Sensorial Interior: Museum Diorama as Phenomenal Space

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Abstract

Museum dioramas are widely recognised as historic visual tropes used to frame the grandeur of the outside world within an interior viewing space. With the development of digital technologies, data projection and soundscape have increasingly replaced diorama production as a means to transform these once static-animal-posed-in-painted-habitat with immersive interiors that engage the visual and aural senses alike. Andre Breton proposes that two modes of consciousness exist: an exterior world of facts and an interior world of emotions. These interiors and exteriors produce an interface and exchange. An invitation to respond to the interior of RMIT University's First Site gallery provided an opportunity to experiment with the three traditional dioramic elements used to bring the exterior world into an interior employing taxidermy, model making and set painting. By engaging digital technologies in response to these three elements, I developed a sensorial interior, where the exterior world of facts was set into dialogue with the interior world of emotion. A physical encounter that expanded on 'interior' as an experiential, relational, phenomenal and emotive space.

Keywords: interior, museum, diorama, sensorial, haptic, history

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Introduction

An invitation to respond to the interior space of RMIT University's First Site gallery provided a unique opportunity to experiment with the dioramic elements employed by traditional natural history museums as a means to frame—or re-frame—the site's external context. Built in 1887, the gallery formerly served as the basement storeroom to the Ancient Order of Hibernians. Consisting of three rectangular rooms linked by large open doorways, each distinct space provided a unique site within which to playfully explore how I might use the interior elements of the diorama to create an immersive felt experience. The following section expands on how the diorama was engaged to develop and deploy an emotive space.

Developed in the late nineteenth century, the traditional natural history museum diorama presented taxidermied animals posed in a replica of their natural habitat further contextualised by a painted backdrop. The life-size scene was viewed from the outside through a glass-fronted screen into the diorama's fabricated interior. The viewing space framed an innovated reconstruction of the natural world (Quinn, 2006).

While my initial investigations identified the constituent elements used in dioramic construction—taxidermy, model making and set painting—I considered how I might transform these methods to create an immersive walk-in installation that might trigger an invisible felt response to the visible exterior facts of the gallery site. This dynamic interchange between the visible and invisible finds echo in Andre Breton's *Les Vases Communicants* (*Communicating Vessels*, 1932), that alludes to the interface between two modes of consciousness, that of an internal and external reality whereby an active exchange is facilitated. "At its centre lies the principal image of the dream as the enabling 'capillary tissue' between the exterior world of facts and the interior world of emotions" (Caws, 1996, p. 21).

Method

While locating my project within the field of contemporary art, I adapted a research tool developed by the sensory ethnologist, Sarah Pink , arriving at an iterative-inductive method that enabled the project to evolve. This method included observation, listening and asking questions such as 'what happens if…?' that facilitated a poetic interpretation in the production of the three installations.

In seeking to heighten a haptic engagement with First Site's interior spaces, I put timelines and historical facts aside, replacing them with less didactic elements that engaged conceptual concerns related

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to the gallery site as an "inter-history" (Attiwill, 2004, p. 7). An inter-history that provided a platform for arrival and departures, where the external facts about the site and the gallery's interiors were set into "dynamic production" (Attiwill, 2004, p. 7). As academic-architect Suzie Attiwill attests, "[b]oxes are good for keeping things contained but they can also be reductive and static… Curiosity… tend[s] to open things up and in so doing, offer[s] lines of flight, creativity and the potential for the new" (Attiwill, 2007, p. 3). As a unique interior, the traditional museum diorama provided initial inspiration from which to experiment with ways to reconceptualise the history of RMIT within the interior of the gallery space.

By isolating three elements within the diorama's interior— taxidermy, model making and set painting—I experimented with these using digital technologies in search of new potentials that might set these historical facts into a dynamic relationship with an interior world of emotion: as living armature; as ground cover; and as soundscape. The following exegesis expands on how the three dioramic elements were developed and deployed.

Digital Technology

In developing my immersive diorama installation, I sought ideas from contemporary artists whose work is informed or inspired by this natural history innovation. *VROOM* (2000) for example was an immersive exhibition in which artist-academic Sarah Kenderdine engaged digital technologies to create an interactive 3D light and sound experience. Using an eight-screen 360° rear projected stereoscopic display system, *VROOM* engaged devices such as wands and motion sensors that responded to a viewer's movements. The work was enhanced through the use of spatial soundscapes. Installed at Melbourne Museum, *VROOM* enabled the museum visitor "… to delight in automata, believe in magic, the phantasmagoric, and to be transported by special effects" (Kenderdine & Hart, 2003, p. 2).

While inspired by Kenderdine's use of the digital to transport the viewer using special effects, budget constraints informed my choice of simpler technologies to experiment with how I might heighten an emotional rather than didactic engagement with the gallery site and its three distinct spaces.

Living Armature

In the first room of the gallery, I experimented with the dioramic element of taxidermy, where animals are presented in their "grand finale" (Kaldal & Rothfels, 2012). While taxidermy is the process

whereby a museum specimen is prepared for presentation in a lifelike pose, its armature—as support for the taxidermied skin—is the unseen interior that amplifies the shape of the skin's former animal. In considering how I might conceptually reference this invisible interior, I found initial resonance in Mark Dion's proposition that in order to critique natural history museums, he needed to "become the museum by personifying its work" (Corrin, Kwon, & Bryson, 1997, p. 98). His suggestion that the various departments of the museum function like "vital organs in a human body" (Corrin et al., 1997, p. 98), paralleled Cornelia Parker's *The Maybe* (1995), where Tilda Swinton was engaged to perform as if asleep, lying inside a museum vitrine during the gallery's opening hours. Swinton's sleeping, breathing form juxtaposed the still objects presented in the other vitrines within the exhibition space, highlighting the museum's lifeless objects with Swinton's aliveness. I found additional influence in Christian Thompson's *We Bury Our Own* (2012) where he holds various representative artefacts from the Pitt Rivers ethnographic collection up to his face or against his body.

Figure 1
Christian Thompson "Invaded Dreams", *We Bury Our Own,* 2012. 100 x 100 cm. C-type print (Image courtesy of the artist)

In referring to himself as "armature," Thompson is able to "…embody the past and be intrinsically linked to the present" (Thompson, 2012, p. 3). By extending Dion, Parker and Thompson's use of the living body as a physical agent led me to consider how I might engage the conceptual support that held, animated and enlivened the interior world of taxidermy's mechanical brace.

A Congress of Birds

Rumi's poem—*Conference of the Birds* (~ 1177)—inspired the title for my next steps in the creation of the sensorial diorama where

his allegory highlighted the need for an interior quest rather than an external ordeal to find spiritual leadership (Attar, 1984). I found contemporary resonance in Marcus Coates' *Dawn Chorus* (2007), where he transformed birdsong to comment on nature in the modern world; that it is not found in the open spaces of the countryside, "… but in the withered memory of something wild and ancient, buried deep within ourselves" (Griffin, 2007, p. 2). Responding to Coates' powerful suggestion that nature resides somewhere buried deep within us, I appropriated Rumi's title and engaged the bird motif to consider how I might evoke a sensorial engagement with the interior of the gallery site; a space where history and interior might be engaged in dynamic relationship rather than in a static re-telling.

Making and Animating Bird-inspired Bonnets

The taxidermied birds presented in the dioramas at Melbourne's Museums Victoria and London's Natural History Museum provided initial inspiration, with their wide variations of size, colour, plumage and pose.

Figure 2
A selection of birds from Museum Victoria ornithology store, and London's Natural History Museum ornithology store, Tring.

The playfulness of Edward Lear (2013)'s nonsense verse and caricature added additional influence and I arrived at the idea of crafting bird-inspired bonnets

There was a Young Lady whose bonnet
Came untied when the birds sate upon it;
But she said, 'I don't care!
All the birds in the air
Are welcome to sit on my bonnet!'

The Judicious Jubilant Jay,
who did up her Back Hair every morning with a
Wreath of Roses
Three feathers, and a Gold Pin.

Figure 3
Edward Lear
nonsense verse
and caricatures
(Lear, 2013.
Courtesy of
Bodleian Library)

There was a young person in red,
Who carefully covered her head,
With a bonnet of leather,
and three lines of feather,
Besides some long ribands of red.

Thompson's (2012) proposition—that he was the "… armature to physically support ideas" (p. 3)—provided the impetus for how I might play with animating the bonnets. In seeking to engage the interior world of emotions with the exterior world of facts, I set about enlisting the physical agent of a model who could provide the armature to animate the bonnets. In thinking about how I might document the model's actions, I turned to Sanna Kannisto's *Act of Flying* (2006). Kannisto captured the stilled motion of hummingbird flight using a stop-frame camera that revealed moments in time that ordinary vision cannot perceive. Engaging Kannisto's method of capturing stilled moments of a moving subject, I progressed by taking a series of still images of a model who provided physical agency to the bird-inspired bonnets.
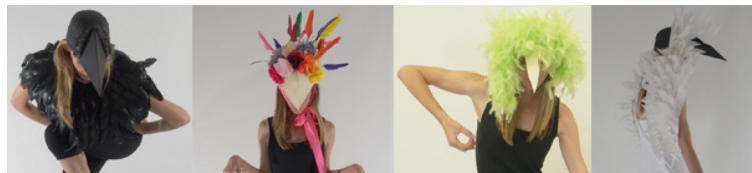
Figure 4
Selection of bird
masks animated
by a model.

Intending to make a selection of these stills as the final outcome, I downloaded the images onto my computer screen and to my delight, as I scrolled rapidly through the photographs, I noticed that the still images came to life similarly to "persistence of vision" (Endt, 2005,

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p. 2), where the suggestion of movement is created when a series of still images are seen in rapid succession. The still images came to life echoing earlier forms of cinema, where Eadweard Muybridge's still images of horses first galloped (1878), and Etienne-Jules Marey photographs of pelicans took flight (1889). By projecting my still images at one-second intervals into the first room of the gallery, a visual vitality was created between the moving images of living armature and the interior space they were projected into setting exterior and interior into the dynamic relationship within the room. This outcome led my investigations onto the second element of the diorama—model making.

Ground Cover

In the second room, I experimented with model making, whereby the dioramic interior consisted of models that replicated shrubs, grassland and rocks to enable the taxidermied animal to look as if it was standing in its natural habitat. In thinking about how I might model this illusion, the former external landscape that First Site now covered provided inspiration.

I invited landscape architect Heather Graham to assist me in identifying the plants that had formerly grown on the site. Her research identified 72 plant species. As many of these plants were alike in appearance, I considered how I might replicate them to highlight their constituent differences: leaves, flowers or bark perhaps. The list of plants that Heather provided piqued my interest because she had referred to them using their Latin binomial nomenclature, a naming system whereby the genus and species of any identified plant are universally recognised.

As a touchstone, Mark Dion engaged this naming convention in *Systema Metropolis* (2007) in recognition of its first proponent—Carl Linnaeus in 1735. Invited by London's Natural History Museum to celebrate Linnaeus's tercentenary, Dion sought assistance from the Museum's science-curators who applied Linnaeus's binomial system to identify and name a collection of plants and insects. While this work is usually conducted in the back of house areas of the museum, Dion brought the scientist-curators into the exhibition space of the Museum to publicly demonstrate this naming method.

In thinking about how I might substitute model making for something less didactic and more sensorial, Linnaeus's binomial naming system provided a pertinent reference. By etching the genus and species names of each plant onto acrylic tags, attaching them to string and suspending them from the gallery ceiling, the

Figure 5
Etched acrylic
tags moving
freely in the air
current

When I directed a spotlight onto the tags as they twirled about, the refracted light was thrown onto the surface of the gallery walls. Evidenced in name only, the plants' former vitality was activated by light reflecting off the tags. The ethereal and immaterial effects of light dwelt temporarily on the surface of the gallery wall. The wall's surface provided what Giuliana Bruno suggests is a form of dwelling that "… engages mediation between subjects and with objects… a surface condition creates a sensitivity to the skin of things… modes of surface encounters and connectivity take place in this theatre of surface"(Bruno, 2014, p. 94). Surface—as gallery walls—provided a dwelling that hosted the effects of refracted light off the acrylic tags. The interior gallery walls became a connective surface that was placed into dynamic relationship with its exterior landscape through the simple technology of a gallery spotlight directed onto acrylic tags.

Through refracted light playing on the interior surface, the once static interior established a platform for arrivals and departures—an "inter-history," where history and interior were set into "dynamic production" (Attiwill, 2014, p. 7).

Echo Chamber

In the third space of the First Site gallery, I engaged the painted backdrop used in dioramic interiors as a point of departure. As the diorama was not only a "technical creation … born of the spirit of light…"(Schivelbusch, 1988, p. 219), it also engaged sound to enhance

the visual and evoke the illusion of realism (Lambourne, 1999). For this reason, in considering how I might transform the third space in the First Site gallery's interior, I experimented with the idea of replacing the diorama's traditional set painting with sound. I arrived at the title *Echo Chamber*, as space "…in which information, ideas, or beliefs are amplified or reinforced by transmission and repetition" (Fowler, 1990). As sound artist Brandon LaBelle (2014) proposes, sound in the form of an echo can "… teach us the dimensions of our surroundings…" (p. 23). Moreover, in addition to sound itself, "[l]istening involves amplifying and transforming the way space is produced and accounted for" (Fischer, 2014, p. 13). Artist duo Marie-Luise Goerke and Matthias Pusch — collectively named *Serotonin* — developed *A parcours through the ocean of heaven. Or: the Levitite* (2016), consisting of five acoustic dioramas that commented on the history of research and collecting at the Museum fur Naturkinde Berlin where the dioramas were installed. Where Serotonin used the acoustic dioramas to comment on the role of the museum in research and collecting, the work also amplified questions about who decides what is recorded, how it is recorded, and what should be remembered?

Figure 6
Echo Chamber
as phenomenal
soundscape.

These questions were further considered in a group exhibition *Hlysnan: The Notion and Politics of Listening* (2013) at the Casino Luxembourg that focused on the art of listening as a means to engage the ephemeral nature of sound rather than the materiality of objects. The Old English word *hlysnan* — to listen — places emphasis on listening with intent. To hear usually refers to automatic or passive sound perception, while listening is purposeful; it implies concentration and awareness of what one is listening to.

While *Hlysnan* engaged sound artists to address and question socio-

political issues, In a similar sonic response to site, artist Hannah Rickards' *Grey light. Left and right back, high up, two small windows* (2014–15), created an eight-channel soundscape to present a detailed spatial image of Seldom Community Hall where she was based as artist-in-residence at Fogo Island Gallery, Canada. She used the room as a container to host the sounds generated by the atmospheric conditions outside, such as the percussive clack of the air vent, the radiators and the foghorn.

Like Rickards who had taken recordings from outside and brought them inside, I recorded sounds from around the gallery site and overlaid them back into space. Presented as a six-channel soundscape, listeners were immersed in a felt aural engagement with the interior space. Dimming the lights aided in amplifying the sonorous qualities of the room. In so doing, the interior took on qualities that Rickards (2014) refers to as an

> … indeterminacy to their form, surface, boundaries – works that, in reference to a phrase by John Cage, are 'less like an object and more like the weather. Because in an object, you can tell where the boundaries are. But in the weather, it's impossible to say when something begins or ends.'

This was an interior that Rickards (2014) refers to as a "climate of engagement" where the various elements within the room were defined by sound: "To listen is to enter a spatiality in which time becomes space, located between past, present, and future and encompassing notions of the remainder — the trace …" (Fischer, 2014, p. 16).

Where the diorama presented remnant echoes of First Site's external landscape, so too, as LaBelle proposes the echo "… in other words, locates us through a repetition, or a repeat, and in repeating is able to be kept in the present and remembered … Echo is a type of mimicry: a sound that comes back to us as, yet as if from another body… echo then is a form of doubling, or dubbing, a voice made strange precisely by its re-play, by returning what we have heard before, yet from another" (LaBelle, 2012, pp. 23-24) .

By echoing the gallery's exterior back into its interior as sound, the past was brought into the present as a felt rather than didactic experience.

Conclusion

While my initial investigations identified the constituent elements used in dioramic construction—taxidermy, model making and

painting—these static signature elements of the display were transformed to create a space where the exterior historical facts were placed into dynamic relationship with the interior world of emotion. Using simple digital technologies, the first space animated the hidden internal support structure of taxidermy through living armature. The second interior, the spirited life of plants found dwelling on the connective surface between their former exterior landscape and the interior gallery walls. In the third room, by replacing set painting with sound, the interior space became less like an object and more like the weather. Digital technologies served to transform the diorama's traditional static exterior world of facts, and in so doing, amplified an interior world of emotions. The exterior history of the gallery site was set into a dynamic relationship with its interior phenomenon resulting in a sensorial diorama; an encounter that expanded on the notion of the interior as an experiential, relational, phenomenal and emotive space.

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