Chapter 61
Immersing People in Scientific Knowledge and Technological Innovation Through Disney's Use of Installation Art

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ABSTRACT

This chapter argues that installation art is a powerful, but underused, method for presenting scientific knowledge and visions of technological innovation. It reviews Disney's extremely successful exhibits at the 64-65 fair as iconic examples of art installations designed to provide strong narrative experiences of technological innovation. Disney used different aspects of installation art to present powerful immersive installations as presentation of technological and scientific knowledge through multiple media. The goal is to identify general methods for conveying such knowledge to general, lay audiences in ways that might not only encourage greater understanding, but also inspire future generations toward scientific and technological discovery.

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.

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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 UNESEF. 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.

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)