemporary collection and launched the nonprofit Warehouse. I was in Miami shortly after the Warehouse opened in 1999 and stopped by the vast, 45,000-square-foot, unpretentiously retrofitted industrial building, which was in a disadvantaged Miami neighborhood then on the verge of becoming the Wynwood Arts District. I found Margulies standing prominently front and center, warmly greeting visitors, guiding people on walk-throughs, encouraging everyone to take their time and explore the art in his thought-provoking wonderland. In conversation with me, he stressed the fact that the Warehouse had a popular after-school program designed for local children.

By this time Margulies had turned full throttle toward video and media art, acquiring what he appreciated and believed would appeal to a younger audience. Wanting to keep the program fresh, he and his team revised the selection of what was on view each autumn. They began to emphasize the most recently acquired video installations, giving each its own space. The Warehouse provided a bracing context for media art, which was exhibited alongside the classic sculpture of Isamu Noguchi, Duane Hanson, and Anselm Kiefer and just a few steps from important photographs in the Margulies Collection. In the laid-back atmosphere of the Warehouse, both the neophyte and the contemporary art specialist felt at home.



Fig. 415

Amar Kanwar (born 1964)

I often saw Margulies on foot and alone amid the global parade of professionals who traveled to the same contemporary art shows that I did. In 2002 I found him at the opening of documenta 11, the eagerly anticipated international survey that is held every five years in Kassel, Germany, and spotlights contemporary art trends. As Margulies surveyed what was on view, I noticed that he appeared quite taken by Amar Kanwar's *A Season Outside* (1998). Here was an artist who had begun his career at university as a history student but had been profoundly shaken by the events in India in 1984. That year, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated. A few months later, the Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal discharged a toxic gas, killing hundreds and injuring thousands. Following the Bhopal disaster, Kanwar seemed to ask himself, What has meaning anymore? How was an artist and an ordinary citizen to behave in the wake of catastrophes that included unconscionable murder?

At documenta 11, Kanwar's installation focused on the relationship between India and Pakistan, postcolonial nations founded through the partitioning of the former British India at the stroke of midnight on August 14, 1947. The sectarian division that continued in the fraught relationship between the countries is vividly detailed in *A Season Outside*, which examines the "twelve-inch mythical line" marking the border between the two nations at the Punjabi village of Wagah. Ritualized displays of military bravado are performed daily at this site of standoff and made more poignant by the onerous physical labor of transferring goods from Indian to Pakistani hands across the same divide.

Notwithstanding Margulies's strong interest in Kanwar's new work, purchase seemed impossible. Kanwar refused to sell. This was in part due to his being a newcomer in the art world without a source of professional advice. A year later, when Kanwar exhibited his work in Chicago at The Renaissance Society, he had a dealer, and Margulies was at last able to purchase the installation he so desired. Margulies and Kanwar are somewhat alike: both have an integrity and a fierce commitment to their ideals. *A Season Outside* has remained on view at the Warehouse for over fifteen years.

It was Kanwar's precisely calibrated installation that made Margulies discover how far video art had evolved as it became more technically complex. As artists created multifaceted works with carefully defined prerequisites and parameters, acquisitions had to move beyond single-projections cast on a wall. Installations now arrived with precise floor plans for spaces of pre-determined size, along with detailed installation notes that outlined specified audio-visual equipment. The video installation was not for the faint of heart.

Fig. 430

Tabaimo (born 1975)

When Margulies acquired the Nagano-based artist Tabaimo's *Japanese Bathhouse* (2000), he faced major challenges. In need of qualified media installers, the Warehouse hired specialists to assemble the required audio-visual equipment—three projectors with specific lumens—and oversee the setting up of the installation. Carpenters built a stage set with three specifically sized walls, which Tabaimo's projections seamlessly cover from floor to ceiling.



A

(A)  
Detail of *A Season Outside*  
(1998), by Amar Kanwar

A visual flight of fancy tinged with menace in its playfulness, *Japanese Bathhouse* envelops viewers in a fairy-tale-like story that tackles the changing gender roles of the twenty-first century. The animations portray anxieties lurking beneath the surface of everyday life, exposing a darker world behind the inscrutable exterior of Japan's well-ordered society. In one memorable sequence, blank-faced salarymen wearing business suits soak contentedly in a large public bath (an *o-furo*). Suddenly a naked woman is seen scaling the wall that traditionally separates the sexes in communal baths. With a big splash, the woman plops down among the men. In an equally disturbing scene, a high-school boy takes off layers of his skin and disappears, perhaps failing to find his true self.

The artist related her animated work to late-seventeenth-century *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints, especially those of the female beauties who inhabited "the floating world," an imagined universe of wit, style, and extravagance—with overtones of naughtiness and transgression—of the Edo period, a transitional time with all the social strains and cultural flourishes that are seen today.

Figs. 409-410

Nathalie Djurberg (born 1978) and Hans Berg (born 1978)

There is a connection between the work of Tabaimo and that of Djurberg and Berg, whose collaborative videos Margulies acquired in 2013. The Swedish visual artist and composer-musician also explore disquieting, erotic undertones, in their case those lurking beneath Western social constructs. The juvenile heroines of *Madeleine the Brave* (2006) and *Deceiving Looks* (2011), which features music by Berg, are preyed upon by malicious adults and menacing animals, in tales recounted in a more exaggerated manner than the Cinderella and Goldilocks stories read to children. Rendered in Claymation and therefore one step removed from reality, the ominous eroticism in these works is made humorous and therefore palatable.

Djurberg is an unpretentious impresario, an animator who fabricates everything herself. In these early videos, she sculpted the diminutive clay figures as she peered into a mirror, grimacing, copying her own contorted expressions. She built the rough-and-ready little sets, operated the camera, laboriously captured each image frame by frame, and then edited the final video. Berg created the music and the sound effects. For the most part, Djurberg's figures perform in silence, without words.

In the parables she creates, hateful enmity is promulgated through seemingly illogical prejudices, which often date back centuries. The videos point to human resilience and at the same time to the ways in which humans consistently and thoughtlessly exert their power. They pose the question, Do we need a positive outlook in order to wake up and face yet another day? Her humble tales with their edgy humor encourage viewers to rethink cultural issues from new perspectives.

Fig. 399

Cory Arcangel (born 1978)

Arcangel's cheery tenacity is a good match for Margulies's generous and optimistic disposition. Trained as a composer and musician at Oberlin College, Arcangel started out as an adroit code writer who deftly appropriated, critiqued, performed, and used digital tools

(hardware and software) as proficiently as Rembrandt drew with a pencil. His media work has had multiple outcomes—uploaded to the web and accessible for free or sold as collectable, limited-edition products. Arcangel believes that the museum gallery can be made into anything an artist requires: a malleable platform (host) for an interactive device, the site of an installation, or the space for a performance. He considers the home page of his personal website to be his “public studio,” to which he directs enthusiastic young followers. There he has granted total access to his research and processes, providing source codes and welding instructions as a means of empowering others. He provides pathways through his latest investigations, displaying his admiration and delight for popular culture and the avant-garde.

An inveterate researcher, Arcangel began by scrutinizing low-end tools, mainly cast-off equipment (laptops, Gameboys, VHS cassettes) that he picked up at thrift stores and off the street. First, he would check to see if the insides of the discarded gear had personality. Should there be something interesting in the programming—which to him corresponded to the notation system in music—he would tinker with it and devise a new work. His modus operandi was to create theater by tracking the journey of the gear through its obsolescence cycle. By working with trashed materials, he was able to sidestep and critique the cult of the new and the impulse to master and achieve perfection using the latest systems.

Arcangel achieved acclaim in the underground and then the art world with his *Super Mario Movie* (2004). He had taken a functional vintage Nintendo game cartridge from 1985 and rearranged or removed most of the visual elements from the microchip. Introducing it first as an online technical tutorial on his folksy website, he empowered his audience by describing each step necessary to re-create it. When he released a narrative version, a collaboration with the collective Paper Rad, Margulies pounced on it.

Hacked right out of his legendary game, the normally bustling, diminutive Super Mario, Nintendo’s mascot, can be found standing in place, pinioned on a block emblazoned with a question mark. The ingenuous plumber floats in the vast blue sky, unable to relocate. He looks right, then left, then right again. Because it would be the end of the artwork if he were to jump off his perch, Mario is doomed, forever stuck confronting his imminent demise. The stranded gnome epitomizes the upbeat 8-bit, low-res computer-game culture and yet, at the same time, subverts the gamer’s usual fixation on achieving a perfect score. Tinged with disconcerting humor, Arcangel’s work is, on one level, tragicomedy for the masses. On another, it is disarmingly rigorous, befitting an art audience. Unlike Sisyphus, the legendary king of Corinth who must forever push a boulder uphill, Mario stands eternally perplexed, with neither a gamer’s conviction that practice makes perfect nor the power to advance.

Figs. 401-403

Doug Aitken (born 1968)

In every conceivable way, media art has continued to advance on both the most intimate and the most colossal scale. On a visit to Manhattan in December 2007, Margulies was excited by a monumental work by Aitken that MoMA had commissioned for the exterior of



B

(B)  
Detail of *Super Mario Movie*  
(2004), by Cory Arcangel and  
Paper Rad

its building. A technical feat in both production and execution—a multiplex spectacle on the scale of a drive-in—*Sleepwalkers* (2007) made late-night pedestrians stop dead in their tracks during the sub-zero holiday season. Eight enormous video projections offered sequences of intertwined stories that revolved around five archetypal New Yorkers—a bicycle messenger, a postal worker, a businessman, an office worker, and an electrician. The nocturnal individuals were shown as they woke up, prepared to set out into the night, and then made their way through the city to their disparate destinations. As the characters moved from the solitude of their personal and professional lives into the chaos of their urban existences, their separate stories appeared on different surfaces of the Museum’s facade, with moments of synchronicity in their movements.

Margulies pursued and acquired the single-channel, linear version of *Sleepwalkers* for the Warehouse. His team followed Aitken’s instructions and installed the work on a flat screen mounted on a cobalt-blue wall. Since it was possible, practically, to translate the work to a smaller scale than its original projection, *Sleepwalkers* stands a good chance of being shown often and thus kept alive.

Fig. 398

Anthony McCall (born 1946)

In 2007, prompted by his daughter, Elizabeth, Margulies caught an exhibition of McCall’s “solid-light” installations. This unconventional cineaste had first launched these installations in 1973. In a dark movie theater at MoMA, in which the audience had been asked to smoke, McCall had unveiled a brand-new type of abstract film. It was elegantly simple, consisting of expanding and contracting minimal lines that “described” an opaque cone of light that surged out of the projection booth and bore straight through the theater.

To the chain-smoking audience, the volumetric illusory cone, composed of projected light, appeared solid and three-dimensional. McCall was deconstructing cinema, reducing the medium to its essential components of time (duration) and projected light. When he presented related work abroad at avant-garde festivals, where he mingled with peers that included Michael Snow, VALIE EXPORT, and Ben Patterson, such writers as Gene Youngblood argued that an expanded cinema was requisite for a new consciousness then in the air.

After the premiere at MoMA, McCall went on to exhibit his new kind of cinema in alternative art spaces with no projection booths, where viewers became participants, their bodies intersecting with and modifying the fugitive but colossal form. In today’s health-conscious climate, McCall’s solid-light installations are generated by haze machines rather than an audience of heavy smokers.

Returning to art-making after a hiatus of twenty years, McCall was experiencing a well-deserved renaissance in 2007 when Margulies acquired the solid-light installation *You and I, Horizontal (III)* (2007). The work benefited from the increasing pliability of new technology, especially the latest projectors, which were lighter in weight, brighter, and sharper than ever before. At the Warehouse, the three-dimensionality of McCall’s work aligns him with sculpture rather than with the flat, two-dimensionality of conventional cinema. Viewers readily move about to engage with his conceptually pure



and mysterious “film.” Children and twenty-somethings lie down on the floor beneath or alongside the luminous cone in an attempt to physically experience the changes, as if bathing in the light of a bright and shining moon as it moves across the night sky.

McCall’s installation points to how the relationship between body, experience, and cognition is vastly different than before, especially now that technology has become users’ coequal partner. The youngest generation of artists that grew up with media is going way out on a limb to take heterodox positions. Their work appears out of left field in creative breakthroughs made through experimentation on a laptop at home or in shared workspaces that combine art, technology, social utilities, and science.



395.  
**Tony Oursler**, *Colors*, 1995, 701  
video projectors and mattress, video  
(color, sound), 1:2:50 hr.

Margulies remains keen to understand how artists are using new tools, especially at a time when ideas and content matter more than material formats. Whether ordinary mortals, curators, writers, or collectors, visitors to the Warehouse are grateful that this collector is in tune with art that expresses a sense of humanity, a concern and respect for others. Margulies is committed to his institution, to the artists, and to the art world and always explains that that is what he is here for. Moreover, the artwork at the Warehouse will be both accessible and well-provided for in the future.