

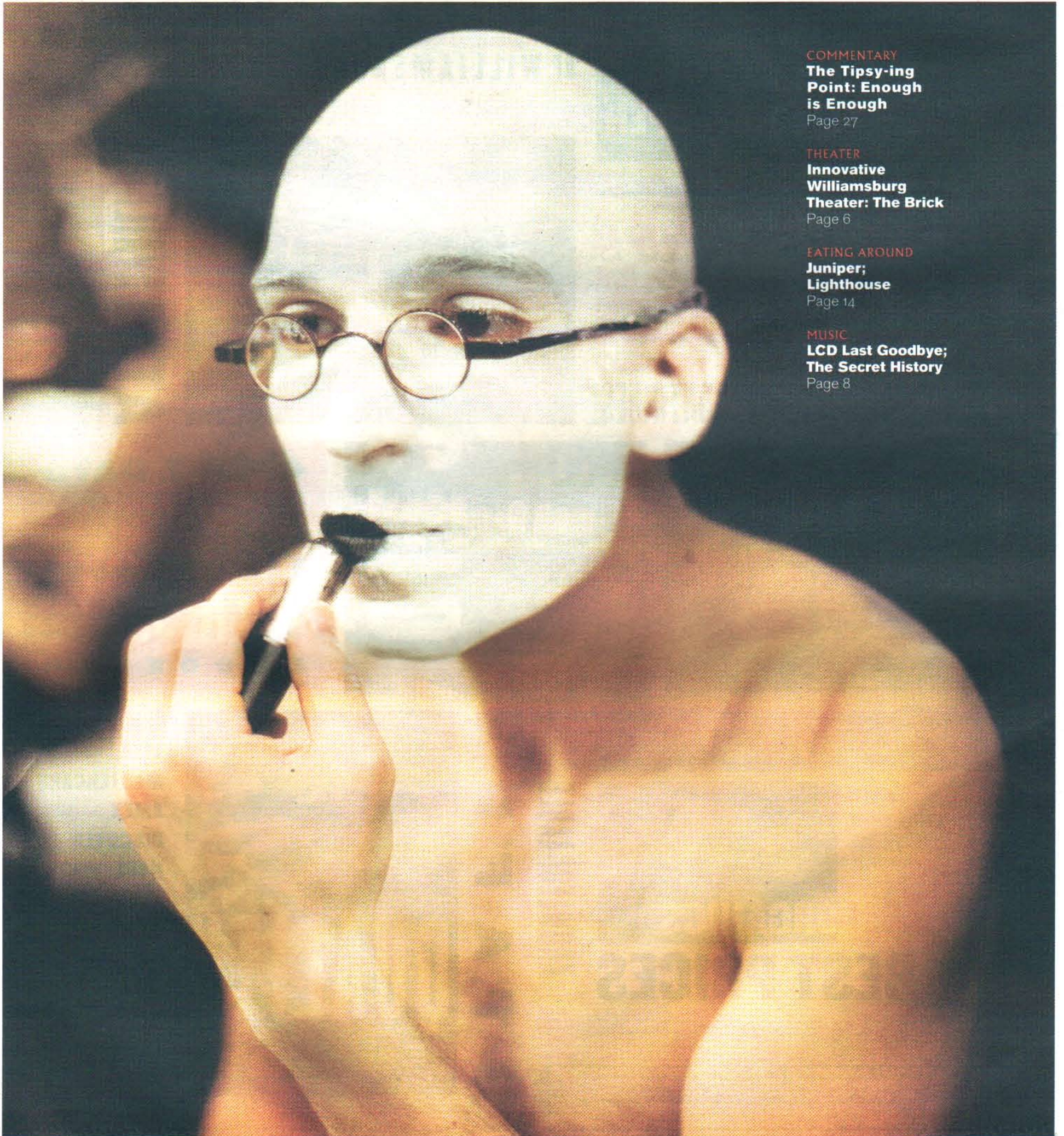
# WVG

# Williamsburg Greenpoint News+Arts

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*"Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody."*

No28



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by SARAH SCHMERLER

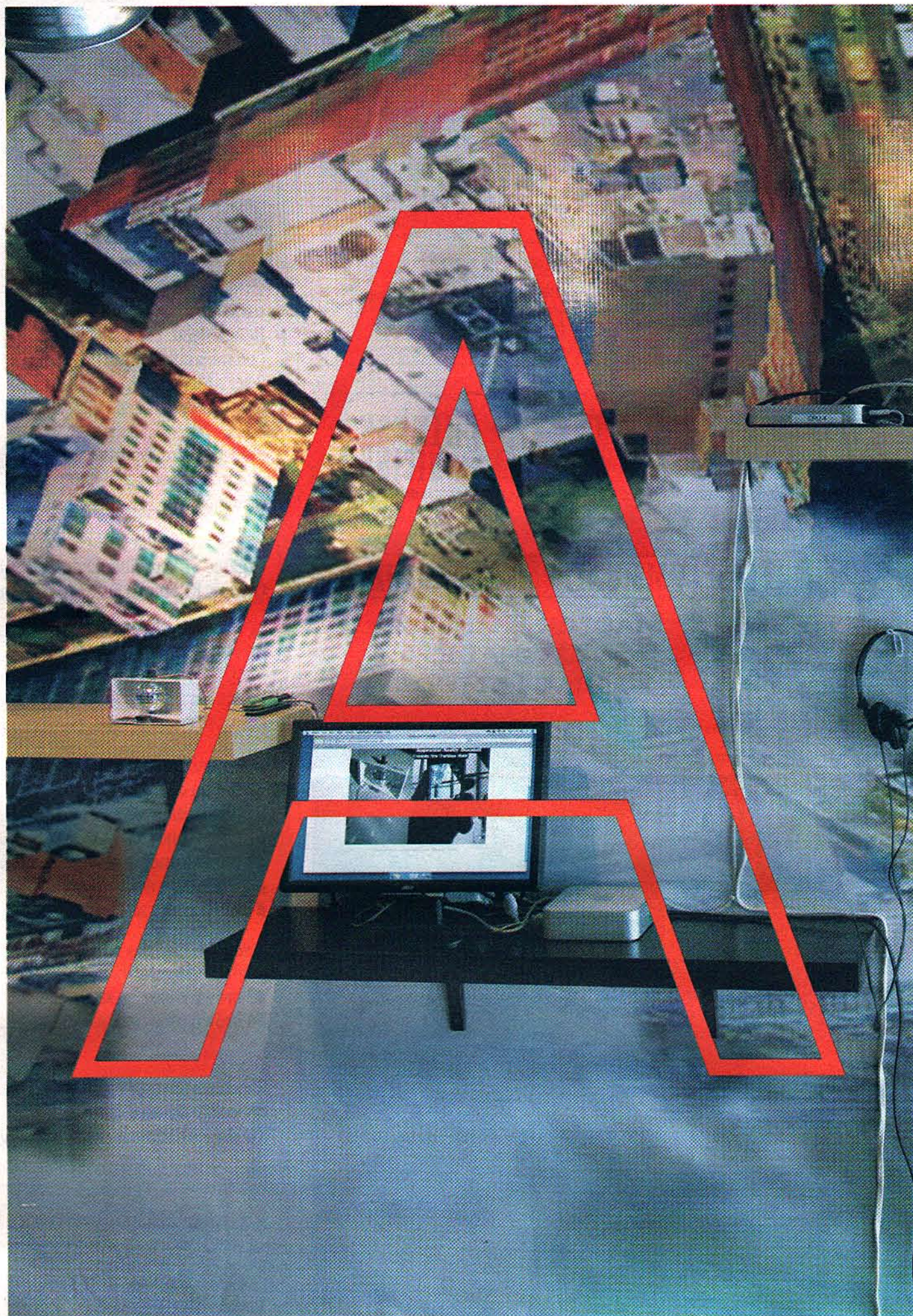
Get ready to re-draw your mental map of Williamsburg, because there's a huge new art community in the hood. Thing is, you'll need your iPhone to see it.

Two artists and an art critic explain AR (Augmented Reality) in laymen's terms (with zero bullshit).

How busy are you? I guarantee that, no matter how much, Brooklyn-based new media artist Mark Skwarek is busier. Not only does Skwarek teach 3-D gaming at Polytechnic Institute of New York University and pursue his own artistic career, the 33-year-old Bushwick native is also curating and participating in exhibitions across the globe. They employ an amazing bleeding-edge technology called AR—augmented reality.

Simply put, augmented reality is a software that allows 3-D images, sound, text, and animation to superimpose itself over the live video feed that commonly comes through the lens of your iPhone camera (any smartphone or iPad will do). When you're experiencing augmented reality, these days it probably means you're walking down the street holding your smartphone up in front of you, at arm's length, as though you were about to take a picture; instead, however, you're reading, grooving, or otherwise listening to stuff you see on the viewscreen—*while you're viewing real life.* (A word of warning: watch out for cars, people, and other bump-into-able things when you do this. It's wicked cool.) Thanks to GPS satellite technology (and a host of market-savvy programmers and entrepreneurs), there are already lots of commercial and social exploitations (um, *applications*) that already employ AR. For example, the first time I fired up AR on my new smartphone, a Taco Bell down on Fulton Mall, and the coffee shop closest to my house (with the best 'Yelp' review) were just two of the many "points of interest" (or POIs) that immediately clamored for my attention on the viewscreen. (LAYAR, an app that runs AR, is easily downloadable, and there are others.)

Nice enough for most folks. But an art critic like me craves aesthetic content. (Hey, I'm busy, too.) This month, however, I'm in luck. Skwarek, and another amazing Bushwick AR artist and curator, Will Pappenheimer (who teaches new media at Pace University) have just finished installing a show at Williamsburg's Devotion Gallery, called "Gradually Melt the Sky," that promised me all the AR art that my newly charged iPhone battery could handle. Hence, I decided to head over there before the opening to interview them. Blocks away from the gallery, and already some pretty weird things started to happen on my iPhone screen. I was prompted to download "Deadatar" by Allen Sondheim, one of the artists in the show; what appeared to be a giant explosion (I later learned it was a "volcanic cloud") that was part of Skwarek's artwork "Parade to Hope," based on statistical data



constantly searching the idea of "hope" across America, dogged my steps as I crossed Union Street; and finally, when I got to a gas station on Maujer Street, I was greeted with a shower of twinkling stars and rotating disks, courtesy of Will Pappenheimer's utterly engaging augment, "starryvision."

Once inside the gallery's walls, we finally found some chairs and put our smartphones down to talk. Surrounded by some 20 artworks that were shrewdly chosen by the duo, we touched on a variety of subjects: Yoko Ono (whose

groundbreaking artwork inspired the show); what the true meaning of AR art might be; where it comes from, and, of course, where it's going.

**Is all art that's created with AR essentially subversive? It seems like AR artists are grooving on the medium's amazing potential for making people blink and think twice about all sorts of stuff—social and institutional—they see around them.**





"Gradually Melt the Sky"  
Augmented Reality (AR)  
Interview with Mark Skwarek  
and Will Pappenheimer

ManifestAR, that are going both ways.

**WP** AR is, first of all, an overlay, a kind of mixing all that is virtual or networked and the so-called real, and this hasn't really happened before in quite this way—fully superimposed in real time. So if you go into the world and "augment," it's the idea that you're adding something to the world. But the notion of juxtaposition is really important too. It's a new kind of juxtaposition, if you will. Intervention, you could say, is an avenue that comes out of that; physical systems, physical institutions (that create their own sense of boundaries) suddenly can be permeated, they can be intervened.

**What are some other art historical precedents for AR art. Guerilla Television? FLUXUS? And furthermore, what does playing around with new technology bring to an artist?**

**WP** The WGBH New Television Workshop in Boston gave Portapak cameras to Bill Viola, Nam June Paik, William Wegman. They experimented with the medium and pushed it, they explored it, they parodied the format of commercial television. Now, someone like Bill Viola is playing with issues of time, "the record." Someone like William Wegman is playing with ideas of slapstick. Lots of early TV shows, the daily shows, had lots of slapstick. It was the beginning of live sitcoms.

**Which leads me to another question: do you feel like there's a lot of humor inherent in art made with AR?**

**WP** I'm definitely playing with humor. Jeremy [Bailey] is playing with the Connectix kids video camera (every kid has one) as well as ideas of high and low art. The piece he's showing here was made for a big recent retrospective of Nam June Paik's in London; it's called "Nam June Paik for Tate, Liverpool 2011."

**MS** The e-team's work, definitely. I've got a cloud dragging a tree in it in "Parade to Hope." I guess that's got an element of humor to it. I mean, the whole aspect of trying to find "hope" is humorous, but it's also about idealism.

**Okay, idealism then.**

**WP** Yes, idealism is an important point to make along with humor, the idea that these augments in some way create a world that is better than the world we already have.

**MS** We're seeking out different ideas, abstract ideas (like "hope," for instance, in my case) and making them real.

**WP** My idealism is about the joy or ecstasy of superimposed realms. In my work, "Vita Flaneurazine," that I make with my collaborator John Craig Freeman, there's a virtual drug that's producing all these amazing states. It generates visual patterns, rotating stars, spinning dice,

**MARK SKWAREK** No. I think AR can go across the whole range of experiences. Eventually people with huge budgets of 20 million dollars are going to be producing things that are jaw dropping, with great resolution. They'll be integrating with our reality so completely that it won't be subversive.

**WILL PAPPENHEIMER** Well, yes, I do think it has a strong element of subversion right now. The dominant artists that are doing AR would be the interventionists, and one of the reasons for that is that the technology, frankly, isn't there yet.

At an early stage, during the break of any new technology, artists, when they get hold of it, often think up interventions or "culture jamming" or ways to challenge the technology. It's like when the Portapak video camera came out in the 1970s. When that accessible apparatus became available artists started taking it into their studios. They started self broadcasting.

**MS** Some people play with rules (social, institutional) on their projects. But there are members in our group,



## ART

falling houses. There are kaleidoscopic objects. There are what I call “bioprogrammable toads” that appear on screen—there’s a colony that I’ve sited right now, for instance, in Gagosian Gallery—which trigger these ecstatic experiences. So, you’ll see all these stars and such on your smartphone, but they’re also in the space right now.

**Okay, staying on an ecstatic note, can we describe some of the elements that are marching right now in Mark’s “Parade to Hope”? Where do they exist right now, and where might they be going?**

**MS** Well, it started here with a canyon at the intersection of Maujer Street and Lorimer; that’s where the parade originally emerged, from a volcanic cloud, the one you saw. Then, on April 8th at 8:40PM, at the opening, we had a ribbon cutting, and the parade began to advance. The last it was seen it had entered a ramp of the BQE, and we currently think it’s headed towards I-95. But we know it’s heading towards Boston and the ICA, where it’s part of a show we are doing there on April 22nd along with other members of our group called ManifestAR.

**What are people in the artworld really saying about all this stuff? And, sorry to be a stickler here, but where do you think it’s really going? Theorists must be having a field day.**

**WP** On the web, do you know “emptylist”? It’s a worldwide group of educators and new media people—all very high level and theoretical—and ManifestAR guests for this month. The classical Jean Baudrillard argument or discussion here is that when the map of the virtual and the map of the real overlap, when they match up, and one territory supplants another, what will happen? My response is that the AR map does not replace the territory, it augments it. But I think Mark would disagree. He thinks in many ways the virtual world is a better world ...

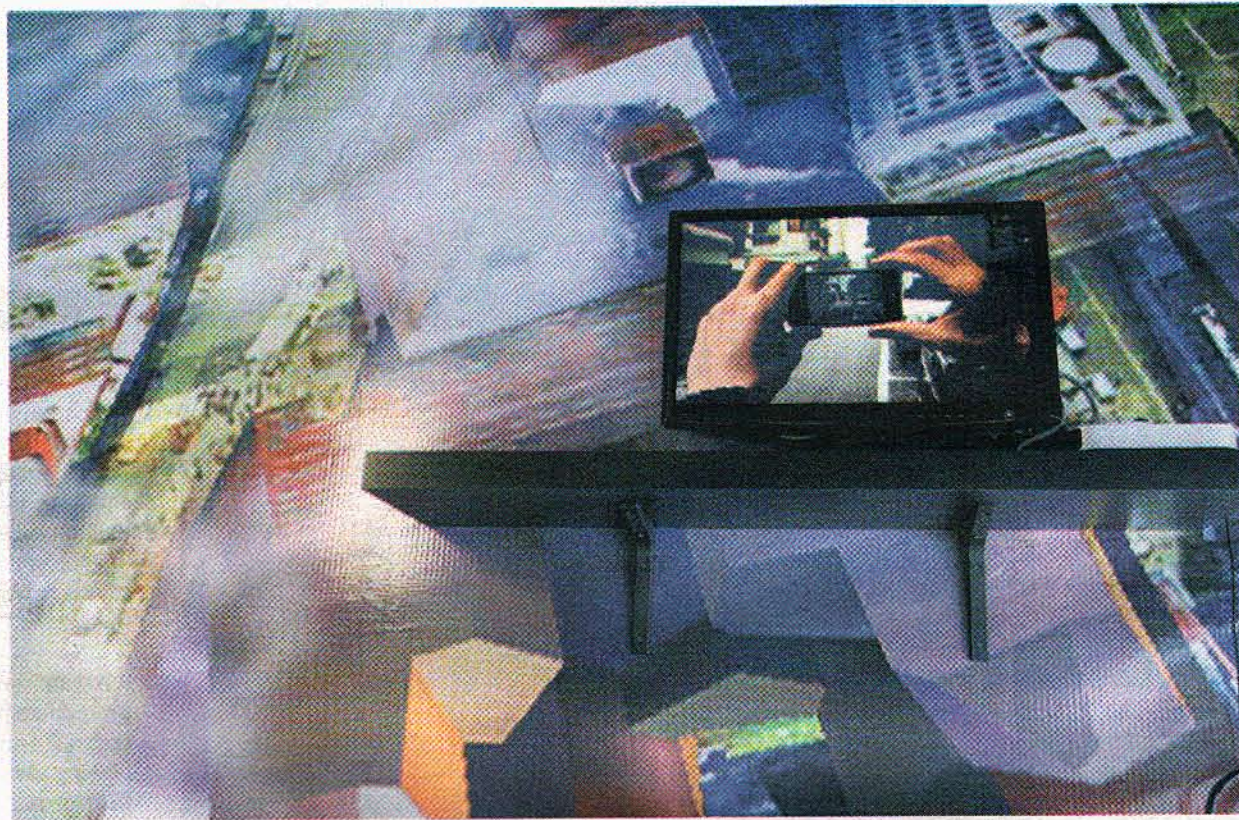
**MS** I could go either way.

**WP** For my part, I don’t want to say that it’s better; I say it’s additive. It’s layer upon layer upon layer—of which the physical world is one layer, and a wonderful one.

**You’ve mentioned before that AR art is really quite physical, despite all this theory. Can you explain?**

**MS** You actually have to go to the site and install the work, you have to tweak it, document it, demonstrate it, engage with so many people. You go back and do a test run, check the signal. AR gets me out of the house a lot.

**WP** What we like about it is that it’s located, it’s relational, and on-the-ground physical. And that’s another aspect to it, that it’s a relational art. [French theorist and curator] Nicholas Bourriaud, in the 1990s, talked a lot about how the aesthetic



“Gradually Melt the Sky,” augmented reality installation at Devotion Gallery. Photos courtesy Will Pappenheimer

not trying to make fools of ourselves. We’re setting the bar very high here. We’re trying to be part of the art community, and along the way we’re figuring out what AR is. Pushing the medium, exploring it, finding out what makes it special. If we knew what it is we wouldn’t be doing it.

**WP** This is a wonderful gap, this time right now. And what Mark says is true. We really don’t know where it’s going.

interest of a relational art is not just in the objects, it’s in the relation between people and the objects; there are social realms to consider, and all these social relationships an artwork is setting off. So it’s not so far from Duchamp, it’s not so far from Beuys ... that’s what Duchamp did; he set off the artworld.

**What’s the next likely step for AR in the cultural landscape?**

**MS** In theory, you can put AR anywhere, and you can do anything with it, so you’re going to see people putting whatever they feel like doing out there without taking anything into account. You’re basically going to see a lot of garbage.

**I’m glad you say that; I’m not surprised. Meaning is hard to come by.**

**WP** People might say “this is not art” if it gets to look too much like a gimmick, like it’s only trying to sell something. But video, too, was an incredibly commercial medium; so there’s the film industry out there, and there’s artists who use film.

**MS** What Will said is right. It’ll be really similar to the way the film industry and artists interact now. Right now in AR, we, the artists, are the ones who are driving the medium forward, and the better projects are the ones that are landing on our side of the fence. But there are people who will want to do this to make money who are going to get paid by the commercial industries to do what they’re good at. There are guys with huge egos who are programmers, motion graphics people ... and on the commercial side there are car manufacturers, media outlets like newspapers, fashion ... Adidas has a shoe that you aim the camera at and it creates a game with an urban design on the shoe. People like that are going to have talent and budget at their disposal that we artists can never compare with. It’s going to bring the attention that we’re getting now down a notch. And so really the answer is, no, we don’t know what’ll happen as far as art is concerned. But that said, the reason we opened this show in Williamsburg is that we enjoy the art community. We’re

**I’m sorry to be so crass, but all this stuff is hard to understand for any layman, and frankly, can easily lead to bullshit. What I define as bullshit is pretty broad: it’s a lot of “critical” people (like myself) taking the easy road and spouting stuff to other people that they don’t really understand themselves. What can you tell the average reader is truly real and meaningful about AR? How can they relate to it, how can they internalize what you’re doing?**

**WP** What we do is being described as being both programming (technical), and also an event in the world. Lived experience is mediated. Lived experience is the same as the online experience. So, for example, the “Parade to Hope” that Mark is doing is both the idea and the lived experience.

**MS** There’s a lived experience and at the same time there’s a programmable experience. But there isn’t a just a machine and there isn’t just lived life. Both are the same. It’s like when you’re searching for something Online, you’re searching for something in your life. And the search for “hope” is a universal search, a commonly held search. At the same time, it’s something you might search for on the web. So, as the Parade goes forward, it searches for everything in its vicinity. As I understand it, it’s programmed to do Google searches for “hope,” and, as the parade passes actual locations, it then incorporates images the people it’s passing have about “hope.” In the South, let’s say, people might associate “hope” with fireworks, so fireworks will join the parade.

**WP** Yes, that’s very true.

**MS** Another thing I can say to people is that when we ultimately find “hope” we’re going to throw a big party—it’s going to be great. □

*“AR[t] Critic”—A journal by first-ever Augmented Reality arts journalist and Brooklyn-based writer Sarah Schmerler. Available for reading directly inside the exhibition by downloading LAYAR to any smartphone.*

“Gradually Melt the Sky” is currently on view at Devotion Gallery, 54 Maujer Street, through May 1.