Do It 2

IF CERTAIN CRITICAL OPERATIONS first explored by artists during the 1970s and '80s have since become nearly ubiquitous in visual culture—with, for example, the isolation and manipulation of popular imagery, once the purview of avant-garde practice, now common among homemade videos placed online—then what are the most significant obstacles, opportunities, and shifts in attitude for artists working in these modes now? Artforum invited DARIA BIRNBAUM—pioneering video artist and subject of a pivotal retrospective next month at the Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent, Belgium (April 1–August 2)—to sit down with media artist and programmer CORY ARCANGEL and compare notes on art in light of widespread appropriation, outdated applications, and increasingly divergent audiences.

CORY ARCANGEL: Recently I read an interview in which you said clubs provided one of the first outlets for your videos. In other words, you felt you could make videos to be projected in clubs at the same time you made videos that were to be shown in art spaces. Was that specific to the time? It made me wonder how the context for video has changed over the past thirty years or so.

DARIA BIRNBAUM: Well, to clarify just a bit, I was saying that whenever I made a work, I believed it could be inserted into different contexts. It wasn’t that I was actually making different work for a specific venue. You see, when I started, video was a very bastardized medium, mainly separated out from the arts. The only video I knew of within the arts in the 1970s consisted mostly of extensions of performance art, body art, or Earth art. Video was understood almost as an expanded documentary format, whereas I thought that it had a great capacity for different applications. I was excited when, for instance, the Guerrilla Girls asked me to show Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman (1978–79) at a special evening in their honor at Palladium, which had these massive video walls, or when I could show Pop-Pop Video: Kojak/Wang (1980) in another club that had forty monitors around the room, so we could stand within this shoot-out, truly encircled by the action on-screen, which never resolves itself. But my excitement was more about the change of context than about changing the content.

CA: Yet all these different things were possible only because the clubs suddenly had the technology. It was the classic era of the New York club, right?

DB: Clubs had fantastic architecture and decor at that time. Places like Area had a different interior
design every month. But when it came to video, I honestly think they were just looking for a new kind of light show. Studio 54 was using lights in an effective way, and the next club had to ask, "What can we do?" Video was perfect for them, because it presented a whole new dynamic of audiovisual stimuli. The Ritz had this enormous screen, and I had never seen anything like that. I mean, the thing was a couple of stories high.

CA: It was called the Eildophot. NASA had that a decade earlier in its first central-command rooms. Now you see it only in movie renditions of NASA.

DB: I know that your work often deals with technology that's practically obsolete. I guess the Eildophot, given its original use, was also obsolete in a sense. So if no longer serviced NASA and those applications, it then seemed to have made its way to the clubs. And the clubs would call me. At that time, I was very hot, since I was seen as somebody who edited really fast, utilizing a multiplicity of images and sound.

CA: This was years before MTV, right? I swear I saw your MTV "Art Break" when I was a kid. I was glued to MTV.

DB: You had to be glued to see it, it went by so fast. But I think what's more significant in all these examples is that one is getting inside popular culture as opposed to the frameworks of institutional art spaces. I used to talk about how Bertolt Brecht would refer to mediums such as the newspaper, radio, or television and how they had the tendency to fulfill themselves and then become overinflated. All of a sudden there are holes within their structures, and then other substances could permeate. That's what happened with cable, for instance. Artists believed that they had finally found a spot within which they could operate; holes opened up and they inserted work into them.

CA: I think I'm definitely in a parallel situation today when it comes to the question of context. You made videos and found it interesting to place them in clubs; my videos go on view in galleries, but I'll also put them online. And just as the galleries weren't interested in your video work because they thought it was just TV, they weren't so interested in my work at the beginning. They just didn't see it as art.

DB: I initially avoided galleries like the plague. I didn't want to translate popular imagery from television and film into painting and photography. I wanted to use video on video; I wanted to use television on television.

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CA: But that last assertion makes me wonder: Is there even such a thing as a bastardized medium today? Sure, if you're talking specifically about the art context and its inevitable waves of style. In larger culture, however, you now have to consider all the developments in distribution. The fact is that you can put anything up on the Internet and there will be five people who want it, no matter how weird or obscure the information. The niche exists; someone's going to find you, period. That means there can't ever be, in terms of expression and audience, a wrong move. Now, for me, this creates a dilemma: I'm still dealing with. On the one hand, it's great, because I'm conceivably able to just chase my wild, weirdest dreams. But it's also completely paralyzing: if I were to make just what I 'liked,' it could just as well be all about hockey or something like that. So I use the art context to bring me back.

DB: How does that dilemma unfold with your video games? Aren't they bastardized? As much as we want to let go, there is, I think, still contradiction in art and culture along the lines of, for example, the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition "High and Low" [1990]. Such exhibits have supposedly come together to allow for comparative views, but this actually only reinforces a "low," bastardized component in the art world—until, that is, the art world can see a gateway into it. And that gateway is usually a reinforcement of art-historical values and views. And then comes those critical interrogations where people make something of it, saying, "Oh, how interesting that he uses these video games that are obsolete." Because that's a cool word in the art world: obsolete. [laughter]

CA: Well, you're right to some extent. I can put a video game online and the core audience will be drawn like a magnet to it, while in the art context, some people just won't even go there—although, as I get older, I find that more people are willing to accept it, because everyone else is getting older, too. There's a generational shift. I guess I tried to address the problem with I Shot Andy Warhol [2002] and Super Mario Clouds [2002], which were meant to be blind to both audiences, meaning that art people would see the work one way and like it while Internet people would see it another way and like it. I wanted these parallel rails on the train tracks. I Shot Andy Warhol doesn't totally work online, though, because your average computer dork doesn't care about Warhol. The Clouds really worked, on the other hand, for the reasons you describe. In the art context, it brings to mind the history of landscape and video installation.

DB: Another of your videos, Japanese Driving Game [2004], features an endless road, which for me reflects this parallax between the rails of art
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DB: How does that dilemma unfold with your video culture or the way they’re bastardized? As you say, the last thing we do when we want to go to there, is, I think, still contradiction in art and culture along the lines of, for example, the Museum of Modern Art’s exhibition “High and Low” [1990]. Such exhibits have supposedly come together to allow for comparative views, but this actually only reinforces a “low,” bastardized component in the art world—can it, that is, the art world can see a gateway into it. And that gateway is usually a reinforcement of art-historical values and views. And then those critical interrogations where people make something of it, saying, “Oh, how interesting that he uses these video games that are obsolete.” Because that’s cool word in the art world: obsolete. [laughs]

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DB: Another of your videos, Japanese Driving Game [2004], features an endless road, which for me reflects this parallax between the rails of art and popular culture. In the video, you’re looking out endlessly, and it’s as if the two sides reach toward each other—there’s that promise held out—but they never really come together, and the road stays empty.

CA: That work was also about how video games convey space. Structurally, video games, and especially the ones from the ’80s, are different from television because they assume there is land to the left and right of the screen. Your perception is of an endless, horizontal, scrolling plane. So my work is dealing with the way the matrices of the medium, or like some of your early Pop-Pop Video work was discussing, the editing techniques found in, say, soap operas.

DB: The piece still seems very reflective of a kind of hopelessness in its endlessness, manifested for me in the empty road that goes on forever. That’s my feeling of what’s going on, in a larger sense, between popular culture and art—what standards are stepped in attempts to reinforce its own history now more than ever before.

CA: But that kind of separation is only going to be more pronounced given the rise of the Internet. I think that Art is bound to become more and more specialized, because that’s what’s dominating. It’s going to be like the galleries versus the popular culture, simply because of the way information travels. Each person goes his or her own way. Already, we don’t have superstars like Michael Jackson anymore, because people aren’t “watching the same channel” the way they used to.

DB: It’s funny you say that, because I recently viewed your Bruce Springsteen “Born to Run” Glokenspiel Adenotema [2006] online. Springsteen has maintained a certain stardom level—and with some integrity—and yet you make him into an obsolete background figure by playing this “dumb” glokenspiel live against a recording of his music. This is humorous enough, but what’s most interesting to me is that you’re performing in New York at the Museum of Modern Art, of all places, and you’re almost like a star yourself.

CA: Well, somas have a “Pop” night. But that project works in every setting. I mean, it’s ridiculous. I use a spotlight sometimes. I have all heavy metal. I create a cultural mixture that doesn’t make any sense.

DB: But my point is that the audience is screaming before you ever start playing. I asked myself, What’s the fuck is this, where an art audience is cheering like that, giving you star status? It made me think about how odd it is, as when the arts seem to demand that someone’s got to “crack the code” of popular culture. I remember feeling like people in the ’80s wanted me to crack the code of television. I did that, but then I never found the next model.
looking at. And when I’m “leaving bread crumbs” for my audience, I’m Twittering. Basically, it’s like production itself has become consumption.

DB: That sounds to me almost like when artists first got hold of the Porta-Pak. They would just turn it on, not really knowing what to say with this new device. I remember a tape by Howard Fried called Fuck You, Purdue [1972]. It was just him in his studio, pacing and recording every word. “Fuck you. Fuck you, Purdue.”

CA: I have to see that.

DB: There was a genuine amazement about the technology, and artists were as amazed as anyone else, with the hope that they would look into the new aspects of the medium’s potential. But you merely got people turning on that Porta-Pak and recording every moment of what they did. This doesn’t say a hell of a lot. Rather, what this says is that the potential is there, and we’re kind of staring instead of Tweeting, trying to figure out what this space is all about. In other words, in trying to fill vacuous space, which has been opened up as a potential area for communication, you end up filling it with such garbage that you’re almost shutting: “I just had my lunch now.” This silly twice the space you did with just “I had lunch now.”

CA: I’ve seen some of those early artist satellite broadcasts where people finally get a link from around the world and all they do is wave at each other.

DB: But this situation you describe today, where everyone has to know the other person’s life, is like reality TV gone berserk. Who has the time to Tweet away their life, really? You’re focusing on an image that you think is there, which represents a “reality,” but the truth is it’s the whole production mechanism around it—what you don’t see—that’s really being activated.

CA: Actually, this relates to how I prepare incredibly elaborate demonstrations of technology that in the end have no purpose—either missing the technology or just employing it in a way that makes no sense. I’ll spend six months programming something that doesn’t actually do anything. Or I’ll get Photoshop, open it, leave it on a default setting, click one button to print out something huge, and that gets circulated as a work by Cory Arcangel—even though anyone who knows Photoshop knows it’s just Photoshop. Eventually, people will forget Photoshop. And then more people will recognize the image as mine than will recognize it as the software’s. Or maybe not. Who cares? The point is that the aesthetic produced by those things becomes my work, which is just basically exploiting the way the whole art system works.

DB: The question of time’s effect here is interesting. Your video-game work, for example, is not only about obsOLEscence but also about bringing forward those things in previous era’s games that are then echoed in contemporary games. That’s the importance of them.

CA: Using the older video games was partly a practical decision. Those computers were so cheap, and they come from the time when one person could manipulate that technology. New systems like PS3 require so much production work now that every video game is comparable to a Hollywood movie. Beyond that, I was interested in how a given technology’s time might be over. I fill a gap in the history of technology and culture, doing things people didn’t actually do when these systems were in use.

DB: But what is relevant here is that these were actually prototypes for games to come. Maybe it’s intuitive, but you’ve removed those elements that once seemed essential but not, and you’re left with the endless road or the clouds. In fact, as your work makes clear with that precise scrolling space, it’s the very backgrounds that set the atmospheric dimension of these games and created their sense of being. This is what Roy Lichtenstein did in Pop art; this is why the work becomes art. What I personally don’t like is that people can get so invested in art-historical perspectives that they then miss out on the contemporary perspective—like capturing the Photoshop chart with the one hit and then blowing it up. I wonder if there now exists any real depth of understanding regarding media arts, video arts, arts that reach out into the landscape of the Internet—and I’m concerned that the arts seek to recognize them for the depth of what they have, rather than for the surface of what they give.

CA: In my last show, I was kind of playing with this idea. My works were like litmus tests to see whether people would accept them.

DB: Audiences might get upset, like they used to. When I was growing up, my favorite thing in the world was to visit Malevich’s Supremacist Composition: White on White [1918] at MOMA and
It's been 20 years since Cory Arcangel's "Tape Loop" was first hacked together on a computer, and it's still running. But there's a "reality," but the truth is it's the whole production mechanism around it—what you don't see—that's really being activated. CA: Actually, this relates to how I prepare incredibly elaborate demonstrations of technology that in the end have no purpose—either missing the technology or just employing it in a way that makes no sense. I spend six months programming something that doesn't actually do anything. Or I'll get Photoshop, open it, leave it on a default setting, click one button to point something huge, and that gets circulated as a work by Cory Arcangel—even though anyone who knows Photoshop knows it's just Photoshop. Eventually, people will forget Photoshop. And then more people will recognize the image as mine than will recognize it as the software's. Or maybe not. Who cares? The point is that the aesthetic produced by those things becomes my work, which is just basically exploiting the way the whole art system works.

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DB: Audiences might get upset, they could use them. When I was growing up, my favorite thing in the world was to visit Malevich's Supremacist Composition: White on White [1918] at MOMA and see the crowd of people discussing whether or not this is art. Years later, I tried to buy a slide of it, and MOMA said it wasn't reproducible and no slide existed. For me, this was an amazing awakening—an excellent painting that wasn't reproducible.

But now, your work is eminently reproducible. I don't know what that means for the arts of the future. In an era of dominant media flow, we are trying to utilize the very tools of it—and yet the question remains, What does one say with it? If everything becomes data flow, and dominant culture is all there is, then we risk losing our ability to question that culture and further the possibilities for humankind. In this regard, I do see art as creating a reflective space for people to question the very aspects of where and who they are, thus expanding their perspective. It's one reason I stopped only appropriating—that still believe in what images can do—and why I don't think everything can or should be translated on the Web. I don't believe what Sherrie Levine said decades ago, that no stone has been left unturned. I'm still hoping there are images yet to be made, and I think the resonance of what Malevich was attempting to do lives on in that painting. In fact, in 2001 I turned to Schönberg's opera Erwartung [1909] with that in mind, experimenting with his music and the opera's libretto. I wanted to reinvent in what was presented at the turn of the previous century and ask, "What meaning do those words and music have now?"

CA: Why Schönberg? When you talk about White on White, Schönberg created a comparable moment in music. People just threw up their hands and asked, "Is this music?"

DB: Well, that piece was written in the year of my mother's birth, so some personal factors are involved. But basically I utilized it because Erwartung is a one-act opera with only one person in it, a woman—I'm still concerned with the stereotyping of women—and the libretto was written at Schönberg's invitation by Marie Pappenheim, a twenty-seven-year-old medical student. Very few libretti are written by women, so I was interested in taking that as a way to address the dominant structure of Schönberg's opera, which was known for its fragmentation.

CA: And was it of interest to you that music has been built into a DNA, this idea that there is a score to be interpreted? Other mediums don't have that, but in music, every composer is basically inviting you to reinterpret his composition.

So, for example, I have a video interpretation of one of the Goldberg Variations that features images of different people—and a few animals, like cats—that I downloaded from the Internet, each one playing an individual note. I'd been trying to figure...
Isn't this what your work with Photoshop or Bach is? You've pasted image onto sound—exactly as MTV does—but you've done so to the nth degree. It's as if a society has so swallowed its own double that you're vomiting it back again: the loading of images beyond the point of total saturation. —DB

DB: This makes me recall an introduction to a catalogue once published by Mary Boone and Michael Werner on Barbara Kruger—who, of course, employed much of what she learned as an art director in commercial advertising. They got Jean Baudrillard to write an essay, and he argued in it that Kruger's works could operate at any scale. In other words, whereas White on White can't operate at just any scale—it works as it works for what it is—Kruger's work can extend itself, take on multiple scales and permeate culture, just as media does. And in a line I really appreciated—they bought him well—Baudrillard said that, when it comes to her work, it's as if a society had so swallowed its own double that it vomits it back again.

Now, isn't that what your work with Photoshop or Bach is? You've pasted image onto sound—exactly as MTV does—but you've done so to the nth degree. It's as if a society has so swallowed its own double that you're vomiting it back again: the loading of images beyond the point of total saturation. Maybe this leads to what I think art should be—a critical dialogue, where people intuitively start turning other people away from that screen, no longer living out their lives in sheer alienation and loneliness. Maybe you're filling the holes in a way that people can finally say, “Oh, I get it. That's the most flattened chocolate cake I've ever seen. I think I'll eat some fruit.”

QA: I would love to think that my work is that—dark chocolate on dark chocolate on dark chocolate. I guess I was pointing at a hole in YouTube with the Variations piece. I thought, No one is seeing the big picture here, which is what everyone is doing with it.

DB: I've started a new work utilizing YouTube; it's based on a piano piece by Robert Schumann. My idea is to place in a gallery setting different images of people playing this one composition, as seen on YouTube. People would grasp both the urgency of trying to express a masterpiece and the different interpretations such a work is subject to. But the real point is that there are so many people on YouTube playing this piece, from Horowitz to an unknown fourteen-year-old.

QA: It also shows how the Internet makes it very hard to keep ahead. The question of who "did" something is moot. It's just guaranteed that any idea you have has been executed by some kid somewhere. I mean, where is art left when everyone is a producer?

DB: This is a good question. Having grown up reading a fair amount of Marxist theory, I recall that Walter Benjamin's idealistic hope was that people would become involved in production. Society would be better off if it wasn't only about producing products for the general populace as the coin...
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Technology in a particular way? Why don't you ever just see an ugly Photoshop gradient straight up on a bus sign, for example? What might happen if you overused technology, or if you underused it? There are always holes open at either end of the spectrum. And filling these holes creates experiences that are somehow, I think, worthy.

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CA: If everyone is a producer now, then we have a data-archiving problem. How are we to know where to look, or how, to look for accurate information? I don't want to speak in favor of heavily edited, micromanaged media, because obviously that has its own problems. But the Internet is full of half-truths; you can find a "factual basis" for anything. With things like Wikipedia, you're forced to ask, "What is the real version of history?" Or, more precisely, "What's really happening, and who's in control of it?"

CA: If I think Benjamin was interested in the way in which people might change their ideologies, in other words, by participating, since then they are less capable of being simply consumers. Of course, as you're suggesting, the problem now revolves around the questions, What are you producing? Is the simple act of reproduction by itself meaningful? Where do you look for any value structure or affect that this can have? And does it say, ultimately, that anyone can be an artist—this dream of the Internet, that there is no hierarchy?

It all brings to mind an ongoing project by Hans Ulrich Obrist [launched in 1993], called "Do It," which has included both a book and a travelling exhibition. Here, the concept seemed a little—perhaps false—utopian fulfillment of Lawrence Weiner's project Statements [1968]. The artist issues a set of instructions that have or do not have to be executed by the receiver of the statements. But I think Hans Ulrich became infatuated with seeing work dispense widely into culture. And who gets eliminated from this system? Well, the artist. In a real sense, Lawrence Weiner's saying that artists can, or need not, be present to execute work themselves or, as in the case with early Michael Asher works, the artist can then hire someone else to execute the work. But in the case of "Do It," perhaps this is more like what T. J. Clark called a false utopia of images. In your work, you come to this schema much differently, right? You present on exact a set of instructions, too, but it's democratic in the sense that you say, "It's art," but don't take it too seriously as art, because anyone can get at the essence of what this game is about.

CA: Yeah. When I put instructions or code online, it is really intended for use by people who don't know anything about art. This makes it slightly weird when people in the art context get excited about the work—particularly given that conceptual art, as well as the kinds of work that were in "Do It," is slowly becoming a kind of vernacular on the Net. One is always encountering a cool new project someone is doing and explaining.
type "pizza," hit a button, and some guy delivers. In terms of sheer eyeballs, a thousand times more people have seen that than the Clouds piece, but I never hear about it, because these are random people I don’t know.

DB: But this is interesting because of the art world’s framing of things in terms of whether they have critical value or not. One could imagine this as the next step after Rirkrit Tiravanija’s work involving cooking to develop—a again perhaps idealized—social grouping within the arts. In fact, I could almost see a slippage of Hans Ulrich’s “Do It” here—you know, where we all begin ordering pizza and consider that within art terminology as a kind of new work. And then you really have to ask, “Where does that take you? If this is your most populist piece, what does it do in terms of the art-historical value of such shows?” And one can mirror “Do It,” within the framework of art, by ordering a pizza. This becomes a kind of “Do It 2.” But is this not, then, the mirror darkly, Baudrillard’s swallowing one’s double and spitting it out again, where all the things we use to define the dimensions of an artwork are nonexistent? What’s existent is simply the voiding of the things we’re consumed too much of, and that includes artwork itself.

CA: Too much pizza. It’s funny because I got in trouble for that piece, because apparently Dominico’s is owned by a Christian conservative. Though I read at one point that somebody outside the art world eventually downloaded the program and modified it to order from Pizza Hut.

DB: Do Pizza Party and some of your other works qualify as a kind of hacking? Do you use that term to describe your work?

CA: I get in a lot of trouble with that term. I’m not some hooded figure breaking into banks and doing covert political stuff. I’m closer to the older meaning of hacker as somebody who just does clever things with software; there was a connotative of it being a kind of joke, technically cool. That is the kind of hacker I am. I modify things, and they will be technically cool or just interesting, and then I’ll redistribute them.

DB: We used to say “pirating.” I mean, the term pirating was used for my early work.

CA: Was it really?

DB: Yeah. For example, when I started, there were no home-recording units. There was no TiVo. There was nothing like that.

CA: It must have been very difficult for you to get that footage.

DB: It was. There was no way to get the footage I needed directly. I had to find people inside the industry who believed in my artwork and were willing to get images out to me. So they called me a “pirater” of imagery. That had a very romantic sound to it: “Oh, she’s the one who pirates imagery from television.”

Maybe this is the real difference between our generations. In pirating, there was no way to talk back to the media. The stuff was coming one way at you and there was no way to arrest it, stop the action, divert it, alter the vocabulary, or change the syntax. Your hacking, on the other hand, is coming from almost total accessibility.” —DB