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I Got High on an Augmented Reality Drug at the Whitney Museum



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Photo: Courtesy of @nadinejohnson

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For the Whitney Museum's annual Contemporary Curators gala-studio visit, artist Will Pappenheimer created an augmented reality “virtual designer drug,” called Proxy, 5-WM2A (<http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/Artport/Commissions/Proxy>), to calm the moving nerves of the artists and patrons in attendance.

For the uninitiated: augmented reality is the supplementation of our live physical world with computer-generated media. This is different from virtual reality, which is the replacement of our live physical world with an alternate world created through computer-generated media. If I walked out of my apartment in Chelsea

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wearing Google Glass (<http://www.vogue.com/4589937/google-glass-apple-watch-wearable-tech-ask-lynn/>) and said, “Take me to the Whitney,” and a big blue arrow flashed in my line of vision, pointing the way north on Eighth Avenue, that would be augmented reality (AR). If, on the other hand, I stayed in my apartment, put on an Oculus Rift headset and said, “Take me to the Whitney,” and images and sounds created the effect that I had been transported to the actual museum, that would be virtual reality (VR).

At the party, presented by Louis Vuitton in honor of every living artist who has ever had a solo exhibition at the Breuer Building, I along with some friends—everybody was doing it, Mom!—decided to try some *Proxy*. It was my very first augmented reality “drug” experience, and the effects were positively mystifying.

When I opened the Layar app (the gateway drug, if you will), and located and scanned the proper QR code (with the help of my friend Alyssa), *Proxy* transformed the Breuer Building’s imposing space into a festival of kaleidoscopic colors and shapes right before my very iPhone. A sparkling red fish swam across a wall where **Jasper Johnses** and Edward Hoppers once hung. An architect’s blueprint bordered by a lone dancing pink flower was swiftly bifurcated by an army of spinning green and blue disks that I suspect would have made Alexander Calder smile. Then our guest of honor, the Breuer Building, made a surprise appearance as a languidly rotating digital model on the right side of my screen—only to be summarily splattered with stars and specks of digital paint as though by the wrist of a virtual Jackson Pollock.

And those are just a few of the visual effects I experienced. I will admit that I had my doubts about the potential efficacy of a “drug” that claims to enter the mind through the phone-brain barrier. But by the end of the night, I was truly impressed. It felt as if one man’s original interpretation of the Whitney’s history at the Breuer Building had been effectively consolidated into a supplemental patina of playful digital reality that I could enter at will by merely glancing at my phone.

When I spoke with Pappenheimer, who was patiently demo-ing *Proxy* and assisting revelers with their technical issues all night long, I learned that this had been his intention. “Since my work is site-specific,” he told me, “I always start asking how I can bring out some aspect of the situation and make it part of the human moment, the social moment.” For this installation, his onsite research inspired him to investigate and model *Proxy*’s visual pyrotechnics on the category of dissociative drugs. “I found there was this whole category of dissociative drugs, and what they do is cause you to detach from and withdraw from your environment. So this is the dissociative class drug for the Whitney, so that we can all begin to withdraw our deep love and memories from the Breuer Building and move to a new place.”


What moved me in particular was Pappenheimer’s juxtaposition of sheer frivolity—multicolored rays, stars, dots, childish figurines, a wandering rainbow tunnel, a veritable solar system of radiant colors—with the heavy, concrete gravitas of the Breuer Building. *Proxy*’s unabashed levity seemed to underscore the point that,

during the 48 years that the building has housed the Whitney, the art within its walls has never been much constrained by it. Just last month, at the building's very last Whitney exhibition, a career-spanning **Jeff Koons** retrospective, we witnessed how effectively this austere structure supports and frames works like *Balloon Dog* and *Hulk Elvis*.

I will miss seeing art at the Breuer Building, but *Proxy* certainly eased the pain.

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