

DON CORRIGAN

Future Is Present

A Conversation with Van McElwee

St. Louis artist Van McElwee's *Time Fork: World B* (2020) is currently on exhibit at Laumeier Sculpture Park in Sunset Hills, Missouri. McElwee's Augmented Reality (AR) installation is part of the park's 2021 thematic exploration, *The Future is Present: Art and Global Change*, which runs through October 20, 2021. The park is displaying artist projects covering such topics as environmental crisis, tech waste, deforestation, astronomical phenomena, and alternative realities. McElwee's electronic and video exhibitions have found audiences in London, Vienna, Shanghai, Tokyo, Seoul, and other world capitals. His body of media art includes over one hundred single-channel video works, installations, and web projects. McElwee's grants and awards include a Guggenheim Fellowship, an American Film Institute Independent Filmmaker Award, a National Endowment for the Arts Independent Production Fund, a Regional Arts Commission Individual Artist Fellowship, and a travel grant from the government of India. McElwee's work has been exhibited extensively and is represented in the Kitchen Video Collection in New York City, and by Bruno David Gallery in St. Louis, Heure Exquise! in France, the Inter Media

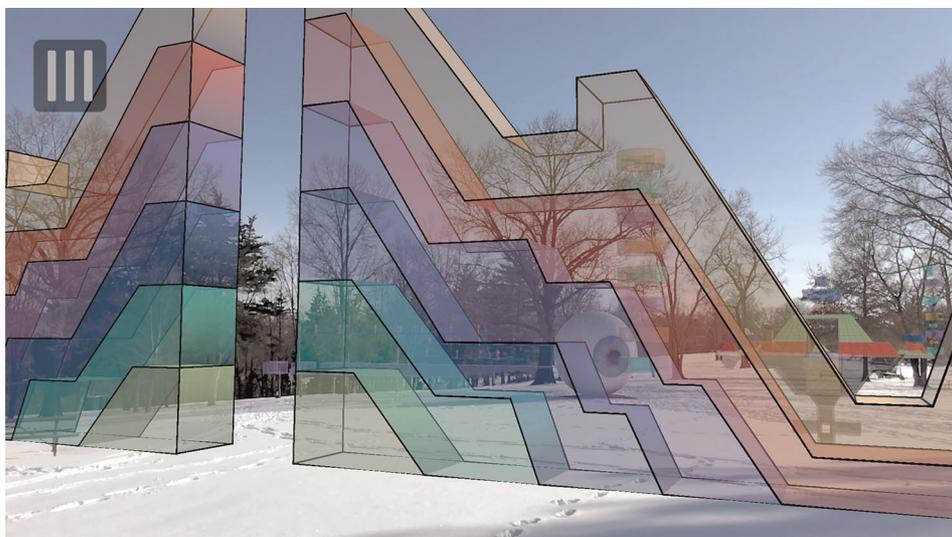


IMAGE 1. *Time Fork: World B* (2020) by Van McElwee; in-app Augmented Reality image.

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Art Institute in Germany, and LUX in London, UK. In a ten-year survey of his work, the curator of Anthology Film Archives, Andrew Lampert, wrote, “McElwee is an ultra-prolific digital pioneer of the highest order.”¹ Our conversation took place at Laumeier Sculpture Park, by telephone, and by email over a period of several weeks in March 2021.

DON CORRIGAN: How did *Time Fork: World B* evolve from an idea into an artwork? What conceptual framework and physical components had to come into play?

VAN MCELWEE: I planned *Time Fork: World B* over several years, knowing that AR would be up to the task by the time the idea came to fruition. Then it was a matter of designing the elements with pencil and paper. My son, Casper McElwee, is a commercial animator who also works in AR. He built the 3D models that became virtual architecture on site. We paid great attention to traditional architectural values, such as proportion, harmonic ratios, modularity, and articulation of surfaces. We used a fine-tuned palette of six colors. The buildings are simple, geometric, and devoid of detail, preserving a timeless, Platonic quality inherent in the medium. I commissioned a 3D drone mapping of the property, which allowed us to nestle the virtual structures into the actual landscape. Rampant Interactive designed the app that turns phones and tablets into windows for peering into *World B*. Laumeier’s enthusiasm, the Kranzberg Exhibition Grant, and other donors made the whole enterprise possible. A grant from Webster University provided iPads that visitors can check out in addition to using their own phones and tablets.

DC: How was Laumeier Sculpture Park in St. Louis an appropriate launchpad to put an Augmented Reality piece together? What is it about the geography and mission of the park that makes your work a good fit?

VM: The rolling landscape of Laumeier is full of possibilities for imaginary architecture. Remarkably, I was set free to design an AR environment on an architectural scale—to imagine a human settlement in a parallel world. On numerous walks I visualized the features of *Time Fork: World B* integrated into the actual park. For example, we can see that the terrain of our world and *World B* drift in and out of phase; some of the virtual structures float, while others are partially underground. A small pyramid, titled *Capstone*, could be a private temple, or the tip of a buried pyramid of unknown size. There is also evidence of unseen bodies of water in *Time Fork: World B*.

DC: What was your approach to convincing the curator at Laumeier Sculpture Park that *Time Fork* was a piece appropriately sited at the park? Any special needs that presented hurdles in the eyes of the park caretakers?

VM: From the beginning, Director Lauren Ross and Senior Curator Dana Turkovic were receptive to a site-specific AR installation. In early discussions I deployed my first AR work, *Pavilions: Nested Worlds* (2018), for the three of us to walk around in. Dana and I began discussing archaeology and technology in the context of the planned (at the time of these discussions) exhibition, *The Future is Present: Art and Global Change*. We decided that *Time Fork: World B* would work as a stand-alone installation as well as part of the larger exhibition, which opened later. These conversations helped me to clarify the subtle theme of choices in

1. Andrew Lampert, program notes, *Van McElwee: A Decade*, Anthology Film Archives (2010).

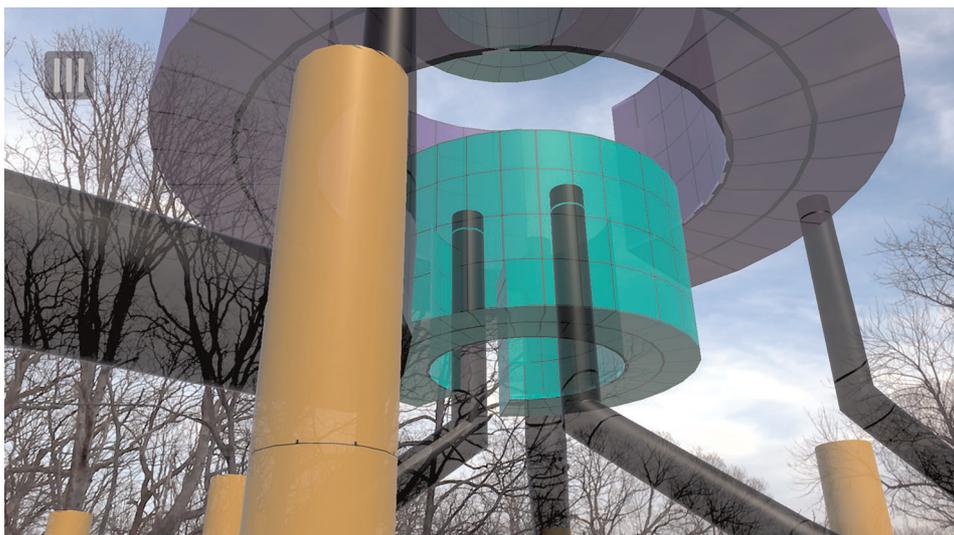


IMAGE 2. *Time Fork: World B* (2020) by Van McElwee; in-app Augmented Reality image.

Time Fork: World B. The work is also environmentally friendly, made of pixels rather than particles. It comes and goes with the touch of a button.

DC: Can you elaborate on the idea of choices and how that fits in with *Time Fork*? How can viewers of the work exercise choice?

VM: My video work is obsessed with the nature of reality, dimensionality, and what I call “choice-space.” I use this notion as a structural element, not as an argument for or against free will. A left or right turn in a maze could also represent the flip of a coin. This is also expressed in my earlier Web-based work in which a set of video and sound clips are rearranged in real time via a random editing algorithm.

DC: Can you give some tangible examples from the current installation?

VM: The idea of variation-space plays out in a whole new way in *Time Fork: World B*, which stems from the narrative device that a human choice or a celestial event such as a supernova could create a world. Of course, time could be forking constantly and we would never know it. The art is not meant to illustrate a final theory. It actually works the other way around: ideas and feelings grow into forms and images, which operate on their own, like music or architecture. In *Time Fork: World B*, individuals and societies are seen in a space of possibilities, or *virtualities*, as Gilles Deleuze would say. For example, what look like ceremonial boat landings intersect the hill at different heights, suggesting rising and lowering of water levels over a long period of time. Other AR structures in the park, such as stairways and towers, could be under construction or in ruin, going up or down. The direction of time is unclear. The sloping South Lawn is filled with curious doorframes. Crossing a threshold, one may be entering or exiting a tomb or a dwelling. We move like ghosts here, passing through walls and other barriers, archaeologists of a parallel world.

DC: Many visitors to the park are tempted to see themselves as part of this artwork in a mode that is reminiscent of characters in films such as *Tron* (1982, directed by Steven Lisberger), *Blade Runner* (1982, directed by Ridley Scott), or *Total Recall*

(1990, directed by Paul Verhoeven). Is that deliberate or is that just what happens with this kind of art piece?

VM: As a work of architectural fiction *Time Fork: World B* invites fantasy. At this scale, cyberspace has left the screen and we're walking around in it. Our sense of self changes; we become avatars. Having several selves is part of the thrill of computer games and immersive media. Who are we, and how real are we? *Time Fork* aspires to Brenda Laurel's early vision of Virtual Reality (VR) as a zone of free play.

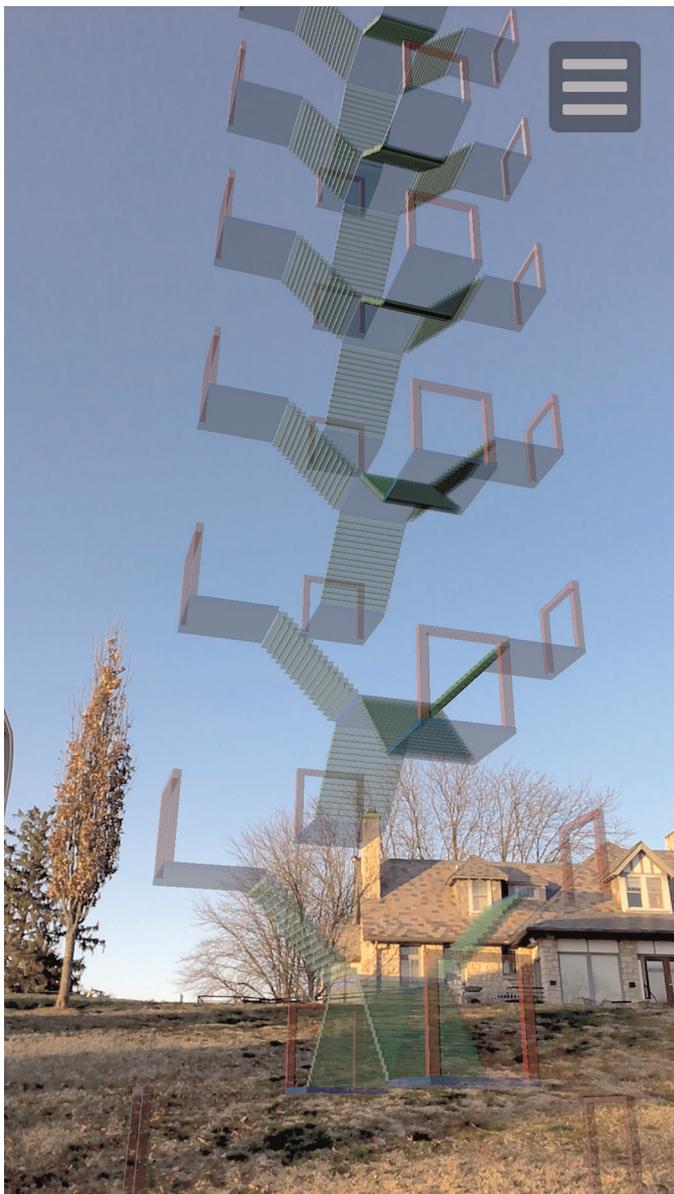


IMAGE 3. *Time Fork: World B* (2020) by Van McElwee; in-app Augmented Reality image.

DC: You make references to three civilizations that have preceded the existence of *Time Fork: World B*, including the Cahokia Mounds located just a few miles across the Mississippi River from Laumeier. What is this all about?

VM: I wanted to forge a connection with our everyday world and give the feeling that *Time Fork: World B* is in some ways similar. For example, there are three towers with windows pointing to Cahokia Mounds in Illinois, Winterville Mounds in Mississippi, and Teotihuacan in Mexico. But there are other windows that open toward unknown sites that have no correlation in our world. A nearby pile of gigantic rings could be materials laid out prior to tower construction or alternately, a collapsed tower. Another structure that subtly references the Cahokia site is the Ceremonial Gate, which is composed of strata that suggest levels of temple construction, a cutaway of alternate history. This “slice” could have at least two meanings: the gate could be a celebration of cultural growth and of periods of religious and political authority. Or, the bands could represent a catastrophic mound slump, in which sections of earthen mounds collapse, revealing levels of construction. These sudden events probably undercut the authority of rulers and destabilized mound-building cultures. For us, the stratification tells two different stories, one of growth, one of collapse. Alternate worlds can be mysterious.

DC: What about the significance of the nearly forgotten, nearby Cahokia civilization for your work and your thought? It seems to have been rediscovered in recent years with anthropologists telling us that it was once the biggest city in the world, that its leaders used mythology about a supernova appearing at that time to help control the residents, that it might have died out because of environmental degradation and climate change.

VM: Visitors to *Time Fork* are asked to entertain a playful fiction: almost a thousand years ago, time branched to create a parallel world, which has continued to change and develop to the present. I call this *World B*, which split from our common timeline around 1054 CE, concurrent with the appearance in the sky of Supernova 1054, which created the Crab Nebula. This celestial event was visible worldwide and is associated with the rise of Cahokian civilization. *World B* exists in the same present that we do, but it has a different history, starting from 1054. The connection with Cahokia invites us to consider an alternate story, which is embedded in the architecture of *Time Fork*. The focal point of the site is *The Terminal*, which may be a transportation hub, a government building, or a temple. It brings to mind the mounds of Cahokia, but also the stone pyramids of Mexico. Yet there are differences. Large openings appear where steps would be in a Mesoamerican stone pyramid. We enter a vast octahedral space opening to an oculus above and to an inverted pyramid below. Standing at the center, we are suspended precisely between real and virtual space. We are standing in a mystery; the past and present are unclear. Civilization in *World B* is waxing or waning.

DC: Coming back to your presence on Earth for a moment, so many artists have to support themselves with college teaching as you have for four decades. What are the advantages and drawbacks of being a creature of the academy?

VM: In my case, teaching made an art career possible. My post at Webster University’s School of Communications offered access to expensive technology and other essential resources, such as travel, grants, and sabbaticals. I had several superb teachers in my college years who introduced me to new ways of being an artist, so I was able to be part of a lineage. Teaching also made a viable retirement possible, and now I’m relishing the unstructured time—I can dream and build all day long if I feel like it.

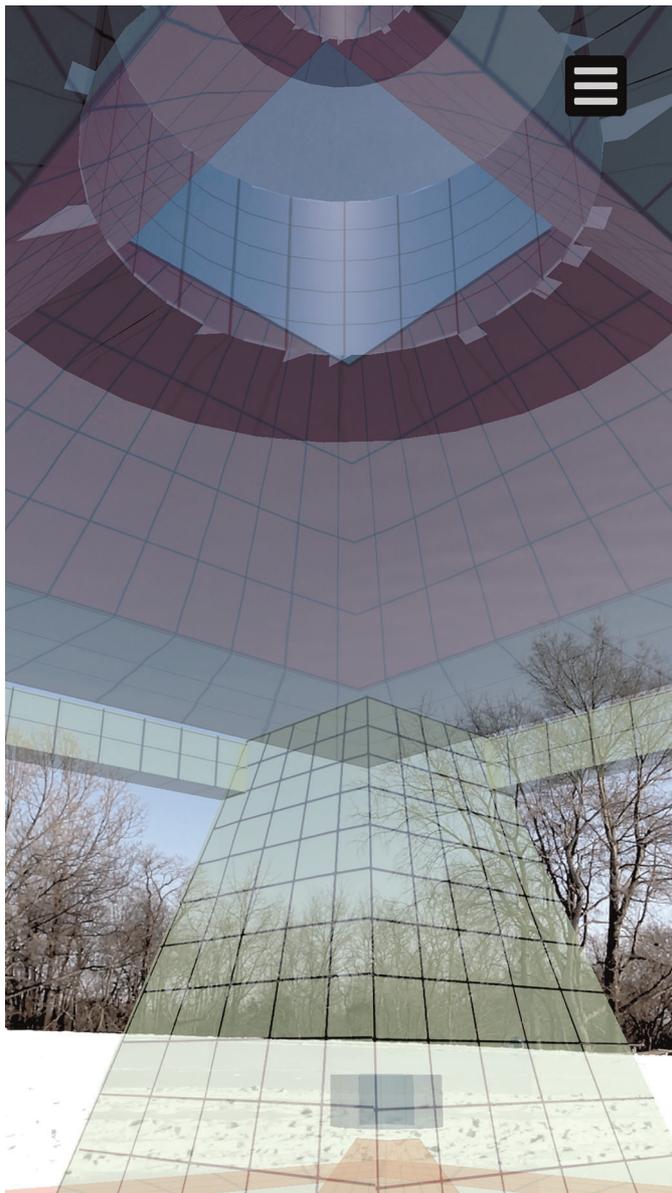


IMAGE 4. *Time Fork: World B* (2020) by Van McElwee; in-app Augmented Reality image.

DC: Since the 1970s you've pushed Portapak, television studios, and software out of their comfort zones. Now you're working with Augmented Reality. Why?

VM: Augmented Reality turns our minds inside out. It's an alternate world, a notion that I've explored in video forever. I think of a world in AR, VR, and games as a new unit of media, like frame, shot, and story. These worlds overlap and intrude on one another, creating a multiverse. We need to experiment with world-building tools in a noncommercial way to discover their full artistic potential. Because mind and media shape one another, new

media call for new ideas. This notion goes back to the birth of video art and it saturates the history of experimental film and sound art. Right now, AR is Terra Incognita—I'm just wandering around in it, setting out a few markers. There's also the simple magic of drawing a circle on the ground and stepping into it. It feels like reality has been cut and folded like a piece of paper, revealing another space. This feeling was expressed in *Time Fork* as well as in my first AR piece, *Pavilions: Nested Worlds*. AR is a new dimension.

DC: How was *Pavilions* a precursor to what you now have at Laumeier?

VM: *Pavilions* uses AR as a means and a metaphor to imagine six alternate worlds, represented by six superimposed music pavilions of different shapes and pastel hues. Composer Rich O'Donnell performs a six-channel original work that fills this manifold. Participants wander a complex space, stepping from one world into another. Sounds move, intersect, and seem to reverberate through the translucent structures. The form of *Pavilions* reflects the labyrinthine condition of digital culture: games, the internet, the rhizome; networks and choice-spaces. The installation can be adapted to any space, anywhere, as long as there are six sound sources available.

DC: Turning to more general applications of AR, we live in a commercial culture where everything has to have some practical value. Even art for art's sake has to have the practical value of being a leisure pursuit and something of an interlude from the commercial world. What potential commercial value does AR have?

VM: In addition to gaming and shopping uses, AR will add a layer of information in almost any sort of training—medical, military, you name it. Kevin Kelly writes in *WIRED* magazine that AR will become the spark for the next big tech media platform. Kelly actually envisions what he calls “Mirrorworld,” an interactive layer of data covering much of the physical world like a skin.²

DC: Elon Musk seems determined to send humanity to Mars to start the first civilization on another planet in our solar system, a unit of the galaxy that seems to be growing smaller. Still, there are great distances to travel and humans in their spaceships will spend a lot of time bored and away from home. Is AR going to be a necessary outlet to alleviate the boredom and loneliness?

VM: Both AR and VR, which exist on a continuum of immersion, would relieve the loneliness and claustrophobia of long space flights. Less appealing, deep immersion in that unnatural situation might loosen one's moorings. That could be a concern. It's interesting how this type of conversation calls for conjecture. Erin Manning poetically described art as a memory of the future. Media art always carries a breeze from the future, as it should, since its tools and language are constantly evolving.

DC: Gender studies show each generation is growing further away from the old binary sexuality. An alphabet of orientations is evolving with LGBTQI and more. Can AR give humans an opportunity to experiment with different sexual identities without the commitment or stigma?

VM: Of course, virtual worlds allow people to try out all sorts of things in a safer space. In LARP [live-action role-playing-games], gender is just an avatar away. As worlds intermingle,

2. Kevin Kelly, “AR Will Spark the Next Big Tech Platform—Call it Mirrorworld,” *WIRED*, February 12, 2019, www.wired.com/story/mirrorworld-ar-next-big-tech-platform.

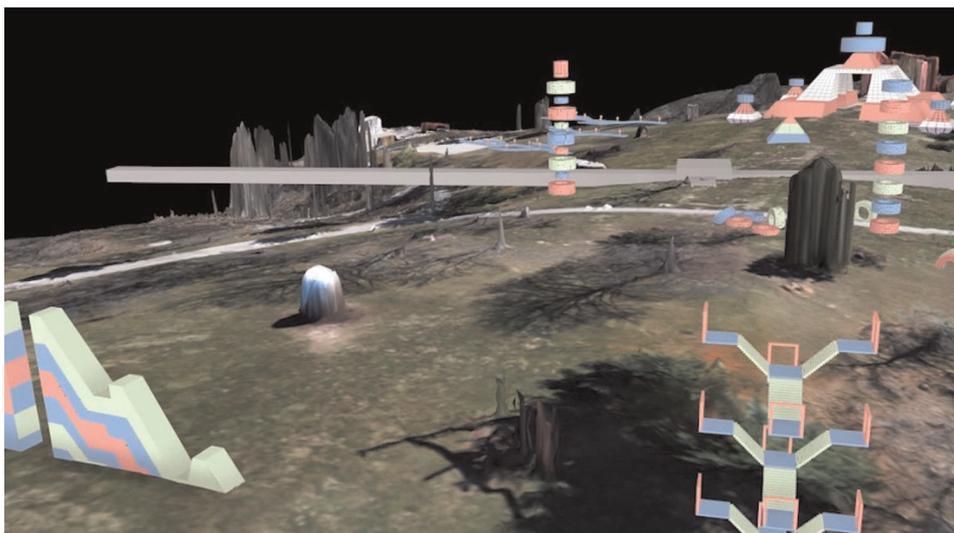


IMAGE 5. Detail of digital model of *Time Fork: World B* site (2020) by Van McElwee.

we will invent myriad identities and relationships. *Second Life* gave us a premonition of this twenty years ago. Hopefully, the diversity online will be so wild and fun that physical differences won't matter as much to certain people.

DC: Marshall McLuhan cautioned us not to become too enamored with each revolution in media, because there is always a price to pay, a cost, a loss that is involved. Does McLuhan's caveat hold true with AR?

VM: Virtual relationships with other humans or artificial partners, living or dead, in various combinations, will deeply challenge our sense of who and what we are. This could be liberating. But what happens when your full-bodied VR system gets into a feedback loop with an artificial intelligence, one that knows you and knows what you want? Such an arrangement would pull many of us into a black hole until our credit or electricity ran out. It begs the question "what if, when you die, the world disappears, and you don't?"

DC: Using AR in these ways, will there be a digital trail left that can be just as damaging to privacy and self as the digital history left behind by surfing porn sites or extremist political content on the web?

VM: I can't imagine much, if any, of these experiences being kept private, which may end up being fine with the participants. We radiate so much information. I truly believe that there's an Artificial Intelligence squatting somewhere in the future, feeding on our current data flow, processing it in ways that we could never understand.

DC: Is this an undesirable outcome? What are the totalitarian implications of this for some nightmarish autocratic state of the future? Are we going to willingly surrender and sacrifice all personal privacy in favor of this bright, iridescent technological future?"

VM: I think we've stumbled onto McLuhan's concept of how media "extensions" also bring about "amputations." We know that being under surveillance changes our behavior. This is the Panopticon Effect that Michel Foucault identified. A panopticon is a prison designed so that one guard can observe all of the prisoners—a form of mind control. On the street, on the phone, and on the internet we tend to internalize that observer. We think,

“What are my scrolling habits? Browsing history? Did I linger on that image too long?” It doesn’t help to know that we actually are being tracked in numerous ways. Yet Kelly and others believe that a world with no secrets will be healthier, happier, and saner. In any case, we’re looking at walls crumbling, but new spaces opening up. Theoretically, in a fourth dimension of space, one could reach into a sealed box and steal something. Or one could walk out of a prison.

DC: You have been an apostle of McLuhan through much of your intellectual life. For a good, long time he fell into disfavor, especially with academics in communication studies. Why is he having such a resurgence today?

VM: We are desperately trying to get our bearings in the midst of runaway technology. McLuhan’s ideas not only hold true today, they get stronger and more relevant with time. For example, he said that each new medium miniaturizes the ones that preceded it. The current examples are endless. This principle hit me in a new way a few years ago. A student showed me a phone app with an image of tiny turntables and records that could be scrubbed to make sounds. The app miniaturizes not only the technology, but the twentieth-century DJ art of scratching.

DC: You talk about media as the nervous system of the world, which obviously echoes McLuhan’s use of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s ideas. In what other ways has McLuhan influenced your thinking?

VM: Of course, Teilhard de Chardin’s vision of the noosphere was a revelation. Reading McLuhan as a painting major in the 1960s led me to see media critically, and full of creative possibilities. Later, Gene Youngblood associated Expanded Cinema with expanded consciousness, which was cool. Soon, like many others before, I was pointing a video camera at its monitor. Painting has an aura; video is an aura. But as you know, McLuhan was not a cheerleader. He thought of television as a juggernaut that could only be tamed by understanding and imagination.

McLuhan pointed out that art is a distant early warning system for civilization. He saw fundamental principles that hold true today, which is why many consider him a prophet. He would not be surprised that the Global Village is now a Global Brain, and that video screens are no longer windows, but wormholes. These changes never stop; they only accelerate. “We are the primitives of a new era,” said pioneering media artist Aldo Tambellini a half century ago. His statement now describes a permanent condition.

DC: AR will take us many, many steps beyond the evolution of legacy media. What would McLuhan make of AR?

VM: McLuhan would surely point out that GPS tells you where you are, just like a clock tells you when you are. He would remind us that these space-time grids are mere abstractions of visual culture. He would certainly note, with some trepidation, that AR is the beginning of a hybrid world that mingles the actual and the virtual. If McLuhan were alive today, he would offer striking insights on computer games and nonlinear storytelling. No doubt, Janet Murray’s *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997) would be in his library.

DC: In your view, is AR another medium, like books, newspapers, radio, and television? McLuhan told us in *Understanding Media: Extensions of Man* (1964) that each new medium might benefit us by giving us something new, but also hurts us because it takes something away—it amputates. What do we gain and what do we lose with AR?

vm: McLuhan's amputation metaphor just keeps on giving. The internet connects and isolates, for example. Electronic media are by nature ubiquitous, invasive, and immersive. Paul Virilio pointed out decades ago that technology is now colonizing our bodies in the same way that it colonized the planet. AR goggles, glasses, or contact lenses could be worn continuously, embedding important information into the physical world, along with three-dimensional ads, games, and fantasies. Not wearing these devices would feel like flying blind. The old world of time, space, and matter will have shrunk once again, buried in data.

dc: Immersive media and psychoactive drugs seem to be on a collision course. Cannabis is being legalized. Psychedelic therapy sessions are being sanctioned for depression, addiction, and end-of-life anxiety. Do you see a synergy between these two realms?

vm: Aside from the fact that psychedelic drugs and electronic entertainment have always gone together, my guess is for a very strange future. Yuval Noah Harari suggested that after technology takes over many jobs, humans could spend most of their time on drugs and computer games. Not a heroic period. But one can fine-tune that vision to include exquisitely designed medicines and imaginary worlds that we mutually create, explore, and inhabit. Add biotech and nanotech and we are in Roy Ascott's visionary territory. I'm thinking specifically of his 1999 essay, "The Future Will Be Moist." Looks like we're in another McLuhan heaven or hell scenario.

dc: Finally, your work has always avoided overt political messages and your art is never didactic. However, it cannot have escaped your notice that Americans today are living in two vastly different political constructs. Is it mere coincidence that AR arrives in a time of fake news and "doctored" videos and memes? People are purposely stepping into alternative realities. What can we learn as reality forks in these hyper-political times?

vm: From what I can tell, reality is cracking like an old sidewalk. One of the weeds poking through is the deepfake, which will work all too well on those who are already soft targets for disinformation. But I think the assault on truth that we're experiencing is just a darker facet of a larger phenomenon, in which the real and the virtual are merging, trading places. *Time Fork* operates in that fluid space where it is clearly imaginary, a sort of amusing toy spread across the landscape. The medium is used to draw attention to a playful alternate reality. You can think of *Time Fork* as architectural fiction, a sort of theme park. Just as left and right eyes reveal a third dimension, the parallax of actual and virtual can reveal a deeper reality. As the real and the artificial increasingly overlap and mingle, media become tools for contemplating the totality of experience. How do we live and make decisions in a reality that is constantly branching, being manipulated, and being invaded by other realities? How does our existence change when actual and virtual occupy the same space? Is reality itself an artwork—or is it an artificial construct with competing interpretations, political or otherwise? ■

DON CORRIGAN is an award-winning journalist and academic who has published six books on nature and the environment. His most recent book is *Nuts About Squirrels: The Rodents That Conquered Popular Culture* (2019), which examines media treatment of squirrel characters using the concepts in Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. He was recently inducted into the St. Louis Media Hall of Fame.