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White Cube Augmented: AR Art and the Gallery Space

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The major retrospective of Damien Hirst's work that Tate Modern is holding this year currently includes an additional, uninvited and somewhat invisible artwork by another artist. *All Hail Damien Hirst!* (2012)¹ is an augmented reality (AR) installation by Tamiko Thiel that actually questions Hirst's status and his role in the art market: Thiel created a digital collage that portrays Hirst as a holy figure surrounded by a cascade of gold coins, and added it as a content layer to Layar, a popular augmented reality browser. Using this application and a mobile device connected to the Internet, visitors to Tate Modern

ventions in the institutional spaces of mainstream contemporary art. Recent projects include the "invasion" of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York (2010)² and the "occupation" of the Venice Biennial (2011)³ by "placing" artworks (by means of GPS tracking) inside the exhibition spaces and inviting visitors to view them with their mobile devices. In these interventions, the context (the exhibition spaces of the museum or biennial) becomes even more important than the content (the artworks themselves) because the main discourse focuses on the fact that the project is taking place inside

AR interventions at the Venice Biennial. Lodi describes the project as "a Pavilion that is experimental and without invitation, and which ultimately is not a provocation. It is, rather, a bit of black humour, casting a wink at the aura that shrouds the Biennial, that historic, promised land, which tends to lift in the midst of augmented reproducibility."⁵ During the setup of their intervention at the Venice Biennial, the artists' group Manifest.AR distributed a flyer that humorously opposed their project with a demand to "STOP the «virtual» infiltration of the 54th Biennial," warning that "the exclusivity of



Damien Hirst, *All Hail*. Tate Modern Turbine Hall.

can view the artwork Thiel created through the screen of their smartphones or tablets as if it were placed inside the hall of the museum. The artwork thus becomes integrated into the exhibition space without the knowledge, consent or control of the institution. Tamiko Thiel's "celebration" of Damien Hirst exemplifies the work of a group of artists who currently are developing artistic projects with AR technology and conceiving inter-

the rooms of a renowned art institution, without permission. In the invitation to their "art invasion" at MoMA, Sander Veenhof and Mark Swarek state that it will feature "augmented reality art in its proper context: a contemporary art museum," and add: "MoMA is not involved yet."⁴ Simona Lodi stresses this connection between the project and the "aura" of the institution in her curatorial text for *The Invisible Pavilion*, one of the

the closed grounds of this traditional art event is at risk."⁶ These examples show that one of the main intentions of these AR art projects is to call into question the hierarchies and limitations that the institutional spaces of the art world impose. The rooms of MoMA or the spaces of the Giardini in Venice, as well as any other museum or gallery space, present a contradictory combination of openness and exclusivity: anyone can visit them but only a

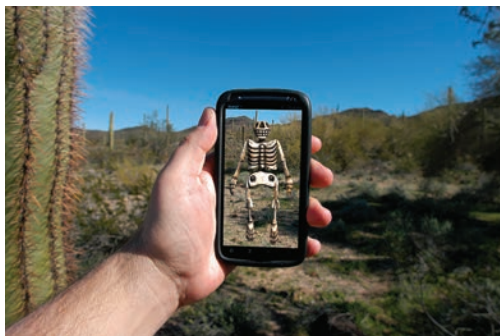


Tamiko Thiel, *Shades Of Absence Public Voids*, Venice Biennale, 2011. AR intervention in the Venice Biennale.

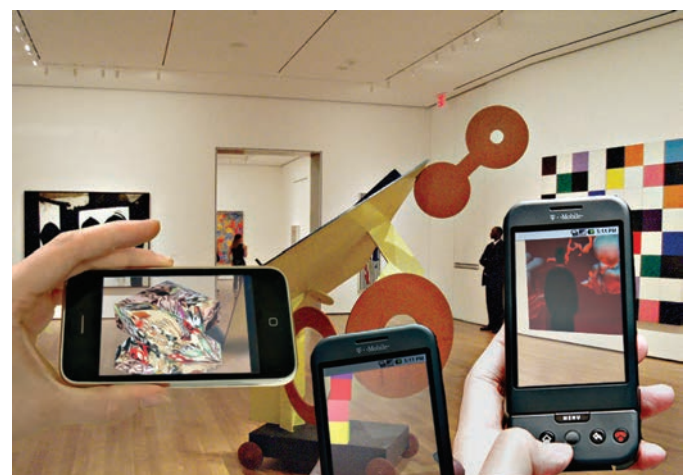
few artists will ever show their work inside their walls or the perimeter of their fences. This exclusivity is both a condition and a consequence of what George Dickie defines as the Institutional Theory of Art, “the idea that works of art are art because of the position they occupy within an institutional context.”⁷ According to Dickie, an artwork is “an artefact of a kind created to be presented to an art world public.”⁸ This implies the necessary existence of the artefact, the public and the art world, which in turn implies the existence of a physical space where this presentation takes place. Artist Brian O’Doherty defined this space as a “white cube” in a series of articles published in *Artforum* in 1976, introducing a concept that has now become widely accepted. O’Doherty describes the gallery space not as mere container, but as defining context: “So powerful are the perceptual fields of force within this chamber that, once outside it, art can lapse

into secular status. Conversely, things become art in a space where powerful ideas about art focus on them.”⁹ The propositions of Dickie and Doherty, briefly outlined here, serve as an indicator of the peculiar relationship that AR art establishes with the gallery space. The Institutional Theory of Art and the concept of the white cube refer to an art world that is manifested in physical spaces (mainly the art gallery and the museum), which are obviously owned and controlled by members of said art world. Under these conditions, anything that is presented to the public inside the gallery can be art because those who own the space have selected it and control what is being displayed. The openness of institutional spaces, in order to preserve the exclusivity of their contents, is therefore meant as a “read-only” interaction with the public. Yet, AR technology allows an artist to enter the gallery space, geolocate any kind of digital content and invite visitors to see it by means of their

mobile devices. The white cube is thus virtually “invaded,” as artists (and the public) are now able to “write” on the walls of the museum, a twist that reminds us of the changes web 2.0 technologies brought to the previously static World Wide Web. It is tempting to state that AR interventions are redefining the gallery space, but that would take us to the utopian vision of the early net artists, who proclaimed “to be bypassing art institutions”¹⁰ and conceiving of the Internet as a temporary autonomous zone, in which individuals would be on the same level as institutions and the roles of the main actors in the art world would disintegrate and mutate. Net art did not disintegrate the hierarchies of the art world, but rather has been (partly) assimilated by them. AR art may follow the same path, precisely to the extent in which its manifestations tend to support the concept of a white cube where “things become art.” The white cube, in this way, is



John Craig Freeman.
Border Memorial : Frontera de los muertos, 2012.
Augmented reality public art, Arizona, USA.
Photo: The Artist.



MoMA, visualisation.

not questioned but “augmented:” a new layer is placed on it, as an additional floor in the museum that makes it larger and reinforces its position as “the proper context” for art.

Augmented Reality technologies provide an exciting new ground for an art that does not need to be located exclusively in the gallery space. On the one hand, projects such as Sander Veenhof's *Biggâr* (2010),¹¹ a virtual sculpture of planetary dimensions, or John Craig Freeman's *Border Memorial: Frontera de los muertos* (2009–2012),¹² dedicated to migrant workers who have died along the US/Mexico border, move away from the art world in order to intervene in the real world. And on the other, even if an AR intervention is placed inside the gallery space, it can go beyond the mere act of “occupying” the space and become critical, or even replace the physical artworks with content provided in realtime (as in Julian Oliver's *The Artvertiser*¹³). Obviously, we are witnessing technology and

a form of artistic expression that is still in its early stages, and needs to be developed further in order to reach the point in which reality (physical reality as well as the consensual reality of a social system such as the art world) is not just augmented, but redefined.

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Pau Waelder is an art critic, curator and researcher in digital art and culture. Among his latest projects are the conferences *En_lloc* (Now_Here) and *Digital Culture* (Fundacio Pilar i Joan Miro a Mallorca). As reviewer and editor, he has collaborated with several art magazines. He is New Media Editor at *art.es* magazine.

Notes

¹ Tamiko Thiel, *All Hail Damien Hirst!* (2012). <<http://www.allhaildamienhirst.com/>>

² Sander Veenhof and Mark Swarek, *MoMA DIY Day*

(2010). <<http://www.sndrv.nl/moma/>>

³ Two parallel projects took place at the Venice Biennial in 2011: *The Invisible Pavilion* and the *Manifest.AR Venice Biennial 2011 AR Intervention*.

⁴ Sander Veenhof and Mark Swarek. “Invitation.” *MoMA DIY Day*. <<http://www.sndrv.nl/moma/?page=invitation>>

⁵ Simona Lodi, “About the Invisible Pavilion.” *The Invisible Pavilion*. <<http://www.theinvisiblepavilion.com/>>

⁶ Sander Veenhof, “STOP! Virtual Infiltration of 54th Biennial.” <<http://www.sndrv.nl/stop/>>

⁷ George Dickie, “The Institutional Theory of Art,” in Carroll, Noël (ed.), *Theories of Art Today*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2000, 93.

⁸ George Dickie, op. cit., 96.

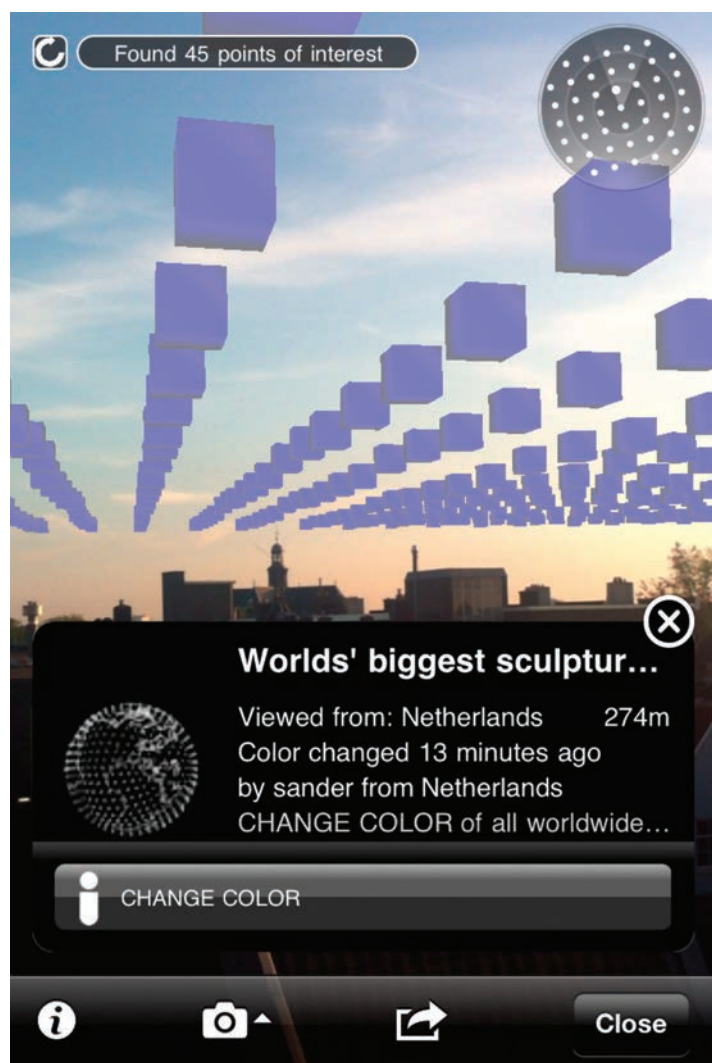
⁹ Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press, 1999, 14.

¹⁰ Natalie Bookchin and Alexei Shulgin, “Introduction to net.art (1994-1999).” <<http://www.easylife.org/netart/>>

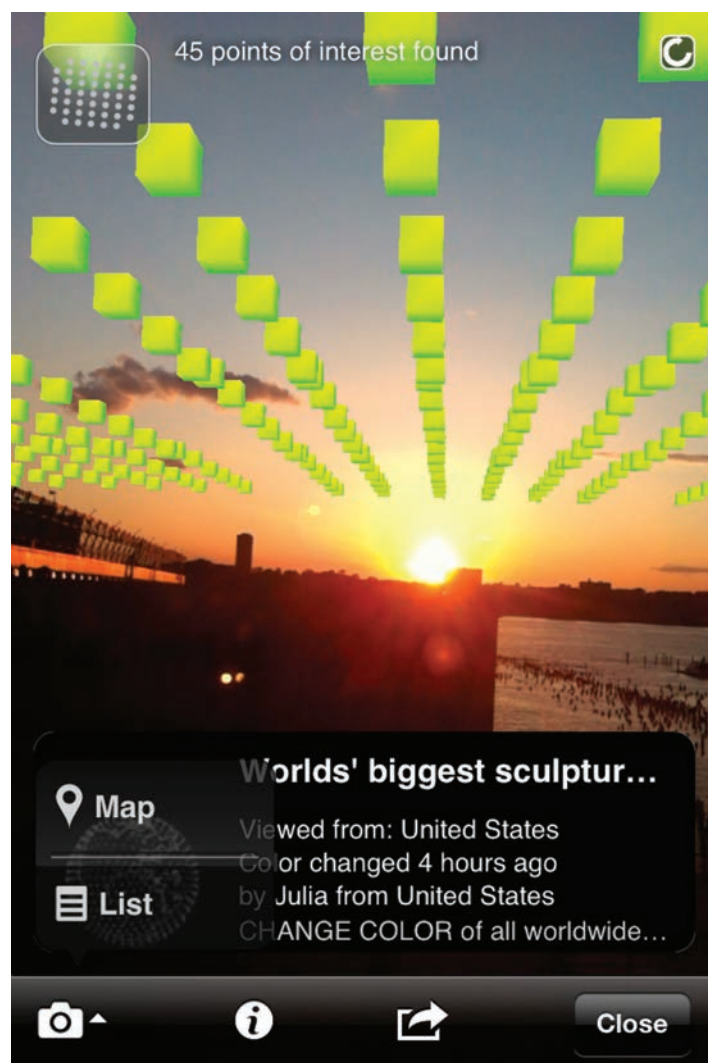
¹¹ Sander Veenhof, *Biggâr* (2010). <<http://www.sndrv.nl/biggar/>>

¹² John Craig Freeman, *Border Memorial: Frontera de los muertos* (2009-2012). <<http://bordermemorial.wordpress.com/border-memorial-frontera-de-los-muertos/>>

¹³ Julian Oliver, *The Artvertiser* (2008). <<http://theartvertiser.com/>>



Sander Veenhof and Mark Swarek, *MoMA DIY DAY*, 2010.
AR intervention at the MoMA DiY DAY, New York, 2010. © the Artists.



Sander Veenhof and Mark Swarek, 2010.
Augmented reality interactive sculpture, Amsterdam. © the Artists.