

SIMON ROBERTS

Of Other Spaces

by Irenosen Okojie, 2017

I'm reminded that there's beauty in a shared affinity, looking at this image of Kiss fans: a snapshot taken at the Download Festival, an annual three-day metal-rock-punk festival held at Donington Park. The image is oddly macabre, yet humorous, defiant, and unapologetic. Walk past any one of these individuals in their glorious Kiss garb and you'd take a second look; the group of them together makes for a compelling photograph, a slice of theatre to be admired. The photograph is a meditation on the power of collective identity—the thrill and sense of belonging that comes from finding your social tribe, no matter how odd, alarming, or baffling it may appear to others. For these Kiss fans, attending the festival isn't just about the music, although music is a key element which brings them together; it's also about being on show. They're performing, not just for the camera, but for other festival attendees. In full costume, they distinguish themselves from the throngs of festival-goers. There's an element of the ritualistic here: the painted faces, the predominantly dark clothing, the sinister air, the silent shared language of difference. There's no sense of their individual identities, temporarily shelved to make way for this collective performance. For fans of metal and rock, the festival itself is a celebration dedicated entirely to this genre of music. I consider festivals an important element of Britishness—everything from the Notting Hill Carnival to the Stonehenge Summer Solstice Festival—they run the gamut from the revered to the ridiculous. They're a staunch staple of the British summer diet, the perfect spaces to see otherness made visible.

The photo struck a chord. I recognize there's difference on show. What interests me is the feeling of otherness it evokes: spaces to embrace that otherness, straddling the line between the subversive and the visible, the desire to have difference acknowledged, a gaze on that subculture, whether that gaze is liberating or restrictive, and whether that counter-cultural way of existing, when embraced by a wider demographic, loses its authenticity. In this case, the gaze is the camera lens. In this scenario, the festival space feels conducive to the gathering.

My interest in the subject of otherness comes from navigating spaces where I always felt slightly different to the people I interacted with. At an early age, I was the African kid with a strong Nigerian accent at a Norfolk boarding school. Then, having assimilated somewhat after a few years, returning back to settle in London, I was the Nigerian kid with the posh accent. Feeling somewhat settled in London after some time, whenever I returned to Nigeria, I was the girl from England with the London accent, easily identifiable as somebody slightly different before even opening my mouth. These degrees of difference share an unexpected allegiance with this photograph, which reminds me that elements of otherness, identity, and space have shaped me, in a sense informed my creativity. As a result, I often write

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about characters on the fringes of society: the outsiders, the people made invisible, the disenfranchised. I write about them in order to give them a voice, in the same way that subcultures provide spaces for people to build a form of community, to feel less alone. I write these characters in the hope that those who experience alienation may recognize elements of themselves. In my work I present otherness as normalized. It's no less human to be different.

This photograph reflects otherness in essence as difference. It's the feeling of not fitting in, not being embraced by the 'dominant' social group or the 'mainstream'. During the various stages of life, negotiating that difference can be difficult, traumatic, and disheartening. It forces you to find alternative spaces where your difference is embraced. The picture highlights that, once you find a space or subculture of shared affinities, your difference becomes liberating. This for me is the crux of the idea of subculture: a freedom in expressing one's authentic self with like-minded people. It allows the cultivation of ideas, a way of life, art, and values that goes against the norms. It's radical in essence, a movement quietly building and thriving in the wings. Subcultures catch the imagination. In the age of the Internet, they can rapidly become appropriated by the mainstream, often mutated and watered down as a result.

This image encapsulates otherness that exists in a subculture wholeheartedly, a feeling that's been an ongoing thread in my life. I may not be a Kiss fan, but the makings of the context feel familiar. A festival space, music as a vehicle for self-expression, the air of rebellion in costume, the joy of otherness in large quantities. It's no wonder it resonated. It's the beauty of finding your tribe wonderfully captured.