

Seeing Through? The Materiality of Dioramas (Bern, 1–2 Dec 16)

University of Bern, Dec 1–02, 2016

Deadline: May 31, 2016

Noémie Etienne

Seeing Through? The Materiality of Dioramas (1560-2010)

Dioramas are at the crossroads of artistic and scientific practices. They bring together artists, scientists, and collectors, thus providing an opportunity to reflect on the polyvalence of these actors and the definition of their expertise. In 1822, Louis Daguerre coined the term “diorama” when describing his theater. The word diorama means literally “seeing through.” In accordance with this etymology, dioramas embody a sense of transparency and life-likeness. In addition to providing theatrical and visual experiences, dioramas are multidimensional installations that incorporate paintings, objects, stuffed animals or mannequins. Habitat groups mixing taxidermy and painted backgrounds were designed for natural history museums, while anthropological dioramas were disseminated all over Europe during the second half of the nineteenth century. They were usually life-sized and site specific but they could also be reduced to maquettes.

To date, these installations have been studied by scholars from various disciplines, mainly as side topics. Media historians have considered them primarily as proto-cinematic, whereas within the fields of anthropology, museum studies and postcolonial studies, they are generally analyzed as displays that reflect political taxonomies and stereotyped representations.

However, dioramas are not merely images or displays: they are also physical objects made of multiple materials, such as plaster, wood, paper, paint, glass, fur, wax, and metal. The discipline of art history thus provides us with the opportunity to approach the materiality of these installations. Indeed, dioramas are composite and hybrid things, created through cultural interaction and physical encounter. Multiple hands as well as various visions are involved in the process of their creation – and later on, during their conservation. Dioramas therefore allow for the study of contact zones and material exchanges between private and public spheres, as well as between Western and non-Western contexts. Finally, dioramas as objects of study within the field of art history enable us to address values such as authenticity and realism in various contexts.

Part 1 (1560-1822): A Genealogy.

This session will explore the diorama’s prehistory before its “invention” by Daguerre, starting with objects, installations, and machinery created for churches and theaters between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. Three-dimensional installations, such as groups gathering natural history specimen (taxidermic animals, skeletons) will be of greatest interest. Presentations may focus on wax museums, and more broadly on hyperrealistic figures that were displayed in groups and

used for entertainment as well as for pedagogical or medical purposes. Early forms of panoramas, and diaphanoramas - will also be of primary importance, such as the creations of the Swiss landscape painter Franz Niklaus König, first exhibited in Bern in 1811.

Part 2 (1822-1970): Dioramania.

The second session will consider the numerous dioramas created during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Habitat Groups and anthropological dioramas became very popular in international fairs and museums until the mid-twentieth century. They were common in both Western and non-Western cultures, and were especially prominent in the Middle East. In some cases, dioramas were intended to represent national identities and in others, they became forms of resistance used, for instance, by African-American or Native American communities. The contributions to this section may explore the creation of specific sets of installations in fairs, museums, and public space, as well as the politics of dioramas.

Part 3 (1970-2010): Re-appropriations.

As of the 1970s, state-sponsored museums created displays of traditional craftsmanship through life-size dioramas, such as the Dubai Museum or the Jewels and Costume Museum in Amman. Native American community centers, such as The Mashantucket Pequot Museum in Connecticut, have been using life-size dioramas since the late 1990's. They are also being reinterpreted by contemporary artists, as shown, for example, in the photographs of Hiroshi Sugimoto. In that perspective, the re-exhibition of dioramas would be a topic of interest. Finally, writing the history of dioramas today might also be a way to reframe the creation of artistic movements such as Surrealism or Dada, as well as the work of such artists as Marcel Duchamp, Edward Kienholz, and Joseph Cornell, by filling in important gaps in the history of art, and the history of installations.

Conference Date: December 1st and 2nd, 2016.

University of Bern, Institute of Art History, Department of Modern and Contemporary Art History.

Submission:

An abstract of approximately 500 words and a brief CV should be sent to Noémie Etienne (netienne@getty.edu) and Nadia Radwan (nadia.radwan@ikg.unibe.ch) by May 31.

Responses will be given by June 30.

The colloquium will be held in English.

Reference:

CFP: Seeing Through? The Materiality of Dioramas (Bern, 1-2 Dec 16). In: ArtHist.net, Feb 29, 2016 (accessed May 16, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/12317>>.