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The City Life

The Blandness of the Asphalt Fairground

One of those foundation studies that New Yorkers chronically ignore has asked a relevant question: Are white tube socks so essential to hip urban life that they must be sold in cut-rate batches from one summer street fair kiosk to the next? The vendors of the ubiquitous socks, intermingled with equally repetitious dealers of gyro sandwiches and spinach pie, have helped make the street fair scene a glassy-eyed exercise in déjà vu.

“Uniformly bland” was the conclusion by the non-profit Center for an Urban Future in a decidedly critical study that asked whatever happened to all that diversity New Yorkers brag about. That’s a good question for any weekend wanderer craving a touch of Bruegel to ease the fairs’ monotony. Maybe not drunken revelers lolling in haystacks, but at least some sense of local fun and eccentricity. (The last noticeable deviation at my local street fair was when the serial crepes vendors painted over ki-

osk references to Paris during the Francophobe phase of the Iraq invasion.)

The study attributes the fairs’ tediousness to the fact that a small number of vendors hold a significant share of fair permits obtained by mastering the city bureaucracy. Many dealers aren’t even based in the five boroughs, and potential newcomers lack how-to information. The study speaks up for local artists and businesses, asking who needs 20-plus dealers of knockoff purses along one nine-block fair? Or a vendor from Long Island monopolizing the sale of supposedly city-steeped pickles?

Solutions are harder to find. The study plumps, as an example, for one city manufacturer of “organic dog biscuits” who ought to be out there.

Organic dog biscuits? Well, to each his own — which is exactly the point. But put the dog biscuits over by the tube socks.

FRANCIS X. CLINES