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Through the Looking Glass

Dioramas, Bodies, and Performances in New York

Noémie Étienne

DIORAMAS ARE MUSEUM DISPLAYS that resemble photographs. Defined by their multi-mediality (uniting painting, sculpture, lightening but also collected material culture, casting or taxidermy), dioramas are devices belonging to the fields of natural history, anthropology, history, but also to popular culture in fairs and malls since the 19th century. Often made in order to reproduce a scene in a mimetic way, they are inventing a reality that never existed, as Umberto Eco already argued.¹ Moreover, dioramas are complex three-dimensional installations made of a variety of materials, such as paint, wood, plaster, fur, iron, or paper. Even though dioramas necessarily involve a mixture of media and material, they inevitably become an image from a chosen angle when reproduced in an article such as this one. Thus, when they are photographed, dioramas look like two-dimensional pictures. Their multimedia and multidimensional characteristics are masked by their reproduction.

As a likely consequence of these phenomena, the sense of sight has been a central element in the study of dioramas by scholars coming from a variety of disciplines. In media history, dioramas are frequently presented as an anticipation of cinema.² Alison Griffiths suggests that each diorama might be considered a film scene.³ With reference to Walter Benjamin and the panorama, Jonathan Crary emphasizes the emergence in the 19th century of a mobile spectator whose shifting

¹ See for instance Stephen Christopher Quinn: *Windows on Nature. The Great Habitat Dioramas of the American Museum of Natural History*, New York 2006; Umberto Eco: *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays*, trans. by William Weaver, San Diego/New York/London 1986, pp. 3–58. For a critic of such displays, see Donna Haraway: *Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden*, New York City, 1908–1936, in: *Social Text* 11 (1984), pp. 20–64.

² See for example Birgit Verwiebe: *Lichtspiele: Vom Mondscheintransparent zum Diorama*, Stuttgart 1997.

³ Alison Griffiths: *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology & Turn-of-the-Century Visual Culture*, New York 2002, p. 49. See also Erkki Huhtamo: *Illusions in Motion: Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles*, Cambridge 2013; Jonathan Crary: *Techniques of the Observer*, Cambridge 1991, p. 112.

perception presents things in their multitude rather than their singularity.⁴ However, the spectator described in the books cited above is often a moving eye without real embodiment.

In this article, I would like to provide an additional perspective for the study of dioramas. As I will suggest, bodies and performances are also key in the approach of the topic. I will argue that bodies are not only represented in anthropological dioramas through plaster or wax figures, but that real, alive human bodies are central to the production and reception of such displays. In terms of methodology, I was inspired by the concept of the *contact zone*, developed by Marie Louis Pratt.⁵ The content of this paper draws on my most recent book, in which I studied the anthropological dioramas made for two museums in the United States: The Museum of Natural History in New York; and the New York State Museum in Albany (the capital of New York State). Two men, with different levels of fame, were in charge of such dioramas: the famous anthropologist Franz Boas in New York; and the Native American (Seneca) anthropologist Arthur C. Parker in Albany.⁶

Differentiating regimes of perspective is useful for establishing a typology of dioramas: first, picture-dioramas are front-facing and often behind glass, and they have a large painting as their background. Many conform to this pattern, including all those created by Arthur C. Parker at Albany. A perspective is created by the construction and landscape, and this unavoidable point of view suggests a fixed spectator. Second, display-case dioramas, such as the many dioramas fabricated by Franz Boas in New York, are installations that the visitor can walk around, and they therefore afford numerous points of view. Third, milieu dioramas are truly immersive ensembles in which spectators, upon entering them, are decentered, and participative, as in the model described by Julie Reiss and Claire Bishop in relation to contemporary art installations.⁷

In the first part of the article, I would like to shed light on the different ways human bodies are involved in the fabrication of such displays. In the second part, I will demonstrate how physical contact was also key to their reception, and even something expected and encouraged in the museums. Finally, as I will show in the third part of this article, dioramas themselves were not only museum displays in the first decades of the 20th century, but also the settings for performances that

⁴ Crary: *Techniques of the Observer* (as note 3), pp. 20–21.

⁵ Mary Louise Pratt: *Arts of the Contact Zone*, in: *Profession* 1991, pp. 33–40.

⁶ For a larger introduction and contextualization of dioramas, see Noémie Étienne: *Les autres et les ancêtres. Les dioramas de Franz Boas et Arthur C. Parker à New York, 1900, Dijon 2020*.

⁷ Julie Reiss: *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art*, Cambridge 1999. See also Claire Bishop: *Installation Art: A Critical History*, London 2005.

are today only recorded in photographs. These images have been largely fabricated by the communication and pedagogy department of the American Museum of Natural History around 1910–1930, and are by no means a neutral record of activities. As any kind of source, they have to be understood not only as direct traces of activities, but also as highly staged moments that a variety of actors wanted to be recorded. Nevertheless, this material informs us on the priorities of the museum and the expected reception of dioramas at the time. My argument is that the issue of contact was—and still is—essential, albeit rarely noted by scholars. Dioramas are contact zones and potentially conflict zones. Thus, I intend to dissociate the diorama from the history of photography and cinema, two media with which it is often compared, in order to underline its materiality, its three-dimensionality, and the politics of its fabrication.

1. Bodies in the Making

Anthropological dioramas feature human figures in the way of mannequins. The people represented in such displays are manipulating objects, focusing on activities more or less familiar to the spectator. Franz Boas is a German anthropologist known for having imported such dioramas to the United States at the end of the 19th century. In this context, Boas created two different kind of life groups: picture-dioramas and display-case dioramas, focusing mostly on native populations from the Northwestern Coast of the United States. For Boas, the groups were a bridge to further learning while also being entertainment. They had to be »attractive as well as instructive,«⁸ since the first guaranteed the second, and teach the visitor the function of certain artefacts and ceremonies. Thus, the spatial display of the collections was to be both ludic and pedagogic, following a double mandate subsequently reaffirmed by a number of North American museum practitioners who took the American Museum of Natural History as their model.⁹

Plaster mannequins were meant to teach the meaning of objects. Morris Ketchum Jesup, director of the American Museum of Natural History from 1881 to 1908, directly compared the plaster figures within the dioramas with exhibition labels: »Most of the work in the plaster shop is intended to furnish figures which are needed to elucidate the meaning of specimens; that is to say, they serve the

⁸ Frederic A. Lucas: The Story of Museum Groups. Part 1, in: *American Museum Journal* 14/1 (1914), p. 6.

⁹ Henry Fairfield Osborn: The Museum of the Future, in: *American Museum Journal* 11/7 (1911), pp. 223–26; Maurice A. Bigelow: The Educational Value of the American Museum of Natural History, in: *American Museum Journal* 11/7 (1911), pp. 234–235.

same purpose as descriptive labels.¹⁰ In 1911, Frederic A. Lucas, the director of the museum, emphasized again that educational value was found in the relationship of the objects and the figures who used to stage them: »In our ethnological halls you see not only the objects used by strange and far-off people, but the people themselves engaged in the occupations of everyday life.«¹¹ These displays made artefacts less dependent of evolutionist discourse, contextualizing and foregrounding their function while also »musealizing« them as specimen to be preserved and explained.

Interestingly enough, this physical interaction with the object in order to reveal—that is, fix—its meaning recalls the etymology of the word *display*, which comes from the medieval Latin *displicare*, meaning »deploy« but also »unfold«.¹² In her book on 17th century Roman palaces, Gail Feigenbaum shows that the display of objects such as tapestries, garments, and furniture is the performance by which different social, secular, and religious groups inhabit their apartments and show off their possessions. To exhibit is a practice belonging to the body (of the figure and the spectator) in movement; the word *display* is a verb of both action and result.¹³ The diorama gives form to the etymology of the word *display*, unfolding the meaning of an object by deploying fabricated bodies to put it to work.

Native bodies were at the center of such displays. Indeed, the anthropological dioramas of the American Museum of Natural History created by Franz Boas were representing Native Americans performing ritual dances or using tools. Boas used photography to prepare his dioramas, and documented the ceremonies he aimed to picture.¹⁴ At least three images are known for the group representing crafts associated with the cedar tree, one of the first dioramas installed by Boas in the American Museum of Natural History in the late 19th century. These photographs were taken by Oregon C. Hastings, a Canadian commercial photographer based at Fort Rupert in British Columbia and a friend of the Tlingit ethnologist George Hunt, who collaborated with Boas on a study of Kwakwaka'wakw culture, a First Nations people in British Columbia. The first image shows a woman, photo-

¹⁰ Report by Morris Ketchum Jesup, 18 May 1898, New York, AMNH, Library Archives, Administrative Files, New York.

¹¹ Frederic A. Lucas: Evolution of the Educational Spirit in Museums, in: American Museum Journal 11/7 (1911), p. 228.

¹² Gail Feigenbaum: Introduction: Art and Display in Principle and in Practice, in: Gail Feigenbaum and Francesco Freddolini (eds.): The Display of Art in Roman Palaces, 1550–1750, Los Angeles 2014, p. 11.

¹³ »A dynamic concept of display is embodied in the thought and performance leading to and responding to the arrangement of things. Display, as opposed to collecting, assumes change.« Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁴ On Boas and photography, see Ira Jacknis: Franz Boas and Photography, in: Studies in Visual Communication 10/1 (1984), pp. 2–60.

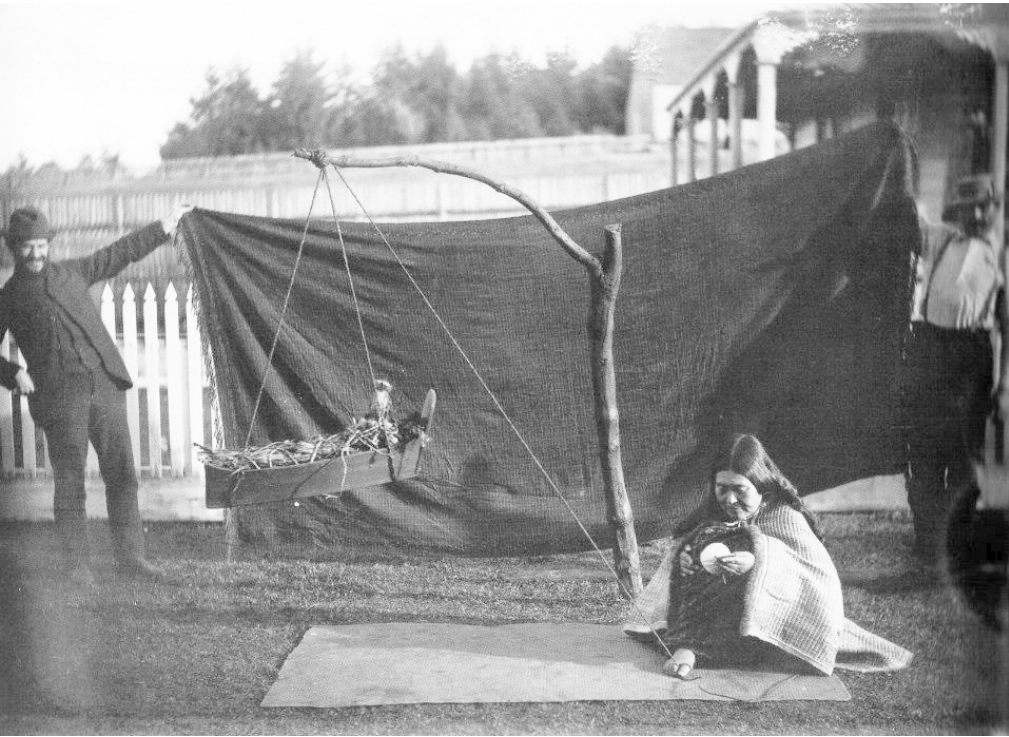


Fig. 1. *A Kwakwaka'wakw Woman Weaving, with Franz Boas and George Hunt Standing behind Her*, Tsaxis (Fort Rupert), British Columbia, 1894.

graphed in profile, shredding cedar bark in front of a large dark blanket.¹⁵ The second shows a similar scene taken from behind the woman, while the man holding up the blanket can be viewed on the right. The third is more explicit about the staging of the image, since the two men holding the blanket (Boas and Hunt) are visible and smiling (Fig. 1). This image reveals the stage machinery of the project. The two people holding the blanket are visible while the woman goes about her activity pretending to ignore their presence. In the background is a form of colonial architecture, perhaps a veranda, where we can see a series of columns, along with picket fences and houses.

The bodies involved in the production of the dioramas are not only the ones fictionally staged of the Native women, but the ones of the anthropologists themselves. Indeed, anthropologists used their own bodies to explain the function of an object or a pose during a ceremony. The anthropologist Aaron Glass studied

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 33–34.



Fig. 2. Franz Boas, *Hamat'sa Coming Out Of Secret Room: Ceremony for Expelling Cannibals* 1895.

the photographs of Franz Boas taken during the construction of the *Hamat'sa Life Group* in 1895, which premiered that same year at the Cotton States and International Exposition (Atlanta World's Fair) before its permanent installation at the National Museum in Washington, D. C. (Fig. 2). The point of departure for this diorama was the field research that Boas had done the previous year on the ceremonies and regalia of the Kwakwaka'wakw. In an effort to communicate to his colleagues the iconography of the initiation ceremony represented in the group, Boas himself imitated the poses that he wished the figures to be given in the corridors of the museum (Fig. 3).¹⁶ Thus, the anthropologist transmitted information not only through the photographs and notes taken during an expedition the previous year to Fort Rupert, Vancouver Island, but also by miming the way in which he wished to see the movements represented.¹⁷

¹⁶ Aaron Glass: On the Circulation of Ethnographic Knowledge, in: Material World (blog), 22 October 2006, under: <https://www.materialworldblog.com/2006/10/on-the-circulation-of-ethnographic-knowledge/> (December 20 2019). See also Aaron Glass: Frozen Poses: Hamat'sa Dioramas, Recursive Representation, Making of a Kwakwaka'wakw Icon, in: Christopher Morton and Elizabeth Edwards (eds.): *Photography, Anthropology and History: Expanding the Frame*, Farnham 2009, pp. 89–116.

¹⁷ Alice Beck Kehoe: Boas as Hamat'sa: Appropriate for the Medal for Exemplary Service to Anthropology Award?, in: *Anthropology News* 47/2 (2006), pp. 4–5. See also Julie



Fig. 3. Franz Boas Posing for Figure in an Exhibit Entitled »Hamats'a Coming Out of secret room,« c. 1895.

In addition to anthropologists and models, other people were also involved in the making of dioramas, as a case study of the dioramas made under the supervision of Arthur C. Parker at the New York State Museum in Albany will show.¹⁸ When it was impossible to obtain all the objects necessary for the full realization of a diorama, Arthur C. Parker took the liberty of fabricating them. The example of the garments is particularly striking in this context, since the plaster figures that used to exhibit various specimens (masks, baskets, and so on) also required shoes and garments to clothe them. In this context, he asked two Seneca-Oneida women, Alice Shongo and her daughter

Maude (later Maude Shongo Hurd), who were hired to make these accessories. To make this clothing, forgotten techniques had to be relearned. Thus, Parker wrote to Julia Crouse, another Native woman involved in the fabrication of clothes for the dioramas: »Moose hair embroidery is not difficult. We have samples of the work which plainly show the method.«¹⁹ Indeed, museum holdings served as an archive of authentic exemplars and traditional knowledge.

Dioramas present men and women performing manual activities, some of which had partly fallen out of practice. They exhibit historical objects collected by anthropologists in the field and the fabricated pieces commissioned by the museum. In addition, figures of the contemporary Native American craftswomen who had produced some of the items on display were integrated into the installation. Parker made a cast of Maude Shongo during one of her visits to the museum to study its collection of craft work. Her plaster effigy appeared as a basket weav-

Brown: *Contesting Images: Photography and the World's Columbian Exposition*, Tucson 1994.

¹⁸ Noémie Étienne: *Memory in Action. Clothing, Art, and Authenticity in Anthropological Dioramas* (New York, 1900), in: *Material Culture Review* 2014, pp. 46–59.

¹⁹ Letter from Arthur Parker to Julia Crouse, 6 January 1910, Albany, NYSM, Life Groups, file 9.

er in the *Iroquois Industries* diorama and was surrounded by the baskets she herself had woven. In a vertiginous play of interreflections, dioramas preserved craft knowledge and displayed contemporary objects produced through its revival while also exhibiting the fabricated likenesses of the women and men who made them.

2. Boarding the Canoe

Multiple bodies are involved in the production of anthropological dioramas. First, dioramas are showing mannequins representing people. Second, such displays are made through the physical involvement of scientists, models, artists, and artisans. Furthermore, the bodies of the beholders are also an expected dimension of their reception: indeed, dioramas are the theater of multiple performances, some of them left unrecorded and forgotten today. In the second part of this article, one main case-study will allow me to exemplify this point: the example of a milieu diorama built around a Haida canoe and constructed in the American Museum of Natural History around 1910, four years after Franz Boas left the museum to become a professor at Columbia University in New York. At this time, the canoe was populated by plaster mannequins made by the sculptor Sigurd Neandross. As I will show, children were expected to enter this specific display, allowing a direct and playful contact with the scene (Fig. 4).

The American Museum of Natural history bought the huge canoe at the center of this display in 1881 in British Columbia.²⁰ By 1884, it was hung from the ceiling of a hall, which is how canoes had generally been exhibited in European curiosity cabinets since the 17th century. The same form of installation was chosen for the Canadian pavilion in the Crystal Palace in 1851, for instance, which was created under the direction of the German architect and theoretician Gottfried Semper, who foregrounded objects made by the First Nations and hung a large canoe from the ceiling.²¹

In New York, the very size of the canoe—about twenty meters long—led the museum to try a number of different means of display.²² In 1908, at the suggestion

²⁰ The Great Canoe in the Grand Gallery, American Museum of Natural History, under: <https://www.amnh.org/explore/news-blogs/on-exhibit-posts/the-great-canoe-in-the-grand-gallery> (December 20 2019).

²¹ Alina Payne: *From Ornament to Object: Genealogies of Architectural Modernism*, New Haven/London 2012, pp. 52–53.

²² »The monstrous boat hung for many years from the ceiling of the hall, taking its present place in 1908.« Mary Cynthia Dickerson: *Herculean Task in Museum Exhibition: Foreword regarding the Ceremonial Canoe Scene in the North Pacific Hall*, in: *American Museum Journal* 10/8 (1910), p. 227.



Fig. 4. *Children viewing the Great Canoe, 1911.*

of the soldier and adventurer George T. Emmons, who had taken part in the Jesup North Pacific Expedition (1897–1902) organized by the American Museum of Natural History, the canoe was transported to the central hall to be part of a diorama. Emmons, Clark Wissler (Boas's successor), and the museum director Hermon Bumpus wanted to use this object as »a great open exhibition case in which to set forth the primitive culture of the Northwest Coast Indians.«²³ As with other similar displays, the installation was originally intended to bring a number of different items together in a single space and allow »attractive use of the rich Northwest Coast materials in the possession of the Museum.«²⁴ The display underwent considerable change during the 20th century, in particular in its relation to the public. There were nevertheless periods when it was possible to enter this diorama. In a photo dating to 1911, the year in which the group was inaugurated, children are climbing into the canoe (Fig. 4).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

In the 1950s, however, the museum put barriers in place to prevent people from accessing the canoe. Thereafter, in accordance with the patrimonial regime that separates objects from the public, the only people who could touch it were the restorers. In the early years of the 21st century, the canoe was again hung from the ceiling—in the Grand Gallery, where it can still be seen today. Touch, even when forbidden, remained an integral part of the reception of the canoe. Holden Caulfield, the young protagonist of J. D. Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), recounts his fascination with the canoe, which is intimately linked with involuntary but real and repeated contacts with the object:

»I loved that damn museum. I remember you had to go through the Indian Room to get to the auditorium. [...] Then you'd pass by this long, long, Indian war canoe, about as long as three goddam Cadillacs in a row, with about twenty Indians in it, some of them paddling, some of them just standing around looking tough, and they all had war paint all over their faces. There was one very spooky guy in the back of the canoe, with a mask on. He was the witch doctor. He gave me the creeps, but I liked him anyway. Another thing, if you touched one of the paddles or anything while you were passing, one of the guards would say to you, »Don't touch anything, children,« but he always said it in a nice voice, not like a goddam cop or anything.«²⁵

Thus, even long after direct interaction with the canoe was prohibited by the museum, the memories of its reception are connected to furtive, subtle (yet illegal) physical contact.

The numerous photographs in the museum's archives featuring children testify both to the pedagogical efforts of the American Museum of Natural History (and other museums on the East Coast of the United States) and to the importance attributed by the museum to keeping an archive of its activities. The dioramas were one of the high points of organized school visits, as we know from the photographs of the time but also from the memories of many New Yorkers. The dioramas afforded an experience mediated by touch and play. Around the turn-of-the-century, this ludic dimension was essential. The narrativization of objects in dioramas, achieved through the bodies of figures and visitors, maps onto the way in which the mannequins themselves were »brought into play«. This distinguishes the diorama from other media such as painting or photography: the diorama involves a sort of performance, whether physical or symbolic. The diorama represents an action and is the locus of an experience: the spectators' interactions with it are partly anticipated by the artists and curators of the museum.

²⁵ J. D. Salinger: *The Catcher in the Rye*, New York 1962, pp. 126–27.

This type of interplay was ludic, pedagogic, and entertaining. It was also certainly political. Milieu dioramas in particular were places where non-Native adults and children were able to observe but also to interact with (often misrepresented) Indigenous culture. In the late 19th century, Native Americans, as an abstract concept rather than a living and plural reality, gained authenticity (but without loss of exoticism) and were moved from the status of »alien savages« to that of »first Americans.«²⁶ Between 1880 and 1920, the massive and continuous arrival of immigrants, notably from Southern and Eastern Europe, profoundly transformed North American society. Defining »Americanness« had become a priority, and one of the mechanisms for this was the establishment of a direct line of descent between Native Americans and the »New« Americans.²⁷ That rhetoric became possible only when white people began to see Native Americans as less menacing—that is, once a large part had been killed or confined to reservations. The 1880s marked the end of the most intense armed conflict between Native Americans and the U.S. government. Precisely at this time, the United States saw a proliferation in popular culture of performances and spectacles featuring white people—and sometimes Native Americans too—»playing Indian.«²⁸ Studying the phenomenon, scholars such as Philip Deloria and Rayna Green argue that constructing and re-enacting the characters of »the Indian« and »Indianness« in performances, costumes, and holiday camps made it possible to create and develop a specifically American identity.²⁹ Anthropological dioramas created in the United States around 1900 were among the devices that—like other phenomena such as musicals, historical reconstitutions, and reenactments—paved the way for the assimilation and appropriation of Native American culture and history into the development of an American identity.

²⁶ »By an ironic semantic twist, by the end of the 19th century, the same Euro-Americans who had once viewed American Indians as alien savages came to embrace them as the true, the natural, the »first Americans,« icons of the nation and its territory.« Alan Trachtenberg: *Shades of Hiawatha: Staging Indians, Making Americans, 1880–1930*, New York 2004, p. 10.

²⁷ Leah Dilworth: *Imagining Indians in the Southwest: Persistent Visions of a Primitive Past*, Washington, D. C. 1996, p. 184.

²⁸ Rayna Green: *The Tribe Called Wannabee: Indian in America and Europe*, in: *Folklore* 99/1 (1988), pp. 35–36.

²⁹ Philip J. Deloria: *Playing Indian*, New Haven 1998.

3. Dioramas and/as Performance

Unlike milieu dioramas, which the spectator can enter, picture dioramas and display-case dioramas are frontal installations where the interplay with the scene is not happening physically. Yet many displays showing mannequins and anthropological artefacts in a mimetic setting are complicating this typology: They show the variety of displays created in New York in the first decades of the 20th century in order to be activated by the beholder's body. In the third part of this article, I will argue that such displays are connected to other forms of activities typical of the period, like tourism and scouting. On the one hand, such dioramas are generating movements such as travels to the Southwest. On the other hand, actions are also taking places in the museum itself, transforming such installations into a setting for performances that have not always been recorded.

One of such installations presented a tepee, which could be seen in the Hall of American Indians at the American Museum of Natural History in 1907, the date at which it was photographed. The two photographs documenting it show the opening in the tepee through which people are looking at the scene unfolding inside. In the first image, a group of children—monitored by one of the museum guides—peers in. For the second image, the photographer positioned himself and his camera in front of the opening so that we all can see a woman preparing a fire. Inside the tepee, the figures seem to look out at the spectator as if they have been surprised at their activities. In this example, the display is animated when visitors activate the object with their imagination and perceive the figures reacting to their arrival. Such staging resembles those at the universal expositions and world's fairs of the 19th century, where visitors watched autochthonous performers demonstrate everyday activities.

Another activity at the frontier between performances, observation, learning and interacting with Indigenous people at the time is tourism. At the end of the 19th century, visits were organized for tourist to the Southwest of the United States, in order to observe performances and dances that were described as particularly interesting and preserved, such as the Moki or Hopi Snake Dances in Arizona. In this context, the tourist can also be playing at the frontier of the specimen, and, while doing so, posing for photography. Between 1895 and 1896, the art historian Aby Warburg traveled throughout the United States. He came from Germany for his brother's wedding, disembarking in New York, where he met Franz Boas. In 1896, he visited the Southwest, in particular Arizona, New Mexico, and California. During his trip, he had himself photographed with a Kachina mask on his head but not lowered over his face, which gave him a borderline interaction with the object that could be described as ›touristic.‹ He located himself symbolically



Fig. 5. *Doing Indian Dances*, Hall of Plains Indians, 1939.

between participation and observation, creating an experience for himself that was at once ludic, simulated, and real.

Moreover, tourism generated dioramas as much as dioramas generated tourism. In 1923, while a patient at the Bellevue sanatorium in Kreuzlingen, Switzerland, Warburg gave a lecture about his trip to the United States.³⁰ Warburg had attended an Antelope Dance performance in the Pueblo de San Ildefonso in New Mexico, not far from Santa Fe, during which the dancers' movements reenacted those of their totem animal. When Warburg returned to Arizona after his stay in California, in late March 1896, he and his guide visited the villages of Walpi and Oraibi and witnessed a Kachina Maize Dance. During the 1890s, Warburg also attended a series of performances that were given recognition in the national

³⁰ Aby M. Warburg: *Schlangenritual: Ein Reisebericht*, Berlin 1988. That book is a translation of *A Lecture on Serpent Ritual*, in: *Journal of the Warburg Institute* 2 (1938–39), pp. 222–292, which is itself a translation of a compilation of Warburg's lecture notes from 1923.

press.³¹ Warburg did not witness the Snake Dance, which is held every August alternately in the villages of Walpi and Oraibi. His knowledge of the ceremony was garnered from images in books and in particular from the tourist brochures he owned, but also likely from dioramas. In 1923, when Warburg was giving his lecture at Kreuzlingen, dioramas representing the Hopi Snake Dance were omnipresent in museums and certainly contributed to the interest of Warburg and his audience in the ceremony. Indeed, the Snake Dance quickly became a must for dioramas created after the First World War.³² Seemingly every institution had to have one, whether miniature or life-size. Their view might have stimulated Warburg and others to go west and develop their own experience of the scenes dioramas depicted.

In the museum, performances were also realized in front of dioramas. These are parts of the display that are mainly lost to us today, but dioramas were often the stages of actions orchestrated in order to invite mostly non-native children to integrate part of native culture. Indeed, after the pedagogical reforms undertaken around the turn of the century, children constituted the institution's key audience. In a revealing fashion, a photo from 1939, titled *Doing Indian Dances*, shows the same tepee I mentioned earlier, but this time the children are pictured (Fig. 5). Girls and boys are dancing in front of the tepee. On their heads they wear paper headdresses, and they are brandishing cardboard weapons. The scene is caricatural, but it shows the bodily exercises favored by the museum in imitation of Native American practices. This game was not only organized inside the museum, it was photographed there. Dioramas were no longer a form of display; rather, they became decor, a sort of backdrop to the children's play that the museum wanted to be recorded.

The images of costumed young children in front of a tepee are reminiscent of other contemporary projects that involved children, such as the Boy Scouts of America, which was founded by Ernest Thompson Seton in 1910. Seton also organized summer camps for young girls and boys; a photo of one of the camps shows a group of children in front of a tepee. The name of this imaginary tribe, Sinaway (away with sin), accurately articulates Seton's objectives: »playing Indians« made it possible for young people to rediscover an authentic world far from a civilization that he considered »a failure.«³³

³¹ Dilworth: *Imagining Indians in the Southwest* (as note 27), p. 21.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 21–75.

³³ »Our system has broken down. [...] Our civilization is a failure. Whenever pushed to its logical conclusion, it makes one millionaire and a million paupers. There is no complete happiness under its blight.« Ernest Thompson Seton: *Gospel of the Red Man: An Indian Bible*, Garden City 1939, p. 117, quoted in Dilworth: *Imagining Indians in the Southwest* (as note 27), p. 99, see also p. 103.

Finally, a last example is shedding light on how the reception of dioramas implies a physical, bodily, movement-oriented response. To conclude this third part, I would like to suggest that the dioramas seen at the Museum of Natural History in New York had repercussion a couple of decades later in another museum in the city, namely the Museum of Modern Art. In 1941, the exhibition *Indian Art of the United States*, curated by Frederic H. Douglass and René d'Harnoncourt, opened at the MoMA and underlined the link between Native American objects and Euro-American culture.³⁴ In contemporary discourse about this exhibition, but also in the historiography as it has developed since the 1990s, dioramas have been presented as the model of display that was avoided. Alfred H. Barr Jr., MoMA's first director, later described the 1941 exhibition as a major museographical innovation that had avoided both »the purely aesthetic isolation and the waxworks of the habitat group.«³⁵ For art historians such as Susan L. Meyn and W. Jackson Rushing, their abandonment was a breakthrough, inaugurating a new mode of existence for ethnographic objects as art. Meyn writes,

»Even though there had been discussions about presenting ethnographic items for their inherent aesthetic qualities, particularly in the Southwest and at the Museum of Northern Arizona, the 1931 exposition displayed Indian objects—baskets, pottery, weaving, quillwork, and easel paintings—as art. Objects in the exhibit were not shown in a typical, scientific museum setting—that is, a natural history diorama.«³⁶

Yet the rupture between dioramas and the exhibitions instituted by the Indian Arts and Crafts Board was by no means as simple as one might think. Indeed, it is worth noting that d'Harnoncourt's 1941 exhibition at the MoMA also included performances, such as that of the sand painters. Photographs of this performance are similar to those taken of the dioramas at the American Museum of Natural History about twenty years before, and suggest that dioramas had an (most likely unwanted) echo in a museum such as the MoMA. And even if this show is well known for being somehow a rupture with earlier, more ethnographic or nature historical displays, it is interesting to note that actually such performances repro-

³⁴ Frederic H. Douglas and René d'Harnoncourt: *Indian Art of the United States*, New York 1941, p. 8.

³⁵ Statement by Alfred H. Barr Jr., in: René d'Harnoncourt, 1901–1968: *A Tribute*, New York 1968, n.p.; quoted in W. Jackson Rushing: *Marketing the Affinity of the Primitive and the Modern: René d'Harnoncourt and Indian Art of the United States*, in: Janet Catherine Berlo (ed.): *The Early Years of Native American Art History: The Politics of Scholarship and Collecting*, Seattle 1992, p. 194.

³⁶ Susan Labry Meyn: *More than Curiosities: A Grassroots History of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board and Its Precursors, 1920–1942*, Lanham 2001, p. 59.

duced earlier traditional dioramas from the Museum of Natural History, just a little down north in the city. In this context, the performers imitate the diorama as much as the diorama imitates the performers.

4. Conclusion

Dioramas created in New York around 1900 are way more than bi-dimensional images whose fabrication is anticipating the invention of photographs or movies. They are tri-dimensional, multimedia displays whose physicality should be considered. First of all, their making includes different kinds of bodies, such as the ones of the models and anthropologists who made them, be it through casts, clothes productions, or bodily transmission of knowledge. Second, their reception is also physically acted out by the beholders, as the existence of so many photographic documents produced inside the institution attest. Children in particular were expected to interact with the plaster mannequins and even with the material culture preserved in the museum. Indeed, dioramas generated actions: the beholders experienced a simulacrum of native culture in front of dioramas through the reenactment of prototypical dances and ceremonies, and even travelled further away in order to visit some of the places depicted in the museum.

Furthermore, I suggest in this article a broader definition of the diorama, not only as a multimedia installation mixing sculpture and painting in a mimetic scene, but also as a place of physical, bodily experience. Around 1900 in the United States, the actors involved in the making of such displays called them »Life Groups« rather than »dioramas.« For instance, Boas used the words »life groups« or »installation«³⁷ to describe the examples mentioned above. In the view of his contemporaries, what such displays have all in common is a mix of instruction and entertainment. Indeed, the installations mentioned above were produced in order to address this concern: allowing a pedagogical yet entertaining mediation of knowledge in the museum. Furthermore, all of them are connected to a potentially active, contact-based form of reception. Defining the diorama in a historically correct perspective should therefore not only be made through a formal analysis aiming to underline visual similitudes between displays, but can be even more productive (and exact) when approached through the lens of the time, namely as a place for performances allowing both teaching and playing, knowledge production and mediation.

³⁷ Claude Imbert: Boas, de Berlin à New York, in: Michel Espagne and Isabelle Kalinowski (eds.): Franz Boas: Le travail du regard, Paris 2013, p. 16.

To conclude, I would like to share an anecdote showing how diorama are still materially embodying memories. Indeed, their archival dimension (as noted in the example from Albany) is still generating performances today. Even if the context has drastically changed, and if certain of such displays are currently dismantled or strongly criticized,³⁸ other dioramas function as sources for Native communities. Indeed, dioramas do not only have a materiality but a form of temporality and exist over time. In 2019, I attended a talk in New York given by the Kwakwakaw'kaw activist Andy Everson (a descent of George Hunt whom I mentioned earlier in his work with Boas).³⁹ Everson explained that he and his community were actually reenacting Boas's dioramas as part of their own culture that had been greatly attacked and destroyed between the early 20th century and today. As they were lacking sources and records, he suggested observing such dioramas as archives in order to reproduce some of the ceremonies lost in time—despite the fact that, as we have seen, such displays were highly staged. However, as mimetic displays made by an important anthropologist working in connection with a native informant, Boas's dioramas are considered today as valuable enough to be used as information sources. In this case, the performance potential of the dioramas I studied in this article is reactivated one more time. Because of their mimetic dimension, they further generate the reproduction of certain gestures by Native people. As much as dioramas were imitating—and therefore, as Eco stated, inventing (hyperreal) actions and performances, they were—and still are—producing new realities.

Picture credits:

Fig. 1: New York, American Museum of Natural History. Photo: Oregon C. Hastings. American Museum of Natural History Library, image no. 11604.

Fig. 2: National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian, Wahsington DC.

Fig. 3: The Smithsonian Museum, Washington DC.

Fig. 4: New York, American Museum of Natural History. Photo: Julius Kirschner. American Museum of Natural History Library, image no. 33596.

Fig. 5: New York, American Museum of Natural History. Photo: Thane Bierwer. American Museum of Natural History Library, image no. 291194.

³⁸ See for instance Ana Fota: What is Wrong with this Diorama? You Can Read All About It, in: New York Times, March 20, 2019, under: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/20/arts/design/natural-history-museum-diorama.html> (December 20 2019).

³⁹ Andy Everson: A Book of Treasures: Utilizing Hunt-Boas Texts in the Contemporary Kwakwaka'wakw Potlatch, Symposium *Field/Fair/Museum*, February 15 2019, Bard Graduate Center, NYC, under: <https://www.bgc.bard.edu/events/925/15-feb-2019-symposium-field> (December 20 2019).



Fig. 1