

DIORAMA

INVENTING ILLUSION

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THE DIORAMA: EXHIBITING ABSENCE?

In a time when we are writing a history of closed, emptied and censored exhibitions, a show about the diorama almost automatically takes its place in the long list of impossible exhibitions. Often inextricably linked to its architecture, the diorama is an extremely complex exhibition form that sets the scene of a certain situation and its original environment. As a rule it consists of artificial decoration: a painted background, three-dimensional figures, scenographic elements and a pane between the scene and the spectators. Although the diorama embodies a centuries-old staging of “looking”, it still constitutes a blind spot in our cultural history. Having been widely used by natural history museums and acknowledged by contemporary artists, dioramas do not crop up in art history. Despite having played a significant role in literary and popular-cultural accounts in the 19th century, after 1900 the diorama was soon considered outdated.

This disinterest was the result of various factors: It was ousted by other reproduction techniques, there was a move away from all subjects that did not fit the Modernist canon (illusionism counteracts the sublimity of art), rejection by parts of the scientific community (inappropriate presentation of animal species in natural history museums) and finally the ambiguity, if not double standards, concealed behind the diorama’s educational aspiration. The figures and anecdotes running through its history are ambivalent, bizarre and frequently like something from a novel. The destruction of the holdings of taxidermist Rowland Ward and his famous London store at Piccadilly Circus, also known as “The Jungle”, not least points to a colonial legacy, one that people seek to keep at a distance.

Considering the vanished dioramas and the disregard frequently shown for their originators and collections, “Diorama” traces a still unwritten history, which takes shape precisely in the absence of “exhibitible” objects.¹ The exhibition presented at Palais de Tokyo in Paris and subsequently at Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt is the first broad-based study of this topic and seeks to link the various threads leading to the origins of the diorama. Indeed, the diverse histories of this form of presentation have barely been researched in terms of their interrelationships and parallel temporal developments. Moreover, the exhibition relates the history of the diorama from its precursors (also called proto-dioramas) in religious art to its adoption by contemporary artists. Although the available literature on the history of the diorama sheds light on its diverse origins, it barely touches on the historical convergences between the natural sciences, art and anthropology. Yet they give rise to common themes and similarities, such as the stage vocabulary that identifies the theater as the interface between the seemingly contrasting forms of expression of religion and science.

Even if, according to historians, Louis Daguerre is considered the inventor of the diorama, his original definition of “seeing through” in relation to a semitransparent screen painted on both sides and animated by lighting effects barely has anything in common with the stuffed animals in the showcases at natural history museums. That said, Daguerre’s invention of the proto-

cinematographic theater called “Diorama” in 1822 came in precisely the same year that Charles Willson Peale painted his famous work *The Artist in his Museum*. In the picture, the American painter and natural scientist reveals the collection of his curiosities, presented in showcases, behind a red theater curtain reminiscent of Daguerre’s Paris diorama. Science becomes the stage. The painter’s palette and the taxidermist’s tools visible next to the artist refer to the duality of art and science, which is also reflected in the material manufacture of the diorama. At the same time, in the Dutch colony Surinam self-taught painter Gerrit Schouten was creating boxes with a painted backdrop and paper figures. Thematically referencing the local customs of the slaves, these boxes are classified as ethnographic dioramas, which were to reach their peak in the context of colonial exhibitions. The simultaneity of these “dioramic” forms, which at first glance appear so different in terms of context and aesthetics, bears witness to the numerous conceptual similarities and chronological interfaces which the exhibition seeks to present in detail.

A show such as this faces the challenge of acknowledging the wonder generated by the diorama as well as analyzing its scenic effects. As such, both the presentation and arrangement simultaneously reference the theatrical character of the entrance hall of the American Museum of Natural History in New York, as well as the materiality of the objects comprising the diorama and which with their special features can also be presented individually. The deconstruction of the diorama as the tour of the exhibition progresses reveals the critical function of artists’ dioramas, which goes beyond conventional criticism of the museum presentation. Interestingly, several phenomena overlap in the renewed occupation with the diorama from the late 1960s onwards. The best known is the artistic reception of Marcel Duchamp’s work *Étant donnés* (1946–1966). It was followed by a whole series of works that seek to get to the bottom of the mystery of this artwork, which Duchamp secretly created in his studio. The legendary instruction manual for *Étant donnés* analyzes the technique, mechanisms and creation of the diorama and became a critical template for Jeff Wall’s conceptual photography, which was already questioning the optical and mimetic illusion of the photographic image in the 1970s. These considerations are part of a large-scale response to artistic academicism, namely the institutional critique that opposes the moralizing authority of the museums. Around the same time, the dioramas of the American Museum of Natural History in New York were inspiring the early photographs of Robert Gober and Hiroshi Sugimoto, as well as the installations of Robert Smithson, which show materials and species in “geometric containers” that have been taken out of their natural habitat.² A few years later Donna Haraway took up these artistic approaches and published her trailblazing essay “Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden (New York City, 1908–1936).”³

Donna Haraway’s essay, excerpts of which are reprinted in this catalog, takes its place in an anthology of published texts and newly commissioned articles that take various positions on their shared subject. Thus the dioramas of the American Museum of Natural History in New York are analyzed not only by the man who created them, Carl Akeley, but also by Stephen Christopher Quinn, Donna Haraway and Hiroshi Sugimoto. The secondary literature on the diorama is incredibly wide ranging – technical handbooks, artists’ essays and theories from the field of cultural studies which subscribe to the critical reading of visual and material culture. This body of literature reflects the fundamental discussions relating to the definition of the diorama between the didactic function of a scientific instrument and the social function of a popular entertainment medium. The anthology of texts is accompanied by an extensive iconography, which takes observers on a dioramic “trip around the world”, as it were. The chronological and geographical reference points invite them to better understand the complex history of the diorama between popularity and disinterest.

Ever since they were started to be used in natural history museums in the late 19th century, dioramas have been subject to changing fashions, saw their popularity peak twice (between 1890 and 1900 and again from 1920 to 1930) only for them to disappear completely for a while before

SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT

coming to prominence anew. The wave of destruction threatening the dioramas of American natural history museums was recently dubbed “The Diorama Dilemma”. The ethnographic dioramas of the colonial exhibitions suffered a similar fate. In France, the closure of the world’s first immersive diorama museum, which opened on Paris’ Rue Buffon in the 1920s based on the collection of the Duke of Orléans and featured creations by Rowland Ward, was testament to the scientific community’s disinterest. Accordingly, numerous dioramas or “remains” of dioramas reappeared in the collections of contemporary artists, historians, teachers or art lovers who took an interest in unorthodox inventors such as Walter Potter and his anthropomorphic animals. Walter Potter, self-taught artist and founder of his own museum, embodies a parallel world of the diorama, in which the small folkloric attractions of London’s Great Exhibition of 1851, as well as a social and cultural history of rural England, are reflected.

With its hybrid history, the diorama does not fit into the conventional canon of the fine arts. It does not bear the signature of a single creator, but involves various professions, whose members generally remain anonymous. These include painters, decorators, sculptors, hunters, scientists, amateur researchers, taxidermists, pedagogues and technicians. Significant figures connected with the history of the diorama such as Carl Akeley and Rowland Ward present in their writings their view of taxidermy, particularly with reference to its similarities with model construction and sculpture. Painting techniques from the Renaissance were revisited for the background paintings, such as the grid technique for reproducing a landscape on a large, curved canvas. In the 19th century diorama paintings stood in competition with the paintings of the great masters: They imitated the atmospheric changes by day and night and used the effect of light to generate the illusion of romantic landscapes. The diorama is “mechanical painting”, which falls out of the artistic canon: “The primary purpose of painting is to generate an illusion. Take Raphael, Van Dyck, Poussin or Claude Lorrain – none of them fulfilled this purpose. In a painting we look for other qualities, whose secrets those skilled painters started to understand: taste and spirit in the composition, clarity in the drawing, harmony and impact of the color, ultimately everything that has to do with the execution. These qualities appeal to people with an enlightened understanding of art; only illusion appeals to the masses. A comparison may make this truth more tangible: Most people will walk past ten landscapes by Poussin without pausing, but will stop in front of a diorama image.”⁴ The power of illusion is so strong that the diorama appeals to the observer’s faith and even competes with the Church.

When Daguerre invented his theater, the word ‘diorama’ also referred to the semitransparent screen on which lighting effects were projected, and the theater building in which the performances took place. The entire architecture was a diorama. Accordingly, from the very beginning the double meaning of the word encompassed the space between the exhibited screen and the three-dimensional architecture, thus the actual definition of exhibition. In other words, an exhibition on the diorama is an exhibition on exhibiting. Any attempt to tell its story leads back to the beginnings of exhibition activities in the context of the first amusements for the masses and optical inventions. Contemporary artists consider the diorama a conceptual installation and a way of deconstructing the visual techniques passed down from the 19th century and as such acknowledging the expressive power of sculptural elements. The painted background, the figures, the scenery and the glass pane together form a staged vision of a place and a time that actually existed or could have existed. The diorama appeals to the observer’s faith. Like a stage set it generates an illusion, like architecture it is “unexhibitable” in its entirety, like a fictional literary object it is purely speculative (even if some people still defend its scientific objective).

The exhibition “Diorama” makes reference to the concept of the “uncanny” as coined by psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch. When viewing a diorama we face a scene that seems familiar, but still generates a distance to the “known”. The theater appears to resemble what is being shown, but the viewer cannot be sure of it. “A living creature could be an object, and conversely a lifeless

SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT

object could have a soul, even if this suspicion only feebly tugs on our awareness,” wrote Jentsch in 1906. Between art and science, life and death, artificiality and reality the observer walks through what Roland Barthes called “theater-minus-text”, one in which time becomes space, as Orhan Pamuk so beautifully put it. These geographically and chronologically precisely situated microcosms, which strive for permanence, are windows to the world, mirrors of the time they were created, but also places of mental projection that create space for the imagination. As a representation of human power over the world, the diorama embodies the absurd desire to collect in one space the entirety of the knowledge available at a particular time. In this paradise of optical illusion, perception is put to the test. The spectator, who is sometimes reflected in the screen-like pane, sees only images of what is often an overly ideal world. And what if the world were nothing more than one big diorama, in which we wander through the spectacle of our own lives?

¹ See in particular the exhibitions “Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art” (Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, 2000), “The Art of Diorama” (Bedford Gallery, 2008) and “Otherworldly: Optical Delusions and Small Realities” (Museum of Arts and Design, New York, 2011).

² Ann Reynolds, “Reproducing Nature: The Museum of Natural History as Nonsite,” in: *October. Art, Theory, Criticism, Politics*, 45 (Summer, 1988), pp. 109–27.

³ Donna Haraway, “Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936,” in: *Social Text*, 11 (Winter, 1984–5), pp. 20–64.

⁴ Journal des artistes, 1827, cited in Guillaume de Gall, *Le diorama de Daquerre: La peinture mécanique*, (Paris, 2013).