



**CONEY ISLAND USA**

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Coney Island's Not-for-Profit Arts Organization

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*If you please...*

## **Coney Island USA and the Morbid Anatomy Library Present the Great Coney Island Spectacularium**

CONEY ISLAND, NY: We are all familiar with the Coney Island of hot dogs, roller coasters, and side shows. But what's been lost is the Coney Island of large-scale, actor-peopled, immersive spectacles, sometimes thematically bizarre which took place on a scale that is astonishing to the contemporary sensibility: spectacles like the Boer war reenactment starring real Boer war veterans; the incubator show, featuring real premature babies; and fighting the flames, which staged full scale tenement fires every half hour.

The Great Coney Island Spectacularium – a project by artists Joanna Ebenstein and Aaron Beebe – is a response to and an evocation of this under-remembered Coney Island. The exhibition will consist of a variety of elements, each opening at a different times over the exhibition's year-long run: A curiosity cabinet inspired installation exploring these attractions through artifacts and images; The first authentic dime museum in Coney Island since the world-famous Eden Musée closed its doors in 1923; a spectacular immersive cyclorama commemorating the 100th anniversary of New York's second most devastating disaster, the burning of Dreamland on May 27, 1911; and an ongoing series of spectacles and performances including The Congress of Curious Peoples, a 10 day series of performances and lectures about curiosity and curiosities broadly considered; a performance of Grand Guignol inspired Victorian horror; and much more.

Incredibly, on an average day in Coney Island between 1890 and 1915, a visitor might have experienced one or more of the following: a Midget City Theater vaudeville show in Lilliputia – a town populated entirely by 300 midgets and modeled on 16th century Nuremberg; a staged tenement fire (a constant danger of everyday life) featuring a cast of 2,000 men, women and children; freakishly tiny premature babies kept alive by a novel technology only later adopted by hospitals; candy frankfurters, pork sausages and sauerkraut at the Bauer Sisters Candy Delicatessen; a reenactment of the Boer War starring 600 genuine Boer War veterans or a dramatization of The Galveston Flood, which had killed 6,000 people only two years before; San Francisco destroyed by fire, the Titanic destroyed at sea, or Pompeii destroyed by Mt. Vesuvius; a Bontac Village where genuine head-hunting Bontac tribesmen lived in an authentic replica village; and Dragon's Gorge,

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an indoor scenic railway with views of The River Styx and Hades, the North Pole, Africa, the Grand Canyon. And that was just the beginning.

These attractions were the final flowering of an earlier tradition of theater, dime museums and magic lantern shows that flourished before cinema changed the entertainment landscape. In Coney Island – as in the late Victorian worlds fairs, museums, department stores and parks, with which it shared very fluid boundaries – a universe of spectacle was refined and perfected in ways that now often seem perplexing and bizarre, blurring the boundaries between science and spectacle, current affairs and entertainment, and education and titillation.

Today, we have new attractions that capitalize on the same very human desires for escape, mediated danger, and thrills, but somehow they pale in comparison. Popular exhibits such as “Body Worlds” and “Pompeii the Exhibit” do carry on the dime museum tradition of blurring entertainment and education while film – just one of the many popular attractions to be found in early Coney Island – has continued many of the themes. But on examining the remarkable list of attractions that were available to a the average American a century ago, its hard not to come away with certain questions.

- How is it that the history of this entire period – with so much to tell us about contemporary popular culture – has fallen between the historical cracks?
- Why have we settled for entertainment that is so much smaller and less fulfilling than what our grandparents were producing and enjoying?
- How can we regain some of the wonder and astonishment that early Coney Island represented to people all over the world?

The Great Coney Island Spectacularium is an exploration of these questions.

### **The Great Coney Island Spectacularium**

An installation by Joanna Ebenstein and Aaron Beebe

Exhibition Opening: April 9, 2011

Ongoing events include:

Congress of Curious Peoples: April 8-17th, 2011

The Cyclorama of the Great Dreamland Fire: opens May 27, 2011

Grand Guignol: December 10th and 11th, 2010

More at [www.spectacularium.org](http://www.spectacularium.org)

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All information above Guaranteed 100% True!

**Press Images**

Larger versions and captions can be found at

<http://www.astropop.com/coney/>

Email [morbidanatomy@gmail.com](mailto:morbidanatomy@gmail.com) for print-ready high resolution images.

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