

From Radical to Routine:

BURNING MAN AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF A COUNTERCULTURAL MOVEMENT

Thesis

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Abstract

Burning Man refers to three entities; a community of motivated creatives, an organizational body and the week-long Nevada-desert art event that attracts up to 70,000 participants annually and culminates in the burning of a large effigy. All three iterations are rapidly growing and ask participants to embrace Ten Principles (or social ideals held in common) in order to create the liminal space that is ripe for individual and social transformation inherent to the Burning Man experience. With what may be considered widespread success of the event, Burning Man is grappling with how to sustain, protect and grow the culture of the event and community with many new participants each year. This work explores how the radical, avant-garde and transgressive event has necessarily changed over its 29-year history and how institutionalization, normalization and regulation has affected the spirit of curiosity, ingenuity and *communitas* at the heart of this extreme experience. It examines the trajectory of emergent culture, how emergent and dominant cultures interface and the role of cultural incorporation in this process. This work points to new directions for the practice and growing body of Cultural Sustainability work and theory by focusing on emerging cultural phenomenon and analyzing how Cultural Sustainability practices may be applied to the conscious creation/evolution of a culture.

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1. Introduction

Burning Man is a hyper-demonstration of the cultural questioning, creation and evolution that is occurring in western culture. From 2011 to 2015, I have been a participant-observer within the culture of Burning Man, and in this time the Burning Man event, community and organization has attracted exponentially more participants and media coverage, concerns regarding the enculturation of new participants, and criticisms of the social experiment.

Burning Man can be liminal space, a “time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action,” with regard to dominant mainstream culture, and as a carnivalesque environment, it “can be seen as potentially a period of scrutinization of the central values and axioms of the culture in which it occurs.”¹ By consciously creating a massive communal and shared liminal and luminoid space, Burning Man can be an opportunity for humanity to experience transformational ‘evolution’. These lived lessons of possibility can then affect the boundaries of reality and possibility for the individuals who experience them, as well as the wider dominant culture itself. Therefore, participants directly experience the dance of creativity, carnivalesque negation and subjective realities.

Cultures cycle through being emergent, incorporated into the mainstream and residualization. The incessant cycling of the counter culture of absurdism and social questioning that defines the art-as-life avant-garde movements [such as Dadaism, the Situationists, The Suicide Club and The Cacophony Society] that Burning Man grew out of places Burning Man within the trajectory of a recurring and ongoing onslaught of emerging social definitions. However, as Burning Man succumbs to mainstream society’s demands for structure and instances of incorporation in order to sustain itself, its [r]evolutionary potential may be being sacrificed.

Dick Hebdige succinctly states, “the moment when dominant society begins to recognize a subculture is the moment that the resistant power of the subculture begins to die.”² To avoid a disappointingly dull death by dilution, I believe that participants of this creative subculture have a responsibility to reinvent the experiment, to continue being subversive and push the boundaries of reality and possibility past the point of comfort, demonstrating to the mainstream masses that reality is subjective and more fun from the driver’s seat. Otherwise, the once radical experiment risks becoming a “misplaced attempt to merely rearrange the elements of the status quo rather than to radically alter it in a direction more in keeping with both survival and human dignity,” as anarchism philosopher Dennis Fox puts it.³

Is Burning Man maintaining legitimacy and authenticity, with its steroidal growth being simply testimony to this alternative paradigm’s relevance, applicability and appeal, or is the expanding community an indicator that the experiment has succumbed to the popularity the community purports to be averse to?

Since finding so much personal inspiration, identity and community amidst this culture, and being a committed Cultural Sustainability proponent, it has become of great import to ask: Has the event run the gamut of the cultural cycle, lost its appetite for criticizing the status quo, and become part of the dominant narrative? Or could this evolution of the countercultural movement be the hyper colored televised broadcast of the revolution we have been waiting for?

These questions are well suited to form the foundation for a Cultural Sustainability enquiry. Cultural Sustainability is an emergent intellectual space that spans a potentially deeply reflexive in practice folklore, anthropology and social activism.

¹ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), 167

² Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. (London: Routledge, 1979)

³³ Dennis R. Fox “Psychology, Ideology, Utopia, and the Commons”. *American Psychologist*, 40 (1985):48-58

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People have been asking me where I am from my entire life. I am biracial, my surname is difficult for many to pronounce, I choose to live in Australia, I speak with an American accent and I have moved 30 times in as many years. I am often asked where I'm "from" and endure constant references to my supposed and assumed "home". My wide and frequent movements give a lot of people a lot of reasons to ask me these questions, both necessitating the conversation and making it difficult to resolve.

Then I decided to go to Burning Man.

"I'm going to Burning Man too," I heard myself say. The continuous self-satisfied and somewhat smug self-descriptions of my Catchment Management course colleague were getting to me. It was January 2011 and we were in a group of variously-aged post-graduate students throwing oranges into creeks in the high country of Victoria, Australia. And yes, ok, we get it, you're cool and you're on the very edge of it all, because you're 'going to Burning Man this year'. Something in me snapped – together or apart, the interpretation is open – and I was surprised to hear the proclamation of inclusion and participation made in my own voice. I was going to Burning Man.

Four months earlier, I had decided to quit my job and walk away from my burgeoning career when I caught myself using the little clock in the corner of the computer screen to calculate how much money I had made that day so far. I was spending more and more time researching and sharing stories from the American Midwest in the wake of 2008's Global Financial Crisis and the proliferation of evidence of a shift from a financial to a social economy. Albeit borne of necessity, I found [and still find] this movement intensely inspiring and magnetically attractive, yet the motivation for revolutionary social constructs was seemingly impossible to translate to the comfortable and complacent Australian society I was frustrated to be amidst.

Partially to be one of the cool kids, and partially to just do something beyond the pale, I decided to go to Burning Man. Little did I know, how entirely clichéd this was.

Two months after that summer's day in the Australian High Country, I left Melbourne and headed for Chicago, where I set up my home base for my explorations of the American Midwest and Burning Man. My first interaction with anyone from the Burning Man community happened two months before I went to Burning Man. It was the anonymous greeting I received upon arriving at the Great Lakes Regional Burning Man event, a camping weekend in June 2011 in Northwest Michigan. It was here that I was greeted with an incredibly generous and genuine good hug and the traditional proclamation of, "Welcome home".

As I have described, I have lived a fairly nomadic existence so the word "home" is particularly charged for me and difficult for me to feel or define. But this stranger, whom I would never be able to identify again, held me emphatically saying, "Welcome home," with sincere intent, honesty and love. This was an immediately liminal space that dissolved my understandings of the anonymity and intimacy and opened me up for new definitions. It was at that moment that I formed a deep sense of connection and belonging to the people and temporary place of this society I had unwittingly chosen to become a part of.⁴ This moment marked my entrance into the world of Burning Man and transformed my sense of self, society and home.

After eight months in the Midwest and my first trip to Burning Man, I returned to Geelong, Australia and quickly reconnected with the love I share with the people and land of Australia. Looking out over the Geelong waterfront one night, I was surprised to recognize the nighttime scene of Burning Man in the

⁴ I soon realized Burning Man community members often refer to the playa, the location of the main annual BM event in the Nevada desert, or sometimes wherever many of them are gathered as 'home', based on the idea that you are deeply safe, supported and celebrated here.

watery reflections of the regional Australian city's lights and its ever-present oil refinery flame. I realized the pure potentiality of the playa is everywhere, and the sense of empowered possibility that I discovered at Burning Man, was not in the dust of the desert, but within me.

Since I became involved with the event and culture in 2011, increasing mass media coverage, social networking and a growing common cultural shift has attracted a huge influx of attention and demand to attend Burning Man. Simultaneously, concerns regarding the enculturation of new participants and criticisms of the experiment have intensified. This dramatic growth of demand for the community, the subsequent debate and discussion around the inclusion of new members, and the definition/defense of Burning Man culture for new and old community members alike has been my research focus throughout my pursuit of the degree for which this project is the capstone.

1.1 What is Burning Man?

Burning Man is an expression of a New Social Movement that is born of the philosophical lineage of the Cacophony Society, The Suicide Club, Dadaism and the Situationists. Though classified as an art event, the week-long 70,000 strong gathering is not a celebration of quality, but of capacity; the capacity to create, act and transform. The culture of Burning Man is an emergent dynamic and heterogeneous force that overall values radical expression, creation and civic participation and provides an alternative social and organizational structure that challenges mainstream, dogmatic and hierarchical social structures and concepts. The ideals, or principles, of the Burning Man event, culture and organizing body, and the resulting reality of compromises in their enactments is the subject of this work.

In 1986, Larry Harvey led a handful of friends to gather on a San Francisco beach and burn an effigy that Jerry James built. In 1990, 89 people created the event in the Black Rock Desert and the event steadily grew each year until it sold out (63,000 tickets) for the first time in 2011. Though the event population increases slightly each year, all tickets on public sale have been purchased nearly instantly each year since. As the event grew, demand for the experience has diversified and a regional network was launched in 2000. Now nearly 100 communities in over 20 countries gather around Burning Man events from potlucks to weekend campouts happening throughout the year and around the world. In order to help maintain a sense of commonality, the descriptive, rather than prescriptive, [Ten Principles were created in 2004](#). They include Radical Self Reliance, Communal Effort, Civic Responsibility, Leave No Trace, Decommodification, Gifting, Radical Self-Expression, Participation, Inclusion and Immediacy.⁵

Burning Man can be said to refer to three entities; a community of motivated creatives, an organizational body and the annual week-long desert art event that culminates in the burning of a large effigy. All three are rapidly growing and present their participants with Burning Man's Ten Principles (or social ideals held in common) in order to create the liminal space that is ripe for individual and social transformation that is inherent to the Burning Man experience. "Each year, Burning Man builds and dismantles a weeklong city of over 70,000 persons in the Nevada Black Rock Desert. Known for its artistic self-expression and community, Burning Man attracts aficionados of various affinities, including Nevada locals, artists, anarchists, punk rockers, ravers, drag queens, Silicon Valley engineers and academics".⁶

Once activated, the Burning Man event site becomes Black Rock City, Nevada's third-largest city - for one week a year. Besides personal provisions, people are expected to bring offerings to share with one

⁵ Burning Man Project, *10 Principles*, <http://burningman.org/culture/philosophical-center/10-principles/>, Accessed 24 November 2015

⁶ Katherine K. Chen, "Lessons for Creative Cities from Burning Man: How organizations can sustain and disseminate a creative context." In *City, Culture and Society* Volume 2, Issue 2 (June 2011), 11

another and co-create the experience and indeed the city. Within hours of gates opening, the city is filled with tens of thousands of people and hundreds of art projects, themed camps, and cars and trucks that have been modified to look like dragons, a fire spewing octopus, a 4 –story toilet, mobile bleacher stand, giant fish of all varieties, cupcakes, yachts, magic carpets and tropical islands, many with fire, amazing lighting displays and awesome sound systems, most with platforms seething with dancers and hitchhikers. It's like 'Mad Max' meets 'The Rocky Horror Picture Show' meets 'The Ten Commandments'. The difference between Burning Man and a transformational psychedelic experience is: it is real, it is actually happening, and yes, we see it too.

The playa, the name for the area of the Black Rock Desert where Black Rock City is staged, is an ancient lake bed that is made up of alkaline dust, the remnants of the petrified bones of a previous aquatic ecosystem. There are no indigenous species now. Of anything. Life is no longer supported here, and that is kind of the point – to survive and thrive, creating amazing examples of human capability and celebration beyond the perceived boundaries of reality and possibility. Temperatures range from below freezing to well over 100F, and extreme wind and dust storms are to be expected. As the largest 'Leave No Trace' event in the world, participants pack in and pack out everything they need to survive, thrive and look fabulous doing it; there is no water or garbage service automatically provided and in order to secure each year's event permit, the temporary city of over 5 miles square and 70,000 people must not leave more than a shoebox of debris behind.

Today, the Burning Man organization provides roughly \$1.2 million in arts grants, portable toilets, the Man (a 40-ft effigy of no stated meaning that is ceremoniously burned on Saturday night of the event), Centre Camp (a public square of sorts) and a street grid etched into the playa dust to set the scene.⁷ The rest of the onslaught of experience is offered and shared by you and your neighbors. And it's crazy and overwhelming.

In the living gallery that Burning Man becomes, the idea is that artists are expressing who they are, while their work invites everyone else to express who they are too – in that way every art piece is a collaborative work that evokes and performs the natural expression of collective identity. The entire festival is a collaborative expression of collective identity, filled with art pieces that elicit participation and the expression of community's unmediated autobiography as expressed in the content of the event.

Burning Man provides "the capacity to remove oneself from our contemporary culture of commodity" and allows individuals to reflexively gain perspective and challenge mainstream notions of how individuals can relate to one another through the gift-giving system.⁸ With traditional forms of exchange such as money and barter removed from the event, cultural capital, the exchange medium of value at Burning Man, is attained through participation.⁹ Participation is what separates Burning Man from other festivals.

"We aren't throwing the party, they're throwing the party," says Hippie Tim, a Burning Man community leader and artist from New Zealand, "We're just organizing the happening," he continues¹⁰. Other events may have hot lineups that attract ticket sales and interest, but at Burning Man, the attendees are the lineup and they are encouraged to bring what they would like to see or do themselves. "There is no performances per se, people are not going there to necessarily be entertained. You're going there for a community experience, where if anyone does put on anything for entertainment, they're doing it for

⁷ Burning Man Project, <http://burningman.org/culture/burning-man-arts/grants/brc-honoraria/>. Accessed 24 November 2015.

⁸ Jeremy Hockett, "Participant Observation and the Study of Self: Burning Man as Ethnographic Experience" in *AfterBurn: Reflections on Burning Man*, ed. Lee Gilmore and Mark Van Proyen. (University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 67

⁹ Robert V. Kozinets, "Can Consumers Escape the Market? Emancipatory Illuminations from Burning Man" in *Journal of Consumer Research*. 29 June 2002

¹⁰ Hippie Tim, *Personal Interview*, 4 February 2013

free and for the love of it," says Mark Stirling, KiwiBurn [Burning Man's New Zealand Regional event] initiator.¹¹

Burning Man paradoxically evades attempts to clearly define what the community it emerges from is or what it in fact means; keeping in step with the enigmatic and irreverent culture they celebrate. "There lurks a higher and more important injunction: to keep the event free from the prison of interpretation and explanation, from the insidious net of Meaning. This refusal is prophylactic. By setting our bullshit detectors on high alert, Burners ward off pretension, self-consciousness, and all of the pre-packaged "experiences" that have come to define late capitalist subjectivity. On the playa, we are united in our evasion of significance," says Davis.¹²

Mclver quotes Bakhtin saying, "At carnival the people 'have no sanctimonious regard for anyone. They are the hosts and are only hosts for there are no guests, no spectators, only participants,'¹³ which echoes Hippy Tim's statement that one cannot attend KiwiBurn, but one can be a part of it.

Burning Man staff member, artist, community leader, long-time participant and devotee, Steven Raspa describes Burning Man: "[In Black Rock City] you have the most fascinating, marvelous, thoughtful, creative people on the planet. And the people that are coming to Burning Man are thought leaders who I have faith in that can help us get out of the holes that humanity is digging for itself...When they're hearts and minds are open, you can cut right to the chase about where people are in their lives, what's important to them, what the big ideas are, there's no small talk necessary and people will speak honestly, sincerely and authentically."¹⁴ Raspa's comments bring to life Kozinets' postulation that a social economy celebrates self-expression because it is devoted to acts of giving.¹⁵ This is the foundation for a new approach of how to conceptualize trust, mutuality, and reciprocity with others. As "giving begets giving, social distance is temporarily bridged, and a temporary form of caring, sharing community is built that is viewed by participants as existing at a distance from the market."¹⁶

Burning Man is much more than a conventional festival, it is a fascinating and rich place to question and pursue the relationship between self-threatening, evolving and emerging culture and the dominant culture. This space does not just have the potential to offer freedom from conventional life, it also posits demands that the very experience of escaping the confines of mainstream reality prove that there is much more to be questioned.

Burning Man's direct liminal experience brings the philosophical tradition of existential questioning to life; "Once you are free," said Baudrillard, "you are forced to ask who you are."¹⁷ "Participating in the creation of an entire city devoted to what we want to do, rather than what we have to do to make money, has the tendency to invite self-reflection... Who am I? What do I really want to be doing? If people can create a twelve-ton sculpture of a bird's nest made entirely out of plumbing pipe, what are the limits on my own creativity?" asks Huffington Post columnist Jay Michaelson.¹⁸

"Caveat Magister," a prominent Burning Man blogger, states that a process of action followed by subjective explanation is consistently expressed in Burning Man culture, and my Cultural Sustainability

¹¹ Mark Stirling, *Personal Interview*, 4 February, 2013

¹² Erik Davis, "Beyond Belief: The Cults of Burning Man" in *AfterBurn: Reflections on Burning Man*, ed. Lee Gilmore and Mark Van Proyen. (University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 15

¹³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (1984). p 249-50. qtd in Sharon Mclver, *WaveShapeConversion: The Land as Reverent in the Dance Culture and Music of Aotearoa*. (University of Canterbury, 2007). http://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/bitstream/10092/1635/1/thesis_fulltext.pdf Accessed 2 February 2013, p 183.

¹⁴ Steven Raspa, *Personal Interview* 11 November 2014

¹⁵ Kozinets, *Consumers*, 29

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Jay Michaelson, "The Truth About Burning Man", *The Huffington Post*, 18 November 2011. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jay-michaelson/the-truth-about-burning-m_b_279464.html. Accessed 24 November 2015

¹⁸ Ibid.

efforts, including this thesis, are just this; direct experience and action followed by positioning and incorporating the subjective instrument of my positionality.

According to Caveat, “The way most of us encountered Burning Man and decided to participate, [was] we came because we heard people were doing amazing shit: and when we saw it we thought ‘I could do amazing shit too,’ and then we changed our lives.”¹⁹ According to Caveat’s statement, a member of the Burning Man community occupies a space of transformation that invites but does not impose anything upon anyone else, “We stop acting as agents of social control and instead become agents of possibility: we create possibilities that society does not normally allow, and then we participate in them – and open them up for others to participate in too,” says Caveat.²⁰ “To Burn is to act as an agent of possibility: creating a space where something amazing can happen, letting anyone join, and then cleaning up after it when it’s done.”²¹

The necessity to destroy previous constraining concepts of capacity is essential to human cultural and social evolution. “What makes Burning Man such a great place to take risks is that everyone is doing it – which doesn’t make it safe at all [someone’s radical self-expression may hit you where it hurts], but which does make it easier. It’s not “safe” to take risks, it’s “easy” to take risks. We’ve taken your risks and lubricated them,” says Caveat, demonstrating how this event and culture is a concentrated and accelerated expression of social evolution.²²

This rings true for my own personal story of Burning Man. In 2011 I experienced both a regional Burning Man event [Lakes of Fire, Michigan] and I went to Burning Man in Nevada too. In 2012, I was accepted into Goucher College’s Master of Arts in Cultural Sustainability [MACS] program, successfully applied for a grant from my local government and started work on creating FIGMENT Geelong, a Burning Man-inspired interactive arts festival free-for-all in my Australian hometown, for which I created my first physical art installation. I do not doubt that my experiences of life beyond the pale among the Burning Man community inspired this development in my artistic production capabilities.

1.1 Purpose of the Work

*In artistic productions we may catch glimpses of that unused evolutionary potential in mankind which has not yet been externalized and fixed in structure. – Victor Turner*²³

The aim of this work is:

- 1. To inspire a radically honest and self-reflective social conversation within the Burning Man organization and community that questions the event’s sustainability, the culture’s purpose and the organization’s mission by discussing three critical cultural pivot points in Burning Man’s history.**

Burning Man was born of a culture of creative social destruction that used dominant social structures as fodder for their own pyres. Burning Man has been called a permission engine, and it can be this, but as the survivalist elements of the exercise evolve into standard market demand and supply structures, it is also increasingly easy for it to just be a really great party. My hope is that those involved with the Burning Man organization, event and community rediscover their self-penned permission slips to

¹⁹ Caveat Magister “Who the Hell Are Burners Anyway?” *The Burning Blog*. 5 April 2012. *The Burning Man Journal*.

<http://journal.burningman.org/2012/04/philosophical-center/tenprinciples/who-the-hell-are-burners-anyway/> Accessed 24 November 2015.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Caveat Magister, “Burning Man Should Treat ‘Academia’ the Way It Does ‘Commercialization’,” *The Burning Man Journal* (26 February, 2013)

<http://journal.burningman.org/2013/02/opinion/serious-stuff/academia-commercialization/> Accessed 24 November 2015

²³ Turner, *Ritual*, 128

experiment, challenge the status quo, reclaim authority, damn the man, kill the Buddha, burn the Man and *fuck shit up*.

2. To challenge the field of Cultural Sustainability with the postulation that 'sustainability' [by definition the continuation of the cultural status quo], is in itself, a demonstration of the sanitization and incorporation of the destabilizing ideas and activist roots of folklore into the established order of academic cultural concerns.

I aim to challenge the Cultural Sustainability practice to question the pursuit of 'sustainability' and consider if this is also an expression of Fox's "misplaced attempt to merely rearrange the elements of the status quo rather than to radically alter it in a direction more in keeping with both survival and human dignity," which is what I believe to be the particular opportunity of our field.²⁴ The field of Cultural Sustainability is heavily influenced by the field of folklore, which has both activist and conservative expressions. Considering folklore as an activist pursuit, Debra Kodish asserts that "fundamental principles and assumptions need to be questioned."²⁵ Additionally, Clifford offers that tradition is "less about preservations than about transformative practice and the selective symbolization of continuity,"²⁶ which forces me to ask if by practicing cultural 'sustainability' and the preservation of traditions we are in fact engendering the established order's appropriation of emerging cultures' destabilizing ideas, allowing the superficial elements of the potentially revolutionary effort to rejoin mainstream society as Guy Debord's "new flavors to old dominant ideas"?²⁷

I ask if cultural "[r]evolution" or some other as yet unnamed theoretical framework --as is seemingly being demanded by the New Social Movements Burning Man is related to-- is a more appropriate pursuit.

²⁴ Fox, *Psychology, Ideology, Utopia, and the Commons*

²⁵ Debra Kodish "Envisioning Folklore Activism", *Journal of American Folklore*, Volume 124, Number 491, Winter 2011, 45

²⁶ James Clifford, "Taking Identity Politics Seriously: The Contradictory, Stony Ground..." (2000), in *Without Guarantees: Essays in Honour of Stuart Hall*, eds. Paul Gilroy, Lawrence Grossberg, and Angela McRobbie. London: Verso Press, 94-112

²⁷ Guy Debord *Report on the Construction of Situations* (1957) qtd in, Robert Chasse, Bruce Elwell, Jonathon Horelick, Tony Verlaan, "Faces of Recuperation", *The Situationist International*, Issue #1 (New York, June 1969), <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/faces.html> Accessed 24 November 2015.

1.2 Thesis overview

Things change. Culture is emergent, multiple, hybridized. – Rory Turner²⁸

The culture we live is threatened, criticized and counter-exemplified by the culture we create. – Roy Wagner²⁹



John Law installed a smiley face on the Man in 1996
Photo Heather Shirkey, courtesy of Olivier Bonin Dust & Illusions

The field of Cultural Sustainability is itself an emerging pursuit that is borne of the well-established anthropological and folklore social sciences. Cultural Sustainability is an evolution of these disciplines that asks its practitioners to include, rather than ignore, their subjective experiences of, and influences on, their communities of study and their cultural work. Cultural Sustainability is a practice that not only documents moments in cultural histories, but seeks to empower culture bearers to express, share and actively evolve their cultures in this time of widespread social and physical environmental destabilization.

Though many in this field practice Cultural Sustainability as a form of protection against the loss of tradition due to various threats (e.g. politics, diaspora or competing cultural influences) in my

²⁸ Rory Turner, Week Three Cultural Sustainability Theory Lecture (2012). Accessed online

²⁹ Roy Wagner, *The Invention of Culture* (University of Chicago Press: 1975), 11

consideration of the Burning Man community, I examine how a culture that is rooted in disruption and liminality has evolved to become more routine as it grows in popularity. Wagner posits that, “if creativity and invention emerge as the salient qualities of culture, then it is to these that our focus must now shift,” suggesting that ‘sustainability’ and the repetition of hollow and symbolic traditions may not be the most deserving of our academic attentions.³⁰

This project follows four overlapping and interrelated trajectories:

- my own story as a participant observer within the Burning Man community 2011-2015,
- that of the Burning Man event and community itself,
- that of the countercultural zeitgeist of absurdity, avant-garde thinking and artistic action [of which Burning Man was spawned], and
- that of the field of Cultural Sustainability.

In order to understand Burning Man, brief background discussion on previously emerging avant-garde movements will be presented, as well as postulation of what may be next for this line of cultural questioning and disquiet.

Considering Burning Man

Utilizing four years of field notes, personal reflections, extensive personal interviews and literature reviews, I present a discussion centered upon three cultural pivot points and instances of the Burning Man organization’s leadership invoking a practice of Cultural Sustainability, and defining the course of the cultures’ evolution by its directive actions.

1. Burning Man: From Chaos to Community

The introduction of regulations and controls as a result of the fatal chaos and danger at Burning Man 1996, the formation of a network of regional Burning Man events beginning in 2000, followed by the creation of the descriptive and guiding Ten Principles codified in 2004.

2. Burning Man: From Transgressive to Traditionalized

In 2007, the Man, the effigy placed at the center of the Burning Man event, was set alight earlier than planned for by Paul Addis. Some call Addis an arsonist (indeed he was convicted of this felony charge), while others call him a renegade artist or ‘poetic terrorist’ who acted in the true spirit of the event. Nevertheless, the Burning Man organization’s response to Addis’ rebellious act directed the event’s trajectory towards traditionalization and away from an environment that encouraged transgression.

3. Burning Man: Sill Subversive or Simply Sold Out?

In 2011, tickets for the Burning Man event sold out for the first time and have continued to sell out faster and faster in the years since. The Burning Man organization’s response to this new scarcity was to institute a hugely unpopular lottery system for tickets for the 2012 event. The intrusion of scarcity into the experience of Burning Man, is just one example of an element of dominant capitalist society finding its way into the social experiment; the petri dish is not secure. In 2014, the organization faced community scrutiny as it came to light that some Burning Man camps (one run by a Burning Man board member) were themselves commodified spaces, with waged staff and paying

³⁰ Wagner, *The Invention of Culture*, 16

guests rather than participants, suggesting that scarcity, poor leadership and lack of cultural awareness may be diluting Burning Man to become just a great party for those who can afford it.

Burning Man is an active experiment in the conscious and purposeful creation of culture. It is an inherently curious, adventurous and explorative exercise, however these moments demonstrate a standardization of the Burning Man event. The decisions made in these directive moments have each been purported to be in the interest of sustaining the event amidst growing attention and scrutiny from the regulatory forces of mainstream society. These directive steps made Burning Man today a hybrid of what Burning Man once was, and the wider dominant cultural framework that Burning Man's carnivalesque nature necessarily refers to, reacts against and critiques.

Since the pivotal year of 1996, the sustainability of this culture has been consciously and strategically planned for by those central to the event's annual happening. The Burning Man organization's actions following the Paul Addis' "early burn arson performance"³¹ in 2007 testified to the presence and protection of the event's traditions. And the way the organization seemingly attempted to abdicate responsibility for access and allowed 'survival of the richest' (creating 'pre-sale' tickets for \$800 when normal ticket prices were \$390) to allocate access since the event sold-out in 2012, calls into question the event and community's growing similarity to dominant culture. Through these shifts, it is clear that this group has been practicing Cultural Sustainability as it has maintained a group identity through changing circumstances, however whether or not sustainability is possible or preferable at this stage is now the question.

We ask if this is simply the imminent and expected cultural "change" that Rory Turner refers to and Cultural Sustainability practitioners and Burning Man culture bearers should expect?³² Or have these modifications compromised the fundamental core of this culture so deeply that it is disengaged it from its avant-garde, chaotic and subversive roots, that its revolutionary potential has been rendered obsolete? What is Burning Man's role in, and relationship with, mainstream culture today? Is sustainability possible for this culture?

Considering Cultural Sustainability

Burning Man does not stand alone as a shining example of an alternative cultural story, but as a very noisy and bright example of an expression of an idea, perhaps even a new post-capitalist, post-post-modern social ecology – one that is defined by complementarianism rather than competition, sharing rather than scarcity, direct knowing via exploratory experience rather than study from a distance, and an ambition to keep playing rather than to win.

Superficial elements of the avant-garde and countercultural subsets of society are being increasingly integrated into the mainstream while environmental, social and political attacks threaten the foundations of the powers that be. We are witnessing a redefinition of culture and as researchers we have the unique opportunity to be a part of this instant anthropology. As curious, motivated, self-aware and self-defined 'students of culture', Cultural Sustainability practitioners are not only acutely tuned to witness this profound shift, but occupying a space of responsibility to add direction and illumination as these cultural movements breakthrough.

Reconsidering the realities that postmodernism have offered for our mortal ennui and the limitations of the secular dogma of 'survival of the fiercest', I ask if 'sustainability' is the best term, or goal, for our

³¹ *Dust and Illusions*. Directed by Olivier Bonin. Madnomad Films, 2009.

³² Rory Turner, *Week Three*.

field's pursuit when applying Cultural Sustainability work to emergent culture, or if the concept of cultural evolution and a re-imagining of terms and models would better suit the cultural reality of the ever-emerging zeitgeist.

1.3 Methodology

For this inquiry, research findings are made up of various photo and video media and information pertaining to and collected from the Burning Man event founders, specifically identified Burning Man cultural members and critics as well as those who offer expert critiques and commentary on characteristics of emergent culture and its relationship with dominant culture.

Procedures and Materials

In order to respect the common Burning Man cultural norms of 'ask first' and 'protect the community' that I learned from my time in the Chicago Burning Man scene, as well as adhering to the strict ethical codes of ethnographic fieldwork, I requested participant consent to record any and all media for this project and clearly detail the level of identification of those who participate, or agree to have their image or voice recorded. IRB approval for this work has been secured [see [Appendix III](#)].

Field notes were taken as preparation for each interview and to record impressions and reflections post-interview or focussed cultural observation task. Recorded interviews were transcribed and incorporated into field notes. Photographs and videos of interview participants and public behaviours of groups and/or individuals with the intent for use in research presentations/writing were taken throughout the course of study.

Audio recordings, still and video camera and field journals were used to conduct participant-observation, personal interviews, field notes and sound, video and audio recordings of:

- Burning Man 2011-2014,
- KiwiBurn 2013 [Burning Man New Zealand Regional Event],
- Burning Seed 2012 and 2013 [Australian Burning Man Regional Event],
- July 2013 "Night at Burning Man" event, San Francisco, CA,
- 2014 San Francisco Decompression,
- October 2014 Pearlinton, Mississippi field visit,
- San Francisco Santacon 2015, and
- personal interviews with Burning Man event organizers, event attendees and community members 2012 - 2015.

Interview Protocol

In the process of arranging for and conducting interviews, the purpose for this project and the fact that it would be published was made clear to all participants. Consent for recording participants' views, voice and image and the level of identification of the participant with their view, voice or image was secured by audio recording and/or written agreement as appropriate. Interview subjects were invited to participate of their own free will, and compensation did not exceed a coffee or meal. Copies of the recorded material from each participant will be provided upon request. Interviews were conducted formally and informally.

Interview Participants

Olivier Bonin	Andie Grace	Jamie McIver	Chicken John Rinaldi
Chris Cohen	Sarah Harbin	Nick Martin	Stuart Schuffman
Erik Davis	Shaye Harty	Carmen Mauk	Anneke Swineheart
Simon of The Playa	John Law	Oly Nomaddicted	
Brian Doherty	Candace Locklear	Celanie Polanick	
Colin Fahrion	Jessica McCaffrey	Tom Price	

Interview Questions

The semi-structured interviews evolved from my observations and included open-ended sets of focused questions. Interview questions were based on the subject's views and ideas about Burning Man and emergent culture. The questions in both formal and informal interviews evolved through time and were modified to suit each research setting and interview participant.

An indicative question set is as follows:

- What is the nature of your involvement with Burning Man?
- What role does Burning Man play in your life?
- How has your involvement with Burning Man affected your life?
- Tell me about Burning Man 1996
- Tell me about Burning Man 2007, specifically the early burning of the man
- What do you think of Paul Addis' actions?
- What do you think of the Burning Man organization's response to Paul Addis' actions?
- What do you think about the Burning Man ticket situation?
- What do you think about how the ticket situation has been/is being handled by the Burning Man organization?
- Do you think the culture of Black Rock City has changed/is changing? How? Why?
- Are you planning on going to Burning Man again? Why, why not?

Limits of Research

Limitations of this research include a lack of direct and official participation from representatives of the Burning Man organization and I would like to have more video and audio that reflects research participants' tone, hesitation and emotions (e.g. excitement, nervousness, confidence, etc.) in order to give the narrative more nuance and integrity.

Approach as a Researcher

The dilemma of going home, the place that anthropologists are always leaving from rather than going to...
– Ruth Behar³³

I initially sought to use this exercise and my experiences of the past four years' study and participant observation to establish Burning Man as an emergent culture, more than just a party event or a flash in the pan phenomenon alternative to mainstream society. I believed that if it was seen as a culture, passionate participants may be armed with the perspective necessary to practice cultural sustainability and guard this iteration of culture from incorporation.³⁴ However, as my own experience within the culture of Burning Man expanded, it became clear that this perspective was unnecessarily short-sighted

³³ Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 24

³⁴ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford University Press, 1977

and more than a little naive. With this work finally completed, I seek to provide a documented form of “the most necessary form of witnessing left to us,” which Behar calls “a key form of approaching and transforming reality.”³⁵

As self-analysis, self-expression and conscious culture creation are common elements of Burning Man culture, I do not feel that any cultural mores or expectations of insider behavior were threatened by conducting this research as a participant-observer. My role as a member of this community has always been clearly defined as being led by my research aims and the intent to create work that will be shared and published.

According to Victor Turner, “Anthropology has historically developed as a discipline concerned with other peoples’ realities – the more different from our own, the better. It has been less interested, and less successful, in dealing with the ways its own reality – its activities, values and ideas – is affected by the contemporary world of which it is part.”³⁶ And as I explored the culture of Burning Man in various iterations, events, communities, and roles around the world for the past 4 years, I have been forced to see myself and the cultures of Burning Man participants, organizers and wider mainstream society all as both the familiar and the strange, echoing Wagner’s statement that, “The study of culture is in fact our culture... [which] re-creates us through our efforts.”³⁷

As Turner states, “In Cultural Sustainability, we are talking about a term, a label, for a relationally mediated emergent conceptualization of something... the thing that we are making is always going to be framed in terms of our own world.”³⁸ I relate to a lot of what Ruth Behar presents in *The Vulnerable Observer*, and in particular, the following quotation demonstrates how becoming a part of the Burning Man community through my role as a researcher both demanded and protected me from intense personal reflections relating to my own identity, values, and beliefs.

Yet because there is no clear and easy route by which to confront the self who observes, most professional observers develop defenses, mainly, ‘methods,’ that ‘reduce anxiety and enable us to function efficiently.’ Even saying, ‘I am an anthropologist, this is field work,’ is a classic form of the use of a method to drain anxiety from situations in which we feel complicitous with structures of power, or helpless to release another from suffering, or at a loss as to whether to act or observe.³⁹

I found field notes to be very seriously challenging on this subject. I believe I misread and poorly planned for what proved to be a surprisingly high level of self-scrutiny and reflection that working with a community so close to my own identity and personal psychological growth pursuits, demanded. Behar states that, “In anthropology, everything depends on the emotional and intellectual baggage the anthropologist takes on the voyage,” and this project forced me to unpack and question the contents of my cases.⁴⁰ My reflections on this community of interest and fieldwork often turned intensely introspective, questioning and undermining the bases of many of my core assumptions and beliefs, and seeing them as projections of my own psyche. This was at times, honestly, paralyzing. I realized I am frequent acting in the role of the observer in everyday life and came to question if my ethnography and cultural documentation practices are natural strengths for objective observation, the practice of which actually threatens my ability to personally connect meaningfully with a group and shared identity. These deep connections between my “personal experience and the subject under study” demanded “a keen

³⁵ Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer*, 27

³⁶ Turner, *Ritual*, 15

³⁷ Wagner, *The Invention of Culture*, 16

³⁸ Rory Turner, *Week Three*

³⁹ Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer*, 6

⁴⁰ Ibid, 8

understanding of what aspects of the self are the most important filters through which one perceives the world, and more particularly, the topic being studied.”⁴¹ This work brought up a lot of philosophical, emotional and intellectual challenges for me and by October 2014, I found each instance of approaching field work and creating field notes felt increasingly inherently risky for me; I feared what new layer of self-analysis and questioning I would imminently face. This slowed the work.

Wagner’s description of the fieldworker’s experience sounds a lot like what one expects to experience at Burning Man. Though it can be assumed that the participant chooses to be at Burning Man and is prepared for the experience and therefore has some familiarity or expectations, as Wagner says, “His imaginations, and often his whole management of himself, is compelled to come to grips with a new situation, it is frustrated, as in culture shock, in its initial intention, and so brought to invent a solution.”⁴² I know that I practice fits and starts of anthropological analysis or ethnographic research at Burning Man, but in light of this reading, I now realize that everyone must do this at least a little bit. The many difficulties associated with returning to ‘normal life’ that Burning Man participants discuss and write about, echo the sentiment that, “Making the strange familiar always makes the familiar a little bit strange,” as Wagner describes the fieldworker’s processing of culture shock.⁴³ Wagner says, “It is worthwhile studying other peoples’ [culture], because every understanding of another culture is an experiment with our own”.⁴⁴ At Burning Man it is possible to personally experience deeply different versions of “‘natural law’, ‘logic’ or even ‘culture’,” as Wagner suggests, and “by seeing them as we view the concepts of other peoples, we may come to comprehend our own meanings from a truly relative viewpoint”.⁴⁵ However at Burning Man, the experiment is directly with one’s own experiences of self and society, which may be key to the ‘self-aware (rather than self-conscious) anthropology Wagner anticipates.⁴⁶

This thesis project has also been an extended affair due to a combination of the challenge of defining when research must stop to give way for writing and analysis amidst the ongoing, dynamic, fascinating and culturally interrelated nature of this zeitgeist movement. My own discomfort with establishing a strong stance or concrete commentary, as my own positionality and views regarding the movement were shifting, affected the timeline of the project as well. This project was realized with the understanding that I can only describe what was, but not what is, or is coming.⁴⁷

1.4 Literature Review

A literature review of emergent culture, cultural incorporation, countercultures, Burning Man, and festival culture provided information, conceptual frameworks and analytic perspectives for qualitative analysis.

Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*. 1985.

Bey’s T.A. Z concept is a philosophical underpinning of the revolutionary potential of the social experiment of Burning Man. Furthermore, his definition and exploration of the ideas of Poetic Terrorism

⁴¹ Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer*, 13

⁴² Wagner, *The Invention of Culture*, 12

⁴³ Ibid, 11

⁴⁴ Ibid, 12

⁴⁵ Ibid, 16

⁴⁶ Ibid, 12, 15-16

⁴⁷ Inspired by Christopher Nolan’s statement in the November 2014 edition of *Wired Magazine* (that he edited), “We can only really see the dimensions below the one we exist in—a problem never more clearly or cleverly explored than in Reverend Edwin A. Abbott’s novella, *Flatland*, where a three-dimensional creature struggles to explain his existence to a two-dimensional creature who can himself see only one of the dimensions he lives in.” (<http://www.wired.com/2014/11/christopher-nolan-wired-editor>)

and Art Sabotage are directly applicable to the discussion of the 'early burn' event of 2007. Bey's notion that tradition and cultural mores may be inverted to disrupt a culture that has been degraded to a spectacle of consumption in order to save it, can be seen in Paul Addis' actions. While Bey's conclusions of how a T.A.Z. may be sustained or need to be abandoned provides direction for the consideration of the future of Burning Man.

Burning Man: Community of Chaos? Produced by Mark Silver. Channel 4. 2000.

Silver's film provides a glimpse of the state of affairs of Burning Man long before I was directly involved and soon after the event became organized. With commentary from many of the core cultural leaders and actors then, and now, this is a good resource for direct quotes and to compare changing attitudes, especially those of the Burning Man founders.

Caveat Magister. "Who the Hell Are Burners Anyway?" The Burning Blog. 5 April 2012.

Caveat Magister's blog post is the best attempt to come to a clear description of what it means to call oneself a member of the Burning Man community I have found. Caveat references incomplete adherence to the Principles and presents examples of the radically different people, camps and activities one may find at the Burning Man event, working up to a definition stating that it is made up of action and personal experience, not words and description and inherently independent, creative and messy (but we clean up after ourselves).

Katherine K. Chen, Enabling Creative Chaos; The Organization Behind the Burning Man Event. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

Chen's *Enabling Creative Chaos* is an intense discussion of the benefits and pitfalls of bureaucratic and collectivist approaches to organization. Chen applies considers these frameworks for an analysis of the distinctive and hybridized approach to business, volunteer/community building and the expression of responsibility and expectations that the Burning Man organization has taken in order to sustain the unique culture of this society. Though it could be used as an organizational management and negotiation handbook, *Enabling Creative Chaos* also describes a social structure and discusses how the fringe, marginal or unorthodox character of the community has been protected while interacting with conservative and conformist entities like the federal authorities that issue the annual permit for the Burning Man event. Chen reflects on nine years of experiential research, personal experience and genuine group participation to pen this contribution to the community of Burning Man.

James Clifford, "Taking Identity Politics Seriously: The Contradictory, Stony Ground..." (2000), in Without Guarantees: Essays in Honour of Stuart Hall, eds. Paul Gilroy, Lawrence Grossberg, and Angela McRobbie. 94-112. London: Verso Press.

With what may be considered widespread success of the event, Burning Man is grappling with how to sustain/contain/maintain/protect/grow the culture of the event and community with so many new participants. "Commodification of identities and traditions," Clifford says, is "integral to a late-capitalist or post-modern world system of cultures," or the culture of the dominant culture that surrounds the subculture of Burning Man.⁴⁸ Therefore the event and community's cultural mores of dedication to

⁴⁸ Ibid., 101

decommodification and valuing experience and interaction over consumption and transactions, is particularly challenged by mainstream society's influences.

Clifford's question, "How much hybridity can conventions accommodate without losing the ability to assert integrity of tradition?" is applicable to this emerging culture's rapid growth, and Clifford's statement that, "The relative dynamism and power of interacting local and global forces and the ultimate question of determination - who consumes whom - cannot be read off,"⁴⁹ continues the theme of supporting this critique of the cultural sustainability practices at play within the Burning Man culture. It is certain that the culture of Burning Man cannot be sustained, it must evolve and change, particularly because this is a culture and an event founded upon transgression, sacrilege and defiance. As Clifford states, tradition for Burning Man may be "less about preservations than about transformative practice and the selective symbolization of continuity."⁵⁰

Brian Doherty, *This is Burning Man: The Rise of the New American Underground*. New York: Little Brown and Company, 2004.

Though much more academic and literary work has been published since 2004, Doherty's *This is Burning Man* is the quintessential book on the event, the community and the history of both (and served as my personal introduction to them too). The author weaves interviews and personal accounts into an intimately informative and surprisingly objective description and history of a counterculture that is not without controversy, politics and factions. Despite accounts that vary dramatically from 'official' descriptions on the Burning Man website and may seem critical of members of the Burning Man organization and community, all of those I have talked to from within the movement praise Doherty's work as an essential study guide, causing me to give merit to the history presented.

***Dust and Illusions*. Directed by Olivier Bonin. Madnomad Films, 2009.**

Bonin expertly executes an objective and critical view of the history and present (as at 2009) expression of the ideas that shape Burning Man. After five years of effort, Bonin's film speaks from a place close to the core of the Burning Man organization and community and does not belittle this effort with cronyism. A similar tone was presenting in my personal interview with Bonin. The film explores the earlier movements (Suicide Club, Cacophony Society) and early days of Burning Man as well as the well-heeled spectacle of the 2000s.

Kevin Evans, Carrie Galbraith and John Law, *Tales of the San Francisco Cacophony Society*. San Francisco: Last Gasp, 2013.

This anthology of philosophies, experiments, pranks and subversive actions tells the stories of the countercultural group that pre-dated Burning Man and sets the scene for the emergence of Burning Man in the San Francisco Bay Area. The promotion of this book led to my deeper interaction with the contemporary community of Cacophonists in San Francisco and interviews with main players in the book.

Debora Kodish "Envisioning Folklore Activism." *Journal of American Folklore*. Volume 124, Number 491, Winter 2011.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 100,102

⁵⁰ Ibid., 100

This piece inspired my understanding of ethnography as an inherently curatorial pursuit, as 'authenticity' may be defined by the folklorist's voice of 'authority'. In this article, Kodish argues for the importance of activist ideals for folklore research and public practice. Kodish also presents the concepts of authenticity and authority, as well as Bakhtin's Carnavalesque, as sources of disempowerment and objectification as well as empowerment and agency. From this reading I developed the idea that festival spaces may be the spaces in-between that allow much needed social innovation and creativity to emerge and inspire societies to evolve.

Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969.

Victor Turner's definition and use of concepts of liminality and *communitas* are foundational for this cultural sustainability pursuit. Considering the cultural changes that have occurred since the community has grown from 35 people on a beach to 70,000 in the Nevada desert demands understanding of ritual, group formation and bonding and the unique nature of liminoid experiences that open-festival environments such as Burning Man create.

Roy Wagner, *The Invention of Culture*. University of Chicago Press: 1975.

This work helped me to understand the practice of ethnography better and realize that I practice this approach to experience more often than not. Wagner's description of the fieldworker's experience sounds a lot like what one expects to experience at Burning Man. Though it can be assumed that the participant chooses to be at Burning Man and is prepared for the experience and therefore has some familiarity or expectations, as Wagner says, "His imaginations, and often his whole management of himself, is compelled to come to grips with a new situation, it is frustrated, as in culture shock, in its initial intention, and so brought to invent a solution."⁵¹

The many difficulties associated with returning to 'normal life' that Burning Man participants discuss and write about, echo the sentiment that, "Making the strange familiar always makes the familiar a little bit strange,"⁵² as Wagner describes the fieldworker's processing of culture shock. At Burning Man, it is possible to personally experience deeply different versions of "'natural law', 'logic' or even 'culture'," and Wagner's assertion that, "by seeing them as we view the concepts of other peoples, we may come to comprehend our own meanings from a truly relative viewpoint"⁵³ further vindicated my ethnographic study of this culture that I was in fact a part of. Furthermore, since at Burning Man the experiment is directly with one's own experiences of self and society, this practice aids the advancement of Cultural Sustainability by providing fertile space for that which may be key to the 'self-aware (rather than self-conscious) anthropology Wagner anticipates.⁵⁴

Finally, Wagner's statement that, "the culture we live is threatened, criticized, counter-exemplified by the culture we create,"⁵⁵ forms the philosophical bedrock for my personal and academic exploration of the culture of Burning Man.

Gary Warne, *Carnival Cosmology*, posted 3 January 2012.

⁵¹ Wagner, *The Invention of Culture*, 12

⁵² Ibid, 11

⁵³ Ibid, 16.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p 12, 15-16

⁵⁵ Ibid, 11.

Besides being quoted in full in two other sources, this essay by Suicide Club founder, Gary Warne, is important to this work because it has provided a personal point of inspiration and understanding to me throughout this process. "The world is a midway; cities are its sideshows,"⁵⁶ runs through my mind as I engage in experiences both mundane and magnificent. "Fear is a freeze on the future, the filter or floodgate that stops our imaginings,"⁵⁷ narrates my inner voice as I hesitate at the face of a challenging new experience. "The world is becoming a total play environment and I am becoming something else entirely. The future is no longer on a circuit like the news, entertainment or something an entrepreneur plans as I expectantly read the notices in the bleached parchments on the corner stands. It is an imagination away,"⁵⁸ describes the validation I feel for taking the strange, indecipherable, incessantly winding and seemingly illogical path through the life/playground I find myself at the helm of. Because of course, "We [are] here to play, if nothing else, here to play with the world and other people."

Brad Wieners, "Hot Mess" in *Outside Magazine*. 24 August 2012.

Wieners blends a relatively recent report of the contemporary reality of Burning Man with an impeccable telling of the 1996 events that changed Burning Man forever, made up of a collage of first-hand accounts.

Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

This piece stimulated the core ideas of this work; the process of cultural incorporation. This discussion of the "incorporation" of the emergent paradigm's superficial elements by the dominant power system particularly fueled my suspicion of Burning Man's rapid growth of popularity and created my interest in differentiating "dominant" and "popular" cultures. Williams' description of the potentially dramatically distant "social location of the residual" inspired my postulation that Burning Man is merely the current articulation of an alternative paradigm that was more prominent before industrialization. Finally, the introduction of concept of social spaces initially ignored by the dominant as fertile spots for dissent which are then slowly transformed to be included in "ruling definition of the social" is directly applicable to my research topic. My concern for the applicability of the author's Marx-steeped assertions to the diverse community I am working with, was alleviated as Williams states that the struggle of emergent society is distinct from that of the rising class.

⁵⁶ Warne, *Carnival Cosmology*

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

2 Background

Yesterday's weirdness is tomorrow's reason why. – Hunter S. Thompson⁵⁹

Burning Man is a contemporary iteration of a lineage of subversive subculture through The Cacophony Society and the Suicide Club, which were strongly inspired by The Situationist International and Dada avant-garde movements, among others. In order to assess the state of Burning Man culture today, it is necessary to understand the revolutionary and revelatory ideas from which it emerged.

2.1 Burning Man and Avant-Garde Arts Movements

Dada (1916 – present)

Dadaism arose in war-time Europe and continues to be expressed in post-punk efforts and contemporary pop culture phenomenon (i.e. flash mobs, SantaCon and street theatre). “Dada is pure dynamite, it mocks attempts to grasp it, and it is perennially rediscovered and in use by the discontented young.”⁶⁰ Dada attempts to destroy old-fashioned values and bourgeois culture to “be new and unrestricted”.⁶¹ Dadaist practice is sometimes surreal, always absurd and constantly challenging experiences, naturally eliminating boundaries and borders of beliefs, and making room for the visions, art and actions that are beacons for social transformation.⁶²

This viewpoint concurs with Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality*, which states that, “Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product.”⁶³ Ortner goes on to interpret the Berger and Luckmann triangle to say, “Society is a system, that the system is powerfully constraining, and yet that the system can be made and unmade through human action and interaction.”⁶⁴

Building upon Dadaism's commentary on the unnecessary and excessive limitations and restrictions of mainstream social structures and orders, Codrescu created his “Posthuman Dada Guide”, a guidebook/Dadaist performance piece for the 21st century ‘posthuman’, “to give young people solid intellectual, historical support for saying ‘screw you’, which is what they do anyway, even unsupported by serious scholarship,” and “to remind older people, too, that refusing war and thinking radically new thoughts are vastly preferable to institutionalizing the little we think we know.”⁶⁵ As a rebellious art movement born of the frustration of war, in Dadaism everything is sacred and profane, intensely important and simultaneously inconsequential, from bureaucratic nonsense to human life. These tenets of cultural questioning were obvious in the pre-Burning Man efforts of The Suicide Club and Cacophony Society that utilize recuperation to venerate the mundane and undermine and criticize the sacred [e.g. zone trips and culture-jamming].

A Dadaist refusal of ritual comes into play as definitions and dogmas are ideologically absent from Burning Man. Evoking a participatory epistemology, Burning Man participants are all welcome to create

⁵⁹Hunter S. Thompson, *The Curse of Lono* (Bantam Books, 1983)

⁶⁰ Cosana Eram, “The Posthuman Dada Guide: Tzara and Lenin Play Chess (review)”. *Modernism/modernity*, Volume 17 Number 3 (The Johns Hopkins University Press: September 2010). <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mod/summary/v017/17.3.eram.html>

⁶¹ Anna Glazova, *Dada and Constructivism*, http://www.vladivostok.com/speaking_in_tongues/glazova22eng.htm

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*. (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 61

⁶⁴ Sherry B. Ortner, “Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties”. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Jan. 1984), 159

⁶⁵ Andrei Codrescu, *Q&A with author Andrei Codrescu*, (Princeton University Press, 2008) <http://press.princeton.edu/releases/m8846.html>
Accessed 24 November 2015

their own meanings related to their enacted and dialectical experiences, because as with Dada, a lot of the experience and art of Burning Man is “made up of paradoxes, concealing and revealing meaning at the same time,” as Dadaist commentator Anna Glazova puts it.⁶⁶

The Situationist International (1957-1972)

Burning Man’s ideological links to The Situationist International, a European organization of social revolutionaries that was active 1957-1972, can be found in some of the Situationist International’s main concepts:

1. *Détournement* - turning the capitalist systems expressions against itself, i.e. using corporate logos and slogans as pranks that undermine the marketer⁶⁷. Playing amidst Terry Turner’s concepts of anthropological theory and activism, the Situationist International’s notion of *détournement* takes the inventions of dominant culture and puts them to different uses.⁶⁸ This is at the core of the culture jamming and the Billboard Liberation Front-type antics that defined The Cacophony Society’s actions and Burning Man’s early days.
2. Anti-capitalism - creating ‘situations’ of “play, freedom and critical thinking”, and⁶⁹
3. The construction of situations that unify ‘art and life’ – Radical Self-Expression, one of Burning Man’s Ten Principle, invites inspired and artistic life. Relating this practice to the theory of Cultural Sustainability, Rory Turner discusses the participatory nature of reality: “We live amongst self- and co-created structures that are the results of our unconscious habits; we consciously and unconsciously produce social life through our actions. We are actors on a stage where our actions contribute to the creation of the stage itself. Therefore, things can change and culture is emergent, multiple, hybridized.”⁷⁰

The San Francisco Suicide Club (1977-1983)

Gary Warne, Adrienne Burk, David Warren and Nancy Prussia founded The San Francisco Suicide Club in January 1977 after the group lived through a “terrifying adventure” of traversing the seawall under the Golden Gate Bridge together as 30-foot waves assaulted them.⁷¹ The surprise survival activity inspired them to form a club to encourage members to ‘live each day as though it were their last’ by “creating events and experiences that would challenge their deep personal fears, expand their knowledge and understanding of their world and those in it”.⁷² The name of the Club was inspired by the Robert Louis Stevenson stories of a group of men who are intent upon losing their lives. Far from wanting to die, members of The Suicide Club were people who wanted to lose the narrative of the lives that were expected of them and live beyond what they perceived as the unnecessarily restrictive boundaries of contemporary society.

⁶⁶ Glazova, *Dada and Constructivism*

⁶⁷ Douglas Holt and Douglas Cameron, *Cultural Strategy: Using Innovative Ideologies to Build Breakthrough Brands*, (Oxford University Press: 2010), 252

⁶⁸ Terry Turner, “Anthropology as Reality Show and as Co-production: Internal Relations between Theory and Activism” in *Critique of Anthropology* Volume 26, (2006), 15

⁶⁹ Holt and Cameron, *Cultural Strategy*, 252

⁷⁰ Rory Turner, *Week Three*

⁷¹ John Law, *Memorial Gathering for San Francisco Suicide Club Co-Founder David Warren (1935-2009)*, 29 December 2009, <http://laughingsquid.com/memorial-gathering-for-san-francisco-suicide-club-co-founder-david-warren-1935-2009/> Accessed 24 November 2015

⁷² Ibid.

The agreement between the founding members of the Suicide Club states:

Members must agree to set their worldly affairs in order to enter into the REAL world of chaos, cacophony, and dark saturnalia, and they must further agree to live each day as though it were their last, for it may BE. The club will explore the untraveled, exotic, miasmal, and exhilarating experiences of life: deserted cemeteries, storms, caving, haunted houses, Nazi bars, fanatical movements, hot air ballooning, stunts, exposés, impersonation. The Club will be ongoing for the rest of our lives.⁷³

Living each day as if it was his last was not just a metaphor for Warne, the principle instigator and leader of the Suicide Club. He in fact had a terminal heart condition that promised to cut his life short, which may have influenced his appetite for experimentation. Hailed as a genius and visionary by many passionate San Franciscan subversive subculturists, Warne brought the idea of the Suicide Club to life as a Spring 1977 class at San Francisco State University's fee-free Communiversity, a part of the then-budding Free School Movement. The Suicide Club was played out as an ongoing calendar of events with no philosophy or purpose attached. In their terms, a Suicide Club event, most commonly a group adventure, infiltration or stunt, is an "experience to be appreciated and embraced as a chance to be fully awake and alive, on the world's terms, not necessarily your own."⁷⁴

The diverse group of fringe-dwelling fun seekers that participated in the class included the people who would go on to create the Cacophony Society and Burning Man and other culture jamming efforts. Self-proclaimed prankster John Law joined the Suicide Club at age 18 and went on to be a founding member of the Cacophony Society and Burning Man. Referring to The Suicide Club and the Free School Movement he says, "In a society that had grown increasingly alienated and divisive, it taught cohesive, shared experience. It championed exploration and adventure in a culture increasingly subdued by media. Its basic intention, to confront the fears that limit human action, was an antidote to the anxieties perpetrated through politics and television news. While students in traditional universities might forget the facts learned in required academic classes, the lessons learned in The Suicide Club empowered participants for life."⁷⁵ The curious, creative and connected shared experiences Law describes as Suicide Club activities were playful explorations of liminal spaces and experiments in alternative culture creation that required the complete commitment of all involved for the game to work.

The Suicide Club disbanded in 1982 after the size and complexity of the experimental experiences got too big for the waning numbers and energies of its members. The next year, Warne died of a heart attack.

The Cacophony Society (1986 – present)

In 1986, former Suicide Club members regrouped to form the San Francisco Cacophony Society. This new subversive fringe group was defined by "whimsical audacity and brazen action" in pursuit of "shared experiences outside the pale of mainstream society."⁷⁶ The Cacophony Society was more open with a much more public presence than The Suicide Club, "You may already be a member," is a common catchphrase for the group, indicating how easy a whimsical approach to lived experience can be.

⁷³ Elaine Molinari, "David Warren and the Suicide Club" in *Guidelines*, Accessed online.

http://www.sfcityguides.org/public_guidelines.html?article=1255&submitted=TRUE&srch_text=&submitted2=&topic=San%20Francisco%20Characters, Accessed 24 November 2015. see [Appendix I](#) for a list of the Suicide Club's 12 Chaotic Principles

⁷⁴ Bob, *Legacy*, 20 May 2013, <http://www.suicideclub.com/479/history/legacy> Accessed 24 December 2015

⁷⁵ John Law, *Communiversity: The Free School from the 70's That Changed the Way People Play: Chronology and history of The Suicide Club's "free university" at San Francisco State* (2015). <http://bad.eserver.org/issues/2015/88/communiversity.htm> Accessed 24 November 2015

⁷⁶ Kevin Evans, Carrie Galbraith and John Law, *Tales of the San Francisco Cacophony Society*, (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 2013), xi

The Cacophony Society staged events and invitations to experience the city as a “playground,” to exercise imagination and creativity, and to push the boundaries of reality. Actions included replacing teddy bears on a toy store shelf with animals stuffed with concrete and tags that read “Life is heavy and hard,” a formal dance held in a coin laundry, and the institution of the contemporary urban activities of the Urban Iditarod, Salmon Run (dressing like fish and running against the tide of competitors in major urban running races) and Santacon.

Cacophony Society activities reflect Situationist tactics of creating opportunities for humans to “interact together as people, not mediated by commodities,” amidst “moments of true community [and] the [subsequent] possibility of a future, joyful and un-alienated society.”⁷⁷ Cacophony Society events went further to say something about how segments of society alienate each other. “‘We are the outcasts’ [their actions proclaim], ‘but look at yourself, you don’t fit in either.’ And really, who would want to?”⁷⁸

Long-time Cacophony member Carrie Galbraith and co-author of *Tales of the San Francisco Cacophony Society* says, “I embraced the Cacophony concept as I understood it: any idea can be brought to life and acted out. All events are valid, all alternate realities can be embraced and believed, all stretching of the boundaries between reality and imagination can be tested.”⁷⁹ (See [Appendix I](#) for Stuart Mangrum’s 12 Steps to Cacophony.)

Embracing opportunities to face (and therefore defeat) fear and expand conceptions of reality by viewing the world and its structures as a play environment are running themes of the active philosophies of the fringe dwellers of Dadaism, The Situationist International, The Suicide Club and The Cacophony Society. And these characteristics of this at once both residual and emergent culture have come to meet the mainstream in the form of Burning Man.

In this way, the idea for, and initial iterations of, Burning Man came from an anti-conformist quest for curious living that was often pursued by those who did not fit in with mainstream society for whatever reason. Founding Member, John Law describes the Cacophony Society as “a group populated by geeks and nerds, myself included - a group of misfits, even more so than The Suicide Club.”⁸⁰ Which is what makes Burning Man’s popularity among the power players of contemporary mainstream society noteworthy and piques my suspicion of the culture’s authentic continuity.

In a personal interview, John Law described the following four cornerstone concepts of what he believes is good about the Burning Man event. “They’re such powerful concepts that they resonate even with all of this detritus clinging to it. That’s why Burning Man is what it is... there’s still a core that resonates which is why... it’s an important thing. They’re doing their best to kill it, but it’s still there,” Law says.⁸¹

1. The Suicide Club’s philosophy and culture

According to Law, this is defined by Garry Warne’s “12 Chaotic Principles” and The Suicide Club’s organizational structure that allowed participation to be optional and for participants to self-select roles, rotate leadership, set specific scenes and make agreements.

“They were trying to experiment, to see if you could have an organizing core where people could do absolutely anything that they wanted to, within the structure... they had a newsletter, and the newsletter editor rotated every month, so sometimes they

⁷⁷ LibCom.org *Situationists – an introduction*, <https://libcom.org/files/Situationists%20-%20an%20introduction.pdf> Accessed 24 November 2015

⁷⁸ Jac Zinder, “The Cacophony Society’s Carnival of the Absurd”, *LA Weekly*, Vol 16, No. 35, (1994) qtd in Evans, Gallbraith and Law, *Cacophony*, 112

⁷⁹ Evans, Gallbraith and Law, *Cacophony*, 59

⁸⁰ Mark Beers, *Who the hell is John Law? An interview with prankster John Law*. 14 December, 2014. <http://cometmagazine.org/cometsite4/cometsite3/comet2/jlaw.html> Accessed 24 November 2015

⁸¹ John Law, *Personal Interview* 4 September, 2013

were really cool and other times they were barely legible. Anyone could do an event, and they would present what anyone else needed to do to participate. You had to agree to do it, everything was based on agreements, we had to agree to how we were going to set the stage to play. Once you made the agreement, then you could do anything within that structure. So if you come to an event, like say you're climbing the Golden Gate Bridge, you don't want to have people bringing pot... you don't want them smoking pot or bringing it on the bridge, in case you get caught – it's the rule of two. Y'know, you don't do that. So, I did a lot of climbing events, so that was one of the rules. But if you didn't like my event, you could come back and do the event yourself, put it in the newsletter and do it with different rules. That was the structure that they set up and it worked really well. And with that many event organizers, it was wild."⁸²

2. The Strugatsky Brothers' "Zone" and Carrie Galbraith's Zone Trip concept

In *Tales of the San Francisco Cacophony Society*, Carrie Galbraith explains, "The concept for the Zone came from my infatuation with the films of Andrei Tarkovsky, specifically *Stalker* and the book it was based on. In Cacophony, we took turns leading the others on Zone Trips, where you didn't know where they were taking you. For the first one, I just put an event write-up in the newsletter. 'We're going to the Zone. Meet at my place at 11 p.m. on Friday night. We'll be back on Sunday.'"⁸³ Zone Trips were created by the self-selected participants who agreed to play along with these extended moments of disbelief in order to experience life beyond the pale, in a self-created liminal experience.

To this point, Chicken John Rinaldi, director of the San Francisco Institute of Possibility, showman and member of the Los Angeles Cacophony Society and Burning Man participant since 1995 says, "The point forever and always is that you're trying to push the idea that the sacred space truly is 'The Zone'... it's the place where anything can happen. It's the place of great discomfort, an intention mixer, where you're not really sure what the intentions are; it feels good and it's exciting, but it feels weird and you're not confident that you know exactly what's going on. That's 'The Zone'".⁸⁴

3. Hakim Bey's Temporary Autonomous Zone theory

In 1990, Hakim Bey (Peter Lamborn Wilson's pseudonym) coined the term 'Temporary Autonomous Zone' to describe an essential ingredient to the preservation of autonomous uprisings and the socio-anarchistic movement's success.⁸⁵ According to Bey, a Temporary Autonomous Zone (T.A.Z.) is, "a liberated area... where new ways of being human together can be explored and experimented with... [located] in the cracks and fault lines in the global grid of control and alienation, a T.A.Z. is an eruption of free culture where life is experienced at maximum intensity."⁸⁶ The concurrent development and expression of Bey's thoughts and call to "create spaces of freedom in the

⁸² Law, *Personal Interview*

⁸³ Brad Wieners, "Hot Mess" in *Outside Magazine*. (24 August 2012). <http://www.outsideonline.com/outdoor-adventure/events/Hot-Mess.html> Accessed 24 November 2015

⁸⁴ John Rinaldi, *burncast.tv #44 A Conversation with Chicken John (part2)* Produced by BURNcast.tv. YouTube. (1 May 2009), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k7dNpXq7rQ> Accessed 24 November 2015

⁸⁵ John Jordan, *Theory: Temporary Autonomous Zone*, <http://beautifultrouble.org/theory/temporary-autonomous-zone/> Accessed 24 November 2015

⁸⁶ Ibid.

immediate present whilst avoiding direct confrontation with the state,” demonstrates Burning Man’s place as part of wider call for cultural change and social evolution.⁸⁷ Law remembers discovering Bey’s work in 1991, “I think it was the second year out in the desert [1991], and we were like, ‘Wow, this is what we’re doing, this guy’s writing about what we’re doing with intellectual constructs.’”⁸⁸

4. William Binzen’s Desert Site Works (1992-1994)

According to Law, this long-durational living art work is “where Larry [Harvey] got all of the philosophy for the intentional community and art in the desert. Desert Site Works was not being merely entertaining, like a television, it was about radical participation, involving people’s five senses to move them off of their normal orientation in life.”⁸⁹

Binzen defines his “experiment in living art” as, “an experiment in temporary community. We are made up entirely of artists, in multiple disciplines, performers, musicians, and back seat philosophers ready to stand up and talk. Here, in the desert, there is no human audience for our spectacle – we play for ourselves, or to find ourselves, or for amusement, or invention. This is about art as self-discovery, personal and interpersonal healing and the conjuring of new life-ways, new modes of being and becoming, and sharing culture.”⁹⁰

2.2 Burning Man and The Ritual Process

The Liminal and Liminoid

Famed anthropologist, Victor Turner coined the term ‘liminality’ in his seminal anthropological treatise, *The Ritual Process*, in reference to the time in-between time, amidst the ritual when the definitions, expectations and rules of former world or state of being have been lifted or released, and the new designations and meanings of the imminent world are yet to be imposed⁹¹. In this space, “social hierarchies may be reversed or temporarily dissolved, continuity of tradition may become uncertain, and future outcomes once taken for granted may be thrown into doubt”⁹². The resulting ambiguity and “dissolution of order during liminality creates a fluid, malleable situation that enables new institutions and customs to become established.”⁹³ The liminal is necessary within and for the structured, whereas the liminoid is the optional experience that is electively undertaken; “One works at the liminal, one plays at the liminoid.”⁹⁴

More than just a state of limbo, liminality, “a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action, can be seen as potentially a period of scrutinization of the central values and axioms of the culture in which it occurs.”⁹⁵ Thus, the integration of liminality within a cultural framework enables the structure to be dynamic, self-reflective and revolutionary. Burning Man events offer liminal spaces in

⁸⁷ John Jordan, *Theory: Temporary Autonomous Zone*

⁸⁸ Law, *Personal Interview*

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ William Binzen, “Inside ‘Desert Siteworks’”, quoted in *Tales*, 76

⁹¹ Turner, *Ritual*

⁹² Agnes Horvath, Bjørn Thomassen, and Harald Wydra, “Introduction: Liminality and Cultures of Change” in *International Political Anthropology* 2.1 (2009), 3–4

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Victor Turner, *Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (1982), 55

⁹⁵ Turner, *Ritual*, 167

contrast to mainstream society; it is an experience that teeters on the edges of mainstream reality and is ripe with the potential of transformation and possibility, and opportunities to dream and realize the level of self-imposition of dominant socio-philosophical boundaries.

Gary Warne's ideas on the rise of empowered play and adventurous living over the limitations of fear, are expressed in his essay, "Carnival Cosmology". The following selected excerpts describe the process and cumulative effects of his own rituals of facing his fears and experiencing unconventional events amidst liminal spaces. Warne's words describe the curious, empowered and wondrous approach to life that The Suicide Club, The Cacophony Society and Burning Man were all born from.

"I have been exploring a world of adventures, exotic locales, mystic essences, confronting my fears was the immediate goal, the predominant focus of the explorations and challenges. Now..., my fears have become wafer like and crumbling, shadows of their former selves. Now I find fear only a final, non-evolving image... that prevents me from entering into a visionary dialogue with whom I could become.

Fear is a freeze on the future, the filter or floodgate that stops our imaginings; something within us that stops us from becoming more powerful and loving... We were here to play, if nothing else, here to play with the world and other people.

"Other possibilities are becoming much more apparent. The world is becoming a total play environment and I am becoming something else entirely. The future is no longer on a circuit like the news, entertainment something an entrepreneur plans as I expectantly read the notices in the bleached parchments on the corner stands. It is an imagination away."⁹⁶

Whether or not it was his heart condition that gave him the courage and drive to push his life experiences past the edges of social expectations and into the shadows of absurdity and chaos, it was Warne's living example that attracted others to this lived philosophical quest. And despite the fact that my own experiences of Burning Man and Burning Man culture commenced 29 years after Warne's death, I am reminded of my own revelatory ritual moment by his essay.

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It happened in a portable toilet at Burning Man 2011. Deep into my fifth night at Burning Man, in this space, where the simply biological nature of life is ritualistically repeated no matter the wider physical or social context, I found myself in between worlds and in a liminal space. After struggling to work with my own transmuted wardrobe of thick coat over favorite vintage one-piece swimsuit, tall boots, el-wire light strings wrapped around my body, goggles and dust mask around my neck, shoulder bag with provisions to sustain life for a hearty hike; I found familiarity. Within the hard plastic booth that was my own for a brief moment, I could hear the echoes and see the shadows of the plethora of inventive flame effects, massive art installations, pounding sound systems, seething masses of cyclists and creative citizens of Black Rock City that surrounded me. This space provided a break from the world that I had, until a moment ago, been forced to realize as not just possible, but achieved. It was like a reverse Schrödinger's box. I was genuinely unsure if opening my cubicle door would reveal a return to the cacophony of Burning Man, or an awakening from this richly chaotic experience that came from beyond my imagination. Of course, both results are inherently possible. And the outcome of the experiment remains up to my subjective interpretation and my perception.

⁹⁶ Gary Warne, *Carnival Cosmology*, posted 3 January 2012. <http://www.suicideclub.com/7/essays/carnival-cosmology-by-gary-warne/>
Accessed 24 November 2015

It was at this moment that I came to realize the extent of my ability to author my life experience. I felt full of love and gratitude for every decision that I had ever made in my life, because it had gotten me to right there and then - sitting in a portable toilet in the Nevada desert in the middle of an immersive social experiment that I could not have conceived of without experiencing it. I knew, through direct and immediate experience, that my perceptions up until now had been unnecessarily restricted. And just like the “Welcome Home” I received a few months earlier at the Michigan Burning Man Regional event, my imagination was inspired to unlock and expand to perceive more than what was now proved to be a mundane understanding of reality. It was clear that it was up to me, if I would be alive or dead, awake or asleep, muted or on fire, when I released myself from the box.

This surprise personal revelation that I experienced at Burning Man echoes the form and function of the carnivalesque efforts of the Dadaists, Situationist International, Suicide Club and Cacophony Society. These experiments of experience amidst the fringe and emerging elements of society prompt empowerment of the individual and escalated questioning of the status quo.

Author and independent scholar, Erik Davis presents liminality in his discussion of Foucault’s ‘heterotopia’ as “a place where otherness is allowed to run riot. So, an example, with qualifications, is a place like Burning Man, particularly early on when there were less cultural ideas of how you were supposed to behave... It’s always an evanescent point where people come together and there’s a kind of open-ended questioning. It’s like, ‘We don’t know what our social interactions are going to be, we don’t know what subjectivity is going to be, or how our connections are going to happen now,’ and I think that there’s a part of us that really seeks that because we recognize in that the possibility that things can be other than what they are. That the world doesn’t have to be the way that it is.”⁹⁷

According to Rinaldi, “Living outside of convention is the most important thing that you can do. And in the early days of Burning Man, watching people have ‘aha moments’ was like one a minute.” He continues to say that an experience that begs the questions, “‘What else don’t we know?’ - that’s absolutely an ‘aha moment’”. When you experience this door opening and there’s a hallway with 50 other doors in it and each of those doors is a hallway with 50 an on and on...” that is a breakthrough moment.⁹⁸

It just so happened that for me, this door opened on to Burning Man.

Communitas

Though deeply personal experiences create the rich and addictive revelations that fuel this lineage of subversive action that is the subject of this work, it is the shared experience of these occurrences and understanding of their lessons that creates the culture in question.

Liminal occurrences eliminate structural hierarchy, for their moment of ‘time out of time’, and it is within this space of organic equality and camaraderie that *communitas* emerges. As Victor Turner defines it, “*Communitas* is the being no longer side by side [and one might add, above and below] but *with* one another of a multitude of persons... *communitas* has an existential quality; it involves the whole man in his relation to other whole men.”⁹⁹ *Fight Club* author and Cacophonist, Chuck Palahniuk describes the liminal rituals he enjoys writing about as events which “people enter into with a completely flat social status; nobody is any greater or lesser than anyone else, and everyone enjoys each

⁹⁷ Erik Davis, *TECHGNOSIS, Technology and The Human Imagination: Jason Silva and Erik Davis. Produced by Shots of Awe.* YouTube. 18 March 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QGwKge-ivkU> Accessed 24 November 2015

⁹⁸ John Rinaldi, *Personal Interview* 4 April 2012.

⁹⁹ Turner, *Ritual*, 126, 127

other's company and there's a sense of *communitas*."¹⁰⁰ The unstructured and organic character of *communitas* represents "the 'quick' of human interrelatedness" and could very well be thought of as "the 'emptiness at the center' which is nevertheless indispensable to the functioning of the structure of the wheel."¹⁰¹

Communitas is best considered in relation to structure; it emerges when structure is absent, or momentarily in question.¹⁰² *Communitas* has a "spontaneous, immediate, [and] concrete nature, ... as opposed to the norm-governed, institutionalized, [and] abstract nature of social structure."¹⁰³ However structure and anti-structure cannot function properly without the contrast and balancing effects of the other. "Exaggeration of structure may well lead to pathological manifestation of *communitas* outside or against 'the law'," Turner rationalizes, while, "Exaggeration of *communitas*... may be speedily followed by despotism, over-bureaucratization or other modes of structural rigidification."¹⁰⁴ Therefore, *communitas* cannot stand alone."¹⁰⁵

Invoking the ideas of the liminal space of ritual experience, the Suicide Club description includes the all-caps text, "DVEST YOURSELF OF EXPECTATIONS, SOLIDARITY IS A NECESSITY, PLAY IT OUT TO THE END".¹⁰⁶ Releasing one's definitions of possibility enables new experiences to be realized, and that was the quintessential point of the Suicide Club. The commitment to collective action and remaining in the game until it ends creates a sense of *communitas* and social bonding.

It is clear that Burning Man can act as a liminal space for the creation of *communitas* to contrast the structured and well-defined experience of the dominant cultural establishment. However, "it is the fate of all spontaneous *communitas* in history to undergo what most people see as a 'decline and fall' into structure and law."¹⁰⁷ Therefore, as Burning Man becomes more established, incorporated and conventional itself, it is important to note where and how experiences of the odd, the unfamiliar, the liminal, and that challenge that status quo are found. However, it can be asked, is Burning Man becoming more conventional, or is the conventional becoming more like Burning Man?

In addition to the historical pattern of institutionalization that Turner describes, the growing population, and subsequent diversity of motivations and ways of understanding and enacting the experimental culture of Burning Man, are also threatening the experience of *communitas* and the profound possibilities of a widely shared liminal and ritual experience. And it is this questioning of the prevalence of that sense of deep camaraderie in today's experience of Burning Man that underpins the cultural sustainability issues of the event and community as discussed in the section, '[Burning Man: Still Subversive or Simply Sold Out?](#)'.

¹⁰⁰ Chuck Palahniuk, *Chuck Palahniuk and the SF Cacophony Society: Creating Culture from Mayhem*. 23 September, 2013. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VNm8PBUY-R4> Accessed 24 November 2015

¹⁰¹ Turner, *Ritual*, 127

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 129

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Gary Warne, *The San Francisco Suicide Club Description*. 2 February 1977. <http://www.suicideclub.com.php5-21.dfw1-1.websitetestlink.com/?p=21> Accessed 24 November 2015

¹⁰⁷ Turner, *Ritual*, 132

2.3 Burning Man and Counterculture

In 1968, Theodore Roznak published an article describing "a culture so radically disaffiliated from the mainstream assumptions of our society, that it scarcely looks to many as a culture at all but takes on the alarming appearance of a barbaric intrusion."¹⁰⁸ A year later, Roznak published the best-selling *The Making of a Counter Culture* and coined the term now used to describe the vital role of opposition that large-scale social movements play in our world. Now classic treatise, *The Making of a Counter Culture* analyzes what others saw as chaos, and Roznak describes as "a youthful opposition to the 'technocracy'" that he said was "at the root of problems such as war, poverty, racial disharmony and environmental degradation".¹⁰⁹

Considering common descriptions and definitions of counterculture, it is easy to see that Burning Man is borne of this subcultural arena. Social anthropologist Jentri Anders observed the desire for the following freedoms in her study of counterculture: freedom to explore one's potential, freedom to create one's Self, freedom of personal expression, freedom from scheduling and freedom from rigidly defined roles and hierarchical statuses.¹¹⁰

Donald Costello's 1972 essay discussing the films *Woodstock*, *Easy Rider* and *A Clockwork Orange* as "the best films of the counterculture" demonstrates the point that the counterculture of the 1960s (and I argue Burning Man) is an iteration of a much larger social impetus than one decade or one label can contain¹¹¹. Discussing *Woodstock* (the film), Costello says, "The young of the 60's had contended that their culture was based not on exploitation but on love, not on violence but on peace, not on restraints but on freedom. Woodstock showed them that that was true. Their culture was communicated from one to the other not by mind and words but by sights and sounds. Sensations, feelings, intuitions, spontaneity reigned. To receive the message of the culture, then, required not sharpening the reason but expanding the consciousness."¹¹² The experience of going to Burning Man is commonly compared to Woodstock, although it is a much larger event in a much harsher environment, and is not a festival of music, but of art and community. However, the ideals and description of culture that Costello presents demonstrates the similarities of these two events that value direct experience and liberty over the banal realities of mainstream life.

Cultural incorporation

Williams' presentation of the concepts of emerging, dominant and residual cultures in *Marxism and Literature* can be used to describe how Burning Man culture echoes other previous and current social movements. Williams' discussion of the "incorporation" of the emergent within the dominant paradigm explains how parts of previous countercultural movements have been subsumed into mainstream cultural parlance, while other aspects seem to reverberate through subsequent cultural attacks as the new culture struggles to move beyond incorporation; with Burning Man being one of these revivals. Williams' description of the potentially dramatically distant "social location of the residual" inspires my postulation that Burning Man is a contemporary and established articulation of an alternative paradigm that will continue to emerge in new and more challenging ways.

¹⁰⁸ Elaine Woo. "Theodore Roszak dies at 77; scholar coined the term 'counterculture'". *Los Angeles Times*. 14 July 2011. Accessed 19 August 2012. <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/jul/14/local/la-me-theodore-roszak-20110713> Accessed 24 November 2015

¹⁰⁹ Woo, *Theodore Roszak*

¹¹⁰ Jentri Anders, *Beyond Counterculture*, (Washington State University Press, 1990)

¹¹¹ Donald P. Costello, "From Counterculture to Anticulture" in *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 34, No. 4, *America in Change: Reflections on the 60's and 70's* (October, 1972), 187-193

¹¹² Ibid, 188.

In the Situationist International's establishing pamphlet, *Report on the Construction of Situations*, Guy Debord describes official culture, or the culture that receives social legitimation or institutional support in a given society, as a "rigged game"¹¹³ in which "conservative powers forbid subversive ideas to have direct access to the public discourse, and where such ideas are integrated only after being trivialized and sterilized."¹¹⁴ This sanitization of destabilizing ideas and actions is akin to the process of cultural incorporation that befalls countercultural movements. This process, also called 'recuperation', robs the dissenting movement of its teeth by then subsuming the superficial elements of the defiant effort back into mainstream society, in order to exploit them as "new flavors to old dominant ideas."^{115,116}

Counterculture is, by definition, "inherently unstable", meaning that it must be adaptive and dynamic to remain (ironically) true to its essential nature.¹¹⁷ Costello claims that *Easy Rider* was made "by members of the counterculture for other members of the counterculture, and it was a warning... that the values of the counter-culture were becoming indistinguishable from the values of the mainstream... In the self-discovery scene, Captain America's words, "We blew it," are clear in meaning; and they are a warning for a counterculture that cannot really be counter if it accepts the values of the dominant culture into which it enslaves itself."¹¹⁸

Burning Man culture is now well represented in mainstream media, superficial expressions of this culture have come to play roles in marketing strategy for 'edgy and cool' capitalist pursuits, and it is estimated that 40% of the population of Black Rock City have been new participants for the past three years, therefore the culture of Burning Man is likely the prey of cultural incorporation by popular culture. As Clifford puts it, the "commodification of identities and traditions" is "integral to a late-capitalist or post-modern world system of cultures," therefore this is an indicator of the process of incorporation of Burning Man culture by dominant capitalist culture.¹¹⁹

As Burning Man cultural commentator Caveat Magister puts it, "Modernity not only does not offer a way out, it actively struggles to pull other systems in, appropriating and ruining them. Each one becomes a fad that other 'winners' in modern society spend a great deal of money on (Yoga mats! Kabbalah! Zen retreats! And now... yes... Burning Man!), missing the point that by the time whatever-it-is becomes a commodity it is no longer an alternative to the system: it is a part of the system."¹²⁰

¹¹³ Lisa A. Lewis, *The Adoring audience: fan culture and popular media*. (Routledge, 1992), 31

¹¹⁴ Debord *Report 2*, 10

¹¹⁵ Debord *Report.2*, 10

¹¹⁶ Chasse, Elwell, Horelick and Verlaan, *Faces of Recuperation*

¹¹⁷ Theodore Roszak, *When the counterculture counted*, 23 December 2001, <http://www.sfgate.com/books/article/When-the-counterculture-counted-2835958.php> Accessed 24 November 2015

¹¹⁸ Costello, *From Counterculture to Anticulture*, 189-190.

¹¹⁹ Clifford, *Taking Identity Politics Seriously*, 110-111

¹²⁰ Caveat Magister, "What I've learned about Burning Man from reading 'Culture and the Death of God.'", *The Burning Man Journal* 6 April 2015. <http://journal.burningman.org/2015/04/opinion/serious-stuff/what-ive-learned-about-burning-man-from-reading-culture-and-the-death-of-god/> Accessed 24 November 2015

3 Burning Man: From Chaos to Community

In 1986, Larry Harvey and Jerry James built an eight-foot statue of a man, took it to Baker Beach in San Francisco, and set it on fire. As Harvey repeated this ritual in subsequent years, it became popular with the Cacophony Society network of "culture jammers" and pranksters. By 1990, when Harvey and friends piled down to Baker Beach to burn the effigy to mark the summer solstice for the fifth time, the burn was stopped by authorities due to its threat as a fire hazard.

The Golden Gate Park police's cessation of the event was a unifying event for those gathered, and the first trial of the community that was slowly gathering around Burning Man.¹²¹ In this instance, the community demonstrated a flexible cultural identity as it had not yet fully formed.

When the effigy burn was cut short, Cacophony society founder and Suicide Club member, John Law, and Cacophonist and soon-to-be Burning Man founder, Michael Mikel, invited Harvey to join the Cacophony Society's Zone Trip #4 to the Black Rock Desert, to construct, display, and burn outsider art. This seemed to suit the artistic and myth-less tone of the effigy-burning ritual that had no defined meaning or implications. 89 people were there when the effigy was burned in the desert a few weeks later and Harvey has returned every year since to do the same thing – but more than a few people and artworks join the journey each time.

Dorothy Noyes' article, *Group* discusses the "impossibility" of a "neat definition" of the title term in a 1995 edition of the *Journal of American Folklore*.¹²² Geertz recognizes that incoherence is necessary for something so complex as a cultural system and the vast restrictions of our understanding of such an intricate entity, ending with the gross and gorgeous admission that "cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete"¹²³. However, in *Social Identity*, Richard Jenkins states, "People must have something inter-subjectively significant in common – no matter how vague, apparently unimportant or apparently illusory – before we can talk about their membership of a collectivity."¹²⁴

Noyes' discussion of the fact "that groups are not homogenous," is clearly expressed in the dramatically diverse Burning Man community. Since 1990, Burning Man the community and culture has intermittently shied away from and struggled with defining its identity.¹²⁵ In a group that practices 'do-ocracy' (the idea that if you want something done, you should do it), definitions and communications via actions have been proven to be more effective than long-winded treatises in this community. As Caveat Magister, an official Burning Man blog writer, puts it, "The idea that we're united by our actions, rather than our motives, ideals, or thoughts, means that when we try to communicate Burning Man to the rest of the world, we do it by doing."¹²⁶

Burning Man was born out of a group of people that sought to disrupt conventionality and encourage inspired and inspiring experiences beyond the boundaries of reality by practicing 'culture jamming'. These transgressive ideals and actions led them to explore the vast expanse of the Black Rock Desert with unbound creative expressions and without restrictions. For the first few years, they had the mental and physical space to truly explore the extents of their capabilities, however as more people were drawn to the bright shiny light of authentic self-expression and exploration as an escape from the dominant society of consumption, permission and limitations, the creative chaos became unsustainable.

¹²¹ The organization's (Harvey's) willingness to work with authority is still obvious in the cooperative manner the Burning Man organization works with various levels of government and other regulatory bodies

¹²² Dorothy Noyes. "Group", *The Journal of American Folklore* Vol. 108 (1995), 449-478.

¹²³ Clifford Geertz. *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books, 1993), 3-4.

¹²⁴ Richard Jenkins. *Social Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 102.

¹²⁵ "Festival" as a celebration of commonality. I don't believe the four annual 'burns' prior to 1990 could be called 'festivals'

¹²⁶ Caveat Magister, *Who the Hell Are Burners*

"In the early days, people used to take drugs, drop acid, drive... at 90 miles per hour in their car with their headlights off while they were drinking wine and shooting guns out the window [laugh], and we just can't do that anymore," says Michael Mikel to organizational researcher Katherine Chen, in her book *Enabling Creative Chaos: The Organization behind the Burning Man Event*¹²⁷. "At the time, it was open frontier. It was freedom basically," he continues¹²⁸. In the early 1990s, Burning Man was an "intentional community focused on art, created one giant living piece of art for six days, a very ritualized ultra-uber art experience," remarks Burning Man artist Charlie Gadeken in Olivier Bonin's 2009 documentary *Dust and Illusions*.¹²⁹ Steven Raspa, Burning Man staff member and Lead Community Events Organizer, describes his first experience of Burning Man, "I recognized that it was similar to the magic that I had experienced in New York in the Lower East Side in the 80s, which was that people were making their lives out of the part of the city that people didn't really want, out of the cast offs, and there was a sense of the potential that you could do anything. It was playful and collaborative and adventurous. And I felt the same feeling when I first went to Burning Man in 1996."¹³⁰

Dust and Illusions dives deep into the history, politics and early group dynamics of Burning Man and describes the first intra-cultural clash at Burning Man. For the first few years, there was no amplified sound at the event which is now classed as playing host to many of the best sound systems and dance parties on the planet. So when electronic dance music enthusiasts, or 'ravers' came to Burning Man in 1995, conflicting interests and definitions of a good time were apparent. Bonin narrates, "Burning Man's outlaw ideals of danger and responsibility" clashed "with the ravers' ideals of being able to live to their fullest in a safe and cuddly environment."¹³¹

For the 1996 event, the divergent groups of radical campers came to a compromise and 'Rave Camp' was set up one-mile downwind of the main event with a defined road leading to it. "Though the previous year's issues were resolved, the distance and lack of connection with the rest of the city proved to be problematic," comments Burning Man founder, Harley K. DuBois.¹³² "A breakdown of civic standards and community created chaos, ultimately resulting in serious injuries occurring to rave participants. The Burning Man organizers, and I in particular, were devastated by the experience, and vowed that no such incident would ever occur again."¹³³

In personal interview, Law states, "At some point it simply became impossible to do what we were doing. I think 5000 was the cut-off point, maybe even less than that, to maintain the experiment that we were doing."¹³⁴

"We needed to impose some kind of structure, some kind of regulations," remarks Mikel.¹³⁵ "John [Law] came out of the tightknit group of The Suicide Club, where everyone felt responsible for each other, so he felt responsible for everyone at Burning Man. That [1996] was the year John left - he felt that it had become too big."¹³⁶

¹²⁷ Katherine K. Chen, *Enabling Creative Chaos; The Organization Behind the Burning Man Event*. (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 32

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ *Dust and Illusions*

¹³⁰ Raspa, *Personal Interview*

¹³¹ *Dust and Illusions*

¹³² Harley K. DuBois, "Managing Diversity: The Zoning of Black Rock City", *The Burning Man Journal*. 25 May 2010.

<http://journal.burningman.org/2010/05/black-rock-city/building-brc/managing-diversity-the-zoning-of-black-rock-city/> Accessed 24 November 2015

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Law, *Personal Interview*

¹³⁵ *Dust and Illusions*

¹³⁶ Ibid.

1996: Fatalities

The chaos of punk-art-anarchy meets vast open desert with little more than self-imposed boundaries that was Burning Man screeched to a halt in 1996. It was made clear that self-regulation was not meeting the mark when a key member of the core group was killed in a motor vehicle accident, and one volunteer was killed and others severely injured when someone driving a car ran over a tent. Suddenly, thousands were not only mourning the loss and injury of close friends but also the naïve innocence of their adolescent community; the group's identity had to grow up.

Brad Wieners' 2012 *Outside Magazine* article, "Hot Mess", describes the situation via direct quotes from those who were there.

Harley Dubois (Burning Man founder): We were always looking for the tipping point. When does it not work anymore? In '96, we found it.

Michael Mikel (Burning Man Founder): It started during the setup days. Michael Furey, a neon artist, was in the town of Gerlach, drinking at the bar. Toward dusk he got on his motorcycle to go back to camp, and people tried to convince him to put his bike in a truck, but he declined. There was somebody in a van driving back at the same time, and Michael started doing these runs at the van to see how close he could get.

Vanessa Kuemmerle (Burning Man artist): It was that twilight hour. I had gone into town and was at a gas station where there were a whole bunch of people trying to figure out how to get to Burning Man. There was a caravan of maybe 10, 20 cars. Beautiful sunset. At some point I see a flashing light out on the playa. Is it really far away? Close? And then all of a sudden, *whoom!*—I see that it's John [Law]'s white van. A guy called SteveCo was driving. I pull over and stop the car. SteveCo stops the van and just looks at me and goes, "Mike Furey's dead." Furey had been playing chicken with the van and was basically decapitated by the side mirror. There wasn't any ambiguity there.

John Law: Furey killed himself, but it was Larry's response that made me certain I was done after that year.

Kuemmerle: We're waiting for a coroner and the sheriff. An SUV comes up, or a minivan, and Larry and a few other people get out. Larry bursts onto the scene and he says—I swear to fucking God—four times in a row: "There's no blood on our hands!" My jaw was on the playa. It was one of those moments of looking into someone's mind and not being too excited about what I saw.

Joe Fenton (member of the Black Rock Rangers, Burning Man's internal response and security team): Larry's way of dealing with 1996 was to try and control what was getting to the media. When Furey died, the first thing Larry did was look at his watch. He made sure to say it happened at 11:30 the night before the event officially began. So it didn't happen *at* the festival but *before* the festival, as if Furey's death was somehow not related. It was a stupid, alcoholic, moronic death. But you couldn't deny that he chose this event to die at.

Chris Radcliffe (Cacophonist and Burning Man artist): Burning Man had become Larry's whole life, so for John to say it's over—that was a problem.

Larry Harvey (Burning Man Founder): What finally occurred in '96 was a question about two different visions of what Burning Man should be. Should it be civilized? Or should it be, essentially, a repudiation of order? If it's a repudiation of order and authority, and

you're the organizer and it involves thousands of people, what does that mean for you? What kind of a moral position is that to be in?

Law: Of course it had to change. We knew better than anyone, because we worked hard to keep everyone safe. But there was an opportunity there to say, Don't make it bigger. Why does it need to be thousands? Keep it to a size where you know who you're dealing with.

Mikel: There was a second serious accident in '96, the morning after the burn. Someone drove over a tent with a couple in it and then crashed into another car, scalding a third woman with radiator fluid.

Law: No one who goes to Burning Man today is going to care about a bunch of old farts who are mad at each other because the band broke up. But they should know who they're dealing with. Larry's no saint. He's also no visionary.¹³⁷

In the wake of these extreme reality checks, the people organizing the event divided into two factions, but all agreed that the current characteristics of the previously uncontrolled event could not be sustained. Some felt the happening itself was the point of the group and the under-organization of the event was critical to its identity and purpose, while others believed the group formation had become the paramount point of the desert retreat and the happening was the medium for this community development. The faction in favor of a pure experiment in chaos and ending the event at this critical juncture left the group (including John Law, the man who first invited Harvey to bring the Man to the desert with the Cacophony Society) and those who remained formed the Burning Man organization and transitioned the free-for-all into an inclusive and creative community and event.

"A lot of that desire for growth came out of my philosophy with Cacophony; the more people you have with creative ideas, the more things you can come up with, the more wonderful art [and] ideas will happen," says Mikel.¹³⁸

It was at this time that the liberty-fueled, hyper-adolescent and individually-focused nature of the event changed. "They come for the art, but stay for the community," said Harvey.¹³⁹ Guns, dogs and driving were banned, an urban plan for Black Rock City was instituted and guidelines were formed and disseminated for the event that emphasized creativity and community. And "the wild chaotic energy of the first years would be channeled toward creativity and art," reports Bonin.¹⁴⁰

"It would make it irresponsible to make it large and not make it civil. We proceeded to create Black Rock City as it does exist," testifies Harvey, "I don't think those things exterminate freedom - only if your freedom is the desire to shoot your gun anytime anywhere, [and/or] drive at 120 miles per hour regardless of what's in your path," he continues.¹⁴¹

Mikel tells Chen, "We've become a community, there now is a responsibility to other members in the community. There are limits to what you can do, and we've made changes, but there's still a tremendous amount of tolerance."¹⁴²

¹³⁷ Wieners, *Hot Mess*

¹³⁸ *Dust and Illusions*

¹³⁹ Larry Harvey quoted in Stephen T. Jones. *The Tribes of Burning Man: How an Experimental City in the Desert is Shaping the New American Counterculture* (San Francisco: Consortium of Collective Consciousness, 2011), 251.

¹⁴⁰ *Dust and Illusions*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² Chen, *Enabling Creative Chaos*, 32.

But this evolution of the experiment wasn't endorsed by everyone. "Sure they had to get rid of the guns and slow the cars down and other things that were necessary for a city of 40,000 people, but what they didn't have to do was micromanage every angle of the organization," asserts Rinaldi.¹⁴³ The dichotomous rub between chaos and control was the foundation for the early cultural concerns within the community.

1997: Corporate Structure

Now that the effects of this event were reaching beyond the ephemeral 'Zone' into very concrete realities like hospital bills and loss of life, those who wanted to ensure Burning Man continued to exist as an event needed to create an incorporated entity. They chose to form a Limited Liability Corporation so that the responsibility and risk of the event, and any potential lawsuit could be shifted to an abstract entity.¹⁴⁴

Despite Harvey proclaiming, "Burning Man doesn't belong to me... it belongs to you!" in a particularly dramatic demonic performance spectacle at the 1996 event, Paper Man LLC was formed in 1997 between the three original founders (Harvey, Law and Mikel) in order to own and control the name and service mark of "Burning Man".¹⁴⁵

"If we're going to survive, we're going to have to take some stuff seriously," comments Burning Man founder and then-PR maven and now CEO of the Burning Man Project, Marian Goodell.¹⁴⁶ Bedoya describes an intrinsic "tension between administrative culture and creativity; the rub between efficacy and risk," that sounds like what Goodell has to contend with.¹⁴⁷ "We just have to face some realities, Goodell continues, "Our hearts might be somewhere else, but we are necessarily a business because actually that's a pretty powerful vehicle to be utilizing in order to navigate and be heard," she says.¹⁴⁸

"Burning Man, because [it is] a top-down hierarchy, is totally sustainable, but it [Cacophony] wasn't a top down hierarchy," Law told me.¹⁴⁹ "What it is now is totally different from what we were doing. That's why I get along with Marian, I don't have any heart connection or any sense of ownership to it. I can just look at it as an interesting phenomenon."¹⁵⁰

The inherent and implied nature of cultural policies mean one can look to other aspects of policy and culture to find the social organization structures that go on to form cultural norms. However, "the power of creativity and the dynamic nature of culture often defy the coherence and consistency expected of policymaking."¹⁵¹ Hence the paradoxical entanglement of the role of public policies for cultural sustainability: social definition for group definition and cohesion, but also a point of departure for rebellious ingenuity.

In Chen's *Enabling Creative Chaos*, an intense discussion of the benefits and pitfalls of bureaucratic and collectivist approaches to organization is presented as an analysis of the distinctive and hybridized approach to business, volunteer/community building and the expression of responsibility and

¹⁴³ *Dust and Illusions*

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*,

¹⁴⁵ Larry Harvey, *Burning Man 1996*. Produced by Puzzling Evidence TV. YouTube. August 1996. <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLF3FE4A2CB26EC3CC> Accessed 24 November 2015

¹⁴⁶ *Dust and Illusions*

¹⁴⁷ Robert. Bedoya, *US Cultural Policy: Its Politics of Participation, Its Creative Potential*. (New Orleans: National Performance Network, 2004)

¹⁴⁸ *Dust and Illusions*

¹⁴⁹ Law, *Personal Interview*

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*.

¹⁵¹ Caron Atlas, "Cultural Policy: What Is It? Who Makes It? Why Does It Matter?" in *Culture Counts: Strategies for a More Vibrant Cultural Life for New York City*. (New York: New York Foundation for the Arts, 2001), 65-68. http://www.nyfa.org/files_uploaded/Pages_65-68.pdf Accessed 24 November 2015

expectations that the Burning Man organization has taken in order to sustain the unique culture of this society. Highlighting the organization's delicate dance of balancing the two social organizational frameworks, Chen discusses how the fringe, marginal or unorthodox character of the community has been protected while interacting with conservative and conformist entities (e.g. the federal authorities that issue the annual permit for the Burning Man event).

In this period of cultural questioning and shift, those who stayed on to become the event's organizers "viewed formal organizing as a crucial step in enabling a creative community to develop and thrive."¹⁵² From their perspective, "under-organizing contributed to the debilitating chaos of past events where people were too preoccupied with their survival to engage in creative activities," according to Chen.¹⁵³ However, community leaders did not want to form a traditional and over-organized bureaucratic model with strict top-down control and the potential for "mission fanaticism."¹⁵⁴ Chen says, "Members sought conditions that enabled creative chaos without debilitating chaos and totalitarianism."¹⁵⁵ Reflecting the question of cultural sustainability that faced event goers in 1996, and Victor Turner's work regarding the inter-reliant relationship between structure/anti-structure, the two extremes that continue to threaten the Burning Man event are: not providing enough structure for the event and allowing chaos to overwhelm participants; and choking the creativity and vitality of the event with too much structure.¹⁵⁶

Burning Man is not alone in this hybridized form of social and commercial organization. Entities of all kinds, community and commercial, are increasingly adopting both bureaucratic and collectivist practices in order to maintain relevance, member participation and cultural sustainability.¹⁵⁷

Bureaucratic practices such as a chain of authority, standardization and specialization are included in Burning Man's organizational structure to enhance fairness, efficiency and stability, while collectivist practices such as having a mission, decision making by consensus (of top level organization members) and individual role creation support flexibility responsiveness and meaning within the group while also amplifying the organization's financial transparency and accountability to its members.¹⁵⁸ These collectivist practices that often marry members' interests with the needs and goals of the group, enable members to be united by shared missions and goals that are meaningful to them individually too; what Weber calls 'value rationality'.¹⁵⁹ Chen quotes Burning Man organization board member Harley Dubois as saying, "It's not about being efficient, it's about making people a part of something."¹⁶⁰ By endeavoring together, individuals create relationships of trust and reciprocity that form a larger collective identity, or as Putnam puts it, "social capital".¹⁶¹ Contrary to the common form of the dominant populations' regulation of subordinates and calling to mind Turner's notion of 'communitas', Noyes states that "acting in common makes community."¹⁶² And to that end, Burning Man founder, Larry Harvey is quoted as saying, "Communities are not produced by sentiment. They grow out of a shared struggle."¹⁶³

¹⁵² Chen, *Enabling Creative Chaos*, 5

¹⁵³ Ibid,

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 6

¹⁵⁵ Ibid

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 3

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 8

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 19 and 155

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 9

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 71

¹⁶¹ Putnam quoted in Chen, *Enabling Creative Chaos*, 22

¹⁶² Noyes, *Group*, 468.

¹⁶³ Jim Goad. *Burning Man for Dummies: Everything You Need to Know About the Festival in The Desert Where Rich Kids Play Hippie*. 29 September 2015. <http://thoughtcatalog.com/jim-goad/2015/09/burning-man-for-dummies-everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-festival-in-the-desert-where-rich-kids-play-hippie/> Accessed 24 November 2015

Chen calls for attention to be paid to organizations such as Burning Man which create forms of legitimizing outputs, activities and practices that do not conform to prevailing standards, in order to support the sustainability of that values-based culture because, “if an organization does not have sufficient legitimacy, it may be pressured to adopt existing standards or practices that are inapplicable or incongruent with its enterprise.”¹⁶⁴ Meaning that entities operating within this space of hybridity and organizational experimentation are susceptible to incorporation into the prevailing patterns they seek to discover alternatives to. The particular point of danger is when the organization’s focus is on surviving as an entity, rather than meeting a particular current need or goal, or continuing the experiment.

If the focus is on the experiment, rather than the existence of the entity, the failure or demise of the happening should be just as valid a result as continuing circumstances of success.

Concerns over Conventionality

With a sustainable structure and growing population, early event participants noticed an infiltration of familiarity at the event.

Notable Burning Man Artist, Pepe Ozan directed many elaborate performance art operas at Burning Man. In Bonin’s documentary he reflects, “Burning Man is supposed to be the opposite of civilization, it’s supposed to be where you let go. But the amount of people, and the [presence of the] Nevada Police is bringing the rules of civilization within Burning Man.”¹⁶⁵ “With that surging population, suddenly what has been a rather anarchic, unstructured community begins to become more like the city we thought we had left behind, a place where there are speed limits, parking restrictions, traffic considerations,” comments D.S. Black Silver.¹⁶⁶ Brian Doherty has been going to Burning Man annually since 1997 and has regularly written pieces for Reason Magazine about the event and its cultural implications. Doherty notes this growing sentiment among Burning Man artists too. Quoting the man who initially built the Man, Jerry James, “If it just becomes San Francisco East, why not stay home? ... It’s not the social experiment it used to be. Larry talks about building community--what I see them building is just like the community we live with every day, all these cops and rangers and rules and roads.”¹⁶⁷

However, this cultural blending was not just about what is happening within the physical and temporal boundaries of the event and its participants, but also due to increased interactions with the governmental and regulatory forces of the state. Doherty reports, “The agencies that sign off on Burning Man’s permits have come to see the festival more as an opportunity than as a problem and have thus forged a relatively easygoing relationship with the openly danger- and drug-filled event. And Burning Man’s gradual evolution of rules is more properly seen as an extended experiment in community building than as a case study in the suppression of liberty.”¹⁶⁸ It is important to recognize that Burning Man organizers did not capitulate to all of the demands of the dominating authorities. “You have no idea how fucked up that would be,” Goodell, the then Burning Man government liaison told Doherty, in response to the pressure from county health officials to organize garbage collection for the event and its participants.¹⁶⁹ “It would no longer be a radical camping experience. We might as well stay home and put the recycling in front,” she scoffed.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁴ Rothschild and Whit (1986) quoted in Chen, *Enabling Creative Chaos*, 117

¹⁶⁵ *Dust and Illusions*

¹⁶⁶ *Burning Man: Community of Chaos?* Produced by Mark Silver. Channel 4. 2000. <https://vimeo.com/53507839> Accessed 24 November 2015

¹⁶⁷ Brian Doherty, “Burning Man Grows Up: Can the nation’s premier underground event survive its success?”, *Reason Magazine*. February 2000. <http://reason.com/archives/2000/02/01/burning-man-grows-up>

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid

¹⁷⁰ Ibid

“Taking everything you have in the city and taking that out into the desert is not what I wanted. I wanted to be constantly experiencing new things that kept me on my toes,” says Law in *Dust and Illusions*.¹⁷¹ And maybe that’s why he has spent a lot of time in Detroit in the last decade.

Follow me on this parallel: The lack of regulation in Detroit not only allows creativity and action, it demands it. “The people in Detroit know that they are on their own and if they want something done they have to do it themselves,” comments urban analyst Aaron Renn, who goes on to say that this has led to the development of very creative enterprises, art and ways to deal with challenges¹⁷². The creative and entrepreneurial culture that is blossoming in Detroit and other cities in decline as a result of a lack of regulation may be surprising. But Renn concludes, “There’s not much chance a strong city government could really turn [Detroit] around, but it could stop the grass roots revival in its tracks.”¹⁷³ Though the imposition of comparatively gentle controls at Burning Man may seem a far cry from the excessively bureaucratic and permission-seeking society of the establishment, once can see how those taking to Burning Man for the radical experiment of rampant liberty may cringe at the creation of policies, permits and procedures.

Doherty voices this in an early 2000 Reason Magazine article, noting that, “Every step away from pure anarchy is defended by Harvey in sensible terms,” yet asking, “Is it appropriate for administrative governing bodies to manage or direct culture, especially one of inventive ambition? Can creativity be authorized?”¹⁷⁴

Artist Rebecca Anders tells Bonin, “I went in 1997 looking for the wild, crazy, impassioned experiment. [But] apparently there was a new aspect of Burning Man that year - there was more organization, more rules... but what I saw was people making large strange impossible art.”¹⁷⁵ And as Doherty told Wieners, “While it definitely changed after 1996—it was way more planned—that didn’t keep it from being amazing. Before then, a lot of the art was discards. Stuff cobbled together, old doors or signs, or Steve Heck’s surreal collection of junk pianos. As it went on, the art was commissioned. It may have become more of a theme park, but people were still *making* the theme park as they went along.”¹⁷⁶

We have to take a responsibility for our own fun, and for the fact that our subjective gauges of possibility must be recalibrated after each iteration of experiencing life beyond the pale. Anders kept going to Burning Man, and describes how she has made the event “impassioned” for herself, “The festival itself has become very predictable to me... I’ve more become involved in making the art work happen. You can only go to the same party so many times, making the large scale artwork has become the adventure.”¹⁷⁷

In 2000, a group of Burning Man participants from Portland got meta and decided to prank the event itself. Doherty reports, “[They] staged a bogus ‘Larry Harvey’ book signing in center camp. One of their number donned a fedora and stuck a cigarette in his mouth--Harvey’s signature accessories--and sat on a couch on the mobile living room art car. Suplicants were forced to kneel at gunpoint before ‘Larry’ as he signed cheap, thrift-store paperbacks with xeroxed cover stickers identifying the book as *Mein Camp*,

¹⁷¹ *Dust and Illusions*

¹⁷² Aaron Renn, “Detroit: Urban Laboratory and the New American Frontier”, *New Geography*. 4 November 2009.

<http://www.newgeography.com/content/001171-detroit-urban-laboratory-and-new-american-frontier> Accessed 24 November 2015

¹⁷³ *Ibid*

¹⁷⁴ Doherty, *Burning Man Grows Up*

¹⁷⁵ *Dust and Illusions*

¹⁷⁶ Wiener, *Hot Mess*

¹⁷⁷ *Dust and Illusions*

by Larry Harvey. 'Do not touch Mr. Harvey, do not speak to Mr. Harvey, do not look at Mr. Harvey,' a gunman shouted through a megaphone. 'Move along.'"¹⁷⁸

Apollo vs. Dionysus: Smiley and the Symbol

It could be said that Burning Man's core intra-cultural debate is that of Apollo vs. Dionysus. Friedrich Nietzsche asserted that human nature is made up of the rational, orderly and predictable Apollonian aspect, and the irrational, passionate, creative and chaotic Dionysian aspect, and that a balanced existence is ideal.¹⁷⁹ While Nietzsche sought to inject the reasoned sensibilities of his time with more spirited Dionysian traits, it may be argued that the initially adolescent and chaotic energy of Burning Man is simply maturing to include elements of rationality and predictability.

In 1996, the event's last anarchic year, pranksters flashed a smiley face on the Man, the focus of the event, for just seconds at a time. "We put a neon smiley face on it with an intermittent timer so it would flash on and off at intermittent times. Larry was incensed that the symbol was being made fun of, he would deny that now, but he was definitely pissed off. It was really funny. And that's what people should do, they should make fun of the stupid thing," Law says.¹⁸⁰ Rinaldi told Jones, "It was a defacing of the icon," and a challenge to the event's control.¹⁸¹ The anti-establishment exercise of Smiley was symbolic of the split between those serious about creating a new kind of community open to all and those who are wary of such highfaluting goals and just wanted to have fun and make radical art, like Law and Rinaldi. Supposedly, Harvey had the Smiley removed and destroyed¹⁸².

"I just find it annoying that something I put so much energy toward has become a religion for some people," Law continues.¹⁸³ Indicating the level of standardization and lack of innovative impetus he sees in Burning Man today, Law says, "It's like a Star Trek *convention*."¹⁸⁴ Law's exact and cutting phrasing is purposeful.

In 2007, as a public response to the early burning of the Man, Scott Beale, a longstanding Burning Man participant and the founder of Laughing Squid, a blog and web-hosting organization with many links to the San Francisco absurdist-art scene, (and others) received an anonymous email, apparently from Smiley himself. The message included the following account of the 1996 event and Smiley's short life on the playa:

Burning Man season 1996. The theme? Hell.

The idea is, everything in society is owned and operated by Helco. The supra-national conglomerate that recently has also successfully purchased Hell for an undisclosed record amount of cash and stock options. People really seem to be taking it all a bit too seriously. Hell is on everybody's mind and lots of art projects reflect the preoccupation.

About June sometime, after a talk with Larry to glean some insight on how serious he was about it all, a plan was hatched to secretly install a neon smiley face in the Man's head, which would be switched on just as his immolation began.

¹⁷⁸ Doherty, *Burning Man Grows Up*

¹⁷⁹ Athabasca University. *Apollonian Aspect of Human Nature*. 8 May 2009, http://psych.athabascau.ca/html/Glossary/demo_glossary.cgi?mode=history&term_id=772&color_id=3 Accessed 24 November 2015

¹⁸⁰ *Dust and Illusions*

¹⁸¹ Jones. *The Tribes of Burning Man*

¹⁸² Rinaldi, *burncast.tv*

¹⁸³ *Dust and Illusions*

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*

The plan was to put a sublime or whimsical spin on the all too serious darkness of the whole ordeal at that point. The idea that we could mock society and its foibles even to take a swipe at western religion while simultaneously exalting and in fact elevating our own Icon in our own Image was an obvious disturbing hypocrisy to many of the Cacophonists. Yes, we saw it coming, even in June.

On Saturday evening before the burn (we burned the figure on Sunday back then) we had ourselves a little playa theatre.

With the Burning Man Project in its sights, Helco's lawyers maneuver themselves for a hostile takeover. A board meeting is held at Helco tower. Satan himself appears along with Mr. Clean, the Michelin man, Ronald Mc Donald, Ken and Barbie et al. They vote unanimously to buy the Burning Man Project at any cost.

Just in the nick-of-time Ted "Unibomber" Kaczynski detonates flammables in the tower, which immediately explode in a ball of fire. The Unibomber zips out of a top floor window down a cable into a wall of neon lights sending a shower of sparks sufficient enough to allow a swift getaway.

The SEEMEN robots and machines set about destroying a mock strip mall to the shock and awe of all present.

Hell is upon us. Sometime after midnight, Smiley was switched On for about 1 minute. A curious murmur made its way around camp.

The next morning Larry came out to the Man and stood there for nearly an hour staring at the head. When the sun rose up behind it, the shadow of the smiley neon revealed itself.

Larry was outraged, incensed, indeed furious at the sight. He screamed at Dan Miller to "get that god damned thing out of MY man!" At which time Dan needlessly risked his safety and the rest of the neon installed on the figure to climb up the structure and remove the offending smiley face.

What was revealed at this point is that Larry wasn't interested in the idea of the "community" having any input in "his" project. He knew as we all did the "theatre" of Hell was affecting the dynamic out there. In fact, we had "sacrificed" one of our own (Michael Fury RIP died in a motorcycle crash) the previous Tuesday. And in fact the carnage from Saturday the night before was just becoming more apparent. Still he was determined to fulfill whatever his vision was no matter what the costs were on the rest of us. It's clear now he was positioning himself for his own version of a hostile takeover.

So while Larry pontificates ceaselessly on how the Man belongs to everybody at the event, reality is quite opposite.

The moral of the story?

Don't worship false idols.

Bring your art home!¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁵ Scott Beale, "The Neon Smiley Face and Burning Man 1996". *Laughing Squid*. 31 August 2007. <http://laughingsquid.com/the-neon-smiley-face-at-burning-man-1996/> Accessed 24 November 2015

This interplay between sacred and profane is imperative to the carnivalesque, topsy-turvy world of the absurd. As this example illustrates, those leading Burning Man may have lost sight of the play that underpins the social experimentation and started to take themselves and the event too seriously.

Expressing the intense idolatry Law is critical of, some four years after Smiley's brief visit to Black Rock City, Harvey says, "Every road in the city in some sense leads to the man. He hovers like a vision at the end of all of these spoked streets in the arc of the city. To know where you are, you reference the Man. Finally, it seems like knowing who you are includes that final or ultimate reference."¹⁸⁶

Rinaldi describes Burning Man as he saw it at the start, "C'mon you know, 'Let's go to the desert and get naked and get stupid and do drugs and drink beer. And build stupid shit and light it on fire. The person that builds the stupidest thing wins - that's the energy that went to Burning Man. The foundation that that was built on was stupidity and chaos and they're trying to switch that around now and say 'legitimate stupidity and chaos.'"¹⁸⁷ Rinaldi continues, "They took the event and bent it over a barrel and inserted all this meaning up its ass and it kind of stayed up there and now that it's all diluted with shit and grime and all that stuff that's in your intestines, now it's ready to come out 'Here you go, MEANING.'"¹⁸⁸

"It had two choices in 96 - either blow up and stop, or eventually become a larger scale controlled commercial event which is where it's going right now," comments Law.¹⁸⁹ Reiterating his intention to create an experimental space for the exploration of experience beyond perceived possibility, rather than a popular and controlled event Law says, "It [Burning Man] is not a bad thing, it's still the best party in town, but not at all what I would be interested in working on. I want to encourage people to do what they want to do, not what we've decided they need to do."¹⁹⁰

Thirteen years later, at the 2013 San Francisco Commonwealth Club session "Creating Culture from Mayhem", Law was joined onstage by Cacophonists Carrie Galbraith and Chuck Palahniuk and asked for his sixty-second idea to change the world. Demonstrating his commitment to the unconventional, Law's succinct and unswerving response was, "Find out what you're supposed to do and do something else."¹⁹¹

As Rinaldi puts it, "You're either a friend of Smiley, or a friend of Larry."¹⁹²

2000: The Burning Man Regional Network

As the event continued to grow, Burners started discussing difficulty returning and reintegrating to their geographical homes cities and "normal" communities after experiencing such a divergent and free atmosphere at Burning Man. A common desire to stay connected to other Burners and to bring the identity, lessons, creativity and inspiration home from the desert coalesced. This resonates with Noyes presentation of the sociological idea of 'group' as proposed by Ben-Amos that does not depend on shared identity, but on regular interaction¹⁹³. In 2000, the Burning Man Regional Contacts network blossomed; veteran Burning Man community members led localized gatherings and started sharing information about the event and community with their year-round neighbors. As communications and

¹⁸⁶ Silver, *Burning Man: Community of Chaos?*

¹⁸⁷ Ibid

¹⁸⁸ Ibid

¹⁸⁹ Ibid

¹⁹⁰ Ibid

¹⁹¹ John Law, *Chuck Palahniuk and the SF Cacophony Society*

¹⁹² Rinaldi, *burncast.tv*

¹⁹³ Noyes, *Group*, 453

events were led outside of Black Rock City and the core organizational structure, it became clear that a uniform explanation of the cultural forms, practice and values of the community should be developed.

According to Carmen Mauk, Director of Burners Without Borders, a non-profit emergency and social assistance offshoot organization of Burning Man, as the Regional Network developed, "People [were] seeing Burning Man as a celebration, but they [felt] compelled and accountable to this larger idea and [felt that we] had to be doing something else other than putting on parties. And [the] Burning Man [organization] saw that and changed the regional coordinators contracts... there have to be civic projects now."¹⁹⁴

Event founder, Larry Harvey explains that this expansion is not just geographic but paradigmatic in his August 2011 *Reality Sandwich* online magazine submission, "I Am, We Are, It Is." Harvey expands upon the title of the piece, explaining that "I Am" is the sense of inner reality and authenticity that Burning Man provides a space for, "We Are" refers to a sense of unity and bonding through endeavor with others out there and "It Is" completes this progression to create a culture in which a "feeling that outside this circle there exists some greater gift that everyone is joined together by as they give to it."¹⁹⁵ With the organic budding, organizational support and subsequent ripple effect of community events and the Burning Man Regional Network, the culture of Burning Man expanded in its scope and reach with multiplied opportunities for group entry and participation in 2000.

2004: Burning Man's Ten Principles

The Ten Principles are heralded by many (mostly newer) members of the Burning Man community as holy tenets; even though they were brought back from a big sandy place by a guy, the principles are not commandments for acceptable behavior for community members, but are the closest thing to a clear, widespread description of what Burning Man is. The Principles were created in 2004, to guide the development of the Regional Network of Burning Man events and are the result of one member of the Burning Man organization's attempt to describe the commonly underlying elements of a ridiculously diverse group of people and what may be essential to creating a space that would attract Burning Man participants.

Geertz quotes Goodenough, stating that, "A society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members,"¹⁹⁶ therefore despite the regular grumbling and distrust of doctrines that is imperative to conversations amongst Burning Man Community members, the Ten Principles are both, the best, and roughest, definition of Burning Man culture and the mission of the Burning Man Project available.

Burning Man staff member, artist, community leader, long-time participant and devotee, Steven Raspa, explains, "The Ten Principles are descriptive, they were never prescriptive, they didn't come first. They were written down to describe what was important about the culture and experience at a time when we needed the tools and ways of talking about it. We had Regional Contacts coming to us and saying 'How can we talk about this culture? What do we say?' And very begrudgingly, [Harvey] wrote some things down, summarized elements, and surprisingly they worked really well. It's about creating the conditions for people to bring human expression; it's not about having it look exactly the same everywhere in the world."¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ Jones, *Tribes*, 222

¹⁹⁵ Larry Harvey. "I Am, We Are, It Is". *Reality Sandwich*. 22 August 2011. http://www.realitysandwich.com/i_am_we_are_it_is Accessed 15 August 2012.

¹⁹⁶ Geertz, *Interpretation*, 11

¹⁹⁷ Raspa, *Personal Interview*

1. Radical Inclusion

“Anyone may be a part of Burning Man. We welcome and respect the stranger. No prerequisites exist for participation in our community.”¹⁹⁸

The principles of participation and inclusion, regardless of past experience or expertise, encourage participants to expand their skills and explore their creative potential. Burning Man’s collectivist practices include having volunteers create roles based on their interests, rather than organizational needs. “It’s not about being efficient, it’s about making people a part of something,”¹⁹⁹ says Burning Man organization board member Harley Dubois. Shared endeavor breeds social capital. The explicit policy of radical inclusion formalizes the openness, extreme inclusivity and welcoming community attributes that can form entrepreneurial communities and also propagates a culture of innovation and creativity.

However, inclusion does not extend to those who commit crimes, cause harm or harass another or threaten the continuation of the event with irresponsible behavior.

2. Gifting

“Burning Man is devoted to acts of gift giving. The value of a gift is unconditional. Gifting does not contemplate a return or an exchange for something of equal value.”²⁰⁰

At a Burning Man event, it is normal for someone to offer you things, experiences, and hugs with no expectation for anything in return. Gifts are not necessarily tangible. Theme camp parties, sound camp dance beats, smiles and friendly support for the stranger are common gifts found on the playa. The act of simply being truly present and open, willing to connect with and help others, share resources and time constitute giving the gift of oneself.

3. Decommodification

“In order to preserve the spirit of gifting, our community seeks to create social environments that are unmediated by commercial sponsorships, transactions, or advertising. We stand ready to protect our culture from such exploitation. We resist the substitution of consumption for participatory experience.”²⁰¹

Having determined that the buying and selling of goods is a distraction to connecting and creating relationships, Burning Man is a commerce-free event. Nothing is bought or sold (except for ice for health and safety reasons, and coffee for unknown reasons, from the Burning Man-run Centre Camp)], and those found to be trading at Burning Man Regional Events are given a warning and then evicted.

Decommodification extends to mean the removal of the reminders of the default world’s constant barrage of corporate advertising and influence. Burning Man participants are encouraged to cover or decorate prominent logos (e.g. rental trucks) in order to keep it a non-consumer event.

4. Radical Self-Reliance

¹⁹⁸ Burning Man Project, *10 Principles*

¹⁹⁹ Chen, *Enabling Creative Chaos*

²⁰⁰ Burning Man Project, *10 Principles*

²⁰¹ Ibid.

*"Burning Man encourages the individual to discover, exercise and rely on his or her inner resources."*²⁰²

Burning Man is an exercise in radical self-sufficiency; you must bring all you need to survive, be comfortable or thrive depending on your carrying capacity. At the gate, volunteers check that participants have adequate food, water and shelter (and ticketing) before granting entry. Furthermore, participants are responsible for their own experience too. This starts to play with radical self-expression to create an area of potential conflict. In my experience, self-reliance usually trumps. For example, not everyone will want to sleep at the same time and so the answer to this is including earplugs on the recommended packing list (while reasonable noise levels are also dictated, but rarely enforced).

5. Radical Self-Expression

*"Radical self-expression arises from the unique gifts of the individual. No one other than the individual or a collaborating group can determine its content. It is offered as a gift to others. In this spirit, the giver should respect the rights and liberties of the recipient."*²⁰³

Radical self-expression forms the content of the event. Black Rock City is an open canvas with room for the interpretation, play and creative expression of everyone. Identities and ideas are welcome to be expressed and experimented with abandon here.²⁰⁴

6. Communal Effort

*"Our community promotes social interaction through collective acts of gifting. We value creative cooperation and collaboration. We strive to produce, promote and protect social networks, public spaces, works of art, and methods of communication that support such interaction."*²⁰⁵

"Commerce defines us on the basis of deficiency and need," says the Survival Guide for KiwiBurn²⁰⁶. In a space that denies this function, the collective wealth and abundance of collective efforts and capacities are unlocked. Principles such as immediacy, radical self-expression and radical self-reliance, ask participants to mine their inner resources to realize that their skills, talents and capabilities can be much more plentiful when they are asked to be. And when combined through communal effort, community is formed.

Cooperation and active collective efforts are what make Burning Man happen. At KiwiBurn 2013, the main effigy, The Man, was larger than he has ever been before and was built and placed on a high hill near a forest plantation. Midway through the event, local authorities' fire safety concerns determined the effigy was too close to the forest and it was dismantled and moved to another location. As The Man was being lifted once again, his spine snapped. He sat in a mangled mess of wooden skeleton and form for two days. Medics attached an oxygen mask to the head, an IV drip to the arm and a coroner tag to the foot. The lead builder was devastated (having also endured the death and funeral of a loved one

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Radical self-expression can go too far and threaten the continuation of the community or violate other principles. At KiwiBurn 2013, a "loveable troublemaker", Scat, threw fireworks into the Man burn, contravening the stipulations of the fire permit and causing local officials to instantly cancel the burn permit for the next night's Temple burn²⁰⁴. Though a member of the core crew, Scat was evicted from the event and will likely be banned from next year's event as a result of threatening the safety of the community, but more importantly the good relations with local authorities and the continuation of an important community ritual. There is a cross between the cowboy-culture of do-ocracy that blatantly ignores regulations and has traditionally been a part of this community, but most, including the ruling Executive Committee, now that the event is growing larger and becoming well-known understand that the demands of the local authorities must be respected in order to secure the sustainability of the event.

²⁰⁵ Burning Man Project, *10 Principles*

²⁰⁶ KiwiBurn. *Survival Guide*. (2012) http://www.kiwiburn.com/sites/default/files/survival_guide.pdf Accessed 15 August 2012.

during the event) and walked away, leaving The Man to hands of the community. A revolving group of enthusiasts and builders constructed a large sacred heart from broken bits and offcuts and augmented the effigy's chest to erect the heart so it rose from the fallen man, ready to burn brighter and higher than his broken body. As far as I know, The Man has never burned lying down, but this effigy burn was one of the most profound for me as it demonstrated the Burning Man community's collective effort, unwillingness to relent, determination to burn and denial of failure.

7. Civic Responsibility

*"We value civil society. Community members who organize events should assume responsibility for public welfare and endeavor to communicate civic responsibilities to participants. Organizers must also assume responsibility for abiding by national law and district bylaws."*²⁰⁷

How organizers navigate the extensive territory of insurance and litigation, especially considering the extent of the absurdity of some of the artworks and environmental elements at Burning Man events (e.g. Human Operation Game, live electric fences, flame throwers, Mad Max-styled Thunderdome, flying bicycles, 3-storey teeter-totter) remains unclear. However, combined with radical self-reliance, the principle of civic responsibility places accountability for personal experience and the creation of works or opportunities for the experiences of others, with the individual. At Burning Man, experiences that are obviously dangerous are often accompanied by a sign reading, "You read the back of your ticket, right?", referring to the legal waiver words that cover the reverse of the ticket that indicate that by using the ticket, one takes full and complete responsibility for themselves and their life (while at Burning Man).

8. Leave No Trace

*"Our community respects the environment. We are committed to leaving no physical trace of our activities wherever we gather. We clean up after ourselves and endeavor, whenever possible, to leave such places in a better condition than when we found them."*²⁰⁸

Evading another possible terrible element of event production, Burning Man is a leave no trace event, meaning that responsibility for rubbish and refuse is decentralized to the individuals who attend the event. No garbage receptacles are present at the week-long event of 70,000 participants; everyone is expected to pack out what they pack in and think carefully about what they bring so as to reduce waste and litter (i.e. no feathers!). Matter-Out-Of-Place (MOOP) is a term referring to anything that would not be found the environment if the event was not held there – bottles, cigarette butts, sequins, feathers, paper scraps, building materials, no matter how small must all be collected and participants are encouraged to pick things up as they go, no matter who dropped them, to keep the task manageable. Campers are responsible for clearing their campsite and spending one hour "moop-ing" the wider site before leaving the event.

9. Participation

"Our community is committed to a radically participatory ethic. We believe that transformative change, whether in the individual or in society, can occur only through the medium of deeply personal

²⁰⁷ Burning Man Project, *10 Principles*

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

participation in experience. We achieve being through doing. Everyone is invited to work. Everyone is invited to play. We make the world real through actions that open the heart."²⁰⁹

Participation accentuates the principle of inclusion, articulating that the only way to experience an environment of invitation is to get involved and contribute to the collective experience. The idea is that Burning Man is made up of a society of activists, volunteers and do-ers who believe there is no 'they', only 'us'.

There are beautiful artworks, spectacular performers, killer sound systems and wondrous community burn events at Burning Man; there are no spectators, everyone contributes in their own way to create the collective experience. As Hippie Tim said, "You cannot attend KiwiBurn, but you can be a part of it."²¹⁰

10. Immediacy

*"We seek to overcome barriers that stand between us and a recognition of our inner selves, appreciation of the reality of those around us, participation in society, and contact with a natural world exceeding human powers. No idea can substitute for this experience."*²¹¹

Immediacy underpins all of the principles, moving them from lofty ideals for academic debate to demands for action in the here and now. Immediacy also leads to the notion of 'do-ocracy' and appreciation of learning through action that is prevalent at Burning Man. Immediacy is most obvious in the burning of the Man and the Temple, gorgeous temporary artworks that represent the labor and love of many. The Temple is the site of the most reverence (though it may also house a trashy dance party) of a Burning Man event as it is often the cathartic repository for thoughts, memories, associations and relationships that participants want to let loose, or burn away. The symbolism of the fire, dancing flame and resulting ash is beyond the scope of this paper and surely appreciated by the reader.

Much like the central effigy figure of the event, the creation and distribution of the Ten Principles was a clear step towards describing the culture of Burning Man to others while also giving insiders a central reference point. The construction of the Ten Principles, much like the establishment of the Regional Network and in fact the institution of regulations in 1996 and even ticketing in 1992, were all steps in the transformation of Zone Trip #4 from a once radical and subversive experiment to a structured and incorporated institution of routine at the edge of popular culture. Though Burning Man still offered a version of a vacation from the insatiable reach of dominant and capitalist culture, a liminal "time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action" and potentially "a period of scrutinization of the central values and axioms of the culture in which it occurs,"²¹² the increasing seriousness with which the organization's leadership administered the exercise cannot be overlooked; the materialization of a dominant culture of Burning Man itself was obvious. Which, in turn set the scene for that ever-emergent quest to "be new and unrestricted"²¹³ to solicit yet another level of absurdity and chaos to emerge from within.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Hippie Tim. *Personal Interview*.

²¹¹ Burning Man Project, *10 Principles*

²¹² Turner, *Ritual*, 167

²¹³ Glazova, *Dada and Constructivism*

4 Burning Man: From Transgressive to Traditionalized

*Heresy is a fundamental premise of western civilization. – Rory Turner*²¹⁴

Burning Man as a cultural event is an open stage for the self-selected community that gathers once a year to express themselves. The cultural agenda or implied cultural policies of Burning Man are not to dictate, program or appraise culture, but to allow for its organically authentic expression, communication and progression on the stages the event makes available for public use. However, cultures are defined and expressed by traditions and common characteristics. And despite being born of an impetus to experiment and innovate, the enactment of tradition has been a part of Burning Man the community since the start; the central event of burning the effigy being an obvious example.

In 2007, the interpretation of what was traditional to the culture of Burning Man was debated via direct action. The effigy, which had always been burned on Saturday night, was set alight on Monday, the first night of the event, by Paul Addis, a San Francisco artist and performer who had been a part of the Burning Man community since 1995. Though there was no acceptance of destroying someone else's property or art in the Cacophony Society, Addis claimed to be acting in the 'true spirit' of Burning Man, referring to the radical and transgressive roots of the event. Many others, including the Burning Man board, considered his actions an affront to the community, its traditions and its safety. The incident resulted in Addis' two year stay in prison, and some would argue, his suicide in 2012.

Considering the necessarily dichotomous demands of tradition – to reflect and define a community through recognized definitions, and to also be a consistently reinterpreted performance of that culture within its contemporary circumstances, the 2007 incident and the Burning Man organization's response to it, highlights the apparent boundary between transgression and tradition, while also questioning transgression as tradition, at the Burning Man event.

2005: The Petition

In 2005, two years prior to Addis' radical action, discontent with the way the Burning Man organization was running the event was expressed by Bay Area artists. Frustrated that the budget allocated to support artists' contributions to the ticketed event had never exceeded 5% of total ticket sales, Rinaldi and Jim Mason lead a charge of artists to stage an artists' strike.²¹⁵

"We have no control; we have no say. It's like you're saying to us, 'We have it all figured out, don't worry about it, just come and have fun at the party'" Rinaldi tells Bonin.

"One of the complaints was that it was becoming a big party and wasn't meant to be a big group hug or new age love fest, but this is an experiment of a particular type of civic formation... but the tool, the secret sauce that made that work was the creative work," Mason professed.²¹⁶ "It [Burning Man] needs to have a new grand experiment within the grand experiment of Burning Man," Mason is quoted as saying in a 2005 San Francisco Bay Guardian article.²¹⁷

So Mason and Rinaldi came up with an experiment, aiming to pull the event back to focus on radical art. Titled the "We Have a Dream" petition, Rinaldi placed a full-page ad in the *Bay Guardian*, which issued a demand upon the Burning Man organization and Harvey in particular: "Give us our event back or we

²¹⁴ Rory Turner, *Week Three*

²¹⁵ *Dust and Illusions*

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

leave,"²¹⁸ read the statement signed by hundreds of Bay Area artists. The Petition as it came to be known, sought a renewal of the event's art scene by increasing the funding to 10 percent of the total take, democratizing the art selection process, rotating guest curators drawn from the Burning Man art community and emphasizing art over the party and the community.²¹⁹

"What they [the artists] are really afraid of is that the event will become inauthentic," Harvey told Jones in response to The Petition, then going further to question, "Can you maintain a sense of community at that magnitude?"²²⁰ But he missed the point. That was exactly the reason for the challenge; the pervading sense that 'community' was more important than awe inspiring art.

"People go for the art festival, not for the community festival," Rinaldi said, dripping disdain on the last two words. "If it is to survive, it's going to be for one reason, and that's because of its artists, not because we're a community."²²¹

The divergence among leaders and participants in the Burning Man cultural group demonstrates the heterogeneity of communities and highlights the difficulties associated with sustaining a movement (that at least initially was) based on individuality of expression and commonality through collective responsibility through massive growth. Rinaldi's challenge was a failure as far as raising money and revolutionizing the organizational structure of Burning Man, but a success in that it amplified the growing discontent with the way the structuralization of the event was occurring and how the organization was defining what and who Burning Man is for.

2007: The Man Burns Early

*In a world which really is topsy-turvy, the true is a moment of the false. – Guy Debord*²²²

Harvey has stated that the event's central effigy, "Is pegged at the center of Black Rock City for a reason; it's the ritual axis,"²²³ and that makes sense, it is a large landmark that helps one navigate the vibrant city. But then Harvey goes on to say, "That's [the effigy] the thing you can depend upon, in a world that's always changing."²²⁴ This pseudo-savior characterization of a structure that stands for only one week per year seems misplaced. And Harvey cannot be referring to a something that the effigy is a symbol of, since there is no shared mythology to be found. The reverence for the empty symbol of the effigy is extreme, demonstrating the twisting of "authenticity and irony into a Möbius strip that never lets you know what side you're on, that is intrinsic to the Burning Man experience," says Davis.²²⁵ The festival's expressive mode could be called post-pop surrealist, pushed to the point where irony cannibalizes itself and disappears, leaving a sincere and seamless merging of the profound and the profane.

"Worshipping the central symbol is distasteful in the supreme. Even having the processional promenade and the architectural focus on this central point is antithetical to what I believe the event really was about,"²²⁶ comments Law, a former-Burning Man participant and founder of the event. Adrian Roberts, long-time Burning Man participant and publisher of *Piss Clear* [the alternative newspaper that was written, published and distributed during the Burning Man event 1995-2007] comments, "Now it [the effigy burn] is a totally choreographed [and] scripted Disneyland production. It is a show, it's a

²¹⁸ Steven T. Jones, "State of the Art: As Burning Man approaches its 20th year, Bay Area artists are staging a revolt that goes to the soul of the mega-event." San Francisco Bay Guardian. 8 December 2005. http://www.sfbg.com/39/10/news_burningman.html Accessed 15 August 2012.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (1967)

²²³ *Dust and Illusions*

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Davis, *Beyond Belief*, 17

²²⁶ *Dust and Illusions*

spectacle.”²²⁷ Finally, “The Man is a symbol of what's happened to the event, he's become arrogant, and untouchable, and above everyone else,”²²⁸ narrates Bonin.

The actions Addis took to undermine (what he perceived to be) the social structures of oppression, and “damn the man”, came from a shared sentiment of wanting the party to be pranked. A push to amplify the absurdity of the event has been a part of the desert party since the beginning. Scott Beale is a longstanding Burning Man participant and the founder of Laughing Squid, a blog and web-hosting organization with many links to the San Francisco absurdist-art scene. Commenting on 2007’s early burn Beale says, “For years the joke on the playa was to set the man on fire early and in the mid 90’s Bigrig Industries used to hand out match packs printed with the words ‘Burn The Man Early’.”²²⁹ And though the date of capture is unclear,²³⁰ it is interesting to note the call for dissonance and disturbance in long-time Burning Man participant and artist, James Stauffer’s comments that, “[Burning Man] is a little too satisfied with itself and a giant prank could be the best thing you could do at Burning Man. Burning the man three or four days early could be a good thing - get it out of the way.”²³¹ Like the symbolic challenge of Smiley in 1996, Addis’ actions challenged the controls the Burning Man organization exercised and the aftermath of his defiant act forced collective questioning of the effects these controls had on the identity of the event and its participants.

Around 3am on Tuesday, August 28, a spectacular lunar eclipse captured the attention and awe of most of the inhabitants of Black Rock City. And the effigy at the center of the city, which is usually set ablaze in spectacular fashion on Saturday, was set on fire. “The best burn ever was in 2007, when someone burned the Man a week early... all of a sudden you’re like, ‘Is the Man on fire?!’ It was spontaneous. It was exciting. It was everything that the burn hadn’t been in years,” describes Roberts.²³²

Veteran Burning Man author, Doherty reports that Harvey was watching the eclipse when he noticed the fire. When he could see that the situation was under control and not dangerous, “[Harvey’s] immediate reaction was laughter,” noting that the effigy was “‘nothing but a wooden doll,’ and that the event is really about the joint effort of attendees... It will turn this year’s Burning Man into a ‘narrative of community and redemption’ as the attendees get to see or assist in the public rebuilding of the statue.”²³³ This sentiment echoes what Law has to say about the event too, “What still makes it worthwhile is the individual efforts of different people and their creative efforts... what initially brought people into the idea of Burning Man was working together to perform a task.”²³⁴

Recorded accounts demonstrate that other Burning Man organization board members largely found the incident amusing at the time, or even a welcome divergence from routine, too. “Seeing the man burn early, I thought it was kind of funny,” Mikel told Bonin.²³⁵ “I was definitely secretly happy... that something was challenging us on its value. When I think we’re dangerously close to behaving like a religion or a cult or over emphasizing it’s [the effigy’s] importance,” remarked Goodell.²³⁶

Goodell goes on to say, “I think it’s good that it burned down, it’s variety. I’ve been screaming for years, let’s have some variety here, let’s change the plan of the city, let’s change schedule, let’s do something

²²⁷ *Dust and Illusions*

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Beale, *The Neon Smiley Face*

²³⁰ *Dust and Illusions* was released in 2009, but made over four years

²³¹ *Dust and Illusions*

²³² Wieners, *Hot Mess*

²³³ Brian Doherty, *This Is Burning Man* (2014 electronic edition)

²³⁴ *Dust and Illusions*

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid.

different. This form is exhausting and Larry won't let the form be changed."²³⁷ Though it is understandable that the organization had to contend with the legal and liability processes and procedures that Addis' act triggered, and it could be assumed that the regulatory bodies the Burning Man organization seeks to maintain good relations with in order to secure the event's annual permit, would not be amenable to authorizing an event that appears to be hospitable to crime (e.g. arson).

In the afterword for his book, *This is Burning Man*, Doherty chronicles his experience of the early burn event. "The crowd's mood was split, with some adopting a premature Burn Night attitude, shouting, 'Burn the Man'," the same could be said for the Burning Man community's attitude towards the incident now.²³⁸ According to Doherty, Johnny Dwork, a Burning Man attendee since 1996, "saw the early burn as a chance for Burners to rethink their attachment to the central icon of the event and get to 'live the myth of the phoenix.'"²³⁹ Whereas in a personal interview, Price said, "I think it was the action of a very disturbed person that was incredibly selfish. Like really, 'You? You're going to decide that you are going to be arbiter of what should and shouldn't be allowed' What an asshole... many of us worked for ten months to create an experience that no one got to experience because of it, so I'm highly biased."²⁴⁰

"They didn't have to make it a felony! Addis was not well, and the [Burning Man] board [members] knew that. They sent their sick friend to prison, for what? No one got hurt. He burned firewood—wood that was intended to be burned. And it was *funny*. It was like going back to the beach. And yet [Will] Roger showed up in court with every receipt he could find to make sure it amounted to a felony," decries Rinaldi.²⁴¹

Indeed, Burning Man board member, Will Roger, who would be the organization's representative in the subsequent prosecution proceedings against Addis, stated, "I was not amused. There's a difference between doing a prank and arson. It cost us thousands of dollars to build a new Man in just a few days. We took him to court over the damages."²⁴²

The event's leaders demonstrated their commitment to the sustainability and traditionalization of the event in their response to the man being set alight earlier than planned for. The 2007 event's theme was 'Green Man' and in line with that premise, Tom Price, a long-time Burning Man participant who would go on to found Burners without Borders, was a part of an effort that collected timber from Burning Man camps to donate to Habitat for Humanity. In his own words, this endeavor was "overwhelmed with tones of wood,"²⁴³ so the need to spend as much as Roger reports was spent on the replacement effigy seems unjustified. Besides, if the opportunity for the incident to be a "narrative of community and redemption" was fully played out, it could have resulted in a lot of alternative outcomes other than simply repeating the effigy build and installation exercise. In fact, Mikel said, "If I had made the decision I think I would have not rebuilt the man. From my point of view, there's so much more going on, there's so many other burns going on, it's all a part of Burning Man."²⁴⁴

This rift in routine could have resulted in an awe-inspiring and art-generating experiment in collective creation. (In contrast, consider the story of the KiwiBurn 2013 effigy.) Despite Goodell, Harvey and Mikel's expressed sentiments that seem to recognize that cooperation and active collective efforts are what make Burning Man events happen, the Burning Man organization's unimaginative and repetitive

²³⁷ *Dust and Illusions*

²³⁸ Doherty, *This Is Burning Man*

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Tom Price, *Personal Interview* 13 March 2015.

²⁴¹ Wieners, *Hot Mess I*

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Price, *Personal Interview*

²⁴⁴ *Dust and Illusions*

response can be read as a testament to the unnecessarily serious significance the leadership then attributed to the emerging culture's purposefully hollow symbology.

Reflecting the revolutionary potential of the beginnings of Burning Man (and echoing *Easy Rider's* Captain America), Addis is quoted as saying, "Burning Man in the period of 1996-1997 was the right place at the right time with the right minds. We had a great opportunity to put all of our hands on the wheel and really affect social evolution. We had a bunch of gifted people who had the chance to break the mold on a lot of things."²⁴⁵

Addis bemoaned "the event's supposed degeneration from its former edgy dangerousness and total freedom,"²⁴⁶ and "felt the event had betrayed its possibilities... he thought the early burn of the man was a vivid action-prank to demonstrate this. 'One, [burning the Man early] was a reality check. Two, it was a history lesson. It was, 'This is why this started. Why are you here?'"²⁴⁷

In an online dispatch posted on Thursday, August 30, two days after the early burn, Addis speaks. After explaining various precautions and distractionary techniques he and his crew allegedly actioned to ensure the operation did not harm any bystanders, Addis unashamedly declares:

We could give a fuck less what you all think of us for doing this. Most of you are newbies who have been drawn in by the semi-religious nature of the event, or maybe just the easy drugs and easier sex. You have nothing to offer the event other than your fucking money and obedience. You spend the rest of your lives in mortal fear of everything that insurance companies tell you to fear, and pretend that you're free and clear because you spend four days at a desert bacchanal where spinelessness is not only encouraged but genetically replicated for implementation in successive generations. In short, you are the swine of which Thompson spoke. Get over yourselves.

Some of us live quite well without fear. Doing so requires the ultimate in what Burning Man used to represent: personal responsibility and individual liberty. That's all been lost in the last decade of Burning Man's history. Consider this operation a history lesson that was desperately needed.²⁴⁸

Apparently the similarity of the sentiment was strong enough to attract commentary from Smiley himself. On Friday, August 31, Beale posted the following on Laughing Squid:²⁴⁹

We were sent an anonymous email from the people behind the Neon Smiley Face. The message is directed to Paul Addis, the person accused with lighting the man on fire early...

Attn: Paul Addis

Greetings Paul,

²⁴⁵ Miyoko Ohtake, "A Fiery Q&A with the Prankster Accused of Burning the Man", *Wired.com*. 30 August 2007. <http://www.wired.com/2007/08/addis/> Accessed 15 March 2015.

²⁴⁶ Brian Doherty, "The Burn Will Go On (Again); Disgruntled Burner in Custody", *Wired.com*. 28 August 2007. <http://www.wired.com/2007/08/the-burn-will-g/> Accessed 15 March 2015.

²⁴⁷ Ohtake, *A Fiery Q&A*

²⁴⁸ Omgoleus, "Paul Addis's statement on burning the Man", *DoseNation*. 30 August 2007) <http://www.dosenation.com/listing.php?id=3076> Accessed 15 March 2015.

²⁴⁹ The original post included the quotations about Smiley which have been included in the section [Burning Man: From Chaos to Community](#)

Word travels fast around here. I see by my Daily Albatross Dispatch you torched that infernal stick figure. Jolly good show man. I don't get much action these days so it was quite refreshing, your stunt. Reminded me of the early days, back when premature immolation was considered a prank. Although I'm sure Steve Heck would disagree.

I think you've done a valuable service to human kind; the old boy was getting a bit passé anyway. Wanton destruction is so twentieth century don't you think? Perhaps now the hoards will come up with a way to make fun without atomizing tremendous amounts of fossil fuel, petrochemicals and timber. Perhaps create something to be used more than once, something with purpose. And maybe they'll stop following that silly hat around, there's nothing behind it you know.

So good on ya man, thanks for the dust up. I hope UuberManCorp heLLC don't throw the book at you. That would surely reveal lack of grace and loss of good humor.

Thanks again, you provide much needed perspective my boy.

I'm off to cook some tofu dogs in my solar oven with no tell-tale sign of smoke to give me away.

Happy Trails Ya'll,

Your Friend,

SMILEY!!!²⁵⁰

Anarchist and Situationist Analysis

A carnival or carnivalesque situation is that in which the social mores, roles and rules are turned upside down in a sort of social pressure release valve; so that by releasing the pressure to conform and be an ideal version of humanity (that we just never are) if for just a brief time, we may return to the game of society to play another round. As a carnivalesque and probably liminal or luminoid experience, Burning Man is "a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action... potentially a period of scrutinization of the central values and axioms of the culture in which it occurs."²⁵¹ As the Situationist pamphlet states, "Static ideologies, however true they may be, tend, like everything else in capitalist society, to rigidify and become fetishized, just one more thing to passively consume."²⁵²

The "nonofficial nature" of Rabelaisian carnivals is obvious within the early culture of Burning Man; "No dogma, no authoritarianism, no narrow-minded seriousness can coexist with Rabelaisian images; these images are opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook."²⁵³ And as Davis says, "By setting our bullshit detectors on high alert, Burners ward off pretension, self-consciousness, and all of the pre-packaged "experiences" that have come to define late capitalist subjectivity. On the playa, we are united in our evasion of significance."²⁵⁴ However this vigilance may be questioned, and it may just be a prevalence of unwanted significance that Addis was staging a revolt against.

²⁵⁰ Beale, *The Neon Smiley Face*

²⁵¹ Turner, *Ritual*, 167

²⁵² LibCom.org, *Situationists*

²⁵³ McIver, *WaveShapeConversion*, 167

²⁵⁴ Davis, *Beyond Belief*

Critical social psychologist Dennis Fox states that "Utopian" speculation in general, and anarchist political analysis in particular, are necessary correctives to misplaced attempts to merely rearrange the elements of the status quo, rather than to radically alter it in a direction more in keeping with both survival and human dignity."²⁵⁵ This reference to the process of cultural incorporation, or the removal of threatening elements of an emerging cultural movement and the retention of the zeitgeist's superficial elements, seems in line with what Addis, Rinaldi and Mason criticized about the enactment of the Burning Man experiment as they saw it.

Following Fox's injection of anarchist political analysis, one quickly discovers the concepts of Poetic Terrorism and Art Sabotage, which seem to explain the unique need and space for this type of protest. Bey describes the Poetic Terrorist (PT) in the first sections of his book, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone*:

The PTerrorist behaves like a confidence-trickster whose aim is not money but CHANGE... Don't do PT for other artists, do it for people who will not realize [at least for a few moments] that what you have done is art, don't stick around to argue, don't be sentimental; be ruthless, take risks, vandalize only what *must* be defaced, do something children will remember all their lives... Dress up. Leave a false name. Be legendary. The best PT is against the law, but don't get caught. Art as crime; crime as art.²⁵⁶

The notion that Addis' actions may be seen as 'art' is echoed by Bonin in his acknowledgements of the artwork included in *Dust and Illusions*, where he has listed "early burn arson performance 2007 by Paul Addis" as one of them.²⁵⁷ However, the crucial point that ideologically separates Addis' actions from those of maintaining tradition of the Burning Man community is that he caused destruction of artwork and property that was not his to do so with. Bey's Art Sabotage discussion addresses this.

Bey defines Art Sabotage (A-S) as, "the dark side of Poetic Terrorism — creation-through-destruction," and much of the expanded definition that follows seems applicable to the 2007 early burn.²⁵⁸

"A-S goes beyond paranoia, beyond deconstruction — the ultimate criticism — physical attack on offensive art — aesthetic jihad... A-S seeks to damage institutions which use art to diminish consciousness & profit by delusion. This or that poet or painter cannot be condemned for lack of vision — but malign Ideas can be assaulted through the artifacts they generate," describes Addis' take on what he considered to be needless veneration of the symbology and routine ritual of the effigy that had developed at the Burning Man event.²⁵⁹ The following seems to support Addis' actions if they can be understood to have been taken as an affront to the Burning Man organization in order to release what he felt was inappropriately concentrated power: "If certain galleries & museums deserve an occasional brick through their windows — not destruction, but a jolt to complacency — Don't picket — vandalize. Don't protest — deface... Smash the symbols of the Empire in the name of nothing but the heart's longing for grace."²⁶⁰

Acts of Poetic Terrorism and Art Sabotage are rifts in routine that disrupt traditions to create situations, and the Situationist concept of *détournement*, turning the offensive or overbearing force's tools against itself, can be interpreted from Addis' 'early burn arson performance.'

²⁵⁵ Fox, *Psychology, Ideology, Utopia, and the Commons*.

²⁵⁶ Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*. (1985),

<http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/hakim-bey-t-a-z-the-temporary-autonomous-zone-ontological-anarchy-poetic-terrorism#toc4> Accessed 15 March 2015.

²⁵⁷ *Dust and Illusions*

²⁵⁸ Bey, *T.A.Z*

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

The Dynamic Nature of Tradition

Tradition may be "less about preservations than about transformative practice and the selective symbolization of continuity."—James Clifford²⁶¹

Recognizing the personal, as well as the political, components of identity and tradition, it should be understood that both Addis, with his renegade rebellion, and those who admonish his disruption of the routine of the 2007 Burning Man event, represent authentic expressions of the same culture.

In *Taking Identity Politics Seriously: 'The Contradictory, Stony Ground...'*, James Clifford states, "Articulations of tradition, never simply backward-looking, are thus generative components of peoplehood, ways of belonging to a discrete social time and place."²⁶² And according to Charles Briggs, "Affirming the authenticity of traditions, or their distinctiveness from other cultural forms, thus places scholars in the same camp as nationalists," because. "cultural forms that derive their authority from a perceived connection with the past are 'invented,' 'imagined,' 'constructed,' or 'made.'"²⁶³ Therefore the practice of Cultural Sustainability is an active and lived practice, that must include room for cultural evolution, as opposed to cultural restraint, static preservation and practices of cultural curation. For as Hymes states, "intact tradition is not so much a matter of preservation, as it is a matter of re-creation, by successive persons and generations, and in individual performances."²⁶⁴ This consideration of the performative and evolving nature of tradition is exemplified by the role Addis' "early burn arson performance" played in the 2007 Burning Man event, and also explains why members of the Burning Man community are still so divided in their opinions of the situation. The 'selected symbol of continuity' for this group is not clear.

Addis may have believed he was acting within the early Burning Man tradition of transgression and defiantly radical art, to fight the hybridity of consumption and creative cultures that he had come to perceive at Burning Man. Or perhaps he thought that he was breaking the rules as a transformative practice, enabling the culture to grow into its potential of keeping the flame of the "new and unrestricted"²⁶⁵ alight at the edge of experience, the symbology he chose to represent being that of bold rebellion rather than of a stick figure ceremony. In either [or any other] explanatory scenario, it is clear that cultures and traditions are dynamic and responsive social entities.

On the other hand, it could be argued that Addis was not recognizing or appreciating the necessary transformation of culture that is its natural process due to the re-creation and performance of the selective symbology. The fundamental subjectivity of cultural considerations and the practice of Cultural Sustainability is highlighted here. As Clifford concludes, "This is answered with limitations that are political (what does it take to convince ourselves and others) rather than ... empirical (how much) or moral (is this real)."²⁶⁶

In the end, this episode in the history of the culture of Burning Man defined what had endured, or what was chosen as the 'symbol of continuity' for the community by the Burning Man organization, and that was the tradition of burning the Man in a safe, ceremonious and scripted manner, demonstrating the culture's movement away from radicalism and towards routinization.

However, in order to maintain a culture of radical social experimentation, renegade art, immediate experienced community (communitas), we must question the use and function of that which becomes

²⁶¹ Clifford, *Taking Identity Politics Seriously*, 100

²⁶² Ibid, 97

²⁶³ Charles L. Briggs, "The Politics of Discursive Authority" in *Research on the Invention of Tradition. Cultural Anthropology* Volume 11 (1996), 435

²⁶⁴ Dell Hymes *Folklore's Nature and the Sun's Myth* (1975), 355

²⁶⁵ Glazova, *Dada and Constructivism*

²⁶⁶ Clifford, *Taking Identity Politics Seriously*, 100

routine. Reenactments of liminoid experiences may be inauthentic, and more to the point, ineffective, invoking nostalgia and the traditionalization of temporal circumstances rather than replicating the fundamental challenging of reality and resulting revelations.

Hymes states that, "Short of preservation in the form of boxed storage in locked vaults, our efforts to preserve tradition through record, description, interpretation, find their natural end in presentation, that is, in communication. The re-creative aspect is both inevitable and desirable. The issue, then, is simply the character of the re-creative effort, in terms of fidelity, insight, and taste."²⁶⁷ From within their institutional entanglements of commonly-held community values and public policy structures, cultures must adapt and evolve in order to survive. It can be said that cultures ostensibly require rule breakers to innovate and improve ways of life. And therefore the definition of what enactments are deemed to be either 'traditional' or 'transgressive', is a curatorial assessment that is inherently subjective.

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"Every social movement shaves off its sharp edges as it becomes something to be consumed by more and more people,"²⁶⁸ comments Price, who worked for nearly a year on a display that was at the base of the effigy and therefore damaged and only opened for presentation for one day due to Addis' actions. Price is suggesting that the defiant character of Burning Man that Addis was enacting was something that the event necessarily needed to shed as a result of its growth. But it was exactly this sanitization and growth that Addis was protesting.

Alison Green reviews Miwon Kwon's *One Place After Another*, and summarizes to say, "The transgressive and subversive gestures which were the domain of the avant-garde in the early part of the twentieth century have become mere glosses, patinas of radicality that cover what is essentially conservative work, fully-assimilated into political agendas, but rarely truly effective as community projects or as artistic ones."²⁶⁹ My 2013 Burning Man field work included the observation of an innocuous carnivalesque tradition that incorporates transgressive behavior into a relatively controlled cultural tradition.

For my third year at Burning Man (2013), I joined the Centre Camp Lighting and Illumination Team (CCLIT) and worked for 10-days pre-event to set up the lighting for Black Rock City's central public space. This gave me need and access to be on the playa earlier than I had been in previous years, and in these pre-event days I discovered a lot about the subculture of the crews that create the city. The week leading up to the main event is in itself its own event, with traditions, events and celebrations that mirror the imminent more public events. In this time, I wrote the word 'tradition' on my arm with a sharpie on two separate occasions.²⁷⁰

Contemplation of the word emblazoned on my forearm elicited Hymes' consideration of tradition as one of his 'five key notions' of folklore for me. Though according to Hymes, "our present world may seem increasingly a world of technology and mongrelization of culture in which the traditional has less and less a place, the traditional is a functional prerequisite of social life," as all individuals and groups seem to share a "universal need" to form and identify traditions.²⁷¹ It was witnessing this need come to life that led to the second scrawling of the term on my forearm (the first time, as an answer to my self-questioning of what underpins belonging); my ethnographer lens and super early-entry pass enabled me

²⁶⁷ Hymes *Folklore's Nature*, 356

²⁶⁸ Price, *Personal Interview*

²⁶⁹ Alison Green quoted in Eve S. Mosher, "Artists as Agent of Social Change – or Agent of Government?". (10 September 2008). <http://www.evemosher.com/2008/artists-as-agent-of-social-change-or-agent-of-government/> Accessed 15 March 2015.

²⁷⁰ Practicing participant observation at Burning Man results in unique note taking practices. I have notes on a plastic bag and a coke can too.

²⁷¹ Hymes *Folklore's Nature*, 353

to take notice of the prevalence and importance of traditions within the often irreverent and intentionally contrary and confusing cultures of the Burning Man build crews.

The 4:20 Spire

Black Rock City is laid out on the bare playa with spikes, flags and spires. The Golden Spike is the first spike set in the playa and it is used to demarcate where the Man will stand to mark the center of the city. From there, precise measurements and angles are used to mark out the circular streets and set locations for art, camps and infrastructure. Now a known tradition, on the day the Golden Spike is set, images and general excitement for the year's gathering spread throughout the Burning Man community online, as this marks the official start of the building of Black Rock City.

From the initial spikes, the city is laid out and areas marked with colored flags to demarcate specifically assigned properties, the central thoroughfares of the city, the Esplanade (the most central street of the concentrically designed city) and the paths from the Esplanade and 3 o'clock, 6 o'clock and 9 o'clock axes to the Man and the Temple. These central axes are also marked with spires that act as lamp posts. Throughout the event a team of volunteers form the Lamplighters, and each day at dusk and sunrise they don ceremonial white robes and walk the length of these corridors to install and uninstall lit lamps, a tribute to the earliest cities and their civil servants. Each year, at 4:20pm on the Thursday before the gates open, the last spire is raised at 4:20 and Esplanade, indicating the end of the build period.

I was running late for the 2013 event, so when the flare gun was shot to start the time allowed for the build crew teams to leave their mark on the spire, a fellow explorer who knew too well of my obsession with documenting tradition started taking notes for me. On a coke can. In James Cross' words, the event kicked off with a "flurry of activity" with "each group of [the] culture represented."²⁷² It was entertaining and amusing as the "de-serious", "anti-organized" and "janky implementation" of each team was on display²⁷³. James also notes the obvious "love" that is on display,²⁷⁴ as it is the connection to work, each other and the event that drives them to work, and now play, so hard. And finally, the topsy-turvy nature of participants purposefully doing the most wasteful and useless job possible of the self-selected duty they take great pride in, reveals a sort of "re-reverence," or taking the joke seriously.²⁷⁵ This is a theme of the performance of culture that is Burning Man; with no strong mission or clear cultural definition to refer to, the absurdity and cultural questioning that is at the core of the event's beginnings results in a dance of meaning and nihilism, and sacred and profane.

The 4:20 spire event is a classically carnivalesque celebratory tradition; a brief socially sanctioned opportunity to recognize and play with social norms, before putting them squarely back in their places. All of the teams that have been on playa preparing the city for its public gather together and celebrate their efforts by performing their duties in the most ridiculous, wasteful, useless and ass-backwards ways possible. There's more going on than is possible to make out. The Heavy Machinery team drives in a boom lift carrying a crushed car for spectator seating, Department of Public Works crew members use screw guns to attach zip-ties and attempt to hammer screws, the Communications team installs a broken satellite dish with "Cats and Porn" scrawled on it, my CLIT team hangs a broken par can with zip-ties that are knotted together, and the Lamplighters install a crushed and barely recognizable lamp onto the post.

Team membership markers of swag and logos are markers of pride in this internal community of Burning Man crew members. There are about 200 people gathered to watch the shit-show and most are in Burning Man crew emblazoned attire. The authorized unofficiality of the gathering is noted; Harvey is

²⁷² James Cross. *Coke Can field notes*. 2013

²⁷³ Ibid

²⁷⁴ Ibid

²⁷⁵ Ibid

there in his signature Stetson, as is Burning Man build photo-documentarian, John Curley - there will be a handful of stunning storytelling shots on the Burning Blog by morning. The spire ends up a mess that will stay up as an apparent monument to absurdity with no explanation made for the 70,000 other participants who will fill the city when the gates open in a few days' time. A fun and frivolous celebration of the serious hard work that goes into building Black Rock City, the tradition of the 4:20 Spire install is not a rebellious or defiant scene, but essentially a school muck-up day for the pre-event work crews; a performance of the brat-punk attitude, that could be said to have been part of Addis' 2007 actions, reinterpreted to suit the structured and coordinated scene of Burning Man. The 4:20 Spire ritual indicates that it is understood that a space for unruly behavior is necessary, and can be catered for to a certain extent.

Folklore activism

Debora Kodish's *Envisioning Folklore Activism*, celebrates and calls for a more active recognition of her field's unique ability to support cultural sustainability, as a force for cultural evolution.

Kodish refers to Bakhtin's exploration of the carnivalesque to say, "Bakhtin, in other oppressive times, told us where and how to read between the lines, listen to the silences, use festival laughter and transgression," suggesting that these festive and 'transgressive' spaces can be used for activism, which is what some would describe Addis' actions as.²⁷⁶ Goodell's comments that indicate that she was glad for the rift in the routinization of the event demonstrate that there was some applicable truth in Kodish's statement that, "This [folklore activism] is about learning to recognize, hear, and sing freedom out of what has long been named trouble," and that perhaps the organization benefited from having a forced and dramatic cultural inquiry.²⁷⁷ However, rather than engaging with the cultural definition and direction debate Addis' arson invited, the Burning Man organization took clear steps towards cultural sustainability, or cultural direction, and stamped out the insurgent influence and unimaginatively repeated the effigy routine without curiosity or conversation with the community members.

Considering Paul Addis' rebellious burning of the 2007 effigy as a performance of culture and of protest, as cultural sustainability professionals we should be concerned with how the profession justifies the choices of which cultural expressions to sustain, demonstrate, celebrate or consciously evolve and which to let wither and fade. Looking at the Burning Man organization's actions that seemed to be in protection of community traditions, a process of cultural curation is at work. Could Burning Man as an institution embody both innovation and tradition? In many ways, the intensely dynamic nature of the Burning Man event from year to year strongly demonstrates the changing nature of tradition; that it changes over time and groups may incorporate innovations; therefore, innovation and tradition are not necessarily dichotomous. However, it seems that some things have become sacrosanct and off-limits within the culture of Burning Man. Which of course, in an event full of free-spirit transgressives, begs the question, what role does disruption and disturbance play in Burning Man's offerings to dominant culture today?

²⁷⁶ Kodish, *Envisioning Folklore Activism*, 39

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 38

5 Burning Man: Still Subversive or Simply Sold Out?

2011-2014: A Sold Out Event

Due to environmental and other regulatory concerns, the Federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM) dictates how many tickets are issued each year for Burning Man. In 2011, these tickets sold out for the first time, with over 55,000 tickets issued at prices ranging from \$190-390, and every year has sold out since then. The 2015 event sold out in 40 minutes, with many ambitious attendees complaining of missing out on tickets even though they were online and attempting purchase as soon as sales opened. Therefore, as the Burning Man community grows amidst federally mandated population constraints for the main event, the Burning Man organization is appropriately placing more emphasis on outreach groups and decentralized versions of community gatherings and endeavors. However, the Principles of Burning Man are now being tested as the culture's stated ideals meet constraints in practice.

'Radical Inclusion', one of Burning Man's Ten Principles, is defined as "Anyone may be a part of Burning Man. We welcome and respect the stranger. No prerequisites exist for participation in our community". No prerequisite except a ticket, that is. In 2012, the BLM increased the allowed occupancy to 60,000, and event organizers attempted to remain true to the group's values by developing a strategy for how to handle the rightly expected onslaught of demand for tickets to that year's event. Their answer to Radical Inclusion amongst an economy of limited supply and unlimited demand, was a lottery.

The announcement of the process of random selection and distribution of tickets sparked a whole lot of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* references, controversy, conversations and media coverage, which all ultimately resulted in a massively inflated increase in demand for tickets. Many suspect much of this apparent demand may have been industrious scalpers and people padding their odds of 'winning' tickets with extra entries with family, friends and dogs' details rather than an actual 250% increase of 'burners' or community members wanting to attend the 2012 event.

Two weeks out from the 2012 event, there were a lot of tickets being sold and traded online, but for an event that takes a whole lot of planning even just to attend and survive (let alone put together a few-hundred strong and amazing theme camp or radically modified vehicle or other art to share), it was too late for many to get themselves together (and time off work etc.) to attend. The lottery system allocated access to only portions of many teams that work together to create immense offerings to the event, putting a great deal of social strain on subgroups and teams and demanding a lot of attention and care from Burning Man organizers as they tried to keep the city intact.

The inadvertent shredding of the Burning Man community's social fabric, plus the rampant community backlash to the lottery system, meant it was scrapped for the 2013 event and tickets have been allocated via the following streams since then. In January, 4,000 Pre-Sale tickets are available for a premium price of \$800. This elevated price helps to fund the application-based low-income ticket (4,000 tickets at \$190) program, which is evidence of the Burning Man organization's commitment to Radical Inclusion. In February, a Directed Group Sale offers 20,000 tickets to major theme camps and known groups and entities that bring a great deal of life to Black Rock City for \$390. Then 40,000 tickets are sold via the Individual Sale which opens two weeks later as a 'survival-of-the-quickest' affair. And finally, 1,000, \$390 tickets are sold in August in the OMG Sale.²⁷⁸

Burning Man 2011 was my first year at Burning Man and I continued to attend the event for each of the next three years. I had no problem getting tickets; in 2012 I easily purchased a ticket in the Individual Sale, a friend gave me the gift ticket he was allocated as a Burning Man Regional Contact in 2013, and in

²⁷⁸ Burning Man Project. *Tickets*. <http://tickets.burningman.org/> Accessed 15 September 2015.

2014 I was granted entry as a 'gift' ticket in response to the hours of volunteer work I did for the organization's Centre Camp clean-up crew the year before. In 2014, I volunteered for the Gate and Perimeter crew and earned a ticket for the 2015 event which I did not use.

Tom Price has strong feelings on the Burning Man organization's approach to the event's apparent supply and demand discrepancies, as do many other Burning Man participants. Though he recognizes that he "will never buy another ticket to Burning Man. I will call Marian, or my wife will call Marian, and she will give me one. It's not an issue for me," as he puts it, "but that doesn't matter. What matters is that Burning Man [the organization] has become such an institution it is no longer able to differentiate between its interests and the interests of the community it serves."²⁷⁹

Price sees that the current structure, most especially the Directed Group Sales, is not transparent enough. "The system is structured to incentivize wealthier people attending. Unless you're tapped on the shoulder and invited to the secret Direct Sale process. You're fucked. Period," he says.²⁸⁰

The issue is that access is most strictly limited for those who want to attend but do not have either the financial or social capital to be in the echelons of the chosen contributors (Directed Group Sale) or the rich (Pre-Sale and/or hiked up scalper ticket) insiders. "It's the thousands of people who camp with 30 people but only got five tickets and are having to decide if they're going to go this year. Or they wait and hope and pray that they might get in later. But even if that happens they don't have the time nor the emotional commitment [to make a great contribution]," says Price.²⁸¹

Chris Cohen, beer aficionado, San Francisco resident and entrepreneur spoke with me about his frustration with trying to get a ticket to his third Burning Man in 2015. "I didn't get a ticket during the general sales... I mean, I'm sure I'll be able to turn up for tickets somewhere but, I don't know. It's pretty frustrating... I feel like a sucker. I feel like I followed their directions and I was on the sit at noon on the dot, as soon as ticket went on sale and I still didn't get a ticket."²⁸² More than just limiting people's access to attending the event, the ticketing scarcity seems to limit people's contributions to Black Rock City too. "The thing is, you know, I'm supposed to mayor my camp... I'm not going to put effort into that shit if I don't know I can go, you know," said Cohen.²⁸³ In our personal interview, I suggested he could volunteer for the Burning Man organization (like I have) to earn a guaranteed ticket each year. "I thought about doing that too. But what I wanted to do was contribute through my camp, not just work for the Org," replied Cohen, again demonstrating that participants' commitment to creative contributions to the City may be sacrificed in order to secure access to the event. However, frustrations like Cohen's may drive more energy into the growing Regional Network of local events. "Since not getting a ticket on Wednesday and it now being Sunday, I have wondered like, you know, could I just go to like a bunch of other regional events and not fucking worry about Burning Man? I'm definitely into that. These things are on my mind right now, so I don't know," Cohen said.²⁸⁴

Nick Martin arranged to bring his parents and partner to Burning Man 2015, but this was not without dissatisfaction with the ticketing process too. Martin and his partner went to KiwiBurn, Blazing Swan (Western Australia Burning Man regional event) and Burning Man in 2015, "We're going this year, my partner and I, but this should be my last year going to the big one [Burning Man]," said Martin.²⁸⁵ "It was an emotional rollercoaster just trying to get tickets and that's fucked up. It feels to me like it's going away from what it should be. Like people are paying thousands of dollars online for tickets and I think

²⁷⁹ Price, *Personal Interview*

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Chris Cohen, *Personal Interview*, 22 February 2015

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Nick Martin, *Personal Interview*, 23 February 2015

it's ridiculous. And finding out that programmers were able to buy tickets minutes before everyone else... Like we were there, we were ready and we were in line for 30 seconds since it's up and we still didn't get tickets," Martin echoes Cohen's experience.²⁸⁶ Martin was particularly stressed about getting tickets due to the extra expenses and logistics necessary to make it to the event from Australia, plus he was planning to propose to his partner and wanted to share the experience with his parents too. Again, like Cohen, Martin is considering focusing on the regional events closer to his chosen home, "The real burn [Burning man] is a big crazy experience and it's amazing. But I think it's very, it's very much impersonal at the same time... Regionals for sure, I'd love to do at least one regional a year."²⁸⁷

Price, Martin and Cohen describe an individually felt social stress of inability to secure access and therefore the capacity to fully participate in the culture and community of the Burning Man event, resulting in possibly less grand or expansive experiences on offer to share at the event. Exacerbating this dilution of shared experience, Price describes the wider social effect of 'tourism' that the ticketing situation seems to suggest. "It's incentivizing evermore participation by the wealthy and the tourists who come and hire camp Sherpas to create their experience for them," says Price, I would add that the 'tourists' Price mentions may also be joined by those who secure tickets late in the game and therefore do not have many resources to put towards their contributions on the playa.²⁸⁸ "And then they go out and consume the sponsored, official, approved art," concludes Price, revealing his concern about the sanitization and commodification of the entirety of the event.²⁸⁹

With what may be considered widespread success of the event, it is clear that Burning Man is grappling with how to sustain/maintain and protect/evolve the culture of the event and community with so many new participants. The event and community's dedication to decommodification, valuing experience and interaction as paramount to consumption and transactions, is particularly challenged as, the "commodification of identities and traditions" that, according to Clifford is, "integral to a late-capitalist or post-modern world system of cultures" characterizes the mainstream culture that surrounds this subculture.²⁹⁰ It is certain that the culture of Burning Man cannot be sustained, it must evolve and change and my personal experiences from within the community over the past four years testify that its culture and cultural participants are changing rapidly. As Clifford states, tradition may be "less about preservations than about transformative practice and the selective symbolization of continuity."²⁹¹

Conversation and consideration of the changing nature of the structure and contents of the Burning Man event are most obviously raised by the aforementioned ticketing issue, however concerns regarding the curation of the experience itself – the people present, the art, the inclusivity of experiences – are valid too. As the event has grown up and social structures have formed within it, examples of the hierarchical and commodified experiences common to everyday life are sneaking in in not so subtle ways.

Commodification and Inclusion

The 2013 "Temple of Wholyness" project brought commodification to the experience of the playa in a few very clear ways.

At the 2013 Temple Burn, I noticed that there were two distinct lines of Black Rock City Rangers (the volunteer non-confrontational community mediators and safety officers) who were holding two distinct

²⁸⁶ Martin, *Personal Interview*

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Price, *Personal Interview*

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ Clifford, *Taking Identity Politics Seriously*, 101

²⁹¹ Ibid, 100

burn perimeters, one being roughly 150 feet closer to the Temple. I asked the Ranger who was closest to me to explain the situation. “Oh it’s a very expensive project and they had to do two Kickstarter campaigns,” she said. She rattled off all the numbers of how much the project cost and how much they had raised (over \$100,000) and then said, “And these are the people that helped build the Temple,” referring to the major financial contributors and gesturing to the inner circle area I was peering into from the perimeter I was held at. I could not help but think, “Hey wait a minute, I helped build the Temple! I went and worked in Alameda with them!” Instead, I responded to ask, “Oh, so it’s a commodified space?” And the Ranger replied, “Yes, these are people who gave a lot of money.” I was like, “Okay, thanks for clearing that up for me.” Flying in the face of the Burning Man community principle of decommodification, to the Temple of Wholyness’ Kickstarter page, lists the following experiences as ‘rewards’ for financial contributions to the crowdfunding campaign: Pledges above \$1,000 could be rewarded with access to the Temple Builders’ crew area for the Temple Burn, contributions over \$500 could receive a “Kitty Cat Car Joy Ride with the Temple artists” and tour of the Temple on playa, and 21 pledges of \$300 or more signed up to receive “an invitation to a soiree with the Temple artists at the Golden Cafe, the oldest camp in the Black Rock French Quarter. You will be treated to a delectable meal paired with fine spirits, as well as a special absinthe tasting, while enjoying wonderful live entertainment. Enjoy conversation and share stories with the Temple builders in an intimate gathering.”²⁹²

This is an example of what I like to call “pre-commodification”, or the negotiation of the community ideal of decommodification by shifting the capitalist consumption to simply occur earlier rather than not at all. Pre-commodification at Burning Man was not introduced by the Temple of Wholyness’ fundraising approach; it has been happening since crowdsourcing started. However, the commodification of the experience of such a central element of the event, that the Burning Man organization was very aware of, seems to indicate an institutional acceptance of this type of activity, or at least intentional oversight for certain inner-circle community members.

“Something snapped when it was being able to buy the experience on playa like buying an art car ride,” comments Andie Grace, former Burning Man employee (Communications Manager and Regional Network Manager) and participant since 1997.²⁹³ “That is a big fat nose in the tent; the camel got his whole head in there at that point,” she says, “because it’s one step away from the whole place being littered with those experiences, and then you and I, walking in brand new who didn’t know about donating to all of things because we’re new here and we just decided to go,[we] are shut out of every place you walk up to.”²⁹⁴ And it is this exclusion (as opposed to the practice of the principle of Inclusion), that this indicates that threatens the sustainability of the culture and experiences of *communitas* at Burning Man.

Commodification, Participation and *Communitas*

Practices of exclusion and VIP areas undermine the experience of equality and namelessness that is inherent to the experience of *communitas*. Similarly, a focus on consumption of experience over creation of experience and common endeavor may be eroding the prevalence of this potentially transformative experience of deep connections with others too.

“In the early years of Burning Man, a lot of the fun was the building of the projects in the desert - it wasn't a showcase. The administration now tries to make sure the show is good when the gate drops on

²⁹² The Connection Crew, *The Temple 2013 – Burning Man*. 13 April 2013, <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/oticoasis2011/the-temple-2013-burning-man-0/description> Accessed 24 December 2015.

²⁹³ Andie Grace, *Personal Interview*, 6 September 2013

²⁹⁴ *Ibid*

Monday,” said Mason.²⁹⁵ “Burning Man was a possibility engine. It wasn’t about *who* makes great art, it was that *everyone* is making art. That’s the greatest thing,” concurred Rinaldi.²⁹⁶ And discussing what worked in the counterculture groups he was a part of, Law said, “In the Suicide Club and in later groups, we were agreeing with a group of people to do something, often that we were not supposed to do, or that has some danger involved in it. So... [we were] doing something in concert with a group of people that depend[ed] entirely on one another.”²⁹⁷ This sense of interdependence, coupled with the shared commitment to the alternate reality they were co-creating is *communitas*.

As an emerging social movement, the first challenge is letting those who are looking for this alternative narrative know that it exists; the Burning Man cat is out of the bag. Ironically, the second difficulty is the incorporation issue of ‘free riders’; people following along and consuming the contributions of others rather than making offerings of their own to the collective experience. “There is concern that rich people form insular communities that block others out and go against what Burning Man is all about,” said Doherty.²⁹⁸ While this is not new, the prevalence of this attitude and its effects on the cultural experience of Black Rock City is growing. Doherty notes, “The confluence of the event and tech money is an old story... instead of someone coming in with their own stuff, these people who are really rich, pay other people to show up with a nice trailer and cook their food for them, it does happen...what is new though is these guys are so rich now, they’re realizing they don’t have to rough it at Burning Man.”²⁹⁹

The market for on-playa experiences has been tapped by entrepreneurs; there are companies that deliver and set up yurts with swamp coolers, deliver fresh fruit and vegetables, pump septic tanks, and of course, the ‘turn-key’ camps.³⁰⁰

For some time, Burning Man community members have been wary of the sense that the experience of Burning Man and the community itself are being sold for the entertainment or consumptive participation of others. In 2014, a Change.org petition to “End the commodification of Burning Man by for-profit camps” was launched in response to the proliferation of ‘turn-key camps’ (camps that provide all your Burning Man needs, for a fee).³⁰¹ In September 2014, it was revealed that a Burning Man board member was the head of Caravancicle, a Burning Man 2014 camp that was outed for providing paid ‘Sherpa’ staff (\$180/day), full-camp set up with private and shared areas, food, drink, beautiful company, transportation and costumes to paying (\$16,500/person) camp members while shutting out others.³⁰² The fact that a Burning Man board member apparently skirted the community’s defining principles in favor of providing a most excellent ‘pay to play’ party, calls the organization’s commitment to these defining principles into question along with the rationale for appointments of particular board members.

As an experiment in social and cultural creation, it is disappointing to see evidence of Burning Man capitulating towards the conventional value systems that herald the rich and powerful.³⁰³ Are these paying players members of the community too, or do they define the initial territorial claims of capitalist

²⁹⁵ *Dust and Illusions*

²⁹⁶ *Wieners, Hot Mess*

²⁹⁷ *Law, Personal Interview*

²⁹⁸ *Doherty, Personal Interview.*

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁰ In 2012 -2014, I was involved with a camp that received fresh fruit and vegetable delivery. In 2014, I camped with a couple who had a yurt and cooler delivered, set up and packed up and taken away for them. That year I also camped next to a group that had a personal chef/cleaner who set up their camp and decorated their bikes before they arrived, after which he prepared and cleaned up after all of their meals.

³⁰¹ Benjamin Kloetser, *End the Commodification of Burning Man by For-Profit Camps*, Change.org. (2014). <https://www.change.org/p/black-rock-city-llc-end-the-commodification-of-burning-man-by-for-profit-camps?javascript=false>

³⁰² Felix Gilette, “The Billionaires at Burning Man”, *Bloomberg Business*. 6 February 2015. <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-02-05/occupy-burning-man-class-warfare-comes-to-desert-festival>

³⁰³ Questioning the value of the ‘inclusion’ and ‘participation’ that these groups bring to the shared Burning Man experience, and discussing the various ways in which people may participate in the experiment is an important conversation and could make up an entire thesis, thus this is all I will say in this piece of work.

consumer culture within Black Rock City? It seems metaphorically appropriate that the known 'turn-key' camps are given official placement at the edges of the city,

Others are interested in attending Burning Man to learn from the culture on display. In 2000, Brad Wieners of Wired Magazine said, "Here's where I think commerce will play in, [it] will be the package holiday. Stuart Brand [founder of the Global Business Network and the Long Now Foundation, and associate of Ken Kesey], I sent him a note, because he and the Global Business Network were looking at bringing executives out [to Burning Man] to 'rock the zeitgeist', by which I mean bring people who want to understand the mindset of young people today. 'Where are their minds at? Well here's your chance to find out. Come out to Burning Man.' It's almost a reverse of Ken Kesey's bus, instead of taking the freaks to the suburbs in the bus, this would be going to the suburbs, loading up the bus, bringing them to the freak out."³⁰⁴ What of these researchers, gawkers, tourists? (As a participant who has taken field notes each year, I am mindful of this edge.)

Many in the community complain about the increasingly apparent class divide in Black Rock City, and some, including Harvey, see it as simple "jealousy" of those who can afford to have these luxuries as part of their 'radical' Burning Man experience.³⁰⁵ This faction suggests that there have always been all kinds of people at Burning Man, doing all kinds of things their own way, and that the growing reality of class on the playa should not be a big deal; "Just because somewhere there's this wall of trailers with rich people, if you're there to criticize and judge how other people are doing Burning Man, you're missing it," says Doherty.³⁰⁶

However, others point to the effect this dilution of communal experience has on the transformative potential of the experience; which is essentially the weakening of *communitas*.

Bob Putnam volunteered and worked to clean up Pearlington, MS after Hurricane Katrina January – April 2006 with Burners without Borders, a group of self-organized disaster relief workers that was born out of their shared experiences with having been to Burning Man. Regarding the turn key camps he says, "Yeah, just how disappointing it is that people are soliciting...they'll never get the experience!"³⁰⁷ Putnam continued, "From my perspective of it anyway, is that the majority of the experience is to go out there and survive with no rules among a whole group of people... originally when it started you did the sweat equity, y'know, that means you appreciated it. But now all of these people want to go in their RVs, with their personal cooks and everything else, and I can see how it can take away from someone's experience," says Putnam.³⁰⁸ These comments made me realize that it is not just the 'tourist' that is affected by this participation via consumption, but that even though I can choose to ignore, or may not even notice, the experiences of exclusion or elitism on the playa, the fact that it is there at all erodes our shared senses that we are all in this together; having others not playing along diminishes *communitas*.

Defining the Community

The difficulty in getting tickets, growth of attendance of regional events, and the debatable 'participation' of some who attend Burning Man, all add up to say that attending, but not participating in, Burning Man does not itself constitute community membership, and therefore begs the question of, what does?

³⁰⁴ Brad Wieners quoted in Silver, *Burning Man: Community of Chaos?*

³⁰⁵ Larry Harvey, *Personal Conversation*, A Night at Burning Man event, 23 July 2013

³⁰⁶ Doherty, *Personal Interview*

³⁰⁷ Robert Putnam, *Personal Interview* 22 October 2014

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

Caveat Magister's blog post is the best attempt to come to a clear description of what it means to call oneself a member of the Burning Man community that I have found. Caveat states that answering the question, "What are the core beliefs that unite us?" has now become one of some urgency [as] more new burners are coming in, fewer veteran burners can attend, and the nature of our community is at a crossroads."³⁰⁹ Referencing incomplete adherence to the Principles and examples of the radically different people, camps and activities one may find at the Burning Man event (i.e. Barbie Death Camp, hula hooping, Thunderdome) Caveat presents a community definition stating that states the group is made up of action and personal experience, not words and descriptions, and is inherently independent, creative and messy. "First of all," Caveat proposes, "we didn't study up on the 10 Principles, or any other philosophy, and then say 'Yes, this is for me'... We came because we heard people were doing amazing shit: and when we saw it we thought 'I could do amazing shit too,' and then we changed our lives."³¹⁰ Caveat goes on to say that this process of action followed by explanation is consistent with the way Burning Man evolved too. "It was only after Burning Man formalized and organized that the 10 Principles were developed as a way of trying to explain what the hell this is. They were supposed to be explanations, but in fact they are aspirations: the 10 Principles, loosely speaking, are our goals, not our commonality or *raison d'être*. They're things we strive to be, and admire when we see in others... but the Burn came first. With Burning Man, the experience always comes first."³¹¹

Despite having never been to Black Rock City, Putnam comments on what makes one a part of Burning Man community, "Originally when it started you did the sweat equity, y'know, that means you appreciated it... it's a whole aspect of Burning Man, that's how I see it anyway, it's not about the fire and everything else, I mean that's all small parts of it, but it's about the survivalist and the sweat equity and camaraderie." It seems that even though Putnam did not share the experience and memories of Black Rock City with his fellow Burners in Mississippi, they shared a bond based on the extremity of their experience of communal effort to not just survive, but thrive and give to others in a harsh environment and make that environment beautiful along the way. Asking Putnam about his association with the term "Burner", he responded, "I mean you think of a 'Burner', I'm not into fire ritual and stuff like that... it burns more within me than I show, I guess."³¹²

"We're united by our actions, rather than our motives, ideals, or thoughts," Caveat continues, adding that a 'Burner' occupies a space of transformation that it invites but does not impose anything upon anyone else. Finally, the conclusion is: "To Burn is to act as an agent of possibility: creating a space where something amazing can happen, letting anyone join, and then cleaning up after it when it's done."³¹³

Following Caveat's definition, it can be said that those who merely place themselves at Burning Man, but allow others to facilitate their actions and clean up after them, are not 'burners', but cultural tourists.

As a slight aside, tourists tend to visit places with good weather, and the surprisingly mild weather that Burning Man participants have enjoyed since 2011 may have something to do with the event's popularity. Building upon Putnam's discussion of the importance of "sweat equity" and common basic endeavor to define the experience of being a 'burner', Davis commented on the importance of the harshness of the playa environment for the creation of community. "One of the great things about Burning Man were these things you couldn't control, like terrible weather... that meant you were going to confront things that were going to be challenging and that was part of it. And that's another weird

³⁰⁹ Caveat Magister, *Who the Hell Are Burners*

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Robert Putnam, *Personal Interview*

³¹³ Ibid.

thing, this whole last period [Burning Man 2011-2014], you guys have not experienced the hard-ass mother fucking weather. It got nasty out there and dangerous. It's been weirdly clement," Davis said.³¹⁴ In a personal interview, Burning Man satirist and long-term participant, Simon of the Playa, agreed that the effects of the physical environment provide an important intensity to the Burning Man experience, "That's part of the experience; getting out of your comfort zone... the insecurity, the uncertainty of the desert and how it can just whip up and fuck your shit up really quick and you've got to be prepared for it, and then you have to deal with it afterwards and go on. I've had some of the best times during the middle of the shittiest weather at Burning Man."³¹⁵

Positionality

As Turner states, "Anthropology has historically developed as a discipline concerned with other peoples' realities – the more different from our own, the better. It has been less interested, and less successful, in dealing with the ways its own reality – its activities, values and ideas – is affected by the contemporary world of which it is part," which indicates where the complementary field of Cultural Sustainability can add to cultural analysis.³¹⁶ In this way, this exercise has been difficult for me, as I have been dealing with a reality that is not at all different from mine, but only become more and more mine through the practice. In that way, I recognize the effect of nostalgia on my perceptions, while also attempting to reflect upon very real changes in both the culture of Burning Man and my own positionality as I become more familiar with the culture. To this point, Doherty says, "I've seen it grow from 4,000 to 70,000 and no matter how much it's grown and changed, the core idea is very powerful and when it brings people in, I see it change people. It's like Christmas; if you think Christmas sucks now, maybe it's because Christmas when you were seven is different from Christmas when you're 27. The magic is still there, and people who are new still feel it, if you feel like it's not what it was, it's more you than the event."³¹⁷ Building upon this apparently common metaphor for the magic and wonder of Burning Man, Simon said,

When you're a kid, that first Christmas, it's phenomenal. It's the best shit ever and then you get older and you realize there might be something up. Somebody is not telling you the whole shit. And you see like ribbons in the closet and possibly some wrappings... And then, you're actually in on a joke. You're telling your little brother, 'Yo, Santa is coming down, you got to leave the cookies for this guy,' and then it becomes almost like a ritual until you become disillusioned and you realize it's full of shit, it's for fourth-quarter sales. And then you became a parent. Then you have to put on a show. And you watched that kid ripping out the paper. And it's like that's the moment you get it. So that's why I bring virgins every year.³¹⁸

So to round out my analysis of the current state of Burning Man culture, I interviewed participants who have recently joined the community, committed to bringing first-timers and are passionate about the event.

Celanie Polanick attended Burning Man in 2014 and 2015 and we spoke in January 2015, before she had secured a ticket for that year's event. She spoke of how her attendance the previous year was a result of the confluence of a surprise opportunity, impulsive decision making and lack of responsibilities. "Burning

³¹⁴ Erik Davis, *Personal Interview*

³¹⁵ Simon of the Playa, *Personal Interview*, 26 February 2015

³¹⁶ Terry Turner, *Anthropology as Reality Show*, 15

³¹⁷ Brian Doherty, *Hack*, Triple J (ABC Radio) 27 August 2014, http://mpegmedia.abc.net.au/triplej/hack/daily/hack_wed_2014_8_27.mp3 Accessed 24 December 2015.

³¹⁸ Simon of the Playa, *Personal Interview*

Man and this last minute moment of choice of going is like – it was an experience psychologically about like taking a risk to have faith in something being worth it even when that completely went against any values about like what I should be doing with my time that I had ever been taught by authority figures... I'm supposed to be invested in all these institutions that don't want to give me a time of day, and none of those things are happening in my life," Polanick said.³¹⁹ She continues to describe the impressions and affects her first burn had on her:

When I first got there, I thought the idea of being like, "welcome home" was really stupid. When I left, I thought about it and it made me cry, and I was like, "No, I understand completely now what this means."

So to me, what Burning Man is, is a temporary experimental society in which every factor that stopped people from participating or being authentic is taken away, and every factor that causes them to – that greatly or exponentially encourages their participation is exploded – it's exponentially increased. It is just built for people to come and like do, not just be but do. And, all they had to do is make a space where they didn't tell you not to do – like all they did was they made a space where there were no rules stopping this from happening, and this is what, you know, happened...

A lot of people think they know what Burning Man is because they think it is a time to really like have extra fun and let yourself go and like not stop yourself from doing things that are humanistic, and that really bothers me a lot because I feel like they are drastically underestimating the spiritual and political and creative parts of Burning Man...

This extreme weather strips your comfort and your behavioral patterns away... [so] you don't expect to be comfortable, so instead you're immediate. Instead you're present...

I think that Burning Man takes the things you were afraid to know about yourself, the things you were afraid to want, the things you were afraid to do with your own life, and it gives you a week where that person is all you have. You don't have to be somebody who has to do all the things that you're already doing. All you have to do is explore the things that are the secret things...

And that experience is so freeing that a lot of people never look back. And I, honestly, would say I'm one of them because I haven't. I'm a really different person, but I'm more me...

What I think Burning Man is the most powerful medicine for. It is people who are on the brink of doing something cool with their lives and they aren't doing it.³²⁰

Chris Cohen attended Burning Man in 2013 and 2014. Cohen was heavily involved in the electronic dance music scene in the early 90s in Florida and the community formed around immediate experience and expression that he has found within Burning Man is what attracts him to the culture, "It replicates the kind of fun stuff we used to do when we were a lot younger... I had a community like this and I did a thing like this once upon a time. And so, going to Burning Man felt like a mind blowing version of what I had experienced before, like taking it to a level so far beyond what I had dealt before but, in a way, feeling like I was coming home."³²¹

³¹⁹ Celanie Polanick, *Personal Interview* 22 February 2015

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Cohen, *Personal Interview*

Cohen describes his impressions of Burning Man and comparisons with other festivals:

I feel like Black Rock City is just, you know, it's going to be amazing. I definitely will never forget the first time I went on the Playa. It was just like 'Holy Christ, what is happening here?!' And that moment blows away every festival I've ever been to, for sure.

You can go to any of these other big festival events but like, it's all like you pay the shitload for this experience and you will be entertained. And Burning Man is one of the only things I've ever been to where, yeah, god damn, when I walked out there and I just looked around and I already understood like how the economics of Burning Man worked. And I was just like, 'Wow, all of this shit was made by these people? That is really ridiculous.'

The thing that blows me away the most is knowing that all that stuff is just made by the community; just people taking it upon themselves to do something that they thought would be fun, as opposed to being like, 'I need to entertain a bunch of people. How do I do that?'

My immediate response to all that [commentary that Burning Man is not what it used to be] is just like, you know what, I went for the first time two years ago and it's amazing. Yeah, it changes because, you know what, it is an intense experience and it's a time consumptive experience and a lot of people can't do it every year and so the contributions naturally change.

Nick Martin reflects Cohen's comparative comments, "One thing I love about burns is that they're so spontaneous. It's not as like a music festival, [where] there's no community. Everyone is out for their own, everyone is just getting drunk, wants to see the show there with and they don't even really realize there is 4,000 people around them."³²²

Jamie McIver has participated in Burning Man annually since 2008 and has brought Burning Man virgins or newbies (including his stepfather in 2014) for most of those years. McIver comments on his continuing commitment to being a part of Burning Man:

I actually remember arriving and the first time getting out on to the open playa it's like ten thirty in the morning or something like that and I'm with my best friend and we've driven all night to get there and we kind of cut and sorted and make our way out and all of a sudden it's like ten thirty in the morning and this giant silver spaceship passes us and it's blasting Biggie [Smalls] and there are people dancing their faces off and it's heading out of the city and I just looked and I was like, 'What the fuck is going on here? This is fantastic!'

After that first year it totally changed my perspective and I understood having been there, how valuable it was and it became a priority, it became "Okay, I'm doing this and I'm going to build around it." It's continued to be that every year. I put it on my resume that it's something that I do so that any employer that I have knows that it's something I am really planning to go and do.

Every year, I would say before I go every year I think to myself, 'Well maybe, maybe like after this one not that I'd never go again but maybe after this one I'll take a break,' and

³²² Martin, *Personal Interview*

then after each one, it's like, 'Oh I'm going back next year, that was so great.' Every year I feel like it's just evolved for me so much and I feel like the experiences that I'm having.

I guess to me, it's a celebration of things that I value. To me it's an opportunity. I don't believe that one can live the way things are, the full week of the event, 52 weeks a year but I also don't think it's a total absolute fantasy. I think it's an extreme expression or celebration of a way of seeing the world of interacting with people and other culture and community. So far every year, I check in and I feel like I am really lucky to be able to be part of something that creates so much, from intense amount of joy and learning and expression and connection and for me that's kind of what it's all about. It's getting to be a part of creating that and doing that with other people.

It seems to me that most Burning Man participants practice fieldwork, knowingly or not. According to Wagner, the fieldworker's invention is "a kind of metamorphosis, an effort of continuous, ongoing change in our culture's forms and possibilities... the culture we live is threatened, criticized, counter-exemplified by the culture we create," a statement that supports the common Burning Man participant's experience of personal questioning and redefinition and performance of and addition to the culture of the Burning Man community.³²³

³²³ Wagner, *The Invention of Culture*, 11

6 Conclusion

As demonstrated in the accounts above, the Burning Man experience is various and distinctive for each participant, each time. The Burning Man experience is also dynamic and changing because culture itself, our environment, and ultimately ourselves, as tools of interpretation, are changing. At a point, as happened for John Law and Paul Addis, the experience of Burning Man may no longer suit us, as individuals, or as a collective culture.

SantaCon: When Culture Jamming Goes Conventional

The trajectory of SantaCon may provide Burning Man with an extreme, though remarkably fitting, cautionary tale. Some San Francisco SantaCon participants took action to reclaim the intangible and invaluable spirit of “temporality” and “possibility” within their community on December 13, 2014. In a Facebook post, Andie Grace described the intent of the happening:

For many years an event called SantaCon has grown from its roots as a culture-jamming gathering with roots in a rebellion against the consumerist nature of Christmas. 20 years later and having spread to many cities, it's now the world's biggest drunken costumed bar crawl... Which is fine, but not the Santa I knew back in the day, where the prime directive I enjoyed was interacting with the shopping public, not just getting so drunk you can't stand up, vomiting in alleys in front of confused kids, and treating our city's bartenders like Santa's personal servants. As a cheeky performance antidote to it all, we conducted a funeral for Santacon right in the middle of the event yesterday, complete with a candy cane coffin marched around while a brass band played.

I participated in the funeral event, excited to see how an event that had been completely taken over by the consumer culture it was initiated to challenge, could be reclaimed, or in this case, laid to rest.

Price, the man who was a part of leading Burners out of Black Rock City and into disaster areas to expand and share their creative and survival skills to support and assist communities in need, called the crowd to order to deliver the eulogy. “SantaCon was not originally an excuse to buy Santa suits and go on a bar crawl, it was an opportunity to comment on the fact that you cannot consume your way to happiness, and yet, in the way that capitalism always does it has turned this anti-capitalist event into yet another commodity to be consumed. And so we kill this consumer event so that another can rise from its ashes... We will come up with something new,” Price proclaimed.³²⁴

Like other annual events that have also been replicated in cities around the world (Brides of March, Iditarod, Salmon Run, Burning Man), SantaCon started as a Cacophony Society event. But, as the Daily Beast points out, “Most Cacophony events were one-off affairs, just enough to jam the culture a bit before moving on. The idea with SantaCon and most Cacophony events is not to demonstrate how to have fun and recruit people to repeat an established form of expression or fun, but to inspire others to create and share their own fun; to make up our own games, to share the authentic expressions that could only come from us.”³²⁵ But even to Cacophonists, SantaCon was worth a repeat in San Francisco in 1995, and then when the pranksters decided to do it yet again in 1996, they took it to Portland. Then

³²⁴ Miriam Fathalla, “Rest in Peace, Santacon”, YouTube. 17 December 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GRon5rJLhY0> Accessed 24 December 2015.

³²⁵ David Freedlander, “Before the Bros, SantaCon Was as an Anti-Corporate Protest”. 12 December 2014, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/12/12/how-bro-culture-hijacked-santacon.html> Accessed 24 December 2015.

the next year to Los Angeles, then New York where “they marched in front of the United Nations as representatives of the North Pole, holding signs to stop the Holly-caust”.³²⁶

SantaCon was originally intended to be a public and shared expression of independence from the mandates of consumerism. The game was to celebrate adolescent thrill-seeking and authority-questioning while playing with the sacrosanct – demonstrating that reality is suspect and therefore ready for the making, but the original anti-consumerism message and call to ridiculousness has been lost to result in SantaCon being perceived as nothing but a drunken mess. And simply by repetition, SantaCon itself became a tradition, an institution, disconnected from its origins and devoid of its inspiration. First it was disruptive, then it was derivative (SantaCons took place in almost 200 cities this year), and now, in the case of SantaCon (at least the 2014 event in San Francisco) it’s dead; the SantaCon Funeral happening turned the scrutiny of capitalist consumer culture that SantaCon was devised to express, back upon itself.

Newness, innovation and ingenuity are all, of course, impermanent. Therefore, for a culture that is based upon accelerating the evolution and audacity of human expression to remain true, it must constantly undo itself, applying the same irreverent irony and critical questioning it demonstrated towards dominant power structures and systems to that which becomes authoritarian within its own ranks.

As another SantaCon Funeral participant penned the following on their website,

The true crime against SantaCon is the lack of innovation. The entire message has been lost”. Explaining the actions of the funeral creators they write, “since we couldn't expect anything new and creative from the current batch of Santas, we had to prank our own prank and put SantaCon someplace they can't get to it. By declaring Santacon dead, we reclaim some of the overly congested bro-space and bring it out of the fog. Hopefully we've left a void that can be used for someone else to be creative, show initiative and develop something new. That's the space we worked within for many years until we reached SantaCon's cultural elastic limit. Maybe with a little wiggle room and a little less momentum, we might get to see something fun again. Bring it.”³²⁷

Though a much simpler affair, the cautionary tale of incorporation and commodification of the once radically subversive SantaCon is fair to point out to those concerned with the cultural sustainability of Burning Man.

Carl Jung states, “We cannot change anything unless we accept it. Condemnation does not liberate, it oppresses,”³²⁸ therefore the SantaCon funeral pranking of the prank not only keeps the game going, but gives it options for change and cultural sustainability too. Interestingly, another example of cultural reclamation also occurred in December 2014, in Berlin.

Berlin’s Kreuzberg murals were reclaimed when some of the artists that created them removed them from their impressive public presence by painting over them.

Seven years after the monumental wall pieces came into being, we felt it was time for them to vanish, along with the fading era in Berlin’s history that they represented. The murals took their involuntary place in this reality as a pilgrimage site of guided street art tours, as a photo opportunity for countless greeting cards, book covers and record sleeves. The artists. They found themselves to be their own biggest enemies, contributing to their own displacement. Gentrification in Berlin lately doesn’t content

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Truck Boy. “I Killed SantaCon”. 15 December 2014. <http://bakatbakastaktcz.blogspot.com/> Accessed 24 December 2015.

³²⁸ Carl G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, (Mariner Books, 1955), 240

itself with destroying creative spaces. Because it needs its artistic brand to remain attractive, it tends to artificially reanimate the creativity it has displaced, thus producing an “undead city”. This zombification is threatening to turn Berlin into a musical city of veneers, the “art scene” preserved as an amusement park for those who can afford the rising rents.³²⁹

It’s hard to apply the artists’ explanations to Burning Man, but like the creative environment of Black Rock City, Berlin’s creative environment was an accident that can’t be replicated by others but could be considered to be threatened by a culture of consumption and fetishization.

2013: Cargo Cult – calling for creative leadership and cultural spread?

It is hard to get a read on what those in Burning Man’s leadership positions see as the appropriate role for themselves and for Burning Man at this point in the earth experiment. However, there was a clue in the 2013 “Cargo Cult” event theme. I believe this theme choice was a reference to this growing distrust of the authority of the event, from within the Burning Man community as well as mainstream observers. The Cargo Cult theme asked Burning Man participants new and old to reconsider and question the values, power and meaning they attribute to the event, its artifacts and its emerging mythologies. I believe the event’s leaders were asking participants to not cast them in the role of John Frum, the giver of pseudo-divine knowledge or practices, recognizing that they may offer distorted and novel ways of being and seeing by organizing the event and highlighting that the magic or meaning of the traces left behind all come from the beholder, the participant, not the Man, the organization or the event itself. I suspect the organizers chose to highlight the concept of Cargo Cults at Burning Man 2013 as an attempt to inspire the community to not follow the precepts of Burning Man as the blindly faithful, but to practice the self-aware anthropology Wagner calls for.

The official explanation of the suggested inspiration point for art and experience at the Burning Man 2013 event includes the following:

Like the islanders, most of us are many steps removed from the Cargo that entirely shapes our lives. We don't know how it's made, where it's made, or how it works; all we can do is look beyond the sky and pray for magic that will keep consumption flowing... Burning Man is of course what one makes of it. So we must recognize that a few participants question the literal existence of John Frum. They believe that cargo culture is unsustainable; no deus ex machina descending from the sky can possibly provide consumers with relief. The only spaceship worth considering is planet Earth. Each and every one of us, it is held, must find our Inner Frum: the first step toward salvation is to give our gifts to fellow human beings.³³⁰

When I was in the chaos of the desert in August 2013, trying to make sense of not only the event’s theme but my role in the universe, I couldn’t work out who the Burning Man organization was casting into the roles of John Frum and Cargo Cult members? Were the event ticket holders the society of the future bringing a message of progress and evolution to a subsequently confused mainstream society? Or were event participants the ones that are confusing the message, attributing an inappropriate amount of power and prestige to the artifacts of selfishly flawed cultural missionaries (the organizers themselves)? Caveat Magister commented, “Judging strictly by the superficial, the difference between

³²⁹ Lutz Henke, “Why We Painted Over Berlin’s Most Famous Graffiti”, *The Guardian*. 20 December 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/dec/19/why-we-painted-over-berlin-graffiti-kreuzberg-murals> Accessed 24 December 2015.

³³⁰ Larry Harvey and Stuart Mangrum, *2013 Art Theme: Cargo Cult*, http://burningman.org/culture/history/brc-history/event-archives/2013-event-archive/bm13_theme/ Accessed 24 December 2015.

“Burning Man” and a “Cargo Cult” is the difference between ABC and CBS. They’re not the same thing, but a casual observer might never notice.”³³¹

Clifford’s question, “How much hybridity can conventions accommodate without losing the ability to assert integrity of tradition?”³³² is just as applicable to this emerging culture’s rapid growth issue as it is to the issues of older more ‘traditional’ cultures it was presumed to be formed for. Questioning of the authenticity, integrity and proliferation of the culture of Burning Man are loudest from within the community. And just as the flocks of new Burners are potentially changed and affected by experiencing and participating in Burning Man culture, it cannot be denied that the event and those who have been there longer are affected by the newbies too. This is reflected in Clifford’s statement that, “The relative dynamism and power of interacting local and global forces and the ultimate question of determination - who consumes whom - cannot be read off.”³³³ Attempting to balance being overly diluted among a strong influx of new ideas, experiences and cultural invention and continuing to encourage a culture of questioning and redefining realities, the Burning Man organization has its work cut out for it. Never mind maintaining its subcultural definition and anti-establishment stance while becoming more and more an established power structure. “All global-systemic approaches run the risk of reductionism, where difference becomes merely derivative of, and contained by, structural power,” Clifford continues, and the Burning Man organizers, who believe that Burning Man and its culture are essentially important and invaluable, are worried about the culture and the leadership of the community being co-opted or incorporated into the currently dominant paradigm.³³⁴

The 2013 ‘Cargo Cult’ theme extends this by inviting participants to ‘threaten and criticize’ the Burning Man culture, traditions, beliefs, dogma and mythology in order to ensure the culture’s relevance and future by highlighting the essentially constructed nature of culture itself. This level of self-aware analysis is necessary for the dramatically changing culture’s sustainability or even future existence (there is a difference) but requires keen and critical attention. To conclude, I return to Caveat Magister’s discussion of this theme and the reflection of Burning Man and Cargo Cult cultures, “We can learn a lot from John Frum – but we have not earned the right to take his name in vain,” he writes before suggesting that the Burning Man community “look to Cargo Cults not as strange and silly religions, but as inspirations for what Burning Man is trying to become. Cargo Cults represent a profound cultural transformation that successfully saved those cultures. Isn’t that what so many of us want to do? Change the culture in order to save it?”

Burning Without the Man

In 2011, Tom Price, founder of Burners without Borders and Black Rock Solar, an outgrowth non-profit organization that installs solar energy systems in the event’s local area, explains how his organization builds upon this legacy, “What we’re creating is disruptive culture. We’re demonstrating the ability of really anybody to make real substantial concrete change in the world and do it from a values-based place, do it with a focus on the social, rather than financial, bottom line. And that’s destabilizing and it’s empowering.”³³⁵ Then, in 2015 Price told me, “I’m going back [to the Burning Man event in 2015] to say goodbye. I don’t believe that the event is going to survive the way that things are happening to it, not in a way that is useful to me... the character of the event, I think that it’s just changing, it’s always changing

³³¹ Caveat Magister, “Cargo Cult is a Daring – and Dangerous – Theme. Get it Right.” *The Burning Man Journal*. 14 December 2012. <http://blog.burningman.com/2012/12/culture-art-music/cargo-cult-is-a-daring-and-dangerous-theme-get-it-right/> Accessed 24 December 2015.

³³² Clifford, *Taking Identity Politics Seriously*, 100

³³³ Ibid, 102

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Ibid, 178.

but this is a different level I feel like. And it feels like a wealthy playground. The per capita average income jumped \$10k just between 2012 and 2013. If my friends can't go, why would I go?"³³⁶ It can be said that the real magic of *communitas* is how the deeply shared experience can create bonds between strangers, but Price reflects, "I haven't felt connected to people [strangers] out there in years."³³⁷

This unique "burn out" (not wanting to stop pushing oneself to new experiences and realities, but wanting to do it beyond the confines of the Burning Man experiment) is relatively common in long-term Burning Man participants. So in order to sustain the culture, must we leave it to do more, for further, question it and experiment?

Caveat states, "The right question – for the 10 Principles or anything else about Burning Man – is not 'what does this mean?' which is the beginning of doctrine, but 'how can I use this to do something amazing?' which is the beginning of new frontiers."³³⁸ The curious and inspiring edges of experience are necessary to play amongst in order to garner creative thinking, creation and culture.

Burning Man Philosophical Centre member, Benjamin Wachs adds:

I think we make a mistake when we think that the experiences of possibility will ever be the same when you go back. If Burning Man is doing its job, if we are in fact changing through it, then we are playing a kind of Russian Roulette with our experience of it. At some point, for most of us, our best decision is to leave Burning Man and take what we have gained out into the world... I don't think Burning Man is any less than it was back in the 90s. Most of the changes and trade-offs strike me as relatively trivial. But I do think that the experience it offers - in the desert - has diminishing returns for most individuals. And this isn't necessarily a bad thing. If it helps us find our life's work, why are we still hanging around when there's that to be done?³³⁹

Davis agrees, reflecting that the environment for play and experimentation is necessarily limited by its edges. "You [Burners] have a responsibility to keep pushing it, and that's true but you can only push so far inside a framework that has now achieved great inertia and stability and organizational intelligence and institutional memory and all of these sociological effects, if that's not being engaged at the "top", there's only so much you can do. You're inside somebody else's playground," he said.³⁴⁰

An example of the compromised utopia that Burning Man may be, author and independent scholar, Erik Davis presents Foucault's 'heterotopia' as:

A place where otherness is allowed to run riot. So, an example, with qualifications, is a place like Burning Man, particularly early on when there were less cultural ideas of how you were supposed to behave... Heterotopia never lasts. It's always an evanescent point where people come together and there's a kind of open-ended question of like, 'We don't know what kind of social interactions are going to be, we don't know what subjectivity is going to be, how our connections are going to happen now' and I think that there's a part of us that really seeks that because we recognize in that the possibility that things can be other than what they are. That the world doesn't have to be the way that it is.³⁴¹

³³⁶ Price, Personal Interview

³³⁷ Ibid

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ Benjamin Wachs, *Personal Email Communication "What Is Burning Man Anymore?"*. 24 November 2015.

³⁴⁰ Davis, Personal Interview

³⁴¹ Davis, *TECHGNOSIS, Technology and The Human Imagination*

Burning Man has been a part of the movement that is ushering in a cultural evolution, since this evolution has the freedom to take place when humanity is free from the repressive structures of mainstream society. The T.A.Z. element of the Burning Man experience is crucial to the event's expressions as an experiment. Bey describes Burning Man in his definition of a T.A.Z. as "an exceptional party where for a brief moment our desires are made manifest and we all become the creators of the art of everyday life," that does not "wait for a revolutionary moment, and instead create spaces of freedom in the immediate present whilst avoiding direct confrontation with the state."³⁴² However to retain the T.A.Z. character, the desert oasis of culture must "preserve the creativity, energy and enthusiasm of autonomous uprisings without replicating the inevitable betrayal and violence that has been the reaction to most revolutions throughout history"³⁴³. The T.A.Z. characterization of Burning Man fades away when we realize that, "Before the T.A.Z is spotted and recognized by the state, it dissolves and moves on, reappearing in unexpected places to celebrate once again the wonders of conviviality and life outside the law. It might last hours, days, years even, depending on how quickly it is noticed by authorities," according to Jordan.³⁴⁴ With Burning Man squarely set on the fringe of the mainstream, it is clear that its T.A.Z. character has been compromised. But the idea may be well-iterated by individuals and initiatives outside of Black Rock City. In fact, that would be the sign of a successful movement; those who participate at Burning Man playing the empowered, inspired, responsible and inclusive ways of Burning Man elsewhere all over the globe.

So the future of Burning Man may not be Burning Man at all, but a resulting movement that alters the status quo and changes our definitions of 'normal' to allow for ever more experimental and carnivalesque festival spaces. In this way seeing Burning Man as a mainstream vacation space is not a testament to the detriment and decay of its core revolutionary ideals, but an ironic tribute to their dissemination and triumph.

Summer Burkes, Burning Man writer, worker and critic penned a partial definition of this new generation:

Our generational movement will NOT BE called 'Burners,' as in 'hippies' or 'beats' or whatever else. IT WILL NOT. This [Burning Man] is only a vacation. The rest of the year, most of us are doing stuff. We like to DO STUFF. DO STUFF. It's catchy, it has nothing to do with Burning Man, and it's a command as well as a blanket term for all of us *all over the world* who don't know the difference between work and life. As long as it's all play, we're cool... Those who have taken the Red Pill, who have pulled the feeding tube out and are powered exclusively by absurdist joy, kinetic energy, and the physical detritus of capitalism... We build and make rather than shop and watch. We enjoy manifesting art and useful things out of other people's castaways. We burn down anything that doesn't work and build a new one in its place. WE DO STUFF.³⁴⁵

I believe a key to this observation is the different attitudes towards death that the founders of the Suicide Club, The Cacophony Society and Burning Man have expressed. Gary Warne, Suicide Club initiator explicitly stated that the group was a place to 'live each day as your last', while Cacophony Society founder John Law promotes finding 'what you're supposed to do and do[ing] something else. However, in 2004 Harvey said, "I don't want to die; I hate the idea of dying. It's not so much the injury,

³⁴² Jordan, *Theory: Temporary Autonomous Zone*

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Jordan, *Theory: Temporary Autonomous Zone*

³⁴⁵ Summer Burkes, "Paul Addis is More Tyler Durden Than You Are", *The Ladies' Guide to the Apocalypse*. 30 August 2007. <http://summerburkes.com/2007/08/paul-addis-is-more-tyler-durden-than-you-are/> Accessed 24 December 2015.

it's the insult."³⁴⁶ As Rinaldi puts it, "The minute we're as comfortable with failing as we are with winning — the moment we're in it for the experience and not the victory lap — is the moment we're free."³⁴⁷ The restriction of seeking significance, or 'sustainability', seems to restrict Burning Man's cultural evolution, and perhaps the shift necessary to sustain humanity that Mikel refers to.

In personal interviews, four different participants brought up the word and notion of 'significance' to me. "I don't think that the quest was necessarily about them... wanting to fill their pockets with money," said Doherty, "I think it is equally if not more so about them filling their souls with significance..."³⁴⁸ The incredibly human need to be recognized and appreciated may be affecting some of the culturally directive actions of the Burning Man leadership team and block the much larger environment and trajectory of this post-postmodern movement of empowered, imaginative and connected living.

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Burning Man emerged from the radical and expressive and experimental milieu of San Francisco's post-hippy grunge, punk and machine arts scene as an expression of this wave of counter culture. However, considering Hebdige's comment, "the moment when dominant society begins to recognize a subculture is the moment that the resistant power of the subculture begins to die,"³⁴⁹ the institutionalization and mainstream recognition of Burning Man testifies to the fact that the counterculture has evolved beyond this experiment to form new boundaries to break through, while through repetition and routinization, the Burning Man event has moved away from the outposts of the avant-garde to the fringe of contemporary conventional culture.

This may be seen as a net gain; as many people as possible experiencing 'cracking open the head,' as Pinchbeck puts it, to know via the direct experience that more is possible than that which is sold to us within the confines of contemporary consumerist cultural dictates, however an honest analysis recognizing where Burning Man sits in the cultural spectrum of the zeitgeist is necessary for the culture's sustainability, and this evaluation will give room for other iterations of social experimentation too.

The Burning Man founders seem to know that their organization plays a special role in this imminent and important wider cultural shift, but seem to miss the fact that like the dynamism of cultural evolution they advocate, the organization's role (once at the forefront of a movement that is about deconstructionism and transformation) is necessarily constantly changing and could easily be suddenly obsolete. "The culture we live is threatened, criticized and counter-exemplified by the culture we create," reminds Wagner.³⁵⁰

The Burning Man organization does not seem to be aware of how much incorporation has affected its actions and leadership of the event that once brought together a rebellious and experimental group of artists and creators. Rooted in the carnivalesque, this framework of co-creation results in an open, empowering and seemingly contagious social structure that attracts more attention, creative expression, action and participants every year, but is (or should be) necessarily contrary and anti-authoritarian; "[Carnival] is the people as a whole, but organized in their own way, the way of the people. It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the carnival," says Bakhtin.³⁵¹ However, as Paulo Friere indicates in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the petty bourgeoisie who are sympathetic to, and believe they

³⁴⁶ Larry Harvey quoted in *Burning Man: Beyond Black Rock*. Directed by Damon Brown. Gone Off Deep Productions, 2005.

³⁴⁷ John Rinaldi quoted in Bronwyn Ximm, "Tonight! Buy Chicken John's Book, Help Save His Space for 'Odd and Unlikely Artworks' *Bernalwood*. 30 September 2011. <http://bernalwood.com/2011/09/30/tonight-buy-chicken-johns-book-help-save-his-space-for-%E2%80%98odd-and-unlikely-artworks%E2%80%99/> Accessed 24 December 2015.

³⁴⁸ Doherty, *Personal Interview*

³⁴⁹ Hebdige, *Subculture*

³⁵⁰ Wagner, *The Invention of Culture*, 11

³⁵¹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (1984), 255 quoted in McIver, *WaveShapeConversion*, 167.

are a part of, the plight of the proletariat gets in the way of the necessary social revolution that is afoot.³⁵²

"In order for us to survive on this planet we have to engage thousands, millions of people. We have to do it, we're giving our lives to it, it's that important." said Mikel.³⁵³ But as Doherty says in a 2000 *Reason* article, "Harvey, like his partner Michael Mikel, has declared that his intention is to change the world. But change it to what? A giant party filled with postmodern art projects?"³⁵⁴ In a 2008 interview, the event's founder and organization's leader, Larry Harvey said, "For the last three years I've done these sociopolitical themes [American Dream in 2008, Green Man in 2007 and Hope and Fear in 2006] so they know they can apply it. Because if it's just a vacation... well, I've been on vacation long enough."³⁵⁵ The leadership's goal of affecting change and cultural shift away from the event demonstrates that this community is concerned with social change and reform, like the 1960s counterculture, and not *just* a huge party in the desert (though they are obviously committed to continuing to host the annual Nevada gathering).

The leadership of Burning Man has a unique opportunity to continue to act in line with the assumed inspiration for the 2013 'Cargo Cult' theme, encouraging and supporting external, diverse and divergent iterations of this revolutionary spirit. Unfortunately, it seems as though the organization has succumbed to elements of incorporation and is more focused on accumulation of value and market share than being a part of an independent and unowned movement.

Until November 2014, the official Burning Man organization's mission statement included the following: "The touchstone of value in our culture will always be immediacy: experience before theory, moral relationships before politics, survival before services, roles before jobs, embodied ritual before symbolism, work before vested interest, participant support before sponsorship."³⁵⁶ Now, the newly created Burning Man Project mission statement is simply, "The mission of the Burning Man organization is to facilitate and extend the culture that has issued from the Burning Man event into the larger world," and refrains from attempting to define what this culture is.³⁵⁷

Referring to his story of being filled with wonder at his first Burning Man, Daniel Souweine does well to eliminate the subjectivity of the attempt to analyze the reality of Burning Man. "I think the right way to think about this is the Martian test... If you took a Martian, dropped them in Black Rock City, and asked them for a report back, what would they recount. Would they tell you about how Turnkey camps have robbed the spirit of the place, or how there are too many frat bros, or how the celebrities have turned the place into Times Square? Or would they tell you stories like mine?"³⁵⁸

In order to achieve Cultural Sustainability for Burning Man, the event's organizers must be vigilant to guard against Burning Man acting like adult Disney; putting on a great show of fantasy brought to life, where novel experiences are considered exceptions, rather than examples of an expanded breadth of possibility, indicating a framework for the exploration of our emerging culture of experience. The experience should also be encouraged to be expressed as varied articulations, proliferating free of any attachment, branding or endorsement from Burning Man.

³⁵² Friere, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (Bloomsbury, 1970)

³⁵³ *Spark: A Burning Man Story*. Directed and Produced by Jessie Deeter, Steve Brown Spark Pictures. (2013)

³⁵⁴ Doherty, *Burning Man Grows Up*

³⁵⁵ Stephen T. Jones. *The Tribes of Burning Man*, 176.

³⁵⁶ Black Rock City, LLC. *Mission Statement*.

http://web.archive.org/web/20050220023249/http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/mission.html Accessed 24 December 2015.

³⁵⁷ Burning Man Project, *About Us*. <http://burningman.org/network/about-us/> Accessed 24 December 2015.

³⁵⁸ Daniel Souweine, "Burning Man Critics Miss the Point", *The Huffington Post (Blog)*. 16 September 2015.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-souweine/burning-man-critiques-mis_b_8130462.html Accessed 24 December 2015.

As Cultural Sustainability practitioners, we too have a responsibility to reinvent, as we experiment with new ways to interact with and document (and therefore, create) culture. Though cultural changes and evidence of incorporation are clear in the Burning Man culture, in order to continue the experiment and best serve the purpose of the counterculture, the temptation to superficially judge the experiment as a cheapened experience and a consumerist exercise in itself, must be resisted. It is necessary to remember that the interpretive and subjective tool we use for analysis - our dynamic and personal experiences - are inherently and inextricably biased and affected by past experiences; one's first Burn is spent dragging one's jaw in the dust and just acclimating to the environmental, social and psychological climate of the experience, whereas it is a likely challenge to find the transformative experiences after many iterations. Therefore, we are the cultural commentators to support and record the stories of William Blake's Eden, the paradise of realized human imagination which we see "not as a peaceful garden, but as a fiery city".³⁵⁹

³⁵⁹ Davis, *Beyond Belief*, 38

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Appendices

Appendix I: The Suicide Club's 12 Chaotic Principles, by Gary Warne³⁶⁰

CHAOTIC PRINCIPLE No. I - DIVEST YOURSELF OF EXPECTATIONS

CHAOTIC PRINCIPLE No. II -YOU WILL NEVER BE TOTALLY IN CONTROL

CHAOTIC PRINCIPLE No. III -BE A FOOL NOT A SADIST. YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO TAKE IT AS WELL AS DISH IT OUT.

CHAOTIC PRINCIPLE No. IV - ALLOW PEOPLE THE VALIDITY OF THEIR OWN EMOTIONS (HUMOR IS A VERY SERIOUS THING)

CHAOTIC PRINCIPLE No. V - SOLIDARITY IS A NECESSITY

CHAOTIC PRINCIPLE No. VI - PLAY IT OUT TO THE END

CHAOTIC PRINCIPLE No. VII -THE MORE EXTREME THE ACT, THE MORE EXTREME AND VARIED THE RESPONSE WILL BE.

CHAOTIC PRINCIPLE No. VIII - HUMOUR IS AS RELATIVE AS ANYTHING ELSE

CHAOTIC PRINCIPLE No. IX -FEAR IS A STATE OF MIND: THE FEAR/RISK RATIO IS NOT PROPORTIONAL

Since most fears are about things that have NOT happened to us or that we haven't experienced but have only witnessed thru media representatives or in our fantasy states- we usually don't know what an experience is like and our fears keep us from finding out.

CHAOTIC PRINCIPLE No. X - WE HAVE MANY THINGS TO RISK BESIDES OUR LIVES

It is also possible, I won't posit a principle here- that our adventures and fantasies are a Combination of excitement and fear and other people's adventures are more frightening than our own because THEY have the excitement/ motivation and we don't so we are only left with the fear. To support this I offer up that one of the people who waited outside of the tunnel was the one who organized the FUR SALE demonstration, which terrified me and which didn't faze him.

CHAOTIC PRINCIPLE No. XI - WE SUBCONSCIOUSLY BELIEVE WE HAVE EXPERIENCED THINGS WHEN WE HAVE ONLY WATCHED THEM. WE HAVE NOT.

CHAOTIC PRINCIPLE No. XII -WHEN WE TEST OUR FANTASIES OF OURSELVES WE FALL SHORT- SO WE DO NOT.

³⁶⁰ Gary Warne, *1977 Evolution into Chaos: A Chronology*. 3 February 1977. <http://www.suicideclub.com/9/essays/1977-evolution-into-chaos-a-chronology-gary-warne/> Accessed 24 December 2015.

Appendix II: 12 Steps to Cacophony, by Stuart Mangrum

Stuart Mangrum presents “12 Steps to Cacophony” at “Chuck Palahniuk and the SF Cacophony Society: Creating Culture from Mayhem”, 23 September 2013, Access via <https://youtu.be/VNm8PBUY-R4?t=1h26m5s>

Step 1. Make The City Your Playground

Step 2. Take A Zone Trip

Step 3. Cultivate Odd Friends

Step 4. Cacophonize Your Closet

Step 5. Make Something

Step 6. Burn Something

Step 7. Read More, Watch Less

Step 8. Become A Niche Expert

Step 9. Make A Spectacle Of Yourself

Step 10. Pull An Epic Prank

Step 11. Expand Your Comfort Zone

Step 12. Leave The World A Weirder Place

Appendix III: IRB Approval



Institutional Review Board
1021 Dulaney Valley Road
Baltimore, Maryland 21204
irb@goucher.edu
www.goucher.edu

Date: November 17, 2014
To: Miriam Fathalla

From: Ann Marie Longo, Goucher College IRB
Re: *Burning Man Beyond Black Rock City*

DECISION: APPROVED

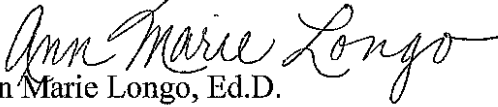
Dear Investigators,

The Goucher College Institutional Review Board has reviewed your proposal. Your project is approved through November 16, 2015. Should you wish to continue that project beyond that date, you will need to submit materials for a continuing review. If you wish to make any changes to your study protocol at any time, you will need IRB approval of the modifications before you make them. Please report any adverse events associated with this project to the IRB immediately.

Your approval number is 20141511.

Please submit your signed consent forms to the Provost's Office at the conclusion of your study.

Best of luck with your research.


Ann Marie Longo, Ed.D.
Associate Professor of Education
IRB Chair