

Opening day had arrived. On July 11, 1822, a crowd assembled in a 350-seat theater at 4 rue Sanson in Paris to witness a pair of paintings come to life.¹ The massive double-sided canvases were installed on two stages connected by a revolving floor.² They offered complementary scenes: the interior of Canterbury Cathedral's Trinity Chapel and a verdant Alpine landscape.³ Audience members filed through a darkened tunnel and into a grand auditorium crowned by a proscenium arch. Behind it stood an enormous, realistically rendered tableau. The tableau became increasingly animated as the crew commenced a dynamic lighting program, reflecting and illuminating the transparent canvas from both sides.⁴ A proto-cinematic flow of setting suns and rising moons illustrated the passage of hours, days, and seasons. After about fifteen minutes, the stage floor rotated to reveal the next scene.

Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, founder of the theater with painter Charles-Marie Bouton, called this spectacle a "diorama." Stemming from the Greek *dia*, meaning through, and *horao*, meaning see, the term was apt.⁵ On one hand, it gestured to the auditorium's optical mechanics: through the proscenium aperture, a crowd watched choreographed beams of light produce illusions across translucent painted media. On the other hand, the term invoked the theatrical experience itself, wherein visual simulations embraced their own constructedness as they transported audiences to new spatiotemporal worlds. This dichotomy fascinated philosopher Walter Benjamin, who would observe that it was precisely the diorama's "means of technical artifice" that enabled its uncanny imitations of environmental phenomena.⁶ For Benjamin, photography also enacted a similar collapsing of nature and *techne*, which forged both analogical and historical links between the diorama and the camera apparatus.

¹ At the time, rue Sanson was adjacent to what is now Place de la République.

² Kiku Adatto, *Picture Perfect: Life in the Age of the Photo Op* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 41.

³ R. Derek Wood, "Daguerre and his Diorama in the 1830s: Some Financial Announcements," *Photoresearcher* 6 (March 1997): 35.

⁴ Dore Bowen, "The Diorama Effect: Gas, Politics, and Opera in the 1825 Paris Diorama," *Intermedialités / Intermediality* 24-25 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.7202/1034155ar>.

⁵ Daguerre had painted the Alpine landscape canvas and Bouton executed the painting of Trinity Chapel for the opening night demonstration at 4 rue Sanson. See Noemie Etienne, *The Art of the Anthropological Diorama: Franz Boas, Arthur C. Parker, and Constructing Authenticity* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2021), 13.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, "Paris—Capital of the Nineteenth Century," *New Left Review* 48 (1968): 88.

By 1840, a fire had destroyed the auditorium at rue Sanson and Daguerre's copper plate photographic process, the daguerreotype, had begun its cultural ascent.⁷ Interest in the diorama gradually dissipated, but its spirit of spectacular immersion persisted, eventually resurfacing in popular practices of photographic dissemination and display. At the 1855 world exposition in Paris, photography appeared alongside an array of commercial products in the Palais de l'Industrie.⁸ The exhibition hall's massive glass and iron roof—modeled after that of London's Crystal Palace, where the first world exposition took place in 1851—served as a sweeping display case, accenting the theatricality of twenty-eight countries' presentations. The Crystal Palace's design was itself based on the greenhouse, that glass ur-structure built for cultivating and showcasing “exotic” plantlife displaced from its native ecologies. With the world expositions, glass-roofed halls became, per Benjamin, hothouses for consumers. They were loci for nationalist phantasmagoria where exhibitors juxtaposed ornate flora with metalwork, furnishings, industrial machinery, works of art, and scores of objects appropriated from European colonies.⁹ As inside the diorama theater, acts of corralling, reproducing, and commodifying the world were also entertainment inside the exposition hall, and the architecture that housed them was entertainment, too. Within these monumental exhibitions, presentational impulses catered evermore to an imperialist gaze, reinforced by ethnographic taxonomies and annexed capital.

In Micah Danges and Eileen Neff's collaborative installation from “New Grit: Art & Philly Now” at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA), these histories meet an assemblage of their own contemporary instantiations. Echoes of constructed viewership embedded in the diorama, the camera, the photograph, the greenhouse, and the consumerist display reverberate across translucent fabrics, opaque pictures, recursive windows, readymade sculpture, and copies of copied imagery. The installation incorporates simulacra of reality in manifold forms, yet none appear unvarnished or readily knowable. Rather, the artists' (re)constructions become active participants in their own interpretation.

The diorama emerges most saliently in Neff's *Man in Blue Looking* (2020), a photograph produced at Drexel University's Academy of Natural Sciences. This genre of diorama, conceived by American and European natural history museums in the late nineteenth and early twentieth

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Carolyn Peter, “Expositions Universelle, Paris (1854, 1855, 1867, etc.),” in *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Photography*, ed. John Hannavy (New York: Routledge, 2013), 512-514.

⁹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 7-19.

centuries, borrowed some formal techniques from Daguerre's creation of the same name.¹⁰ Many examples, including the twenty-six erected at the Academy between the late 1920s and mid-1960s, aimed to recreate naturalistic habitats of animals that museum researchers had collected on international expeditions.¹¹ Institutions would present taxidermied fauna before illustrated convex backdrops, all fastidiously illuminated to produce a perspectively aligned experience.¹² In Neff's photograph, these precedents converge with recent Academy conservation efforts during a large-scale renovation project. Two figures, one in a black coat and one in a glowing blue hazmat suit, face away from the viewer amidst painted mountains and trees. In its temporary, partial state of deconstruction, the tableau's immersive qualities—and with them, their attendant subject/object binaries—fall away. The shadow-laden backdrop becomes disjointed from the scene's projected narrative, announcing itself as painted surface.

Flush with the edge of the wall, the photograph's installation undercuts the gallery's own spatial inconspicuousness. Danges' two photographic prints on mesh panels perform a corresponding operation, recontextualizing and transmuting the architecture within which they're installed. The artist took the original photographs in and around a greenhouse maintained by the University of Pennsylvania's Biology Department at James G. Kaskey Memorial Park in West Philadelphia. Rather than clearly framing the building or the plants inside, Danges trained his camera on the enclosure's glass thresholds themselves. His images depict greenhouse walls, industrial window frames, rippling fern leaves--all subjects in absentia. By picturing the structure's industrial-grade facade (which enables researchers' control of environmental conditions), the artist's views offer expansive, searching alternatives to those prescribed for close empirical observation.

Two large gallery windows symmetrically flank *Window Panel Divider (Hard Bros.)* (2020), hung parallel to the back wall. This triangulated configuration instantly produces a kind of spatial palimpsest: while the panel bifurcates the wall behind it, the bevelled metal window divider that it depicts replicates that effect. The window divider not only cuts across clusters of greenery in the picture's background, it also cuts across whatever spaces one happens to glimpse through the panel itself at any given moment. The thick metal chain dangling in the foreground

¹⁰ Ann Reynolds, "Visual Stories," in *Visual Display: Culture Beyond Appearances*, ed. Lynne Cooke and Peter Wollen (New York: The New Press, 1998), 89.

¹¹ Robert McCracken Peck and Patricia Tyson Stroud, *A Glorious Enterprise: The Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia and the Making of American Science* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 275-83.

¹² *Ibid.*

of *Window with Chain* (2019) plays a similar role, anchoring itself in front of a densely layered array of glass panes, doorways, window frames, and protruding branches. As one moves around these works, their depths of field alternately advance and recede, forming and unforming an infinite stream of imagery contingent upon the viewer's shifting position. There are no "recto" nor "verso" views to be found, only continual horizontal inversions shot through with ripples of moiré. If diorama canvases, historical greenhouses, and Parisian arcades helped to construct and amplify consumptive gazes, then Danges' photographs explore and confound that amplification's own optical workings.

Behind glass panels, historical dioramas were meant to offer illusory "windows on nature," views otherwise inaccessible to most museum visitors.¹³ Both artists situate us between windows and the environments they delineate. Together, their works usher us around and through these windows' frames, steeping us in their constructed presence, slowly revealing them to possess both perceptual depth and conceptual weight that defy invisibility. Theirs are windows not only to be seen through, but also to be looked at.

Neff confronts these dynamics directly with her camera lens in *Border Crossing* and *The Hedge Was in a Box* (both 2020). These works pair a photograph of a window from the PMA's 1920s New York City townhouse period room with a green plastic hedge prop, both of which are flanked by two virtually identical photographs of a cardboard box revealing the plastic hedge within it. At the center of the tableau, the period room window and the hedge reciprocate one another's artifice. The window's crimson curtains initially seduce our gaze, but the ghostly visibility of a museum building window behind them haunts the picture's background. The hedge's placement directly in front of Neff's photograph exacerbates this fragmentation, compounding the image's constructed viewpoints.

Like a pair of cheeky bookends or trompe l'oeil sconces, the cardboard box photographs echo the curtain-window dualism of Neff's photograph, reminding us of the hedge's commercial origins. It was, indeed, in a box once. Before that, it was in a manufacturing plant, and before that, perhaps in a tube or a vat of liquid plastic. These industrial state changes, born of both human and non-human labor, strike alien parallels to the photosynthetic transformations that Danges observes in his chronicling of the UPenn greenhouse. In a pastiche of doors and

¹³ Claudia Kamcke and Rainer Hutterer, "History of Dioramas," in *Natural History Dioramas: History, Construction, and Educational Role*, ed. Sue Dale Tunnicliffe and Annette Scheersoi (London: Springer, 2015), 11-14.

windows, fabric and plastic, glass and boxes, enclosing and disclosing, hedges and edges, both Neff and Danges revel in slippages between the constructed real and the simulated fake.

These poetics reverberate across the space, mapping mutually generative relationships from one work to the next. Like a rhyming couplet, Neff's *Man in Blue Looking* echoes the bright hue of *Blue Jays Looking at Blue* (2020) on the opposite wall. This diptych presents a multitude of dichotomies: abstraction and figuration, monochrome and polychrome, painting and photography all emerge as lyrical co-presences that demand deliberate, absorptive viewership. As Holland Cotter reminds us, "all of this absorbing takes time, the way bird watching does."¹⁴ In a set of reflections on Ellsworth Kelly's early years, Cotter recalls the artist's birding activity in rural New Jersey, through which Kelly developed approaches to color and form that surfaced in his later work. Cotter's 2015 remarks resonated with Neff (herself a birder), especially in the wake of Kelly's death later that year. They informed her decision to pair the blue jays with a panel of matching blue pigment, a gesture serving as an homage to Kelly and an exercise in seeing through his eyes, extolling the jays' feathery chromatic richness. She photographed the same bird multiple times during a residency at Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest in Kentucky, then digitally stitched two images of it into the same photograph. By positioning the jays to share a vantage point, Neff mirrors the figures in *Man in Blue Looking*. The monochrome blue panel, like the diorama backdrop, becomes an object under the jays' gaze.

Insertions, extractions, and (de)couplings abound in Neff's work, sometimes fervently announcing themselves, other times evading notice altogether. To find *The Bird Is in a Tree* (2020), for instance, one would need to look up. The artist installed it at a seam between the gallery wall and ceiling, creating an illusion of the work extending into the narrow space between them. Neff cut off the original image's top portion, however, and framed only its bottom and sides, placing it such that the ceiling itself completes the frame. To make the image, the artist photographed an animatronic yellow-throated warbler toy on one of her landscapes. The bird appears perched at an odd angle, casting a subtle shadow, flattening the scene beneath it into an airless backdrop that signals both the diorama and Neff's blue monochrome. While the entirety of *The Bird is in a Tree* is visible as-is, it still conceals as much as it reveals, hovering like an inconspicuous picture puzzle above the rest of the exhibition.

¹⁴ Holland Cotter, "Nature's Lesson on Understanding Ellsworth Kelly," *New York Times*, August 20, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/21/arts/design/natures-lesson-on-understanding-ellsworth-kelly.html>.

By following the artists' sightlines up to the ceiling, around corners, through fabric, and across a multitude of surfaces, we begin to develop an awareness of our own spectatorial coordinates. In turn, we can better understand looking as time-based, an act whose own constitutive layers might reveal themselves if and when we become ready to see them. Danges generously ushers us towards these revelations, folding an acute awareness of the time it takes to build them into his series titled *Two Parts*. These works, on which the artist has been iterating for over five years, evolved from the same ongoing series of greenhouse photographs as did the two mesh prints. Danges approaches both series with equal sensorial acuity, mediating his photographs' visual details through a series of precise, responsive material and tactile manipulations, arrangements, and compilations. Like the mesh panels, *Two Parts* relies on meticulous acts of organizing and staging, seeing and feeling. In this case, however, the denser the visual data—the more we can feel the presence of Danges' imagery—the more resistive to legibility that visual data becomes.

To produce the series, the artist overlays multiple photographic prints, portions of which have been removed and replaced by fragments from other prints, to create a stack of composite images. He then suspends the images between layers of acrylic, usually leaving only intermittent whisps, edges, or corners of the constitutive fragments visible, providing phantom-like clues of the aggregated presences therein. The pieces' glossy finishes and framed perimeters signify photographic conventions, but their highly reflective charcoal-colored surfaces behave more like sculpted mirrors than pictures. The closer we get, the more depth we seek, the more our own reflections superimpose themselves in the space of the image.

As we play cat-and-mouse with our own transitory, re-presented presences, these works invite us as much as they implicate us, quietly challenging us to reconcile their disjointed constructions with our own implicit desires to apprehend something holistic, discernable, or categorizable. They deny feelings of stasis historically ascribed to photographs as "captures" of singular, decisive instants, instead lingering among interwoven timescales that encompass both material production and viewership. Temporalities of multiple exposures, the artist's combinatorial layering process, and our shifting perceptions of each finished work overlap with each other. Like the stacked prints themselves, *Two Parts* conjures a sense of deep, geological time that churns and changes, softly and slowly, with each viewing. The artist reminds us that our own positionalities determine, as much as the work does, what we happen to see.

With painstaking attention to its architectural contexts, Danges and Neff's collaborative installation alternately reflects, reconfigures, and obfuscates the museological gaze that compels it. Their works disrupt our viewing experiences precisely to reveal their otherwise invisible seams. With every rerouted perspectival axis, the artists position viewership itself as subject while their part-photographic, part-sculptural surfaces assert their own material objecthood. As we linger in the reflexive spaces they create, myths of neutrality and objectivity embedded in histories of the diorama, the camera, and the greenhouse become irradiated, fractured, and built anew. Perception is revealed to be inextricable from the environment in which it happens, a product of natural processes and ideological constructs whose parameters are in constant flux. We may always occupy museum spaces as participants in a network of presentational modes and gestures, but amongst Danges and Neff's works, we can't help but meditate on why, how, and for how long we participate. We can't help but see and feel our acts of looking for the spectacles they are.