

Simon & Tom Bloor Planning for Play

A few pages into Walter Benjamin's essay 'One Way Street', a collection of philosophical fragments, aphoristic ruminations and poetic reflections on modern life seen through the urban environment, the writer turns his attention to the 'Construction Site' and, through it, to the imagination of the child. He writes 'children are particularly fond of haunting any site where things are being visibly worked upon. They are irresistibly drawn by the detritus generated by building, gardening, housework, tailoring, or carpentry. In waste products they recognise the face that the world of things turns directly and solely to them. In using these things they do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the artefact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new, intuitive relationship. Children thus produce their own small world of things within the greater one.'¹

For Benjamin, it is not the specially designed 'toy' that the child wants, but other materials and objects, unmediated by the minds of adults and psychologists, which they can both make their own and make their own worlds within and around. Benjamin's essay was published in the late 1920s and his 'construction site' operates at once literally and metaphorically: both as a building site and as a creative space where new relations and exchanges can occur - for children certainly, but also by extension for adults.

This passage from Benjamin's text comes to mind on considering the work of Simon and Tom Bloor and 'Planning for Play' in particular. The Bloors are interested in a not dissimilar poetics of play, creativity and regeneration, but approach these concerns from different positions, through different material cultures and at a different moments in their historical life. Benjamin's is located in the decade after the First World War, through the lens of surrealism, and theirs' take place in the early twenty-first century looking back at the decades after the Second.

For the Bloors it is the specifically designed environments for play and the post-war playgrounds of concrete and steel that capture their imaginations. These places aim to co-ordinate the minds and movements of their children at the same time as they plan to offer opportunities for free play and improvisation. Although the Bloor's own art works evidently relish the ambitions of these post-war objects and environments, it is their later dilapidated and abandoned states, and the unsentimental poignancy of these modernist ruins that they cherish too. These later sides of the works are what the artists have grown up with and made their own. Rather than view them nostalgically they enjoy exploring the subsequent ways in which these concrete ensembles have been pulled up into later presents and have accrued new layers of interpretation and play. Through the decade compressions that their works exact, sympathetic relations and synergies abound, as the orderly and the disorderly, the constructive and the destructive coincide and as generational responses collide.

Concrete and spray paint come together like fish and chips and newspaper. Steps aspire to be themselves - and then down again to nothing in particular. Cardboard geometric structures impersonate street detritus bollards and seating. Sheets of wire meshing are sprayed and twisted into shape, bent away from their industrially formatted verticality, as these monochrome urbanscapes are charged with flinches of red, yellow and blue. 'Planning for play' is to be read as anticipating play more generally - inviting the uninvited and expecting the unexpected - as much as an explicit reference to a programmatic envisioning of play at a specific historical moment. Simon and Tom Bloor's 'Planning for Play' is thus retrospectively evocative of the longer-term fates and fortunes of material objects such as these once they are put out into the world and become part of our urban lives.

Jon Wood, 2014

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, (trans. Edmund Jephcott; edited and introduction by Peter Demetz), New York: Schocken Books, 1978, p. 69.