Place Making, Money, Community, and Art: a Symposium on the Future of Burning Man Culture

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"Belief is thought at rest."
– Motto of the Philosophical Center

The mission of the Burning Man Project is to foster the growth and development of Burning Man culture as it is described by the Ten Principles. Contained within the by-laws of the Project is a deceptively simple statement, "Nothing less than all of these Ten Principles combined will really do." This not only means these principles are integral to one another, it also implies that the means by which we will accomplish this mission must manifest what we wish to achieve. Although it is perfectly possible to produce quality ketchup without imbuing that process with *kechupness*, we are not manufacturing a commodity for consumption. As by a sort of moral law, our means and ends must be the same. We should exemplify that thing that we aspire to create: a living culture, a new way of being in the world.

The idea that the emergent values of Burning Man have evolved and are evolving as an integrated whole – one that has the capacity for self-reproduction – can guide us as we engage the four topics chosen for this year's discussion. When we first selected these four subjects, it was immediately apparent that any attempt to strictly separate them from one another would limit our thinking. To speak of art (particularly Burning Man's interactive art) without reference to community would be downright silly. Likewise, to ignore the role of place making, when the design of Black Rock City – itself a work of art that promotes unmediated interaction – would be equally bootless. Finally, to avoid any mention of money (when tens of millions of dollars surge through our city each year, and in their outflow distribute art throughout the world) simply makes no sense at all.

We therefore propose a simple rubric for us to follow in our discussions large and small: we ask participants to view each of these topics through all of the others, to treat these points of view as parts of an organic whole. This essay will attempt to model this approach – nothing less than all of these ideas combined will really do.

Place Making

In the case of place making, this is a story about both natural and urban geography. The famous founding scene of Burning Man on Baker Beach was quite inspiring; it connected our small band to natural forces and vistas on a scale far greater than ourselves. But with equal force it may also be said that Burning Man was hatched in the 1980's at a salon, the epicenter of a group of amateur bohemians. The house where this occurred was chockablock with people, many of whom had migrated to San Francisco because they had heard that San Francisco was a place where one could be whatever one might choose to be. This social landscape generated very high rates of social interaction.

Not only did the city's handsome housing stock produce a sense of snug propinquity, a picturesque closeness of contact that had the potential to magnify interactions, housing rental rates were very low, and this economic fact, perhaps more than any other factor, is what drew the Beats to North Beach and the Hippies to the Haight in the 1950's and 60's. This is what made it possible for so many of these immigrants to lead a life that was devoted to spontaneous creative endeavor. Money, and the relative lack of it, also led to self-reliance and collaboration. In the absence of any reliable market for innovative art, a distinctly bohemian ethic evolved, and this unleashed a scene in which creators were set free to live entirely for their gifts.

When Burning Man removed itself to the Black Rock Desert in 1990, participants confronted an environment that rhymed with and amplified all of these factors. The physical arena of the playa was very like the sea and shore in San Francisco – except that here, in a vast oceanic space, it seemed literally possible walk on water. Against this utterly blank canvas, anything that *was,* was more intensely so: everything created took on the properties of a numinous vision. Moreover, as our temporary city evolved throughout the 1990's, it grew into a sophisticated urban matrix with population densities approximately equal to a kibbutz. We engineered a social environment that in some ways was a mirror image of San Francisco's underground scene. This account tells the story of how our culture achieved what is historically unique: it is the first bohemian scene to have turned itself into a city.

Avant-garde and bohemian scenes are hardly new, of course. This year's art theme compared Black Rock City with Renaissance Florence – doing so in terms of place making, money, community and art – and modern history is strewn with examples of creative scenes that have profoundly influenced the life of the world around them: artist bohemias on the left-bank of Paris, the Bloomsbury Group in London, the Beat scene in both New York and San Francisco. The list is long and varied, but these instances tend to have certain things in common: they center around particular places that promote interaction, they arise fortuitously with no recourse to a plan, they tend to flower briefly, then disperse, they depend on close personal ties between participants, and not infrequently, women have taken the lead in socially curating these gatherings. The one thing that distinguishes

Burning Man from these examples, however, is that in forming a government and consciously designing a city, its organizers were obliged to study and examine the cultural phenomenon that they wished to create.

If we accept the idea that Burning Man is both an emergent phenomenon that is driven by spontaneous participant interaction, and a structured social experiment aimed at cultivating culture, there are many questions we might ask. Colonies of coral may be made to grow in artificial matrixes that provide them with environmental niches, but how can we as planers achieve the proper balance between a structured social context and the free and hectic process it is meant to foster? As with other deeply qualitative perceptions, we tend to know our culture when we see it. How can the Ten Principles, which describe this culture as evinced by values based on actual behaviors, aid us in making these distinctions? In the midst of this discussion, we encourage every participant to speak from his or her immediate experience of creative scenes; what about these places and occasions is reproducible, how have they been made to come alive?

Community

It is almost axiomatic in our contemporary world that the more we talk about community the less there is of it. Historically, in all or the centuries that have preceded our own, communities and their cultures have reliably formed within arenas of action in which participants were immediately present to one another. Community is based on communion: the ability to communicate with something or someone in a very intimate way, and this involves acts of both mirroring and merger with others. As recently as the early 19th century, the physical extent of these arenas of action was limited by how far one might travel on a horse in a few days. In addition to this sense of coherence in space, communities were also bound together by a sense of endurance through time, and this is invariably supported by ritual practices that rehearse collective identity.

What is true at this macro-level of group dynamics is also rooted in the deep-seated needs of individuals. When we examine developmental psychology, it seems apparent that the driving urge of every child is to fashion a durable and reliable identity. We can observe this need from infancy onwards as it is spontaneously authored by actions; the need to be continually witnessed, the incessant demands to hear stories about the past and to hear these just-so tales repeated again and again, and even in their tendency to draw their families represented by stick figures – not unlike the Man – situated at the center of a cartoon home that both encapsulate a sense of belonging and presents an outward face to the surrounding world. The first thing people hear when they arrive at our event is, "welcome home." The need for a coherent space and for a reassuring sense of continuity in time may be hardwired in our brains.

Burning Man is famous for uninhibited self-expression; it is celebrated as an engine of innovation, a way of living on the edge of the unknown – it seems radically different from

what is traditional and ordinary. And yet the word radical, employed three times in the Ten Principles, has a second meaning: it refers to all that is embedded, like a taproot, in our nature, and this is the very thing that rituals appeal to. The Burning Man event is permeated with ritual; the pounding of the Golden Spike that annually marks the geographic origin of Black Rock City, the stately procession of the lamplighters at sundown, the burning of the Man on Saturday night, when for the first and only time an entire community witnesses itself. All these things arise from soulful need; the desire to belong to a place and belong to a time, to belong to one's integral self and to belong to others, even in the midst of impermanence.

In a discombobulated world that is dominated by celebrities and brands, click bait and weak links, tweets and anonymous internet rants, it seems hardly surprising that many have mistaken reality television for the being and belonging that real community can generate. Mass consumption has displaced communion, and we live in a world that is over-mediated, one in which we are constantly manipulated by what the philosopher Simone Weil once called "an icy pandemonium of extraneous wills." The ritual culture that has spontaneously emerged from the Burning Man experience gives us something that is both self-sustaining and more durable because it offers us an opportunity for membership in a community.

Money

Many people think of Black Rock City as a moneyless utopia. By forswearing money during one week in the desert, they feel they've found redemption in a fallen world. This ignores the obvious fact that in coming to the desert and preparing to participate, they have spent at least as much in the marketplace as the Burning Man organization spends in creating our city. As evidenced by Florence, civilization isn't possible without widespread commercial activity. We retreat into the desert every year to contemplate those things in life that are beyond all price, that kind of immediate experience that has an unconditional value: this is why we have suspended commerce in our city. But if Burning Man is to be more than a refuge, and if we believe that it is destined to do work in the world, we should invest our efforts in creating a society that conditions how money behaves.
– Following the Money: The Florentine Renaissance and Black Rock City

Communitarian sentiments have profoundly influenced the Burning Man Project's fundraising efforts. This is a story that begins with First Camp, the home of the founders in Black Rock City. In its early years, as the headquarters of our organization, First Camp functioned as a kind of command bunker in which tensions, if measured in pounds per-square-inch, approximated pressures at the bottom of Marianas Trench. However, as time wore on, it evolved into what it is today. Participants in First Camp, including the founders, pay camp dues, and camp members are assigned communal chores. Its membership consists of friends and family, staff members, board members and invited guests, and it encompasses, like any proper community, three generations, including young children. It also sports an intimate canteen for communal dining.

Throughout the 1990's, as Burning Man confronted one existential crisis after another, its organizers were constantly huddled together. We were dimly aware that many people who attended the event possessed worldly skills and resources that could greatly aid us in our efforts, but we had no way of reaching out to them. However, as our camp grew into a village and created a more welcoming environment, we began to invite some of these people to join us. This was potentially a fund-raising opportunity, but in the gracious spirit that befits a gift, we simply included them in our community.

When, in 2015, a new opportunity arose to purchase Fly Ranch, we decided it would be best to raise these funds from donations from as few people as possible. We were engaged in a private and very sensitive real estate negotiation, and didn't want this process to go public. This is where the community that we'd created in our camp came into play. Some of the core donors to the Fly Ranch fund have shared a home with us, becoming part of our extended family: we had shared meals, guests volunteered to work in our kitchen, and conversations at the table were not driven by a list of talking points. Instead, they naturally centered on people's immediate experience of our culture.

The terms of the donations we received are not transactional – there really is no quid pro quo, no this for that – and this rewards our faith in gifts. By incorporating seeming 'outsiders' into our society, by living with them and relating to them, we made it possible for people to internalize a way of life, and this goes back to the tenet that the means by which we will accomplish our mission should always be consonant what we wish to create. This way of proceeding is actually somewhat heterodox. Instead of luring donors with the prospect of prestige and special treatment, we opened the door to a greater and more immediate sense of being with others, a soulful amplification of identity. Having raised large sums of money from a few, we now imagine we can pivot round and raise small sums of money from the many – that famous ninety-nine percent of ordinary people.

It is our plan to appeal to this grassroots community by citing the behavior of a so-called elite. This has its challenges, since it is much easier to form intimate relationships with small groups of people, than to achieve rapport with a multitude. But we believe we can innovate new tools that will accomplish this. We intend to document and communicate through a variety of media all of the early uses of Fly Ranch, making it apparent that such small gatherings will include a wide spectrum of community members. We can hold out the future prospect of larger-scaled events that will make possible a much broader public participation. We also think we should involve our regional communities in this effort. It is the Project's goal to generate funding and recruit skills from our greater community on a scale that is equal to what has been provided by wealthy donors. If our culture can affect a rapprochement uniting the haves and the have-nots, we will have contributed something crucial to the course of the 21st century.

Art

Black Rock City's [art] honoraria are awarded by a small committee, but this curatorship, as practiced by a few, is counter-balanced by a radically populist patronage. Each year many artist groups will subsidize their projects through community fundraising events and crowd-sourced campaigns on the Internet. Some critics say that Burning Man should shoulder all of these expenses, but we have found that self-initiated efforts create constituencies, loyal networks that support these artists on and off the playa. This has produced a flow of art that's issued out of Black Rock City in the form of privately commissioned work, civic installations [funded by non-profits], and exhibitions subsidized by festivals.
– Following the Money: The Florentine Renaissance and Black Rock City

The idea of the impecunious artist can be a pleasant thing to contemplate: it is the stuff of romantic legend. Burning Man was founded by artists who lived for their gifts, and lived to give these gifts to others. But everyone seems to agree that people who devote their entire lives to the production of art deserve to be compensated for their efforts. Perhaps our greatest challenge is to build a bridge that can unite Burning Man's cultural values and its spirit of gifting with the transactional world of commerce. In an essay by Zay Thompson, who has served as a Burning Man regional organizer in Kansas, he concludes his remarkable meditation on values by stating, "I think one of the major goals in bringing our culture to the default world should be to show society how to simultaneously value commerce and community and not corrupt the two. Let community and commerce do their thing freely and naturally within their own contexts. When they exist in an organic rather than a corrupt or artificial relationship, they'll naturally benefit each other."

A concrete example of how this notion might be applied to art is furnished by a recent proposal put forward in a public forum by Timeless, a veteran artist in our community. He observes that value is generated in the marketplace for art in two chief ways. The first of these is called *accrued* value – this is why art galleries exist; exhibiting an artist's work can generate demand. A second major factor that contributes to the market value of art is *provenance*. This refers the history of ownership of a work of art and the prestige attaching to the reputation of an artist. In our contemporary world, this has turned into a sort of celebrity star system, a celebration of brand names, in which artists might not even craft their own work. In this context, the intensely collaborative work produced at Burning Man, sometimes by veritable armies of artists, dilutes its value as a recognized commodity – its social value undermines its market value.

The prestige of Burning Man, however, has increased in recent years and this, in itself, can stand in as a kind of provenance, and the exposure artists receive at the event has also led to the eventual sale of their art. The proposal advanced by Timeless, however, would take this somewhat informal process one step further. Patrons who are Burning Man participants would be invited to sponsor aspiring artists, paying them fair salaries to create new work. These pieces would then circulate throughout our community, and be finally offered up for

public auction. With the sale of this art, these sponsors would be free to either pocket the proceeds, or reinvest these funds, to pay them forward, as it were, to fund the further production of art. What could be a vicious circle of exploited effort could become a virtuous circle that might benefit everyone. The values of our community and the values of a marketplace might coincide. We have no way of knowing if this proposed system is practicable, although it has a certain theoretic elegance. But it could serve us as a model of how money and the market might cohabit with our culture.

Addendum

One recent effort at place making hovers over this discussion. Earlier this year, the Burning Man Project reported on the purchase of Fly Ranch. Many of you may have noticed that this announcement was written with a certain masterful ambiguity. People naturally crave plans, of course, and the Project does entertain definite aims. These do not include vacation homes, a luxurious hotel, or a utopic commune that will model a perfected version of society. Instead of creating a refuge, we want Fly Ranch to interact robustly with the world at large. Starting slowly and in tandem with construction of an infrastructure that will help protect this potentially fragile environment, we can imagine hosting small events and gatherings that will include a full spectrum of the groups and individuals that comprise our community. At a later date, with the acquisition of the adjacent Hualapai Flat, a large alkali playa, we think it may be possible to host larger-scaled open-ticketed events that will make possible an even broader public participation.

As a privately held property, Fly Ranch can eventually be made available for use throughout the year and, if this site is managed prudently, we can imagine significantly increasing our capacity to provide for the needs of a growing community.

Beyond Fly Geyser and its neighbor pools, lie 3,800 acres that form diverse and stunningly beautiful habitats; thousands of migratory birds fly over this landscape, herds of wild horses wander through it. We intend to take our time and haunt this place, developing it step by meditated step, as a family would. Any advice will be appreciated.