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Variety Arts Theater
What a Wonderful World: An Audiovisual Poem
Making Sense of Their Surroundings
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by Jody Zellen



The Variety Arts Theater in downtown Los Angeles was built in 1923. It is a five-story Italian Renaissance style building currently registered as a Historic-Cultural Monument. It was built for a woman's group called the Friday Morning Club who occupied it for 61 years. They sold the building to the Society for the Preservation of Variety Arts in 1977 where it was used for theater, cabaret, and other live performances. In 1989 the city closed it for financial evasion, and since then it has occasionally been rented out as it awaits renovations. Now, it is the setting for the exhibition *What a Wonderful World: An Audiovisual Poem*, showcasing videos from the Julia Stoschek Foundation, a nonprofit arts and cultural foundation with spaces in Berlin and Dusseldorf. The foundation also manages the Julia Stoschek Collection — a comprehensive collection of time-based art.

During international biennials and festivals, it is not unusual to wander into large, empty buildings reconfigured as exhibition spaces. This is a rarity in Los Angeles. Presently we are awaiting the opening of LACMA's latest expansion, as well as the Lucas Museum of Narrative Art, each with its unique architecture. L.A. seems more focused on new structures rather than reusing empty spaces. That said, pop up shows during Frieze week are also appearing at an abandoned Sizzler, as well as the 99-cent store on Wilshire Boulevard, not too far from LACMA. In its dilapidated state Variety Arts Theater is an unusual setting for an art installation. The seats have been removed, the walls are crumbling, and the rooms are in disarray. Yet it works perfectly for this purpose.

Curated by Udo Kittelman, the title *What a Wonderful World* is borrowing from a song recorded by Louis Armstrong in 1967. This is the foundation's first exhibition in the U.S. It brings together films and videos by more than 50 artists. According to the curator, the exhibition (and the song) "*speaks of the beauty existent in the world, but also of moments that hold out the promise of happiness.*" The title also recalls the Frank Capra film *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), a film that examines the meaning of life and poses the question, "*what if...*"

Juxtaposing gems from the history of cinema to the avant-garde, visitors are invited to wander through the six floors between 5:00 PM and midnight, often catching the works mid-loop. In this setting, that's not a problem. It would take days to watch everything from start to finish. Some works are projected onto walls or large screens, while others are placed in more intimate settings with smaller, old-fashioned TVs or video monitors. While some viewers might rush to the classics — George Méliès' *Le voyage dans la lune* (*A Trip to the Moon*) (1902), or Luis Buñuel's, *Un Chien Andalou* (*An Andalusian Dog*) (1929), what happens in between is an unexpected experience. How the works integrate with the setting — contrasting or fusing with the dilapidated walls and funky dark rooms is also very much the point. Not that the location overwhelms, but it adds ambiance to the viewing and reinforces a sense of history, as well as the passage of time.

It is hard not to be seduced or awed by Arthur Jafa's bombastic *Apex* (2013), a large projection in the main auditorium on the first floor, only to turn around and see Winsor McCay's *Little Nimo* from 1911. The juxtaposition of this early animation featuring a white boy dancing alongside figures in blackface with Jafa's imagery drawn from popular culture, heightens our perception of race and how it has been used cinematically over the years. Images of racism, violence, and its aftermath pervade the exhibition. These include Jordan Wolfson's *Artists, Friends, Racists* (2020), P Staff's *Pure Means* (2021), a two-channel work that splits the imagery of a solo figure wielding a knife into red and blue screens, as well as Bunny Roger's *Mandy's Piano Solo in Columbine Cafeteria* (2016), a work that is simultaneously calming and menacing.

Violence to the body is suggested in Paul McCarthy's *Ma Bell* (1971), and visible in Sigalit Landau's *Barbed Hula* (2000). It is a treat to see these contemporary works in conjunction with precursors such as the eye slicing scene in *Un Chien Andalou*. Depending on one's endurance, the experience may be exhausting or overwhelming. The takeaway is less "What a Wonderful World" than "What a Disturbing Time." Yet, to see how so many artists and filmmakers interpret and make sense of their surroundings to create poetic masterpieces and meditations on contemporary life, is nothing less than spectacular.

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