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# Hallucinogenic Hyperrealities

3 WEEKS AGO WRITTEN BY ALYSSA RAPP FEATURED ARTIST INTERVIEW

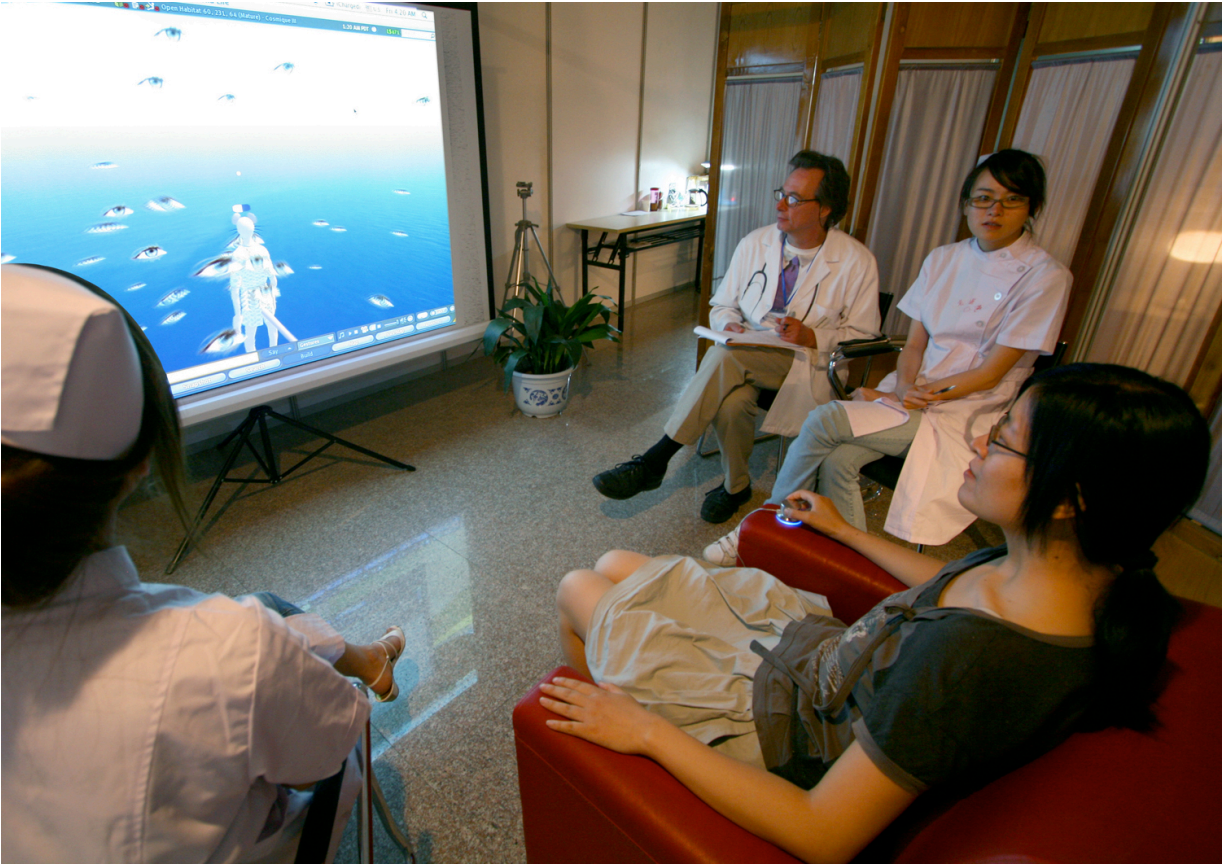
Not even the Sibyl could have foreseen this current era in which programmers can digitally synthesize psychotropic states, yet now digital culture has, in fact, catapulted escapism to such higher realms. As exhibited in the work of artist and clinician [Will Pappenheimer](#), even hallucinogens have become unhinged, engineered into virtual designer drugs that a user can “drop” with the click or lick of an app.

While the term Augmented Reality Drug sounds like a fictional thingamajig out of a nerdy 90’s TV show, perhaps a retro schema of what futuristic technology might produce, these computer-generated medications are real, or hyperreal for that matter. With the influx of designer drugs such as Molly (MDMA) in youth and celebrity culture, chemical augmentations of natural human experience have grown synonymous with the word party. Now, however, those who want to expand consciousness have a safer alternative. Virtual reality produces sensations more exotic and transcendent than those of traditional drug use, minus the life-threatening side effects. One simply needs an iPad, a code, and maybe some tongue action.



Will Pappenheimer works to develop Augmented Reality drugs. He leads the team of VF betaAR, a variant of the pioneer AR drug, Virta-Flaneurazine. Initially Pappenheimer and his collaborators developed Virta-Flaneurazine as part of a start up company with the impetus to cure Wanderlust Deficit Disorder (WDD) or internet addiction. But lately, Pappenheimer has celebrated a more playful side of the technology: He has used the psychedelic effects of the drugs as a mode to facilitate institutional critique. In his practice, the artist highlights his “interest in spatial intervention” and “altered meaning of things.” Along this vein, he has created psychotropic simulations with the Layar Augmented Reality app that, when downloaded, alter the viewer’s experience of a museum space.

In the recent project, Proxy, 5-WM2A (2014), Pappenheimer focuses on designing a virtual drug for attendees of a Whitney gala and studio party. Artport, the digital exhibition space on the Whitney Museum of American Art’s website, commissioned the drug and made it accessible for people to download from the site and “drop” at the event. According to the institution, the digital experience helps people “cope” with the move from the [Whitney’s](#) history-laden Breuer location on 75th Street and Madison Avenue to the museum’s new building in Chelsea. The virtual stimuli generated by the app overlay the participants’ visual field and allow viewers to “disassociate” from the old space and prepare for a new chapter in Whitney history. Proxy is a celebratory drug that “refreshes the museum visit, providing perceptual alterations of the real world and an ecstatic state of mind”.



While Pappenheimer's work provides a service to the museum, his well-crafted visuals take center stage and become accessible to the public in a way that subverts the traditional power dynamic between artists and the institutions who support them.

Proxy follows in the footsteps of earlier projects such as *Dose*, *We AR in MoMA*, and other collaborations with the group ManifestAR, an international art group that creates interventionist art with augmented reality programs. *Dose*, an AR drug that provides a 15-minute psychedelic journey, also uses the Layar Augmented Reality application. Users scan a QR code, lick the small white pill that pops up on screen, and then view surroundings through the camera on the mobile device. Those who want an even more intense experience can select the Bufo Colonies layer, which causes Bufo toads to infest the screen. The experience becomes even more intense when the user licks "good" toads or comes into contact with the secretions on the toads skin, presumably by touching the screen of the mobile device. *Dose* induces various states of consciousness, similar to those experienced with psychedelics.

Pappenheimer's alterations of spaces via AR shift the architectural landscape of art institutions and change the power dynamic of these spaces. *Dose* and similar virtual drug projects have transformed Occupy Wall Street protests as well as MoMA, Gagosian gallery, the Venice Biennial, and the Sydney Biennial, to name a few. Pappenheimer superimposes his aesthetic sensibilities on the spaces: His virtual drug offers a divergent perceptual experience.

In the following Q and A session, Pappenheimer sheds light on his fledgling explorations of Augmented Reality, the progression of his projects, and his thoughts on the social effects of digital drugs.

AR: How long have you been working with the idea of creating Augmented Reality Drugs? What was your first inspiration?

WP: In October 2010, two artist friends, Mark Skwarek and Sander Veenhof, created an invitational Augmented Reality intervention called "[We AR in MoMA](#)," for Conflux in NY and invited me to participate. Their basic concept was to stage an unannounced alternative virtual exhibition in MoMA without permission. This intrigued me in terms of both institutional critique and as an examination of how virtual and physical worlds meet. For my entry in that exhibition, I wanted to extrapolate on an element that my collaborator, John Craig Freeman, and I had developed for a previous Second Life project, *Virta-Flaneurazine*. We had developed the idea that *Virta-Flaneurazine*, as a wonderment drug, was patterned after the drug toxin produced by Bufo toads. By bringing an augmented reality Bufo toad to MoMA as a virtual sculpture I wanted to suggest that both as a species these toads were digital invasives into the hallowed physicality of the art world and also that the audience, in touching or interacting with them, would then become intoxicated, ultimately to experience a iconic art space in a different way. In [successive versions of this Bufo toad invasion](#), as both an invited and uninvited artist, I would place "colonies" of these toads in institutions like the [Gagosian gallery](#) in New York, the ICA in Boston, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the Philadelphia Art Museum and the [2011 Venice Biennial](#).

Connected with this invasive toad development, I began to add the capability that if the user touched or, optimally, licked the toads on their iPhone or iPad they would launch another layer of hallucinations that would essentially take over their cell phone vision. Aside from allowing me to create an engaging series of visual effects, as in making any artwork, I began to concentrate on this immersive potential as the idea that cell phones are essentially becoming extensions of our consciousness. Therefore, why wouldn't they (or perhaps I should say the cyborg "we") be able to experience an altered psychological states such as psychedelics? The background is also still very much an idea of intervention in that a psychedelic experience is something we are not meant to have in museums. So I invite the audience to engage in this [intervention] as way of destabilizing or refreshing institutional experience, which is sometimes so controlling and laden with systems of power. This goes back also to some principles of the Parisien art group the Situationists who were trying to subvert emerging bourgeois lifestyles in Paris of the 50s and 60s.

AR: Was there a specific inspiration for the visuals that you created for Proxy? The stills I have seen look very much like surrealist graffiti art.

WP: There are a couple of inspirations for Proxy. One is elements of the Breuer building, which is such an iconic part of everything we have experienced at the Whitney Museum. I had the rather remarkable privilege of spending three days in the building, emptied of all it's artwork; and so, the way I designed the visual elements was

responding to this empty iconic space. It was inspiring in many ways to think of filling the heavy physicality of an empty Brutalist architecture with many different virtual hallucinations. So, for example, the two planes of what appears to be dots are in fact derived from a photo of the ceiling lights in the entryway. At different times, a model of the Breuer building rotates across and above the viewer, alternating from cement to a computer wireframe and flashing pieces of images from the Whitney collection. Other elements, as in many of the versions of these drugs, are derived and modified from various paraphernalia that we encounter on the Internet, like gif stars, color gradations and shared 3D models on 123D Catch. The idea is that with virtual drugs, wouldn't we begin to hallucinate various bits and pieces of the visual language of the web. Or it could be that the internet is dumping its visual contents willy-nilly into our retinal view. You're right that it is kind of surrealist and also that in some sense it is graffiti art because we are not really meant to be experiencing virtual hallucinations in an art museum.

AR: Are the visuals all programmed statically, or do the levels of light and images that the viewer is looking at dictate which colors and images pop up?

WP: For most of the versions of my AR drugs so far, I create a complex stage set of animated 3-D objects, some with transparencies, that are all moving in different directions, appearing and overlapping in different ways. There are so many variables that what you see is almost never the same. Depending on which way the viewer looks, they will see different things in different views. Then, elements can change over time. It's also like building up any kind of artwork, you keep adding things until there is an intriguing visual experience and complexity. I work a lot also with user input AR, and it is likely that I will incorporate various user input to these experiences. The drugs so far have had such complex visuals that I'm not sure users would see the changes they might input.

AR: How do you feel about virtual drugs? Do you think they provide the public with a healthy alternative to regular drugs, or do they merely perpetuate a culture in need of a fix?

WP: This is an interesting question, and it was definitely raised a while back in interviews for the Virta-Flaneurazine Clinic. I think perhaps you might be able to sense from my background above that proposing the idea of virtual drugs is more than just the idea of getting high, seeking an escape, or seeing surreal and colorful hallucinations—although that is definitely an entry point. On the surface it appears as if I am supporting the idea of even more distraction through virtual media. Yet this a seductive and social context to create something that might get people to think about their engagement with technological media and how much it has become part of our consciousness. In each context that I show this ongoing project, I am now thinking of it as a “designer drug” in that it is made to address some of the conditions of the place where it will be used. So the Whitney drug was described as a “dissociative” drug to help the Whitney community leave the Breuer building to move to their new location in the meatpacking district. But it is also, for me, a form of intervention in that I am providing an alternative, sometimes

illegal and chaotic experience in controlled institutional spaces. It's like shifting how we are meant to experience a given location and, in that sense, opening it up. And finally the hallucinations allow me to create an immersive changing visual experience, which is like a 3D moving painting sculpture. Like many artist's works that present a intense color pattered fields, the reference is to both a psychedelic state and an aesthetic composition.

When offered a digital drug at the next art opening you attend, relax and soak in the invasion of colors, shapes, and visual rhythms on your screen. Will Pappenheimer lives and creates in Brooklyn, New York. His list of solo and group exhibitions deserves its own tome. He currently teaches Digital Media as an associate professor at Pace University in Manhattan. Will Pappenheimer's next mind-altering art piece will feature at the Opening Virtuale Lausane at EPFL Rolex Center in Lausanne, Switzerland. Learn more about his projects on his [website](#) and on [Facebook](#).