

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

*50-Man-Machine* is a multimedia performance installation environment that places visitors in a satirical “machine” designed to process them into nameless, faceless “worker bees.” *50-Man-Machine* and its individual parts explore the ways in which the social and economic systems of the United States absorb the individual’s identity. It addresses the cultural importance attributed to education, job, role, responsibility and other pressures that affect and shape our personal identities and our identities as a people. It should be noted that the United States is not singled out as the only source of such social and economic pressures, but it is the subject of this thesis.

The title of *50-Man-Machine* is an abbreviation of the original title, *The 50-year-old-combover-man-that-rules-the-world machine*. The nature of the title refers to an idea circulating within the media and themes of such works as *The Wizard of Oz*<sup>1</sup>, *Brazil*<sup>2</sup>, *Metropolis*<sup>3</sup>, *Nineteen eighty-four (1984)*<sup>4</sup>, and *Brave New World*<sup>5</sup>. It also makes reference to an abundance of imagery in advertising media that implies that success can only be achieved if a person is wearing the right suit. Additionally, one must go to the right school, have the right job, drive the right car and live in the right house before one can be permitted to be happy and retire early. Retiring early, of course, means that you can then do what you have always dreamed of doing but had to wait until age sixty-five to do. It alludes to the ways in which we as a people accept a locked position in life

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<sup>1</sup> *The Wizard of Oz*. dir. Victor Fleming. per. Judy Garland, Frank Morgan. MGM, 1939.

<sup>2</sup> *Brazil*. dir. Terry Gilliam. per. Jonathan Pryce, Robert DeNiro. Universal Studios, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> *Metropolis*. dir. Fritz Lang. per. Alfred Abel, Brigitte Helm. Universum Film Aktiengesellschaft, 1926.

<sup>4</sup> George Orwell, *Nineteen eighty-four: a novel*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949.

<sup>5</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1939.

dictated to us by our society even though we stubbornly maintain pride in the concept of the “American Dream.”

The *50-Man-Machine* event takes the form of a type of fun-house experience that may be found at large theme parks such as Disneyworld or the Epcot Center. These theme parks offer visitors experiences that often allow them to explore a space while imparting some form of moral lesson. *It's a Small World*<sup>6</sup> at the Disneyland theme park in Anaheim, California, is one such space that attempts to show children that the world is a friendly place and that all races are the same. Through a series of labyrinths, space navigation, crowd control, imagery, required document forms, interactive performance and sales tactics, *50-Man-Machine* seeks to engage its audience in various levels of dialogue surrounding the construction of a manipulated identity. The carnivalesque nature of the experience is meant to direct attention to the ways in which we may not be in control of our lives. It also seeks to provoke thought about the personal and sacred concepts of dreams and freedom, about how these things can be sacrificed due to social and political pressures, and about media representations of these concepts.

The site for the performance installation environment is the ground floor of Building One at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art<sup>7</sup> in North Adams, Massachusetts. In MASS MoCA's mill environment, *50-Man-Machine* attempts to build upon the site's history in order to make a stronger statement reaching both a working public and a traditional art audience. By placing itself inside the context of a contemporary art gallery space, this playful experience is meant to engage dialogue and public interest concerning what is truly right or wrong and what might be a form of brainwashing in this society. In its attempt to generate this dialogue, *50-Man-Machine*

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<sup>6</sup> Disney, “It's a Small World,” <http://www.disney.com/Disneyland/explore/index.html>, Nov. 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Further info on MASS MoCA can be found at <http://massmoca.org/>, Nov. 1998.

strives to blur the boundaries and cultural truths of art, the artist, the audience, and a good and free life.

*50-Man-Machine* evolved out of my desire to express a feeling of frustration at what seems to be a lack of control about my own future. The original intention was to create an experience that might portray the pressures in my own life. Having the desire to overcome such feelings, I became more and more interested in hearing other people's stories and opinions about their own doubts and hopes for the future as a means of consolation. The *50-Man-Machine* performance installation environment serves as a means of expressing my own perspectives towards an expected path, as well as a tool to explore and come to terms with my own future.

To discuss the intentions of the *50-Man-Machine* one must first look at the individual elements of the work, the dynamics of the work as a whole, and the purpose of the elements which comprise what I envision as an entire mock processing plant. *50-Man-Machine* consists of several major elements, including a live performance, pre-recorded performance, a form to be completed, props, audience manipulation, and a product. All elements are arranged together within Building One. Diagrams #1-3 (appendix) illustrate the raw space, space design and installation, and audience trajectory.

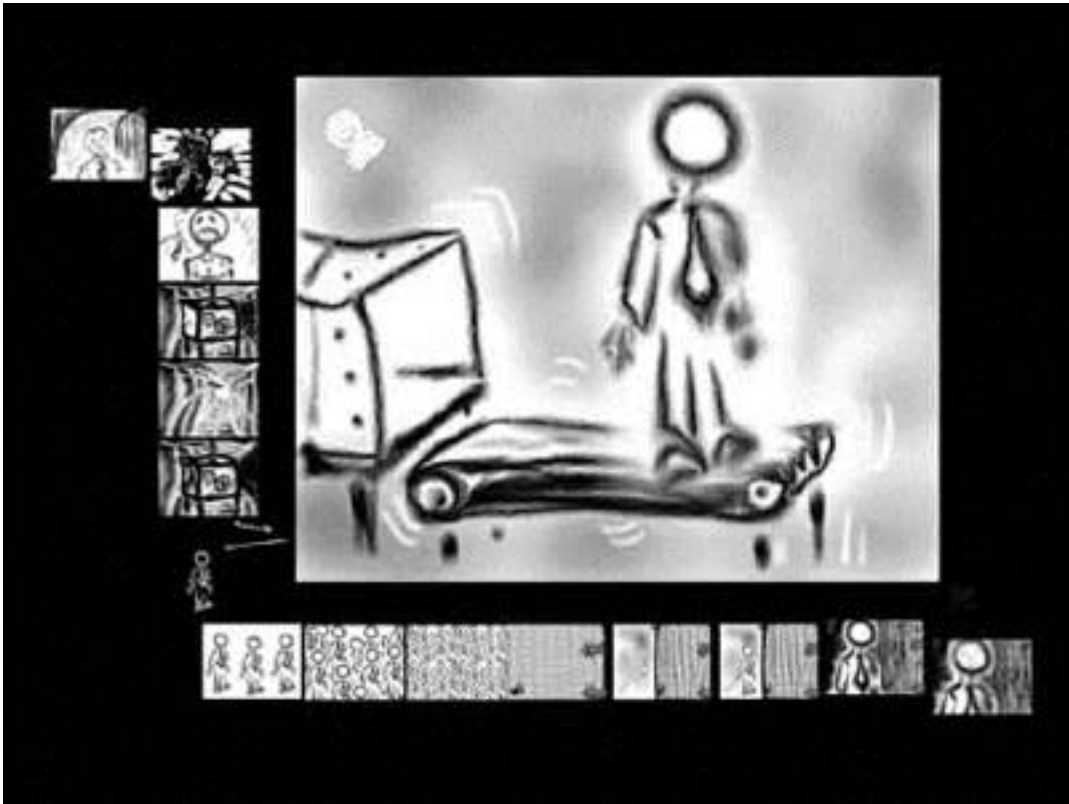
The performance style and structure parodies the corporate organization. Concepts and ideas are present in a playful child-like way. This method is both very inviting and a bit unnerving as adults and children have different personal space zones. As in *Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory*<sup>8</sup>, a fear of the unexpected may lead to a loss of control.

Descriptions of the technical setup, performance, details, and resulting reactions that follow refer to the Master's Thesis performance of *50-Man-Machine* presented at

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<sup>8</sup> *Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory*. dir. Mel Stuart. per. Gene Wilder, Jack Albertson. Wolper Pictures, 1971.

MassMoca 23-30 October 1998. The environment design for *50-Man-Machine* is relatively simple, and takes the form of a basic (anti-) corporate “funhouse.” There are two entrances/exits, five sculptures, one centerpiece, a time clock, a tunnel, an element of sound, and video projection.



**Figure 1.1:** The promotional graphic for *50-Man-Machine*. It is a summary of the performance installation environment and is taken from the *50-Man-Machine* animation.