

Immersing People in Scientific Knowledge and Technological Innovation Through Disney's Use of Installation Art

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter uses Disney's extremely successful exhibits at the 1964-65 New York World's Fair as iconic examples of art installations designed to provide strong experiences of scientific progress and technological innovation. The chapter therefore explores how Disney and installation artists have used this form to create immersive, memorable experiences for audiences. The goal is to identify methods for using installation art to convey scientific knowledge to general audiences to foster greater understanding and inspire future generations toward scientific and technological discovery.

When Walt Disney began to sketch out his plans for Disneyland, which opened in 1955, he was explicit in this desire to bring the same narrative craft to rides and exhibits that he demanded of his feature films. He wanted visitors to (actually) step inside, immerse themselves in the story and experience the wonder and emotional connection directly. While the Disneyland and World's Fair exhibits are certainly not the first examples of the construction of large-scale, immersive narrative experiences, they have been extremely influential in the areas of art, education and culture. At the 1964-65 fair in New York, Walt Disney wanted to demonstrate the vast improvement in installation/dark ride technology over the 1939 World's Fair (also in New York) and its influential future-gazing exhibits such as GM's "Futurama." In later

years the Disney Company, groups of artists, and institutions such as museums have drawn on the methods used by these iconic exhibits to develop installations to convey concepts and trends in science and technology.

Disney designed and built four installation exhibits for the 1964-65 fair: Ford's "Magic Skyway"; "The Carousel of Progress" for General Electric's Progressland Pavilion; "Great Moments with Mr. Lincoln" for the State of Illinois; and "It's a Small World" co-sponsored by Pepsi and UNICEF. The narrative craft of exhibits such as Carousel of Progress (Figure 1) and the Magic Skyway (Figures 2 and 3) are compared below to works within the genre of installation art, which has developed greatly since the 1960s. Similar to Disney, many artists have deployed immersive installation art exhibits to envelop audiences in a detailed aesthetic and conceptual narrative. Some artists, as well as educational institutions, have used experiential installations for addressing or presenting scientific concepts, and much potential exist for further work in this direction.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The 1950s and 1960s were vital for the development of installation art. Installation was one of several anti-commodity forms such as conceptual art, performance and body art, earth works, and

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Figure 1. “Father,” dog, and electric oven from the Walt Disney World revised version of the Carousel show (2006, public domain, photo by SteamFan available on Wikipedia)



new forms of sculpture, which emerged in these decades (Morse, 1998, p. 4). However the birth of the genre is often traced back to the surrealist exhibits held in Paris in 1938, 1957, 1959 and in New York in 1942, which inspired the contemporary “Art Installation movement” insofar as the artists desire to display their artworks according to their own aesthetics rather than allowing a museum curator to take on that task (thus, defining the exhibition of the collection of artworks as an integral element of the artwork as a whole). The first of these was the 1938 *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme*, a surrealist exhibition held in Paris that included Salvador Dali’s installation “Rain Taxi” (Tomkins, 1996, p. 364). In the 1960s and 70s installation art was certainly explored, however the occurrences were sporadic and did not truly reach the height of its label as an artistic movement until the 1990s (Bishop, 2005, p. 8). In the 1980s installation art began making its way to the forefront in major international exhibitions such as *The Venice Biennale*, *Sao Paulo Biennial*, and *the Skulptur Projekte, Munster*, as a way to fill large architectural or industrial spaces with a sensorial experience aiming to leave guests with a more tangible memory of the exhibition. Increasingly,

more and more post-1960’s art venues sought to exhibit installation art as an outcome. Currently, Installation Art is the backbone of many international biennials and triennials for its ability to completely immerse the guests in the art and alter the consciousness of the guests through sensory perception (Bishop, 2005, p. 37).

The Disney exhibits at the fair are examples of installation art in several aspects. First, as opposed to more long-standing forms of two-dimensional art, installations must, of course, be installed by the artist(s), typically in a prepared space. Often in more immersive works the boundaries of the space, such as interior walls, have been modified to the specific needs of the piece, transforming it into a new “environment.” Following the surrealist expositions of the 1930s and 40s, the next important development of the genre emerged with the experiential “environments” and “happenings” created in the 1960s by artists such as Allan Kaprow, who were reacting against the commercial boom of Abstract Expressionist paintings in European and American galleries (Bishop, 2005, p. 23). As opposed to Disney’s commercial engineering approach,¹ the spaces for these Kaprow’s environments tended to either be disused

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