



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'¹. 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'². 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 hurtled 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.³ 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

2. Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York, A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York: O10, 1994), p. 35.

3. Simmel's essay 'The Philosophy of Adventure' was first published in German 1910.

serious / playful

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, its 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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Simon Terrill, *King's Lynn Mart No2*, type C print, 120cm x 150cm, 2016

a mess of iguanas a shrewdness of apes a pace of asses a cete of badgers a sloth of bears a singular of boars an obstinacy of buffalo a clowder of cats an intrusion of cockroaches a cowardice of curs a herd of antelopes a drove of asses a colony of bats a family of beavers a drift of bees a pod of birds a sedge of bitterns a sounder of boars a bellowing of bullfinches a kaleidoscope of butterflies a tok of capercaillie a mews of capons a herd of caribou a pounce of cats a mob of cattle a clutch of chickens a clattering of choughs a rag of colts a stench of skunks a covert of coots a pack of coyotes a sedge of cranes a bask of crocodiles a murder of crows a head of curlews a parcel of deer a pack of dogs a pod of dolphins a trip of dotterel a dole of doves a plump of ducks a fling of dunlins a convocation of eagles a bed of eels a herd of elephants a gang of elk a cast of falcons a business of ferrets a charm of finches a shoal of bass a flamboyance of flamingoes a business of flies a skulk of foxes an army of frogs a skein of geese a herd of giraffes horde of gnats a flock of goats a charm of goldfinches a dopping of goosanders a band of gorillas a flight of goshawks a cloud of grasshoppers a covey of grouse a rasp of guineafowl a flick of hares a boil of hawks an array of hedgehogs a brood of hens a bloot of hippopotamuses a parcel of hogs a bike of hornets a stable of horses a meet of hounds a cackle of hyenas a herd of ibex a colony of ibises a plague of insects a train of jackdaws a party of jays a smack of jellyfish a troop of kangaroos a kindle of kittens a deceit of lapwings an exaltation of larks a leap of leopards a pride of lions a plague of locusts a shoal of mackerel a murder of magpies a flush of mallards a stud of mares a richness of martins a nest of mice a shoal of minnows a company of moles a barrel of monkeys a plump of moorhens a herd of moose a scourge of mosquitoes a fleet of mudhens a barren of mules a watch of nightingales a parliament of owls a yoke of oxen a bed of oysters a pandemonium of parrots a covey of partridges a muster of peacocks a pod of pelicans a colony of penguins a head of pheasants a drift of pigs a kit of pigeons a wing of plovers a bevy of quail a colony of rabbits a gaze of raccoons an unkindness of ravens a crash of rhinoceroses of building of rooks a run of salmon a fling of sandpipers a pod of seals a herd of sea urchins a meinie of sheep a dopping of sheldrake an escargatoire of snails a pit of snakes a walk of snails a host of sparrows a clutter of spiders a colony of squirrels a murmuration of starlings a pack of stoats a phalanx of storks a gulp of swallows a raffter of turkeys a drift of swans a scream of swifts a nest of wasps a doylt of swine a spring of teal an ambush of tigers a knot of toads a hover of trout a gang of turkeys a bale of turtles a pitying of doves a nest of vipers a herd of walruses a bunch of waterfowl a pack of weasels a rake of wrens a romp of otters a gam of whales a company of wigeons a bunch of wildfowl a pack of wolves a wisdom of wombats a fall of woodcocks a descent of woodpeckers a herd of wrens a dazzle of zebras an admission of zebras an aarmory of aardvarks an army of caterpillars an aurora of polar bears a bale of turtles a bed of clams a tower of giraffes an implausibility of gnus an intrigue of kittens a labor of moles a romp of otters a streak of tigers a gam of whales a destruction of cats a draught of fish a drift of hogs a flight of cormorants a formality of penguins a kettle of hawks a pack of bears a lump of toads an orchestra of crickets a paddling of ducks a peep of chickens a knot of frogs a lead of foxes a leash of deer a loft of pigeons a lounge of lizards a machination of monkeys a mask of raccoons a memory of elephants a mew of capons a mischief of rats a mob of emus a mob of kangaroos a mob of sheep a bounce of wallabies a mouthful of worms a mutation of thrush a nest of crocodiles a nuisance of cats a nursery of raccoons a pack of rats a span of mules a stare of owls a parade of elephants a parliament of rooks a sel of possums a pint of mussels a prickle of hedgehogs a quiver of cobras a rabble of butterflies a roost of fowls a sault of lions a scorn of camels a soviet of ants a stench of skunks a swarm of ants a tiding of magpies a trembling of finches a trip of goats a troop of dogfish a turn of turtles a ubiquity of sparrows a warren of wombats a whiteness of swans a whoop of gorillas a wrack of rabbits a yoke of cattle a set of oysters a bale of turtles a brood of hens a cloud of grasshoppers a clan of hyenas a stretch of giraffes a swarm of cockroaches a smack of jellyfish a murder of crows a kit of pigeons a cackle of hyenas a volery of birds an ambush of tigers a barrel of monkeys an orchestra of crick-



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