Is a Bathtub Still a Bathtub on Mars?

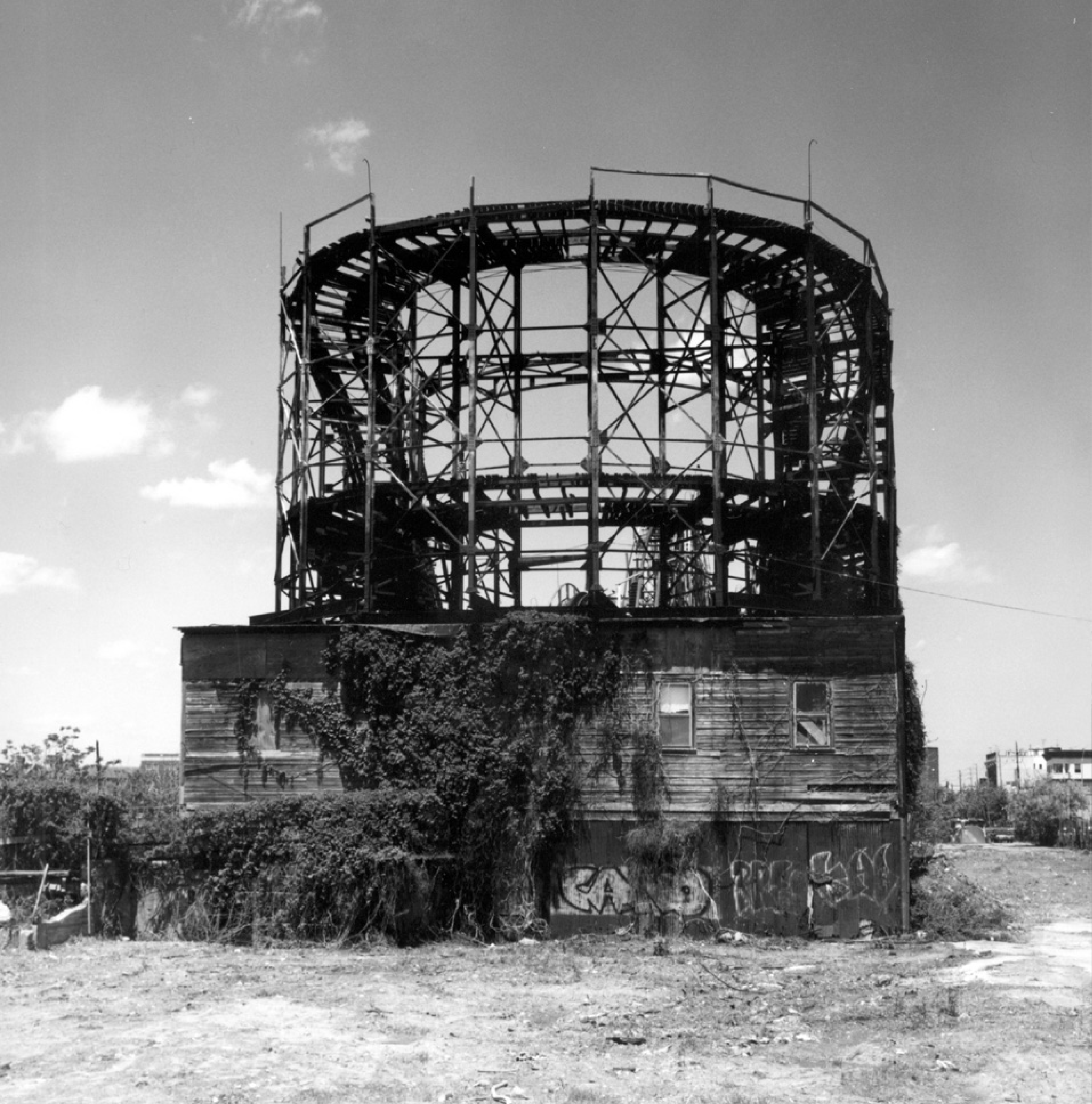
By William Alatriste What happens when a thing--a book, a camera, or in this case a roller coaster--is stripped of its function, when the correspondence between what a thing is and what it does is shattered? What then does it become? The works of Goethe languishing on a shelf for years are just so many feet of leather; a camera gathering dust on a desk is a nothing more than a paperweight; and a dilapidated roller coaster sitting right in the middle of prime real estate becomes not only an eyesore, but worse, a stumbling block to progress—progress in this case being tied to profit, to urban renewal. Is this what was going through the minds of the politicians and urban planners who tore down the Thunderbolt in order to make way for, of all things, a parking garage?

The Coney Island Thunderbolt rose up from the ground like the memory of something fabulous, a dark, decaying vision of rust and wood and vine. Just a few hundred meters from the ocean, it was that point where history flared visibly into the present. Standing poised between two worlds, its existence was simultaneous; its appearance contradictory, challenging. It was a ruin that had somehow escaped all the furious building and breaking and rebuilding of Coney Island over the years. It sat there stark, unmoved, inhabiting the space around it fully, making no demands other than to be considered on its own merits, either as a decaying structure or perhaps as found sculpture. Its permanence was taken for granted (and why should I or anyone else have given the matter a second thought—it had been there, sturdy as a planet, for decades). Sturdy yet forever on the verge of collapse, in the end its very solidness proved its undoing. While it lived (and here I mean while it gave shape and substance to the landscape) it bewildered even the most hardened eye. “Here I am,” it announced. “Make of me what you will.” Until the day it was ravaged— by time, not progress—it remained a gorgeous sepulcher to Brooklyn’s seaside past.

I came to it the way we sometimes come to knowledge: by default. I had been busy photographing the other Coney Island, the one of ferris wheels and water rides, and was searching for a way to visually describe its character. The challenge I had to overcome (one which many photographers experience), was having to work from the outside in, was being peripheral to a specific world while trying to reveal something essential, even intimate, about it—and doing so without lapsing into a kind of voyeurism that’s decorative and often betrays meaning.

I often saw the Thunderbolt from a distance, the way one looks upon a field of cows from a passing train and thinks not of cows but of shapes against a background. That is, without passion, and with little awareness as to what the shapes might mean. It was simply there, holding fast in a world of change, shielding nothing from its viewer, shedding history. Perhaps I failed to notice it at first because my eye was preoccupied with other matters; perhaps I was impatient, or unwilling to let things yield up gradually to sight; or maybe I was too busy trying to force vision rather than letting it evolve naturally. But then something marvelous happened: one afternoon, while trying to break myself of the old, habitual ways of approaching a subject, to free my eye from the tyranny of spending too much time looking at things without really seeing them, I turned away from the bumper cars and water rides, turned my back on the familiar, and was confronted with a reality of a different order. Once hovering at the extreme edge of vision, the Thunderbolt had suddenly become central to sight.

To some, it might have appeared a plague spot on the landscape. To others like myself, the Thunderbolt seemed to blossom forth from history like Bottecelli’s Venus. And yes, it might have been antiquated, anachronistic, a petrified, hulking mass. But it wasn’t, it couldn’t possibly have been unnecessary, or useless. Like so many other monuments, it pointed to the past; it supplied perspective, was a



reference to a forgotten world--and in doing so was a temporary stay against all the flux and flow, all the confusion of modern life. It was also, in a word, beautiful. Who could have known, who could have imagined, that its fate would be decided by emperors of air.

And so, three and a half years after tearing down the Thunderbolt, what has become of this space? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. No grand schemes were ever realized. No developer has stepped in to make things new again. It's just a landscape of weeds, a growing emptiness, a hole in the heart of vision. And now, faced with the almighty minus of this experience, I ask myself what has been gained, what lost? Perhaps I'm just being naive. I'd like to believe that the Coney Island Thunderbolt came down for a reason, a damn good reason, and not just because it had outlived its usefulness to a community, or had ceased being the thing it

was supposed to be. But in a society consumed by the demons and demands of urbanization, a society which shows little tolerance for the past, the fact is, the Thunderbolt—all Thunderbolts--are living on borrowed time, and all will no doubt be annihilated by the need to tear down history to build something more practical over its bones. But when I see what's happened here, I can't help asking myself a very basic question: isn't the desire to fill space with something practical, a baseball field for instance (off to the left) or that most suburban appendage—the parking lot—itself a form of blindness? Hopefully these photographs are a partial answer. In a world overrun with progress, they describe a condition of loss—literal loss as well as death of the imagination.

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