

CHAPTER THREE

AN OVERVIEW OF THE PRESENTATION

50-Man-Machine's presence is made up of many disparate elements. The presentation consists of the former onsite electronics packaging room, a ninety foot winding tunnel lit with directional runway lights, dual climate controlled zones, the five interactive sculptures, the “main gear” centerpiece, performance actions, a product and additional performers in the roles of host, hostess, security guard and documentation persons. These elements work together to create a world that can be explored and experienced.

With *50-Man-Machine* I wanted to create an immersive experience, and to address certain norms in the art world. I wanted to avoid the proscenium arch, the stagnation of a gallery, the social aspects of an exhibit-opening event, and to address audience expectations of performance formalities and of the definition of art. The nearest things to



Figure 3.1: Disney's *It's a Small World* promo shot.

the type of experience that I envisioned for this project are the worlds created by Disney's Imagineers²¹. These people are responsible for the creation of experiences at Disney's Epcot²² Center and those of the Disney theme parks. One notable exhibit is *It's a Small World* which utilizes elements of theatre, dance, sculpture, song, architectural and environmental design, costuming, technology and audience participation. *It's a Small*

²¹ Imagineers are Walt Disney World's exhibit designers, manufacturers and engineers.

World is a small boat cruise through a model world containing animated figures dressed in ethnic costumes and singing in their own languages. Though this exhibit is designed to



Figure 3.2: A scene from the Thai *Ramakien* epic made of gold leaf and lacquer on wood.

be a positive influence for children, many adults find it to be a somewhat unnerving experience due to its presentation. There are many other sensory immersion types of exhibits that range from quick theme park rides to very sophisticated otherworldly experiences.

South East Asian forms of entertainment have influenced my way of thinking about performance presentations a great deal.²³ Specifically, Thai forms known

as Khon, Lakhon, and Nang²⁴ hold

important places in my childhood memories. Almost all traditional Thai forms of entertainment use *The Ramakien*²⁵ (based on the Indian *Ramayana*), the king's story, as a primary source of story material. In fact, the Thai audience is so acutely familiar with *The Ramakien*, all of its chapters and characters,



Figure 3.3: *Ramakien* bas-relief on Thai temple walls.

²² The Epcot Center, Orlando, Florida is a Disney themepark with a strong technological slant. Epcot is the acronym for Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow.

²³ An in depth discussion of *The Arts of Thailand* can be had in the book of the same name by Steve Van Beek and Luca Invernizzi Tettoni published in Hong Kong by Travel Publishing Asia, Ltd., 1988.

²⁴ Mahidol University, "Arts," <http://www.mahidol.ac.th/Thailand/art/arts.html>, November 1998.

²⁵ The *Ramakien* epic as represented by *The Ramakien: The Thai Epic* with renarration by J. M. Cadet, (illustrated with the bas-reliefs of Wat Phra Jetubon, Bangkok, Thailand) Kodansha International Ltd: Tokyo, Japan, 1971.

that there is no need for an introduction to any particular vignette that may be performed. However, certain aspects have been enhanced over time to allow for more consistent representation of characters to the point of becoming easily recognizable icons.



Figure 3.3: Khon masks.

Khon is a form of performance that includes the use of the paper maché full head masks. The formalized movements of Khon performances make the acting and dancing inseparable. Each step has a meaning, emphasized by the appropriate music, narration and song. Performances do not

rely on the proscenium arch, or stage and are held in theatres, public areas, sacred sites, and in various royal settings. In Khon, the story is communicated through a single narrator, and details are the true key to better understanding. For instance, Hanuman, the monkey god, is always white and sports canine teeth while Totsakan, the dark demon king, has sharp tusks, a large crown and “bulging crocodile eyes.” Khon and other Thai theatrical arts are steeped in tradition and ceremony. Each Khon mask must be blessed before use and each must go through the ceremony of “opening the eyes.”

Lakhon can be a much more immersive experience utilizing large numbers of performers in a grand form of epic tale. Lakhon uses the same story material as Khon yet there are no masks signifying social caste and character. This style of performance relies strongly upon the presentation of recognizable



Figure 3.4: A Lakhon performance.

scenes to communicate the story line, and upon a massive presence that makes attendance an unforgettable experience.

Nang, which means hide (skin), or Nang Yai, which means great hide, is the art of shadow puppetry. These shadow puppets are tooled from water buffalo hides. Nang theatre incorporates the use of large transparent scrim materials, lighting, live improvisational music, disembodied narrators, and easily transportable scene materials. The use of shadows and the



Figure 3.5: Nang shadow puppets in action.

transformation of space exemplified by this art form is very important to my work. These tools allow for the ability to create and sustain an illusion of an alternate reality.



Figure 3.6: *The Wizard of Oz*, recently restored and re-released, 1998.

Hollywood productions, such as *The Wizard of Oz*, exploit the use of icons in order to simplify character recognition and the process of storytelling. In *50-Man-Machine* the use of iconography is a dominant feature. Symbols alluding to power, work, job, role, allegiance, authority and results are represented by the security guard, the host with his political tendencies, the hostess with her protocols, the stripped and skeletal businessman sculptures, the

gristmill or “main gear,” and of course, the two troops of businessmen. *Oz* used very definite one-to-one representations of character. Some of these connections are easily made and in many cases applicable to the concepts and characteristics of *50-Man-Machine*. Examples: A lion in search of his courage; a tinman in need of oil and without a

heart; a scarecrow searching for his brain; Dorothy, the representation of innocence; Toto represents loyalty and responsibility, and the Wizard of Oz himself is in many ways the 50-year-old-man-that-rules-the-world. This movie provides an education in control, authority, acceptance, life's searches, fairness, and possibility for change. *50-Man-Machine* seeks to communicate valuable notes on society, consequences, choice and happiness in ways similar to the ways in which Baum's story communicates and has communicated to many people for decades.

The film *Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory* has an unnerving effect on me. Wonka's world is an extremely immersive experience for his visitors. So much so that



Figure 3.7: *Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory* promo.

most of his visitors disappear only to be processed in the humorous and inviting machinery of his world. They disappear because it seems to judge each visitor for his or her sins and then punish each accordingly. Other scary elements in this world are Wonka's factory workers called "Oompa Loompas." These workers are dwarfen in stature, are dressed exactly alike and move as tightly as a military unit. Oompa Loompas are always busily completing all sorts of inexplicable tasks during the film. It is exactly this dedication to these inexplicable tasks that makes them frightening. In this vein, *50-Man-Machine's* similarly carnivalesque environment leaves much room for surprise.

The feeling of carnivalesque environment, like Wonka's, is something that I have attempted to harness and express through the use of eight performers dressed as businessmen acting out specific skits within the audience's traditional space. Performance here is not limited to a stage. It happens within the audience continuously

but in a random order. In this way performances are constantly occurring within and around the audience members without them being signaled for beginnings and endings of these pieces. Unlike the experience of annual Halloween haunted houses that are in effect restarted for each set of new visitors, I wanted an unexpected and ever evolving



Figure 3.8: During “the sell” in *50-Man-Machine*’s carnivalesque environment. There are four performers selling compact discs in this scene.

experience that had a definite ending. This ending is modeled after the ending of a dream which is usually sudden, unexpected and a little jolting. Within this environment, confrontation of many audience expectations and performer expectations with *50-Man-Machine*’s reality may instigate a re-assessment of those expectations.

Another influence in *50-Man-Machine*’s overall experience comes from the French-Canadian non-traditional circus group, Cirque du Soleil²⁶. Cirque du Soleil’s shows are huge very well organized theme based productions featuring musicians, non-traditional clown characters, acrobats, actors, dancers, tightrope walkers, strongmen, jugglers, and stagehands that are integrated into the show. Their integration of stagehand

²⁶ *Saltimbanco*. dir. Jacques Payette. per. Cirque du Soleil. Productions Telemagik Inc., 1994.

and performer has been particularly inspiring for this work. An example of this is the fact that *50-Man-Machine*'s performers serve not only as performers, but also as food servers, crowd control agents, salesmen, stagehands and safety persons.

Unlike much contemporary dance and theatre, the music, movement and props of *50-Man-Machine* do not rely on each other in order to serve their respective purposes. Each aspect exists in the same space and time yet the music isn't a sound track for the dance and the dance doesn't directly affect the interactive sculptures. Merce Cunningham's modern dance work holds similar supporting characteristics yet his work rarely has a story line. His dancers move with angularity through space unattached to the accompanying music and unframed by a large mural or set. Merce Cunningham²⁷, John Cage, and Robert Rauschenberg have created several works that exemplify this concept. Among these works are *Minutiae* (1954), and *Aeon* (1961). Each of Cunningham's elements exist in the same space and in some way contribute to the overall work, but they do not do so in a traditional way. Cunningham allows the audience to extract meaning from each element because no meaning is offered. After seeing *Pond Way* (1998)²⁸, consisting of music by Brian Eno, design by Roy Lichtenstein and choreography by Cunningham, I realized that my understanding of the work had little in common with those persons I saw the piece with and even less so with the piece's title.

In *50-Man-Machine* I have purposely chosen to offer minimal explanation and minimal direction to the audience. Information offered includes a brief background and an acknowledgement on the reverse side of each timecard, probing queries and greetings

²⁷ Merce Cunningham Org. *Repertory*. http://www.merce.org:80/repertory_chronology.html, Nov 1998.

²⁸ Summer 1998 Jacob's Pillow, Massachusetts, hosting of Merce Cunningham and company. Details on most of Cunningham's work can be found at <http://www.merce.org:80/>.

from the host and hostess, and passive information gathered from the questionnaire. There is also the possibility of audience members sharing information with each other. In this way, each audience member has to experience the event randomly without the convenience of knowing where their position should be in the space, when and in what order the performances will take place, and how they should interact with the work's different elements.