



'Brutal magic': Staging Human-Environmental Relations in the Anthropocene

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When Charles Baudelaire visited the diorama, a form of nineteenth-century popular entertainment, he was entranced by its evident falseness which gave way to what he termed 'useful truths'. By generating a convincing illusion of nature through conspicuously mechanical means, the diorama provoked its spectators to experience an intersubjective engagement with their environment. The form was later marshalled in the service of natural history, but the pedagogical and ideological imperatives of the early twentieth-century museum denied the explicit falsehood that was so central to the original diorama. When the form was revived by twenty-first century contemporary artists, the open acknowledgement of its illusory quality was restored as part of a critique of singular authority. Reckoning with the role of deception in an Anthropocene diorama displayed in Paris's Museum of Hunting and Nature, this article asks how what Baudelaire termed the diorama's 'brutal magic' might speak to environmental lies and truths today.



Disappointed by the conventionality of landscape paintings on view at the 1859 Salon, the poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire claimed he would have preferred to visit the diorama:

I want to be brought back to the dioramas whose brutal and enormous magic knows how to impose a useful illusion on me. I prefer to contemplate a few theatre sets, where I find artistically expressed and tragically concentrated my dearest dreams. These things, because they are false, are infinitely nearer the true; while most of our landscape painters are liars, precisely because they have neglected to lie.¹

The diorama was a form of popular entertainment featuring enormous paintings of outdoor scenes whose effects changed with the manipulation of light, giving the impression of shifts in the weather or the time of day. Audiences were enthralled by these effects and repeatedly reported being ‘fooled’ by the diorama’s tricks.² For Baudelaire — who relished the spectacle of modern life — the staid naturalism of landscape painting left no room for the imaginative play he experienced at the diorama. The moment of foolishness prompted by the diorama destabilized his perspective and allowed something else to surface, something he found nearer the truth.

There are no surviving dioramas of the type Baudelaire described.³ We cannot, therefore, see what so moved the critic. But the adaptation of the diorama as a form, first in natural history museums and more recently in contemporary art, means some of that ‘brutal magic’ persists today. A 2021 installation in Paris’s Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature (Museum of Hunting and Nature) uses a diorama to address the Anthropocene, a term for the epoch in which human activity is registered in the geological strata. As that human activity renders our planet increasingly unlivable, some might argue that what we need in the Anthropocene is less artistry and more clarity, more cold hard facts. But illusion still has its uses.

¹ ‘Salon de 1859’, in *Oeuvres complètes de Charles Baudelaire*, 7 vols (Lévy frères, 1868–70), II: *Curiosités esthétiques* (1868), pp. 1–358 (p. 338). All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

² Stephen Pinson makes a similar argument in tracing the diorama’s contributions to the daguerreotype, and later photography’s, associations with the ‘real’. Stephen C. Pinson, ‘Trompe l’oeil: Photography’s Illusion Reconsidered’, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, 1.1 (2002) <<https://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring02/trompe-loeil-photographs-illusion-reconsidered>> [accessed 1 September 2025].

³ There is one full-scale diorama authored by Daguerre remaining, used as the altar of a church, though its context and parameters of viewing make it distinct from the subjects of this study. See Theresa Leininger-Miller, ‘Daguerre’s Sole Extant Diorama, Recently Restored: Daguerre’s *Gothic Church Interior* in Saint-Gervais-Saint-Protais de Bry’, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, 13.1 (2014) <<https://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring14/leininger-miller-reviews-daguerre-s-sole-extant-diorama-recently-restored>> [accessed 1 September 2025].

Rather than merely illustrating what is far from an evident reality, the Anthropocene installation builds on a lineage of contemporary artists who, in an echo of Baudelaire's observations, use the diorama's lies in an effort to generate new truths. Tracing the history of the diorama reveals its potential to prompt intersubjective encounters between humans and their environment. Whether we are fooled by the diorama's illusions or able to move beyond them depends, ultimately, on us.

The nature of the diorama

The diorama's capacity to stage human-environmental relations was part of the form from its earliest incarnation. The technology was patented in 1822 by Louis Daguerre and Charles Bouton. Daguerre is much better known for having invented that other useful illusion, the daguerreotype, and the diorama is often understood in relation to the histories of photography and cinema.⁴ Drawing on his prior career as a designer of stage sets, Daguerre intended the diorama as a durational performance in a purpose-built structure. The two artists set up shop on the rue Sanson in Paris and charged three francs for a thirty-minute viewing. Paintings were animated by lighting, movement, and the occasional live animal. Subjects ranged from the harbour at Brest to the Temple of Solomon, with most showings featuring one interior and one landscape view. Generally, Bouton painted the interiors and Daguerre the landscapes. Illustrations of the diorama structure highlight the building's many windows allowing for abundant natural light, the well-dressed crowd in attendance, and the location in a neighbourhood known for entertainment (Fig. 1).

The wonder of the diorama lay in its illusion. It succeeded, as one critic reported in 1827, in 'completely fooling the spectator, not only with the resources of painting, but also with additional measures, more or less clever'.⁵ Those additional measures included light projected from behind the canvas, shining through areas of relative transparency and giving the diorama its name — the word derives from the Latin for 'seeing through'. By painting on both the front and back of the canvas, the diorama could offer different images depending on how much light was passing through it. Although no dioramas survive, there are substantial written accounts of the form.

⁴ Dore Bowen discusses the diorama's unique representational possibilities as part of a dialogue around technological progress in 'The Diorama Effect: Gas, Politics, and Opera in the 1825 Paris Diorama', *Intermedialités*, 24–25 (2014–15), doi:[10.7202/1034155ar](https://doi.org/10.7202/1034155ar). Noémie Étienne has challenged the reduction of the diorama to the optical, arguing for the importance of its materials and the politics of its production, in *Les autres et les ancêtres: les dioramas de Franz Boas et d'Arthur Parker à New York* (Les presses du réel, 2020).

⁵ 'Diorama: Vue prise à Thiers', *Journal des artistes*, 9 December 1827, p. 787, cited in Guillaume Le Gall, *La Peinture mécanique: le diorama de Daguerre* (Mare et Martin, 2013), p. 112.

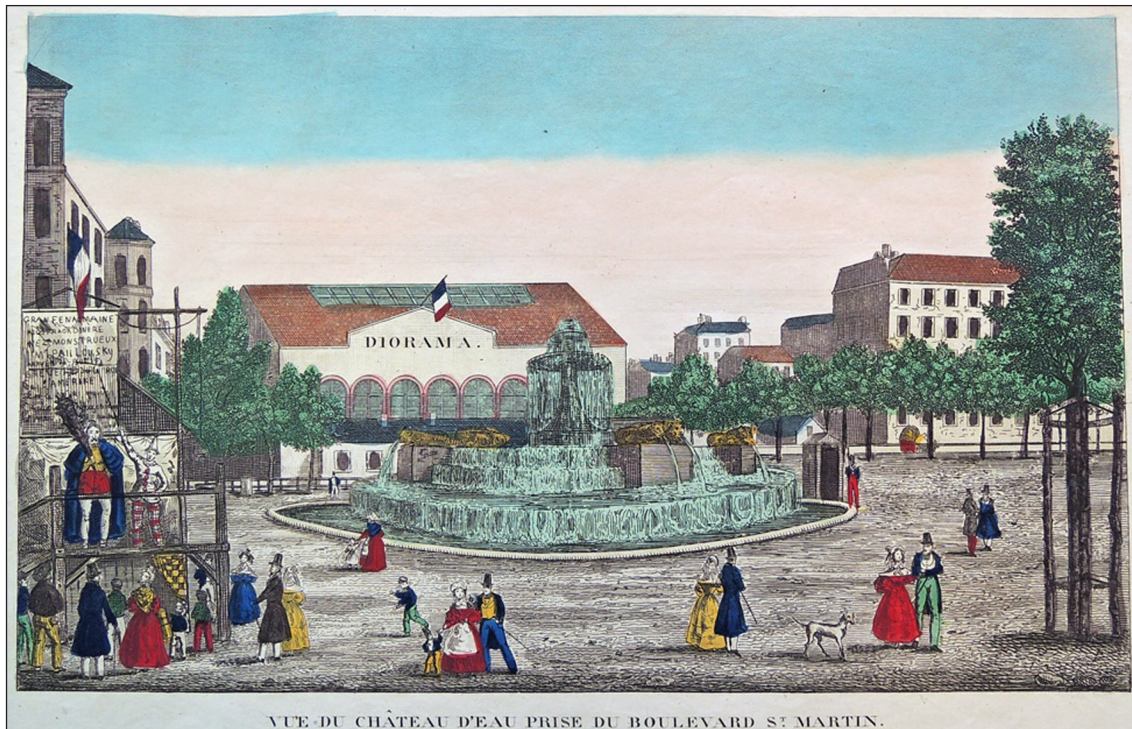


Fig. 1: Nicolas Gengel and Adrien Dembour, *Vue du Château d'Eau Prise du Boulevard St. Martin* (1840), hand-coloured wood engraving.

Remarks from critics and pamphlets designed to accompany the show provide some sense of what drew visitors to the spectacle.

While viewers often marvelled over the details of Bouton's interior scenes, what made the diorama especially remarkable was what it could show viewers of nature at a time when nature itself was being formulated as something to see.⁶ The advantage of the diorama over the panorama, another immersive nineteenth-century specular technology, was its ability to render nature's *changeability*.⁷ It would resolve what one French journal called 'a long standing problem':

how to find and gather the means to show, through imitation, the aspects of nature such as they are presented to view, that is to say, the impression of various changes that occur, over a period of time, the wind, the light, the atmosphere and their alterations.⁸

⁶ Nicholas Green describes the transformation of nature into a visual commodity in *The Spectacle of Nature: Landscape and Bourgeois Culture in Nineteenth-Century France* (Manchester University Press, 1990).

⁷ Jonathan Crary discusses the transformative consequences of new ocular technologies in *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (MIT Press, 1992).

⁸ J. G. V. de Moléon, 'Notice sur les Panoramas et les Dioramas', *Annales de l'industrie manufacturière, agricole et commerciale, de la salubrité publique et des beaux-arts*, 2 (1827), p. 211.

As Romanticism entailed greater attention to the natural world, it was apparent to those increasingly sensitive observers of nature's charms that the world hardly stayed the same. Nina Amstutz has argued for the value of reviving the Romantic-period eye in coming to grips with Western modernity's seeming rupture from, and desire to return to, nature.⁹ While sublime landscape painting offered one means of generating intense experiences of nature via art, the diorama had an unparalleled advantage in its ability to produce temporal effects.

Nature's animation could also pose a threat and early dioramas prefigured the Anthropocene diorama's potential for dealing with a world in disaster. One of Daguerre's most popular and longest running scenes depicted a recent catastrophe: an avalanche in Switzerland's valley of Goldau that had occurred on 2 September 1806 and killed 457 people. The diorama began, a contemporary account described, by showing the 'magnificent valley' in splendid daylight.¹⁰ Slowly, the lights dimmed, shadows descended, and the scene transformed into one of desolation. The picturesque effects of trees and lakes were replaced by a vast scene of crumbled rock, dust, and debris. It was enough, the correspondent noted, to 'strike terror in the soul of witnesses'.¹¹ Other dioramas also incorporated dangers, natural and otherwise: a scene of the Black Forest recounted the 1804 assassination of a countess and her servant; an 1824 diorama featured a fire in the city of Edinburgh; another was titled 'The beginning of the flood'.¹² These scenes suggest the diorama offered something more reflective than simply marvelling at nature's wonders, providing a place to test out different orientations to the natural world and the risks it entailed.

Daguerre was well aware of his contribution to defining nature. In his announcement of the venture, he described the possibility of conveying 'the churning of waters, the procession of clouds, the effects of the sun, the moon, the rain, the snow, storms'.¹³ These features, so characteristic of our lived reality, escape the static world of a picture. Daguerre's intention was to provide a 'complete illusion' of nature and he went to great lengths to do so. He brought, for example, an entire Swiss chalet, a selection of Alpine trees, and a live goat to animate his rendering of Mont Blanc. Accused of trickery, Daguerre heartily agreed, declaring, 'I wanted to rob nature, and therefore had to become a thief.'¹⁴

⁹ Nina Amstutz, *Caspar David Friedrich: Nature and the Self* (Yale University Press, 2020).

¹⁰ B. Lapeyrette, 'Nouveau tableau représentant l'eboulement de la vallée de Goldau en Suisse', *Feuille d'annonces judiciaires, commerciales et avis divers de l'arrondissement d'Oloron*, 2 March 1837, p. 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹² Georges Potonniée catalogued the diorama titles and run dates in *Daguerre: peintre et décorateur* (Montel, 1935).

¹³ Louis Daguerre, letter to the editor, 28 April 1821, *Annales françaises des arts, des sciences et des lettres*, 8.2 (1821), p. 93.

¹⁴ Cited in Malcolm Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art* (Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 141.

Why bother to steal from nature when it is available to us freely? One answer lies in creating the possibility for transportation, allowing the urban spectator to experience a distant landscape if only for an afternoon. But the diorama also allowed the spectator to experience the pleasure of being fooled. Disorienting illusion was not an incidental effect of the diorama; the device was designed to deceive. As an 1826 article in *Le Globe* recounted, while painting offered only an ‘incomplete illusion’, the diorama is about ‘rendering him [the spectator] gullible, making him mistake a copy for the original’.¹⁵ Though the reviewer was less charmed than Baudelaire by being rendered a fool, he demonstrates a period recognition that deception was constitutive, rather than incidental, to the diorama.

In the moment of foolishness, Baudelaire suggested, dreams come forth. Other contemporary observers recorded this aspect of the diorama too. The diorama’s effects were such that it could, as an 1830 visitor observed, ‘excite those emotions and raise up those associations which a contemplation of the actual scene would produce in the mind’.¹⁶ One claim to such excitation was captured in a novella dedicated to Bouton and Daguerre. In *La Vallée de Sarnen* (1823), Jenny Dufourquet ‘recounts’ (or perhaps invents) a ‘touching affair’ she witnessed at the diorama.¹⁷ In the midst of experiencing the ‘magic influence of this enchanting site’, Dufourquet was distracted by the cries of an elderly man named Fernand, who found in the reproduction of the valley of Sarnen a memory from his past, reignited in the space of fiction. Less pithy and poetic than Baudelaire, Dufourquet’s story provides an elaboration of how the nineteenth-century viewer might have conceived of their place within the diorama’s illusions.

Fernand’s story testifies to an interweaving of self and environment that was prompted by, and replicated in, the space of the diorama, where human and natural dramas intertwined. Escaping an unhappy marriage in his youth, Fernand had embarked on a series of travels that eventually brought him to Switzerland. Moved by the beauty of the landscape, he desired a love equally beautiful: ‘my greedy heart asked for another happiness, asked of this nature so rich and so ravishing for a heart as pure and astonishing as she [nature] was’ (p. 25). He finds it, as we may have guessed, in the valley of Sarnen. In telling the tortured history that followed, Fernand relies on metaphors of nature, including darkening skies and leaves trembling with regret, to characterize his personal history.

Fernand supposedly relived his past as if it were in the present moment thanks to the ‘fidelity’ of Daguerre’s reproduction (p. 47). And yet, as Baudelaire told us, the

¹⁵ Cited and translated in Pinson.

¹⁶ Cited in Andrews, p. 141.

¹⁷ Mme J. D. [Jenny Dufourquet], *La Vallée de Sarnen* (Chez les marchands de nouveautés et au diorama, 1823), p. ii.

diorama's claims were *evidently* false, a falseness apparent even to its contemporaries. The architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc observed openly, 'The Diorama stinks of the machine, and man, fortunately, is horrified by the machine.'¹⁸ In an engraving published in the 1860s, labelled as 'Daguerre's diorama' though surely representing one of the innovator's many imitators, there was no hiding the mechanism behind the magic: it shows the operation of the hand crank that changed the diorama's effects (Fig. 2). It was hardly a secret that the diorama was mechanically operated. Far from being an embarrassment that needed to be concealed, this falseness, for Baudelaire, was the diorama's advantage. It brought him into the work but did not leave him suspended in illusion — a recognition of the diorama's deception was as integral to its effect as its truth. Visitors to the diorama found themselves in a position of spectatorship that Michel Foucault has described as 'at once privileged and inescapable', aware of the ways in which their experience was constructed but enthralled by it nonetheless.¹⁹ Foucault was referring to the interpellation of the viewer in Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*

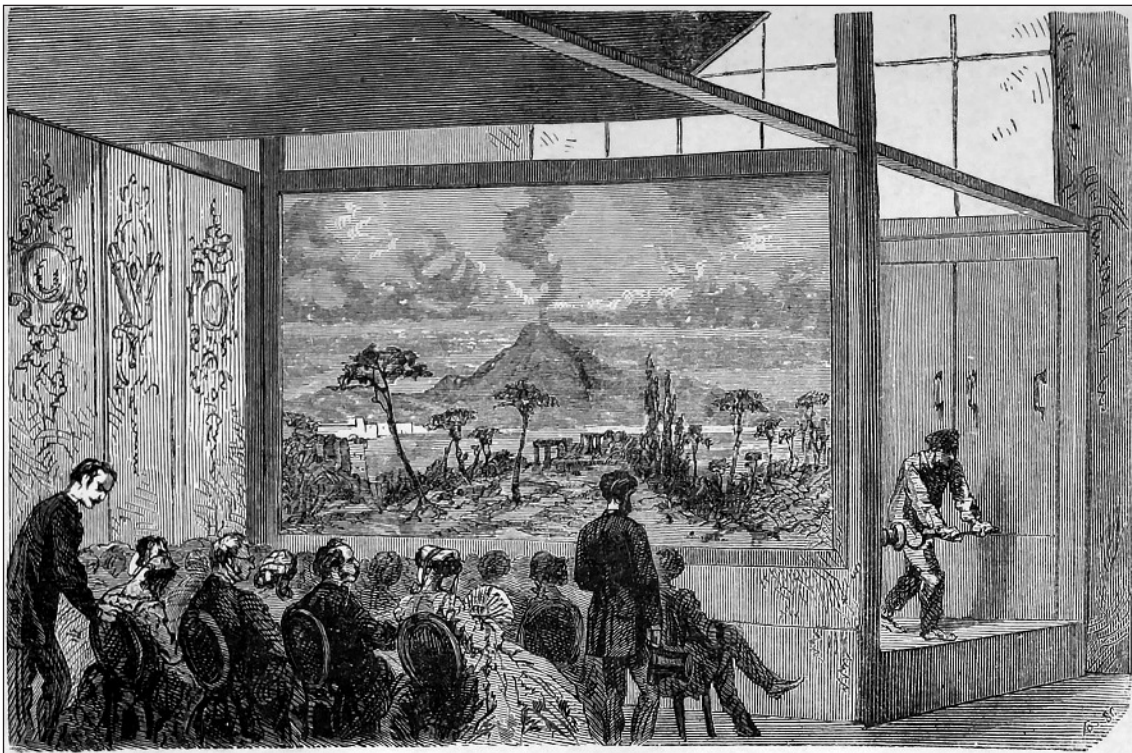


Fig. 2: A. de Neuville et Jahandier, 'Diorama', in Fulgence Marion, *Bibliothèque des merveilles: L'Optique* (Hachette, 1867).

¹⁸ Cited in Erkki Huhtamo, *Illusions in Motion: Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles* (MIT Press, 2013), p. 153, doi:[10.7551/mitpress/9228.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9228.001.0001).

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (Routledge, 2005), p. 6.

(1656), a painting about looking and being seen. But his claims extend to dioramas, which also exist through the act and the agency of beholding. Rather than presupposing the naivety of the nineteenth-century viewer, we might consider claims to having been ‘fooled’ as part of the work itself. The audience completed the performance through their affective engagement, and accounts of being moved by the diorama’s magic were a way of exploring intersubjective relationships with the environment. Building on the possibilities Daguerre developed, natural history museums would try to marshal the experience of the diorama to specific political and ideological ends.

Habitats and humanity

The diorama found new life in the late nineteenth century as part of an effort to display distant environments for the edification of urban spectators.²⁰ Here, Daguerre’s claims to ‘rob’ nature took on a painfully literal form, as the habitat dioramas depended on taxidermy specimens shot and killed for the purposes of display. Set against sublimely painted backdrops, arranged with natural foliage, and secured behind a glass wall, the habitat dioramas offer a vision of nature captured and arrayed for the human eye (Fig. 3).

Habitat dioramas were developed in the United States by the taxidermist Carl Akeley.²¹ Akeley pioneered an innovative form of taxidermy, draping skins over sculpturally carved forms rather than stuffing them with sawdust. The result was to make the dead animals look more alive. He expanded these uncanny associations still further by arranging the animals in picturesque settings: in a muskrat group Akeley arranged for the Milwaukee Public Museum in 1889, arguably the first habitat diorama, the animals are put in dialogue with one another and their environment, including a painted landscape background, elements of foliage and brush, and the illusion of a pond. Some of the best known and spectacular examples of the genre appeared under Akeley’s tenure at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York City, notably in the Hall of African Mammals. Twenty-eight dioramas feature lions, gorillas, giraffes, mountain nyalas, bongos, and more, set in panoramic landscapes and accessorized with plants, grasses, and elements of the natural world collected and brought back from Africa by a team of artists and scientists. Often featuring endangered species, the dioramas were nominally concerned with conservation.

²⁰ Karen Wonders charts the emergence of the form in *Habitat Dioramas: Illusions of Wilderness in Museums of Natural History* (Almqvist & Wiksell, 1993).

²¹ William Bullock’s early nineteenth-century displays of specimens and their environments in the Egyptian Hall, London were another flirtation with the diorama form as a means of communicating natural history. See Susan Pearce, ‘William Bullock: Inventing a Visual Language of Objects’, in *Museum Revolutions: How Museums Change and Are Changed*, ed. by Simon J. Knell, Suzanne MacLeod, and Sheila Watson (Routledge, 2007), pp. 15–27. My thanks to the anonymous peer reviewer for pointing me to this source.



Fig. 3: Carl Akeley, *Mountain Gorillas* (1921), diorama. American Museum of Natural History, New York. Photo courtesy of Thomas Quine.

Animal specimens in habitat dioramas figured as part of a relational claim to a new world order, one in which humans — namely, privileged white humans — were the orchestrating presence. The museum equally constructed ethnographic dioramas, motivated in part by the anthropological research of Franz Boas. The ethnographic dioramas affirmed racist stereotypes, not least of which was the idea that Indigenous cultures were as in need of preservation as the gorillas being actively hunted by Akeley and his team. The most offensive of the displays at the AMNH, titled ‘Old New York’, depicts an encounter between European settler colonists and the Lenape, a group indigenous to the land now known as New York. The diorama relies on outdated clichés and obscures the violent reality of colonialism. Those claims have since been partially corrected.²² The animals, however, continue to exist within the constructs established for them in the early twentieth century.

As with Daguerre’s original diorama, illusion was paramount in the production of the habitat dioramas. Their curved backdrops and meticulously delineated perspective

²² AMNH added an overlay of critical context to its diorama of old New York in 2018, discussed in ‘Old New York Diorama’, American Museum of Natural History <<https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent/theodore-roosevelt-memorial/hall/old-new-york-diorama>> [accessed 2 September 2025].

make the scenes appear to extend well beyond the edges of the vitrine. Careful attention to the arrangement of objects conceals any seam between painted and placed elements. The painted background, as the AMNH painter William Leigh observed, ‘must be as typical of the continent as were the beasts they accompanied [...]. We must produce complete pictures, faultless history, perfect science.’²³ Complete, faultless, and perfect, habitat dioramas left little space for viewers to attend to their falseness.

There were other ways in which habitat dioramas excluded the viewer’s subjective experience as a constitutive aspect of the work. The scenes, though produced through the human violence of the hunt, attempted to recreate an animal world aside from human presence. Such a proximate and intimate gathering of gorillas, for example, is something no spectator would have seen up close and first-hand, thus precluding the work of memory that characterized Fernand’s tale (see *Fig. 3*). The glass of the vitrines is, further, tilted inwards so as to deny even our reflection; rather than bringing the viewer into the scene the dioramas cast them resolutely outside it. The habitat dioramas, lastly, neglected to incorporate the very changeability that made Daguerre’s diorama into such a potent site for reflection for nineteenth-century viewers. In the AMNH, the timeless, seasonless, personless world of ‘Africa’ unfolds without interruption. Not a temporary show but a permanent arrangement, the natural history dioramas borrow Daguerre’s form but abandon the imaginative co-creation that constituted its magic. By denying that they lie, the habitat dioramas fail to reveal any useful truths.

The habitat dioramas were a pedagogical pursuit, though what was being taught was less about animals and more about their captors. Media historian Bryan Rasmussen, in considering Akeley’s work, saw him as inventing a new kind of nature. Rasmussen claims that ‘Akeley had to build an idea of nature before museum goers could properly perceive nature’s vulnerability’.²⁴ Nature, of course, did not need to be invented; a version that could be entirely captured, contained, and controlled by humans, however, did. Dolf Sternberger similarly found in habitat dioramas ‘a new and different, a man-made Nature’.²⁵ The AMNH dioramas were intended both to formulate and to pass on this ‘man-made Nature’ to their visitors. As one early proponent of the form argued, habitat dioramas were ‘scenes of artistic beauty [that] unconsciously instruct the spectator’.²⁶ In purporting to teach the spectator, the habitat dioramas disempowered

²³ Cited in Karen Wonders, ‘The Illusionary Art of Background Painting in Habitat Dioramas’, *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 33.2 (1990), pp. 90–118 (p. 105), doi:[10.1111/j.2151-6952.1990.tb00981.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2151-6952.1990.tb00981.x).

²⁴ Bryan B. Rasmussen, ‘Technologies of Nature: The Natural History Diorama and the Preserve of Environmental Consciousness’, *Victorian Studies*, 60.2 (2018), pp. 255–68, doi:[10.2979/victorianstudies.60.2.11](https://doi.org/10.2979/victorianstudies.60.2.11).

²⁵ Dolf Sternberger, ‘Panorama of the 19th Century’, trans. by Joachim Neugroschel, *October*, 4 (1977), pp. 3–20 (p. 8), doi:[10.2307/778476](https://doi.org/10.2307/778476).

²⁶ Samuel Hubbard, ‘Where Science Joins Hands with Art’, *Scientific American*, 10 February 1917, p. 155, cited in Wonders, ‘The Illusionary Art’, p. 90.

them: ‘unconscious’, we have no role to play. The openness of the experience chez Daguerre, where one could find one’s own memories, dreams, loves, and losses, was replaced by a closed narrative, one Donna Haraway has identified as that of ‘white and male supremacist monopoly capitalism’ or ‘Teddy Bear Patriarchy’.²⁷ Playing on the nickname of one of the early patrons of the museum, Theodore Roosevelt, Haraway understands the diorama as a meaning machine in the production of ideas of race, gender, and class that were shaping early twentieth-century America. That several early participants in the production of dioramas, including Haraway’s protagonists Roosevelt and Akeley, later abandoned the hunt and became conservationists only further perpetuates the illusion of humans’ control over the natural world, one they might choose to poach or to protect according to their whims.

In some ways, it is the dogma of the habitat diorama’s perspective that has made it such an alluring subject for contemporary artists interested in questions of knowledge and authority. As a 2017 exhibition at Paris’s Palais de Tokyo argued, revisiting dioramas offers an opportunity ‘to deconstruct the technologies of vision inherited from the nineteenth century while still appreciating the plastic elements out of which they are comprised’.²⁸ From seventeenth-century religious displays to twenty-first century installation art, the exhibition constructed a genealogy of the diorama that was at once critical and admiring. Several artists from the show highlight a range of possibilities for re-engaging with the diorama’s ‘falseness’.

One of the best-known engagements with the diorama form is Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto’s series featuring the habitat dioramas of the American Museum of Natural History (Fig. 4). Sugimoto sought to interrogate the relationship between the image and the real, and photography’s capacity to confuse the two.²⁹ Beginning in 1976, Sugimoto returned to the museum four times to photograph the dioramas. The resulting images are undeniably satisfying, lush and rich gelatin silver prints. Smoothing out any ripples in the habitat diorama’s surface, concealing its hints of kitsch and artificiality, the photographs offer instead a world of stilled, crystalline order. Sugimoto leans into the diorama’s lie and thus renews the magic of encounter, reproducing, for example, the surprise of coming face to face with the magnificent gemsbok.³⁰ But he also casts the spectator further into abeyance. No longer sure if we are looking at a photograph of a live animal or its dead proxy, the image serves

²⁷ Donna Haraway, ‘Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936’, *Social Text*, 11 (1984–85), pp. 20–64, doi:[10.2307/466593](https://doi.org/10.2307/466593).

²⁸ *Dioramas*, ed. by Katharina Dohm and others (Flammarion, 2017), p. 13.

²⁹ Rasmussen discusses Sugimoto’s diorama series and potential links to conservation in ‘Technologies of Nature’, pp. 255–56.

³⁰ Rachael Z. DeLue describes the experience of showing Sugimoto’s photographs to students and their dawning confusion in ‘Art and Science in America’, *American Art*, 23.2 (2009), pp. 2–9, doi:[10.1086/605702](https://doi.org/10.1086/605702).



Fig. 4: Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Gemsbok* (1980), gelatin silver print. © Hiroshi Sugimoto courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.

to destabilize us, reminding us perhaps just how far from nature we have come — without, however, offering us a way back in.

Rather than augmenting the deception of the diorama, photographer Richard Barnes chooses to puncture its illusions and remind us of the falseness of its constructs. In his series *Animal Logic*, Barnes backs away from the diorama's framed view to reveal the labour of its maintenance. In one, a man comes face to face with a stuffed buffalo as he vacuums dust off imitation snow; in another, taxidermy specimens are protected by plastic while a painter on scaffolding touches up the backdrop (Fig. 5). There is no hiding, in these images, that they are human-made and human-maintained, and there is a certain pleasure in this behind-the-scenes access. Yet Barnes simultaneously produces another illusion: that we are insiders, that we are in the know, that we are somehow beyond being 'fooled' by the dioramas' tricks.

Kent Monkman takes a different tack, retaining the diorama and all of its evident falseness to confront uncomfortable realities concerning so-called 'natural' histories



Fig. 5: Richard Barnes, *Academy Animals from Animal Logic* (2004), chromogenic print. Image courtesy of the artist.

and who has the right to tell them. A Cree-Anglo-Irish artist, Monkman frequently reappropriates imagery and artworks that have historically been used to marginalize non-white peoples, inserting, for example, his alter ego Miss Chief Eagle Testikle in the place of George Washington in *mistikôsiwak (Wooden Boat People): Resurgence of the People* (2019). In *Bête Noire* (2014), Monkman directly addresses the ethnographic dioramas that have perpetuated stereotypes of Native American and First Nations peoples as ‘vanishing’ and in need of preservation (Fig. 6). The installation makes reference to a 1970 diorama depicting a buffalo hunt from the Manitoba Museum in Winnipeg.³¹ Instead of that scene’s timeless rendering of a Metis hunter on horseback, Monkman’s Miss Chief sits atop a gleaming chrome motorcycle. Her make-up, painted nails, and thigh-high lace-up leather boots defy expectations for the sober world of the

³¹ Jean-Philippe Uzell gives an analysis of Monkman’s use of the diorama form in ‘*Bête Noire* by Kent Monkman: Revenge by Diorama’, *Espace*, 109 (2015), pp. 28–39 <<https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/73321ac>> [accessed 2 September 2025].

natural history museum. Miss Chief's feathered bra is comprised of dreamcatchers, a cheeky reference to popular culture appropriations of First Nations' material culture. Monkman further assembles distinct representational strategies within the same installation: the slain bull at Miss Chief's feet is not a taxidermy specimen but instead rendered on cardboard in a cubist idiom, its body faceted in the manner of Picasso. The setting remains a vast, panoramic plain, in the style of Albert Bierstadt.



Fig. 6: Kent Monkman, *Bête Noire* (2014), painted backdrop (acrylic on canvas) and sculptural installation (mixed media). Image courtesy of the artist.

Manifestly taking pleasure in what the curators of the Palais de Tokyo show termed the diorama's 'plastic elements', Monkman's work combines different orders of representation. What ultimately holds the illusion together is our presence as viewers. To make the diorama make sense, we are forced to draw the connections between the buffalo hunt and the trope of the vanishing Indian, between cubism and primitivism. Monkman makes visible the ways in which those lines were constructed, here through the flight of hot pink arrows, and implicates the spectator in upholding that relationship. *Bête Noire* demands our active participation in constructing, or countering, the diorama's narrative. Monkman restores to the diorama its capacity for truth-telling through evident falseness. Here the truth has less to do with any reality of

First Nations peoples and more to do with the ways in which their stories continue to be claimed and circumscribed by the producers and viewers of dioramas.

While the habitat dioramas of natural history museums were concerned with a resolute and static truth, each of these contemporary examples re-engages with the falseness that made Daguerre's diorama so compelling. Through a still fuller illusion, as in Sugimoto, or the dispelling of illusion, in Barnes, or the sophisticated negotiation of illusion as both representational technique and cultural product, in Monkman, these works use diorama's deception to produce useful truths about institutional authority as much as about nature. Part of what contemporary art dioramas can offer, then, is a (re)implication of the viewer in the production — or dispelling — of their illusions.

Staging the Anthropocene

The possibilities of the diorama articulated by Baudelaire and revived in contemporary art — useful illusion, the activation of the spectator, and the production of lies that give way to new truths — come into play in a 2021 diorama dedicated to the Anthropocene at Paris's Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature (*Fig. 7*). Sitting somewhere between natural history and art, the Anthropocene diorama reflects the ambivalence of its circumstances and its subject. If habitat dioramas only came into being when the species they featured were threatened, the Anthropocene diorama augurs something much greater: planetary collapse and the threat to all species posed by anthropogenic climate change.

The geological epoch of the Anthropocene was popularized in the early 2000s by geologist Paul Crutzen as a way of accounting for the physical evidence of human activity in the geological record.³² While both the terminology and periodization are contested, the rapid uptake of the term suggested a need for a way to speak about the undeniable impact of humans on our planet. For some, this goes back to the foundation of monoculture agriculture in the Neolithic; others put its start as late as the 1950s when global human resource use dramatically accelerated. Opponents of the term point out that it distributes blame equally across all humans when in reality it was primarily wealthy white humans who have been responsible for climate change and marginalized populations who have suffered its consequences. Alternatives, including 'capitalocene' and 'plantationocene' offer more precise accounts of the extractive systems of consumption, accumulated wealth, and forced labour that have depleted resources and produced emissions. Kathryn Yusoff has written against the term Anthropocene for its false claims to neutrality as part of 'White Geology'. She writes, 'following in the wake of humanism, the production of the Anthropocene is predicated on Whiteness as the

³² Paul J. Crutzen, 'Geology of Mankind', *Nature*, 415.23 (2002), doi:[10.1038/415023a](https://doi.org/10.1038/415023a).

color of universality.’³³ Yusoff calls for a geology that can account for the exploitation of black and brown communities who have long been experiencing forms of extinction, ‘a billion black anthropocenes’.



Fig. 7: François Malingrèy and Scéno-Associés, *Anthropocene Diorama* (2021). Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature. Photo Béatrice Hatala. © Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature.

The Anthropocene diorama questions its terminology only implicitly, in that it features only white humans — and whether this is a questioning or an affirmation of Yusoff’s criticisms is unclear. Distributed between three vitrines, the diorama’s backdrop was painted by the French artist François Malingrèy. Its foreground was arranged by the design firm Scéno-Associés using items primarily pulled from the museum’s collections. The relatively shallow vitrines, dictated by the museum’s spatial constraints, do not give the same depth of field as the AMNH habitat dioramas. Instead, they prompt a piecemeal engagement with the diorama’s elements and a sequential unfolding of its scenes.

³³ Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), p. 51.

The diorama's first vitrine features those humans, painted by Malingr y in his signature uncanny realism (see Fig. 7). Four figures, a man, a woman, an adolescent and a young boy, are in the process of digging a hole at daybreak. Beyond them, the rolling green hills of rural France fan out. The landscape is laced with telephone poles and the sky crossed with jet streams, situating us somewhere after the 1950s, but otherwise there is no sense of time. A selection of animals, both endemic and invasive, animate the view. A crumpled aluminum can tucked beneath some reeds is a mild indication of humans' lack of care for the ground that holds them.

The subtle haunting of an unexplained burial ritual gives way to a more explicit disaster in the second window (Fig. 8). Here, against a pink-streaked sunset sky, smoke billows up from an explosion. Malingr y cites the influence of the 2020 explosion in the port of Beirut, though we might find an echo of any number of recent or looming disasters. In this scene, the animals respond to the painted action. A jay flaps alarmedly against the glass as a wild boar prepares to flee. The final window is set in the cool of night (Fig. 9). Seen through the mouth of a grotto, orange flames dot a forested landscape. Again, Malingr y is making a slight reference to contemporary circumstances — the increasing prevalence of forest fires across Europe.³⁴ A fox peers outward, having killed a rabbit, which lies inert, doubly dead as both taxidermy specimen and narrative prey.



Fig. 8: François Malingr y and Sc no-Associ s, *Anthropocene Diorama* (2021). Mus e de la Chasse et de la Nature. Photo B atrice Hatala.   Mus e de la Chasse et de la Nature.

³⁴ In the summer of 2022, for example, 750,000 hectares burned, compared to an average of just over 260,000 hectares between 2006 and 2021. See 'Europe's Summer Wildfire Emissions Highest in 15 years', Copernicus Atmosphere Monitoring Service, 6 September 2022 <<https://atmosphere.copernicus.eu/europes-summer-wildfire-emissions-highest-15-years>> [accessed 2 September 2025].



Fig. 9: François Malingrèy and Scéno-Associés, *Anthropocene Diorama* (2021). Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature. Photo Béatrice Hatala. © Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature.

While the accompanying informative texts make some pedagogical reference to the loss of biodiversity and rising temperatures that increasingly characterize our epoch, the windows do not tell a clear story, nor do they have a strong message concerning the nature of the Anthropocene. Yet read alongside the history of the diorama as a form and in the specific context of the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature, the Anthropocene diorama can help us to understand what it is to live in a world in which our illusions of control are harder to hold onto. The installation mimics the habitat diorama without retaining its ideological scaffolding; it allows the death and disaster so carefully curated out of those earlier installations to reappear. The certainty that humans are in charge has been replaced by a deliberate confusion as to what is organizing the view.

That a diorama dedicated to the irreversible effects humans have had on the natural world sits within a museum of hunting and nature is part of the project's irony, or perhaps part of its lesson. The museum was founded by the prominent French hunters François and Jacqueline Sommer; it remains a private institution today, connected with the Club des Chasseurs, a members-only club for elite patrons of the sport. Set in a spectacular seventeenth-century *hôtel particulier* in Paris's fashionable Marais neighbourhood, the museum's aristocratic setting underscores its subject. Artefacts of the hunt including antique rifles, oil paintings of beloved hounds, and big game trophies are displayed in sumptuous interiors with high ceilings, velvet curtains, and parquet floors.

The museum addressed controversial perspectives on hunting directly in a 2015 colloquium. The director at the time, Claude d'Anthenaise, stated openly that 'there is a huge question mark concerning the appropriateness of displaying hunting-related collections to the public today'.³⁵ D'Anthenaise's view was that hunting is revealing of 'the changing relationship between humans and wildlife' and thus could not be simply erased from the record (p. 10). He further explored the relationship between humans and wildlife through the launch of an ambitious contemporary art programme in dialogue with the museum's collections.³⁶ Artists including Mark Dion, Sophie Calle, Walton Ford, and many others have offered critical engagement with the museum's objects and opened new perspectives onto the legacy of the hunt.

The Anthropocene diorama participates in an artistic tradition of critical interrogation of hunting while also relying on the hunt for its very materials. Given the inclusion of taxidermy specimens from within the Musée de la Chasse collections, the diorama is an extension of the museum, and its form was shaped as much by the storerooms as by Malingrëy. The diorama thus combines distinct authors and contexts, some who support the hunt, others who question humans' ability to maintain a healthy ecosystem. These opposing views lead to a stalled narrative within the space of the diorama, indicative of the political morass of the present. Rather than showing us the Anthropocene, the diorama makes us feel its internal contradictions and self-destructive logic. In this, it resonates with something d'Anthenaise asked regarding the museum's agenda: 'is hunting actually representable?' (p. 9). He was implying that hunting is an action, a posture, an orientation, and while we may see its accessories, its preparations, and its results, the act of hunting itself exceeds representation. If the Anthropocene is ultimately about the relationship between humans and our world, we might wonder if it, too, is representable.³⁷

The limits of representation are a leitmotif of Malingrëy's painting. The figures in the first vitrine are surrounded by an array of sketches and drawn plans, though the images seem to have little correspondence with their actions. In the third vitrine, elements pulled from the history of art are scratched into the cave walls like graffiti (Fig. 10). We see recognizable bits of Goya, Manet, Matisse, and other classics from the art historical canon. The infanta from Velázquez's *Las Meninas* appears too, reminding us of a long history of asking what representation means for the beholder.

³⁵ Claude d'Anthenaise, 'Introduction: Museumizing Hunting?', in *Actes de colloque: exposer la chasse?* (Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature, 2015), pp. 8–11 (p. 8).

³⁶ Sarah Wade writes about the museum's contemporary art programme in 'Revolted Hunting Trophies: Art Orienté Objet at the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature', in *Revisiting the Past in Museums and at Historic Sites*, ed. by Anca I. Lasc, Andrew McClellan, and Anne Söll (Routledge, 2022), pp. 173–90, doi:[10.4324/9781003147695-13](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003147695-13).

³⁷ Similar questions were raised in the proposed construction of an Anthropocene monument in Toulouse in 2014 under the direction of Bruno Latour and Olivier Michelon.



Fig. 10: François Malingrèy and Scéno-Associés, *Anthropocene Diorama* (2021). Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature. Photo Béatrice Hatala. © Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature.

Yet all of this representation seems to have done little, on its own, to alter the arc of the diorama's scenes. From the forlorn digging of the human figures to the quiet burning of the forests, the diorama leaves scant room to imagine alternative futures. There is no new dawn on offer. In the absence of a resolved narrative, the diorama instead makes space for the kind of intersubjective engagement that animated Daguerre's original productions. It asks us to reckon with the present, finding our own way through it as Fernand, in recognizing himself in the valley of Sarnen, found his. Art does nothing without us.

Baudelaire, lastly, for all his grandiose praise, was motivated in his claims for the diorama. He was disappointed with landscape painting and was looking for more meaningful alternatives. And I, too, am motivated in my interest in the Anthropocene diorama, motivated in wanting art to solve problems that science and politics seemingly cannot. My desire for it to offer a useful message, and my disappointment that it does not, is part of a misplaced belief in visual technologies to do work that we instead have to do ourselves. The diorama's lie is that the world needs us; the truth is that we need it.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

