From Ritual to Spectacle

A Narrative Journey into the Communal Heart of Public Art at the Burning Man Festival

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Dedication

I dedicate this project to those whose endless love, patience, encouragement, and support made this narrative come alive. My heartfelt thanks to each of you:

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Abstract

The Burning Man Festival, a free-spirited yet highly sophisticated social experiment celebrating "radical self expression and radical self reliance" is well-known for its large-scale and highly interactive public art installations. For twenty-five years, Burners (as festival participants are called) have been creating and displaying amazing works of art for the annual event, which currently takes place in Nevada's Black Rock Desert. In the desert, Burners build a temporary city, appropriate the open space to serve as their "tabula rasa" or "blank canvas," and unleash their creative potential in the name of "active participation" and social civility. In the process, they produce public art on a scale unprecedented in United States history.

This dissertation, a visual and narrative ethnography, explores the layers of aesthetic and social meanings Burners associate with public art. Told in narrative form, this project utilizes "in situ" field notes, photographic field notes, rhetorical analyses of art installations, thematic analysis of Burner storytelling, and writing as a method of inquiry as means for investigating and understanding more fully the ways Burners create, display, and consume public art.

Findings for this project indicate Burners value public art beyond its material presentation. Preparing for, building, celebrating, and experiencing aesthetic transformation through the engagement of public art all are viewed as valuable "art" experiences at Burning Man. Working in tandem, these experiences also produce profound feelings of connection and transcendence in the community, suggesting Burning Man's methods for producing public art could serve as model to follow, or points for reflection, for other groups wishing to use public art and other forms of material expression to bring their members closer together.

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PLATE 1

Introduction: A Brief Orientation to this Project

This is a story about Burning Man.

There are two main reasons why I want to tell this story. The first reason is self-serving and I am not ashamed to admit it. I find it ridiculously fun to talk about Burning Man. Burning Man is the preeminent counter-culture art event happening in the United States today. It is an on-the-bus, off-the-charts, and out-of-this-universe kind of experience, and since I have popped down the rabbit-hole and tasted the "radical self expression and radical self reliance" the event promotes, I find it impossible not to talk about it. I want to share the beautiful absurdity of Burning Man. When I do, I get to relive its magic.

I also tell this story to help me explore the political, social, creative, and cultural elements making up the "Burning Man experience." Burning Man cannot be neatly summarized as a party, a vision-quest, an experimental community, or a creative outlet. It is all of these things, plus more, whipped together in a community-sized mixing bowl with the hope the end result will somehow taste good. It is communal cooking at its finest. After a week at Burning Man, however, I am never sure what exactly I just consumed. So I turn to narrative-based research practices as way of making sense of and finding meaning within the complex aesthetic, social, and political flavors of this event.

***

Narrative-based research, the process of writing stories and analyzing stories to explore the meaning of human actions as a form of qualitative research[1], goes by many names. These names include autoethnography, personal ethnography, narrative ethnography, performative writing, lyrical sociology, autobiography, narrative heuristics, qualitative inquiry, and narrative inquiry. Each of these methods varies slightly, reflecting a variety

of ways story-based research can be used to meet research objectives in a wide range of academic disciplines. Scholars using story-based research methods, however, do share a foundational epistemological belief that stories, narrative configurations of characters, settings, and themes temporally integrated and organized into plots (Polkinghorne, 1995) are natural linguistic forms people use every day to connect, feel, understand, and explore the world. The study of narrative configurations, therefore, is a particularly well-suited research practice for revealing insights into culturally situated actions in human experiences (Polkinghorne, 1995; Bruner, 1990; Ricoeur, 1991).

The study of narratives consists of two main research practices: analyzing stories told by research subjects and creating stories based on personal research experiences. When methodologically defining story-based inquiry, narrative theorists regularly split the analysis of stories told by research subjects and the creation of stories by the researcher into two separate approaches. For example, Bruner (1986) separates narrative research into "paradigmatic-type narrative inquiry" and "narrative-type narrative inquiry," and Polkinghorne, (1995) divides the practices between the "analysis of narratives" and "narrative analysis." This division is particularly useful when there is a need to clarify, solidify, and/or defend narrative-based research practices methodologically or paradigmatically, especially against the overarching framework of quantitative research[2].

1 Qualitative research is a collection of interpretative research practices designed to answer questions about how social experiences are created and given meaning. As an interpretive methodology, qualitative research explores the qualities of people and processes over scientific measurement and/or the clarification of causal relationships between isolated variables (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Qualitative research practices vary slightly by research discipline, reflecting disciplinary differences in framing research questions and establishing research goals. Within my discipline – communication studies – qualitative research methods are commonly utilized to study "human symbolic action in the various contexts of its performance" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

2 Critics of narrative-based research methods often argue narrative methods are too soft to be truly scientific, claiming the stories researchers produce are too subjective, evocative, provocative, therapeutic, exaggerated, or romanticized to qualify as scientific data (Bochner, 2001). Proponents of narrative-based research methods counter the opposite is true. They argue the study of narratives is useful and informative precisely because narratives are subjective, emotional, and evocative, thus providing a humanizing alternative to the dominant, and limiting, scientific approach for generating knowledge (Goodall, 2008; Ellis, 2004; Barone, 2001; Richardson, 2000).

My goal with this project, however, is to simultaneously engage in crafting research-based personal narratives and cultural reflection through story analysis, not separate the two, so I apply the term Narrative Inquiry to my work. Starting with Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) definition of "narrative" as phenomena under study and as a method for study, and Williams' (2006) concept of relationally active cultural analysis[3], I define Narrative Inquiry as the practice and the analysis of social storytelling as a methodological framework for critical cultural inquiry.

***

I turn to Narrative Inquiry to help me understand Burning Man for three important reasons.

First, as a festival participant, I find it impossible to separate the physical experience of Burning Man from the stories I create about this event. These stories order and contextualize my experiences and increase my appreciation and understanding of Burning Man. I operate, as MacIntyre (2007) describes, as a "story-telling animal" using my "stock of dramatic resources" to help me understand, and critically evaluate, my social experiences. I also use these stories, as Ellis (1991) and Bochner (2001) describe, to guide my thoughts about Burning Man beyond personal introspection and into a mode of deeply reflexive critical consideration about the greater cultural contexts in which my experiences occur.

3 For this project, I am aligning my culture studies research practices with the Birmingham School of Thought and the perspective of cultural theorist Raymond Williams. Williams (2006) combines the three primary definitions of culture – culture as the process for achieving human perfection, culture as the collection of documents recording human thought and imagination, and culture as a particular way of life – into a single, complex definition, in order to widen the contextualizing scope of the cultural researcher, and to position the cultural activity under investigation within an evolutionary framework of human activity versus static framework of set practices (p. 56). Since this approach requires the researcher to actively consider multiple aspects of a cultural activity (historical, material, social) over time, Williams' orientation to cultural inquiry suggests the critic will need to use multiple research methods (bricolage) in order to conduct adequately complex cultural analyses from these multiple definitional perspectives.

Second, as a cultural researcher interested in the ways groups of people form and maintain communities[4], I cannot ignore the fact that I am not alone in my telling of stories about Burning Man. Storytelling is an incredibly pervasive and bonding form of communication related to this event. Storytelling takes place in all stages of the festival experience including the beginning preparation stages and the decompression activities afterward. My field notes especially reflect substantial periods of festival time spent listening to friends and neighbors talk about Burning Man in story form. These stories contain heroes (Burners) and villains (people trying to disrupt the vibe), places (art installations, Center Camp, the Playa), events (profound social, aesthetic, and spiritual festival experiences), and carefully contemplated conclusions reflecting thoughts and feelings about the Burning Man community. Participant stories are sometimes sad, but more often they are humorous, poignant, evocative, and full of adventure. They are delivered with a great amount of drama and play, and often told while sharing food, drinks, presents, costumes, physical comforts like cool misters or backrubs, or a joint.

Given this prolific use of storytelling, Burning Man presents as a unique example of a "storytelling neighborhood[5]" (Ball-Rokeach, Kim, & Matei, 2001) suggesting greater analysis of Burning Man participant stories would increase our understanding about actual ways people use stories to accomplish the objectives story-based researcher epistemologically and ontologically attribute to social storytelling practices, namely,

4 I draw on the definition of "communicatively integrated communities" (Friedland, 2001) to conceptualize "communities" for this project. I choose this definition because it combines a sociological understanding of "community" as a group of people who organize around common interests and socially cohere by sharing material, relational, and ideological practices, with a communication-based understanding of "community" which emphasizes the group's interactive communication practices (in all media) as the centrally defining cohesive practices of the group. By combining these two foci, the "communicatively integrated communities" concept positions communities as discourse-based social structures, a positioning consonant with story-based research practices.

5 "Storytelling Neighborhood" is a term coined by Ball-Rokeach, Kim, & Matei (2001) describing a specific kind of narrative communication processes through which "people go from being occupants of a house to being members of a neighborhood (p. 294)." The authors envision "storytelling neighborhood" as a daily communication process based in stories, where Fisher's (1987) argument that personal identity is constructed through narrative discourse is extended to include the construction of neighborhoods through the same processes.

the ways stories help integrate different people into communities (Ball-Rokeach, Kim, & Matei, 2001), foster a sense of identity and belonging within communities (Anderson, 2006), organize community members to politically engage the public sphere (Fisher, 1987; Friedland, 2001), and help people to make sense of and evaluate their culture (MacIntyre, 2007; Fisher, 1987).

Finally, as a cultural researcher specifically interested in the ways groups of people use images, art, and other visual elements to bring its members together, I want to understand better the relationship between community-generating storytelling practices and cultural uses of public art. Like social storytelling, public art is another discursive practice (albeit one utilizing a different symbolic vocabulary) also related to the social processes of defining community spaces (Fleming, 2007), promoting community identity (Weil, 2002), and inspiring transformative action (Benjamin, 2008). Because Burning Man is an art event with an abundant display of public art, and it is a communal event with filled with instances of social storytelling, Burning Man again provides a unique opportunity, through the exploration of the relationship between these two community-generating discursive practices, for generating deeper insight into the complex ways communities are created and maintained.

Burning Man presents a wealth of experiences and stories worthy of investigation from a story-based methodology. I choose Narrative Inquiry, therefore, as my overarching framework for this project in order to simultaneously explore the cultural phenomena of social storytelling at this event, the relationship between social storytelling and public art, and to use my own storytelling practices as part of the research process.

***

The story and discussion which follows are the products of my Narrative Inquiry into storytelling and public art at the Burning Man Festival.

Part one is a personal narrative based on my aesthetic and communal experiences at the event. This narrative combines photographs and lyrical vignettes into a layered account (Ronai, 1995; Tracy, 2004), written with the intention of providing the reader with an evocative telling (Ellis, 2004) of Burning Man. The format of this story is methodologically modeled on the concept of writing as a method of inquiry[6] (Richardson, 2000; Goodall, 2000; Goodall, 2008; Ellis, 2004), particularly the practices of creative non-fiction writing, where outward analysis and inward reflection, or what Gutkind (2008) refers to as parallel public and private storytelling, are combined to produce a cultural investigation in the form of a literary text.

Part two is a theoretical and methodological discussion about using Narrative Inquiry as a research method for this study. Specifically, I argue bricolaging story-based research practices with rhetorical methods for analyzing material texts (Blair, 1999; Blair & Michel, 1999; Blair & Michel, 2000; Blair, 2001), where special emphasis is placed on critiquing the physical qualities of public art and the affects of this materiality on the viewing audience, and problem-based ethnographic inquiry (Tracy, 2007; Flyvbjerg, 2001), where the researcher practices situated immersion in the field in order to investigate communication issues in situ, creates an especially effective methodological approach for practicing relationally active cultural analysis in a manner consistent with the overall objectives of Narrative Inquiry.

6 Writing as a method of inquiry positions the act of writing as qualitative analytic process for discovering information about a research topic. The method involves reflexive writing, where the author writes about field experiences from an alternating outward, analytic perspective, and an inward, self-evaluating perspective. Richardson (2000) summarizes the process as "a research practice through which we can investigate how we construct the world, ourselves and others, and how standard objectifying practices of social science unnecessarily limit us and social science" (p. 924). Similarly, Goodall (2000) describes writing as a method of inquiry as a "new" form of ethnographic writing where "creative narratives are shaped out of a writer's personal experiences within a culture and addressed to academic and public audiences" (p. 9). Writing as a method of inquiry is a direct response to the "crisis of representation" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) in qualitative research, a methodological concern about the implications of representing "others" ethically in research, prompting qualitative authors to reconsider the implications of their own writing, both in process and form, and in final presentation.

Ultimately, my goal with this project is to use story to gain better insight into the ways Burning Man uses public art to bring its community members together, and to reveal what other communities could learn about visual communication practices from Burning Man's successes and failures with public art.

And with these thoughts, my story about Burning Man begins…

Part 1: A Visual Narrative about Burning Man

PLATE 2

Prologue

I am struggling to find the right words to describe playa dust.

Playa dust is…
…not sand. It is much too fine to be sand.
Playa dust is…
…not really dust. It is far too coarse for dust.

It looks like nothing. It tastes like a bad pickle. It is soft and crumbly but it supports my weight when I walk on it – except when it doesn't.

That's when it breaks down and swirls up and it surrounds my body and clings to my arms and my legs and it fills my nose and my lungs and my ears and my eyes. And that's when I begin to breathe playa dust – swallow playa dust – play playa dust – and dream playa dust.

And the smell! Oh the smell!

One sniff – one big whiff – and I am *there*!

***

Where is "there?"

Technically – nowhere.

Technically *technically* – "there" is parcel of public land located approximately 120 miles north of Reno, Nevada, or 325 miles north east of San Francisco, California. It is called the

Black Rock Desert and it is geologically classified as a "playa," a dried-up, ancient lake bed. It sits in the heart of the Great Basin Desert, the largest desert in the United States.

Black Rock Desert can appear incredibly beautiful or incredibly frightening, depending on how one feels about *absence*. While the greater desert region supports a range of flora and fauna, on the playa itself, nothing lives. There are no plants, not even cacti, so there are no animals or insects, and there are no birds. The playa is perfectly flat, and although the area is surrounded by mountains, there are no rock formations on the playa itself. There aren't even rocks on the ground. The "soil" consists of densely compacted alkaline dust – the remnants of a lake that dried and died during the ice age.

This abundance of absence also means there is no shelter from the blazing sun or blasts of wind, and without heat traps, the temperature drops substantially when the sun goes down. The playa is open, and expansive, and dangerous, and exciting.

To get to the playa one must drive, at least for the final leg of the journey. There is only one road in and one road out. Gerlach and Empire, two small towns with a combined population of 499[7], are the only communities in the region… at least most of the year. For one week in August, however, a temporary city joins them in the desert. The city has a population almost 100 times larger than Gerlach and Empire, and although its citizens are transient, they thrive on the potential in the absences of "there."

***

I like to drive there.

I like the long stretches of uninterrupted highway, and feeling the car wind and zoom

7 This number is based on the 2000 census.

in response to the road. I love the sounds my car makes as we cruise along. I drive an Outback, so I'm missing the rumble and hum of a sturdy V-6, but that funny Subaru engine sound is comforting in its own way. It pleases me.

I have lived my entire life in the western United States so I don't think twice about driving long distances to get to places I want to go. One has to drive, and drive through a lot of nothing, to get to the places that make the West worthwhile. I'm looking forward to driving 1000 miles to the desert. I'm looking forward to driving west, towards the sunset.

When I drive, especially on the two lane highways connecting the tiniest dots in the Rand McNally road atlas (or for you techies – the dots you can only see on maximum zoom in Google Maps) I roll down the windows and turn off the stereo. I want to be able to play with the air. It helps me think.

Driving in the West is my favorite form of meditation. When I first get into the car, I am stressed. I'm worried about leaving on time and making sure I've packed everything I need, and I fuss over the drinks and snacks. I remain tense until I leave the city and hit the open road. Only then do I start to unwind. With each mile I feel tension leaving my body. As the hours tick by, I transform. I stop making mental to-do lists. I remember how to laugh. I lose clothing. I daydream.

I use the road to prepare myself for the playa. The highway is liminal space[8] and it represents the time I need to prepare myself to live in the desert. It is ironic, however, that I would need this time, because in actuality I already live in a desert. The Sonoran Desert. My current home is in Scottsdale, Arizona.

8 I am referring here to Victor Turner's (1986) concept of "liminal space" which he conceives as a "betwixt-and-between condition often involving seclusion from the everyday scene" (101). Specifically, I am acknowledging Turner's recognition of ritual in relation to transitional spaces, and how these ritualized periods of transition allow institutional questioning to occur. The open road is neither here nor there, but operates, for me, as transition between the two. Driving, for me, is the ritual I associate with the liminal, and as such, operates as my "vehicle" for critical reflection.

But there are deserts, and there are deserts. And in Scottsdale, great pains have been taken to minimize the effects of desert living. Everything is air conditioned and xeriscaped and painted a weird pinkish taupe to blend in with the red mountains and turquoise sky. There are fountains everywhere, giving the appearance of an abundant water supply. And there are golf courses. Acres and acres and acres of golf courses. Hyper-green patches of perfectly manicured grass and countless numbers of middle aged men and women in khaki shorts and polo shirts and wide brimmed hats searching for little white balls. Little white balls that whiz by my windshield as I drive to the dog park. Little white balls that whiz by my windshield on the way to the gourmet grocer.

Scottsdale is not about the desert. It is about the oasis. To remember the desert, I need to drive west.

***

The desert.

No.

The *idea* of the desert.

Yes.

That is what resonates.

Well actually, no, it's the desert too.

The real desert to deal with the desert of the real[9]?

Yes. That's more like it.

***

9 This is a reference to Baudrillard's concept of "real" as presented in Simulacra and Simulation (1994). While Baudrillard identified Las Vegas and Disney World as examples of symbolic hyperrealism, I would also include Scottsdale as an example of a symbolically constructed community.

In my pilgrimages to the playa, I have discovered I am not an isolated seeker. I am not an anomaly – a lone case of "postmodern malaise[10]" searching for reprieve in something real. There are lots of people like me – too many people like me…

People tired of their television sets and long commutes to work.

People annoyed with trying to find their favorite toothpaste in the toothpaste aisle. (Just how many flavors of Crest toothpaste are there anyway?)

People worried they are missing something important – tangible – meaningful – in their lives because they focus too much on having instead of being.

I go to the desert because I am afraid. I am afraid that I am too complacent, too passive, too tired, too angry, too detached, too hungry, too sick, too fat, too much. I go to the desert to purge my anger and frustration, and to remember…. to remember how to dance and laugh and connect and feel… to remember how my body works and how it doesn't… and maybe most importantly, I go to the desert to remember how to kiss.

I am afraid I will forget how to kiss… to *really* kiss…

I don't want to be a cheek kisser… the kind of person who reduces kisses to mere formalities. Dry little pecks on alternate cheeks accompanied with a, "Hi! Hello! How very good to see you again." Kiss. Kiss. I don't want to be a sweet kisser. Closed lips on closed lips. Charming but superficial. I don't want to avoid kissing because I fear embarrassment or accusations of behaving badly. I don't want to be a bad kisser either because I became so distracted I stopped kissing altogether.

10 I cannot locate a standard definition, nor did the term appear in standard medical web sites like WebMD.com. So maybe this isn't a "real" condition after all.

I want to kiss and mean it. *Really mean it*. I want to move beyond passive rationalization, quit flirting with the edges of passion, stop denying the sensations, and go for the kiss. A long kiss… a lingering kiss… the kind of kiss where I can taste you and know you and remember you, and make it so you cannot forget me.

***

So why the desert?

Why not? People have been going to the desert to figure things out for a very long time. Moses. Hunter S. Thompson. Georgia O'Keefe. The desert is a well established literary trope.

As a metaphor for both history and text, the desert marks our estrangement from the world and is the perspective from which we can question the very language we use, the falsifications and ambiguities that language harbors (Mazzotta, 1979).

Or if you prefer…

BRIGHTON
He was the most extraordinary man I ever knew.
VICAR
Did you know him well?
BRIGHTON
I knew him.
VICAR
Well, 'nil nais ibonam', but did he really deserve a place in here?
REPORTER
Lord Allenby, could you give me a few words about Colonel Lawrence?

ALLENBY
What, more words? The revolt in the desert played a decisive part in the
Middle-Eastern Campaign.
REPORTER
Yes, sir. But about Colonel Lawrence himself?
ALLENBY
No, I didn't know him well, you know.
REPORTER
Eh, Mr. Bentley. You must know as much about Colonel Lawrence as anybody does.
BENTLEY
Yes. It was my privilege to know him, and to make him known to the world.
He was a poet, a scholar, and a mighty warrior.[11]

Or maybe best yet…

I've been through the desert on a horse with no name
It felt good to be out of the rain
In the desert you can remember your name
cause there ain't no one for to give you no pain
La la la la la la la la…[12]

It isn't too surprising that the desert, as metaphor, sits in our collective conscious as a powerful site for remembering who we are, what we value, and why we need to stay connected to our creative spirit. Its starkness resonates on a fundamental level while speaking to romantic notions of struggle and survival. Visually, the desert serves as a

11 This is the opening scene to the movie Lawrence of Arabia (1962).

12 This is the chorus to the song "Horse with No Name" written by Dewey Bunnell, and originally performed by the band America (not Neil Young as many assume.) The song was released in 1972.

rather obvious symbolic representation of emptiness in our lives, although an empty desert can be interpreted negatively as void or positively as blank slate upon which we can create a sense of self, depending on the optimism level of your world view.

We can die in the desert, but we can also be reborn. Which will you choose?

It isn't too surprising, then, that the desert, as physical reality, still calls to us. It's one of the few places we can go and not find a Starbucks but maybe, if we are lucky, find ourselves instead.

***

I step onto the playa and breathe deeply. A wave of happiness and nostalgia passes through my body. It smells like home.

A girl with a megaphone sees me and shouts, "You look so clean! Did you just get here?"

I look at my arms and legs and then at the arms and legs of the people around me. I do look clean. Urban clean. Hotel shower clean. Boring clean. The bodies around me are already covered in dust (What color is it?? Eggshell? Ecru? Ivory? Bone? I don't know. . . it's a funny shade of white.) The dust compliments their sun burns nicely though.

The girl passes the megaphone to her boy friend who begins yelling "Fuck you!" at everyone who walks by. I notice the sign hanging behind them. It reads: Camp Fuck You. Ah. . . that explains that. Well, that feels like home too.

We walk. Already the playa cake is breaking up and I feel the familiar burn of the dust on my feet. It's a slight chemical reaction. . . the unfortunate effect of alkaline on skin. But no worries. I packed stuff to soothe my feet.

***

I am a person who finds inspiration on the Playa.

I am part of the group of temporary citizens who pilgrimage to the Black Rock Desert each year to engage in a week of "radical self expression and radical self reliance."

I am a Burner, and I take part in the Burning Man Festival.

I often wonder what, if anything, that really means. . .

PLATE 3

PLATE 4 montage

PLATE 5

PLATE 6

PLATE 7

PLATE 8 montage

PLATE 9

PLATE 10

Chapter 1: Preparation

Among the numerous qualities of the Burning Man experience that are shared by all festival participants – the heat, the dust, the Burn – there is one aspect that is of necessity universal: the journey.

Lee Gilmore (2005), *Fires of the Heart: Ritual, Pilgrimage, and Transformation at Burning Man*

***

Camping gear.
Survival gear.
Art gear.
Sexy adventure gear.

Check!

Quick review of Burning Man's standard issue *Survival Guide* to ensure basic preparations have been met and we comply with the organization's mandate for responsible festival participation which states:

> Participants at Burning Man must bring all necessities to the desert: food, shelter, water, and basic first aid supplies. As you read these guidelines for responsible behavior, please keep in mind you are responsible for yourself at all times, in every regard, as you approach, once you enter, and as you leave Black Rock City...

> … Everyone is expected to abide by these standards. Community membership is a privilege. Violation of these standards could result in rejection from the community (Survival Guide 2007).

Check! I am prepared to care for myself and be responsible for my own actions at all times. I am radically self reliant! I am ready to participate!

I am prepared because my husband, Todd, and I have spent the last two months collecting and organizing everything we need for a week of desert festival living. Our supply list is long, but refined, representing an amalgam of official Burning Man packing tips, past Burning Man experiences, and new suggestions obtained through word of mouth and the eplaya list serve[13]. This year our supplies include:

- A four person tent
- A fourteen-foot dome shade structure
- Two large area rugs
- Four camp chairs
- One collapsible camp table
- One dozen three-foot lengths of rebar and one dozen tennis balls to cover the exposed ends of the stakes
- Two sleeping bags
- Two sleep cots
- Seven days worth of shoes and clothing to accommodate a 70 degree temperature range (lows in the 40s and highs in the 110s)
- Seven days worth of costumes for different times of day and different kinds of events
- 25 gallons of water (enough for two people to consume 1.5 gallons a day plus extra for bathing and washing dishes)

13 Eplaya is the Burning Man community online discussion board. Burners also utilize Tribe.net as a major discussion forum. Visit http://eplaya.burningman.com/ or http://bm.tribe.net/ to join event-related discussion threads.

- Food to sustain ourselves for three meals a day for one week, and special food items to share with dozens of camp mates and neighbors
- Two Coleman gas camp stoves plus extra fuel
- Dishes and cookware which can be washed and reused with minimal clean up
- Two large coolers – one filled with beverages and one filled with perishable food
- A tool chest containing basic hand tools and ample quantities of duct tape
- A well-stocked first aid kit
- A very well-stocked bar with mixers (enough to serve lots of drinks to lots of neighbors on lots of occasions)
- Vinegar
- Sunscreen, lotion, and lip balm
- Several large empty buckets with lids for collecting and transporting gray water
- Large garbage bags for collecting and transporting trash
- A make-shift porta potty (kitty litter and a wash basin)
- A solar shower
- A healthy supply of single-ply toilet paper
- Two beachcomber bicycles
- Flashlights, lanterns, head lamps, and glow sticks
- Gifts for bartering and saying thank you
- Our art

We're proud of this list.

Proud, because this list shows we know how to assemble the basic building materials for constructing a life-sustaining camp in the desert. Proud, too, because the list demonstrates our ability to balance the needs and wants for our camp against the reality that we must haul these supplies a thousand miles from our everyday home in Arizona to our temporary home in Nevada, and that we can make all of this gear fit into an incredibly limiting 68.6 cubic feet of Subaru cargo space.

We are efficient and we are prepared!

We didn't have the Subaru for our first trip to Burning Man though. We started with a beat-all-to-hell 1974 Chevy Cheyenne 3/4 ton pickup.

God Almighty that pickup was a beast!

The gauges on the dash didn't work, so we tracked road signs and watched the time to figure out our speed and know when to fill up with gas. The air conditioner and radio were on the fritz, so we drove the entire way with the windows rolled completely down, blasting our ears with the romantic roar of the constant highway. Somewhere along the way we busted the windshield wiper fluid reservoir, so we kept a jug of cleaner and a roll of paper towels handy so we could wipe the bugs away when the splats got to be too bad. The seatbelts didn't work either, but we weren't worried about accidents. The truck was a steel behemoth capable of rolling over anything, and most of the drivers we passed knew it. They did their best to stay out our way, avoiding at all cost a sure-to-lose encounter with a rusted out, speeding pickup with a poorly secured, butt-ugly topper and a crazy girl with a roll of paper towels hanging out the window.

Man, I miss that truck!

The pickup was ugly but it had good karma. We purchased it from a man who had been using it to run a recycling program in a small, rural town. He purchased it from a Habitat for Humanity volunteer group. Before we found the truck, I had a dream that we would buy an orange and white Chevy pickup. When we saw it for sale, I knew instantly it was the truck of my dreams! When it came time to go to our first Burning Man, it had to be the vehicle that brought us there.

We didn't pack carefully for that first trip though. We had lots of cargo space and no clue what we were really getting ourselves into. We'd studied the Burning Man web site, did our best to interpret the Survival Guide, gathered what we thought we might need, threw it into the back of the pickup, and hit the road. For that trip we didn't really care what we took. All we really wanted was to get there!

> *Get there! Get there! Get there!*
> *Where are we going??*
> *To Burning Man?? Burning Man! To Burning Man!!*

That was three Burning Man festivals and five years ago. We sold the pickup when we moved from Montana to Arizona, and purchased the Outback for more sensible, and street-legal, transportation. Downsizing is definitely one reason we pack differently now. But not the main reason. After frying in the heat, freezing in the cold, having our camp destroyed by 80 mph winds, and encountering a few life-altering aesthetic experiences, we now substitute raw road enthusiasm for conscientious preparation.

We grew into the Outback.

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Our camping gear is imbued with a fine layer of playa dust. It's nearly impossible to clean the dust completely off our stuff. There are two solutions to this "problem." We can wipe everything down with a diluted mixture of water and vinegar, over and over, until the mild acid dissolves the alkaline dust, or we can accept our gear as permanently playa-fied and enjoy it as is.

We choose the latter.

I love pulling our playa-fied gear out of storage and smelling last year's dust poof into the air. Playa dust waking up after a year of storage slumber. Soft dust. Deep inhale.

Burning Man flash back!

. . . Walking across the playa, arms and legs coated in dust, feet in pink ballet slippers buried in soft mounds of alkaline powder. . . a gentle voice singing Hare Krishna in the distance . . . feeling deeply content. . .

Oh God! I want to go back! Get there! Get there! Get there!

With memories awake and anticipation building, our packing ritual officially begins. Step one: systematically review, sort, and repair all materials for building and maintaining camp, then repack everything in clear tubs with clear lids. Tubs help minimize dust collection – and clear tubs make it so we can find what we need without having to open the tubs constantly to look inside (an annoying activity that also defeats the purpose of the tubs as constant opening and closing effectively lets all the dust back in.) Tub packing took us three years to figure out, but now we're on it! All hail clear tubs! Clear tubs for everyone! And thank you, IKEA, for providing affordable clear tub options in a variety of convenient sizes that stack neatly in the Outback.

Step two: remove all of the convenience packaging from our food and beverages, and consolidate as many food and beverage containers as we can. This makes the best use of our packing space but also minimizes potential trash. Burning Man does not provide trash receptacles or any kind of collection services, and their "Leave No Trace" mandate, (number two on Burning Man's top ten list of participant responsibilities[14]) means packing out everything you pack in:

> LEAVE NO TRACE: Please take everything you bring to the event back home with you. . . Contribute to our long-term survival: Pack it in. Pack it out. You are responsible for the condition of your campsite and nearby public areas of Black Rock City (Survival Guide).

Dutifully, I remove the outer packaging from a four-individual-servings-of-pink-grapefruit snack pack, a favorite playa treat for me, with Burning Man's instructional green-isms and catch phrases for consumption-conscious desert camping sing-song through my mind:

> Rethink, reduce, reuse, recycle, respect, restore!! Clean as you go! Never let your trash hit the ground. If it wasn't made by your body, don't put it in the potty. Think ahead! Plan for the future! Leave no trace behind[15]!!

As I tear away the cardboard and plastic, I think about the shape and size of the trash piling in front of me. This forces me to be completely aware of this stuff I am discarding and focus in on the very nature of the products, like this snack pack, I find necessary to bring with me to the desert. Everything we pack represents a choice.

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14 The 10 Fundamentals for Participant Responsibilities (often referred to as the Ten Commandments of Burning Man) are 1. No cruising with cars. Black Rock City is designed for pedestrians and bicycles; 2. Leave no trace. Pack it in and pack it out; 3. No commerce. You cannot buy or sell anything; 4. Public Boundaries. Honor the Bureau of Land Management established buffer zone on the playa and around Black Rock City; 5. Fire Guidelines. Follow all fire safety guidelines and only burn in designated areas; 6. Sound. Follow noise control guidelines limiting power amplification to 300 watts, producing no more than 90 decibels at 20 feet; 7. Dogs. No dogs allowed at the event; 8. Tickets. Required and may be revoked. 9. Laws. Burning Man does not condone illegal drug use, underage drinking, or public sex; 10. Firearms. The possession of any kind of fire arm within Black Rock City is prohibited. (Participant Responsibilities)

15 Elaborate rules and guidelines for responsible behavior sound so completely counter-intuitive to facilitating a counter culture desert retreat. But commandments like "Leave No Trace" stem from organizational concerns for monitoring the festival's impact on the playa itself. Granted, the language of this commandment in particular reflects Burning Man's distinctly Californian style of "green" environmental thinking and the anti-consumption values permeating the organization's communal philosophies, but Burners also know this list of rules reflects a practical need for the playa to remain healthy and clean in order for Burning Man to pass a post-event, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) government land inspection. The Burning Man Organization leases the playa for the festival from the BLM, and in order to renew their lease for future burning Man events, the playa must pass a rigorous BLM post-burn inspection. The stakes are high – a failed inspection means losing our home! – so this makes monitoring our environmental impact a top concern for every citizen of Black Rock City.

In this fully aware state of consumptive critique, I also find myself evaluating how much we spend to participate in this experience. Mandatory spending starts with purchasing required Burning Man Tickets at $240 a pop[16]. Other necessary expenses include materials for building our camp, food and water, climate appropriate clothing, art supplies, preparing the Subaru for the road trip, and four days of travel expenses. Totaling this year's receipts shows we are *conscientiously* spending about two thousand dollars for this adventure[17]. And that's with saving money by shopping at places like IKEA for our basic supplies.

The honorable Reverend Billy[18] doesn't condone such spending behavior. Preaching at the base of The Man with the Church of Stop Shopping Gospel Singers swaying behind him, he cries out to those of us who discount shopped our way to Burning Man. "How many of you stopped at the Wal-Mart in Reno before driving to the playa? Come on! Show your hands!" We raise our hands and look around to all the other Burners with their hands in the air. Yes, we were all there, buying whatever it was we thought we still needed, giving each other the thumbs-up in the parking lot as we did. Looking appalled Reverend Billy exclaims, "We need to exorcise those shopping demons! Sing with me now – AMEN! We don't need to shop to live – AMEN! We don't need to shop to burn – AMEN! And when you feel the urge to reach out and grab something off the mega retail shelf, pull your hand back and shout – HALLELUJAH! Say it with me now – HALLELUJAH! That's all you gotta do to stop shopping now! That's all you gotta do! STOP SHOPPING NOW!"

16 Although open to anyone, the Burning Man Festival is, technically, a private event and requires a ticket for admission. Ticket prices for 2010 range from $210-$300. Tickets are sold in lots of 9,000, with subsequent lots increasing in price. The increasing price scale is designed to encourage early ticket sales, and in theory, encourage participant event planning on a large, community-oriented scale. Burners are asked to purchase tickets in the price bracket they can most afford, and leave the first 9,000 tickets in the $210 bracket as scholarship tickets for low-income "members of our community" (http://tickets.burningman.com/)

17 Burners can spend substantially less or substantially more to attend Burning Man, depending on how comfortably and elaborately they choose to create their camps and the scale and travel logistics of their aesthetic contributions. Travel expenses also vary and affect expenses accordingly. These variables make it difficult to generalize participation expenditures, however, the fact that substantial expenses are linked to attending the event make the "real" cost of Burning Man and often debated topic of concern among participants (eplaya forum index: adding up the cost of Burning Man)

18 To learn more about Revernd Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping visit http://www.revbilly.com/

Sigh. I still hear you, Reverend Billy, and I wish it were that simple. Burning Man is expensive for us. We do the best we can. . .

The third and final step of the packing ritual: sort through piles of clothing and costumes to decide what to wear while cavorting in the desert.

This step should be fun, but it's not. I dread it.

My hang-up is that I am not a costume person. I don't enjoy dressing up in elaborate outfits, or wearing body paint, or messing with my hair. I find costumes incredibly uncomfortable. They make me fidgety. And unfortunately for me, Burning Man is all about using costume and dress-up to channel the event's particular spirit of "radical" self expression. Costumed people are everywhere, dancing and prancing, and living out their fantasies.

> *Open the door to who you really are. Access your feelings and genuinely express yourself by putting on a costume and letting your freak flag fly!*

I can't seem to find my freak flag, though, so I can't figure out what I should unfurl on the playa. At Burning Man I have full permission to wear whatever I want – and by association *be* whatever I want – but I don't feel like there's a freaky part of me I suppress in my day to day living and therefore could, or maybe even should, reveal in the desert.

Staring at the clothing piled on my bed, and faced with unlimited options for self-expression, I feel my mind drawing blank. Who should I be on the playa? Alien goddess? Leather mistress? Wanton bunny? Desperate pirate?

"Arrrr! Matey! Care to join me on the Esplanade for some frrrrreaky fun??"

No. Not pirate. Definitely not pirate. Maybe the bunny?? I am kind of soft and snuggly. . .

Now the doubts are creeping in. Why is this so hard? Am I that out of touch? Too comfortable with my rather average, and fairly straight, middle American life? Am I too private? Too introverted? Too conservative?? Does this mean I don't belong to the desert?

Maybe it's stage fright. Could the thought of having to live up to whatever I wear be holding me back? Costumes conjure expectations. Can I deliver what I project?

I suppose this means I'm envious of costume people. I wish I had a knack for putting together amazingly visual outfits and the ability to bring those costumes to life. Perhaps someday I will be one of those people. But today is not that day…

One alternative to wearing costumes, I know, is to go about completely naked. About 10 percent of Burning Man attendees participate fully nude[19] so naked is a perfectly acceptable option. Plus there are countless bare breasts and bare bottoms and peek-a-boo body parts flashing through body paints and funky fabrics to make almost all of Burning Man naked, at least to some degree. Naked is part of the culture.

But I am also a nudity chicken, and although I've made friends with practicing nudists and feel (mostly) comfortable around naked people, I find I cannot bring myself to engage in full public nudity.

Blame it on my fundamental Protestant upbringing, or residing in red states my entire life, or living self-consciously with a chronic illness for many years – blame it on whatever but the reality won't change. I can't do naked. At least not yet. I will wear clothing at Burning Man again this year, however minimal that clothing might be, and once again I will return from the desert with tan lines.

19 This is an informal estimate, but one that circulates consistently.

The catch, now, is determining what that minimal clothing will be. Since costuming is out, I sort through the piles to see how readily my clothing lends itself to general Burning Man "fashion," a kind of raver club wear meets Road Warrior sci fi meets San Francisco hippie meets cultural satirist look. I try to envision "sexy apocalypse" or "dirty earth child" as I go. These are not looks I sport on a regular basis, though, so my clothing options fall short. I really just want to wear my favorite broken-in oh-so-perfectly blue jeans and t-shirts but I won't. I've learned wearing every day clothes at Burning Man marks you as normal. Midwest voyeur. Culturally regular. Creatively dead. All the things Burning Man is trying not to be.

The Survival Guide states in very small print, "Don't be a "participation snob". . . Just because someone isn't costumed or visibly participating doesn't mean they aren't contributing." Thanks for saying it. But I remember how the Penguin King did not approve of my cowboy hat and blue jeans, and the way he leaned into my face and sneered, "Wear a costume, for Christ's sake, and participate! Don't be so passive. Put on something expressive and show support for this community." His hostility and self-proclaimed superiority surprised me, and that image has never left me. Just because he had a stuffed bird on his head shouldn't have made him the authority over me, or make his experience more genuine than mine. But in that moment it did…

I don't want a Penguin King repeat experience and I don't want to project "creatively dead," so I work out some clothing compromises. I pack a few hats. And wigs. My long blue gloves. Sexy black boots. Striped thigh-high stockings and booty shorts. Sarongs. Bandanas. Goggles. Camouflage pants. A prom dress. And finally, a bright pink faux fur coat.

I stuff the clothing into two large army surplus duffle bags, and let myself feel slightly unsatisfied with it all. I want to belong to the desert, so I cross my fingers and hope the clothing thing works itself out while I am there…

***

"I think we should cross the Hoover Dam this year."

"Really?? What made you change your mind?"

"Going around the Dam adds too much time to the trip. I'd rather deal with the inspection than drive the extra miles."

"Are you sure about that? I thought the AZ Burners said the inspections were a problem."

"Only if you look suspicious. And look at us. Do you really think we'll raise any red flags? We couldn't look more 'responsible middle-class citizen' right now if we tried."

Todd has a point. For two people getting ready to head off into the desert for a free-style week of alternative living, we look very non-alternative. We're not sporting any of the usual counter culture markers – visible tattoos, dreadlocks, body piercings, hemp clothing – that would make us look edgy, disruptive, cynical, or suspicious. I've cut my hair short and dyed it candy-apple red, and Todd shaved his head and grew out his goatee, but we're in our late 30s so we don't even come close to looking like anarchist punks. And the Subaru is a far cry from a hand-painted school bus – that quintessential counter-culture acid-happy symbol for cross country cultural disruption. We look like we usually do. We look like us.

The most direct route from Scottsdale, Arizona to Black Rock City, Nevada is to take I-93 over the dam and into Las Vegas, and the mountain grades on the Laughlin-Bullhead I-95 work around make the alternate route stressful and time consuming. But "responsible citizen" or not, there's something unsettling about having to pass through a post 9/11 heightened security check point because the Hoover Dam has been labeled a high-risk

terrorist target[20] just to get to Burning Man. It feels *wrong*. And the thought of potentially having to unpack my car for a government inspection after channeling the Tetris gods for over an hour to make every tub and bag and box puzzle together perfectly inside the Subaru makes me feel worse.

"It will be fine."
"Are you sure."
"I'm sure."
"Really?"
"I'm sure."
"OK."
"OK"
"Hoover Dam it is."

***

The best part of packing is when the last item is stowed in its place and the car doors WHOOMP! slam shut. That sound means we're hitting the road!

One last look around the house to make sure everything is ready for the house sitter and to say goodbye to the dogs. Jax and Josie look at us with sad Labrador eyes, pitifully aware that the full car means they are not going with us on this adventure. In 2003, Burning Man created a no animal policy[21], but even if the rule wasn't in place we wouldn't bring our dogs with us. Burning Man barely makes sense to me. I can't imagine how upsetting all the sounds and smells and crazy people in costumes would be to our pets.

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20 For detailed information about crossing the Hoover Dam and navigating the security check point visit http://www.usbr.gov/lc/hooverdam/crossingguide.pdf

We make our final rounds. All the gear is packed – *check!* The house is clean and ready – *check!* We are mentally set – *check!* It's finally time to go.

This is it.

Love the dogs.
Lock up the house.
Start the car.
Take a deep breath.
Smile at each other.
Pull out of the driveway.

We are on our way to Burning Man!!

***

Todd drives first. He pulls out slowly and drives around the block, checking to make certain the bikes are securely strapped in place and nothing shifts in the back. Neither of us wants to repeat last year's near disaster when we hit a bump on I-40 outside of Kingman, Arizona, and the bikes broke free and crashed to the road. Fortunately for us the accident happened next to an exit that happened to lead to a Wal-Mart that happened to have all the supplies we needed to fix the bikes and the carrier.

Burning Man luck! Caring for its pilgrims.

Satisfied with the load, Todd brings the car up to speed and points us west. Settling into passenger mode, I sit back, relax my eyes, begin to let my mind float in freeform rhythm

21 See the Pet Unfriendly Playa for a detailed explanation of the no dogs allowed policy: http://www.burningman.com/preparation/event_survival/pets.html

to the road and sky and wind and light, and find myself pondering the very big question my friends and family have been asking since we started staging this trip:

Why are you doing this?

Good question. Yes, indeed.

Why am I going to Burning Man?

Well, friends, let me offer you this road trip love story as a partial explanation. . .

I go to Burning Man because once upon a time I saw a photo I didn't understand. I saw this photo while sitting at my desk, in my office, flipping through a magazine looking for ideas to help me design a new advertising campaign. I don't remember what the campaign was for. But I vividly remember the moment I saw the photograph. It startled me to a stop.

" What is this??" I asked out loud.

Bodies. How many bodies? Dozens? A hundred? I can't tell. Naked bodies calmly lying on the ground, backsides down, pressed together in staggered rows. Dusty bodies. Sunburned bodies. Male and female bodies. Breasts penises elbows knees toes reclining together and framed to look like an endless sea of human beings.

"How weird."

I read the photo caption: Part of Spencer Tunick's group performance at the Burning Man Festival, Black Rock Desert, Nevada, "Masked Ball in the No-Man's Land.[22]"

I thought, "I have no idea what that means."

This photograph was completely captivating to me. No doubt, the nudity captured my attention. There was too much of it in the photograph not to. And there was full-frontal male nudity – a Western cultural rarity – so it was impossible not to notice that too. But I realized I wasn't fixating on the nudity – at least not completely. I was more perplexed by the attitude of the people in the photograph and their unabashed display of casually comfortable group exposure, presented, it seemed, merely for the sake of creating this photograph.

"What is going on here?!?"

I am a trained artist with a studio arts degree in drawing, so I have gazed upon and drawn countless nude models. I am comfortable producing nudes. Nudes, to me, represent illuminated bodies posed in contrapposto and translated with conte sticks and paper into dramatic displays of chiaroscuro. Nudes, from this perspective, are easily understood as art. But this was different than what I was used to seeing, and I couldn't figure out why.

I studied the photograph for days. Then suddenly I knew what was different about the photograph. The people in the photograph were not nude, but naked! Naked! And naked, I was discovering, was very different than nude. Naked appeared immediate and natural, not forced and twisted, elongated and angled, like the artist model's nude. Naked was in situ. Naked was natural bodies in a natural state.

It became obvious, then, what made this image special. The people in the photograph were not models. They were not brought to the site and arranged for the sake of photographer. These people were already there! Their being there showed in the way they were laying on the ground, the way the dust covered their bodies, the way their bodies were marked and

22 The photograph I am referencing was featured in the 2000 Photography Annual for *Communication Arts*. The photograph, however, was originally produced for another magazine. Credits for that publication were included with the photo caption and read as follows: Peter Menzel, Photographer; Erwin Ehret, art director; Ruth Eichhorn, photo director; *GEO Magazine*, client.

unmarked by tan lines, the way they interacted with each other. The photographer didn't design this performance in no-man's land. Somehow, instead, he captured a moment of the performance's being.

Natural bodies in a natural state.

Incredible!

And then an overwhelming obsessive question entered my mind. . .

"If all these naked people were already there –where exactly is there?? Where does one go to take a photograph like this?"

Like any good researcher, I turned to the internet for answers. I searched for "Burning Man Festival" and "Black Rock City" and instantly found myself at Burning Man's official web site, where I was greeted with the simple message "Welcome Home! The Man Burns in 140 days!"

That's how I met Burning Man.

I fell in love with Burning Man soon after.

Burning Man's web pages were filled with photographs of art like I had never seen before – giant installations tearing up from the desert and dropping from the sky, architecturally marvelous buildings set on fire, trucks and cars and vans transformed into roaming desert ships, human bodies moving as organic canvases – all stunningly integrated with the beauty of the desert playa. I was amazed the "naked" picture led me to all this[23].

23 To see similar images visit http://www.burningman.com/art_of_burningman/

Even more amazing was discovering that simply by showing an interest in this kind of aesthetic expression I could be a part of Burning Man. Flashing an old school Cacophony Society smile,[24] and strutting a new school vision for a communal aesthetic, Burning Man courted me with web page love letters inviting me to share its vision:

> The world, in some nauseating fashion, no longer appears to belong to itself. We need some deep and drastic therapy to break this spell. We need to reestablish contact with our inner selves. We need to reinvent a public world. We need immediate connection to the natural world of vital need. And this is where my work and the experiment called Burning Man comes in.
>
> Imagine you are put upon a desert plain, a space so vast and blank that only your initiative can make of it a place. Imagine it is swept by fearsome winds and scorching temperatures, and only by your effort can you make of it a home. Imagine you're surrounded by thousands of other people, that together you form a city, and that within this teeming city there is nothing that's for sale…
>
> This city that arises annually and disappears without a trace occurs in an extraordinary setting… Think of it as a vast blank slate, or better yet, think of it as a sort of movie screen upon which every citizen of Black Rock City is encouraged to project some aspect of their inner selves. The novel use of nothingness elicits a superabundant production of spectacle. But it is spectacle with a difference. We have, in fact, reversed the process of spectation by inviting every citizen to create a vision and contribute it to a public environment. We call this process radical self-expression. What makes this self-expression truly radical is its reintegration of the private and personal back into a shared public domain.[25]

Burning Man's love letters also invited me to make art for the playa:

> There is a yet unnamed art movement that may prove to be of some significance, and Burning Man is closed to its center. It often manifests itself as a circus, ritual, and a spectacle. It is a movement away from a dialog between an individual artist and a sophisticated audience, and towards collaboration amongst a big, wild, free and diverse community. It is a movement away from galleries, schools and other institutions and towards an art produced in and for casual groups of participants, more akin to clans and tribes, based on aesthetic affinities and bonds of friendship. It is a movement away from static gallery art and formal theatre and towards site-specific, time-specific

24 Cacophony Societies are loosely formed groups of artists and other assorted free thinkers invested in subverting and pranking mainstream society through orchestrated performances and social disruptions. Based on anarchist principles, Cacophony Societies tend not to have central organizational structures or engage in recruitment or defining membership activities. Instead Cacophonists encourage self-designation of society membership, as demonstrated by the Society's tag line: "You may already be a member." Self designation is an important guiding principle to Cacophony because it allows members to create and disrupt as they see fit, or to describe this in Cacophony terms, to add their own voices to the cultural noise of their communities. For a glimpse into Cacophony ideology, visit http://www.cacophony.org/. See This is Burning Man by journalist and historian Brian Doherty for an excellent historical account of the relationship between the San Francisco Cacophonists and the foundation of Burning Man, or visit the author's companion web site at http://thisisburningman.com/ for more information.

25 This is an excerpt from La Vie Bohéme – A History of Burning Man, a lecture written by Larry Harvey, one of the original founders of Burning Man. This lecture was originally presented at The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis on February 24, 2000 and is featured on the Burning Man web site under the heading "What is Burning Man" as an organizational manifesto. In this lecture, Harvey argues the solution to contemporary social ills, such as isolated suburban living and widespread longing for intimate connection, is to re-envision the idea of community as active and political, and presents the desert as the perfect space for shared visionaries to create and experience these revived concepts of community living. The complete essay is located at: http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/lectures/la_vie.html

installation and performance. It is a rejection of spoon-fed corporate culture and an affirmation of the homemade, the idiosyncratic, the personal. It is profoundly democratic. It is radically inclusive, it is a difficult challenge, and it is beckoning.

The playa is a tabula rasa, a blank canvas upon which many a fantastic vision has been realized. Submarines, gigantic ducks, swimmers, fire-breathing thistles, serpents, chandeliers, grandfather clocks and balsa wood temples have emerged from the playa. We would like to see your vision! We welcome all participants to create art at Burning Man (Art Installations).

The smoldering images of unbridled aesthetic expression pouring into my laptop and the promise of "tabula rasa" purring in my ear quickly turned Burning Man into a deliciously exciting artistic lover. Intensely attracted to its smart mind and sexy voice, I easily succumbed to Burning Man's creative and communal vision of the playa, and began cultivating desert fantasies of my own making.

The love affair was good! But soon the photographs and words were not enough. Finding such pleasure in my online lover made me ache to meet this desert dream. I needed to touch and feel this experimental community, this place where art lived in the center of its heart, and feel it fully for myself. I needed to see and experience my lover in person!

That's when planning for this trip truly began. And that's why I am on the road now. I am still in love with an aesthetic vision discovered through a photograph many years ago. Although, I will admit meeting my online lover in person didn't turn out quite like I expected. Then again, online romances rarely turn out the way we expect them to[26].

***

"Here we go…"

We pull up to the stop sign at the Hoover Dam security check point, and instantly we are signaled to pull over to the side.

"Looks like we get the full inspection. Lucky us."

A very tall and very stern fully uniformed Bureau of Reclamation officer walks up to the driver side window, and without removing his mirrored sun glasses, or smiling, instructs us to turn off the engine, step out of the vehicle, and leave the car doors open as we go.

We comply. The officer instructs us to stand back from the car and motions for two inspectors to evaluate our vehicle. For the next five minutes we watch the inspectors climb over, under, around, and through the Subaru.

When the inspection is complete, the very stern officer walks over to us and states, rather than asks, "You're going to Burning Man."

"Yes, sir."

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26 People new to Burning Man generally learn about the festival in one of two ways: 1. testimony from previous attendees; or 2. the Burning Man Organization's informational web site. The web site is a particularly important informational tool for people living in places without established Burner groups as there is little information about the festival available to a general audience through other information channels. This control of information is an intentional organizational communication strategy purposefully designed to direct new participants to the web site and makes it the main source of information about the festival. This practice is both good and bad for new participants. Burning Man organizers are vigilant about mass media, citing mass media's potential for appropriating and/or misrepresenting the values and practices of the festival so the web site helps the organization retain its organizational identity and systematically introduce new participants to the beliefs and goals of the event (Doherty, 2004). Organizers, however, also their web site to control the festival's public image and the kinds of information made publically available, making the web content clearly biased in its messages.

He takes a moment to study our car.

"Then I want to ask you a question. If you're going to Burning Man, why did you pack a blender?"

Following the stern officer's gaze, we realize he's looking at the Sunbeam blender box pressed against the hatchback window – the very last item we packed for our trip.

Very deliberately he adds, "You do know you can't plug that in where you're going, don't you? Your party is in the middle of nowhere."

Well now! How do we explain this??

We have a very good reason for packing the blender but we're not quite sure if we want to share. Last year we had a couple wander into our camp asking if we had a blender for trade. Seems their camp had burned up their blenders (which they powered with generators, by the way) and could no longer make margaritas. They were looking for new blenders and in exchange they were offering shrooms. This would have been a great trade because that year there seemed to be a Burning Man shroom shortage, and while they were the first people in our camp looking for a blender, we'd already encountered a half dozen or so wandering bands of campers looking for a shroom supplier. Shrooms would have been a great commodity for extending our bartering abilities. Sadly, though, we had no blender, which meant we could not obtain the shrooms. When we failed to produce a blender, the couple informed us that we should always pack a blender for Burning Man because someone, somewhere will always want to use it. So this year we added a blender to the gear list, partly as a joke, partly as a tribute to the shroom-trading blender seekers to see if their blender sharing advice holds true, and only because there was just enough space to pack it against the rear hatchback window.

But what to tell the stern officer??

Trying not to laugh, Todd provides an abbreviated version of the story, removing all mushroom references for good measure. The officer listens, shakes his head slightly, and through his mirrored glasses gives us a "that's the stupidest story I've heard today but so stupid I believe you" look. Then he changes the subject.

"Your friends were through here earlier. Why weren't you driving with them?"

"Oh. So lots of Burners have already gone through?"

He gives a curt nod. "Aren't you crossing a little late?"

"No. We're not camping with a group. Just us this year so we're not in a hurry."

"You've been to this thing before then?"

"Yes. This is our fourth year. Have you ever gone?"

"No," he replies, clearly not amused.

So we smile. "It's fun."

"So I hear."

He pauses for one last look at the car and at us.

"Alright. You're done. Enjoy yourself at Black Rock City."

***

Now the road magic begins.

After Vegas, we start to see other Burners on the highway. We easily spot each other in our over-packed cars and trucks and vans and RVs. We also recognize each other by the crappy bicycles we're hauling with us. Burners don't take good bikes to the playa. If the gear isn't a dead give-away, the Burning Man symbol made out of electrical tape stuck to our tailgates an bumpers (an X with a square dot floating just above it to represent the arms and legs and head of the Man) surely is. So are the signs "Learn to Burn," "Trust in Dust" and "Black Rock City or Bust" stuck in back windows.

When we pass each other we wave and smile and flash peace signs. Everyone has happy eyes.

We cross paths with Burning Man pilgrims everywhere along the route. When we stop for gas we find ourselves sharing pumps with other Burners who give us presents and wish us safe travels. When we stop to use the rest areas, we see the symbol for the Man doodled in the stalls. And no matter where we stop for to eat, we overhear Burners discussing the driving details of their trip.

With each encounter our anticipation builds.

On the road and feeling the need
to get there! Get there! Get there!
But gotta be patient one more day
then we'll be there! Be there! Be there!

Our stopping place for the night is Indian Springs, Nevada, a tiny town next Nellis Air Force Range, the Nevada Test Site, and Area 51. Indian Springs is basically a wide spot in the road offering road weary travelers the bare necessities: a gas station, a convenience store, a small motel, and a casino with a diner. We like stopping here. It's got a funky vibe and strange aerial lights that shoot across the sky that feed into the magic. I also like to stock up on their Area 51 alien-flavored lip balm, which actually tastes yummy and works especially well on chapped desert lips.

Lots of other Burners stop here too, so before long we're talking to a group of Phoenix Burners at the pumps and comparing travel plans. We say we're stopping for the night but they try to convince us to drive the rest of the way with them, at 100 miles an hour all night long, so we can arrive together at the gates at sun up. Their driver is amped – his eyes are spinning with a crazy nervous energy and he can barely stand still to talk. He's got the "get there's" really bad! But so does the rest of the group. They're in their SUV and on the road again the second we decline to join them.

Second day road magic is more intense.

On day two, we get the terrible "get there's" too. For the rest of the ride we push the speed limit as much as we can, slowing down only for towns flagged as Burner speed traps[27], and stopping only when we absolutely need to, and only as long as absolutely necessary.

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27 As part of their effort to maintain amicable working relationships with government officials on all levels across the United States, the Burning Man Organization and regional Burner groups keep track of communities where Burners experience repeat problems with state, county and local, and reservation police departments. These concerns are passed on to Burners through online newsletters and web forums like *Jack Rabbit Speaks*, Burning Man's online member newsletter, and *AZ Burners*, a regional web resource for Arizona-based participants. The goal is to keep Burners traveling through those regions updated about potential legal problems, like speed traps, long delays, and search and seizures, but also to educate Burners about the concerns motivating these communities to increase their police actions toward Burners. For our driving route, the towns of Tonopah and Schurz have been flagged as towns to watch. Like the Hoover Dam, both towns can be avoided by driving a less-direct, alternate route, which many Burners choose to take. We have never had an encounter with the police in either town, although we have seen an increase in warning signs to decrease speed in both areas.

We're cruising on adrenaline!

One of the absolutely necessary stops we make is at Miller's Rest Area. Miller's is a small oasis just west of Tonopah, with green trees and picnic tables, and an incredible view of the Excelsior Mountains and Monte Cristo Range. Miller's also has a fresh water pump we use to fill our 5-gallon water jugs. The water from this well is crisp and clean, and filling our water jugs here means we only have to haul the weight of that water for the last leg of our journey.

After Miller's Rest Area, we meet even more burners on the road. Now they are driving moving vans and large trucks pulling flatbed trailers filled with gear. These are Burners from the large camps. We see more rental RVs, too. Rental RVs usually mean newbie Burners, but the rentals with their "Cruise America" logos taped over in support of Burning Man's no commercial vending and no corporate sponsorship mandates are most likely carrying repeats.

The last stop we make is in the happy town of Fernley. Fernley represents the last major grocery store and discount shopping center we pass on our trip so we stop here, regardless, to make absolutely certain we have everything we need. This year we make a quick Wal-Mart run to replace our ice and buy 5-hour energy drinks. Then with a ceremonial wave and bow, we jump back into the Subaru, turn off our cell phones, and say goodbye to civilization.

All this traffic, and all this energy, finally converges on one spot: Exit 46 at the 1-80 Junction, also known as the Loves Travel Stop just west of Fernley. Exit 46 is an important exit. It's the junction that connects us to Highway 447. Highway 447 is a very important highway, because it is the road that takes us to playa, and to the actual site of the Burning Man Festival.

PLATE 11 ©Russell Atkinson

PLATE 12

PLATE 13

PLATE 14

PLATE 15

PLATE 16

PLATE 17

PLATE 18

PLATE 19

PLATE 20

PLATE 21

PLATE 22

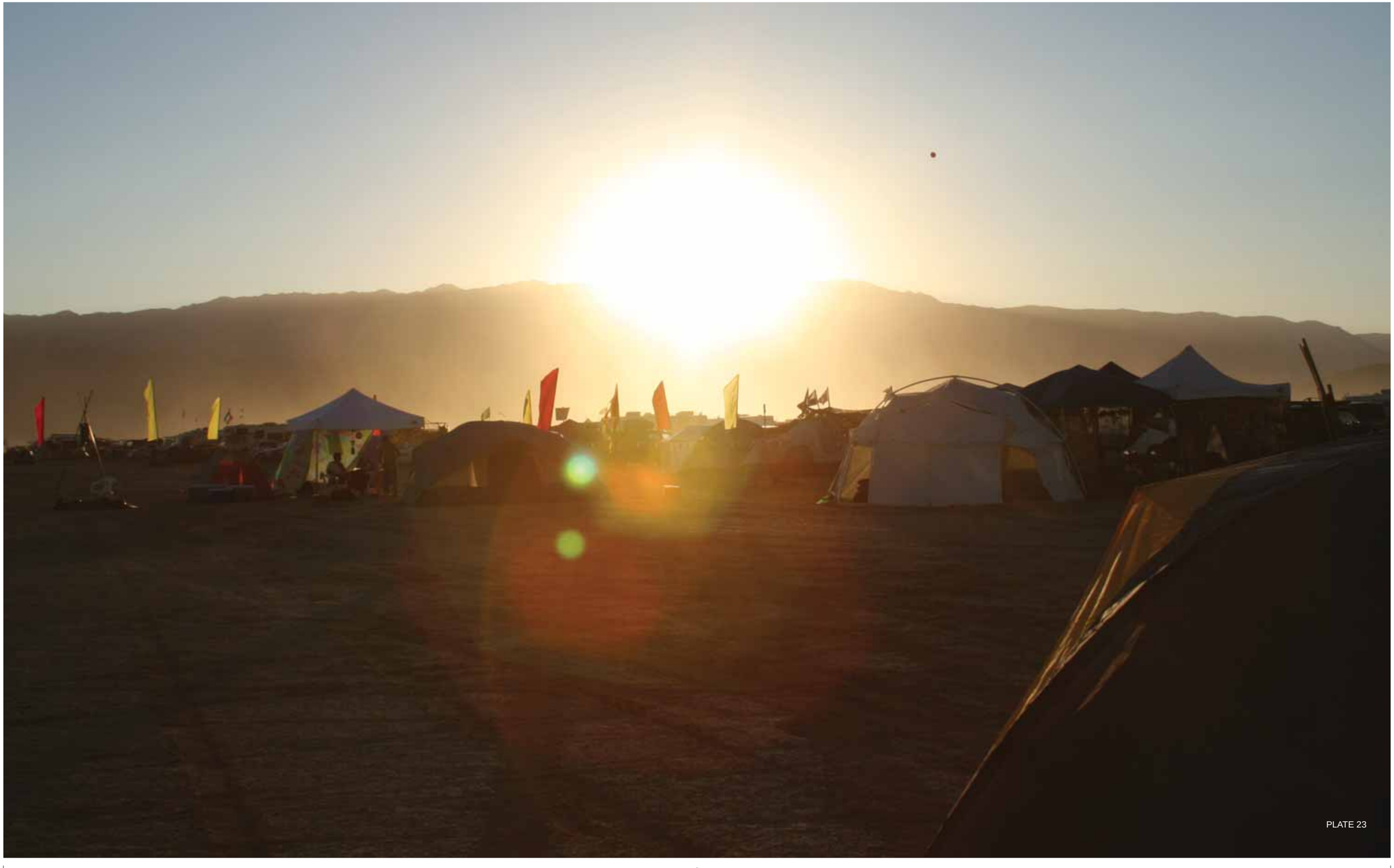

PLATE 23

PLATE 24

Chapter 2: Manifestation

The flight of these men to the desert was neither purely negative nor purely individualistic. They were not rebels against society. True, they were in a certain sense "anarchists," and it will do no harm to think of them in that light. They were men who did not believe in letting themselves be passively guided and ruled by a decadent state… But they did not intend to place themselves above society. They did not reject society with proud contempt, as if they were superior to other men…nor did they fly from human fellowship… The society they sought was one where all men were truly equal, where the only authority under God was the charismatic authority of wisdom, experience and love.

Thomas Merton (1960), describing fourth century Christian hermits living in the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, Arabia, and Persia in *The Wisdom of the Desert*

Many great faiths have been born in visions arising from the desert. And no desert has seen a vision more inspiring of faith than the annual gathering called Burning Man.

Brian Doherty (2004), *This is Burning Man*

***

There is something perfectly wonderful about seeing the Burning Man sign at the entrance to the playa. The sign is not big, but it is bright and real, and the first tangible evidence the festival is real too.

This year, the sign simply reads:

Burning Man
The American Dream
Black Rock City 2008

Beneath the main board, someone has added a smaller sign with an even simpler message:

HOME

"The American Dream" is the theme for the festival. I think it's an odd choice given Burning Man has international appeal, but each year the theme, and the fact that there is a theme, generates controversy, so I suppose this year is no better or worse than years past[28].

Regardless of its thematic merit, I'm very glad to see the sign. It means we're almost done driving. The last 100 miles of two-lane highway were seriously brutal – four hours of creeping slowly, slowly, bumper to bumper, from the Loves Travel stop to this sign. Usually the drive takes half that time, but we've managed to arrive at the peak of opening day

28 In 1998, the Burning Man Organization began designating a yearly theme for the festival. It is generally understood that the purpose of the theme is to provide a shared point of reference from which participants can develop their art, camp projects, and other forms of community contributions. The idea of themes, however, is not universally accepted by Burners, especially long-time participating artists, who argue themes are unnecessarily binding, creatively limiting, and too arbitrary applied. Case in point, in 2005 a group of Burners listed the use of themes as one of their overall complaints with the curator practices of the Burning Man Organization (see the Borg2's *We Have a Dream* manifesto at http://www.whatiamupto.com/BORG2/Petition.htm for the full statement). These complaints, including the concern for themes, were acknowledged by Burning Man officials, however, the theme policy was not affected by this protest and the use of themes continues today.

entrance traffic, which means we've been sharing the road, at 25 miles an hour, with a line of traffic stretching in front of us and behind us as far as we could see.

We were slowed down even more by two accidents and an RV bursting into flames. Every year we see the remnants of moving too fast and poorly-loaded vehicles lying in the ditches on the sides of this road, but watching the camper burn was a poignant reminder just how challenging getting here can be.

We stop with lots of other Burners for a quick and touristy photo op with the sign, then point the Subaru onto the playa to join the 5-mile-per-hour-to-keep-the-playa-dust-down-but-it doesn't-really-help traffic crawl to the main gates. Slowly, slowly, bumper to bumper once again, we funnel toward the entrance of Black Rock City.

Ah! But once we get to the gates all this driving will be worth it!! We'll be met by the Greeters, joyfully naked except for their wide-brimmed hats and dust covered shoes, who will welcome us home and tell us how happy they are we've come back. They'll give us our city map and our activities book, and while they are shamelessly flirting and filling us up with our first dose of Burner love, we'll hear the first time Burners ring the big bells and watch the Greeters pat their newbie butts and breasts with hands full of playa dust.

And everyone will be shouting Welcome Home!! Yes! Yes!! Welcome Home!!

Right now, though, all this love is somewhere up ahead and we don't seem to be getting any closer to it. The traffic snarl is the worst gate traffic we've experienced in our four years attending, and we are losing patience. So are the drivers around us. Rumor has it this year's attendance will pass the 47,000 mark[29], the highest attendance ever for Burning Man. Looking at all this traffic, I believe it will. This is insane.

29 The official census for the 2008 Burning Man festival is 49,599 (After Burn Report 2008).

We try distracting ourselves from the nasty parts of the traffic by reading the little signs planted Burma-Shave style along the entrance route. I always like these signs. They jump start my mood for the other side of the gate. Some years the signs express prayers or poems, philosophical ponderings or pandering nonsense, or messages for unity and peace. Last year the signs were sarcastic reprints of common Burner complaints, broken up in singsong bits to sound like whiney children throwing a fit:

Hey Burning Directors
Please turn back
The clock
I need to get the rush
Of the first time
At Black Rock
There are too
Many people
And there's too many
RVs
Please keep it all
The same
Just for me

This year's signs, however, are proving impossible to read. There is just too much traffic and dust to see them clearly, and managing the traffic requires our full concentration. The dust is increasing, too, at an alarming rate.

Suddenly the car is completely enveloped in thick swirls of yellowy-white dust. Todd stops the car and we brace for impact. Thankfully the cars around us stop moving too. We only know this because no one hits us. We can't see the cars on either side, in front of, or behind us. All we can see is the playa dust blasting against the windows. Immediately

the dust blocks out the sunlight, and the wind drowns out all other sounds except for its own whistling howls and the eerie tinkle of playa dust smashing into and rolling down our windows.

There is nothing to do now but wait…

…and wait…

…and wait…

…and wait…

…for this storm to pass.

"I seriously wish we'd stopped for a potty break back in Empire…"

Todd laughs.

An hour passes, I think. There is nothing to gauge the passing of time except our dashboard clock, and I stopped looking at it some time ago. It didn't seem to be measuring anything. Instead I watch the constant streams of dusty sand trickle down the passenger side window, and think this must be what it's like living inside an hour glass.

Eventually the wind dies down and the dust settles back to the earth. Ahead in the distance, though, we can still see the inky dust cloud rolling across the eastern edges of Black Rock City.

"That can't be good," I sigh.

Todd nods. "I don't think we'll be moving any time soon."

His prediction is soon confirmed by a group of Black Rock City Department of Public Works[30] volunteers running between the cars. Every few yards they stop and shout through bull horns:

DUE TO THE DUST STORM, WE'VE CLOSED THE GATES!
YOU WON'T BE ADMITTED UNTIL THE GATES REOPEN!
STAY WITH YOUR VEHICLES AND WAIT FOR UPDATES!

The DPW crew looks like windblown crap. Usually they're all tough and cocky and project an over the top rough and tumble "don't fuck with me 'cause I know how to blow all your shit up and yes I'll do it while wearing a kilt" attitude. But right now they are in crowd management mode, and clearly worn down by the storm. We all are. We're all stuck and we have no choice but to sit and wait some more.

But then…

Slowly, slowly, vehicle by vehicle, people begin climbing out of their cars and vans and RVs and trucks to yawn and stretch and survey the situation, and decide what to do next.

One by one, these newly freed passengers start introducing themselves to one another.

30 The Department of Public Works (DPW) is a group of volunteers responsible for planning, surveying, building, and taking down the basic infrastructure of Black Rock City. They also manage various aspects of the city's access and use, including the main gates. DPW volunteers actually arrive weeks before the festival opens to the public to assemble the festival's city infrastructure, and remain several weeks afterward to oversee the dismantling of the city. Easily identified by their head-to-toe black outfits which often include black Utility Kilts, DPW volunteers command a great amount of respect, partially for their infamous reputation as hard working and hard playing volunteers, but mostly because Black Rock City wouldn't exist without their efforts. For more information visit http://www.burningman.com/participate/dpw.html or http://www.burningman.com/on_the_playa/infrastructure/dpw.html

Soon after that, small groups of people start gathering together in wide spots on the road.

Soon after that, these small groups of people are laughing and smiling and comparing highway horror stories.

A ripple of energy passes through the crowd. People unpack their costumes. Dance music displaces the sounds of the wind. Food for sharing and bottles for passing generously appear. In this new state of desert being we decide, rather informally but almost unanimously, to transform this lousy traffic jam into one absolutely glorious, let's remember this moment forever, Burning Man tailgate party.

That's when the magic of the road changed into the magic of the playa.

Hours later we finally reach the Greeters station. A very tired Greeter, a young Latino with pierced nipples and playa dust caked in his thick, dark hair, takes our tickets and smiles.

"Welcome home," he says.

Already drunk and already dirty we reply, "We're already here."

***

Black Rock City is alive!

Tuesday morning and the grid, Black Rock City's brilliantly eloquent city blueprint, is pulsing with energy. Laid out like a thick letter C, the grid is almost two miles in diameter, with seventeen radiating avenues and twelve concentric circular streets emanating from

the central tabula rasa city hub where the effigy of The Man is erected each year[31]. It's a smart design. Easy to grow to accommodate more Burners. Easy to navigate once you get used to the fact the avenue names correspond with times on a clock face and street names progress in alphabetical order from A to K, except for the Esplanade which is the inner most concentric street, and the street names change each year to reflect the yearly theme.

Easy that is, unless it is dark and you are on your bike and you are lost, or drunk, or otherwise inebriated.

Then you might find yourself biking in circles, desperately trying to remember if you camped closer to 4:30 or 5:00, and which direction you need to bike so the avenue times increase or decrease, and which way you need to bike to make the streets progress alphabetically. When you find yourself in that situation it's best to abandon the grid idea altogether and bike toward a landmark with the hope it will eventually lead you home.

But in sober daylight, when you can clearly see the street signs, the city grid really is simple and smart and easy to cruise. Just remember all roads eventually lead you to The Man.

The grid is also wonderfully, brilliantly, purposefully blank. The streets and avenues are marked with flagging to separate the roads from the camping areas. This is a necessary practice since the surfaces of the roads don't look any different than the surface of the camping spaces, so without the flagging there wouldn't be any roads and the city structure would be lost. Other than that, there is nothing else to the base of the city except the remarkably flat and glaringly white playa surface laying in wait.

31 The Burning Man Festival was not always organized around a city grid. In keeping with the spirit of "radical self expression and radical self reliance," camping areas and art locations during the early desert years were purposely not designated. The grid came into being in 1999, however, in response to health and safety concerns developing with the rapidly increasing number of people attending the event (Designing Black Rock City). Like most major changes associated with the festival, the grid was met with mixed responses, and although it is mostly taken for granted today, complaints remain that the grid instills too much organizational structure to the event.

Any open space between the avenues and streets is available for camping. Camping areas parcel out on a first come first serve basis, and there are no lines or markers to limit or define the amount of space you can use. The strategy is to arrive, park, claim your space, and build your camp as best you can according to the plans you prepared at home.

Repeat Burners have their favorite areas to camp and we are no exception. Like years past, we claimed a camp site at 4:30 and K Street, which technically should be called K-Car Street since all the streets this year are named after American made cars to coincide with the American Dream theme. We're calling it K Street, though, because K-Cars are lame. Impala Street has a much cooler name, but we like to live on the outer rim of the city in the walk-in camping area. The walk-in area is less crowded and much quieter than other camping areas, which get more crowded and noisier the closer you get to the Esplanade. We choose the walk in area because we like to be able to sleep at least a little while we're here. We tend to like the people who camp in the walk in area quite at bit too.

Dr. Placebo, our friend and camp mate, made it through the gate before the storm last night so he's already started building our camp by pitching his PlayaDome[32] tent and marking off parking spaces with flagging tape strung between pink yard flamingos for our friends who will be arriving later. The PlayaDome is his new purchase and it looks pretty awesome. Eighteen circular feet of interlocking tubing and panels purposely designed to withstand the harsh playa climate. Last year's 80 mile per hour winds messed up Dr. Placebo's old tent, despite our clinging to the tent poles during the storm to keep the wind from blowing it away. That tent was a rectangular car port with open venting that was supposed to allow the wind to pass through. It worked fine until the big storm hit. Live and learn. The new dome is far more aerodynamic and much sturdier so it shouldn't require our bodies to be used as weights to hold it in place should another monster storm occur. At least we hope that is the case.

32 To discover playa domes visit http://shelter-systems.com/playadomes.html

Dr. Placebo. Kind man. Nine time Burning Man attendee. Our honorary Camp Guru. The first person we met at our first Burning Man. He was also our first Burning Man social dilemma. On that very first encounter on that very first day, Dr. Placebo walked into our camp, welcomed us to the playa, and with happy outstretched arms offered us two glasses of Kool-Aid to drink with the sage advice one should always stay hydrated in the desert. A welcoming gesture we later learned but in that moment Todd and I could only question whether or not it was actually wise to accept Burning Man Kool-Aid from a sarong-wearing Jerry Garcia look-alike calling himself Dr. Placebo.

To drink or not to drink?? That was the question.

We shrugged. We drank. The Kool-Aid was fine. We became friends. And now Dr. Placebo and Todd, who is now going by his Playa Name[33] Snacky, are busy playing the parts of architect and structural engineer trying to plot out the best way to set up our tent and shade structure in relation to the shiny new PlayaDome.

As we build our camp, other camps with their own amateur architects and engineers are going up around us. In between construction phases, our neighbors wander over to check out our digs. It's a friendly and supportive exchange. Everyone compares construction strategies. Everyone borrows tools. The conversations disproportionately include the words "guy wires," "support poles," "best angle to the wind," and "duct tape." The question most asked is "How did you get your tent stakes to work in this ground?"

A couple hours later, our shade structure is up and sufficiently tethered to a healthy number of tennis-ball covered rebar stakes. The tent is up, too. We've unpacked our chairs,

33 After arriving at Burning Man, many Burners substitute their every day name for a character name. The new name is called a Playa Name. It is extremely common for Burners to only use their Playa Names, occasionally to maintain a sense of anonymity at the event, but most often to help evoke a sense of adventure and play. Some Burners keep their Playa Names year after year. Others change names to fit the festival theme, reflect life changes, or denote other significant alterations in their festival participation. My Playa name is Queen Perspective.

table, tubs and cots, and arranged them comfortably in the shade. Our makeshift kitchen – our Coleman camp stove, waste water bucket, and separate shade area for the coolers – is fully operational. We stand back and admire our work. It's darn beautiful.

Welcome to Too Bad Manor II[34], our vacation home away from home. And look at us with our second house, totally living the American Dream!

***

Time to explore the city!

We jump on our beach cruisers and join the crowds walking and biking through the streets. God I love this! People and stuff happening everywhere we look! Giant teeter-totter with topless women bouncing up and down. Open bar with spin-the-wheel and confess-your-sins drinking game in play. Drumming circle grooving to the sound of their tribal beat. Four-story tower topped with pirate's flag blasting techno music. Obligatory naked dude painted completely blue walking with a parasol. Dancing Elvis – the Vegas years – working up a sweat. Around it all, tents and domes and trailers and camps are popping up and filling in the blank spots.

I let myself glide with my bike into the heart of the city, absorbing the sights and sounds and the late morning desert sun baking my arms and neck and tops of my thighs as I peddle through the dust. I feel elated – optimistic – happy – like I've caught a fatally contagious, ridiculously delightful, very good mood.

34 After a long weekend watching romantic British movies, Todd and I decided our lovely 1100 square foot 1930s single family home deserved a name like the glorious estates featured in the films. So we christened our house Too Bad Manor, a name chosen to playfully celebrate the comparative humbleness of our home. By extension, *Too Bad Manor II* is a continuation of this name play, given to our camp to once again celebrate the grand humbleness of our living environment.

Half way to the Esplanade we stop at a row of porta potties for break[35]. We park our bikes and grab a stall, thankful there are no lines and the potties are clean. This won't be the case the closer we get to the Burn.

A familiar sign is posted on the porta potty door:

If it wasn't made by your body, don't put it in the potty!

Right! Check!

I sit in the potty and listen to the surround sounds of Black Rock City. A motley blend of music blasts through the walls and mixes inside the stall. Art cars with rumbly engines slowly cruise by, shaking the potties with their V-8 vibrations. A multitude of voices drift in and out of focus. Jingling sounds like a horde of belly dancers or maybe jingle-belled horse bridles flitter in the distance. Then I hear a very soothing male voice speaking inside my stall, almost directly into my left ear:

Welcome to Burning Man. We are very happy you are here. While you are on the playa, be sure to take some time to relax… relax and let it all go… go with the flow… don't hold anything back…

Surprised by the voice, I look around for the source. I find a long white wire and tiny white speaker tucked in the back of the stall. A-ha! Butt-activated porta-potty guided meditations!! Very clever. Very clever indeed!

35 While the Burning Man Festival is basically a services-free event, the Burning Man Organization does provide porta potties for festival attendees. Potties are clustered in various locations throughout the grid and cleaned daily. The more remote the location, however, the better the odds the potties will remain clean. Given the volume of use, one should always carry a flashlight for night time inspection and a personal supply of toilet paper to be safe. The potty locations, too, are somewhat iconic to the event, and so festival attendees should also be prepared for random acts of "radical self expression" to occur around potty sites.

Duly humored and relieved, I find Snacky waiting by the bikes.

"Did you get a recording in you in your stall?"

"What? No. All I heard was a blond girly-girl tell her boyfriend the stalls were gross and they had to find better potties somewhere else." He laughs. "Good luck with that."

"Really? Too bad for her. My potty experience was rather… refreshing."

Back on the bikes we head once again toward the Esplanade. Along the way we stop to watch a pole-dancing class – *work it! work it!* – try to get a free snow cone but they run out of snow before we get to the front of the line – *darn!* – and accept an invitation to play homemade shakers in the rhythm section of a Latin rock band –*keep the beat! keep the beat!*

Sometime after that we actually make it to the Esplanade.

The Esplanade!! Burning Man's version of a seaside Board Walk. The inner-most circle of the city itself, location of the interactive theme camps[36], and the demarcation line separating the camping areas from Burning Man's Playa proper – the giant blank canvas of land sitting in the very heart of Black Rock City – the promised tabla rasa for unbridled creative expression.

36 Burning Man describes Theme Camps as the "interactive core" of the festival. Basically mandated to be participatory and inclusionary, theme camps are set up in key traffic locations on the city grid where festival participants can easily find them and engage in whatever interactive experience the theme camp operators provide. Theme camps tend to be big and elaborate. They are also autonomously created and maintained by groups of campers and not the Burning Man Organization. Over the past few years, however, there has been a strong organizational push to ensure theme camp operators are welcoming to all festival participants and that they build camps that are not too esoteric or elaborate to ensure theme camps are accessible and appeal to large audiences (Theme Camps).

Traffic from all of the radial avenues pours into the Esplanade, filling the entire length of the strip with lights and sounds and colors and constant motion. Crowds of people and bikes and moving art flow back and forth, and all around there is music! costumes! bull horns! dancing! This is the place to see and be seen, to flirt and play in public space.

We steer our bikes into the human stream, and almost immediately Snacky and I start to get separated. Motioning for me to follow, Todd cuts a path through the bodies, and leads me to the beginning edge of the Playa. As we break through the crowds, we catch our first glimpse of The Man standing in the distance.

I am never quite prepared for the first glimpse of The Man. Seeing The Man in this space puts into perspective just how big and open and flat and empty the Playa really is.

Look how far away he stands!

I am always amazed, too, how far I can see across the Playa without anything obstructing my view. There is nothing here except for expanse, and the scattered works of art now being built all across its surface.

I feel very, very small and very, very exposed standing on the edge of the Playa.

Tiny human being. . .

At the same time, across the expanse, I hear the Playa whispering my name.

New adventure! Come and join me!

As if on cue, dust from the Esplanade bellows up, filling my nose and lungs with the Playa. Wind flicks the dust across my lips, giving me a full taste of the desert. For a brief moment, the rising dust muffles the city's human sounds, amplifying the thump! thump! thump! of the Playa's heartbeat now pounding in my ears.

My own heart starts beating in sync with the Playa. A wave of adrenaline shoots through my body. A wicked grin creeps across my face.

Oh yes! I know this feeling!

I am really here! I am at Burning Man!

I am here and I can go anywhere I want and I can do anything I please. I have wide open desert before me and a swarm of potential playmates behind me. All I have to do is make it happen!

I am feeling the freedom of the Playa!

Snacky sees my grin. He's grinning too. "What do you want to check out first? Theme camps or The Man?"

"The Man! Let's see what he's up to this year."

Snacky tears his bike onto the Playa, heading into the heart of the desert. I follow right behind.

***

"Whoa…"

The first Man, so the story goes, was a small wooden effigy a few artsy friends made and burned impromptu at the end of a San Francisco artsy evening. It was a symbolic burn, in the vein of Wicker Man[37], meant to symbolize artsy solidarity and rebirth[38].

Twenty four years later, The Man I now stand before is a 40 foot wooden figure encased head to toe in neon. He's perched on top of a 20 foot by 20 foot by 50 foot wooden obelisk, bringing the total height of installation to about 90 feet. Most years, The Man is lit up in green. This year he's clad in red white and blue neon, and sports a row of white Texas-size neon stars across his belt. The Man clearly dressed for the American Dream. Beneath The Man, the obelisk is covered with flags from countries around the world. Beneath the flags, there are three viewing platforms from which Burners can look out over Black Rock City. To get to the viewing platforms, Burners queue in a long line, finally enter the base of the obelisk, and then climb multiple twisting flights of stairs to get to the landings. As they pass through the entrance, a Burning Man volunteer performing "melodramatic security guard protecting a popular tourist attraction" regulates the flow of traffic while shouting out instructions for proper viewing platform behavior, most of which are warnings not to climb on the outside the obelisk and not to hang body parts off the platform edges. The volunteer doesn't address the fact that Burners shouldn't climb up the obelisk because at its top, securely circling the feet of The Man, are several rows of razor wire.

37 Wicker Man is a large wicker statue of a human man burned in effigy, originally by Druids in Celtic pagan ceremonies, today by various artist and neopagan groups. There is no singular meaning attached to burning a Wicker Man, however, the ritualized action is often linked to notions of sacrifice and rebirth through flame.

38 Operating as a story of origin, the story of the first burn has taken on mythic qualities within the Burning Man community. In becoming a myth, many of the details about the first burn have been replaced with a stylized telling of events. In this stylized telling, promoting solidarity and rejuvenating creativity are stressed as the intended purpose of the gathering. The burn ritual is highlighted as the unifying conduit for fulfilling these goals (see Burning Man's web page 1986 to 1996 as an example of this romanticized telling of the foundational myth). For a more thorough discussion of Burning Man's origins, read Doherty's (2004) history of the event.

All of this, minus the people and the theatrical volunteer, is scheduled to go down in a burning blaze of glory Saturday night – the night of the big, bad Burning Man Burn.

Snacky asks, "Any thoughts?"

"Shit," I say, trying to take it all in.

"My thoughts exactly."

This is the tallest Man ever. It's also the first time we've seen The Man with this much security. At our first Burning Man, there were no obvious security measures attached to structure. We were able to climb to the top of the support dais and touch The Man's feet. The dais looked like a Mayan pyramid with stepped sides, so not only could we climb up to the top, we could sit on the dais and watch the sun rise, or sun set, or snuggle with friends, or do whatever else we wanted to do for as long as we liked. People moved up and down at will, and many more hung out at the base, grooving on the communal vibe. The Man has pretty much felt the same every year since.

This Man projects a different vibe, though, and I'm not at all sure how I feel about it. I like to think of The Man with familiar feelings – familiar icon, familiar gathering place, familiar giant glowing landmark planted in the very center of the city acting as the perfect landmark for when I get lost or drunk or otherwise inebriated and need to find my way home again. That way, when the Man burns down, I feel a sense of loss because I felt connected to him while I was playing in the desert, and a sense of hope because I know he'll be back again next year.

I'm really not sure what to make of this newly fortified Man other than to be taken aback by the whole giant red, white and blue cowboy standing fortified on top of the world

'cause this is the American Dream aura, and wonder how much of this is aesthetically driven and how much is a reaction to Paul Addis.

Let's hear it for Paul Addis, the infamous prankster who last year under cover of a lunar eclipse climbed to the top of the Man and set him on fire – burning him to the ground a full five days ahead of schedule[39]!

Boy did that cause a stir! Fire trucks. Police officers. Burners running around shouting about an early burn. Rumors flew too.

"What happened? Did you see it? Who did it?"

"Was it a prankster?"

"Was it planned?"

"Maybe it was a terrorist attack!"

It also caused a whole lot of public debate in camp afterward. Pro-Addis Burners thought the whole thing was kind of funny, and on point, agreeing at least to some degree with Addis' claims that Burning Man and the Burn had become too much – too predictable, too expected, too routine, and too much of a spectacle – to be genuine.

39 For detailed information about the premature burn, Addis' rationale, and subsequent legal issues visit the Laughing Squid's excellent news, blog, and photo archive (which includes Addis' now iconic mug shot) at http://laughingsquid.com/burning-man-set-on-fire-early-arson-is-to-blame/. The blog also contains information about Burner support efforts for Addis' legal defense. To see an excerpt of Addis' official statement regarding his actions, visit http://valleywag.gawker.com/tech/burning-man/the-arsonist-of-black-rock-city-speaks-295325.php

"Burning Man is straying from its founding principles and its commitment to the arts! The Man no longer represents rebirth. He's become the symbol of excess, and the loss of our vision."

Anti-Addis Burners thought the act was just mean spirited, and the only thing it accomplished was to ruin the experience of The Man for the festival community.

"To Burn on one's own accord is just plain selfish. Who is he to decide what Burning Man is or isn't? Who is he to destroy our Man? The Man belongs to all of us. The Man belongs to the Playa."

Either way, Addis really did impact Burning Man that year. It was eerie arriving at Burning Man and finding out the Man already burned. And it was very disorienting not having The Man glowing on the playa, anchoring the city. Addis upset the routine, and did so by creating an enormous absence in the city. The absence, however, didn't last long. A few days after the early burn, a new Man arrived (apparently the organizers had a spare in storage) and he was hoisted into place atop his platform while we and a few hundred of our closest Burner friends watched and cheered and a roaming DJ with a sense of humor blasted "Freebird" into the air.

The new Man burned as planned Saturday night. Addis went to jail for arson[40]. And this year The Man has his own security check point and theme park attraction line. From the look of things our event organizers are doing everything to ensure The Man burns only on schedule, and he goes down in one hell of a bonfire.

Plans on the Playa, though, are always subject to change. Or so seems to be the moral of the story. I guess we'll have to wait and see how this plays out.

40 On June 24, 2008, Addis plead guilty to felony charges of damaging property at Burning Man, and was sentenced to 12-48 months in prison and ordered to pay $25,000 in restitution. Addis was granted parole in February, 2010.

***

In search of a different mood, we bike toward a cluster of people and towers glittering in the distance. This leads us to The Temple.[41]

Much better
So lovely

Sound and light are different here

Hushed voices
No music
No laughter

Hundreds of flattened aluminum cans strung together to make dull wind chimes
hang two stories up from wooden rafters

Sunlight falls on slow moving bodies
silently climbing spiral staircases
heads bowed – reading

Tears

41 Each year, a non-denominational Temple is constructed on the Playa. The Temple is placed on the far side of the grid, opposite the camping areas, but in direct alignment with The Man. Both installations are connected by a road called the Grand Promenade. The Temple is a commissioned construction intentionally solicited to provide Black Rock City with a defined spiritual space. The most celebrated temple artist is David Best, whose amazing constructions, without a doubt, helped elevate the social significance of the Temple space and subsequently the significance of the Temple Burn, which occurs Sunday night, the last night of the festival, a full day after The Man burns. For more about the Temple and Best's designs, visit http://www.thetemplebuilder.com/

Hands moving across wooden surfaces
spelling out pleas for forgiveness
and prayers for broken hearts

Spilled ink and photographs at my feet
Over my head
Hidden in corners
Displayed front and center

Wind chimes clatter
without wind
moved by the collective exhale of love and pain

I move my hand across the wall
as high up as I can reach
touching a blank spot I write my own prayer

Creative Spirit
Bless those who have blessed me with their generous gifts:

FT for her gift of music
TS for his gift of humor
DB for his gift of design
DG for his gift of debate
HL for his gift of story

Fill them with inspiration like they fill me.
They are my loves. They are my life.

***

Happy surprises when we finally wander back into camp. Amazon Queen, English Mike, Dolly, and Madison are here! Their tents are up. Our camp is now complete.

Our neighbors from last year, Ladybird and Pool Boy from Camp Faux Real, are also back and they've brought friends! So good seeing their rainbow-bright parachute tent billowing again next to us.

Cleu Camp[42] is also back and operating in full force. Their all-white school bus is once again home base for a gaggle of spiritual seekers passing out Cleus to the secret of the universe.

Everyone is here! Everything is set! Perfect time for a happy hour!

Break out the vodka and cranberry juice – 'cause cranberry juice cuts through the dust and tastes extra fine out on the playa! Break out the food – whatever you've got to share – 'cause what better way to welcome everyone home than taking a break from the glaring sun and sharing an impromptu dust-covered meal!

42 Cleu Camp is a group of spiritual seekers with a long history of participating in the Burning Man Festival. To learn more about their spiritual philosophy, visit their web site at: http://www.consciouslife.org.

PLATE 25

PLATE 26

PLATE 27

PLATE 28

PLATE 29

PLATE 30 ©Russell Atkinson

PLATE 31

PLATE 32

PLATE 33

PLATE 34

PLATE 35

PLATE 36

PLATE 37

PLATE 38

PLATE 39

PLATE 40

PLATE 41

PLATE 42

PLATE 43

PLATE 44 ©Russell Atkinson

PLATE 45

PLATE 46

PLATE 47

PLATE 48

PLATE 49 ©Russell Atkinson

PLATE 50

Chapter 3: Celebration

"THE UNIVERSE WANTS TO PLAY. Those who refuse out of dry spiritual greed & choose pure contemplation forfeit their humanity."

Hakim Bey (2003), *T.A.Z. The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*

"At the core of Burning Man's spiritual wager is the commanding claim of personal experience… First time participants quickly learn that status and fun are not to be gained through familiar modes of consumption or spectatorship. Instead, participation, spontaneity, and immediacy are prized, even (or especially) at the sizable risk of delirium, discomfort, or the sort of excess that your parents might call "making a fool of yourself."

Eric Davis (2005), *Beyond Belief: The Cults of Burning Man*

"On the Playa, art serves as an instrument for meshing together community, offering them a medium for discovery, for playing and praying, as well as a lens for seeing themselves. It extends the notion of conceptual and performance art to a wider field of human activity, recalling the surrealist doctrine that there should, truly, be no distinction between art and life."

Daniel Pinchbeck (2007), *Burning Man: Art in the Desert*

***

Space and time collude on the Playa
Artsy things blend and swirl and dance and melt
We are here! Time to play!
Twenty-four-seven intake now! Celebrate!! Celebrate!!
Twenty-four-seven action now! Participate!! Participate!!

***

…WAWM…WAWM…WAWM…WAWM…

Gunmetal black salvage spaceship floats slowly past our camp. Captain Salvage steers the ship while First Mate Betty in her too-big-for-her-face aviator goggles lounges beside him, baring her breasts to the high, hot sun. Poetry drifts from the ship's rear-mount speakers, filling their wake, and our ears, with an angst-laden stream of existential twaddle.

***

Sitting in Center Camp, Snacky and I peruse the list of theme camp events knowing full well they may or not take place due to the chaotic nature of Burning Man and a little thing called Playa Time[43]:

43 There are many scheduled events and activities, sponsored by various camps, at Burning Man. A preliminary schedule of events, called the *What, Where, When Guide* is distributed to Burners at the gate. Other events are advertised during the week via Black Rock City radio stations, on printed flyers, or by word of mouth. Just because an event is advertised, however, does not mean the event will occur when and where it is scheduled, or at all. The free-form nature of the festival makes it is extremely difficult to keep track of time on the Playa. Also, other events or adverse weather may affect scheduling. And sometimes events don't occur because the participants and/or sponsors change their minds and decide to do something completely different. This inherent randomness related to telling time and timing activities is referred to as "Playa Time." The term is not derogatory. Rather, when used it generally expresses acceptance for the festival's chaotic nature and participants' ability to go with the flow.

COFFEE-N -PADDLES
10:00am – 12:00pm
Morning wake-up spankings! Start your day off right with a smack on the ass and a shot of caffeine! @ Orgasmateria with Asylum

ADOPT A TRAINED SOCK MONKEY
1:00pm – 5:00pm
Bring a Kung Fu Sock Monkey to life. We provide the materials while supplies last. Donate more socks to keep the nursery open longer. @ Gremlin & 3:00

SHIRTCOCKTAIL HOUR
12:00pm – 1:00pm
Come celebrate our second successful year of pants-free pride! Sing, dance, drop your pants! @ Spike's Vampire Bar, Center Camp & 3:00

HUMAN CARCASS WASH
3:00pm – 4:30pm
Trade in your old Playa dust for a clean one. We honor stated boundaries of where you want to be touched or washed. @ Allanté & 7:30

ROCK 'EM SOCK 'EM ROBOTS
8:30pm – 10:30pm
Dueling robots from your youth are now big enough to know your block off. Battle opponents in the life-sized Red Rocker and Blue Bomber! @ the Ultra Stunt Danger Academy

CHECK YOUR BAGGAGE @PLEASair
1:00am – 1:00pm
Check Your Baggage on PLEASair's giant luggage! Write your problems on suitcases to be burned at the Temple, then join us for a drink! @ 8:30 & Dart

***

We've been watching this play for 10 minutes now and I still don't have a clue what it's about. Probably because it's a sock-puppet play and the girl putting on the show doesn't change voices when she shifts between characters so all of the socks sound alike. I never know which one is talking.

We also came in on the middle of the story so I'm a little lost on the plot. Best I can tell, one sock broke another sock's heart and it's not going to end well for either of them. It must be a tragedy. . .

Oh! Yup! Violent tragedy. A sock just lost a button eye. Poor guy.

All of this is really confusing but oddly entertaining with the girl and the socks and the cardboard stage strapped to her belly. And I like it here. Nice tent. Soft chairs. Spray misters. All cool.

We should stay for act two. . .

***

About a dozen ten-foot tall metallic poles arranged at four foot intervals to form a straight line rise up from the Playa. The poles are plain, smooth, boring, and white – not very engaging. I'm about to walk away when I spy tiny metal dots placed along the lengths of the poles. I wiggle my fingers in front of the dots and

LAAAAAAAA!!! synthesized music plays.

Oh!!!!

I test a different set of dots on a different pole and

DOOOOOOOO!!! same results but with a different note!

Sweet!

So what happens if...

I wave my hands up in down? **DOOOOO!!! DOO!! DOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!** music follows my every move!

I jump in front of another pole and flap my arms? **MI! MI! MI! MI!** a song begins to form!

Up and down all around every move is music! **MIII! SOL! DOOOOO! SOOOL!!** Every sound a song!

Fun!!

So fun in fact a man with playful eyes and very cute whiskers decides to join in. He positions himself at the other end of the line so he can mirror all my moves. I jump left. He jumps right. I circle a pole. He circles one too. Up down and all around we tease each other into a tune.

FUN!!

At the end of our chaotic song he smiles and takes a bow. "Thank you for the dance!" he says and drifts off into the crowd.

***

Twinkiehenge – replica of Stonehenge made with Twinkies – is displayed in the main tent at Center Camp[44]. It's slightly dorky but also slightly insidious because for some reason seeing all those little, oily, golden cakes glistening in the sun really makes me want to eat them…

***

We see what appears to be a young man floating inside a clear, airtight, oversized vinyl suit hanging from a metal frame with wheels. The suit is completely filled with water and the man's entire body is submerged inside. He has a respirator for breathing, and is naked except for a pair of black rubber gloves covering his hands and a pair of black rubber boots covering his feet, both from the outside of the suit. Using some sort of radio transmitter, the submerged man speaks to the crowd standing around him:

"My name is WaterBoy[45] and I invite you, the dry ones, to embrace your inner moisture and denounce your dry ways!"

***

The cardboard replica of the Chrysler Building Snacky has been sitting next to for the past few minutes suddenly stands up and walks away. It's wearing the cutest little bobby socks and little white sneakers.

44 Center Camp is the main public square at Black Rock City. It is located on the grid at 6:00 and Esplanade. City Camp proper is a large tent housing several stages, lots of couches for seating, and a coffee bar – the only item other than ice available for purchase at the event. City Camp is a prime gathering place and is usually filled with people, concerts, and random acts of personal expression. It also serves as the main information hub for festival participants.

45 To learn more about WaterBoy's aquatic performances visit his website at: http://www.marquecornblatt.com/art/performance/waterboy.html - or - http://www.marquecornblatt.com/art/burn/index.html

***

While walking in the Cleu Maze, a spiraling path laid out with red, yellow, and blue flagging, a group of Cleu Campers wearing their iconic copper pendants shaped exactly like their maze, approach us.

"Would you like to be brainwashed?" they ask.

"Um… sure?" we hesitantly reply.

"Great! Follow us!"

We follow the Cleu Campers back to their white school bus. There we join four other Burners waiting for their brain washing to begin.

"Stand here… backs together… very good… close your eyes… lean back… support each other's weight… listen to the sounds of the Playa… let yourself relax…"

The six of us stand with our backs pressed together, eyes closed, hands at our sides. Slowly the Cleu Campers walk around us, inviting us to meditate to the sounds of their voices. They speak in unison first, then in turns, their voices rising or trailing off as they move around the circle. While they speak, they mist our arms and legs with cool water and tell us we are beautiful and special in every way. Then to the melodic sounds of Fisher Price Happy Apple Chime toys tinkling in our ears, they reveal to us the secrets of the universe.

"Consciousness."
"Life."
"Earth."
"Universe."

"When all conscious lifeforms reach their level of compassion and awareness, Existence will again be truly At-One."

"That is the CLEU!"
"You are the CLEU!"

***

Handing out our Playa Gifts[46] and thinking back…

Tink. Tink. Tink. Tink.

Hammer and anvil. Torch and drill. Watching our dear friends smoke cigarettes, drink beer, and make toys for the Playa in our garage, just days before we leave for the desert.

We're building modern versions of old optical illusions – Victorian thaumatropes. Our thaumatropes have a picture of burning flames on one side of its disk and the icon for The Man on the other. Spinning the thaumatrope blurs the two images together so you can burn The Man any time you like!

Instead of using paper, our thaumatropes are made from a wooden disk with a copper axel. The axel is threaded through an outer copper ring which makes holding and spinning the disk easy. The whole thing fits perfectly in the palm of your hand and has a nice weight. Brilliant Snacky designed them well.

46 Burning Man operates on a gift economy. Gifts are exchanged for products or services, or given as a gesture of friendship or appreciation. Items with Burning Man motifs are common gift items, but all kinds of food items, drinks, articles of jewelry and clothing, and swag are also given away. Commercial products or gifts purchased in bulk are not as valuable as handmade gifts.

Spinning the disk and watching The Man fall into the flames is satisfiying.

So is giving them away.

Thank you dear friends for the gift of your labor...

***

Rosie talks me into going with her to a body painting camp open only to women. She wants to paint her breasts for Critical Tits[47], the females-only, topless bicycle parade taking place later in the day. The parade celebrates women's bodies and women's presence on the Playa and she wants to look sexy fantastic when she rides.

After wandering in circles for a bit, we finally find the camp just off the Esplanade. Our first impression of the low, round tent where the body painting takes place is that the body painting session is clearly intended to be private. The top and sides of the tent are completely covered with a brown opaque fabric. The only entrance is a four-foot tall solid wooden door on the back side of the tent. The only sign marking the camp is the single sheet of white paper taped to the door stating women will only be admitted inside.

47 The Critical Tits bicycle ride is a long-standing tradition at Burning Man. The name is an appropriation of Critical Mass, a monthly bicycle ride celebrating cycling and asserting cyclists' road rights taking place in cities across the United States. My understanding is that Critical Tits began as a way for women to collectively demonstrate their presence on the Playa, an action women felt to be necessary because early Burning Man festival participants were mostly male and the event projected a traditionally masculine aesthetic throughout. Critical Tits was a way to imbibe a feminine aesthetic and the female body into the mix. The bike ride has since become an incredibly popular event. Thousands of topless women ride each year. Men cannot participate in the ride, but they do participate in the after party where they service the women riders as they complete their ride by washing their feet, brushing their hair, and feeding them fresh fruit and champagne. In an effort to keep the riders from becoming exploited, event organizers ask festival attendees and tell representative from the press not to photograph or film the ride. In recent years, the ratio between male and female attendees has evened out, however there are still more men than women at the event, and the overall aesthetic retains certain dominant masculine characteristics including explicit displays of male dominant, straight sexuality, the use of building materials which require intense physical manipulation, and the incorporation of destructive elements like fire and explosions. To learn more, visit http://www.criticaltits.com/

We knock. A very thin woman with wild blonde hair and a leather g-string opens the door and invites us in.

The inside of the tent is a surprising contrast to the outside. Sunlight filters through the brown fabric, filling the space with diffuse yellow light. Rough woven mats cover the ground. Acoustic music softly surrounds us.

A long table sits in the middle of the tent. On the table is a collection of buckets and bowls filled with liquid latex body paints. Next to the paints are piles of brushes and sponges. Hanging from the ceiling are large butcher paper signs with handwritten instructions for applying the latex.

There are about twenty women in the tent, all busy applying paint to their bodies. They are different ages and weights and sizes and shapes. Most are with friends. Some are alone. As they paint their bodies and their friends' bodies, they laugh and smile, hold out their limbs and strike poses, and with loving voices tell each other how beautiful they look.

I think they look beautiful too.

After watching the room for a little bit, I gain the courage to try the paints. I disrobe and apply a base layer of clear latex to my chest. The sensation surprises me. Smooth. Warming. Very pleasing.

After the base layer dries I apply blue swirls then green swirls to my breasts. I play with the paints, letting the feel of the latex guide my brush over my body. The sensation is delightful.

I am amused by this discovery.

I look over at Rosie and see she is having an equally fun time applying her paints Jackson Pollock style.

When the paints are dry we give the hostess a handful of spinners and thank her for her generous gift. We emerge from the tent through the little wooden door.

Outside the tent, a very curious man stops us.

"What is going on in there?" he asks, trying to peek through the wooden door. "Anything good?"

We smile and shrug. "No. Not for you."

***

Looking to our left we see a phone booth with a sign boasting a direct line to God. Behind the phone booth, a couple of Burners are rolling a very large and very pink peace sign toward the edge of the Playa. A very tan man working a very yellow Speedo pulls a red wagon between the phone booth and the peace sign. He pauses, and with great dramatic flair, bends over to pick up a piece of MOOP. Making certain everyone can hear, he tsk-tsks loudly as he deposits the garbage into his wagon.

***

Just off the Esplanade, we spy a crowd gathering around something large and silver glistening in the sun. Snacky and I change directions, and once again bike toward the crowd to check out the scene.

Turns out the crowd is gathered around an enormous set of silver eagle wings[48]. The size of the installation is impressive. The wings flare out about 15 feet into the air and 25 feet on each side of a thick center ring. There is a platform welded to the bottom of the ring so people can stand inside it. The entire sculpture is cast in solid steel, but it can be made to rotate if a Burner or two give the wings a spin.

The sculpture makes me think of Harley Davidsons. And Icarus.

The crowd organizes itself into a line. One by one, Burners climb onto the sculpture, stand like Di Vinci's Vitruvian Man in the center ring, and have their friends take their picture. After the photo their friends walk over and give the wings a spin. After a few rotations, the Burners climb down so the next person in line can take a turn.

A Burner covered head to toe in silver body paint climbs into the ring. The crowd presses forward to take his photo snap! snap! snap! snap! Paparazzi style. Silver guy strikes a few poses, playing along.

After silver guy, a middle aged woman dressed in khaki shorts and an L. L. Bean Safari hat takes her turn. The crowd pulls back. She strikes her pose, smiles for her friend, then asks the crowd in a whiny voice why no one is spinning her. No response. After a few beats a dorky red head kid steps us and spins her around a few times.

This pattern repeats over and over.

48 The sculpture, called Spread Eagle, was created by metal artist Bryan Tendrick. It was one of thirty seven sculptures to receive funding from the Burning Man Organization in 2008. Called the honorarium installations, these competitively selected works of art receive funding derived from event ticket sales. They are also placed in prominant locations on the Playa. For more information see http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/2008/08_art_funded.html

Snacky asks, "So… wanna stand in line for your very own "I was at Burning Man 2008" Kodak moment?"

I shake my head and laugh. "You go do it!"

***

On my way to a porta-potty break I bike past three men sitting next to the road on a wonderfully crap-tastic, this-belongs-at-the-dump-but-I-took-it-to-Burning-Man, dust covered couch. I ring my bike bell and wave as I pass. They respond by raising paddle signs, each one scoring me a perfect "10."

***

A message travels down the line that Camp Arctic[49] is out of ice. Darn. Guess we'll have to head to the other side of the grid to see if the small ice stations still have block ice.

As we turn to go, I notice a young woman standing naked in the middle of the road giving away watermelon slices. She is beautiful in a classical sense – long dark hair, olive skin, heavy breasts, sculpted limbs. She looks Mediterranean, maybe Greek. I suddenly wish I had my drawing pad with me so I could sketch her.

I take a piece of watermelon and thank her for her gift. As I turn to bike away, a man carrying a portable mister catches my eye.

49 Burners can buy block and cubed ice from Camp Arctic, located at Center Camp, or two smaller distribution points located at the 3:00 and 9:00 Plazas. Ice supplies can be limited, depending on demand, since the ice must be trucked into the festival daily. Profits from coffee and ice sales are donated to the towns of Empire and Gerlach as part of Burning Man's effort to maintain good working relationships with Black Rock City's neighbors.

"Wanna spritz?"

"Sure!"

The spritzer, however, is on the fritz, and the more he fiddles with the nozzle to try and fix the spritz, the more the spritz stops being a spritz and turns into a steady stream. He apologizes for his technical difficulties but I say I don't mind. It is the hottest part of the day and the water feels good.

He flashes a naughty smile. "So… does the water feel good rolling down your arm?" He drizzles a stream of water from my shoulder to my wrist.

I smile back. "Yes it does."

"And here?"

He sends another stream of water down my other arm, then down both legs, around my neck, over my breasts, and finally across my stomach.

And then when I least expect it, he shoots a cool little burst of water into my right ear.

The shock of the water is intense and I burst out laughing! Not a little laugh or a polite laugh but an uncontrollable intimate laugh – the kind of laugh I only share with those very close to me, and even then, only rarely.

I am surprised, and a bit overwhelmed, by this unexpected release.

To escape the moment I look down, but what I experience next is even more overwhelming. The lines of water followed the contours of my body, leaving behind narrow ribbons of clean skin. And there, contrasting sharply to the layers of playa dust, I can clearly see the shape of my bicep, the soft pooch of my stomach, the curve of my knee.

For the first time ever I see someone else's drawing of me!

I am stunned by the presence of my own body – by the way this game made my familiar body appear so strange – but I think about the watermelon taste in my mouth and how free I feel from laughing with a stranger – and I realize this is exactly why I come to Burning Man.

***

Needing a break from the City and the Playa and the midday heat, we return to our camp to eat and rest. Our neighbors and camp mates had the same idea and arrive back at camp about the same time we do. Perfect! Now we can eat together and indulge in some serious hang time.

Once again everyone rummages through their food supplies and pulls out things to share. A tasty lunch appears before us – fresh tomatoes, cucumber slices, chicken salad, pita shells, and several varieties of Trader Joe's[50] hummus.

Trader Joe's must make a killing the week before Burning Man. Every camp I've been to has Trader Joe hummus.

50 Trader Joe's is a specialty chain of grocery stores headquartered in Monrovia, California. For more information visit http://www.traderjoes.com/

After we eat, the instruments come out. Pool Boy plays guitar and sings while Dr. Placebo drums along. Someone starts passing a joint.

Two puffs…

Ah… nice! Very good NorCal weed…

"So what did everyone see today?"

"Did you make it to the Temple yet? I think it might be my favorite one yet."

"I can't get over the Man… I remember when you could climb all over him and the camps weren't all set up like this. You just wandered around between them and met people."

"There seems to be a lot of other things to climb on this year, like that silver tower thing."

"Yah. Maybe climbing is a new art form."

"Ha! Or an easy way to make art interactive."

"That reminds me. Did you see the artists protesting at the gate? They held up signs saying they were on strike."

"There does seem to be less art this year…"

"Or not… maybe just less big stuff…"

"No… I think there's less art. The pagoda with the double-decker swing is cool though. You should try to find it tonight when it's all lit up. Very pretty."

"Were you here two years ago when the Norwegians built that crazy dance club out of a million two-by-fours?? That was so cool. It was all lit up too. We danced there every night."

"No, we missed it. Too bad. It sounds fun."

"I've got photos of it here if you want to see it. They burned it down the same night as The Man."

Two more puffs…

The best thing I've seen today? Right now… watching Camp Faux Real's parachute billow in the breeze…

"How were the BED[51] workshops today? People still wanting to learn how to respectfully get laid?"

"Yes. Very good. About twenty people showed up at each session. We gave away lots of BED buttons."

---

51 Burning Man is by no means a crime free environment. Like any major city, Black Rock City has instances of theft and violence, and festival participants should make efforts to ensure their personal safety and security at Burning Man. In our four years of attendance, we have been fortunate not had any negative encounters. This is partially due to the fact that Burners, overall, really do attempt to practice conscientious social behaviors. Also, Black Rock City has its own "non confrontational mediators" called the Black Rock Rangers who help regulate disruptive Burner behaviors. The Black Rock Rangers are not police officers but instead work with federal Bureau of Land Management Rangers, the Pershing County Sheriff's Office, the Washoe County Sheriff's Office, the Nevada Department of Investigations, and the Nevada State Health Division, the public agencies legally allowed to patrol this event, should legal assistance be required. Burners also form intervention and educational groups to help educate participants about dangerous and disruptive behaviors. The Bureau of Erotic Discourse, or BED, is a one such group. BED is a team of volunteers working to provide information and education regarding rape and sexual assault on the Playa. To learn more about the Black Rock Rangers and their mission, visit: http://rangers.burningman.com/who.shtml. To learn more about BED visit: http://www.bureauoferoticdiscourse.org/. To learn more about what activities are legal and illegal at Burning Man, and which state and federal laws apply to the event, visit: http://www.burningman.com/preparation/event_survival/law_enforcement.html.

"My BED buttons says COMMUNICATION IS THE BEST LUBRICANT. I picked it because it matches the message printed on the back of Dr. Placebo's underwear."

"I got some cool swag too."

"Remember when that guy gave Sexy Bob a flute. Talk about an awesome gift. . ."

"We're still wearing the jade necklaces Pool Boy gave us last year."

"I was hoping some of the necklaces would make it back this year."

"Heck yah!"

"Heck yah!"

Last two puffs. . .

. . . ah yes. . .

. . . this is nice. . .

. . . so good. . .

. . . and that parachute thing is perfectly awesome. . .

. . . I think we should get a parachute too. . . for next year. . . so we can sit under it with all our friends who like to eat hummus. . .

***

SUNSET!

Howl with the Burners as the sun goes down!

AAAOOOOOOOWWWWWWW!!!!!! AAAOOOOOOOWWWWWWW!!!!!!

Very dark now
Inky black desert

But oh! how the city comes to life at night!!

Time to transition into Black Rock City nighttime Burners! Add more clothes – need some layers to ward off the cold. Cover ourselves with glow sticks and blinky lights – got to be seen so the art cars and bicycles and chemically altered Burners don't run us down. Fill the Camelbaks with water – need to stay hydrated while we're out playing. Fill the bicycle water bottles with vodka and whiskey – night time looks best with a good buzz.

Darkness masks the imperfections of the city. Everything now is carnival and magical illusion. Lights and sounds amp up the sensations. Pulsing Electronica fills the air. Laser beams and light shows streak across the sky. Illuminated art cars zigzag across the Playa. Burners in costumes come out in force. Everything is up and glowing in motion.

Artwork, too, transforms in the night. Fire sculptures quiet in daylight burst into flame. Kinetic sculptures roar to life. Light shows blink and pulse to the music.

So much to see! Too much to see!

I love Burning Man at night!

***

Thunderdome is once again back in action. Just like in the movie, or sort of like in the movie, people hang all over the sides of the dome while two chosen warriors strapped in aerial harnesses battle each other to the death inside. Death on the Playa, of course, means being knocked to the ground with oversized q-tip shaped battle thingies. The crowd is bloodthirsty though. They scream Fight! Fight! Fight! Kill! Kill! Kill! while punching their fists into the air.

***

"I am not getting on that thing!"

"Why not?"

"Don't you think it's a little freaky they built a roller coaster here in only a couple of days?"

"But they've got chicks with flame throwers roasting the cars!"

"Exactly."

***

WHOOOOOSH!!! Gas flames shoot out from the fingertips of a giant metal hand rising up from the sand. BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! Gas explodes in cascading rhythms across the finger tips. HELP ME!!! Someone screams behind us! I'M ON FIRE!!!

We spin around. A flaming bicycle flies by. Panic! Then we realize it is only an illusion. Another bicycle is pulling the flaming bike behind it. No one is hurt. It's only a joke.

We turn our attention back to the show. WHOOOOOSH!!! goes the giant hand. BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! says its finger tips.

***

"THIS IS A ROCK AND ROLL CONCERT AND WE'RE GONNA ROCK WITH OUR COCKS! SO ALL YOU GUYS OUT THERE – DROP YOUR PANTS AND SHOW US WHAT YOU GOT!!!

***

The 9:30 dance club is a two-story tent large enough for several hundred dancers to cram inside. The club has a two-tier stage, pole dancers, a lights show, and a DJ spinning his own mix. The crowd, on the whole, is young, and it's rather obvious from their sweaty dancing, their suckers, their cuddle puddles in the corners, and their attraction to our blinky lights, a good many of them are rolling on E[52].

52 The Burning Man Organization stresses that Burning Man is not a rave, nor has there been a rave camp at Burning Man since 1996 (Frequently Asked Questions). Ravers still attend the event, however, and most of the large dance areas cater to the raver experience.

A shiny young man without a shirt brushes up against my pink fur coat. He stops a moment to feel the fuzz, his fingertips tracing the length of my sleeve.

"Thank you for your coat," he says, eyes twitching above his smile.

***

Stand at The Man. What do you see?

Pirate Ship
Medusa Head
Flaming Dragon
Glowing Mushroom
Drifting across the Playa!

***

"Where's the music coming from??"

"There! Over there!"

Inside the tent is an explosion of sound. A wacked out marching band[53] has taken over the stage! Horns, flutes, saxophones, drums! Steampunked Sergeant Pepper uniforms on everyone! And everyone is dancing! dancing! dancing! The whole tent is shaking!

In the middle of the music, the man in front of me pulls out a ring from his purple suit jacket. He drops to one knee, and shouts to the woman beside him.

53 Sometime later in the evening we learned the name of the group was the March Fourth Marching Band. To sample their music and get a sense of their Burning Man concert, visit http://www.marchfourthmarchingband.com/

"WILL YOU MARRY ME??"

"YES! YES! YES! YES! YES!" she cries, dancing into his arms.

***

The installation is supposed to be in this direction, but we don't see anything resembling art. We're deep in the Playa far away from any lights, and our bicycle headlamps are basically useless. Nothing to do but keep biking and looking.

A generator suddenly roars to life. Seconds later a super bright strobe light begins to flicker. We head toward the light.

We arrive at a carousel about 15 feet tall and 15 feet in diameter, mounted to a series of motors. The motors turn the carousel and the carousel triggers the strobe light. Attached to the outside of the carousel are sculpted figures, each representing a diver in a different stage of his dive. The entire gizmo spins and flashes. The strobe light acts like a shutter, creating the illusion that the divers are not static sculptures but moving figures diving into the sand.

It's a giant zoetrope[54]! How ridiculously cool is that?!!

After about 10 minutes the motors stop whirring. We decide we want to meet the guys running the show so we walk over introduce ourselves. We give them some spinners and thank them for their amazing art. To our delight they love our tiny optical illusions as much as we love their giant one! They stop working for a few moments to play with the toys and

54 While the flipping action of the thaumatrope creates the optical illusion of a singular image, a zoetrope uses a shutter effect to create the illusion of moving images. Zoetropes, like thaumatropes, rely on persistence of vision to create their illusions.

to tell us all about the crazy amount of time they've put into making their zoetrope, and how tired they are from making the project come together. They look directly into our eyes and say they are physically and emotionally strained from constantly maintaining their art in the desert. Playa dust, we are told, is not kind to mechanical parts.

Hearing the stress in their voices we ask, with concern, "Is this worth it?"

"Oh, yes!" they say without hesitation, "Yes. Absolutely."

***

"What are they?"

"I'm not sure… giant white balloons?"

We move in for a closer look.

"No… but whatever they are they're really beautiful…"

We park our bikes and step quietly between the orbs. There are dozens of them scattered about, each about 10 feet wide, inflated, and lit from below with soft white light. The lights pulse ever so slightly, like a heartbeat, or a love song. Together the globes create a wonderful effect – Burners standing next to them are backlit, turning their bodies into dancing and kissing and embracing silhouettes.

"I don't know what this is, but I am almost certain romance is born here."

***

"Which direction do you want to go?"

"Which way have we already been?"

"I'm not sure… I'm all turned around."

"Then it doesn't really matter which way we go. So I vote for left."

***

Much later, after much wandering, we arrive again at the Temple.

The Temple!

Even more beautiful in glimmering neon
But still so quiet
Except for the sleepy clatter of dull wind chimes

A perfect place to wrap up the night

We lean against a prayer wall and rest for a bit
Warming ourselves with a kiss and a cuddle and a shot of whiskey
Fortification for the bike ride home

To K-Street!

Our second home
Our first home
Our home away from home
Our home that really is our home
Our home that is forever here

***

More than ready to end the night

lock bikes
crawl into tent
strip off clothes
crawl under covers
fall asleep
dream desert dreams

rest body and prepare
to do it again tomorrow

PLATE 51

PLATE 52

PLATE 53

PLATE 54

PLATE 55

PLATE 56

PLATE 57

PLATE 58

PLATE 59

PLATE 60 montage

PLATE 61

PLATE 62

PLATE 63

PLATE 64

PLATE 65

PLATE 66

PLATE 67

PLATE 68

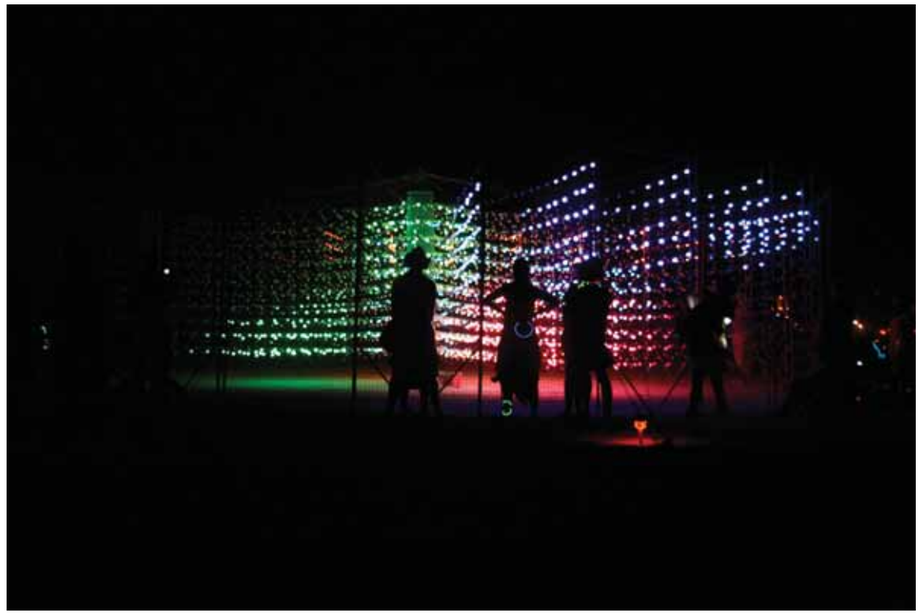

PLATE 69 montage ©Russell Atkinson

PLATE 70 ©Russell Atkinson

PLATE 71

Chapter 4: Transformation and Continuation

> If (Burning Man) can be reduced to one single concept, it is "transformation": transformation of consciousness, transformation of artistic creativity into ecstatic communion, of sculptures into flame and ash…
>
> Daniel Pinchbeck (2002) *Breaking Open the Head*

***

A Saturday morning confession:

I couldn't sleep at my first Burning Man. I couldn't get used to the dissonance – the techno and the explosions and the voices and the engines swirling together in the open desert, creating the sound that is the sound of Burning Man – the sound of constant, ever constant, motion without reprieve. The night sounds scared me.

I was scared, too, because I wasn't part of the noise. Lying in my tent, intensely listening, I wondered if sleeping was wrong. Should I be out there? Am I missing something important? Am I boring? Am I weak? Do all these people know something about being here I don't understand? Why can't I keep going? Why do I feel incomplete?

Standing here today, I can admit my fear because the sounds no longer scare me. I sleep deeply in the effusion knowing now that what I hear is nothing more than the sounds of people – regular, every day people – doing a bit of living. I know, too, that when I wake up in the morning, the sound will still be here, waiting for me to join back in.

I've also come to understand it is necessary, and quite alright, to rest at Burning Man. Being in the desert makes me acutely aware of the limitations of my body, a body that is strangely broken by a disease we still can't name but is capable of wrecking head-to-toe havoc in its anonymity. Burning Man teaches me with amazing clarity where my physical and mental boundaries lie, helping me accept I have a body that needs rest, and helping me understand if I do not honor that basic need, my body will stop working and I will no longer be able to play.

I won't be able to contribute to the din.

So I rest, and look forward to times when our camp is empty and I am alone, and I can move slowly, and watch the clouds, and the dust devils, and the people peddling by on their bicycles, and reflect.

And I take time to appreciate the quieter times at Burning Man, like Saturday morning, when Burners slow down, collectively conserving their energy for the very big night ahead.

***

"Ever notice how Saturday morning at Burning Man always smells like bacon?"

I sniff the air. Bacon. Everywhere. Lots of big breakfasts must be in the works.

"Well, if you don't like bacon, wait a few hours. Then everything will smell like pot."

"Ha! True! Bacon and pot. Burning Man comfort foods."

"So I suppose we should head down to the Playa for one last look. Anything special you want to see?"

"No… let's just go and take some photos."

Snacky and I hop on our bikes and head down 4:30 to the Esplanade. It's definitely a quiet morning. Not a lot happening on the grid. No lines at the porta potties. No art cars in the streets. The Playa is quiet too. There are lots of photographers out, though, especially around the big installations. Just like us, they're trying to capture a few last photos before the artwork disappears tonight[55].

Saturday morning on the Playa is always bitter sweet. It's hard to believe we've been here six days. Where has the time gone? And it's hard to believe in a few short hours The Man will go up in smoke and all this will go away. At the same time, I'm eager for the Burn. Real world thoughts are creeping back in – a sure sign I'm ready for the desert to start releasing its magical grip on me.

Feeling a bit contemplative, we wander about, letting the morning mood lead us. We take photographs of a giant swing set, a field of red metal poppies, a mosaic wall made from tiled mirrors, and a collection of boots from United States soldiers who died in Iraq[56]. We also take photos of the bare spot where the Mayan pyramid stood.

The pyramid. Bleh. I'm glad it's gone. It was my least favorite Playa experience this year.

To be fair, the pyramid builders had a good idea. They built the pyramid to be a stage for a crazy fire dance ceremony, with the plan of burning the whole thing down at the end of their show. They advertised the heck out of their performance, so we went to see what

55 Not all artwork displayed at Burning Man is destroyed at the end of the event. A few pieces, usually smaller, portable works of art, return year to year. Others find homes in communities and galleries afterward. Many installations, however, are designed to be destroyed, thus permanently altering the landscape of the current city and the possible aesthetic configurations of the city in the future with their demise.

56 This installation was part of the Eyes Wide Open traveling memorial which features one pair of boots for every United States military casualty in Iraq. For more information about this exhibit visit http://www.afsc.org/eyes/

it was all about, as did a gazillion other Burners. By the time we got there, the area was packed – good for them – but it took quite a bit of work to find a place to sit. Once we did sit down, we got pinned in by the people pushing in around us, which, unfortunately for us, meant we were stuck with a group of twenty-something guys who decided to take whatever drugs they were taking about twenty minutes before, which also meant they were coming up about the same time the show was starting. The drug use in and of itself wasn't the issue. The annoying part was that whatever drugs they were on were really lame. As far as we could tell, the only affect the drugs had was to compel them to state the obvious about everything they saw. And when I say obvious, I mean really obvious, as in, "Hey! That's a square!" and "Hey! That color is blue!" over and over and over again.

Once the show started, things got worse. The fire dancers looked fine, but because the show was so heavily advertised, all of the roaming party barges with their techno music showed up. And because party barges never turn their music off, they effectively blasted out whatever music the fire dancers were dancing to. Of course, the crowds and the drugs and the competing sounds are all par for the course at Burning Man, and I probably could have dealt with all that just fine, if what happened next hadn't happened next. And what happened next is that fire dancer show changed from being an original production into a performance which copied every aspect of The Burn! And we're talking about THE BURN here – The Burn for The Man! The big show. The climax. The namesake for this artsy community experiment thing we're all living in.

And that felt very wrong.

The fire dancers, I believe, were sincere in the homage. But I also don't think they realized that by recreating The Burn in mini form, and presenting it prior to the big climax, they reduced The Burn down to a formula. Like a movie about underdogs. Or a Harlequin Romance. Or a sitcom on TV. Of course, when Paul Addis burned The Man early, he showed us how formulaic The Burn really is, whether we like to think of it that way or not. But somehow the pyramid's way of revealing the formula made me feel worse than Addis did. Addis' burn was like dining in the dark – familiar foods made strange by changing the way you perceive them. This burn was like eating at a new diner that swears it serves up everything exactly like some old diner with a killer reputation for home cooking, but somehow the food is off, like the cooking grease is wrong, or the salad dressing isn't quite right, so instead of getting a tasty meal you're left with a weird taste in your mouth.

Bleh.

I suppose what all this dissatisfaction really boils down to, though, is that the pyramid burn's blatantly formulaic presentation forced me to confront my expectations for authentic experiences at Burning Man. I've bought into the belief that what happens here should be authentic. The web site tells me I should. But somehow this show left me wondering what a truly authentic Burning Man experience is, and what I really expect "authentic" to be...

Authenticity, as a topic, comes up a lot at Burning Man, so I know what others Burners think it means. Some think it's a product of being in the desert itself – breathing in the playa, walking in the alkaline soil, feeling your feet burn from the ground and your skin burn in the sun while fighting to stay grounded in the raging winds. Others swear it comes from making original art and choosing to live the life of an artist – a life dedicated to consummate beauty, personal expression, and the rejection of the corporate, capitalist model of existence. Still others believe authenticity lies in the pursuit of spirituality and love, and chasing those feelings through the communal conduits Burning Man provides.

On the flip side, the naysayers say "screw it" and go on a sex or drug bender for seven glorious days or walk away altogether because they believe Burning Man no longer gives them the buzz or the connection they crave because Burning Man is just too big and too old and now too much part of the mainstream to ever be authentic again.

There is no shortage of opinions about whether or not Burning Man lives up to its promise of authentic experience, and whether or not Burning Man participants live up to the expectations of what it means to be a true Burner. Most seem to agree, though, that Burning Man authenticity ultimately resides somewhere inside one's own attitude about living, and it's up to the individual to present oneself as an authentic being to help others reach that goal.

That being said, I probably I shouldn't condemn the pyramid burn for being what it was, because all it did was show me I still don't really know what being authentic means to me. And I should recognize this is a problem I need to resolve if I want to make my Burning Man experience into something more than an extremely effective escape from reality, and seven days of self validation buried in the guise of active participation[57].

***

After the photos we head back to camp. We see a little more activity on the streets – a little more energy pulsing in the grid.

One step closer to the Burn…

Snacky decides he wants to take more photos of the neighbors, and the rest of our campmates are off roaming the Playa, so I decide now is a good time to wash my hair. After last night's dust storm I've got so much playa dust caked in my hair I can't get my fingers through it. And because playa dust acts like super strong hair gel, my hair is matted and sticking out in goofy spikes in every direction. Not the look I'm going for today.

57 Burner discussions about active participation and generating authentic experiences resonate strongly with Heidegger's (1962) phenomenological concept of "authentic moments," which he defines as exceptional moments in time when people are most aware of their surroundings and feeling most at home or at one with themselves. Heidegger argues authentic moments are not everyday moments, but rather, moments created by individuals trying to become healthy and whole beings in pursuit of "conscience," or greater immediate awareness.

I test the water I set out earlier to heat in the sun. The temperature is perfect. I transfer some of the water to a small wash tub, lean over the basin, and with a cup scoop the water over my head. Yellowy-gray sludge runs out of my hair. I keep rinsing, and rinsing, and rinsing, until the water runs clear and my hair feels soft and supple again.

Snacky makes it back to the camp and offers his help. He pours water behind my ears and across my neck, making certain the last of the shampoo rinses away. I love feeling his hands touch my hair and the cool water trickling against my skin. It makes me feel light.

When we are finished, I wrap my body in a clean sarong, sit on the playa, and let my hair dry in the late morning sun.

***

Late afternoon and all the neighbors are back, puttering around in their camps.

Restless energy. Killing time…

Snacky can't sit still so he shifts into tidy-up mode. He checks the tubs, looks over the gear, sorts belongings into piles, and surveys the trash. He's already calculating what needs to be done tomorrow morning to strike our camp, pack it up, and hit the road. Our goal is to leave the playa as early as possible to avoid departure madness.

Snacky looks, but I can see in his eyes he can't quite bring himself to dismantle anything or do any real packing. Not yet. After all, we still have one more night on the Playa, and one more night to call the Black Rock City our home.

***

RUMBLE! RUMBLE! RUMBLE! RUMBLE! RUMBLE! RUMBLE!

"GIVE US YOUR BEER OR WE WON'T BURN THE MAN!"
"IF WE DON'T PARTY – YOU DON'T PARTY! GIVE US YOUR WOMEN! GIVE US YOUR BEER!"
"CLEAN UP YOUR CAMP! RECYCLE YOUR BOOZE!"

They're here! The DPW Parade!! We grab our bag of mini liquor bottles and run to K-Street. The road is filled with massive work vehicles – cranes, flatbed trucks, front end loaders – pushing by our camps. The DPW volunteers, dressed in their signature black, hang off the vehicles. Yelling over their blaring rock and roll music, they demand party supplies.

Burners line up along the street and toss alcohol to the crew. We lob little bottles of bourbon, and whiskey, and spiced rum into the air. A cheer goes up.

"YES! YES! WE LOVE MINI BOTTLES!! GIVE US MORE!! GIVE US MORE!!"

We toss dozens of bottles with dozens of thank-yous to the volunteers. When we run out of alcohol, we bow to the crew and profess our love for the DPW. They tell us to go back to our camp and look for more booze.

Just as the parade rumbles by our camp, the sun dips down behind the mountains...

SUNSET!

The night is here! Everyone up! Howl with DPW as the parade goes by! Howl with the Burners as the sun goes down!

AAAOOOOOOOWWWWWWW!!!!!! AAAOOOOOOOWWWWWWW!!!!!!

It's time! It's time! It's finally time!

Time to get ready to burn The Man!

***

Our camp goes all out for our last meal together, which basically means we eat all the good stuff we saved for the end and all the perishables we don't want to repack.

BOOM!!!
The first test explosion. The countdown is on!

When the meal is finished and the kitchen clean, everyone crawls into their tents to dress for the night. When everyone reappears, they are dressed in their Playa best – Dr. Placebo wearing long blue robes and blinking EL wire[58], Amazon Queen sporting a gauzy orange and yellow dress, go-go boots, and purple hat, Dolly dressed in her aqua blue belly dancing costume, Madison wearing red and white striped stockings, short pants, and a green vest that makes him look like an Emo Christmas elf, English Mike in his black top hat, WWII aviator goggles and black trench coat, Snacky in his red plaid flannel pajamas and blinking headlamp, and me in a fuzzy black mini dress, pink and black thigh high stockings, pink ballet slippers, and my fuzzy, friendly, pink fur coat.

BOOM!!! BOOM!!!
Getting louder! Getting closer!

58 EL wire, or electroluminescent wire, is copper wire with a phosphorus material coating and two tiny transmitter wires wrapped around it. It is also covered by a pvc coating and a colored vinyl coat. When connected to a power source and driver, the charge illuminates the wire and creates a glow very similar to neon.

After a brief fashion show, we break out the blinky lights one final time and accessorize each other with as many glow sticks as we can. Fully glowing, we make a last minute run to the porta potties. After that, we debate about whether or not we should take the bikes to the Burn. We finally decide to walk, thinking it will be too much work to try and figure out where to park the bikes since we won't be able to lock them up anywhere close to the Man[59]. The playa surface is so crumbly now the bikes are basically useless anyway.

BOOM!!! BOOM!!! BOOM!!!
OK people! Wrap it up! Time to go! Time to get to the Playa!

Finally ready, we lock arms, step onto the street, and together we head toward the Playa. As we turn onto 4:30 we are instantly pulled into the deluge of all the other fully-costumed and brightly-lit Burners filing out of their campsites and moving together toward the Playa. Thousands and thousands of excited Burners focused on marching directly toward The Man. Thousands and thousands of Burners pulsating nervous energy and...

...whoa...

I stop. Suddenly the sight and sounds of all these Burners pulling me in and pressing me toward The Man overwhelms me. Adrenaline shoots through my body. My stomach flips. My hands start to shake. I get dizzy. I want to run.

"What's wrong?" Snacky asks, seeing the sick look on my face.

"I don't know… just… all these people…"

"Do you want to go back?"

59 Not everyone locks their bikes on the Playa. It is a good idea to lock your bikes, however, if you want them to be there when you return. Unlocked bikes are often "appropriated" by other Burners, especially after the Burn.

"No… but… no… yes… yes, I do want to go back. Will you go back with me? Please??"

Concerned, Snacky tells the rest of our crew to go ahead without us and walks me back to our camp. Once we're back, I don't know what to say or do. I feel completely displaced.

"I've got an idea. Let's go back over to the Cleu maze and sit there for a while."

"OK…"

We walk inside the maze and instantly I start feeling better. It's quiet in the maze. And dark. And empty. We turn off all our blinky lights and let our eyes adjust to the night.

"So what happened?"

"I don't know… I guess I started feeling claustrophobic with all those people pressing in around me…I don't know why... we've done this before... I think maybe I'm just tired."

"Yeah. Me too. We've had a tough of a year. And it took more work to get here this time. And this is the first time we've camped the entire week. Kinda gets to you, huh."

I nod. "Yes. It's a lot to take in and a lot to put out... but was it good?"

"Yes. For you?"

"Yes…"

"Favorite part?"

"I think it was meeting that flute player. I wish I could play like that… and that story he told…made me wonder what it would be like to be a Snake Priest performing snake rituals all over the world. Yours?"

"When I yelled 'potty break' at that big group of Burners bicycling by us and they all stopped so they could figure out who in the group needed to pee."

I laugh. "OK! I agree with you on that one. That was pretty funny!"

I turn so I can look into his eyes. "Todd… is doing this still worth it?"

"I think so… you?"

"Yes…"

We lean back and look at the stars shining brightly. Beautiful stars. Beautiful clear night. Slowly the panic feelings leave my body and I relax. After a bit Todd asks if I'm okay, and if I'm ready to join the party again.

"Sure. I'm ready. Let's go see The Burn."

Todd helps me to my feet. As we are leaving, we notice Cleu Camp has a lone camper still inside the school bus. It's obvious he's been watching us, so we walk over to say hello.

The man inside the bus looks to be in his late 50s or early 60s. He's got a mess of grizzly grey hair, a leathery gaunt face, and several days' worth of whisker stubble sprouting from his cheeks and chin. He's wearing a grey tunic and a beat up Confederate-style hat with a soiled brim. He's holding a plate of fried chicken.

"Thanks for letting us use your maze."

"No problem. Looked like you needed it."

I laugh. "Yeah… just working through a little "night of the Burn" anxiety. But we're going down now. How about you?"

"Oh… the Captain doesn't go to the Burn… not since the first few… no, I try to do something different each time now. Makes it feel more real…"

"I think I know what you mean. I'm not feeling the Burn the same way this year…"

"What year is this for you?"

"Number four."

He nods wisely. "Yup. That's about right. Well… if you're not feeling it, don't go. I suggest you go instead to the Esplanade and walk around and see how different it looks without all the people. You'll be surprised. As for me, I'm going to celebrate number thirteen by staying right here and finishing eating my dinner."

I look at Todd. "What do you think?"

He shrugs. "Sure. Let's do it."

We thank the Captain for his advice and wish him a fine meal. And once again we step onto K-Street, and turn once again onto 4:30.

This time the street looks entirely different.

This time the crowds are gone and so are the costumes and the blinky lights, and the crazy nervous energy. All the campsites are all dark and empty and all the roads are completely abandoned. The only sounds we hear are our shoes scuffling through the dust, the distant roar of the crowd sitting at the base of The Man, and every once in a while, a little bit of laughter or a little bit of music floating above us. When we look up, we find small groups of Burners, mostly veterans from the look of things, sitting in lawn chairs high up in their camps. They look content hanging out, smoking cigars and drinking martinis, and watching the Burn from a good distance.

When we arrive at the Esplanade, we are amazed at how different it looks too.

Everything on the Esplanade is in its place, just like we expected. All the lights are on, just like they should be. But without people, the boardwalk feels completely abandoned and surreal. Like a ghost town. Or one of those sci fi parallel universe that exists slightly out of phase with our own. Or like the carnival came to town but so did the Great Reckoning, and all the carnies ascended into heaven leaving their traveling shows behind.

Eerie. . .

At first we feel like trespassers, walking alone on the empty boardwalk, but curiosity gets the better of us so we start exploring. We walk in and out of the theme camps, touching things we normally wouldn't – looking inside things we hadn't noticed before – taking in the rawness of the materials holding the camps together. We see the plywood and zip ties and spray paint and fabric twisted and bolted and welded and stapled– perfectly imperfect – brilliantly junky – and the evidence of smart hands making the most of limited materials. Everything, too, shows great signs of wear and tear – quick fixes with too many nails – extra support beams straining in their places – gobs and gobs and gobs of duct tape – all repairing a host of abuses – all hidden under a patina of playa dust – all ready to give up the ghost in just a few short hours.

Seeing the rawness and vulnerability of the Esplanade suddenly makes the moment very real. We are here. Now. In the desert. On the Playa. And we are at the end of Burning Man.

Oh god! We need to see The Burn!

We climb to the top of a wooden scaffolding attached to one of the theme camps. Magically, our timing and our vantage point turn out to be perfect. The Burn is ready to begin!

***

THUMPADUMP! THUMPADUMP! THUMPADUMP! THUMPADUMP!
THUMPADUMP! THUMPADUMP! THUMPADUMP! THUMPADUMP!

Hundreds of drummers stand at the base of The Man
beating their drums to the rhythm of the universe

THUMPADUMP! THUMPADUMP! THUMPADUMP! THUMPADUMP!
THUMPADUMP! THUMPADUMP! THUMPADUMP! THUMPADUMP!

Hundreds of fire dancers circle The Man
spinning their flames to the drummers' song

THUMPADUMP! THUMPADUMP! THUMPADUMP! THUMPADUMP!
THUMPADUMP! THUMPADUMP! THUMPADUMP! THUMPADUMP!

THUMPADUMP! THUMPADUMP! THUMPADUMP! THUMPADUMP!
THUMPADUMP! THUMPADUMP! THUMPADUMP! THUMPADUMP!

THUMPADUMP! THUMPADUMP! THUMPADUMP! THUMPADUMP!
THUMPADUMP! THUMPADUMP! THUMPADUMP! THUMPADUMP!

Then silence…

BOOM!

Then cheers!

47,000 Burners let out a cry as The Man raises his arms to the heavens and fireworks explode around him. Greens! Golds! Reds! Greens! Blooming flowers. Sparkling waterfalls. Relentless color over and over booming loudly oh so loudly! 47,000 Burners covering their ears and leaning back – watching fire blast into the sky and flicker slowly back to earth.

KA-BOOM!!

Massive explosion! Blinding white light! 47,000 Burners feel the shockwave blast over their bodies. 47,000 Burners feel its heat follow right behind.

Now flames…

…creeping slowly at the bottom of the base but the flames gain momentum as they rise, consuming fuel and gaining strength, up the flames rise to the feet of The Man…

The crowd cheers!

…up up through his legs and into is body and on through to his arms and finally his head, everything now engulfed and raging and burning burning burning until one arm falls…

The crowd cheers again!

… and the other arm falls…

The crowd cheers louder!

…and The Man completely succumbs to the flames and collapses into a burning heap in the very center of Black Rock City!

***

Happy New Year!! Happy New Year!! Happy New Year!! Happy New Year!!

***

The moment The Man falls, Burners jump to their feet and rush to the fire. They press forward, standing as close as they can to the searing hot flames. Some take off their clothes to test their naked skin against the overwhelming heat. Others carry artwork and personal items to hurl into the fire. We see two Burners carrying 20-foot sticks with single marshmallows stuck on the ends running toward the flames.

Other Burners pull away from the fire to start their own celebrations on the Playa. This year it seems like there are fewer mini celebrations taking place around us though. In years past we've seen Satyr dancing, voodoo rituals, Gregorian chanting, and drumming circles form in the wake of the burn. We've seen giant puppets and pirate ships and quiet little art burns appear as well. This year, the crowd seems to prefer the roaming DJs and dance buses over private rituals.

It's hard to tell, though, what's really going on. After the Burn the Playa turns into a swarming messy mass of people with everyone doing whatever it is they think they should be doing on the night of the Burn. But that's ok because that's the way it's supposed to work. As crazy as the Burn is, in the end, it's up to the Burners to decide what to make of their evening.

And this, ultimately, is the maddening beauty of Burning Man.

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Sunrise. Sunday Morning.
Chilly morning.
Last morning at Burning Man.

Do you want to see the Playa one last time before we pack?
No. It's gone now. I want to remember it as it was.

Do you wish we were staying tonight for the Temple Burn[60]?
Yes. The Temple was special to me this year. But I'm ready to go.

Do you know what time it is?
No. Do you have the car keys?

***

A few slow moving, slowly labored hours later, the Subaru is once again loaded and ready for the road. The pack job isn't neat and tidy this time, but then again, neither is the car. The Subaru is buried under a week's worth of playa dust.

As Todd lifts the bikes onto the carrier, a man in his early twenties wanders over and offers his help.

"Did you have a good Burn?" he asks, in a dreamy sort of way.

60 The Temple Burn is intended to offer a less spectacular and more spiritual act of closure to the festival for the remaining festival participants. Our travel demands, unfortunately, prevent us from attending the Temple burns.

"Yes we did. Did you?"

"Ah… yes… this one… this one was really special. This was my third…

"Our fourth…"

"Yeah, right on, so you know. When you go to your first Burn you think nothing will ever top it. It's wild, right? But this one – this one really meant something. Like this time I wasn't just here to pick up girls and have a lot of sex. Do you do that here? Do you know what I mean?"

"We're a couple but yeah, we know what you mean…"

"That's great you come here together… I'm single but for me this time it wasn't about sex and partying and whatever. It was about something more. It took me a few times to figure that out. This time I really I got it…"

I look into the young man's face. His expression is peaceful, his green eyes very loving. I notice he's standing very close to us, like he doesn't want to lose his connection to this moment, to the feelings rolling around inside him.

"I'm glad you found something special here this year."

"Me too. I hope you did as well."

Time now to say our goodbyes to our camp mates. We stand together on the playa, tired and shivering in the chilly air, everyone looking like a mess from last night's celebration. Our goodbyes are brief. Lots of hugs. Lots of I love yous. Lots of thank-yous for sharing a home. Lots of promises to come back together again for a future Burning Man.

It's too overwhelming to say anything more.

We crawl into our car and Todd turns the key. Thankfully, the engine starts. Cars don't always cooperate after sitting idle in the desert.

The young man with the green eyes stops traffic so we can back out of our parking space. A final act of kindness bestowed upon us as we depart. We pull out, wave our goodbyes, and join the stream of traffic crawling toward the exit gates.

***

Exodus.

The aptly named mass departure from Black Rock City.

Moses wandered forty years in the desert before he arrived at the Promised Land. It will take us forty years to move through this traffic and make it to the Interstate.

Officially, Sunday is not the last day of Burning Man. Monday, Labor Day, is the last day of the event. But most Burners leave on Sunday, like we do, because they need time to travel, or they need time to help with the transition back to the "real" world – the "real" world that returns on Tuesday – the "real" world that most of us in our current condition are in no shape to face.

We packed up earlier this year hoping to beat the morning rush, but Exodus is in full swing by the time we leave our campsite. Four lanes of seriously dusty bumper to bumper traffic funneling toward the exit gates. Dozens of Exodus volunteers, faces covered in heavy-duty dust masks, directing the traffic into the lanes.

This mass of traffic moving across the crumbling, well-used playa completely fills the air with playa dust. Exodus looks like a giant yellow poof moving across the desert. Driving in the poof adds to our overall numbness. But somehow, in the tired and dusty blur of it all, we make it through the gates, and onto the highway, and drive through Empire and Gerlach where they've set up Exodus car washes and bike donation drops, and pass through the Highway Patrol traffic check points without incident, and make it back to I-80 and to a gas station with a convenience store – the first grocery store and restaurant and bathroom with running water we've seen in a week.

***

"They've been to that Burning Man. You can tell by their car."

"What's Burning Man?"

"You don't know? It's that thing out in the desert where they – "

I never get to hear what "they" supposedly do. The convenience store clerk stops talking the moment she sees me step out of the ladies room. She refuses to make eye contact while I pay for our sodas. She turns her back to me after I pay.

***

Where are we?!?

First night on the road and we're having intense Burning Man flashbacks. The oncoming traffic looks like art cars drifting across the Playa.

Probably best to pull over now. Find a hotel room. Take a hot shower. Sleep in a bed.

***

"Oh! Were you at Burning Man?"

"Yes…"

"I thought so from the look of your car. Did you have a good time? I heard there was a big dust storm."

"Yes… where did you hear that?"

"On the news. And in the newspaper. See. They run photos in our paper."

The hotel clerk shows me a two-page, full-color photo spread from his Sunday newspaper. It's a nice spread. Tame. Pretty.

"That's cool. Have you ever gone?"

"No, but I'd like to. If I could ever save up enough money and find someone willing to cover my shifts…"

His thoughts drift as he stares at our car through the lobby window.

***

Hot shower.
Clean sheets.
Cable Television.

CNN headline news:
"John McCain announces Sarah Palin as his vice presidential running mate."
"Despite massive dust storms, Burning Man bonfire goes off without a hitch."

***

Late in the afternoon on the second day of driving, we pull back into our driveway. The house is quiet, the neighborhood static. Everything feels hazy and subdued.

We open the door and our big dogs greet us with wagging tails, paws in the air, and big wet noses pressing against our cheeks. They are a fuzzy blur.

Our house sitters welcome us home too. They took good care of the place. No problems. No concerns. I think. They're talking and moving so slowly I'm finding it difficult to follow their stories.

I need sleep. . .

Moving like zombies, we pull everything out of the car and dump it in our staging room. Afterwards, we crawl into our bedroom collapse on the bed. The dogs pile in around us.

Eyes closed, I reach out and pet Jax' and Josie's ears. So soft. So warm. So strange.

Guess what, puppies? We just came back from Burning Man. It was a grand adventure. . . but I'll have to tell you all about it later. . . after I rest. . . and I find the right words and figure out what to say. . .

PLATE 72 ©Russell Atkinson

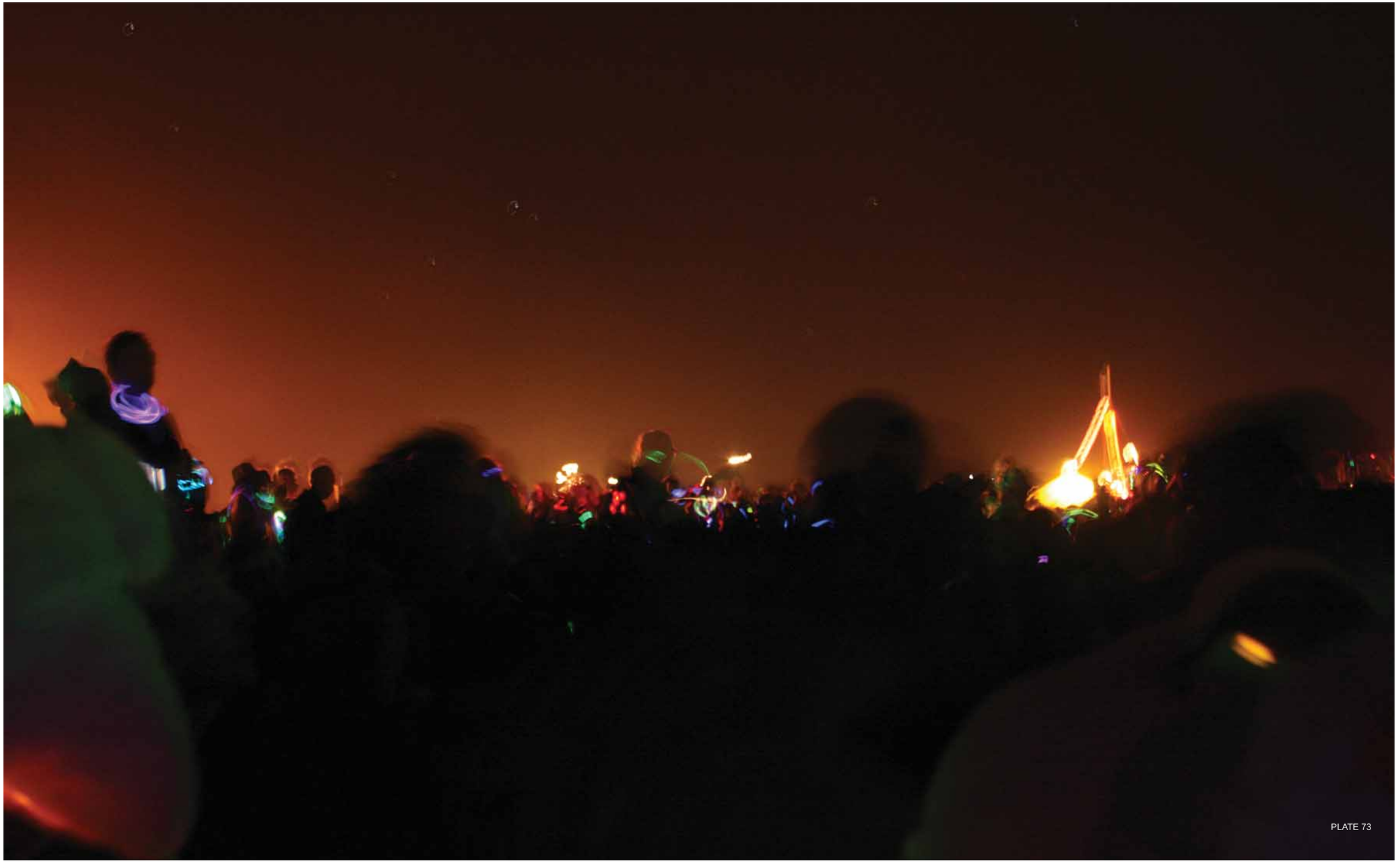

PLATE 73

PLATE 74

PLATE 75

PLATE 76

PLATE77 montage

PLATE 78

PLATE 79 ©Russell Atkinson

PLATE 80

PLATE 81

PLATE 82

PLATE 83 montage

PLATE 84 montage

PLATE 85 montage

PLATE 86

PLATE 87

Epilogue

Two days later…

Flying high!
and keeping the feeling alive
by sharing our stories
and the photos we took
with anyone who asks
"How was your trip?"

**

Two weeks later…

My Burning Man high is replaced with a passive state of limbo. I no longer want to think or feel or move, and I don't care because I don't want to. In this limbo I lose all sense of clarity and purpose. Nothing is left. Everything is gone. There's nothing more I can do.

I am physically and mentally and creatively exhausted.

This is my comedown crash.

I go to work but work doesn't help. The people there feel distant and dull and look too unnatural sitting in front of their computers and talking on their cell phones to break through my mood. Returning to my daily routine doesn't help either. Chores feel tedious

and irrelevant, and they just aren't engaging enough to pull me back into the land of the living and evaporate my comedown daze.

Worst of all, I am bored – *so bored* – with everything. But I am too tired and too apathetic to do anything about it. Instead, I wallow around in a sorry existential state, where the biggest emotion I manage to express is a sigh at my dull life and the no-longer-with-me chaos of the desert.

The dullness is surprisingly persistent. I try to fight it by writing in my journal, but I can't write. Thoughts won't hold still. Words refuse to come together. Emotions won't come out and play. It's like I can't access the part of my brain I need to access to be able to reconnect. It shut itself down and ran away.

I can't bear to pick up my camera either. I haven't been able to touch it since the climax of the Burn, and just the thought of taking photographs now completely overwhelms me. My head is too full of images to add any more, and too full of visual experiences to process the emotions that go with them[61]. I am at image overload and my body knows it. This is creative flight – not creative fight[62].

61 Heidegger (1971) identifies two distinct experiences related to seeing and processing visual information – the external engagement of the material nature of images and art and the internal processing of the aesthetic experiences the images and art evoke. He describes this duality as engagement with the thingly nature of art (the material aspects of the work of art) and the work (the aesthetic experiences) art provides. Taking into account this dual nature perspective suggests the viewer must be able recognize and process both the thingly nature and the work nature of art in order to adequately process and find meaning in the visual experience.

62 However, Burning Man is such a concentrated, chaotic, and emotionally saturating experience, many Burners, including me, find it mentally and emotionally impossible to process their Burning Man experiences, at least with any depth or clarity, until well after the festival ends. Burners refer to the time needed to emotionally "unpack" Burning Man as Decompression. Decompression, in effect, is reverse culture shock – a re-entry phenomena described as the reacculturation or readjustment period for transitioning back into one's home environment after living or working abroad (Martin, 1984). Decompression periods vary, but two months processing time is average, as reflected by the appearance of Decompression reunion events about two months after Burning Man ends. Decompression activities provide Burners with a strong sense of closure by giving Burners a final taste of Burning Man magic, and renewal by encouraging participants to switch their thinking from past burns to future burns. The end of Decompression marks the beginning of the preparation process for the next Burning Man cycle.

To cope with the overload I latch on to the only comforting thought I can find: I've been messed up like this before. Three times. Each time after I return from Burning Man.

Each time I return from the desert I fall into this crippling state of non-being. Knowing this does nothing to abate the numbness – everything remains dull and indifferent, infinite and oblique – but recognizing this is a repeat state of being helps. It gives me a rational thought to cling to while my emotions and fatigue try to work themselves out.

This little bit of rationality also reminds me this mood will pass. It always does once I have rested and recovered and restored my energy – and I am ready to acknowledge what else I know lies at the bottom of this mood – the thing I don't want to say out loud because it makes me sad – a simple truth that feels so much more than that – the inevitable truth I want so badly to avoid but know I can't – the truth that this mood means I am at the end – the real ending – of Burning Man.

Burning Man is over this year.

I know it's true.

I just don't want it to be…[63]

***

63 My re-entry experiences mirror the emotional experiences D.M. Warren and Sonia Patten (1981) equate with re-entry, especially feeling disoriented and numb as a response to the anxiety, stress, and grief felt over having to leave a second culture and return home. Emotional re-entry varies for the larger Burner population, but the Decompression period on the whole, is notably more quiet, asocial, and non-productive than any other period in the festival's cycle. For me, re-entry explains my own lack of motivation for taking photographs or writing during this period, and why out of the millions of Burning Man images in electronic circulation there are so very few stories or images depicting Exodus, driving home, and unpacking . The period after The Burn, or The Temple Burn if viewed, is a collective dead zone.

Two months later…

The dullness passes and I find myself sitting in quiet spaces thinking about the Playa.

Most of these thoughts are happy thoughts, and once I'm lost inside these thoughts I float about, deeply content, inside my desert reflection.

But some thoughts are more complex and challenging to engage. These are the big thoughts, the if/then thoughts, the thoughts that wrap themselves around the base of The Man and stare up at the flames and suggest big questions like "What really happened to me in the desert?"

And "Where, now, do I go from here?"

And "What, if anything, does all of this mean?"

The part of me asking these questions isn't fully satisfied with me in the desert, and wishes my desert memories were somehow different – better – better memories for a better story – a story where I say and do more with the desert or give myself over to the city more freely and in the process come to embody every one of Burning Man's ideals – to the extreme – so upon my return from the desert I emerge, fully formed, as a perfect counter-culture creature with answers.

Then I would have a different story to tell about Burning Man – a defining story where I become deeply spiritual and express, with great eloquence, the sacred magnitude of my desert-changing experience.

And then my story could be profoundly *out there* – an over-the-top-in-your-face epic adventure Hunter S. Thompson-style that conveys to you the cultural significance of Black Rock City in a single gonzo journalistic breath[64]!

Yes! Thompson! Now there's a man who knew how to pack for the desert. Car rental. Tape recorder. Hawaiian shirts. Suitcase full of drugs. Three hundred bucks tops. Not a lot in common with the clear tub, leave no trace approach happening in my staging room, except, perhaps, our shared insistence for an ample supply of grapefruit…

But he is the mythic precedent for post 1960s, San Francisco-fed, counter-culture desert adventures, so I can't help but compare my desert story to his oh so savage journey, even though *Fear and Loathing* was written almost forty years ago!

Forty years!!

Forty years since Thompson climbed a hill outside Vegas and wrote:

> Strange memories on this nervous night in Las Vegas. Five years later? Six? It seems like a lifetime, or at least a Main Era – the kind of peak that never comes again. San Francisco in the middle sixties was a very special time and place to be a part of. Maybe it *meant something*. Maybe not, in the long run…but no explanation, no mix of words or music or memories can touch that sense of knowing that you were there and alive in that corner of time and the world. Whatever it meant….

63 I am, of course, referencing *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*, the 1972 novel written by Hunter S. Thompson, and illustrated by Ralph Steadman. I am also referencing "gonzo journalism," the term Thompson used to describe his own highly subjective writing style.

There was madness in any direction, at any hour. If not across the Bay, then up the Golden Gate or down 101 to Los Altos or La Honda…You could strike sparks anywhere. There was a fantastic universal sense that whatever we were doing was right, that we were winning….

And that, I think, was the handle – that sense of inevitable victory over the forces of Old and Evil. Not in any mean or military sense; we didn't need that. Our energy would simply *prevail*. There was no point in fighting – on our side or theirs. We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave….

So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high-water mark – that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back[65].

I love that passage – it's Thompson at his finest – but also because his sadness shows he did not know, could not know, forty years ago, looking over that dry plain where the water once rose, a new kind of energy would roll back in and tease the high water mark the sixties left behind.

Time marches on. Energies return. And Burning Man appears as a new cultural wave.

In my dreams I am crazy and cool like the Gonzo Man, like what I think I should be if I am running around in the desert, celebrating life and thinking deep thoughts about the world. But I know Burning Man is a different cultural wave flowing in a different ideological direction so my story can't be Thompson's story, or the story of any other

65 This passage is an excerpt from Thompson's famous "wave speech" which appears in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* at the end of chapter eight.

Dadaist, Surrealist, Hippy, Prankster, Cacophonist, Shaman, or Beat from the past inspiring this new experience. Their presence is felt as part of the mix, but they are not *it*, whatever *it* means…

So two months later, I sit quietly and I reflect, and I decide to write my own desert story to sort out what kind of experience this new peak is, and what this new peak experience[66] ultimately means to me.

***

Two hundred pages later…

My desert story begins to take shape, and I discover I am learning lots – so much more than I imagined I would –

about myself
and deserts
and making and consuming art on a very big scale[67].

I realize, too, I am only just beginning to understand the layers of experiences that make up Burning Man, and why these complexities draw me back to Black Rock City over and over again.

66 My use of "peak experience" is informed by Maslow's (1959, 1961, 1976) conceptualization of the phrase, which he describes as a unique and transcendental moments where positive conditions create environments where people experience intense happiness, feelings of completeness, a strong sense of connection with the world beyond the self, a heightened sense of awareness, a strong sense of goodness in the world, and a willingness to be open and sharing with the world and those around them. In this conceptualization, peak experiences are important because they allow people to discover new knowledge about the world and themselves, a learning process which is also conducive to creative exploration, problem-solving, and self-actualization.

67 For this writing project I drew upon written field notes, photographic field notes, in situ ethnographic interviews, and hundreds of Burning Man stories collected from a variety of media sources to craft my narrative. For a detailed discussion of my complete writing as inquiry research method, see Part 2.

What I am discovering, though, brings me joy – intensely energizing and infatuating joy – and feelings of gratitude for having had the opportunity to participate in this wonderfully weird and wildly exhilarating social experiment.

So what am I learning about Burning Man by writing through the joy?

Writing about Burning Man leads me to a rather obvious and undeniable conclusion: Burning Man is Burning Man. It is its own thing.

It is incredibly resistant to categorization.
It doesn't like to be contained.
It changes over time.
It is annoying.
It is a love affair.

Writing about Burning Man also helps me understand Burning Man is so much *more* – a beautifully complex and introspective experience based on the process of transforming desert space into a desert place, a process manifesting in the belief that "radical self expression and radical self reliance" enacted within the context of the desert has the potential to disrupt and inform our social selves in very good and very useful ways. The Burning Man Festival reifies all of our cultural longings and misgivings about the desert, while using the desert as a "cultural wilderness"[68] to entice its participants to be receptive to unprecedented and unbridled social and aesthetic exploration.

68 I am referencing Casey's (1993) concept of "cultural wilderness," a term he coined to describe how wilderness sites are cultural constructions (in that specific cultures determine what environments they consider representative of "civilization" and what environments they consider representative of "wilderness") and the process by which sites labeled as "wilderness" are appropriated by communities and used as sites for exploring community values and community identities. Casey argues wilderness sites work as cultural laboratories because the "wild" elements these sites are intrinsically understood as "wild" by participants, thus providing a needed point of cultural contrast for exploring new and intense social activities.

This exploration, though, isn't T.A.Z. anarchy[69] or sacred communitas[70] – the oppositional ideological extremes Western thinkers tend to default to when asked to envision counter-culture and social experimentation – because Burning Man isn't about absolute personal freedom or civic utopia, at least not fully. These pursuits are there as part of the Burning Man mix, but neither truly explains or represents Burning Man's end game – the impetus – the driving heart beat of the event – namely the culling of collective energy dedicated to the creation and maintenance of a provisional city.

Black Rock City – beautifully temporal yet surprisingly real. Materially real. Palpably real. A realness that exists because Burners decide to make it real. Black Rock City materializes in the desert because Burners commit time, and labor, and materials to its construction, and then commit time, and labor, and materials to its maintenance. Burners provide the fuel to make their city burn.

And it's this burning labor of love that releases the potential for communitas resting inside Burning Man's participation commandments – not as deliberate or accidental unity[71]– but in a way more akin to acting out of respect and duty – or what Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito refers to as communitas emerging from the belief that

69 Burning Man is often naively thought of as an example of Hakim Bey's (2003) concept of a Temporary Autonomous Zone (T.A.Z.), an anarchist concept of public space where actors engage in aesthetic acts of "poetic terrorism" as a smart but disruptive form of social commentary and evasion of social control. The Burning Man Organization, however, has publically stated the festival is not a T.A.Z. as a whole (Doherty, 2004), and instead adamantly positions the event as a pro-community social experiment (Burning Man, 2009).

70 The concept of communitas – intensely unifying community spirit – as used here is most closely linked to the work of Victor Turner (1969) whose ethnographic research into the anthropology of religion made the concept of communitas a regular concept for humanistic and other social and cultural-based researchers. In Turner's conception of communitas, there are three main types 1. Existential or spontaneous – a transient and personal experience of connection; 2. Normative communitas – which is formally organized communitas situations; and 3. Ideological communitas – the basis for utopian social models. In all three versions, communitas refers to a state of being brought about the structural qualities of social institutions which make communitas happen. Communitas, in this context, is not about individuals or an individual's status. Instead, in communitas, status is suspended, in exchange for belonging to a homogenized group (Myerhoff, 1975)

community involvement is gift to be given, or a debt to be paid, in service to another, but in remembrance of the alterity of ourselves[72].

To go to Burning Man, then, and see only the city's realness – its manifested material state –would be to miss most of the meaning Burners imbue into their city. Burners build amazing things, but they are not solely committing their energy to the creation of a specific product – a representative expression of communitas. The city is there for everyone to touch and see, but the bulk of the magic lies in the aesthetic and social activities guiding its creation, and the promise that these activities, and then by extension the products they produce, will provide some sort of otherworldly experiential conduit leading to another kind of real – an even more desired real – *an authentic reality of being*[73].

71 Myerhoff (1975) suggests communities need to strike a balance between structural organization, where organizational rules ensure group needs are met, and ecstasy, where group members are temporarily freed from the restrictions of group rules, in order to create space for communitas to occur. However, because social groups need both organization and ecstasy, she further contends that communitas, by its very nature, cannot be sustained or be made into a permanent state of communal being. Instead, she suggests communitas is intermittent and occurs as either moments of deliberate communitas – where social activities are planned in order to induce a communitas state, or as accidental communitas – where spontaneous gatherings trip the group members into a communitas state. Burning Man, however, is simultaneously structured and spontaneous, and the event encourages and accounts for both elements concurrently in its organizational structure, so arguably it does not neatly fit into either categorization. As such, Burning Man suggests communitas is a more complex and evolutionary structural practice than Myerhoff's binary model addresses. Given that Myerhoff's example for accidental communitas is the 1969 Woodstock Festival, and that Burning Man is a counter-culture event developed in the American counter-culture knowledge of a post-Woodstock era by organizers who experienced the limitations of accidental communitas Myerhoff describes, Burning Man's evolution beyond the binary should also be considered intentional, and that intentionality taken into account.

72 Esposito (2010) challenges the binary assumptions built into Western concepts of communitas by suggesting the origins of communitas lie in social obligation, not transcendence. Communitas, therefore, is not a temporary state of being representing public over private or social over individual, but a chosen obligation to support one's community because the community has value and is needed for survival. He further contends too much communitas, or group belonging and thinking, is detrimental to the community, so immunitas, or individuality, is still needed within a community to keep the group from devolving, and to keep its members from forgetting why their community is fundamentally important to them.

73 My use of the term authenticity in this context reflects Martin Buber concept "being," where "being" is not about individual feelings or pursuing self-actualization, but a willingness to be in genuine communication moment with another human being, where genuine communication reflects an understanding of the complexities of communication, including understanding of the historical moment, allowing monologues, and engaging in and allowing dialogue to emerge appropriately and in the "concrete moments of life." (Arnett & Arneson, 1999).

I marvel at Burning Man's ability to induce civic commitment by suggesting civic engagement leads to authenticity. The Western world tends to be skeptical of these kinds of promises, believing authentic experiences are elusive and rare and any attempt to construct "authenticity" would, by the very effort, rob the experience of the authentic qualities we seek[74].

> *"Authenticity cannot be contrived," we say. "Authenticity must emerge, unfettered and on its own, to be genuine and real."*
>
> *Or if we're extremely cynical we say, "Why put so much effort into what will ultimately be a very calculated path to disenchantment?"*

From this authenticity-begets-authenticity point of view, building a city to facilitate authentic experiences sounds absurd. *How could anything as planned as Burning Man be genuine enough to elicit authentic experiences?* And yet, year after year, Burning Man offers structured civic duty as an invitation – a catalyst – a focusing point – a conduit – into something more – and year after year Burners flock to the desert to take up the challenge and see where *civility*[75] ultimately takes them.

> *While writing this, dust from the playa swirls inside my mind and I imagine myself walking across the dry, cracked desert with clouds of silky white playa dust rising up in billowing spires with each footstep I take. I feel myself drifting into the playa – moving slowly but with intent*

74 For contextualized examples of this argument, see the previously discussed references of Turner (1969) and Myerhoff (1975).

75 My use of the term "civility" here is twofold. First, I am using "civility" to mean civic discourse in the vernacular sense – or public speaking performed by every day rhetoricians "called to the platform as citizens of a community" (Olson & Goodnight, 2004) to deliberate over "social, political, and cultural issues" (Hauser, 1999). Second, I am using "civility" to mean an approach to interpersonal dialog which embraces respectful communication practices, as opposed to self-interest or cynicism (Arnett & Arneson, 1999).

– and fully aware of the moments when my feet touch the ground and sink into the soft dusty soil and rise back up and move me forward step by step into the desiccating heartbeat of the great dry lake.

And as I walk I imagine myself thinking about strawberries and ecstasy and the way my sarong wraps itself around my legs and slips down around my hips – and I drift deeper into thinking about the pleasure of kissing and the pleasure of being – and I find myself wondering… is this the kind of transcendence I seek?

"Maybe…" says the Burning Man voice inside my head, "…if you have someone to share it with…"

With civility as the celebrated conduit to authentic experiences, Burning Man concepts of authenticity present, inherently, as shared community experiences and not individualistic pursuits. Authenticity means contributing to the community and engaging in actions which bring Burners closer together. *And In closeness* – homilizes Burning Man – *we find the best opportunities for achieving our version of attainment, namely comfort and reprieve from the merciless misery of present-day, isolating, suburban ennui*[76].

76 My summation of Burner attainment is based on language choices contained in Larry Harvey's previously cited *La Vie Bohéme – A History of Burning Man* manifesto as well as consideration for the idea of the "inoperative community" where Nancy's (1991) claims that "gravest and most painful testimony of the modern world, the one that possibly involves all other testimonies to which this epoch must answer… is the testimony of the dissolution, the dislocation, or the conflagration of community" and that communism, in its community sense, "stands as an emblem of the desire to discover or rediscover a place of community at once beyond social divisions and beyond subordination to technopolitical dominion, and thereby beyond such wasting away of liberty, of speech, or of simple happiness as comes about whenever these become subjugated to the exclusive order of privatization; and finally… a place from which to surmount the unraveling that occurs with the death of each one of us – that death that, when no longer anything more than death of the individual, carries an unbearable burden and collapses into insignificance" (p. 1) echo Burning Man's charter ideas.

The possibility of communal attainment, I believe, is what truly captures the imagination of Burners and inspires them to build Black Rock City over and over again. It is the hook that keeps Burning Man counter-culturally relevant – inspirationally strong – and its pursuit gives Burning Man its distinctly desert aesthetic and social flair.

Happy New Year! Happy New Year! Happy New Year! Happy New Year!

Attainment makes Burning Man resonate. Attainment turns Burning Man into something *more*. HOWEVER, like most paths leading to something *more*, there is a test – a catch – a trial – a cost – to achieving communal attainment via Burning Man. For Burners, dues come in the form of active participation – real labor – given in service of the Burning Man community.

At Burning Man, it is not enough to think good thoughts or believe somehow in the symbolic rebirth of The Man or claim ideological ownership in any other religious, pseudo-religious, political, or aesthetic belief toting a connection to community. All ideologies are welcome in the desert, but passive participation – showing up without contributing – is a sin. Labor is too necessary to tolerate mooching.

Labor makes the city appear in the desert and keep it from being destroyed by nature. Labor transforms raw materials into great works of public art. Labor turns makeshift camps into majestic second homes.

Labor, in fact, is so important to the Burning Man community it operates as the measure by which commitment is assessed in Black Rock City. The bankrupt actions of the lazies – disparaged as yuppies and voyeurs and frat boys and wanna-bes – who show up at the end of the week in rented RVs and without costumes and only want to party and leer and

brag about the desert are taunted by Burners – *"This is not your vacation!"* they cry. *"This is not your Disneyland!"* – while everything built and displayed and communally engaged is complimented for being true to the spirit of Burning Man[77].

Labor is elevated and celebrated. And Burners fight when labor is jeopardized, especially when constant growing pains threaten to destroy their ability to create and share and enjoy the fruits of each other's labor.

> *Burning Man is getting too big. Burning Man is too main stream. Burning Man has too many rules. Burning Man has too many novices.*
>
> *Keep it special! Keep it small! Keep it real! Keep it ours!!*
>
> *Don't let us destroy our home!!*

And yet, despite this heartfelt disdain for uncommitted passivity, and the real threats growth and change present to Burning Man, Burners continue to find ways to labor in service of the community they love. Through trial and error and discovery and refinement, Burners continue to evolve from cacophony artists engaging in random acts of social disruption into coordinated citizens practicing mindful activities designed to bring them closer to each other.

These coordinated activities are surprisingly sophisticated and fall beautifully into practical clusters – clusters I felt but did not fully see until I sat down and took the time to write

77 "Disneyland" is a referent often used by Burners to illustrate the antithesis of what they believe the Burning Man experience represents and how Burning Man should be engaged. "Yuppie," "voyeur," "frat-boy," and "wanna-be" are the most common derogatory labels applied to festival attendees who show up for the party or the thrill without embracing Burning Man's active participation mandates. Conversely, Burners are quick to give complimentary support to those demonstrating idealized Burning Man behaviors. Complements are given verbally and through the exchange of gifts – usually on the spot and in the moment of enjoyment.

and write and edit and rewrite and ponder my photographs and ask and think – clusters that follow the natural progression of the festival – the labor arc for building a city – not as singular moments or singular acts but as processional moments of ***synchronized labor*** manifesting in the early stages as

Preparation

> the elaborate, thought-provoking, initiation period designed to challenge perceptions of space and time and conceptions of life and living
>
> the more-than-packing phase that's not so much about suitcases and duffle bags as it is about making ideological connections
>
> the stage of the game when Burning Man shares its unique ideas about community and art and social responsibly and Burners – past and potential – explore these ideas to see if they inspire
>
> *a spark*
>
> *a connection*
>
> *a creative fit*

but this is not recruitment – no – recruitment doesn't conceptually fit – this is an invitation – an open invitation – to dance and play with the minds of others

after the invite, if the connection is made, preparation morphs – evolves – into a daydreaming, brainstorming, conceptualizing phase where Burners seek each

other out to learn more and generate ideas for building! building! building! camps and costumes and all kinds of art

meeting in joy and sharing stories for inspiration

while embracing and elevating and celebrating their creative processes for planning and developing and executing their own ideas[78] for contributing to their community

BUT NOT IN ISOLATION!

this is the time for pooling skills and talents and creative identities – the time to unite artists and engineers and chefs and architects – and the time to perform these identities to their fullest!

preparation is embodying the skills needed to produce something real – visible, touchable, tangible – to represent the ideologies in play

This is a quest! In honor and glory! Together, let's make this happen!

and in honor and glory, preparation morphs a final time – this time into an orchestrated effort to collect all of the raw materials needed for production – and to become intimately familiar with all of the equipment and art supplies

78 This initial brainstorming phase is representative of creative problem-solving activities occurring in the first three of Guilford's (1950) classic four-stage model of the creative process, which breaks down creative problem solving practices into the following periods: 1. Preparation, or identifying the problem; 2. Incubation, contemplation of the problem; 3. Inspiration, or finding a solution; and 4. Verification, or testing the solution to the problem. These problem-solving activities, however, are notably couched within the framework of humane creativity, defined by Aleinikov (1999) as "individual/social self-actualizing expansion through production of newness in the domain of humanity" and includes "any creative activity that promotes humane values and goals, humane communication and means, and humane products and processes" (p. 837).

that have been collected – with the understanding that each piece of raw material represents a resource for the quest – and for the survival – of the desert community

only after all this does preparation culminate into actual packing – the organizing and stowing of all the gear and preparing the load for the road – and only after travel turns into arrival does preparation transition into another kind of synchronized labor, the labor of labor –

Manifestation

Reification!

Turning ideas into a material reality.

This is a necessary set of collaborative actions because without physical manifestation Burning Man would remain a dream lodged in the minds of dreamers…

…and ideas locked inside the minds of their conceivers benefit no one, except perhaps the individual thinker who can at least experience the thrill of thinking. But self-satisfaction is not what Burning Man is about so down with mental masturbation and private pleasures! It's time to bring Burning Man out into the open

so everyone can see it!
and believe it!
or question it!
to live it!

Manifestation is all about enabling display, and working together to bring conceptual ideas beyond the consumption of a single thinker and into a collective material plain.

Manifestation, however, cannot occur if there is no space for construction to take place. Construction space is oh so necessary and public construction space even more so because public space means accessible space – at least so much more than private spaces usually provide – and accessible space is oh so vital because accessible space means maximized viewing and maximized viewing must occur for reification to work – as social bonding – especially the social bonding called community-building Burning Man pursues[79].

Public manifestation is Burning Man's replacement for anti-social practices – those nasty late capitalistic practices leading to individual ownership and personal viewing. Manifestation is the catalyst for cultivating civic interaction out in the open – for everyone to see – and restoring community to the public sphere[80].

No private ownership! No private viewing!
Public display! Public display!

79 I am referencing Fleming's (2007) idea of a "vesting process" for public spaces (p. 14) to describe how social interactions occurring in and around architectural design elements give a place its emotional meaning versus the planning and development of the actual physical elements of the public space or the public space in and of itself.

80 The Burning Man Organization's conceptualization of the term "public" coincides with well-established political definitions of "public space" and "private space," especially the bourgeois-society work of Habermas' (1991) who describes the "private sphere" as individual or familial activities occurring inside personal, residential dwellings and away from social scrutiny, and the "public sphere" as business or community-based activities occurring in shared institutional areas and in view of colleagues and neighbors. Burning Man's over arching concept of public responsibility, however, is less Habermasian, and therefore less bourgeois-focused, and more akin with Dewey's (1954) line between public and private which he draws on the basis of extent and scope of consequences of actions which are important enough to warrant control, and his belief that when these consequences are "intellectually and emotionally appreciated" by conscientious individuals, a shared interest is generated and their interconnected behavior transformed (p. 27).

Public manifestation succeeds best when Burners believe they have space – open space – to do their work and the powers-that-be do their work to ensure public spaces remain public spaces where manifestation can occur. Manifestation demands collaboration – between citizens working together to build their ideas – and between city planners and the citizen laborers they are empowered to serve.

When collaborate communication practices are all in place, manifestation activities not only build the city, they also provide the physical materials for transitioning Burners yet again into another kind of synchronized labor, the labor of public discourse, openly celebrated as –

Celebration

A time for Burners to play with all the things that they made! And I do mean "play!"

'Cause this ain't your momma's passive and proper looky-look trip to the fancy art museum – oh no!

Or your daddy's best-foot-forward neat-and-tidy trip to see the new town monument in the old town square – no way!

This is our time to touch and taste – get naked and laugh – and climb all over all our shit!

And this is our time to eat together and smoke a bowl and kiss a stranger and drop a tab and find a nice place to cuddle and screw!

'Cause this is our time to connect… really connect… more deeply than you know… 'cause this is our time to talk about things…important things… like being together, here, in the desert, with all the beautiful things we've made…

Celebration is free play– a silly and loose and chaotic performance – an aesthetic and social improvisational release[81]. Celebration is immediate, and intimate, and interaction-based. But if one looks and listens carefully to the conversations happening inside the improvisation, celebration reveals play has a purpose – a dialogic purpose – purposeful communal assessment and assent.

In the public spaces of Burning Man, material expression and consumption runs free. These actions, however, are not completely absent of criteria or regulation. Burning Man purports unbridled creativity, but the underlying ideologies of the event influence and constrain the ways manifestations appear and engage the audience. These criteria are never explicitly outlined, but the organizational ideologies are known, so the criteria are known, as demonstrated by the assessments contained in Burner conversations.

Aesthetic and social assessments revolve around Burners' specific value system in which play – and surprise, juxtaposition, appropriation, the engagement of multiple senses, bending and pushing on formal design elements, the inclusion of interactive components, and evoking a feeling of carnival – are all elevated.

81 Stephen Nachmanovitch (1991) describes free play as a sophisticated form of improvisation where individuals tap into social patterns of flux while using both their practiced skills and openness with the moment to elevate the aesthetic experience and feelings of connection with those sharing the improvisational experience provides. The most successful improvisational moments combine practice and technique with surrender.

And these criteria speak to an even larger aesthetic ideology – that good art is public art and public art speaks to and from the culture in which it is conceived[82].

The end result is that Burners carry with them an expectation that public art at Burning Man will demonstrate smart, elevated, and insightful cultural reflection in its display – and through this display the art will spark conversations – inspire storytelling – and initiate intimate conversations between Burners…

That was incredible! Have you seen it?
That was lame! They fell short!
What does it say? What does it mean?
Have you tried it for yourself?

…which ultimately operate as intense dialogic moments, often in the form of good old-fashioned civic debate.

This reification of cultural reflection and mandated display of contemplation is a labor-driven and extended interpretation of cacophony – that ever-present and underlying form of public expression which uses material presence to disrupt and surprise and draw attention to social attitudes or conditions often overlooked or invisibly normalized.

82 This approach to aesthetic and social critique demonstrates Bourdieu's (1993) argument that art is created within a field of cultural production in which a "work of art is an object which exists as such only by virtue of the (collective) belief which knows and acknowledges it as a work of art" (p. 35). According to Bourdieu, evaluating art from within this cultural frame work eliminates the "usual dilemmas" of evaluating the individual parts of the work of art to find its meaning and/or looking externally into the larger context of social conditions to find meaning. This shift in critical perspective encourages the viewer to evaluate the material production of the work of art in relation to its symbolic production – or in simpler terms – it allows the viewer to form a critique art based on the art's perceived value to the community in which it is produced.

But the greater implication of celebration is, in effect, asking materiality to operate as ***visual telos***[83] – a specific kind of rhetorical message – a visual statement offered to the public as evidence of the creators' ethical or virtuous thinking.

In the case of Burning Man, visual telos is evidence of ethical and virtuous thinking in service to community.

And if the visual evidence – the public art, the theme camps, the costumes – doesn't live up to that expectation, Burners might just burn it down early, or move it or shift it, or call out the posers, or ignore it completely because celebration is an exchange, and visible on both sides of the debate[84].

'Cause this ain't your momma's passive and proper looky-look trip to the fancy art museum…

Or your daddy's best-foot-forward neat-and-tidy trip to see the new town monument in the old town square…

83 I am drawing on a critical rhetorical understanding of the Greek work telos, which Ono and Sloop (1992) explain as the moment when "pen is put to paper purposefully, when ideas become words and when will becomes action" (p. 48). I extend this understanding to include when public art is put on public display, for this is the moment when art moves from the purview and understanding of the artist/creator, and into a dialogic space for evaluation and debate. Likewise, I extend Ono and Sloop's argument that in recognition of telos, the rhetorical critic must examine rhetorical actions in situ – in the context in which they are expressed and engaged – in order to understand more fully rhetorical implications, by arguing critiques of public art must also examine works of art in their full context, which includes the often overlooked processes for producing art and consuming art, and not just the material stage of public presentation which is most often the sole focus of public art based rhetorical criticism.

84 I believe visual telos best describes the communication phenomenon that allows Burners to feel compelled to physically engage the public art at the Burning Man festival. In effect, the works of art are visual arguments, and so it stands to reason visual arguments require and allow for visual counter arguments in the form of material manipulation to occur. To illustrate, I suggest a perceived lack of telos marked The Man as a target for Addis' prankster act, and explains the extensive debate about authenticity and spectacle which followed in the wake of the premature burn. For years Burners had been grumbling about a diminishing authenticity of the Burn. Addis' actions, however, brought the discussion into the immediate and material plain.

By engaging visual telos, Burners solidify their identities as citizens of Black Rock City. And with membership, Burners again gain access to a another stage of labor – a regenerative stage couched in the transcendent experiences of

Transformation and Continuation

Jamming[85] *now!*
Feeling the flow[86]*!*
Touching apogee!

YESSSSSS!!!!!!!!!!!

Reached the peak.
Over the top.
Coming back down.
Yes….

But feeling better…so much better… than when it all began…

85 Eric Eisenberg (1990) appropriates the musical concept of "jamming" to celebrate a feeling of "closeness that can arise through coordinated action" (p. 139) He further describes jamming as "nondisclosive but fulfilling" and an "ecstatic way of balancing autonomy and interdependence in organizing" (p. 139). While Eisenberg uses jamming to explain communication events occurring in organizational settings, I extend jamming to include the performative acts of synchronized labor occurring in spontaneous clusters across the Playa throughout the Burning Man festival, but particularly on the night of the Burn, when the citizens of Black Rock City are most open and receptive to surrendering to the moment and surrendering to play.

86 This is a direct reference to Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) concept of "flow," which she describes as joy and creativity found in the process of total involvement with life. She contends happiness and the ability to experience optimal (peak) experiences are culturally bound, and that some communities and cultures, through luck and/or planning, create contexts in which flow is "relatively easy to achieve" (p. 79). A community, she argues, can build "flow" into its lifestyle. And when a culture succeeds in matching the skills of its population to the goals of the community, members are able to experience flow with unusual frequency, and with an emotional framing resembling play. I content Burning Man is a community system extremely adept and cultivating the conditions for its participants to experience flow, within the counter-culture context of the contemporary culture of the United States.

Burners build a city and fill it full of amazing things. And in the process of building and critiquing what they built, things click, connections are made, and in the end all the effort feels incredibly worthwhile[87].

Labor finds meaning.

Satiation and satisfaction in a job well-done.

> *We succeeded with our work and the payoff is good! So good! Better than we imagined it would be! So let's dive back in and start all over and get ready to do it again next year!!*

Burning Man gives its Burners a labor high – a powerful sensation of reaching and achieving and stepping beyond the limitations of self – and the payoff provides the motivation for the labor to continue.

> *We're gonna get our fix – a bigger and better fix – again next year! 'Cause we're gonna come back with bigger ideas and better plans than years before!*

87 In the context of Burning Man, labor has both a visual component and verbal component. The visual component is reflected in the materiality of the physical objects Burners produce. The verbal component manifests in storytelling and public debate, the two main approaches for exchanging information and providing inspiration within a telos-centered critique. These two components are important for activating what Goodall and Kellett (2004) refer to as "dialogic moments," where dialog is an organizing and symbolic "form of communication that most readily enables people to engage in systematic questioning that leads to understanding that, in turn, leads to more and richer choices about communication" (p. 163). Goodall and Kellett suggest three dialectical tensions create "the points of entry into, shape the experience of, and provide ways of exiting and learning from the peak experience we know as human dialog" and identify these tensions as 1. *ethos and apotelesma* – getting into the spirit and knowing you have been there; 2. *techne and mysterion* – skillfully building and surrendering to the mystery of dialog; and 3. *paignion and vathis* – being mindlessly playful and open to the deeply profound (p. 163-164). I contend synchronized labor provides a particularly strong organizational context where visual and verbal dialog work in tandem as a symbolically cultivated conduit to peak experiences – and thereby enhance feelings of closeness that lend themselves to communal bonding and community formation. By amplifying the dialectical tensions found in each pathway to peak experiences, the Burning Man culture successfully cultivates flow.

This is labor in the apex of communal love.

What strikes me as truly unique and generous about the Burning Man high, though, is not the willingness of Burners to commit their labor again to the process, although that does ensure the high continues for everyone. It's that Burners so willingly share this joy with outsiders. Because the high is bound up in the process of community formation, Burners are surprisingly open to sharing their avenues to attainment with non-believers. And to allow new people to join the process and find the room to make their own contributions to the community, Burners don't hang onto their amazing material products for posterity. Granted, some of the larger and more permanent installations find more formal homes after the festival, but for the most part Burners truly embrace the concept of the creative Phoenix. Burning down the products of their labor doesn't destroy their social meaning. It only releases the creative energy back into the public mix so that it can return bigger and better and stronger and more visually amazing than before.

> So Burners don't hang onto their material goods for all eternity. They destroy them or pass them along or they reappropriate them into new works of art in order to make room for new people to bring new things into the community.

And with that, labor begins again, back to the beginning of preparation, then onto manifestation and celebration, then once again returning to transformation and continuation, because this is the cyclic path to communal attainment Burners set for themselves…

Amazingly, year after year, Burners meet these high expectations for communal labor and find a sense of attainment through the material works they produce. Not always, because sometimes they fall short. Or they burn out. Or they become disillusioned by the scope of it all. Burners are human. This is real life. And this is hard work.

But when their labor succeeds, the process provides a powerful bonding agent that unites Burners into a fascinating and loving desert community – and produces public art on a scale unprecedented in American history.

Their success also suggests a model to follow, or points for reflection, for other groups wishing to use public art and other forms of material expression to bring their members closer together. Burning Man's clusters of synchronized labor suggest we can look with greater detail at how other visual messages are planned, constructed, enjoyed, and received to evaluate how well they succeed at connecting laborers with those they care about reaching the most.

This is the gift of Burning Man.

***

Two full edits later…

I end this journey with a deep appreciation for Burning Man, and for the ways writing keeps me closely connected to the desert experiences still swirling around inside me. Burning Man is an life-changing event – a magical mystery that never quite ends – and these swirling sensations, I now believe, are Burning Man's lasting Playa gift – a fall-back well of inspiration for amplifying my own art and finding new and better ways to connect with others. And writing, it turns out, is a fantastic way to keep connected to these feelings while working through Burning Man's saturated highs and debilitating lows, and following the annual festival to its natural end.

The more I write, the more I find myself wanting to share my art with bigger audiences, too. Burning Man taught me social connection is an exceptionally effective way to keep creative feelings alive. And for now I want to keep on feeling the feelings I'm feeling. I

am a different artist after Burning Man. I like the transformation. And I like where the transformation is taking me. This story exists, after all, because I went to Burning Man and came back from the desert hungry to write and hungry to share.

Hungry to share… not so surprising… But hungry to write? That was actually unexpected…

Before Burning Man, I did not consider myself a writer. I made drawings. I painted paintings. I took photographs. I enjoyed thinking about pictures and having smart conversations about things I saw. But my time in the desert got me thinking about new things – big ideas – big Burning Man themes – like the importance of public art to a community, the need for art to be open and accessible for people to experience and enjoy, and the need for discussions about art to be as accessible as the art itself.

Desert backlash, of course, to the longstanding institutional separation of images and words engrained in me in art school where we chopped off our hair and wore grungy jeans and dirty Chuck Taylors and postured ourselves under the modernist pretense that *art is art*[88] and doesn't need explanation and if an explanation is needed it's only because the viewers are so naive they can't figure it out for themselves – and we celebrated whole-heartedly that we were not the pithy poets or peddlers of prose housed in the musty old buildings on the other side of campus. We were artists! Grand artists! Masters of vision and visual sensations. The gifted ones who truly knew how to "see" the world!

Ha!

---

88 I am referencing the all too familiar Bohemian battle cry, "L'art pour l'art! Art for art's sake!" and the corollary belief that art should be free from all social, moral, or didactic implications. This unfettered conceptualization of art is a direct reflection of modern art theory which celebrates art's release from long-standing social obligations "which it had been carrying out on society's behalf" for centuries, and art's freedom "to look into its own nature" for relevance and meaning. (Russell, 1991, p. 14).

Desert backlash, too, to the concept of the omnipotent critic engrained in me in graduate school where we prepared ourselves to be proper art critics by reading French theory about genealogy and power[89] and deconstruction and différance[90] and learning to believe art is nothing more than a symbolic conduit for understanding the dynamics of our dominant culture – an outsider discourse fighting for legitimacy inside the field of cultural production[91] – a manifestation of the tension between the visual and the verbal and the incompatible and irreducible modes of communication each represents[92]. And we celebrated thinking about art over creating art because we understood the goal of the critic is to critique "the products of man" (sic) and the "harvests of human imagination[93]" not imbibe in the phenomena of producing art itself.

Ha! Indeed!

89 Foundational concepts in the philosophical writings of Michel Foucault related to contemporary aesthetic theory. Of particular interest to art critics are the texts *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972) where Foucault addresses… and *The Order of Things* (1970) where Foucault places philosophical attention on the nature of art.

90 Foundational concepts for critical textual analysis – the breaking down of a visual or verbal artifact in order to expose its internal construction and foundational basis, and reveal the multiple, and often oppositional, cultural meanings the artifact may have, depending on how it is "read" by an audience – based on the philosophical writings of Jacques Derrida, particularly *Of Grammatology* (1976), his primary treatise on deconstruction.

91 This is specific reference to Bourdieu's (1993) arguments in *The Field of Cultural Production* where he posits the artist's habitus (or cultural rules for successfully garnering social influence) is based on the artist being a creative outsider, and therefore, actions to gain status in the arts are inversely relational to traditional avenues for gaining cultural influence and power enacted by more culturally respectable community members.

92 Mainly this is a summary of Barthes' (1977) argument that images and texts operate within different communication systems and use different referential symbols for expression. The main implication of these symbolic differences is that when images and words are placed together, a symbolic tension occurs. Text placed with an image, therefore, alters our perception of the image, and an image placed within a text changes how we understand the words. These same concerns, however, are also echoed in Foucault's (1970) *The Order of Things*, and W.J.T. Mitchell's (1986) *Iconology*.

93 Quotes from Edwin Black's (1978) treatise on textual analysis *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method.*

Burning Man got me thinking beyond this big binary – the either/or institutional position between artist and critic – I was taught to embrace in school[94]. I suppose this isn't too surprising given the oppositional thinking between doing and being is exactly what Burning Man seeks to disrupt, especially at this period in the festival's evolution[95]. The underlying philosophies of Burning Man and the festival's participatory structure – art for the people, evaluation with interaction – intentionally make it difficult to remain resolute to either aesthetic orientation.

I was surprised, though, at how strongly I responded to Burning Man's disruption, and how this reaction made me want to move my own work into this disrupted space. Burning Man is by a no means a perfect aesthetic experience, but after my first Burn, I no longer wanted my art world and my critical world to reside in separate circles. I came out of the desert with an overwhelming desire to unite art with research, and to create multi-method work for dynamic public display. I wanted more and demanded more of my creative self.

So I became a writer…

94 This statement is reflects my undergraduate education experiences more fully than my masters degree training, where my exposure to Performance Studies in the Communication discipline provided my first educational disruption of these binaries (specifically the work of Dwight Conquergood (1991, 2002) who positions performance scholarship as a method for exploring the "knowing about" perspective of critical analysis with the "knowing how" perspective of lived experience and applied practices) and my doctoral training, where blurring genres and multi-methods approaches to generating knowledge were practiced by the majority of the faculty (most of which are referenced in this project) I had the privilege of working with at Arizona State University. However, despite this greater acceptance and promotion of blurred genres and multi-methods at the doctoral level, I still find these old divisions to be deeply engrained into the educational system on the whole, and their ideological presence exerting a controlling influence over the look, feel, content, and acceptance of academic "scholarship." Interdisciplinary scholarship is more widely acknowledged as a possibility today, but much work is still needed to develop an understanding of what interdisciplinary work can be.

95 It would be too broad of a claim to state the disruption of the producing/critiquing binary has always been the goal of festival organizers. Accounts from Burning Man's early years seem to suggest greater foundational interest in providing a creatively liberating space that did, in fact, nurture the "art for art's sake" ideology (Doherty, 2004). Likewise, the conflict with the BORG2 artists discussed previously indicates that for many long time Burners the "art for art's sake" ideology is still part of their understanding of the purpose of the event (BORG2, 2004). My claims, therefore, focus on current organizational trends – particularly since 2003 when a host of structural and policy changes, including ballooning attendance and new art funding policies, helped give the Burning Man Festival its current ideological character.

Or, more accurately, I started down the writing path with the intent to see if it would take me where I wanted to go.

"Why writing?" you ask.

In many ways writing as a conduit for exploring these new ideas was the obvious direction for me to take. I was already in love with new journalism – better known as creative non-fiction[96] – and was reading Capote and Kerouac and Thompson and Kesey and Wolfe religiously. I obviously liked what creative non-fiction had to offer the reader, and was intrigued with its process and potential as an investigative genre.

But it was my exposure to writing as a method of qualitative inquiry and the scholarship of Norm Denzin, Carolyn Ellis, Laurel Richardson, Tom Barone, and Bud Goodall[97] that made me think I could actually become a writer, and use writing in an academic sense to explore the big disruption of the big binary in ways directly inspired by my time in the desert.

Writing as inquiry held promise because it is a disruptive research method in its own right, one that encourages the blending of genres and the disruption of binaries by using a literary or poetic voice instead of a scholarly tone to produce academic research. Practitioners further this disruption by producing aesthetic products – stories, poems, songs, performances – instead of standard academic essays or articles – in order to share their work more easily with wider public audiences. And because writing as inquiry addressed voice and product, this method encourages the author/researcher to step back from the authoritative role of the expert critic or genius artist, stop stating facts

96 To learn more about this genre of writing visit the Creative Nonfiction Foundation web site at: http://www.creativenonfiction.org/

97 To learn more about the narrative and interpretive work of these scholars, visit their websites: Norman Denzin: http://www.media.illinois.edu/faculty/denzin.html; Carolyn Ellis: http://web3.cas.usf.edu/main/depts/com//ellis/; Laurel Richardson: http://www.sociology.ohio-state.edu/lwr/; Tom Barone: http://coe.asu.edu/elps/faculty/barone.php; and H.L. "Bud" Goodall, Jr.: http://www.hlgoodall.com/

in the name of knowledge, and focus instead on generating an evocative experience in order to promote greater understanding between author, audience and the issues being addressed. As a result of these efforts, writing as inquiry has the ability to access and blend ways of knowing and understanding which fall beyond the limitations of traditional, scientific-based research methods and practices – the very methods and practices, practitioners of writing as inquiry point out, perpetuate the doing/being binary being called into question[98].

Writing as Inquiry and the Burning Man ethos seemed made for each other.

The similarity between Burning Man's social aesthetic and writing as inquiry's reflexive scholarship is understandable, though, given writing as inquiry developed as a method about the same time Burning Man conceptually emerged on the art scene. Both crystallized during the mid 1980s with Burning Man organizers responding to a perceived crisis of community in art (Doherty, 2004) and qualitative scholars responding to a "crisis of representation[99]" in academic research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Likewise, both followed similar ideological trajectories over the past 25 years to evolve into fully active and expressive avenues for exploring the political, social, aesthetic, and spiritual issues affecting communities today.

98 My conceptualization of writing as a method of inquiry, as presented here, is strongly influenced by the work of Tom Barone (2001), who positions narrative-based inquiry as a post-modern, arts-based approach to social inquiry and advocates for producing scholarship which is both aesthetically engaging and aesthetically ambiguous in order to pull readers into narratives to allow sustained dialogs between author and reader to occur, and H.L. Goodall, Jr. (2008) who advocates for not only for a strong literary approach to research writing, but also for practitioners to position public audiences as important, intentional, and necessary audiences for scholarly work.

99 Denzin and Lincoln (2005) explain the "crisis of representation" as a rupture in the established practices of qualitative research brought about by a heightened concern for reflexivity in academic writing, the need for researchers to critically address issues of race, class, and gender more fully in their work, and a way to explore the implications of the movement toward interdisciplinary scholarship happening in the social sciences. In their attempt to address these issues, qualitative scholars looked for new criteria for assessing validity, reliability, objectivity, and "truth," which brought about fundamental reconsideration of research methods and scholarly representation of "knowledge." Writing as inquiry, with its insistence on accountability, plurality, and partial offerings, is one solution to the "crisis of representation."

This similar history, plus writing as inquiry allowed me to stay aesthetically connected to public art by letting me "speak" in the language of art and art experience, satisfied my desire to produce art for a larger and more dynamic community and not just a closed set of my peers, gave me a product to give back to the people whose art inspired my writing thereby promoting the ethical exchange of ideas and inspirations, and buoyed my already elevated belief that the artist/author needs to be fully accountable for the content of his or her expressive actions, suggested to me this was an intriguing intersection of subject and method, and a most suitable approach for exploring aesthetic scholarship within the context of the disrupted binary.

Burning Man demands high levels of authentic reflection and participation from those who experience it. Writing as inquiry provides the means for producing a creative project that contributes back in a manner respectful of the aesthetic values of Burning Man while simultaneously providing the means for critiquing Burning Man in an effective and informative scholarly manner. They speak to each other's ideals.

So in summary, writing as a method of inquiry caught my interest because it is a research method that fell nicely in step with the aesthetic and social considerations I tuned into at Burning Man. And this synergy supports my new vision for the kind of artist/writer and scholarly researcher I genuinely want to be.

There is, however, a sticking point in this blessed union.

Writing as inquiry, in its current stage of development, is primarily word-based[100]. For many of the topics practitioners of writing as inquiry address, this is not an issue. Words lend themselves well to establishing a connection with the audience and bringing the reader to a place where the subjective connections ring true[101].

But for me, an artist trained in a variety of visual media, and a researcher recognizing Burning Man is an exceedingly visual experience bound up in the concept of display, writing about Burning Man without incorporating elements of the visual experience felt entirely contrary to my knowledge and understanding of this event. And to rely solely on word-based systems of reflection felt contrary of my understanding of the world as a visual place – dynamic and visually discursive – filled with beautiful and disturbing and vibrant images whirling together all around us – in constant motion – in every day media – and influencing our understanding of ourselves, our relationships, our lives, and our world.

Like Nicholas Mirzoeff says, and I believe, modern life takes place on the screen[102].

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100 There are many reasons why writing is inquiry is primarily a word-based system of inquiry, but the most persistent reasons reflect a lingering belief that "writing as inquiry" means "telling stories with words," and current academic publishing practices haven't caught up with the digital revolution, or the fact the Western world is primarily a visual world, and remain jarringly unable to fully integrate images or any other form of visual data into their publishing systems. As publishing is still the end goal for writing as inquiry research projects, visual storytelling remains in its infancy in academic publishing circles.

101 There are multiple terms for describing what makes a scholarly narrative "credible" to the reader and to the research establishment. The term I prefer to use to explain these criteria is "fidelity." Donald Blumenfeld-Jones (1995) describes "fidelity" as the subjective understanding about the events of a situation (not as the literal facts of a situation, or "truth," but what the situation meant to the storyteller). Blumenfeld-Jones writes, "Truth treats the situation as an object while fidelity is subjective. The object/subject distinction can become a test for the presence of fidelity and a warning for when fidelity is slipping over into truth" (p. 26). In this regard, fidelity suggests the author needs to pay attention to both the artistic and scholarly tones of his/her narrative research to ensure they remain in a balance, as well as pay attention to the overall affect of the narrative writing on the relationship between author and reader and subjects of the narrative, to ensure that relationship remains respectful of both. Likewise, fidelity suggests the art of storytelling is equally relevant as the effective use of language and storytelling techniques allows readers to "experience a congruence with their own experiences of similar, parallel, or analogous situations. They do not have to derive the same meaning as the artist's original meaning. This is what provides art (and narrative inquiry) with its power of redescription of reality" (p. 31).

102 This is the opening line to Mirzoeff's (1999) An Introduction to Visual Culture and reflects my ontological affiliation with visual studies, an interdisciplinary exploration of visual practices across all methodological and disciplinary boundaries (Elkins, 2003).

Burning Man is an intensely visual dialogic experience reflecting Western culture's growing acceptance and reliance on visual forms of communication to accomplish communication goals previously understood as belonging to the realms of written or spoken forms of expression.

Burning Man is all about finding meaning through the experience of seeing.

To me, then, working within the disrupted binary of Burning Man means not only discovering ways to combine art and critique, but also finding ways to bring images, as art and as data, into the sacred realm of the text.

And to do so smartly.

And with the same level of consideration for visual content as narrative inquiry demands of words.

Because, like Solomon-Godeau (1991) states, documentary photographs are "products of distinct historical circumstances" and "speak of agendas, both open and covert, personal and institutional, that inform their contents and, to a greater or lesser extent, mediate our readings of them" (p. 182). And like Barthes (1977) repeatedly warned us, images change the meaning of words and words change the meanings of images when they are placed together in a narrative context.

Images are loaded. And they pack a punch.

This visual story, then, is my attempt to introduce narrative inquiry to the photographic essay in order to create a combined form of visual and verbal storytelling where both elements can be "read," as Berger simply states, in their own terms[103]. Photographs, therefore, are not placed to illustrate the text. Nor is the text placed to explain the images. Both are presented together, in the spirit of fidelity, to help bring the author/artist and reader closer to the subject at hand, with the hope the dual experiences of reading and seeing will generate a thoughtful conversation about art, and community, and travel, and meditation, and lost souls, and desert pilgrimages, and transformation in the pursuit of something *more*, in the United States, in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

103 John Berger and Jean Mohr's book *A Seventh Man: Migrant Workers in Europe* (1975) is the inspirational format for this project. For a detailed discussion about this format and my decision making process for incorporating images and words together in this visual narrative, please see Part 2.

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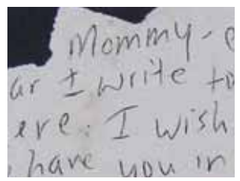
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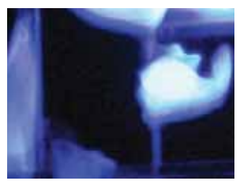

FLIGHT TO MARS

SINNE

PLATE 88 ©Russell Atkinson

Plate Captions

Unless indicated, all photographs are the creative property of Karen and Todd Stewart. Additional images, provided by Russell Atkinson, are reprinted with expressed permission.

PLATE 1: Burning The Man, 2007
Sixty feet of timber and neon engulfed in flames – me sitting at the foot of The Man, camera in hand, watching the blaze. The Burn is the beginning and the end of the story, and the iconic symbol for everything and nothing about the Burning Man Festival.

PLATE 2: Self Portrait – After the Storm, 2007
In 2007, playa wind speeds reached 80mph and produced massive dust storms that lasted several hours. At the time this photo was taken, our camp had just been blown down and all of our gear completely filled with dust by one of those storms. Although weathering the storm was exhausting – we had to hold down our tent the entire time to keep it from blowing away – I also found being in the relentless wind and white out conditions surprisingly meditative. This photo reminds me of both the internal and external strength I tapped into during this storm.

PLATE 3: Road Trip, 2008
Wide open empty space better known as Nevada. This photo was taken on I-95 just after sun rise on our second travel day.

PLATE 4: Nevada Highway Montage, 2008
More of the same – which is exactly how the drive feels. And I wouldn't want it any other way.

PLATE 5: Miller's Rest Area, Nevada, 2008
A perfect little oasis with a generous supply of fresh well water. Burning Man's location and policies heighten the importance of water, so finding this well felt divine. The quiet shade of rest area also made this a peaceful and rejuvenating travel stop.

PLATE 6: Burning Man Traffic, 2008
Bumper to bumper traffic on Highway 447 as we approach Empire, Nevada. This ever increasing flow of traffic into the playa is now par for the course, but also a major environmental concern for area residents and area conservationists. With only two driving lanes and this much traffic, this stretch of highway is also dangerous to navigate. In order to minimize traffic accidents, the Burning Man Organization advises participants to drive slowly, and to hit the jack rabbits running across the road instead of swerving to avoid them. The credo: Every time a jack rabbit dies, a new Burner is born!

PLATE 7: Entrance Lines, 2008
Even more traffic funneling toward the entrance gates. Hot. Dry. Dusty. Long. This leg of the journey requires immense patience – a difficult state of mind to be in when you can see Black Rock City sitting in the distance and can't get to it. Gates are open 24 hours so many Burners try to arrive at odd times to avoid this congestion.

PLATE 8: Entrance Montage, 2008
Views from the passenger window as a major dust storm rolls in. White outs mean gates close and Burners wait for the storm to pass…

PLATE 9: Bike Tread, 2008
A close-up of the crumbling playa – the source of dust – but also the unmistakable surface upon which Black Rock City is built. For Burners, the texture of the playa is as visually iconic as The Man himself.

PLATE 10: Burning Man Tickets, 2004
The best part of the Burning Man ticket is the warning "You voluntarily assume the risk of serious injury or death by attending this event" printed on the back.

PLATE 11: Lookout, 2007 © Russell Atkinson
Juxtaposing the playa's watery past against its current state of dryness, Burners regularly produce visual elements referencing oceans and beaches. As a result, pirate ships and crow's nest lookouts are common visual motifs. Crow's nests are particularly prevalent, as playing with height is also a common aesthetic response to the playa's open space and naturally flat state.

PLATE 12: K-Street Viewed atop a Very Tall Ladder, 2007
Our neighbor set up a 20 foot step ladder in an open area next to his camp. The ladder quickly became known as the "kissing ladder" because couples would climb up each side of the step ladder and give each other a kiss once they met at the top. After kissing, they enjoyed a spectacular panoramic view of Black Rock City. Despite my fear of heights and disdain for ladders, I found the climb, the kiss, and the view completely worth the effort.

PLATE 13: Clue Camp, 2007
Cleu Camp's signature white school bus with members of Cleu Camp sharing a meal in the shade. Cleu Camp also welcomes lone campers and stragglers to camp with them, making the bus the hub for an organically forming communal camp.

PLATE 14: Dome, 2008
Because of their ability to withstand harsh winds and their ability to adapt to a variety of sizes, domes are common architectural elements in Black Rock City. Manufactured domes also assemble and disassemble with relative ease, making it easy to transport dome structures to and from the playa. Watching Burners assemble their domes is entertaining – like watching big children play with enormous tinker toy building sets.

PLATE 15: Street View, 2008
A typical street view of Black Rock City, but a rare instance when a main avenue is missing its swarm of pedestrians and bicycles.

PLATE 16: Water Truck, 2008
In an effort to minimize airborne playa dust, water trucks regularly spray down the streets of Black Rock City. Burners make the most of this roaming water source by chasing after the water trucks and using their streams as a portable shower. A quick and fun way to cool down and keep clean, and a long-standing Burning Man tradition.

PLATE 17: Giant Teeter Totter, Esplanade, 2008
The sign at the fulcrum says you must be topless to ride this ride. No doubt there were many topless women who followed these instructions, as there is no shortage of topless women at Burning Man. The riders we saw, however, were always shirtless men.

PLATE 18: Giant Connect Four, Esplanade, 2003
Always available for game. And a good example of the ways Burners appropriate popular culture – in size, shape, scale, and context – to make the Playa a more playful environment.

PLATE 19: Barbie Death Camp & Wine Bistro, 2007
Although we never tasted the wine, we were captivated by the strangeness of this camp installation. Hundreds of naked Barbie Dolls stuck in the ground and surrounded by references to German death camps kept our minds flipping between the profane and the profound.

PLATE 20: Center Camp, 2003
The main entrance to Center Camp, Black Rock City's main town square. Ample parking for your bike. Easy to forget where you parked it.

PLATE 21: Camp Arctica, 2007
The main ice distribution center, located in the same central plaza as Center Camp. Ice is affordable – about $3.00 for a five-pound bag or block – even though ice is touted as being "more precious than gold" at Burning Man.

PLATE 22: Our Lady of the Schlongs, 2003
Our first year at Burning Man we happened to camp next to Our Lady of the Schlongs. Each year after that, we intentionally camped next to them. It wasn't their incessant carnival cries promising free beer to any man who dropped his pants and let them take a Polaroid snapshot of his package that drew us back – although this was as entertaining to watch as it was annoying to hear. We made them our neighbors because they were great guys, and because their pink and yellow flags provided a perfect landmark for our camp.

PLATE 23: Sunset, 2008
Golden hour on the playa.

PLATE 24: Burning Man Sign, 2008
Welcome Home!

PLATE 25: Big Rig Jig, 2007
An excerpt from Mike Ross' artist statement: "Big Rig Jig is a rumination on power as manifest in the relationship between humankind and nature. We hope to instill thoughts of wonder, fear, instability, nature, and beauty. And we are going to do this by literally cutting up pieces of the oil industry and thrusting them into the air. The sculpture is fashioned from real oil tankers and filled with lush silk plant life, a reminder of the ultimate source of the black gold once transported inside them…" (2007 Honorarium).

PLATE 26: Tasseograph: The Trash TeaHouse Temple, 2007
I loved the teahouse. It had a lovely, magical presence that evoked both tradition and fantasy. And I was quite taken with the architectural eloquence the artists achieved with their highly ineloquent medium – found objects and recycled food packaging.

PLATE 27: Trash TeaHouse Detail, 2007
Close up of the wind chimes hanging inside the tea house made from recycled brass, tin, and aluminum bits. The chimes made a dull clatter that sounded both comforting and haunting in the open desert.

PLATE 28: Cow Car, 2007
I think cows are funny. I think dead cow art cars are even funnier.

PLATE 29: Koilos, 2007
Yes, this sculpture is huge! The person in the photo is only standing about twenty feet away from the base. And yes, this sculpture is hollow (as the Greek name implies) and completely made of metal. I marveled at the technical mastery the artist, Michael Christian, demonstrated with this piece. The open-lattice framework forming Koilos' skin was truly magnificent.

PLATE 30: Homouroboros, 2007 © Russell Atkinson
Peter Hudson's 2007 zoetrope project. Burners peddled stationary bicycles to active a generator which spun a tree full of monkeys to create the illusion the monkeys were climbing the tree. Meanwhile, other burners donned monkey masks and played the drums underneath the tree. At least I think that's how it was supposed to work. I never actually saw the zoetrope in motion. Each time we stopped by, the system was down due to mechanical failure.

PLATE 31: Temple of Stars, 2004
Expecting the Temple to look exactly like it did at my first burn in 2003, I was shocked to see this sprawling temple made from recycled wood scraps stretching across the Playa. About a quarter mile in length, the temple consisted of a main tower (pictured here) with walkways, bridges, smaller towers, and wooden gardens extending to each side. Because I was so fond of the 2003 temple, it took me a while to warm up to the Temple of Stars. This resistance, though, taught me a lot about my expectations at Burning Man, and the ways public art changes and yet remains the same at this event.

PLATE 32: W in Wonderland Parade, 2004
Center Camp parade with beautifully crafted paper mache costumes depicting George W. Bush and friends as characters from *Alice in Wonderland*. One of the more politically explicit performances we've witnessed at Burning Man. While it could be argued that all public art is inherently political, at least on some level, therefore all public art at Burning Man constitutes a political statement, Burning Man artwork generally doesn't read as direct political engagement. It is much more common to see Burners address political and social ideologies in their artwork on a meta-level instead of critiquing specific political actors or actions. Given the nature of the event, the location, and the general Burner population, when political messages are present, they usually lean toward the left.

PLATE 33: FREE MAYO!, 2003
Nasty, oozing, jar of mayo – free for the taking! And yes, the mayo disappeared as quickly as it appeared. My all time favorite temporary art moment at Burning Man. And I still laugh every time I see this photo.

PLATE 34: Ponies, 2003
Afternoon Burners moseying by on their motorized horsey scooters. Cowboy up Burner Buckaroos!

PLATE 35: Temple of Gravity, 2003
Enormous slabs of granite suspended from massive steel beams by swinging chain links. A sense of danger walking under the sheer weight of the hovering stone. Designed by artist Zachary Coffin to "address a vital need: the need to worship something we know is true and one of the few constants in our ever-changing lives… In this godless era it is now time to worship GRAVITY. Come to the temple, think weighty thoughts and speak of heavy deeds. GRAVITY will always let you down" (Realm of Wholly Other). Personally – less inspired to pray, more amazed at how he got all this weight into the desert.

PLATE 36: Dead Burner, 2003
Empty beer. Full water bottle. Ultimate desert fate.

PLATE 37: The Man, 2003
Emerging from the dusty haze. Captured here as I first saw Him at my very first burn. Seeing this photograph makes me long for the Playa – the people, the dust, the discovery, the magic – even though I know nothing comes close to the magic of your first Man and your first burn.

PLATE 38: Labyrinth, 2003
A circular labyrinth nestled at the base of The Man filled with Burners contemplatively walking inside. Viewed at sunset from the top of The Man.

PLATE 39: Steel Drums, 2003
One of the most entertaining and engaging levels of public art at Burning Man is how musicians, dancers, and other performers use art installations as backdrops for their own work. In this case, a steel drummer performs next to a kinetic metal sculpture. His minimal self-presentation fit perfectly with the minimal aesthetic of the installation.

PLATE 40: Girl, 2003
I fell in love with this girl's ruffled bloomers and have wanted a pair of my own ever since. I like how well they go with aviator goggles and big, metal, sculptures sitting on the Playa.

PLATE 41: Temple of Forgiveness, 2007
David Best is the artist behind many of the amazing Burning Man temples (including the 2003 and 2004 Temples also included in this photo collection.) Using recycled materials, like wood sheets discarded from making punch-out models and other toys, Best and his temple crew craft these intricate buildings knowing at the end of the week they will be completely burned to the ground. The Temple design, scale, and attention to detail all contribute to the sacred feeling of the site. Burners also treat the Temple with great reverence.

PLATE 42: Temple of Forgiveness Prayers, 2007
Detail photographs of a section of Temple wall covered in prayers. The Temple is a site for grieving, forgiving, celebrating, and fostering hope. Messages left on the Temple walls are emotionally raw – honest expression pouring out, encouraged by the promise of emotional release when the prayers are burned at the end of the week. Each year I add my prayers to the Temple walls and I cry. It is a safe place to feel.

PLATE 43: Temple of Forgiveness Interior, 2007
Inside the Temple, looking up into the sky.

PLATE 44: Cellestial Body, 2004 © Russell Atkinson
One of the many examples of things to climb on at Burning Man. As a person with a physical disability, I am intrigued with the ease and consistency in which aesthetic interaction is equated with physical interaction at the festival.

PLATE 45: Anomaly, 2008
Artist Mary Franck describes her work as "a central sculpture of a bicycle tree acts as a large MIDI controller to manipulate samples and live sounds. Small boxers with speakers and lights surround it." (2008 Playa Art Installations). When I came upon this sculpture no one was there so there were no sounds to collect or emanate from the speakers. My experience with this piece, therefore, was less like an anomaly and more like viewing a bicycle tree in isolated silence.

PLATE 46: Guardian of Eden, 2007
An 18-foot tall plasma-cut steel lotus flower providing a gathering space for sacred care-givers. Women were particularly fond of this installation and gathered together inside the petals often.

PLATE 47: Big Wheel Art Car, 2003
Every where this art car went, crowds stopped and stared. Every time I saw this art car I had visions of being run over by a rogue Ferris wheel!

PLATE 48: Harmonic Geometry, 2008
Such a simple structure – made only with criss-crossing 4 by 4s – and yet so beautiful to see and so comforting to be underneath. We were drawn into this installation when we heard music coming from within. Inside we found a shaman playing his flute, called to the site, he later shared, by the sound of the chimes ringing in the early morning breeze. The shaman was surrounded by straggling ravers working their way home and Burners seeking a special location for early morning meditation. This photograph fails to capture the beauty of the music, how connected we all felt at that moment, or how deeply moved I was by this experience. Instead, when I see this photograph I remember how resistant I was to taking photos in this space at this time. I didn't want the camera to disrupt the moment.

PLATE 49: Crude Awakening, 2007 © Russell Atkinson
Pictured here is one of the eight giant flaming figures posed in worship around a 100 foot wooden oil derrick which made up the entire *Crude Awakening* installation. The installation was designed to symbolically represent all of the world's major religions bowing in dependency to fossil-fuels. To drive the message of their installation home even further, on the night of The Burn, well after The Man burned to the ground, the *Crude Awakening* artists

blew up their derrick with 2,000 gallons of propane and 900 gallons of jet fuel, creating a 2.4 gigawatt blast of heat and light (Taylor, 2008) which we saw and felt on the outer most rim of Black Rock City. *Crude Awakening* was both awe-inspiring in its level of spectacle but also extremely controversial in its excessive use of fuels to make its point. Many Burners were troubled by the size of the explosion and perceived lack of consideration for the effects an explosion of this magnitude would have on the Playa – issues sitting in the forefront of many Burners minds given the theme for the 2007 Burning Man Festival was "Green Man," a theme specifically focused on environmentalism and conscientious desert living. Criticism of the explosion also appeared in national press coverage of the event, signaling Burning Man's public art is not solely the interest or concern of Burners, but also of interest to the larger culture in which Burning Man occurs.

PLATE 50: Silhouettes, 2008
After we climbed to the top of the Mayan Pyramid, we were asked if we wouldn't mind stepping off so a fellow Burner could have his picture taken without us in the shot. Given how crowded the main art installations are, we thought this was an odd request, but we said ok and moved down to a viewing platform on the backside of the pyramid to get out of the way. From the back side of the pyramid we realized we could see the shadow of the Burner as he struck his Pyramid top victory pose, so we snapped this photo to capture his silhouette, and effectively reinsert ourselves back into the photographic moment.

PLATE 51: The Man, 2008
The Man – sporting the American Dream.

PLATE 52: Time Lapse of The Man, 2008
The center of the Playa at night.

PLATE 53: Burning Barbie, 2003
Burners with a blow torch offering to torch anything you'd like. A very large woman dressed in black came forward and asked them to please burn her Barbie doll. They agreed. Barbie melted. And the woman walked away extremely pleased. We walked away thoroughly amused!

PLATE 54: Mardi Gras Roaming Faces, 2007
Best when viewed at night and from afar, this art car created the illusion of a giant floating head drifting across the Playa. The comic and dramatic expressions meant the head looked different depending on your physical relationship to the car. Easy to spot, making it kind of fun to see all the different places the head popped up during the night.

PLATE 55: Dragon Art Car, 2007
A fire breathing dragon! I swear! At least I remember it that way!

PLATE 56: Burning Band, 2008
A Burning Man institution! Random musicians who march and play day and night all over Black Rock City. I don't think they ever rehearse. It doesn't sound like they rehearse. They sound better because they don't rehearse.

PLATE 57: Fire Dancer, 2008
A solo performer dancing on the Esplanade. No signs. No name. Just the dancer and his music and his fire.

PLATE 58: Furnace Man, 2007
One of the many sculptures that ignite and come alive at night. Warm, radiant heat also feels great after wandering about the Playa late at night, when it's cold and camp is a long bike ride way away.

PLATE 59: Observer/Observed, 2004
The concept – according to artist Kate Raudenbush: "On the horizon sits a mirage, a shimmering mosaic vault of reflected light, a 10x10x10ft hollow cube made of 125 panels of two-way mirror. During the daytime, it is a sparkling jewel, beckoning people to gaze at the mountains, the playa and their own refracted reflection. Meanwhile, in the vault's dim interior, those inside will (while remaining unseen), observe those on the outside observing their own reflections... in a most voyeuristic way. As the sun fades, a transformation occurs: illuminated by a giant mirrored ball, those on the inside will see themselves reflected to infinity on the mirrored walls. But now they cannot see through the two-way mirror to the dark night outside. Instead, those standing outside the cube become the unseen observers: watching the revelers in the translucent sparkling interior, while remaining unseen" (Deep Space). A good example of the ways Burning Man artists play with natural and generated light, and consider the ways their art can transform from day into night.

PLATE 60: Mutopia Montage, 2008
Another legendary group of Burning Man artists are the Flaming Lotus Girls. Based in San Francisco, the FLG are a female-driven group of collaborative artists who build kinetic and mechanical fire art. Membership is open to anyone who wants to join and produce, and every year what they produce is incredible. This installation was particularly mind blowing – Mutopia was a sprawling garden of alien-looking flowers and pods designed to blast bursts of fire out of tops of the plants. Mutopia was a major gathering point on the Playa, drawing crowds Burners into the metal garden where they could hang out and take in the non-stop fire show. The vibe at Mutopia was so positive – friendly, laid back, and communal – like a street fair. The montage shown here depicts but a fraction of a moment of the fire show and a fraction of the crowd gathered to watch.

PLATE 61: Dragon Puppet, 2003
Dragon floating above the crowds the night of the Burn. The atmospheric effect is our camera flash reflecting off playa dust floating in the air.

PLATE 62: Pirate Ship, 2003
Desert ghost ship floating aimlessly across the desert sea.

PLATE 63: Cult of St. Elmo, 2003
One kick-ass Van De Graaf generator. One steel cage. One amazing zap producing St. Elmo's Fire. Owned and operated by the Amazing Dr. Megavolt who reminds those brave enough to step inside his cage: never, ever, under any circumstances, touch the metal sides!! You might not live to regret it!

PLATE 64: Egeria Firefall, 2003
This amazing fountain mixed flowing water with flowing flames. Even more amazing was watching Burners dip their hands into the flaming water, pull out handfuls of flames, and hold the fire without fear of being burned. Mesmerizing to watch the flicker of fire and flow of water together, without cancellation or resistance.

PLATE 65: Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Gospel Choir, 2003
Singing the gospel of anti-consumerism every night at the base of The Man.

PLATE 66: Cirkus of the Damned, 2007
We happened to catch the very end of this very edgy circus performance by Cirque Bizirque. In this photograph, the young man in the center ring is hanging from the top of the circus dome by cables hooked into rings embedded in his back. The performance drew a huge crowd – hundreds of burners sat inside the tent while hundreds more, like us, stood outside and watched. Circus and carnival – ranging from the amazing to the freakish – are enormously popular performance genres at Burning Man.

PLATE 67: Portable Rave, 2007
Everything you need to attract ravers to your instant dance party – loud techno music, go-go dancers in a cage, random carnival games. Whenever it stops, the party starts!

PLATE 68: Inside Jadu Beta, 2004
"A massive object born of the cosmos, Jadu Beta descends into the playasphere. Looming in the distance, animated by the wind, it awaits our approach. Adventure near to this astral body and discover an organism whose form mimics fractal imagery and the architecture of cellular membranes. Tunnel through its thick walls, built of an intricate network of organic shapes, touch its translucent skin, and discover an inner sanctum alive with other-worldly sounds" (2004 Theme Art).

PLATE 69: Cubatron Cone Montage, 2007 © Russell Atkinson
6,720 blinky lights arranged in a cylinder cone 40 feet in diameter and 20 feet tall. Dozens of Burners camped out around it, watching the lights pulse and glow. Randomly joined by a group of Burners determined to hand out 2,000 light sabers by the end of the night. Glowing sword fights instantly ensued.

PLATE 70: Big Rig Jig at Night, 2007 © Russell Atkinson
The remainder of Mike Ross' artist statement: "Our source objects are fundamental to the world's oil distribution infrastructure, and are pertinent examples of our culture's unmatched production of carbon dioxide. By altering these symbolically rich objects, the sculpture is a celebration of humankind's raw power on earth, a visual metaphor for non-sustainability, and a contemplation of our unique ability to recognize and change our most destructive actions" (2007 Honorarium).

PLATE 71: Watching The Burn, 2007
Sitting at the base of the Man with 40,000 of my closest friends. All eyes focused on the fireworks and the flames.

PLATE 72: Fertility Mobile, 2007 © Russell Atkinson
Fertility symbols and symbols representing gender fluidity and sexual freedom are another common motif at Burning Man. Both male and female and straight and queer symbols are present, although it seems like I see more phalli that ova floating about. Regardless of sex or gender, the attitude is “the bigger and more blatant, the better!”

PLATE 73, Heading to the Burn, 2007
A quick photograph of the massive crowd moving en masse toward The Man.

PLATE 74: Burn Night, 2007
Settling in at the base of The Man. We’re asked to sit so everyone can see. We choose to sit because start to finish The Burn will take a couple of hours to complete.

PLATE 75: Funky Energy, 2007
Burn night energy is a strange mix of excitement, anticipation, exhaustion, and celebration. It’s impossible to sit still but we’re inspired to stay put to keep our prime viewing (and photographing) real estate secure.

PLATE 76: Waiting for the Burn, 2007
Time-lapse image partially taken to entertain ourselves while waiting for The Burn to start – partially taken to represent the pre-burn party mood. Lots of laughter and music. Lots of chemical alterations. And lots of performance groups, like Penguin Camp staging a mock protest to demand Burners “save The Man” and “learn not to burn,” interacting with us.

PLATE 77: Fire Conclave Montage, 2007
The official Burn ceremony begins with hundreds of drummers surrounding The Man and laying down a tribal beat. Hundreds of fire dancers, called the Fire Conclave, join the drummers soon after. Representing fire dance crews from around the world, fire dancers join together and prepare all week for this performance, embodying the long standing tradition of using fire art to unite the Burning Man community.

PLATE 78: Fire and Lights, 2007
“The gathering of people, dancing and drumming around a fire, goes back to the beginning of Burning Man and beyond. It is the first basic form of dance that leads to community. By summoning the power of the flame to flow through us, it strengthens and transforms our spirit” (Fire Conclave).

PLATE 79: First Sparks, 2007 © Russell Atkinson
On the night of The Burn, The Man’s arms point to heaven and sparks fly!

PLATE 80: Opening Fireworks, 2007
Absolutely spectacular!

PLATE 81: Opening Fireworks Continue, 2007
Endless ooh-ing and aaw-ing!! The spectacle continues!

PLATE 82: KABOOM!, 2007
Massive incendiary explosion when we least expect it! Blinding light! Searing heat! Collective gasp of shock and awe.

PLATE 83: Flames Montage, 2007
The second wave of fireworks – more intense than the first – and the first visible flames appear at the base.

PLATE 84: Burning Montage, 2007
Fire slowly rising through the man. The crowd watches with varying degrees of boredom and reverence.

PLATE 85: Engulfed Montage, 2007
Anticipation for the end of the Burn mounting. As each part of The Man burns and collapses, the crowd cheers.

PLATE 86: The End and the Beginning, 2007
Bonfire aftermath. The Man reduced to a flaming heap. Creative spirits rise again. Happy New Year!

PLATE 87: TruthBurn, 2007
This photograph is not reversed. It accurately depicts how I first encountered this sculpture on the Playa, as accurately as any photographic record of any event can TRUTHfully capture that experience.

PLATE 88: Temple of Honor, 2003 © Russell Atkinson
Final photograph – placed in honor of the amazing artists who shared their work on the Playa and made this narrative visually possible. Thank you for your gifts!! Namaste.

Part 2: An Academic Discussion about the Visual Narrative

Methodological Considerations

Whenever I tell people I am writing a story about Burning Man, I am, invariably, met with one of two reactions. The people I am talking with either declare how awesomely cool my research topic is, or they ask, "What is Burning Man?"

For those who declare my topic "cool," I reply with my best, "Yeah, I know, right!" because their reaction tells me we share an affinity for Burning Man. The "cool" people are the people who have been there, or at least know something about Burning Man, or are longing to go to the desert themselves. They're the ones who know something interesting is happening in Nevada, and the coolness of our conversation is all we really need to initiate a discursive dip into a communal pool of romanticized desert daydreams.

But for those who aren't familiar with Burning Man and actually want to know what Burning Man is, formulating a useful and informative response is much more challenging. This is an easy and obvious question to ask, but crafting a comeback – a thoughtful and informative response that does justice to the Burning Man experience while providing insight into the event's cultural importance – requires some effort and some thought.

After all, how does one *explain* a Burning Man festival? Or how does one *describe* the complex aesthetic and social experiences Burning Man provides?

Not easily. I should know. I have been trying to work out my own insightful response to the ever present "What is Burning Man?" question since returning from my first burn in 2003. This is not a simple task.

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104 The question "What is Burning Man?" is a very common phrase in the Burner vernacular. It appears regularly in Burning Man organizational materials as well as popular press books and articles. Its use reflects Burners' understanding that it is not easy to articulate or explain the Burning Man experience, and that ambiguity is inherently a part of any discussion about this event.

Each time I go to the desert, I come back with a greater appreciation for Burning Man. The festival repeatedly captures my imagination and more and more I enjoy the cultural disjunction Burning Man provides. Deeper appreciation, however, doesn't mean I fully understand everything that happens in Black Rock City. Four adventures later, I still find myself baffled and intrigued by my experiences in the desert, and still struggling to formulate a satisfactory response to the "What is Burning Man?" question.

Caught in the emotional ambiguity of "post Burning Man," I find myself looking for useful, insightful, and relatable responses to the "What is Burning Man?" question in two distinctly different ways. The first is to let loose an unfiltered and emotional outpouring of everything that happens in the desert, in a ridiculously nonlinear and preferably visual manner, to try and emulate the experience of being *there*. This strategy is influenced by my inner artist – the part of me that believes Burning Man is pure sensation, and that this sensation is best evaluated when it is re-felt and re-seen, and not relayed. My artist side thinks this is the best approach because it explores the tactile and embodied aspects of the Burning Man experience. It brings the feelings of living in the desert, making art, and building a home inside a community to the surface for reflexive evaluation.

The researcher side of me, though, disagrees with this approach. It resists emulation because it wants to explore the "What is Burning Man?" question far more systematically and with a stronger analytical eye. Like my inner artist, my inner researcher marvels at the orchestrated chaos of the festival, but is much more interested in understanding the dedication, organization, and material investment people put into to Burning Man, and what motivates tens of thousands of people to donate their labor to Black Rock City every year. My researcher side is curious about the structures and processes that allow Burning Man to function, and wants to be able to identify the organizing patterns of Burning Man in order to gain insight into the social and cultural practices underlying the event.

When someone asks me about Burning Man then, it is extremely import to my researcher side my response is based on sound scholarly research practices. My artist side, of course, cringes at this thought. So in the end, I am one person toying with two seemingly opposite processes for gaining insight into the Burning Man Festival.

In my commitment to looking for a meaningful response to the "What is Burning Man?" question, however, I choose not to view my different epistemological processes as oppositional. Based on my experiences with Burning Man I believe both approaches have merit, so neither one can be solely "right" in its epistemological leaning. Burning Man is not one thing, nor a singular kind of experience. So instead of pitting or choosing, I resist the urge to bifurcate my methods and look toward aspects of the festival where experiencing and evaluating share common interest, and therefore share common epistemological ground. These intersecting sites are places where my own differing epistemologies can work in tandem, not opposition, to help me explore the meaning of Burning Man.

This commitment to working with tandem epistemologies has lead me to focus my attention on what I believe is the most pronounced and integrated convergence of "experiencing and orchestrating" happening at the Burning Man Festival: Burners' massive commitment to the creation, display, and use of public art. At Burning Man public art is not a passive practice. Nor is it produced at a distance with only a select set of community members involved in the creative processes. Nor is it void of community-based aesthetics. Public art is everywhere. It provides the festival with its mind-blowing aesthetic moments, and at the same time it integrates multiple organizational functions with community focal points to help the festival's participants coalesce into an active community. Public art is immediate and pronounced, and distinctly a part of Burning Man. One only has to look at the art and experience its *punctum*, its visual stinging, and pricking, and disruption of passive looking (Barthes, 1982), to know there is more to this art than mere decoration or personal expression, and to know this art is an integral part of Burning Man's social bonding experiences.

This pronounced use of public art means Burning Man operates as a visual event. By "visual event" I mean key experiences at Burning Man are inherently linked to the production and display of physical objects intentionally designed to be seen. The Burn itself illustrates this idea. But so do the elaborate art installations, the Temple and the Temple Burn, the costumes and fashion statements, the construction and customization of camp sites, the art cars and party barges, and the visually stunning backdrop of the desert itself. There are all sorts of things to publically *see* at Burning Man, making the festival altogether an intensely visual experience.

Burning Man's commitment to developing and promoting its own brand of visible civic activities based on the public engagement of public art also makes Burning Man a visual event. Burning Man was conceived by public artists grounded in cacophony ideology, (Doherty, 2004) and cacophony's commitment to publically visible participatory forms of political and social action have been nurtured throughout Burning Man's history. This commitment to visible public practice is rhetorically evident in Burning Man's participation literature, its sanctioned publications, and its official web site. In all three places, festival organizers map out ways for festival attendees to become visibly active citizens of Black Rock City. This ideological commitment to visible participation is also materially evident in Burning Man's artist endowment and public works program, the Black Rock Arts Foundation, and the continuing materialization of the festival itself.

Simultaneously using public art as a conduit for aesthetic experiences and as a conduit for civic experiences moves Burning Man's public art into the realm of dialogic art, a term Benjamin (1999, 2008) created to describe intentionally disruptive art designed and produced to alter the viewer's consciousness with the hope the disruption will move the viewer into a genuine state of awareness about his or her political, social, and aesthetic environment. Dialogic art is not every day art, or archaic art, or the mass of viewable products filling up our everyday lives (Benjamin, 1999). It is the less common and non-formulaic art attempting to forge a conversational link between image and viewer,

guided by a belief that profound visual disruptions experienced in a shared environment can discursively unite individual viewers into collective social action (Benjamin, 2008).

Dialogic images are rare occurrences in our media-saturated and mundane image culture. The extensive presence of dialogic imagery at Burning Man and the dialogic linking between visual experience and visible community activity occurring at the festival, therefore, are quite notable. It is also notable that congruent with this long-term commitment to creating and promoting communally visual experiences, Burning Man has witnessed incredible growth and popularity. The first Burn only involved a small group of friends. Two years later, participation increased to 40. By the 1990s, hundreds were attending the Burn, prompting organizers to move the event from San Francisco's Baker Beach Park to the Black Rock Desert. Once established in the desert, participation skyrocketed, culminating in the current attendance figures of 49,000 plus. (Timeline, 2010) These exponentially increasing participation numbers has led to the creation of regional and international Burner groups and additional Burning Man-related events, prompting a variety of critics to categorize Burning Man as a legitimate art movement and as a bona fide civic movement all at once (Bruder, 2007; Doherty, 2004; Kreuter, 2002; Nash, 2007; Pendell, 2006; Traub, 2006).

Most Burning Man officials positively frame the festival's exponential growth as evidence of a widespread cultural desire for coalescent aesthetic, social, and civic experiences (Burning Man). This framing, however, does not go unchallenged. In recent years, groups of Burners have publically questioned whether or not the festival in its current configuration can continue to inspire the creation of unique and powerful works of art. They also question the degree to which increased regulation and management of Black Rock City logistically and creatively affect artistic content, why the Burning Man Organization does not increased funding for its public artists in proportion to the organization's revenue increases, and whether or not changes to the festival's structure ultimately lead to an increase in passive spectatorship in the viewing masses (e.g. BORG

2). These ongoing debates demonstrate the value Burners place on dialogic art and the relationship Burners perceive between public art and the festival's success.

Burning Man's overtly visual nature coupled with its remarkable popularity, its commitment to visible civic action, and the membership's expressed concerns for sustainability of the festival's visual nature, make the festival's public art a unique locus for investigating the relationship between visual experiences and community activities. This massive commitment to the creation, display, and use of public art reifies a pronounced convergence of "orchestrating and experiencing" visual information happening within the festival. I am, therefore, intrigued by Burning Man's multiple uses of public art and Burning Man's apparent successes and emerging challenges with creating and maintaining a strong and vibrant community through the use of dialogic art and visible participation as primary forms of civic dialog. I am also intrigued that in this collusion I feel my artist side and my researcher wanting to work together to better understand the ways Burning Man promotes visual experiences and visible participation, where the issues of visible sustainability lie, and what other communities might learn about community formation and maintenance from Burning Man's commitment to visual civic expression.

As a result of this interest, I place Burning Man's dialogic use of public art in the center of my epistemologically-tandem search for useful responses to the ever vexing "What is Burning Man?" question.

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Because I conduct scholarly research from a communication-studies perspective, I began my research into Burning Man's dialogic art by first evaluating established communication-based research methods for investigating the discursive qualities of public art. What I discovered is that within the communication discipline, the analysis of visible objects is a relatively new scholarly practice, and public art studies almost exclusively appear under the

methodological rubrics of rhetorical studies, media studies, or critical culture studies (Hope, 2006). Within these three research areas, public art is most often framed and evaluated as either a form of public memorial, where the visual elements of the public art are believed to represent, commemorate, dispute, or disrupt historical, political, or social events linked to the community producing the art (Blair, Jeppson, & Pucci, 1991; Mitchell, 1992), or as public memory, where the visual elements are believed to illustrate, inform, and reshape, or even erase the cultural attitudes about the subject matter represented by the work of art (Bodnar, 1992; Casey, 2004; Browne, 2004). In both frameworks, the communication effects of the artwork are determined by critics conducting close textual analyses of the visual artifacts, a deconstructive process based in critical rhetoric and semiotic practices designed to reveal the greater persuasive, linguistic, and/or cultural significances expressed by the physical components of the visual objects (Olson, Finnegan, & Hope, 2008).

This close reading / public memory / public memorial approach to studying public art has yielded a fair range critiques. Examples include analyses of the AIDS Memorial Quilt (Jones, 2007; Blair & Michel, 2007; Rand, 2007); the Vietnam Memorial (Foss, 1986; Ehrenhaus, 1988; Carlson & Hocking, 1988; Blair, Jeppeson, & Pucci, Jr., 1991); Kennedy Space Center's Astronaut Memorial (Blair & Michel, 1999); the Civil Rights Memorial (Blair & Michel, 2000); coal miner memorials (MacDonald; 2010); public zoos (DeLuca & Slawter-Volkening, 2009); ancient war monuments (Lamp, 2009); rural cemeteries (Wright, 2005); makeshift shrines at sites of public tragedy (Jorgensen-Earp & Lanzilotti, 1998); tourist kitsch (Sturken, 2007); video war games (Hess, 2007;); web memorials (Foot, Warnick, & Schneider, 2005; Hess, 2007); and various museums and museum exhibits including the Delta Blues Museum (King, 2006), the Buffalo Bill Museum (Dickinson, Ott, & Aoki, 2005); the National Civil Rights Museum (Atwater & Herndon, 2003); and the Museum of Tolerance (Reading, 2003).

These studies vary in topic, but if they are reviewed together, this body of work demonstrates an already establishing research approach for investigating the public

nature of public art which first identifies and contextualizes a significant visible object historically, temporally, and spatially, then offers a breakdown of the key visual components of the object to demonstrate the critic's close textual analysis, then discusses the message(s) the key visual elements express to one or more audiences, and finally offers a summary argument about implications and audience reaction to the visual messages. Special critical attention is also given to the fundamental theoretical focus of public memory/public memorial analyses, namely the tensions between the official voices and objectives of community and cultural leaders who are viewed as representatives of historic, dogmatic, sacred, patriotic, and other formalized power narratives in control of the production of the visual artifacts, and the vernacular voices of the viewing publics who are positioned as diverse, changing, and plural in their understandings and experiences of the formal narratives presented to them (Kammen, 1991; Bodnar, 1992; Phillips, 2004).

The foundational research helping the communication discipline establish this line of public memory/public memorial inquiry is heavily attributed to the theoretical and methodological work of Carole Blair, whose arguments for expanding rhetorical analysis to include consideration for material objects, like public art work, opened up the field of public inquiry to non-written and non-verbal texts. As she explains:

> In speaking or writing about a commemorative rhetoric of architecture or sculpture, I take "rhetoric" to be any partisan, meaningful, consequential text, with the term "text" understood broadly as a legible or readable event or object… If we shift our focus further back to the question of the *source* of the stipulated characteristics – partisanship, meaningfulness, consequence, and even legibility – we must identify what makes these characteristics possible. And perhaps the most basic answer is the materiality of the text (Blair, 1999, p. 18).

Based on this definition of materiality, Blair (1999) suggests five areas of focus for analyzing public art and public memorials from a rhetorical perspective. These areas include analyzing the significance of the text's material existence, the durability of the displayed text, the possible modes of preservation and reproduction associated with the text, how the text operates in relation to other texts, and how the material text acts affect people. These focal points introduced the start of a communication-based method for analyzing public art work, and helped give public memory/public memorial scholarship is analytic character by establishing this line of analysis as a text-based inquiry.

This text-based public memory/public memorial methodological approach to studying public art is effective and informative, since it folds visual analyses rather seamlessly in with written and verbal textual criticism, the more established and therefore more accepted focus for rhetorical criticism (Foss, 1994). It also preserves the textual analysis goal of critically investigating the persuasive elements of the text in conjunction with the audience-centered, public reception of the text's persuasive elements (Vatz, 1973; Black, 1978; Leff, 1986; Browne, 2001; Leff, 2001; Vatz, 2009). Additionally, the method provides a way to organize and contextualize a myriad of visual information under the rubric of visual textual criticism while linking the analysis of this visual information to well-established rhetoric-based communication theories related to public space, public speech, civic dialog, social movements, and the public sphere – the fundamental concepts related to a communication studies approach for investigating community formation and civic action.

In relation to my research objectives for my Burning Man project, material rhetorical analysis immediately appeared to be the best and only research approach for my study. However, the more involved I became with Burning Man, and the more time I spent reflecting on my experiences in the desert and in Black Rock City, the more I found myself questioning the scope of material rhetoric and its ability to fully account for the layers of experiences attached to the creation and display of public art at the festival. I also began to question the method's ability to fully address the social and civic implications of those

experiences. Reflecting on two activities in particular, preparing to attend Burning Man and physically interacting with public art on the Playa, fueled this doubt.

When preparing to attend Burning Man, organizers emphasize the need for Burners to thoroughly prepare to travel and live in the desert, and Burners, in turn, take this mandate very seriously. The result is that preparing for the Playa takes on both pragmatic and ritualistic tones for Burners as there are substantial personal, spiritual, creative, and logistical decisions that must be made to get oneself and one's art to the desert. Preparation also generates anticipation and excitement for the event as it is a shared community experience all Burners participate in, since all Burners must travel one way or another to get to the Playa. These considerations clearly affect both the material and ideological conceptualization and manifestation of art for the Playa while also impacting the audience's understanding, appreciation, acceptance or rejection of the artwork once it is displayed at the festival. Preparation, therefore, presents as a topic which should be considered fully when analyzing the public art at Burning Man.

Studying preparation from with a textual analysis methodology, however, is problematic. Textual analysis, material or otherwise, is not designed to fully take into account behind the scenes or preparatory processes related to the production of the text. Textual analysis is based on an ideological premise that the author is "dead" (Barthes, 1977), or otherwise unknowable and therefore irrelevant as the source of textual meaning (Foss, 1994). From this perspective, pre-text processes like preparation are considered beyond the purview of the critic, whose task is to critique "the products of man" (sic) and the "harvests of human imagination" and not the phenomena related to the production of the text under evaluation (Black, 1978, p. 5).

Another Burning Man phenomenon highlighting a limitation to textual analysis is related to the manipulation of public art at the festival. Burners engage in a civic practice they call "active participation" which often manifests as a form of visible interaction with public

art, either as a producing artist or an engaged audience member. Active participation is a highly regarded community activity, so physically engaging art at Burning Man imbues festival participants with substantial civic credibility. Burners interact with art in a variety of ways, and these interactions often involve physically altering artwork in some manner, like burning, smashing, moving, spinning, rolling, jamming, scaling, appropriating, dismantling, or giving it away. Interactions are physical because visible engagement allows Burners to publicly demonstrate their commitment to underlying Burning Man philosophies which stress aesthetic experiences should provide more to the community than static, passive, and experientially limited viewing. The end result of active participation is that it is almost impossible to find a work of art that is not constantly being altered at the festival. Active participation also suggests the meanings audiences attached to public art at Burning Man are spread across space and time, and emerge from a constant state of flux.

Flux, however, is another consideration conceptually beyond the framework of textual analysis. For a text to be suitable for textual analysis, it must be defined, literally or conceptually, as static to allow the critic to craft a deep read of the text (Ricoeur, 1991). If the text is not "fixed" or "frozen" in time, it is considered too ambiguous to persuasively affect the audience. Highly ambiguous texts, then, fall out of the purview of rhetorical criticism since ambiguity, especially ambiguity in visual texts, equates to persuasively ineffective communication and therefore cannot be adequately evaluated by rhetorical methods (Fleming, 1996).

Introducing these two examples is not to say discussion of preparation, flux, or any similar type of consideration is completely absent in public memory/public memorial text-based critiques. This type of discussion may be included, to a certain degree, as part of the historical or political contextualizing of the artwork, and when establishing the source of dichotic tension between official and vernacular voices related to the art. My concern, then, was not the complete absence of these discussion points. My concern was for the way in which the framework of textual analysis prioritizes visual data for evaluation.

As these examples illustrate, the conceptual and practical framing of text-based methods position certain aesthetic considerations, like the visually observable aspects of art, as primary areas of analytic focus, and position other concerns, like non-material creative practices, as contextualizing considerations designed to support the primary analysis. These framing limitations intrinsically define for the communication scholar what is and is not considered part of a visual text, privilege what elements are evaluated for understanding the meaning of the image, and define which types of aesthetic processes are identified, evaluated, and incorporated into text-based analyses.

In the context of evaluating dialogic art, this hierarchy is cause for concern because it fundamentally affects the practical, epistemic, and ontological considerations of the researcher by pre-defining how a visual text communicates with an audience. In doing so, the method doesn't allow the critic to account for dialogic change – in the artist, the viewer, or the art product itself. To challenge the framework of textual analysis to account for change, then, means pulling the communication critic out of the established framework of textual analysis and into a long-standing debate about how artwork communicates and where the "meaning" in artwork lies.

Questioning the methods for evaluating artwork is by no means a new concern, nor is the concern limited to visual scholars within the communication discipline. Image makers and theorists from many different eras and disciplines have asked the questions "What elements constitute a visual text?" and "How best do we engage visual texts in order to gain insight into their meaning?" (e.g. Plato, 1976; Aristotle, 1976; Kant, 2005; Hegel, 1994; Heidegger, 1971; Barthes, 1977; Barthes, 1982; Benjamin, 2008; Dewey, 1934; Ricoeur, 1991; Foucault, 1970; Berger, 1972; Baudrillard, 1994; Danto, 1997; Mitchell, 1994; Elkins, 2003, Pepper, 1994).

In contemporary scholarship, authors often refer to Sontag's (1966) now classic assessment of interpretation to summarize the limitations of textual criticism:

> Though the actual developments in many arts may seem to be leading us away from the idea that a work of art is primarily its content, the idea still exerts and extraordinary hegemony. I want to suggest that this is because the idea is now perpetuated in the guise of a certain way of encountering works of art thoroughly ingrained among most people who take any of the arts seriously. What the overemphasis on the idea of content entails is the perennial, never consummated project of *interpretation*. And, conversely, it is the habit of approaching works of art in order to *interpret* them that sustains the fancy that there really is such a thing as the content of a work of art (p. 5).

In communication studies, the flip side of Sontag's argument – the voice of pro-interpretation – appears as a rebuttal favoring the bracketing of subjective aesthetic experiences in order to focus on the ordered, less apparent, or perhaps even hidden, persuasive messages the visual texts convey (e.g. Birdsell & Groarke, 1996; Blair, J. A., 1996; Edwards & Winkler, 1997; DeLuca, 2000; Finnegan, 2001; DeLuca, 2002; Hariman & Lucaites, 2003; Hariman & Lucaites, 2004). From this pro-interpretation stance, effort is made to establish that visual texts do operate as content-carrying "speech" acts and these acts can be deconstructed to reveal both the content of the message and the strategies in play that make the messages persuasively effective. This orientation is especially evident in certain lines of critical-cultural analysis, where critics are particularly committed to revealing the communicative affects of power structures and dominant relationships as they are expressed through visual media (Bernard, 1998; Mirzoeff, 1999; Rogoff, 1998; Sturken & Cartwright, 2009).

This long-standing debate, like the tip of an iceberg, hints to the larger and more complex questions associated with image making and image sense-making lurking in the ontological subtext of the divide, like the great philosophical questions "What

is the nature of art?" and "What constitutes an aesthetic experience?" Suffice it to say, addressing the great philosophical questions regarding the nature of images and visual experience fell well beyond the scope of my immediate concern. What did remain relevant was consideration for how contemporary researchers wishing to address the tension between employing visual methods which are both systematic enough to produce valid insights into the communication affects of visual texts and elaborate enough to more fully account for the experiential complexity between texts and text makers and text viewers, might look at both sides of this debated in order to find ways to augment text-based visual analyses so that the newly emerging area of visual communication studies can be expanded to take into account more of the processes and experiences associated with the production and consumption of visual information.

This is the methodological crossroads I found myself facing as I began my project. Based on my lived experiences with Burning Man, I felt the need to keep my research project grounded in rhetoric-based material textual analysis in order to maintain the communication studies focus and a strong connection to public theory. But I also wanted to find a way to increase the amount of subjective considerations I could include in my framing and analyses of the visual texts. I still did not want to substitute textual analysis for aesthetic inquiry, or vice versa, or separate my research methods to produce separate studies. I wanted to extend textual analysis to include more consideration for the subjective aspects of the public art experience.

With that goal in mind, and turning to Blair as a precedent, I began exploring ways rhetoric-based textual analysis could once again be expanded – this time to include process-based experiential considerations.

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As I began exploring ways to augment textual analysis, I quickly discovered I was not alone in my desire to work with more complex and inclusive visual research methods. My search, in fact, dropped me squarely inside a larger research conversation called "visual studies." For all intent and purposes, visual studies can be defined as the "study of visual practices across all boundaries" (Elkins, 2003, p. 7). An outgrowth of contemporary culture studies, visual studies is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of visual objects with practitioners committed to retaining and addressing the complexity of visual media throughout the analytical process. Because of its interdisciplinary nature, researchers in visual studies often combine a variety of research methodological and analytical approaches together to explore images. The goal, however, is not to create what Elkins (2003) calls a "magpie theory of interdisciplinarity" where various methods are cobbled together to cleverly or seductively use images to illustrate theories and/or arguments (p. 27). Instead the goal of the interdisciplinary approach is to create "interesting" scholarship based in immersion with the visual material so that "preoccupation" with the images leads the researcher to new insights and discoveries about visual experiences (p. 30).

By this definition, Elkins presents visual studies as an interdisciplinary practice more akin with bottom-up, grounded theory approaches to research than top down, theoretically driven lines of inquiry. This framing is important as it somewhat frees up visual studies from the larger and more encompassing culture studies project, which is heavily guided by the legacy of the Frankfurt School, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Neo-Marxism, and the tenets of critical theory. This break allows for the bricolaging of methods from a variety of visual disciplines, not just lines of critical inquiry, to allow the researcher to focus her attention on aspects of visual experiences the more established critical practices often ignore or overlook (Elkins, 2003). It also allows practitioners to demonstrate an appreciation of the specific nature of the subject matter at hand – visual materials – over the contextualization of the subject matter – the culture in which viewing occurs – to generate scholarly information about and for distinctly visual epistemological and ontological perspectives.

This conception of visual studies resonated strongly with me. Given my disciplinary struggle with textual analysis and my internal struggle with conflicting visual epistemologies, it isn't too surprising I found the idea of "interesting" bricolage under the disposition of visual studies appealing. Nor is it surprising I would be drawn to a methodology offering a means for uniting seemingly disparate ways of thinking about visual information into a collaborative framework and providing a rationale for evaluating visual information existing beyond the materiality of the visual text. In response to the resonance, I shifted my research focus from the sole purview of material rhetoric and moved into the new and expansive world of visual studies.

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Conceptually speaking, visual studies is an inspiring idea. Practically speaking, visual studies is still quite new so very few research projects have been produced within its purview. At the time I began my Burning Man research project, I could not locate a single visual studies project drawing on theories or methods from the communication discipline to serve as a model or provide guidelines for my work. So before I could begin my own visual studies project I needed to determine what a visual studies approach utilizing communication theory and methods could "look" like, and decide how to proceed from there.

For the reasons discussed above I knew I wanted to keep material rhetorical analysis a key part of my visual studies project, so I began my methodological bricolage with Blair's (1999) five-point evaluative criteria for material critique. But what to add to material rhetoric to better explore preparation, flux and the other subjective, intangible, and transitory features of visible materials and visual experiences? And what to add to material rhetorical analysis to appease my artist side?

I turned back to my communication literature to look for answers. In re-reading the literature I was happy to discover Blair (1999) actually hints at a direction for adding

more subjective methods to her model. At the end of her outline for evaluating rhetoric's materiality she writes:

> But among the many things I have learned from my experience with these memorial sites – often in spite of my own "educated expectations" – is the fact that they construct valenced reaction and depths of visitor experience that cannot be described, much less explained, in terms of their symbolism or by reference to their makers… But I am quite sure that rhetoric's characteristic materiality cannot be reduced to either of those attributes. One of the forgone opportunities of this analysis is consideration of how the material, symbolic, and purposeful dimensions of rhetoric may interact, interfere, or intersect with one another (p. 50).

Blair's call for deeper exploration of the intersection of the "material, symbolic, and purposeful" links material rhetoric to another line of rhetorical scholarship interested in the intersections of materiality and experience – studies of vernacular discourse. In particular, Blair's considerations resonate with Sloop & Ono (1997) and Ono & Sloop (1999) who suggest critics interested in vernacular discourses should think more about space and interaction, and actually go to the place where the discourses occur to better understand evaluate the discursive aspects of rhetorical texts. In effect, Ono and Sloop (1997) advocate for combining the practice of ethnography, particularly ethnography's use of in situ participant observation and field work, with rhetorical analysis to achieve a more nuanced critique.

I found the idea of combining material textual analysis with interpretive ethnography completely intriguing. Interpretive ethnography is a "form of inquiry and writing that produces descriptions and accounts about the ways of life of the writer and those written about" (Denzin, 1997). It is a qualitative approach to research utilizing participant

observation, interviews, field notes, and other detailed observational and analytical methods for collecting and interpreting data. Interpretive ethnography addresses lived experiences but also focuses on symbolic meanings of cultural actions as they occur in real time and are experienced in the real world. Interpretive ethnography methods differ greatly from textual analysis, however its dual focus is, as Sloop and Ono suggest, arguably congruent with material rhetoric's emphasis on vernacular discourses and symbolic interaction. Interpretive ethnography, therefore, could provide my project with the needed methodological extension for investigating and evaluating the social processes surrounding the production and consumption of dialogic public art.

Following Sloop and Ono's suggestion, I decided to extend Blair's method for material rhetorical analysis with interpretive ethnography. Specifically, I chose to make visual ethnography, an approach to interpretive ethnography with a double focus on both the cultural use of visual materials and the study of visual systems within a culture, and one where the researcher uses visual media to explore visual media (Morphy & Banks, 1997) as the interpretive method for my project. I chose this method because in visual ethnography field data is recorded and analyzed with the assistance of visual-based media like photography, and findings are presented in an appropriate visual form like a cinematic documentary. Cameras serve as instruments for extending the senses, and using cameras in research makes use of wide-spread cultural familiarity with thinking and communicating photographically (Collier & Collier, 1986).

Visual ethnographers argue visual media provide a means for incorporating additional sensory information into research practices. Photographs are particularly well suited for exploring "the most subjective aspects of our research" (Harper, 1987, p. 4). Photographs also relay cultural information on multiple epistemological levels. As Prosser (1998) summarizes:

> Taken cumulatively images are signifiers of our culture; taken individually they are artefacts that provide us with very particular information about our existence. Images provide researchers with a different order of data and, more importantly, an alternative to the way we have perceived data in the past (p. 1).

These aspects of visual ethnography, along with visual ethnography's ability to allow the researcher to produce an aesthetically evocative visual product alongside his or her critical interpretation (Pink, 2001) swayed me to its use. Visual ethnography fell in line with my strong desire for my methodological bricolage to include ways of knowing about art that come from producing art, not just critiquing it. On a secondary note, I also found visual ethnography's dual product/criticism approach ethically appropriate for studying Burning Man. With visual ethnography I realized I could conduct a research project that would also produce an art project, and in the process I could give that art project back to the Burning Man community. This would allow me to conduct research in a manner honoring Burning Man's participation mandates which ask festival participants to actively give art to the community and avoid behaviors that are voyeuristic, self-serving, and non-reciprocal.

With my decision to utilize visual ethnography critically and creatively, I also decided to make still photography the primary means for collecting data for my study. Reflecting on my past experiences with Burning Man, still photography felt like the most respectful and appropriate way to use media at the site. The Burning Man Organization heavily regulates the use of video cameras, and many Burners are leery of being filmed. Video, therefore, was not an option. Still cameras, however, are common at Burning Man and taking photographs of the artwork is a regular part of festival experiences. Burning Man's conduct code for still photographers, which encourages people to ask permission before taking photos and to avoid photographing exploitative or gratuitous scenes (Photography, 2001) also coincides with contemporary ethic standards for visual ethnography. Still photography could be minimally disruptive to the overall Burning Man experience while

allowing me to collect a visual record of the festival's visible cultural texts. Photography would also allow me to capture visual data and while remaining close to the visual language and visual practices of the festival. And in the process, photography would become my medium for embodied exploration.

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Given the amount of methodological considerations I now had in place, I believe I could have stopped building my bricolage at this point and begun producing an epistemologically-tandemed yet methodologically sound visual studies project with these methods in hand. The combination of material rhetorical analysis and visual ethnography would complement each other well and would provide multiple considerations for analysis from multiple experiential perspectives. But somehow the pairing did not feel complete to me. I felt like something was still missing.

After much consideration I realized my concern was hovering around the final presentation of the research data and what academic style this part of the project should take. Traditional academic writing uses a detached presentation style to emulate an inherently objective researcher stance. Detached presentation is a science-based research hold-over, demonstrative of a post-positivist paradigmatic belief that objectivity is a necessary component for conducting valid and reliable research, and for producing fact-based results (Deetz, 2004). Traditional academic writing, therefore, is often direct, linear, terminology-driven, and stoic. And it is often void of visual material other than the charts or graphs used to clarify the written presentation of data or findings. As a result, academic writing is often deemed unreadable for general audiences. Given my desire to represent tandem epistemologies in my research, and to produce a product I could give back to the Burning Man community, I knew this writing approach wasn't an option for this project.

Popular press writing, by contrast, is tonally opposite of academic writing. There are a wide variety of popular writing styles in circulation, and they are most often produced at the discretion of the author or the publication source. Popular press writing allows for more stylistic variance because it allows for the inclusion of an assortment of aesthetic techniques like lyrical writing, poetry, minimalism, and allegory. These techniques are purposefully used to produce mental and emotional connections with the reader, demonstrating a belief that mental and emotional connections increase empathy or other embodied reactions, and therefore, our understanding of the topic at hand. Increased understanding in this context is often valued over relaying only factual information. Form and aesthetics, then, take precedent over the demonstration of investigative rigor. In these regards, popular press writing can connect and inform, however, academic audiences often deem this approach too emotional and fluffy, and not representative of academically sound research practices, to be considered legitimate research. So while popular press writing held more appeal than traditional academic writing, I knew this writing approach was also problematic. I needed to find a compromise between the two.

To find a writing solution that incorporated the best of traditional research writing and popular press writing, I looked to newly emerging forms of ethnographic writing, or "new ethnography" (Goodall, 2000; Goodall, 2008) for suggestions. Ethnography is a qualitative practice and as such it paradigmatically challenges the assumptions of science-based research practices including scientific standards for academic writing. These challenges reflect the incorporation of feminist, critical race, and post-colonial theories into the ethical guidelines for conducting qualitative research, and demonstrate a heightened awareness for potential abuses of power by "objective" researchers conducting scientific investigations (Denzin, 1997; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) In accordance with these concerns, and recognizing a legacy of past abuses in ethnographic research, qualitative scholars in general, and ethnographers in particular, pay close attention to potential places where abuses can occur. (Denzin, 1997; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) And one place that is of

particular concern is the actual write-up of the qualitative study (e.g. Clair, 2003; Goodall, 2000; Goodall, 2008; Richardson, 2000; Tierney & Lincoln, 1997; Van Maanen, 1995).

Research writing represents the thoughts and ideas of the writer. Recognizing those thoughts and ideas are often about other people, qualitative research practices require ethnographers to represent the people in their studies fairly, accurately, and ethically. This does not mean the ethnographic researcher is bound to producing only positive reviews. It does mean, however, special care should be given to language choices, the use of subjective data, fact checking by offering research subjects access to the research data, and disclosing the researcher biases which could affect his or her interpretation of cultural and material situations (e.g. Clair, 2003; Denzin, 1997; Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Ellis, 2004; Goodall, 2000; Goodall, 2008; Jackson, 1989; Neumann, 1996; Tierney & Lincoln, 1997; Van Maanen, 1995).

Despite these shared concerns there is, however, no single "right way" to produce an ethnography. Writing styles vary by researcher and reflect differing solutions for producing ethical studies. Variances in writing styles also reflect how ethnographies can be written differently to reflect researcher's use of a variety of research practices and connect with the research with different audiences (Van Maanen, 1988). Researchers producing ethnographies with methods closely approximating social-scientific practices tend to favor a stronger academic tone. Researchers producing ethnographies with more subjective and experiential methods tend to favor a stronger popular tone. Across the continuum, however, ethnographers strive to produce respectful, ethical, and self-reflexive work to help contextualize their observations and demonstrate the limitations and biases inherent to their work.

Since my project now included ethnographic components, I realized I needed to conscientiously decide how I wanted to write up my study. I needed to make a choice about my writing strategy for this project. To help me decide on a writing strategy I made a list of my project goals and prioritized them in the following order:

1. Create an informative and aesthetic research project exploring the "What is Burning Man?" question by investigating the production and consumption of dialogic public art at the Burning Man Festival

2. Produce a final research product that includes both photographs and written passages

3. Strive not to privileging the writing over the photographs or the photographs over the writing so both epistemologies are present in tandem with the data and the findings

4. Keep to the spirit of Burning Man by respecting the festival's mandate for active participation

5. Produce a final project that is simultaneously academically sound and publically accessible

6. Produce a final project commiserate with qualitative research practices in that the final product does not strive to present absolute facts but instead uses a variety of means to produce partial knowledge and increased understanding about the event (Barone, 2001; Lindlof &Taylor, 2002)

While making this list, I found my thoughts drifting back to the people I meet and easily connect with through our shared understanding of Burning Man. I realized, then, I had established my research goals, claimed tandem epistemologies, adopted visual studies, and crafted my bricolage to try and foster a similar connection with people unfamiliar with Burning Man. This strategy, I also realized, reflected my deeply held belief that shared

experiences increase the potential for shared understanding. It was important, then, for me to embrace this belief throughout my research project and find ways to provide moments of access and reflection to highly ambiguous experiences and information. Increased understanding was the motivation so creating opportunities for increased understanding had to be the end goal. I wanted to make entry points into complex texts and dialogs.

Recognizing this overarching goal for fostering connection pulled me toward a line of ethnographic writing called narrative inquiry . Narrative inquiry is a type of qualitative writing that draws heavily on literary traditions to produce the written study (Goodall, 2008). Literary style is used to convey what Bateson (1958) referred to as the inseparable aspects of pragmatic function and ethos of a culture. It is also used to help incorporate the subjective experiences and personal introspections of the author as meaningful data into the research project (Ellis, 1991; Ellis, 2004); help construct a persuasive argument about the viability of the research through the use of different tones and stylized forms (Anderson, 1987; Fox, 1996; Jago, 2002; Tracy, 2004); and help connect readers to the experiential nature of the object of the study through the evocative use of language (Ellis, 2004; Ronai, 1995; Tillman-Healy, 1996). Through the incorporation of reflexive writing passages and careful consideration for representation and voice, narrative inquiry also allows the author address his or her ethical concerns directly in the academic study, through the writing itself (Goodall, 2008).

Like visual ethnography, narrative inquiry has an investigative side and a production side. So like visual ethnography, narrative inquiry would allow me to explore dialogic art from a critical perspective while simultaneously producing an aesthetic product. Also, the literary qualities of narrative inquiry would allow me to produce a written product potentially more compatible with photographic data than traditional academic writing would allow. And finally, engaging in narrative inquiry would give me an aesthetic voice

105 Please see the introduction for further discussion regarding this term.

to use while experiencing the effects of dialogic art first hand, and contemplating the rhetorical affects of the materiality of public art and its dialogic relationship to public discourse and community building.

With narrative inquiry, my visual studies bricolage felt complete. Bricolage in hand, I was now ready to begin conducting the actual research.

Implementation of the Methodological Bricolage, Analysis of the Data, and Implications

I put my visual studies plan into action by spending August 25 to August 30, Monday through Sunday, actively participating in the 2008 Burning Man Festival. Data collection recorded via active participant observation (Spradley, 1980) and the writing of "thick description" field notes (Geertz, 1973) began, however, before the actual start date of the event. Beginning with the online purchase of tickets six months earlier, I started composing handwritten field notes and reflexive journal entries for all Burning Man related experiences leading up to our arrival at the festival's gates.

Once at the festival, my observation level dramatically increased and I began recording written field notes and reflexive journal entries at hourly intervals. Since the size of the festival and its 24/7 activity level made it impossible to record every art-related activity occurring at the event, I focused my field observations on key areas of the festival including Center Camp, the ice distribution centers, the Esplanade, the two small town squares located on opposite radial arms on the grid, the Temple, and the central complex housing The Man, and all major public art installations located on the Playa. Field notes and journal entries were recorded during all waking hours at the event.

Additional written field data was collected at locations where I was able to experience moments of "active participation" more fully. These locations included our personal camp, spontaneous gatherings in other participants' tents and camps, random encounters on the grid, the porta-potties, and open spaces in the desert.

Collecting written field notes and reflexive writing ended several weeks after the conclusion of the festival. Field notes were maintained after the event to include observations about re-entry experiences and personal reflections about the continuing impact of the festival. These final field notes also include observations about the cyclic nature of Burning Man and the ways Burning Man is perpetuated through its regenerative cycle.

Total page count for the written field notes and reflexive journaling was approximately 150 single spaced, hand-written pages. Notes and journal entries, written in free-form, were produced in the spirit of writing as a method of inquiry. As such, this collection of writings represents the first "draft" of my scholarly narrative.

Concurrent with collecting written field notes I also created a photographic record of my field experiences. My photographic record started with images related to packing our vehicle for the trip and ended with our returned home. When desert conditions allowed, photographs were taken with a Canon Rebel XT camera using 55 mm and 135 mm lenses. When heat or dust threatened our camera gear, photographs were taken with a Sony Cyber Shot camera.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines for this project stipulated approval forms needed to be signed prior to photographing portraits of people. Permission would not be needed to photograph crowd shots or pubic art work. Since the primary reason for taking photographic field notes was to capture images of the temporary public art and not to obtain portraits of people, and because I wanted to minimize the disruptive presence of the camera during peak festival experiences, and because many festival participants wish

to remain anonymous or incognito at the event and would feel uncomfortable signing a release form, I chose to focus primarily on collecting photographs of artwork at key locations and minimally pursue photographs of people engaging the art installations.

Again recognizing it would be impossible to exhaustively photograph a 24/7 event, blocks of time were set aside to specifically accommodate the use of photography. Times were chosen based on available light and minimal impact of heat and dust as well as potential for capturing the artwork in its best presentational form. The bulk of installation photographs, therefore, were taken during early morning hours and later in the week, when the sun light was most accommodating and the artwork most complete. It should be noted, however, that these times are also represent peak use times since many Burners want to take their own photographs of the art in the best possible conditions or enjoy the installations before the blazing desert heat makes the Playa unbearable.

Photography duties were split between me and my research partner, Todd Stewart, and long-time campmate Russell Atkinson. All three of us followed the IRB guidelines established for this project. Using three photographers allowed for increased coverage of the event. It also produced images of the artwork from multiple angles and perspectives.

Once collected, the written field notes, the reflexive journal entries, and the field photographs were augmented with secondary data sources. These included the complete content of the Burning Man organizational web site, the complete content of related web sites including Laughingsquid.com and BORG2.com, a comprehensive review of popular press media coverage of the event appearing in print between 2003 and 2008 (bracketed to match my own participation years), a comprehensive review of the San Francisco Bay area on-line news coverage of the event including all posted reader comments and responses to the coverage (the primary source of Burning Man news coverage as well as the news source for the largest community of past and present Burners), a systematic review *ePlaya*, the main Burning Man discussion board, and a comprehensive review of

Burning Man-related publications including *Jack Rabbit Speaks*, the online newsletter, *Piss Clear*, the playa newspaper, and the organization's information and planning guides. Collectively this data set yielded approximately 2,000 pages of text-based data.

Lastly, artifacts collected from my three previous burns were added as a data set. The artifacts included a journal kept during the 2007 Burning Man Festival, an accumulation of Playa gifts, and our collection of Playa camping gear. All photographs taken during 2003, 2004, and 2007 (previous attendance years for all three photographers) were also added to the mix. The inclusion of these photographs raised the overall image count to approximately 1,800 digital photographs of Burning Man.

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Once the data was collected, it was organized for analysis under two rubrics. The first rubric was designed to rhetorically analyze the textual portions of the supplemental data. This data was analyzed by modifying Blair's (1999) five-point guideline for evaluating material objects. Guiding questions for the analysis were framed to address how Burning Man participants discuss the following questions (excerpted from Blair's guidelines while noting these questions were originally developed to be used directly by the critic to analysis an actual material text):

1. What is the significance of the text's material existence?
    a. What is different as a result of the text's existence?

2. What are the apparatuses and degrees of durability of displayed by the text?

3. What are the text's modes or possibilities of reproduction or preservation?

4. What does the text do to (or with, or against) other texts?
    a. What does the text enable, appropriate, contextualize, supplement, correct, challenge, compete with, and/or silence?

5. How does the text act on people?
    a. How does the text demand our attention and make us move or think in particular directions? How does it summon us?
    b. How does the text create a communal space? How does it make the space feel like a destination?
    c. How does the text make us feel important?
    d. How does the text act as an event?

The second rubric was designed to evaluate the primary photographic field data in conjunction with the primary written field data and journal entries. Since the methodological goal of this research project was to combine specifically selected research methods and utilize the methods synergistically, it was especially important this rubric not favor one analytic approach over the other. Textual content analysis could not supersede visual analysis and vice versa. To meet this goal, I worked with my research partner and data base designer and programmer, Todd Stewart, to create a proprietary data base that would facilitate a simultaneous evaluation of the photographs with the written components.

I commissioned the creation of this data base for two important reasons. The first reason was to address the methodological biases found in existing software options. Existing software programs are designed to organize and analyze qualitative data sets with distinct methodological preference. For example, NVivo, the main analytic tool for organizing qualitative data, is designed to interlace discrepant data sets into a cohesive whole to facilitate a unified coding process for the complete data set. As such, NVivo

works with the assumption the primary data will be word based, as evidenced by the fact the first seven versions of NVivo did not contain options for including visual data in the collective. With NVivo 8, options for including visual data were introduced, however these options are extremely limited as they separate the visual data from the textual data and only accommodate a content-analysis approach for analyzing the visual data.

Similarly, ThumbsPlus, a primary software tool used by visual scholars to collect and organize visual data sets only accommodates visual data. It does not include options for connecting written passages with the photographs, nor does it provide any kind of analytic tools. Certain types of digital documents (e.g. Word documents and PDF files) can be linked to image folders but they remain separate files. ThumbsPlus works well as an organizational device for digital visual data sets, and allows the researcher to repeatedly view images contained in the data base. Ultimately this structure keeps the visual data separated from any text-based data sets, thus allowing only visual engagement with the images.

The second reason the data base was commissioned was because there were no other software options that could adequately accommodate exceptionally large visual data sets for qualitative analysis or rhetorical analysis. Of the existing options, NVivo quickly becomes bogged down when images are inserted, and while ThumbsPlus can handle larger quantities of images, its limited search and selection tools and over reliance on folder systems make locating and comparing image data extremely difficult. I needed an effective means for organizing, identifying, selecting, and processing 1,800-plus images, and an effective means for linking 1,800 images to a story emerging through writing as a method of inquiry.

Responding to these limitations and needs, the new proprietary data base was purposefully designed around a relational field model of data organization. With this model, a large visual data set is imported into the data base to create a new data library. Each image in the data set forms a unique entry within the library, with each

image appearing in large format (618x444 pixel / 8.5x6 inches) on its own data entry page. Contained within the data entry pages are multiple input fields for entering and organizing text-based information, all of which are viewable simultaneously with the image. Fields include input areas for recording basic information for identifying the image (e. g. name, year taken, subject matter), a series of fields which can be independently labeled and used to record specific analytic content (e. g. content analysis, material analysis, audience reception) and open fields for recording thoughts and responses to the image while viewing it within the database, or for uploading corresponding field notes or other text-based information related to the image.

Additionally, all text-based field content can be highlighted and coded. Working from any page within the image library, the researcher can globally create and apply coding categories to any text appearing on any indexed page within the library. Coding frequency is visually represented as a color-coordinated bar graph on the right hand side of each page and as a color-coordinated cloud tag at the bottom of each page. The bar graph and cloud tag are purposefully included to provide visual representations of the text-based data, and to further balance the image/text data relationships within the data base.

Once constructed, I correlated all of my Burning Man photographs, written field notes, journal entries, and observations based on Blair's model for material rhetorical analysis inside the data base. As part of the correlation, I also annotated my written field notes with reflexive passages and composed new writing segments for my narrative while reviewing the images. Once again practicing writing as inquiry, I viewed this extension of my written field notes as the second draft of my scholarly narrative.

Additionally, I used the database to facilitate extended inductive and formative viewing periods (Prosser & Schwartz, 1998) for the photographs. Following Collier and Collier's (1986) basis model for pictorial analysis, I used the data base to progress through four analytical stages of image assessment:

First Stage: Observe data as a whole – see and respond to the visual data

Second Stage: Inventory or log data – create categories to assist with research goals

Third Stage: Create structured analysis – add detailed information and/or statistical information

Fourth Stage: Search for overtones and significance of the details by returning to complete field record

The database assisted with visual analysis by allowing me to easily sift and sort through the image library, to slow down and lengthen my viewing times, and to arrange and juxtapose images. I also returned to the data base regularly to maintain my viewing relationship with the photographs.

Once the rhetorical and data base supported analyses were complete, I began drafting the third version of the narrative. Written over a period of six months, the story emerged in episodic chapters addressing substantial periods of communal activities and engagement with pubic art throughout the Burning Man festival. Each chapter was written to explore more fully the primary themes emerging from both analytical rubrics. Consistent with writing as method of inquiry practices, each chapter was also reviewed by a variety of readers to help determine the effectiveness of the writing style, the accessibility of the content, and the perceived fidelity (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995) of the narrative. Readers included Burning Man participants, narrative scholars, and a popular press writer.

While obtaining feedback for the third draft, I began selecting and arranging photographs into photographic essays. These essays were designed to be complete vignettes in and of themselves, but also appear as layered vignettes with the written chapters to form

a complete visual narrative in book form. The photographic essays were intentionally conceptualized in this manner to reduce any appearance they were included to illustrate the written story or there to serve as visual validation for the written portions of the narrative. Berger's (1972) book *A Seventh Man: Migrant Workers in Europe* provided a precedent for my layered vignette approach, and I used this project to help guide my selection and layout of images.

Following Berger's lead, and relying on my professional training in graphic design, I selected and placed photographs into photographic essays while taking into consideration image content, size, ratio, color, form, perspective, style, genre, and the intertextual relationships (Ott & Walter, 2000) between images themselves. Photographs not conforming to IRB standards were not considered for use. Neither were images that for aesthetic purposes failed to convey information about the dialogic intention or capabilities of the pictured artwork. Criteria for storytelling fidelity were also extended to the visual essays, to help ensure the images represented an accessible, relatable, and complete narrative in their own right, and that the layout of the essay provided a visually interpretive exploration of the artwork itself. These criteria were used to help produce a separate but complimentary photographic narrative that would extend the reader's subjective experience in conjunction with the written story.

Upon completion of the third draft of the written narrative and the arrangement of the photographic essays, the fourth and finalized version of the visual narrative was produced. At this time the written narrative and photographic essays were imported into the design program, InDesign, and layered into a book form. After exploring multiple layout options, I chose a design format that I felt best balanced the amount of text against the weight of the photographs and best presented the images and text relationally. After much experimentation I altered the page format from a standard 8.5 by 11 inch letter size format to a custom 7.5 by 9 inch build size in order to better preserve the aspect ratio of the photographs and to accommodate the variety of text styles used throughout

the narrative. I also selected narrow, san-serif fonts for typesetting to keep the text from visually competing with the images. Additional design decisions included moving all photo captions to a separate section in the back of the book in order to preserve the visual presence of the images, and utilizing a variety of text box sizes to allow the narrative and the footnotes to appear visually separate but compatible on the same page.

It should be noted this version of the project was produced for paper publication and in consideration of publication expectations for the communication discipline. However, these design decisions were also made with consideration for alternative presentation forms, such as web-based multi-media formats, should the need or ability to use other kinds of presentation media arise in the future. The design decisions described here would allow for easy transfer of both the images and the written narrative into other media formats.

Findings and Discussion

The complete visual narrative, representing the collaboration between my artist side and my researcher side and a useful and informative yet always partial answer to the "What is Burning Man?" question, appears as the first half of this book.

In keeping with the objectives of this research project and the goals of producing experiential findings via the mediated portions of visual ethnography and narrative inquiry, the findings will not be fully restated here. However, the two main themes the narrative addresses – the pursuit of authentic experiences leading to aesthetic, social, and community transformation and the social implications of these pursuits – warrant a bit more methodological discussion.

Analysis of the data collected from the bricolaged visual studies methodology reveal Burners exert a substantial amount of energy to create, display, enjoy, and experience transformation through dialogic public art. This energy is organized into four distinct periods of synchronized labor, listed here in their natural and most effective order (but in not representative of the only order in which these periods can be experienced) and named for the dominant labor characteristics for each period:

1. **Preparation:** a familiarization period where Burners are exposed to the organization's guiding philosophies and to the organizational guidelines for producing public art. In this period creative concepting, problem solving, and logistical brainstorming activities are rampant as Burners try to determine what art project(s) they can produce and contribute to the festival. Burners engage in substantial amounts of research to learn about desert conditions, supplies, building materials, and available social networks. Excitement and imagination are balanced with practical, material, and logistical considerations.

2. **Manifestation:** a construction period where Burners build and display the public art conceptualized during the preparation phase. Participants in this phase include the conceptualizing Burners as well as additional Burners volunteering their labor or other services to make manifestation occur. Substantial attention is given to procuring and maintaining public display sites for the works of art, and the importance of public access is considered throughout construction. This is a highly interactive, collaborative, and group-oriented phase where

labor is both celebrated and expected as reification of the organizational ideologies inspiring the effort.

3. **Celebration:** a consumption period where Burners look, touch, taste, see, and listen to the public art. Celebration is highly interactive, unstructured, explorative, subjective, and filled with a sense of mystery, excitement, and openness to the unexpected. Celebration also includes evaluative periods where Burners discuss together their experiences with the public art, their interpretation and opinions of the public art, and their assessment of the success of the public art. Discussion is evaluative of specific aesthetic qualities as well as perceived demonstration of the attitudes and beliefs of the Burners producing the art. All Burners are able to participate in the Celebration phase, regardless of previous commitment to preparation or manifestation labor, although previous commitment is valued higher as Burners perceive participation in preparation and manifestation increase the quality of the celebration experiences.

4. **Transformation and Continuation:** a dialogic phase where Burners internalize the peak experiences the public art provides. During this phase Burners experience a labor climax characterized by an intense feeling of satisfaction in their work. Burners may also become self-reflective as they process their Burning Man experiences, and/or they may become more open and community-minded in order to perpetuate the feelings of closeness and connectedness this period produces. Once the labor high passes, Burner energy is redirected so

allow Burners to begin preparing again for the next festival and the next cycle of labor. Burners caught up in the scope and spectacle of the festival may experience transformation with or without contributing labor to the process. Those who experience preparation, manifestation, and celebration often experience transformation more fully, and in the process inspire other Burners to consider producing their own artwork and seeing it through to completion.

This labor cycle is unique to Burning Man, and represents a culmination of over twenty-five years of social experimentation conducted by Burners at Black Rock City. Though specific to Burning Man, the successful development and continuing implementation of this labor model suggest the defining characteristics of each period of synchronized labor could serve as an evaluative model for social critics assessing public art and/or dialogic art produced by other organizations operating in whole or in part as visual events. Descriptions of each labor period illustrate the types of creative considerations, social interactions, and material processes occurring at each phase. When converted from observations to lines of inquiry, these characteristics provide a series of analytic touchstones for evaluating public art with a material-focused and process-focused interpretive method. For example:

Preparation:

- How does the host organization communicate its guiding philosophies to its membership? To its potential membership?
- How are members / potential members made aware of their relationship and responsibility to public art?
- What is the relationship between members/potential members and the raw materials for creating public art?
- Where to members/potential members draw their aesthetic inspiration from?

Manifestation:

- What kind of emphasis is placed on the public display of public art?
- What kind of social practices lead to the production, viewing, and/or circulation of the public art?
- In what ways do members contribute to decisions about placement and access of the public art?
- How do aesthetic concepts and raw materials evolve during the construction phase?

Celebration:

- What kind of access does the public have to the public art?
- How does the public interact with the public art?
- How temporary or permanent is the public art display?
- How easily can the public artwork be modified?
- Who is allowed to modify the public artwork?
- How is the public encouraged to evaluate the public art?
- What criteria does the public use to evaluate the public art?
- How does the public art facilitate community bonding?

Transformation and Continuation:

- In what ways does the audience report being affected by the viewing the public art?
- In what ways does the public art process inspire the production of new art?
- How accommodating is the organization to the production and public display of new public art?
- What happens to the public art after its peak viewing?
- What happens to the community after the peak viewing?

While this list of questions is only partial and representative of only one interpretation of the field data, it demonstrates the potential for converting data findings from a singular multi-methods, bricolaged visual studies research project into a rubric for conducting additional image-based critical analyses. This list suggests methodological crossover is possible when data findings and subsequent questions are grounded in the subject matter at hand – the visuality of art and images and the personal, social, and transformative experiences visuality produce. In introducing this possibility, my goal is not to firmly establish this cross-over practice, or fully illustrate the viability of my visual methods. Rather, my hope is to stimulate further discussion about the potential of bricolaged visual methods organized under the rubric of visual studies for generating useful, informative, and expanded research practices within the communication discipline, and to demonstrate the potential for communication theories and methods to inform other visual research practices.

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