**Reflections on The Minnesota State Fair:**

**Dairy, Agriculture, and The Production of a Regional Sense of Identity**

For our presentation on early entertainment culture in the Twin Cities we decided to explore and investigate the history of the early Minnesota State Fair, beginning with the first regional fair held in 1854, in order to then trace both the way that exhibitions incorporating local dairy and agriculture at the fair worked to create and shape a sense of regional identity throughout the mid Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries in the state, as well as how they continue to remain a central and vital part of the experience of fairgoers today in the twenty-first century. While technological developments and transformations in mass-culture have ultimately resulted in the fairgrounds becoming a public space that is increasingly less committed to celebrating regional *production* processes, this does not mean that regional agriculture has no place of privilege in the event, as today this celebration of regional life and culture is celebrated primarily through the *consumption* of goods produced regionally. This shift can be evidenced, for example, in the excessive amounts of regional foods offered for sale, as well in the emergence of mechanical rides, that is, the appropriation of machines for the production of a “good time” as opposed to agricultural production in a more traditional sense, however, this transformation has not been total, as clearly some emphasis is still placed on the newest manufacturing and farm machinery each year in a traditional sense.

The first fair was hosted in the region in 1854, and would appear much more to us as a kind of trade show than the type of experiences offered by our ‘fun-fairs” or amusement parks today. Pamela H. Simpson, in her text *Corn Palaces and Butter Queens*, makes this clear with her claim that, “Fairs became prominent during the second half of nineteenth century in the mid-western United States, particularly as a means of convincing settlers that the area was good for settling/staking ground. This argument or motivation was conveyed through the social display of an abundance of livestock and other forms of material wealth produced regionally” (Simpson 170). It is clear, then, that Minnesota’s early fair was primarily hosted to bring in revenue for the territory, as well as to attract settlers to the region, as opposed to being organized as a kind of leisure event. This was true even of the first official state fair in 1859, and all following fairs until roughly the turn of the 19th/20 century, as until this period the fairs continued to work much more like farmer’s markets than massive leisure events with competitions, rides, etc. It is also interesting that during roughly the same period, around the turn of the 19/20th century, Minnesota’s state nickname was the “Bread and Butter State”, as opposed to the later nickname the state would adopt, ”the Land of Ten Thousand Lakes”, which clearly puts more emphasis on the state as a kind of place to vacation or relaxation destination, that is, it is emphasized as a place to consume, as opposed to emphasizing it as a superior place for agricultural production.

Three primary exhibitions served to celebrate local dairy and agriculture in the early fairs, and they all were related primarily to production, as opposed to consumption. These events were dairy sculpture competitions, crop art competitions, and livestock competitions. Pamela Simpson writes on page 170 of her text, that, “The first permanent structure erected prior to 1859, was a “dairy hall equipped with a glass cooler to house butter-sculpture displays” (Simpson 170). The fact that the first permanent structure constructed for the fairgrounds was a dairy building shows the centrality of dairy in the early development of the fair. Butter sculptures first emerged in 1894 after the Milton Dairy Company of Saint Paul provided funding for them. These event not only had an important role in shaping regional identity, in the annual sculpture contests that would quickly emerge, but also arguably importantly shaped or crafted a sense of national identity, as Theodore Roosevelt’s visit to the Minnesota State fair as a way to mark his return to politics in 1901 was celebrated with a massive butter sculpture that was made in his honor. During World War II butter rations were limited and the competitions were suspended, however, since the 1960’s the competitions have continued to remain one of the most popular exhibits at the fair. In a very concrete way, these dairy sculptures show the degree to which regional identity is related to the central local resources, as citizens literally craft or model themselves out of these substances (dairy product, butter). (The degree to which a subject can authentically find their “identity” in a commodity is not our concern here.)

In the mid nineteenth century, crop art competitions, the second most popular exhibition type at the fair related to regional agriculture began as a promotional competition, and cash prizes were offered to amateur farmers who could artistically display their squash, potatoes, and other crops. Until 1930’s crop art remained a dominant exhibit, however, with the onset of the great depression this practice could no longer be sustained, as food could not be used for purposes other than human consumption. In 1965 the crop art competition became the seed art competition. Like the sculpting competitions, the 1960’s appear to be a particularly important moment for a kind of transformation in this fair exhibit also, as its transformations reflect changing sensibilities in the fair going public concerning the environment.

Lastly, a livestock arena/amphitheater was built in 1898 with the idea that the wealth of the state could be increased by $150,000 annually if only 600 animals were sold each year and subsequently produced offspring within the state that were then sold. Animals judged in competitions today now range from llamas to swine. Like crop/seed art and dairy sculptures, the scope of these events are always directly related to the agricultural and livestock production levels or outputs to a certain degree, even if the fair by and large has increasingly turned towards a celebration of consumption, as they determine the size or intensity of the exhibitions at the fair.

In a way specifically unique to capitalism, leisure always remains bound to its own opposite in such a public space, un-free labor practices. In this respect, it is interesting to see the fair increasingly modeled around the form of “competition”. The structures of leisure at the fair are modeled around the form of the market. As long as social relations remain capitalist, public spaces will always be bound to barbaric methods of production, while hiding under the artifice that hedonistic consumption remains possible for all. The opportunity exists, of course, at every moment, for such an event (The Public Sphere) to re-define itself, for us to find a new identity outside of the commodity form and free market structures, however, such an opportunity is contingent upon our forms of social practice in each and every present.

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