

No Spectators: Dissolving the Line Between Art & Audience at Burning Man

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Abstract. The author will explore how the invitation of audiences to participate in the visual performances and interactive art installations at Burning Man demand direct involvement and evoke a range of emotional responses in the festival-goers, ultimately providing a living medium for the observer and observed to emerge as something completely new in the present moment. From the origins of the Fluxus movement of the 1950s, Happenings of 1960s Europe, and the psychedelic Acid Tests of San Francisco to the present-day temporal community of Black Rock City, constructed each year in the Nevada desert, the merging of artist, creation, and consumer gives rise to more sublime human connections and the evolution of social paradigms. Exploring the works, user experiences, and techniques of the early avant-garde community and the culture, music, and theme camps of the creative pioneers on the vast desert landscape of Burning Man, known as the "Playa," the author will demonstrate the emergence of "newness" and how sustainable cultural change is being inspired.

Key words: Expanded cinema, Burning Man, Fluxus, Happening, Interactive, Avant-garde, John Cage, Nam June Paik

The line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible.

- Allan Kaprow¹

1. Introduction

Each year on a dry prehistoric lakebed in the vast Nevada desert near the small hamlet of Gerlach, thousands of people from around the globe gather for the countercultural arts and music festival known as Burning Man. Spanning the course of seven days, participants build and subsequently deconstruct a temporal city dedicated

¹ Allan Kaprow, "Untitled Guidelines for Happenings," in Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality, edited by Randall Packer and Ken Jordan (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2001) p. 308.

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to creativity, social freedom, and the premise that all are part of the show - none are spectators at Burning Man. Preparations begin months in advance, as a general theme is prescribed for the event and theme camps prepare their communities and artistic contributions, in myriad forms, to be acted out in the harsh elements of the late summer. From massive sculptures and strange motor vehicles, to reveling parties and acts of mass nudity, to individual acts of creativity and expression, to deafening electronic music productions and intermedia exhibitions, Burning Man is a feast for the senses and an open question for the mind of the curious.

The origin and success of the festival owes a debt of gratitude to early Avant-gardes of the Fluxus movement, who following in the footsteps of the Dadaist anti-art movement, encouraged an entire generation of creatives and intellectuals to break down the walls separating audiences from the art they were simply being witnesses thereof. These revolutionaries of intermedia and expanded cinema were dedicated to the task of breaking down restrictive social constructs, combining seemingly disparate artistic mediums, and forcing audiences to step inside of their creations as they emerged. The “Happenings” which began in the late 1950s were the first such informal events that sought to bring together like-minded individuals for the purposes of discovering “newness” through the practice of tearing down established rules and social preconceptions. The Happening developed as intermedium, an uncharted land that lies between collage, music, and the theater. It is not governed by rules; each work determines its own medium and form according to its needs.² The following analysis will

² Dick Higgins, “Intermedia,” in Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality, edited by Randall Packer and Ken Jordan (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2001) p. 32.

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attempt to draw clear parallels between *the happening* and *the burn*, show how the influence of the Fluxus movement is present in Black Rock City, and how its impact on the artistic community is ongoing. The symbolic burning of an enormous effigy at the end of each year's Burning Man festival invites all to reflect on the transience of life and to go forth with a renewed sense of belonging, to dissolve the line between art and audience, and to embrace the idea that we are the creators of own reality and destiny. The Burning Man organization, sanctioned theme camps, and many individuals continue their work throughout the following year in preparation for the next gathering. Social and political movements have been formed and nurtured and creatively focused human gatherings centered on the principal of *no spectators* have been inspired around the world because of the influence of Fluxus.

2. Development

The annual creative arts festival known as Burning Man has as one of its foundations an intimate bonfire ritual that was staged on the summer solstice in June 1986. California native, Larry Harvey, and several of his cohorts met on a small beach near the city of San Francisco and set fire to a 9-foot tall wooden man and a companion wooden dog. Harvey has described his inspiration for burning these effigies as a spontaneous act of "radical self-expression."³ Over the course of nearly thirty years, the Burning Man event has grown from a small gathering of enthusiastic artistic creatives on a local beachfront to a vibrant electrified city in Nevada's open desert spaces that must now limit its population to 50,000 attendants. The adventurous souls who make the

³ Doherty, Brian (July 2006). *This Is Burning Man*. Benbella Books. p. 28. ISBN 978-1-932100-86-0.

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significant effort to spend an entire week in what is called Black Rock City become part of an experimental utopian community that challenges its citizens to express themselves and depend on their own efforts in ways that are not regularly experienced in normal daily life. Apart from the common concern for general safety and a mutual respect towards others, the event has no clear rules for behavior or personal expression, and it is left up to the individual to decide exactly what they will give and how they will contribute to the community. By the time the event is completed and the volunteers leave, sometimes nearly a month after the event has ended, there will be no trace of the city that was, for a short time, the most populous town in the entire county.

Unbridled creativity, both through interactive art installations and live performances, is an unavoidable mainstay of this experience. In fact, it is such a part of the experience that Larry Harvey, founder of the Burning Man project, gives a theme to each year's gathering to encourage a common bond to help tie each individual's contribution together in a meaningful way. Much like the 1960s happenings which often were assigned specific overarching themes, participants are encouraged to find a way to help make the theme come alive, whether it is through a large-scale art sculpture, a communal theme camp, gifts brought to be given to other individuals, elaborate costumes, or any other medium that one comes up with. The impact of the Burning Man experience has been so profound that a culture has formed around it. This culture pushes the limits of Burning Man and has led to people banding together worldwide, and putting on their own events, in attempt to rekindle that magic feeling that only being part of this community can provide.

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Burning Man has spawned an entirely new genre of outsider art, providing a working environment completely outside of the professional art world. Art made under these circumstances tends to be unconventional and genuine; artists are free to disregard the pressures of public and professional approval. It's the immediacy of the experience that is important; the artist gets direct feedback from the community, without worrying about reviews or sales.⁴ Though sightings of famous actors, rock stars, and well-known producers of mass culture are commonplace, the attention placed on them is subdued and the paparazzi is nowhere to be found. The art is characterized by interactivity; it's accessible, hands-on, and meant to be touched, climbed, and played with, providing intense, intimate experiences not usually available in gallery or museum settings. Neither is art viewed as the work of the isolated individual; virtually all the larger works at Burning Man are produced collaboratively, bringing artists, crews, and participants together in a rich, immersive and immediate experience.⁵ Molly Steenson writes in her description of Burning Man for the newcomer, "You belong here and you participate . . . you're here to build a community that needs you and relies on you . . . you're here to create. Since nobody at Burning Man is a spectator, you're here to build your own new world."⁶ These were the very same values being expressed by the leaders of the early Fluxus movement, and they were also looking for opportunities to engage with audiences in impactful ways. One of these pioneers, Alan Kaprow, meditated on the relationship between the spectator and the work. He put mirrors into

⁴ Christine Kristen, "Reconnecting Art and Life at Burning Man," *Raw Vision* #57 (Winter 2006)

⁵ Christine Kristen, "Reconnecting Art and Life at Burning Man," *Raw Vision* #57 (Winter 2006)

⁶ Molly Steenson (n.d.). In *What is Burning Man*. Retrieved November 23, 2012, from http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/experience.html.

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his things so the spectator could feel included in them. That wasn't physical enough, so he made enveloping collages which surrounded the spectator. These he called environments. Finally, in the spring of 1958, he began to include live people as part of the collage, and this he called a *happening*.⁷ The Fluxus movement and the happenings were considered to be anti-art, anti-commercial, and outside of the main stream.

Though many of the artists and creators that contribute to Burning Man have been trained in art schools and come from the creative industries, their particular genre seems to fit within the extents of outsider art. These artists choose to work outside of the confines of the art world in a very free and collaborative environment. In this world they are not restricted by art world standards; they are not trying to impress a critic, a collector or a gallery.⁸ For one short week out of the year, they are free to celebrate their creativity with like-minded colleagues and earnest seekers for its own sake.

The echoes of the pioneering work of Fluxus composer John Cage can be heard throughout the Burning Man experience. His dedication to the development of interactivity and the pushing of boundaries of what may be considered art and music made the mainstreaming of Burning Man culture possible. The "point" of 4'33", and the appeal of most avant-garde stuff, is that unlike most music it presents an open process rather than an attempt to realize a composer's prescribed directives to achieve a specific intended result. It's an invitation, not a command.⁹ Similarly, Burning Man's

⁷ Dick Higgins, "Intermedia," in *Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality*, edited by Randall Packer and Ken Jordan (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2001) p. 30.

⁸ Christine Kristen, "Reconnecting Art and Life at Burning Man," *Raw Vision* #57 (Winter 2006)

⁹ Peter Gutman (1999), in *John Cage and the Avante-Garde: The Sounds of Silence*. Retrieved November 23, 2012, from <http://www.classicalnotes.net/columns/silence.html>.

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thousands of participants are encouraged to not only experience the art installations, but may also volunteer in their assembly, creation, or destruction (through fire). Philip Corner's Piano Activities was infamously performed at the 1962 Wiesbaden festival, which is often considered the inauguration of Fluxus. The piece, whose score advises a group of people to, among other things, "play", "pluck or tap", "scratch or rub", "drop objects" on, "act on strings with", "strike soundboard, pins, lid or drag various kinds of objects across them" and "act in any way on underside of piano" resulted in the total destruction of the piano.¹⁰ In some ways, the influence of Fluxus on Burning Man is so obvious that homages (perhaps unintentional) to John Cage and Philip Corner have appeared in large scale. Steve Heck is a piano mover from Oakland, California, who saves all the piano parts he acquires in his work, storing them in his crowded warehouse. At Burning Man 1996 he built a two-story enclosure entirely from piano soundboards and casings - 88, to be exact - the number of keys on a piano. Participants continuously played the exposed strings of the soundboards.¹¹

Burning Man has been called an "informal art school" where non-artists can learn basic skills and ideas by helping others. The collaborative nature of the art results in a great sharing of skills and ideas, from which the entire community benefits.¹²

Interactivity between the participants and electrified or illuminated constructions are also common themes. In 2004, the Alien Semaphore, an array of white fluorescent tubes attached to a central horizontal pole, attracted much attention on the playa. One could

¹⁰ Marcus Boon (n.d.), in *Philip Corner: A Long Life: Endless As the Sky*. Retrieved November 22, 2012 from <http://marcusboon.com/node/23>.

¹¹ Christine Kristen, "Reconnecting Art and Life at Burning Man," *Raw Vision* #57 (Winter 2006)

¹² Christine Kristen, "Reconnecting Art and Life at Burning Man," *Raw Vision* #57 (Winter 2006)

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move the tubes into different configurations by way of an interactive control box nearby. Creator, Hedley Davis, came up with the idea of an interactive light display after helping friends to engineer their Burning Man project in 2003. Drawing together seemingly disparate mediums of mechanics, projected light, and wave distortion through the turning of knobs and dials to elicit strange or random effects, simply because they have not been achieved previously, is part of the experience of creating “newness.” Nam June Paik, who is probably most famous for using television sets for canvasses writes, “As the Happening is the fusion of various arts, so cybernetics is the exploitation of boundary regions between and across various existing sciences.”¹³ Nam Jun Paik’s first solo show, “The Exposition of Electronic Music-Electronic Television” at Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal, West Germany included a number of modified television sets. Clearly influenced by John Cage’s previous work with prepared pianos and the 1951 composition, *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*, which used 12 “live” radios, Paik went further by allowing the modulated images on the television sets to be manipulated by talking into a microphone or playing with the dials. “As with most of his other exhibits involving various media, he tried to involve televisions in his concept of audience participation.”¹⁴

“Much of the best work being produced today seems to fall between media . . . the idea that a painting is made of paint on a canvas or that a sculpture should not be painted seems characteristic of the kind of social thought - categorizing and dividing

¹³ Nam June Paik, “Cybernetated Art,” in *Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality*, edited by Randall Packer and Ken Jordan (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2001) p. 41.

¹⁴ Chris Meigh-Andrews, “In the Beginning: The Origins of Video Art” in *A History of Video Art: The Development of Form and Function*, (Oxford: Oxford International Publishers 2006) p. 13.

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society into nobility with its various subdivisions, untitled gentry, artisans, serfs, and landless workers - which we call the feudal conception of the Great Chain of Being.”¹⁵

Artist David Best is well known for his sculpture, prints and art cars. Burning Man has inspired David to create huge, collaboratively built interactive temples which function as large-scale votive shrines. David is a master of recycling, using leftover wooden cutouts from the manufacture of children's dinosaur kits as the raw material for fanciful multistoried temples with pagodas, hanging lanterns, arched bridges, onion domes and altars. Participants visit the temple daily, leaving behind inscriptions to departed friends and family, photographs, letters, and mementoes. The mood is somber and contemplative; many weep, meditate, and embrace. The temples have been a cherished part of Burning Man since 2001, and their ritual burns on the last night of the event hold great significance for the community. David and his volunteer crew work tirelessly for months to complete the temples, and they are burnt to the ground without any thought of exhibits or sales.¹⁶ From a distance the temples look as if they were made of the most delicately carved finery, yet they are in essence simply junk scrap wood. Similarly, Fluxus artists also made use of seemingly random materials or recycled articles. The ready-made or found object, in a sense an intermedium since it was not intended to conform to the pure media, usually suggests this, and therefore suggests a location in the field between the general area of art media and those of life media.¹⁷

¹⁵ Dick Higgins, “Intermedia,” in Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality, edited by Randall Packer and Ken Jordan (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2001) p. 28.

¹⁶ Christine Kristen, “Reconnecting Art and Life at Burning Man,” *Raw Vision* #57 (Winter 2006)

¹⁷ Dick Higgins, “Intermedia,” in Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality, edited by Randall Packer and Ken Jordan (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2001) p. 30.

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This kind of empathic social interaction through art-making generates community on the playa and beyond, as participants return to their homes and create their own regional events in the style of Burning Man. There are currently 65 regional groups worldwide. In addition, Burning Man's sister organization, the Black Rock Arts Foundation, funds interactive art outside of the event, much of which is made by untrained artists. This unusual situation has inspired engineers, teachers, techno-geeks, scientists, community groups, doctors, graduate students, carpenters - all sorts of people who would not consider themselves artists - to make art, many for the first time.¹⁸ Though the Burning Man Festival's future existence is threatened by a number of issues, including concerns for public safety, reckless drug use, and the obvious threat of free-thinking people with access to money and the mass media, the far reaching and enduring impact of its time in the Nevada desert will last for years to come.

Anecdote by the Author

"I had been in the desert for many days and was eager to experience something that a few of my campmates had been describing throughout the week. It had been said to me several times, that one could get on a bicycle, close their eyes, and ride off into the desert for an hour without having to worry about crashing into anything. I found my opportunity to experiment one dark night and rode off into the blackness, far from the lights and sounds of the throng of 30,000 revelers in the city. Hands off the handlebars, and arms outstretched, I pedaled off into the unknown.

¹⁸ Christine Kristen, "Reconnecting Art and Life at Burning Man," *Raw Vision* #57 (Winter 2006)

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It was an exhilarating feeling to completely let go and trust in the words of strangers, that I would not run into anything or fall into a deep crevasse in the Playa surface. Apart from meeting with a few rough patches of earth, I pedaled blindly without incident or accident for what seemed to be 20 minutes or more. Perhaps it was fear or boredom (or something else), but some feeling inspired me to open my eyes and stop. Looking back way off in the cool distance, I could see the faint aura and twinkling lights of Black Rock City, a scene not unlike any other modern metropolis on the horizon.

The borrowed bicycle had carried me many miles from where I began, and slowly I allowed my eyes to adjust to the moonless night, the only light being provided by the milky way's band of stars above. Heading back toward the cacophony of sound and visual stimulation, I soon spotted a small glow off to my left and headed in its direction. As I approached, the image of a small game table with two chairs and a chess match in mid-play materialized. The table, table legs, folding chairs, game board, and chess pieces, all painted in opposing tones of Day-Glo orange and green and brightly illuminated by a battery powered black-light stood solitary in the barren expanse. A wooden cutout arrow indicated which side was next to move.

As I marveled at the creativity of this work of art, I was soon thrilled to realize that I was being invited to be the next player in this game of chess, all alone in the middle of the desert. Miles from anyone or anything, there was no one to witness my contribution to the outcome, nor were there any clues left by which I could identify the previous competitors. I sat in the appropriate chair, and took several minutes to enjoy the

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spectacle. Not only was I admiring the beauty of the work of art, the ingenuity of its creator, and the significance of its meaning, I knew that I was intended to be a part of it - the work was incomplete without me! While contemplating the next move in the game, artist, sculpture, and player became one impermanent dynamic entity, actualized in the present moment. This was to be the chess game of my life in just one move!

Keenly aware of my responsibility toward the next player on this ephemeral green team, I poured my heart into the examination of the board, prudently made my choice, switched the position of the arrow, and rode off again into the night. I attempted to find the chess game on the following night to see what had happened, of course, but was unable to locate it in the vast desert spaces. Like a mandala, it been swept away into just a memory; a powerful memory that lives on as one of my favorite Burning Man anecdotes, and that has changed the way I look at life and the game of chess.”