Nouns of Assembly

Simon Terrill
By Some Strange Alchemy

The fairground is strange and familiar. Around the world, the arrival of the fair heralds the child-like pleasures of the playground, drawing people of all ages and all walks of life into its sugar-coated, uninhibited world. Once inside, serious bodies surrender to giant fun machines, strangers let their hair down, lift their arms up and scream when they want to go faster.

As is so often the case when we look closely at something familiar, Simon Terrill’s photographs of Kings Lynn Mart reveal the extraordinary and unknown. The fairground was once described as ‘by some strange alchemy, both a mechanical apparition and an Aladdin’s Cave of candy-floss, glitter, noise and illusion’. In the same way, these images capture the poignant ambiguities of the funfair and the notion of play itself. Each of us will have a unique response to Simon’s work, a different set of memories and sensory imaginings triggered by seeing these pieces. Drawing on my own research, which explores the history of pleasure-seeking and public space, and using a series of dichotomies, I offer some reflections on the fairground, the crowd and the tower.

old / new
The ritual practices of itinerant showmen – the seasonal work, family-run concessions, cyclical touring routes, and opening and closing ceremonies - are steeped in tradition. The ‘tober’ (a site temporarily occupied by the fairground) is arranged according to ancient rules, honed by generations to attract customers and to control their movement and behaviour. In contrast, the experience itself is framed by the multisensory language of hypermodernity, what Architect Rem Koolhaas calls the ‘irresistible synthetic’. The fairground landscape, with its spray-painted zombies, pop stars and sporting heroes, flashing lights, pulsating techno-music, and machines in motion, embodies the impatience of the modern age.

order / chaos
Here is a tangle of stalls competing, rides whirling, wires crossing, and lines blurring. We encounter a chaos which is permeable and enticing from the outside. But metal fences and the wall of booths and stalls create a boundary separating the fair from the town square and from the everyday realm. Carefully placed entrances act as funnels, directing the visitors in and forward. Once inside, they are faced with a dizzying choice of routes. The high-octane rides at the core of the tober act as a kind of centrifuge, pulling people in from all directions only to be spun around, turned upside down and hurled back into the maze of booths, stalls and smaller rides. At the fairground we encounter the contradictions of modern play. On one hand, the fair offers a highly rationalised form of entertainment – carefully organised, regulated and commodified. On the other, it creates opportunities for risk-taking and a thrilling release from the familiar and everyday.

spectacular / fleeting
Simon’s work captures the short-lived intensity which is so integral to the fair. The repeating imprint of the same rides in the third image recalls Palinopsia, a temporary visual disturbance triggered by bright lights. Like an afterimage on the retina, the spectacle of the fair burns bright but fades quickly, packs up and moves on, leaving no physical trace. Over a century ago, sociologist Georg Simmel wrote about the urban adventure, a new kind of modern experience which broke through the flatness and apathy of daily existence. Like a dream, the adventure is transient, set in contrast to the everyday, and will be forgotten quickly. Yet, the sense of ‘living in the moment’ is sought out for this very reason.

Contemporary fairs continue to fulfill this desire by creating a fleeting, fast-paced fantasy world where time itself seemed to quicken and each visitor is a protagonist in their own adventure. While circus audiences revel in watching skilled acrobats perform daring feats on the high wire or the trapeze, the funfair provides even the timid and weak-bodied opportunities to participate in the action, to experience similar thrills for themselves. At a time when the indifference of the modern world preoccupies the media and is a cause for concern, the fair creates a space for adventure and risk-taking in which everyone might feel extraordinary, if only for a moment or two.

crowded / haunted
The arrival of the fair promises release from the demands of everyday life, and plays host to a mass of individuals joined together in the pursuit of fun. To be part of such a pleasure-seeking crowd is uplifting, liberating and unifying – a far cry from the alienation seen to characterise the urban street. The fairground creates a space of collective freedom and emotional intensity where the anonymity of the fast-flowing throngs is very much part of its appeal. The playful crowd renders everyone equal irrespective of age, gender or status.

In Simon’s photographs, the swirling motion of the rides and lights creates the illusion of a crowd. Our brains insert the people into the fairground, but as we look closer, what we find is rather different: haunting figures – lone ride operators, the odd pleasure-seeker – standing still amongst relentless automation. And so the split personality of the fair, its darker, transgressive side, is hinted at. There is no place stranger than a fairground alive with lights, music and mechanical motion but deserted of human life.

1. Ian Starsmore, English Fairs (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), p. 9
3. Simmel’s essay ‘The Philosophy of Adventure’ was first published in German 1910.
At the fairground, the rules of bodily restraint are abandoned and ‘grown-ups’ can spin, tumble, bounce and fly again. In this Peter Pan world, the funfair is cast as an adult playground where the return to childhood is sanctioned by the fact that it is engineered, produced by sophisticated technologies. The mechanical framing of child-like pleasure embodies a paradox central to modern play: the body is both out-of-control and highly disciplined by the predictable, rhythmic motion of the ride machinery, and the limits of pay-per-ride.

The Tatlin monument reflects similar dualities. Recalling the Eiffel Tower (and the generation of failed projects it inspired around the world), the monument was conceived as a rhetorical structure, a testament to progress and the possibilities of science and engineering. Yet, at the same time, the openness of construction, it’s visuality and kinetics, inspire a child-like wonder and curiosity. It suggests adventurous bodily engagement, calling us to climb, swing, hang, slide. Here, reconfigured as a children’s climbing frame, the playful contradictions of the tower’s design are taken to their natural conclusion, blurring the line between fantasy and hard science, between power and pleasure, between climbing up and falling down.

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