

Assemblage and Décollage in Virtual Public Space

Will Pappenheimer & Tamiko Thiel
College Art Association, 2016

18 min

accompanied by slide/PowerPoint sequence throughout with live demonstrations of specific AR works (if technically possible in room!) in the sections below.

*After Deleuze & Guattari, "A Thousand Plateaus," Introduction, page 23
(our re-assembly marked in bold type):*

*"There is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (**the AR artwork**) and a field of subjectivity (the author). Rather, an assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities drawn from each of these orders ..."*



1) Intro - Rewa Wright's concept of AR art as "software assemblage"

Inspired by the recent writings of Rewa Wright, Ph.D. candidate at the University of New South Wales, Australia, this presentation responds to her ISEA 2015 paper, "Mobile Augmented Reality Art and the Politics of Re-assembly," with its illumination of our ongoing collaborative work *Biomer Skelters* as "software assemblage." Wright's application of Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage theories opens avenues of exploration into how

augmented reality (AR) artworks function as an assemblage of process, participant, location and meaning. Though Deleuze and Guattari's work, "A Thousand Plateaus," is the foundation of Wright's thesis, this presentation does not follow a careful application of their combined theory, but rather explores how it unfolds in our work.

Wright proposes a specific formation of Deleuze and Guattari's machinic assemblage as "software assemblage," operative in location-based artworks such as mobile AR. This model describes events or works as a conjunction or configuration of technologies, media and software that, together with their geographical and social contexts and implications, are actively instantiated by the user/participant at a corporeal and perceptual level. Because these works are participatory, ambulatory and site-based, they emerge out of a fluid experience, configured by us as artists and but only finally "assembled" through the agency of the viewers on location.

A wide outline of this process includes the notions that mobile AR, as it is perceived through portable media devices, brings together procedural coding, network identity, social connectivity and body motions that incorporate the user into the technologies involved, or vice versa, the technologies are incorporated in the user. Inherent in geolocative AR technology is that active bodily engagement by the user/participants is required to view the virtual objects and media. Like birdwatchers, they must physically scan the environment to locate the artwork, using their mobile devices as a portal, a virtual magnifying glass or telescope, into previously imperceptible strata. The artwork may be above, below or behind them, may be near or far away. If they first see an augment from afar, they can walk towards it, finally standing beside or actually inside the artwork. In the process, they must negotiate the shared space with other people, vehicles, furnishings, buildings and the like, in an encounter with not just the artwork as media but with an assemblage of multiple cultural, social and territorial matrices.

Wright suggests that AR artwork additions to or augmentations of a given site register the participant in multiple topologies embedded within the politics of institutional space, contemporary world events, and cultural memory. These are assembled together with the AR artist's work as intervening or juxtapositional imagery, the virtual objects functioning as transformative or critical collage and commentary. To this already complex assemblage, user/participants bring their own perceptions and contextual references to the territorial conditions of the site, even as they themselves instantiate the artwork as active agents.

Whereas there is a tendency to stratify layers of signs and signifieds or regimes of existence into hierarchies of importance, we concur with Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomic, non-hierarchical structures that proclaim a level overlapping playing field: where a GPS topology

has the same importance as geography, where mediation has an equivalent affect as appearance and software becomes incorporated into physical bodies and systems. We see AR not as representation or simulation, as physical versus virtual, but rather as action upon or transformation of preexisting schemes of representation, to shift or undermine them. The AR artwork is immaterial but nonetheless "real" in the dictionary sense of "actually existing or happening, not imaginary" (Merriam Webster), as it can be called up by anyone with the proper hardware and software at any time at that site.

In the context of Wright's concept of software assemblage, we consider it important to foreground use of the artistic strategy of *décollage* to trigger a transformative perceptual re-assemblage in the viewer: the tearing away or re-configuration of layers of situational assemblage to reveal meanings more profound than the superficial physical or material layers alone. It is in this sense that our work becomes interventionist or critical space. Virtual augmentation therefore is not utilized to enhance or commodify objects or space, but rather to reveal problematics of public or institutional site and memory. The virtual artwork, integrated into the actual Cartesian environment that claims a specific functional or ideological territory, reveals what is otherwise hidden, functioning not merely as a technological apparition but also as an index to suppressed social objects or strata of allusion.

2) *Shades of Absence*, Tamiko Thiel (2011, 2013)



(Corcoran)

Shades of Absence: Governing Bodies



(US Capitol)



Shades of Absence: Outside/Inside



Shades of Absence: Public Voids

during this section, either the audience or presenters will demo and use the Shades of Absence app (and use Will's 2nd projector as a second screen?)

Décollage is a primary strategy of Tamiko Thiel's work series *Shades of Absence*. Premiering at Manifest.AR's guerilla intervention into the 2011 Venice Biennale, it is a virtual transnational pavilion for censored artists, created in reaction to Biennale curator Bice Curiger's question: "If art was a nation what would be written in its constitution?"

In these "pavilions of absence," photographs of contemporary artists whose works have been censored are reduced to gold silhouettes and enclosed by terms of transgression. Each erased silhouette stands for countless unknown or lesser known artists who face censorship or persecution with little or no public support. Touching the screen while viewing one of the artworks brings a link to a website with cases of censorship - including but not limited to the artists whose silhouettes are part of the artwork. The empty gold of the silhouettes allude to artists' role as transnational producers of high value commodities, and as critical commentary on the value of art in a multiplicity of contexts.

Shades of Absence: Public Voids (2011), geolocated in Piazza San Marco, references artists whose works in public places have been censored (including at the Venice Biennale itself) to reveal the illusory fragility of artistic freedom in "public" space. This work has been re-sited in multiple locations (for DUMBO under the Brooklyn Bridge, in Los Angeles, Switzerland, etc.) as a critical commentary in the context of public art exhibitions.

In *Shades of Absence: Outside Inside* (2011), dismembered heads allude to the precarious status of artists threatened with arrest or physical violence, whether obscure art world outsiders or world famous insiders such as Ai WeiWei, who was under arrest at that time. Geolocated in the protected and closed curatorial space of the Venice Giardini, the primary site of the Biennale's national pavilions, the décollage strips away the illusion of artist as a protected "supernational" (sic) being with license to speak truth to power. An example of how a seemingly iterative siting of the artwork can create a powerful re-assembly of meaning was the exhibition of the artwork in the show "Not There" at the Kasa Gallery, an official parallel event to the 2011 Istanbul Biennale. In the claustrophobic confines of the Kasa Gallery, a subterranean former bank vault in a country known for government threats to undesired voices, the (virtual) entrapment of viewers as embodied presence amongst terms of transgression implicated them as personal participants rather than as uninvolved spectators.

Shades of Absence: Governing Bodies (2013) was created for the invitational show Manifest:AR at the Corcoran Gallery of Art/School of Art and Design in Washington D.C., with additional sites at the U.S. Capitol Building and the National Endowment for the Arts. Silhouettes of artists censored due to pressure from powerful government officials reveal problematic conflicts beneath the splendid representational surfaces: in the Corcoran itself

(Robert Mapplethorpe and Paul Cadmus), and the assault on the N.E.A. launched from the Capitol building during the 1990s "Culture Wars," (the "NEA Four": Karen Finley, Holly Hughes, John Fleck, Tim Miller).

There are multiple shades of absence for censored works, with some artworks and artists becoming even more prominent due to censorship, and others - the vast majority - silenced and disappearing without a trace. *Shades of Absence* incorporates the viewer as active and embodied participant in the re-assembly of layers of social and historical complexity beneath the veneer of seemingly neutral environments.

3) *Skywrite* - Will Pappenheimer/Zachary Brady (2011 - 2015+)



during this section, either the audience or presenters will demo and use the Skywrite app (and use Will's 2nd projector as a second screen?)

Skywrite, originally created in 2011 by Will Pappenheimer, is a series of 11+ large-scale public AR artworks creating virtual sky-written drawings and messages for the thoughts, concerns and creativity of individuals and citizens at specific sites worldwide. The artwork functions as a gesture towards the democratization of the sky as an open site for public commentary and dialogue, creating an arc from hand-held device to atmospheric dimensions. The *Skywrite* system includes a web app, created in collaboration with Zachary Brady, that allows participants to draw or write on their own phones or tablets, and then to post these [as](#) virtual vapor lines in public spaces, hundreds of feet or meters above the viewer. Sentences and sketches are scaled to stretch for half a mile (800+ meters) and can be seen by others from miles away.

The first series, entitled "We Need Something," consisted of hand-drawn sentences and phrases from widely admired Occupy Wall Street signs redrawn from Zuccotti Park. They were first positioned over various areas of New York City, and then a few months later in and around LA as part of the LA RePlay show (2012) concurrent with a College Art Association conference. The concept was to democratize and occupy the privileged access to sky writing and sky real estate, and disseminate a more citizen-based address through the use of technology. In Los Angeles, Occupy Wall Street texts were sited along the picturesque and affluent beach areas as an intruding and urgent juxtaposition of discontent.

"Signs Over Semiconductors," created for the Zero1 Biennial in San Jose, CA, addressed issues of Silicon Valley isolationism as the meta theme of the overall event. In this version, participants were invited to write or draw messages and post them to a choice of over 24 companies in the San Jose area to breach the topology of inaccessible, dispersed and secretive corporate software mini-cities. "Fishing in the Sky," commissioned by ArtLab for the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center Park in 2014, called for artist and audience texts and drawings responding to an interplay of the area's predicted future sea rise, its history, and economic aspirations. Texts such as "imagine no regrets," "high tech watermarks" and "artist settlers were here" appeared each day until the entire sky above the park was filled. Another version of *Skywrite* suggested by organizers for the Peoples' Climate March, September 21, 2014, featured texts written by the event organizers and the marchers during the event. Virtual sky writing marked intersections along the march's route while tapping into a sense of alternative citizen-based messaging and protest.

Finally, sited here in D.C. is an iteration of *Skywrite* entitled "Sky Petition City," which is inspired by Zhao Liang's 2009 Chinese film "Petition," documenting the city-sized bureaucracy that forms China's governmental grievance system. This work, launched and first accessed in an exhibition in the Corcoran Gallery of Art (2013), but available as well as a public application, is meant to suggest similarities of governmental paralysis currently in the US. Participants are able to draw or write virtual skywriting above 14 different iconic governmental buildings. The work performs a sort of David and Goliath action in the context of a seemingly unassailable governmental apparatus represented by the city's architecture. Even if participants draw an image rather than a comment, the operation performs a graffiti-like gesture towards imprinting or transforming hallowed institutional façades. As each located sky-written image is replaced, the previous one is stacked onto the Washington Monument, functioning like an office paper stack for further consideration.

Thus, different iterations of the *Skywrite AR* function as site-specific public space address or redress systems, challenging the use and access to the sky above in relationship to meaning and politics of the topology below. Participants are invited to move around within the city-

wide works, to look up for the images as a typical bodily gesture and to become part of the project by posting their sentiments. Each of these practices “assembles” a located work out of overlapping corporeal and incorporeal fields, creating a critical or transformational embodiment within multivalent space. A variant of *Skywrite* as machinic assemblage is then “re-assembled” at each iteration with configurations and influences specific to the sites of performance. The AR layer also functions as the *décollage* of this assembly revealing the underlying problematics beneath the surface of the physical and institutional location. *Skywrite*, in its many iterations, reflects the potential and problematics of the personal and public boundaries eroding at a transitional moment of hybridized virtual to physical space.

4) *Biomer Skelters* - Tamiko Thiel & Will Pappenheimer (2013 - 2015+)



During this section, the presenters will launch the Biomer Skelters app and “plant” the audience area with vegetation while projecting an iPad view of this process on the screen.

Generative works like *Biomer Skelters* add to the condition of self-organizing assemblage by having participants’ physiology play a role in the instantiation of the work. A wearable bio sensing system employs participants’ heart rates to plant and populate their wandering paths through a given location or city. As an eco-game, *Biomer Skelters* calls on participants to choose sides in a contest between “native” indigenous and exotic “invasive” AR plant forms. On the slippery edge between simulation and surrealism, the artists create a selection of plants for each specific site, creating a gradient sliding from a familiar, comfortingly iconic indigenous nature into threatening but beautiful invasive bioscapes. Employing terminology that is conventional when applied to plants but racially and politically charged when applied to flows of people fleeing the effects of climate change, *Biomer Skelters* participants align themselves either as defensive “Indigenators” protecting

the homeland biome, or as conquering "Exoticators" forging a new and perhaps inevitable landscape of foreign plants due to climate change.

The *Biomer Skelters* AR propagator app and heart-rate monitor, worn by participants walking or wandering a particular location, incorporates the user as an active agent in a hybrid system. Their choice of team as Indigenator or Exoticator, and the contours of biomes they plant in proprioceptive encounters with the site and its terrain, creates a dialogue with the cultural and historical strata of the site and a microcosm of the eco-politics of present and future.

In Liverpool, a city grown wealthy in the 18th century through the Atlantic slave trade, native plants confronted botanical specimens from abolitionist William Roscoe's collection of exotic plants, many from Africa. In view of ongoing racial tensions in Liverpool and many other parts of England, the contest between native and invasive plants places participants in the flow field of a much deeper discussion that extends also to the very real disruptions of national borders and migrations of human refugees.

For Virtuale Switzerland (2014-2016) in a country with no history of slavery but very restrictive policies for refugees and citizenship, the discourse between beloved native alpine plants and invasive plants – again primarily from Africa and Asia – highlights contemporary “nativist” fears of being overwhelmed by foreign cultures.

In Dubai, native desert plants were confronted with iconic English bluebells, oaks and foxgloves, touching on the colonial history of Dubai as a British Trucial State. Dubai's history as a desert land where life is only possible in cultured oases, its current wealth and drive to transform the desert into a seemingly impossible high-tech garden state – a modern oasis, creates however a very complex relationship to the concept of transformational landscapes. British native plants were seen as delightfully quixotic exotics rather than as a threat to the established order. *Biomer Skelters* AR propagation, set against the oil and real-estate driven fantastic modern architecture and geo-formations of Dubai, further calls into question the sustainability and consequences of hyper wealthy Persian Gulf states. Meanwhile, on a bodily level, an interesting cultural problematic for this location was *Biomer Skelters's* use of sensors worn intimately on the body, a taboo subject at the very least when crossing gender lines between artist and participant.

Biomer Skelters is thus an AR art assemblage consisting of participant choice and proprioceptive agency, the artists' insertion of material from the historical and cultural biome of the geolocative site at which it is performed, and the *Biomer Skelters* system of mobile smartphone device, app code, heartrate monitor, augmented reality server and

artist-created content and data. Participants, as the assembling agents of the geolocated work, instantiate a unique re-assemblage at each different site, in relationship to local botany, issues, cultural histories and topography, in addition to more generalized dialogues with the fields of physiological computing, psychogeography, global climate change and intercontinental relations.

Summary

AR, instantiated or perceived by participants embodied mobile media device technologies, can be considered – in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms – as an “AR machine.” Rewa Wright’s thesis further theorizes that AR works which are reinstalled in different locations are “re-assembled” by each viewer as a matrix of shifting contexts of different sites, institutional spaces, contemporaneous cultures and cultural memories. Our examples illustrate how augmented reality artworks function as an assemblage of process, material, participant, location and meaning. They are fluid manifestations that are the result of motion and process rather than product. Although the virtual layers of the work [are](#) configured by the artist, only the active participation of the user assembles the artwork to its final form, as embodied experience instantiated at a specific site.

We suggest that AR artworks function as critical *décollage*, as embodied user/participant engagement with and intervention into preexisting institutional or ideological schemes of representation. Whereas the ability to define “reality” has always been a privilege of authority and power, the advent of augmented reality art enables artists to reveal the multivalent realities of often suppressed or un-enunciated strata of experience and place, forming an interventionist – and hopefully transformative – assemblage. *Décollage* in this scenic encounter represents an artistic intervention that reveals resonant or discordant, aesthetic and critical relationships of strata thinly veiled by prevailing or conventional orders of the Real.