

# Chapter 18

## Wearable Apocalypses: Enabling Technologies for Aspiring Destroyers of Worlds

Damon Loren Baker

### 18.1 Introduction

While Art is the most fundamentally creative human activity, it is my contention that artists themselves have more to gain out of breaking worlds than in building them. To clarify (and to head off any fears that I am calling for acts of mere terrorism or genocide), by worlds I mean the interlocking systems of conceptions we use to organize and explain our experiences (*Weltanschauung* and *Erschlossenheit* – not planets. Ontology not geology) and by breaking I mean introducing elements that defy enclosure within those systems (*Reductio ad absurdum* and *non-sequitur* – not bombs. Glitches not deletion). While these tactics of destructive augmentation have a long and noble history in the arts going back to Surrealism, Dada and beyond, recent advances in several technologies (and even more importantly, in the access and distribution of these technologies in the form of mobile devices) have made them especially effective and worth re-examining for those artists working in the medium of Augmented Reality.

What follows is an investigation of a collection of specific approaches drawn from the writings of the author William S. Burroughs about visual artist Keith Haring's graffiti inspired work and a discussion of the emerging technologies enable and extend them into use in today's world.

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## 18.2 Origins and Influences

William Seward Burroughs II (February 5, 1914–August 2, 1997) was born in St. Louis, Missouri to a wealthy family (he was the namesake of his grandfather the founder of the Burroughs Corporation) and died in Lawrence, Kansas where he spent the last 15 years of his life with several pet cats. In between he became a drug addict, a novelist, an essayist, a painter, a spoken word performer, was elected to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, awarded the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by France, graduated from Harvard, seduced boys in bath houses in Weimar era Vienna, enlisted in the army, murdered his wife, lived in exile in Tangier, Morocco, was a central member of the Beat Generation of writers along with Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, developed the Cut-Up technique of literary collage and juxtaposition with the painter Brion Gysin and used it to write several of the most influential novels in twentieth century American literature and was prosecuted for violating obscenity laws in multiple states over the blatant homosexual imagery of his work as part of an equally influential legal battle over his works (Morgan 1988). In 83 years of life he participated directly in multiple generations of artistic movements and influenced countless others in a wide range of media (Grauerholz et al. 2000).

Keith Haring (May 4, 1958–February 16, 1990) was born in a small town in Pennsylvania, moved to New York City as a teenager and lived there until he died in his early 30s from AIDS related complications (Gruen 1992). Despite his brief life he became an extremely influential and popular artist, drawing early inspiration from the explosive growth of graffiti in New York City of the 1970s and the pop art of Andy Warhol from the 1960s. His distinctive stylized and pullulating figures have become icons, not merely iconic but the actual (and often official) representation of social issues such as the AIDS epidemic (in ‘Silence = Death’ 1989), Gay Pride (‘National Coming Out Day’, 1988) and the crack epidemic (‘Crack is Wack’, 1986) that defined life in New York City during the 1980s and shaped Haring’s life and work (Reading Public Museum 2006).

Haring was directly inspired by Burroughs’ writing as well. Some examples from his personal journals discussing this influence include: “The major influence, although it is not the sole influence, has been the work of William S. Burroughs. His profound realizations, which I encountered in radio broadcasts of the Nova Convention, and in the book *The Third Mind* by Burroughs and Brion Gysin, which I have just begun to read, are beginning to tie up a lot of loose ends in my own work and thinking” (Haring 1996).

Also: “All of a sudden (now) some things became clear to me in a way that was similar to my introduction to the work of William Burroughs and Brion Gysin in 1978. I mean, that things that existed in my head as ideas I thought to be my own were given form by seeing their embodiment in the life and work of someone else. It is hard to believe I only discovered Burroughs, Ginsberg, etc. in 1978. I “accidentally” stumbled across the Nova Convention at the Entermedia Theatre in

**Fig. 18.1** Keith Haring's "Tuttomondo" 1989 – Mural in Pisa Italy. [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tuttomondo\\_-\\_Haring\\_front.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tuttomondo_-_Haring_front.jpg)



New York City and the effect was astounding to me. Like my “accidental” meeting with Andy Warhol and Pierre Alechinsky’s work and New York City graffiti . . .” (Haring 1996).

The Nova Convention being “three days and nights of readings, panel discussions, film showings and various sorts of performances that sought to grapple with some of the implications of the writing of William S. Burroughs” that “. . . drew an interesting cross-section of people, and one suspected that only Mr. Burroughs could have brought them together. There were more or less conventional poets, novelists, performing artists, composers as diverse as John Cage and Philip Glass, rock musicians, serious students of American literature, street types and others” (Palmer 1978).

In 1988 William S. Burroughs was asked by the publisher George Mulder Fine Arts to write text to accompany a series of 10 silk screen images by his, by then, friend Keith Haring which juxtaposed borrowed images with Haring’s graffiti inspired curving lines (see Fig. 18.1 for an example of Haring’s visual style) titled “Apocalypse”. (The copyrighted images are available online at the Keith Haring Foundation’s website <http://www.haring.com/!/keyword/apocalypse>). Unlike their later 1989 collaboration “The Valley” which consisted of a story by Burroughs with illustrations by Haring (Burroughs and Haring 1989), “Apocalypse” contained an essay that was only thematically connected to the content of the specific images it was paired with. While it referenced New York City, graffiti, and some visual

elements of Haring's work, (Le Compte 1992) it drew upon imagery from much of Burroughs' earlier works and starred as the central figure not Haring but the Great God Pan. What follows is an attempt to unpack some of those sources to clarify the message of the essay and its connection to not just the practice of street art in the 1980s but to current work in Augmented Reality art as well.

### 18.3 The Birth of the Death of Pan

Mariners sailing close to the shores of Tuscany heard a voice cry out from the hills, the trees and the sky: "The Great God Pan is dead!" Pan, God of Panic: the sudden awareness that everything is alive and significant. The date was December 25, 1 A.D. **But Pan lives on in the realm of the imagination, in writing and painting and music.** Look at Van Gogh's sunflowers, writhing with portentous life; listen to the Pipes of Pan in Joujouka. Now Pan is neutralized framed in museums, entombed in books, relegated to folklore (Burroughs and Haring 1988).

Juxtaposed narratives that become gradually more inter spliced are a common element in many of Burrough's works, so beginning an essay about New York City in the year 1988 with a story from Tuscany at the beginning of the first century and using it as a central symbol is recognizably Burroughsian. He even ties it in with his beloved Master Musicians of Joujouka so it is apparent that this essay is at least as much about Burroughs' work and aims as it is about Haring's pictures. And as is common with Burroughs' cut up based writing, this story wasn't written entirely by him, but spliced together from several sources.

The original textual source for the death of Pan is the first century Greek born Roman magistrate and essayist Plutarch. Tucked into a collection of 78 of his essays and speeches titled "Moralia" (loosely translated as "Customs and Mores") in between philosophical essays on the duty of siblings towards each other, and a comical dialogue between Odysseus and an enchanted pig is an essay titled "On the Decline of the Oracles", as the introduction to the Loeb English translation explains:

Plutarch's answer to the question why many oracles in Greece have ceased to function is that the population is now much less than it was, and so there is less need for oracles now than in earlier times. For example, at Delphi there used to be two prophetic priestesses with a third held in reserve; now there is only one, and yet she is sufficient for every need.

The statement of this simple fact hardly requires twenty-nine folio pages, but in this essay, as in the two preceding, there is much of the conversation of cultured persons which is not directly connected with the subject. Thus we find a discussion of whether the year is growing shorter, whether the number of the worlds is one or some number not more than five or is one hundred and eighty-three. We have further discussion of the number five, some astronomy, and a good deal of geometry, some interesting bits of information about Britain and the East and a rather long discussion of the daimones, the beings a little lower than the gods and considerably higher than mortals; perhaps the translation 'demi-gods' might best convey the idea in English. These beings are thought by many persons to be in charge of the oracles; certainly the god himself does not appear personally at his oracles; and in the case of the oracle at Delphi some account is given of the accidental discovery by a shepherd of the peculiar powers of the exhalation from the cleft in the rocks (Loeb Classical Library 1936).

To spare the reader from having to search through the rambling (yet thoroughly charming) essay (as Loeb accurately describes it: “Some parts of the essay make rather difficult reading, but it also contains passages of considerable interest and even beauty” (Loeb Classical Library 1936)). I have isolated the sections specifically describing the death of Pan and the decline of the oracles:

“... it is not the gods,” said Heracleon, “who are in charge of the oracles, since the gods ought properly to be freed of earthly concerns; but that it is the demigods, ministers of the gods, who have them in charge, seems to me not a bad postulate; but to take, practically by the handful, from the verses of Empedocles sins, rash crimes, and heaven-sent wanderings, and to impose them upon the demigods, and to assume that their final fate is death, just as with men, I regard as rather too audacious and uncivilized.”

... As for death among such beings, I have heard the words of a man who was not a fool nor an impostor.

The father of Aemilianus the orator, to whom some of you have listened, was Epitherses, who lived in our town and was my teacher in grammar. He said that once upon a time in making a voyage to Italy he embarked on a ship carrying freight and many passengers. It was already evening when, near the Echinades Islands, the wind dropped, and the ship drifted near Paxi. Almost everybody was awake, and a good many had not finished their after-dinner wine. Suddenly from the island of Paxi was heard the voice of someone loudly calling Thamus, so that all were amazed. Thamus was an Egyptian pilot, not known by name even to many on board. Twice he was called and made no reply, but the third time he answered; and the caller, raising his voice, said, ‘When you come opposite to Palodes, a announce that Great Pan is dead.’ On hearing this, all, said Epitherses, were astounded and reasoned among themselves whether it were better to carry out the order or to refuse to meddle and let the matter go. Under the circumstances Thamus made up his mind that if there should be a breeze, he would sail past and keep quiet, but with no wind and a smooth sea about the place he would announce what he had heard.

So, when he came opposite Palodes, and there was neither wind nor wave, Thamus from the stern, looking toward the land, said the words as he had heard them: ‘Great Pan is dead.’ Even before he had finished there was a great cry of lamentation, not of one person, but of many, mingled with exclamations of amazement. As many persons were on the vessel, the story was soon spread abroad in Rome, and Thamus was sent for by Tiberius Caesar. Tiberius became so convinced of the truth of the story that he caused an inquiry and investigation to be made about Pan; and the scholars, who were numerous at his court, conjectured that he was the son born of Hermes and Penelopê (Loeb Classical Library 1936).

This lays out the basic element of the story related by Burroughs in the opening of “Apocalypse” except for one crucial detail, the exact date. Further clues are provided by the Loeb editors:

Students of English literature will be interested in the dramatic description of the announcement of the death of Pan; and students of religion will be interested in the essay as a very early effort to reconcile science and religion. That the essay had an appeal to theologians is clear from the generous quotations made from it by Eusebius and Theodoretus (Loeb Classical Library 1936).

The particular importance of this section to English literature will be examined later but working forward to the theologians who quoted from it so heavily we find one such quotation of this very passage in Eusebius of Caesarea’s (a Roman historian, bishop and Christian polemicist born roughly 260 AD, died roughly 340 AD) “Preparation for the Gospel” which is a series of fifteen books which he

wrote to introduce Christianity to pagans and persuade them of his new religion's inherent superiority. As is common with this work he quotes large pieces of other's works to illustrate his view of historical information and then follow with his own comments. After relating the story of the death of Pan (mostly identical to the version in Plutarch so I will not repeat it here) he concludes with:

So far Plutarch. But it is important to observe the time at which he says that the death of the daemon took place. For it was the time of Tiberius, in which our Saviour, making His sojourn among men, is recorded to have been ridding human life from daemons of every kind: so that there were some of them now kneeling before Him and beseeching Him not to deliver them over to the Tartarus that awaited them.

You have therefore the date of the overthrow of the daemons, of which there was no record at any other time; just as you had the abolition of human sacrifice among the Gentiles as not having occurred until after the preaching of the doctrine of the Gospel had reached all mankind. Let then these refutations from recent history suffice (Oehler 1851–1854).

As previously mentioned this particular image of the death of the old gods, exemplified by Pan, fading out at the birth of Jesus was particularly important to many English authors and poets. A prominent example would be John Milton, who draws upon this image in his first major English poem "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" (Lewalski 1966) written in 1629, beginning with a description of the birth of Jesus which includes a description of shepherds in their ignorance of the momentous event that has just occurred:

The Shepherds on the Lawn, Or ere the point of dawn, Sate simply chatting in a rustic row;  
Full little thought they than That the mighty Pan Was kindly com to live with them below:  
Perhaps their loves, or els their sheep, Was all that did their silly thoughts so busie keep  
(Lewalski 1966).

And then proceeding in a description of the decline of the Oracles and the disappearance of all the old gods one by one, starting with a retelling of Plutarch via Eusebius spliced into the narrative:

The Oracles are dumm, No voice or hideous humm Runs through the arched roof in words  
deceiving. Apollo from his shrine Can no more divine, With hollow shriek the steep of  
Delphos leaving. No nightly trance, or breathed spell, Inspire's the pale-ey'd Priest from  
the prophetic cell.

The lonely mountains o're, And the resounding shore, A voice of weeping heard, and  
loud lament; From haunted spring and dale Edg'd with poplar pale, The parting Genius is  
with sighing sent, With flowre-inwov'n tresses torn The Nymphs in twilight shade of tangled  
thickets mourn.

In consecrated Earth, And on the holy Hearth, The Lars, and Lemures moan with  
midnight plaint, In Urns, and Altars round, A drear, and dying sound Affrights the Flamins  
at their service quaint; And the chill Marble seems to sweat, While each peculiar power  
forgoes his wonted seat (Lewalski 1966).

This goes on for several more verses with an extensive list of pagan gods which are no longer worshiped and concludes with the triumph of the new order over the old with the birth of Christ:

He feels from Juda's land The dredded Infants hand, The rayes of Bethlehem blind his  
dusky eyn; Nor all the gods beside, Longer dare abide, Nor Typhon huge ending in snaky  
twine: Our Babe, to shew his Godhead true, Can in his swadling bands controul the damned  
crew.

So when the Sun in bed, Curtain'd with cloudy red, Pillows his chin upon an Orient wave. The flocking shadows pale Troop to th' infernall jail, Each fetter'd Ghost slips to his severall grave, And the yellow-skirted Fayes Fly after the Night-steeds, leaving their Moon-lov'd maze.

But see the Virgin blest, Hath laid her Babe to rest. Time is our tedious Song should here have ending, Heav'ns youngest-teemed Star Hath fixt her polisht Car, Her sleeping Lord with Handmaid Lamp attending. And all about the Courtly Stable, Bright-harnest Angels sit in order serviceable (Lewalski 1966).

Burroughs takes the intentionally humorous overly literal step of asserting that this happened on Christmas Day AD 1, in a sort of homage to Eusebius' overly literal treatment of the story related in Plutarch. The primal age of savage mystery and wonder is replaced with an age of orderly science and reason as one world view is enclosed and subdued by a new one, drawing its imagery and metaphors from the stories of a passage of a Greek dominated world to a Roman dominated one. Each world building itself out of the pieces of the previous one most useful to it, and then carefully discarding the remaining bits lest they clog up the machinery of power and explanation. A new world has been created on the ruins of the old. A place for everything and everything in its place.

## 18.4 Off the Canvas, Out of the Galleries and into the Streets

Unsurprisingly queer artists whose work defied easy categorization such as Burroughs and Haring didn't feel that they fit into this neatly ordered world and were rooting for the opposition. After laying out the old stories, a new way out of this maze is presented:

But art is spilling out of its frames into subway graffiti. Will it stop there? Consider an apocalyptic statement: 'Nothing is true. Everything is permitted.' – Hassan i Sabbah. Not to be interpreted as an invitation to all manner of restrained and destructive behavior; that would be a minor episode, which would run its course. Everything is permitted because nothing is true. It is all make-believe, illusion, dream . . . ART. When art leaves the frame and the written word leaves the page – not merely the physical frame and page, but the frames and pages of assigned categories – a basic disruption of reality itself occurs: the literal realization of art. This is a very different direction from Duchamp, Klein and Manzoni, of appropriating everything in sight by signing it or putting it on a pedestal. Instead of appropriating by framing and signing, remove the frames and the pedestals, yes, even the signatures. Every dedicated artist attempts the impossible, Success will write APOCALYPSE across the sky. The artist aims for a miracle. The painter wills his picture to move off the canvas with a separate life, movement outside of the picture, and one rent in the fabric is all it takes for pandemonium to sluice through (Burroughs and Haring 1988).

Burroughs correctly identifies the graffiti inspired street art that Haring and others are developing as an escape hatch from the controlled galleries and dead museums into the streets and beyond. Enabled by the relatively humble technology of the spray can artists were able to juxtapose their creations with the real world. A form of the cut-up techniques Burroughs and Gysin had perfected with words could now be practiced upon the world itself. It was a narrow crack but one that could spread

and grow. The beginning of an end. A revelation. An Apocalypse. “Neither the modern disruption of traditional structures of value, nor the postmodern disruption of modernist mythologizing; rather, it is the “literal realization of art”, a realization which simultaneously requires the destruction of art as a separate category, as a mirror to nature and life” (Murphy 1997).

## 18.5 Conclusion

All of this is intended as a collection of tactics and approaches to be used by contemporary artists working in the media of Augmented Reality seeking to maximize the impact of their work, particularly those using systems that function on commodity electronic devices such as smartphones. By a conservative estimate there are over one billion smartphones in use in the world today (Bicheno 2012). This puts a previously unthinkable amount of computational power, sensors and display systems into the hands and pockets of people from all walks of life all over the world. There are now widely available platforms for the creation of interactive art that escapes the boundaries of galleries and museums into the world in which real human beings live and breathe. Simply recreating electronic versions of past masterpieces or adding virtual bits and pieces on to the world like some sort of virtual decorator isn’t an effective use of the affordances of this new situation. By seizing upon the opportunity to cut up the real world with virtual worlds, with make believe, illusion, dream, ART we can break the bounds of our frames. Instead of pulling bits of the real world onto virtual pedestals and signing them we can aim, once again, for a miracle.

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