

A Walk on the Frontier of Art, Where the Sky Is the Limit

Augmented reality and virtual reality are opening doors to new experiences for artists and the public



Richard Humann's "Ascension" consists of 12 imaginary constellations suspended in the sky and is viewed through an iPad using the augmented reality platform Aery. Richard Humann



By **Ted Loos**

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This article is part of our continuing [Fast Forward series](#), which examines technological, economic, social and cultural shifts that happen as businesses evolve.

When walking on the High Line, it's tough to look more lost than some of the tourists, but I did a pretty good job of it last month when I tripped on a curb while looking at art. (I caught myself before falling, but still.)

I was taking in an exhibition from Aery, a new augmented reality platform tailored to digital art exhibitions. Looking up to the heavens through an iPad, and not at my feet, I was using a loaner tablet to get an artwork by Richard Humann to magically appear.

But it worked: On the iPad, a constellation of a rose appeared, at an angle in the sky and topped by a crown, as Mr. Humann intended. A couple of out-of-towners who were watching me seemed mightily impressed when they looked over my shoulder at the screen.

The technologies known as augmented reality and virtual reality (AR and VR, for short) may seem futuristic, but they are being employed by artists more often.

For me — someone who looks at art for a living, but also avoids downloading new apps — experiencing three exhibitions of augmented reality art over a couple of weeks was a crossing of a threshold, one that more and more people will experience in the years ahead.

“It's going to have a huge impact on the art world,” said Jay Van Buren, who, as chief executive and co-founder of the tech company Membit, helped create Aery, a joint venture between Membit and the real estate firm Related Companies. “Artists can do anything with it,” Mr. Van Buren said.

Membit's technology is based on what it calls a Human Positioning System, its version of GPS. Essentially, the user adjusts the placement of the device based on a set of instructions. Aery is currently in beta mode, but is coming to Apple's App Store soon for iPad and iPhone, and eventually will have an Android version.

Ms. Sade, who is based in New York, has worked with augmented reality a few times during the past five years, building on her background in photography.

She likened the technology to a kiln or a paint brush: In the big picture, it is simply another way for an artist to create. "It's a fabrication tool," Ms. Sade said. "It's a medium."

"Whether it will develop further, I'm not sure," she said. "But it's a fun ride."



Viewing the art installation “Wild, Heterotopias” by Shuli Sade using Aery. Video by Chris Kent with music by Kubbi.

As part of Aery’s inaugural exhibition, the artist Shuli Sade created a piece called “Wild, Heterotopias,” based on her photographs of the landscaping along the High Line. I viewed it in the High Line Nine Galleries: What appeared before me on the iPad, in an otherwise empty white gallery, were globes of spinning, floating greenery and flowers.

In the same way that most sculptors do not cast a piece in bronze themselves — that work is done by experts at a foundry, to the artist’s specifications — Ms. Sade sent her photographs to Mr. Van Buren to be turned into augmented reality.

That is how it worked for [AR]T Walk, a joint venture from Apple and the New Museum in New York City. The experience is free in six cities — San Francisco, New York, London, Paris, Hong Kong and Tokyo — and is slightly customized in each. Seven artists contributed, including the poet-artist [John Giorno](#), who died last month, and the Chicago-based Nick Cave.

Massimiliano Gioni, the New Museum’s artistic director who helped curate the artist contributions, said that when Apple approached the museum about collaborating on the project, the curators saw the same potential the company did.

“The benchmarks were previously more from the world of entertainment and gaming,” Mr. Gioni said of augmented reality and virtual reality. “And they wanted to go well beyond that.” (Mr. Van Buren said that whenever he was called upon to explain

augmented reality, he mentioned Pokémon GO, the interactive game craze.)



[AR]T Walk participants use iPhones to experience the artworks. The program is a joint venture from Apple and the New Museum in New York City. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times



Cao Fei's "Trade Eden" viewed on the [AR]T Walk. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times
Carsten Höller's "Through" viewed on the [AR]T Walk. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

I did [AR]T Walk on a glorious fall day in Central Park, starting at the Apple store on 59th Street and Fifth Avenue. I used one of its iPhones (you do not use your own) to experience the artworks, and to get each piece to appear, I pointed the phone at an object, usually a sign, part of process that the company calls "anchoring."

The art is calibrated based on the position of you and the anchor, and when you have lined up the phone and the sign correctly you feel a slight vibration in the phone that the company calls "haptic feedback."

Mr. Cave's contribution, "Accumul-Istic Quest," had his usual ebullience: At the beginning I was asked to pick one of several personality types, and on the screen I was suddenly being shadowed by a very bouncy, multicolored fright wig. He calls the different characters "istics." (Mr. Cave also created an in-store augmented reality piece called "Amass," which can be experienced in any Apple outlet around the world on your own iPhone.)

Normally the walk is a group affair of about 10 people, and every participant gets an istic. About five minutes into the walk, a large, friendly monster of sorts appears above the tree line — it has a head like a gramophone horn, a version of Mr. Cave's "Soundsuits" characters, which he has been working with for years — and consumes everyone's istics.



Nick Cave's "Accumul-Istic Quest," viewed on the [AR]T Walk. Nick Cave

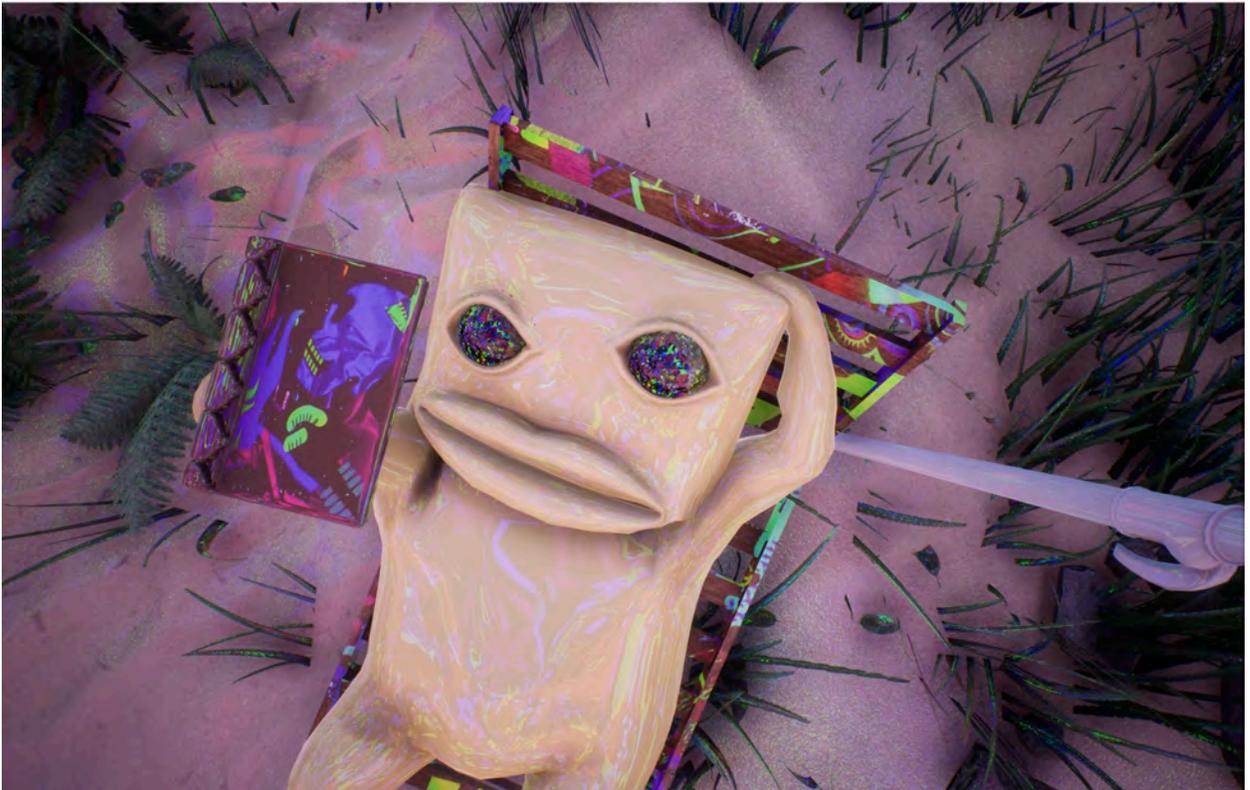
Though done with humor, Mr. Cave told me there was a larger theme at work.

"I wanted it to absorb and swallow everybody, becoming multicultural in the process," he said.

The process of making the work involved many phone calls, with Mr. Cave sketching his ideas and making multiple trips to Apple headquarters in Silicon Valley. "We were practically in a relationship," Mr. Cave joked.

For now, augmented reality seems to be getting more play among fine artists than virtual reality. As Mr. Van Buren put it, "AR loops you in more firmly to the place where you are, rather than taking you away into another world."

But that could change. Bjarne Melgaard's "My Trip" (2019) is a virtual reality work that can be experienced through Dec. 15 in Berlin at the Julia Stoschek Collection. It is a production of Acute Art, a virtual reality studio that collaborates with international artists.



Bjarne Melgaard's "My Trip" (2019) is experienced in virtual reality. Bjarne Melgaard/Acute Art

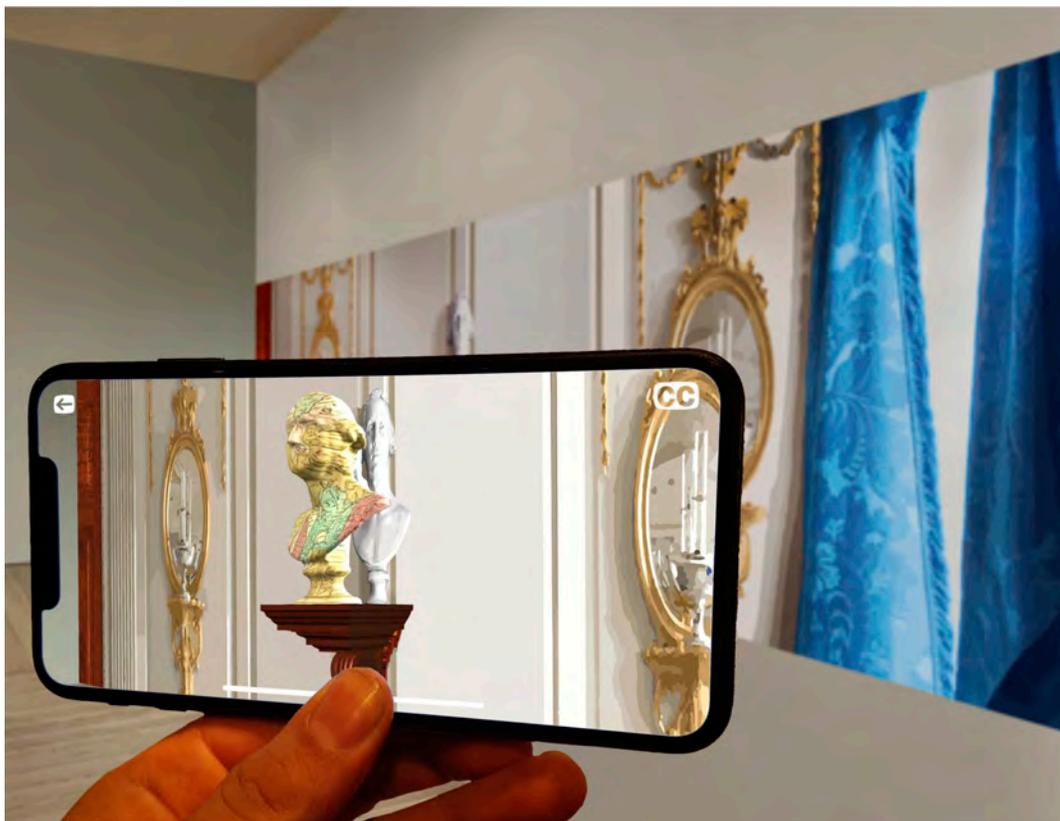
Daniel Birnbaum, Acute Art's director, said "My Trip" was a "trippy fantasy about darkness" that worked as an autobiography of the Norwegian artist.

To create the characters in the piece, Acute’s team scanned sculptures by Mr. Melgaard, and for some of the environments that people can experience in the piece, the artist provided developers with photographs of paintings.

“AR is easier, but it has limitations,” Mr. Birnbaum said. “You only see things on the phone. It can be a little gimmicky.”

But augmented reality’s ability to show two realities at once can be a powerful storytelling approach, as demonstrated by the New York-based artist Alan Michelson’s show “Wolf Nation,” at the Whitney Museum of American Art through Jan. 12.

Two of the four works in the show are made with augmented reality, and Mr. Michelson — a Mohawk member of Six Nations of the Grand River — collaborated on both with Steven Fragale, a painter who has become an augmented reality specialist, creating his own apps for his work.



Alan Michelson and Steven Fragale worked together on “Town Destroyer,” where a bust of George Washington, when viewed through an augmented reality app, goes through a series of changes. Alan Michelson

One of the pieces, “Town Destroyer,” looks like a two-dimensional wall work depicting George Washington’s home at Mount Vernon. But when activated by the show’s augmented reality app on an iPhone, the bust of Washington in the center goes through a rapid transformation, overlaid with a series of colors, patterns and texts. “Town Destroyer” was the name given to Washington by the people of the Iroquois Confederacy, whose villages were burned and pillaged during the Revolutionary War.

To present an indigenous perspective on a familiar icon, “AR provided a solution — more than a solution, actually, a tool with all sorts of metaphorical aspects,” Mr. Michelson said.

Mr. Michelson said that the idea of multiple people holding up their phones to see his works at the same time also made him think of the technology’s “social possibilities.”

Although augmented reality and virtual reality explicitly take us out of the real world — our noses in another screen or two, and possibly tripping along the way — they also can be an invitation to interact with others about what they are seeing.

Mr. Gioni of the New Museum agreed. “The effects are in some ways just a pretext to come together,” he said. “This gets real only when you share it.”

Fast Forward

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