

3. What do you make of the fact that some of the most radical achievements of technology in architecture have been realized in the context of the ephemeral sites of pleasure and consumption: the exhibition, the World's Fairs, and so on?

### **Nathalie Westervelt**

Reason may spoil creativity. Often, inventors are told that they cannot do that which they do by learned folk because reason does not have room for awe. Early in built history, cathedrals inspired awe, and, from time to time, held relics. The first major roads appeared as connectors between cities and these sites of pilgrimage where religious relics were to be seen as advertised in the first brochures of our time. (Julian Beinart) It was everyman who took these journeys to be inspired with awe. Religious routes opened to trade, and during the industrial age, innovation equaled wealth and possibility. Thus exhibitions and fairs became the places to see awe-inspiring technological advances and cheap thrills of instant gratification.

The miraculous temporality of these displays added to the inspirational nature of these temporary cities within the city. The audience was the common man who can be awed by inventions that ennui-filled intellectuals cannot.

In the Poetics and Politics of Transgression, Sallybrass and White talk about hysteria as it is related to middle class women and the denouncement of the carnivalesque. Freud discusses a fair with his fiancée and “agrees with her that the self-indulgence of the common people is ‘neither pleasant nor edifying’. He goes on to add that their own pleasures...have disabled them from participating in common festivities.”(S+W 190) The middle class distinguished itself according to social behavior.

The fear of the monstrous, grotesque, dirty and poor by middle-aged bourgeoisie women prevented them from taking part in the carnivalesque nature of the fair or exhibition to the extent that everyman did. This social rift is accompanied by an increasing gap between those with money and those in need. As in Ancient Rome when the coliseum was built to placate the populace, keep the public occupied, happy and away from insurrection, the late 1800s and early 1900s provided crowds with awe-inspiring technology.

These exhibitions seemed to have been the new pilgrimages and their brochures, testaments of civic prowess and ingenuity. Few of these were permanent except for theme parks. An example of this is Coney Island, talked about in the Rem Koolhaas essay of the same name. It begins with several quotes including, “what a site the poor make in the moonlight.”(K 29) this quote refers to the eventual overcrowding and later abandonment of theme parks such as this, thus enhancing the association between the poor and the carnivalesque.

Coney Island (1883) becomes the “most densely occupied place in the world” (K 32) on Sundays in the summer; Koolhaas theorizes that, no longer a retreat to nature, Coney

Island had to react by intensifying the urban experience. In addition, faced with overcrowding, the flaneur and the poor are the players in the carnival and the only to venture into the atmosphere of seeing and being seen. This is captured by another quote listed before Koolhaas's text, "the glare is everywhere, and nowhere a shadow." Even before Coney Island was open to the glare of carnival lights, it was called, "the island without shadows" by the Indians who lived there. Positioned as a stage, the erection of monuments of technological virtue and Pleasure complete the transformation of street to theater: the scene of satire (Vidler) This street-theater yielded a place where "the strategies and mechanisms that later shape Manhattan are tested in the laboratory of Coney Island before they finally leap toward the larger island." (K 30) Hence, these exhibitions were testing grounds for new achievements in building. The carnivals of people at these exhibitions were the captive audience, the masses, and the clients.