

Burning Man Returners: A Plea

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Welcome back. You were in the desert for a week, during which time people all over the world continued going to work and some of us even died. Relatedly, some of us were born. You attended a festival that is, what some might call, a hippie's Bonaroo; a Coachella that discourages trust fund reliant attendees; a Woodstock that includes people who are resourceful beyond knowing how to furnish a van with tie-dye.

This is an informal look at some of the claims I have heard about Burning Man. I heard reports from friends who had gone that "some people just didn't get it," certainly begging the question of "what is there to get?" While I think that looking for the organizers word on what Burning Man is is worth investigating, I am responding more to social media cries for acknowledgment in the noise of modern American living. *I had an experience I cannot square with the lifelessness of modern society.* For that reason, there are issues with my information gathering that make this something more of a angsty response piece. I hope you will indulge my complaint.

The problem I aim to present in this paper is whether or not Burning Man is merely a vacation or if it is aspiring for, what I am calling, *utopian promise*. That is, the society of Burners is equivalent to a kind of cult, wherein only a type of person is allowed and no one can bring in things from the outside, i.e. non-Burning man cultures. A contradiction of voices appear in environments where one is encouraged to be whoever they are, but also acknowledge the limits imposed on the groups around them. Be who you are, just don't be one of *them*.

An initial push back may be; why need it be both? I am willing to accept this as a conclusion, but it appears that in order for it to be "both," one has to be emphasized over the other. A vacation during which I start a political revolution that ripples throughout the country no longer seems to be about the vacation; it is about the larger political movement. Similarly, a vacation on which I start thinking that I will get a major portion of my work accomplished and end up watching the tide on a faraway beach, drinking daiquiris and wondering what dinner will be, has become more about rest and relaxation and less about vocational accomplishments.

It appears that Burning Man highlights exclusivity rather than inclusivity, and though the woe is strong with attendees who return to find the hollow practices of American society, what with our Aquafinas exchanged for paper that has value only in virtue of our agreeing that it does, the dismay is stronger with the audiences who have to listen to this kind of discontent and wonder; what we are going to do about it?

From the website, Burning Man is "an annual art event and temporary community based on radical self expression and self-reliance in the Black Rock Desert of Nevada." A couple things here, and let us address them in order. The notion of a

“temporary community” should, at least, make us ask the question over what an temporary over another kind of community, say, a permanent community, is. The United States is a temporary community in the grand scheme of things, but it certainly lasts longer than a week. The United States is not the kind of community where you can, by in large, get a slice of watermelon by doing a cartwheel. Burning Man lets individuals let their eccentricity fly, and a society that seemingly discourages that kind of expression will force our artists into the desert. We should be worried, indeed. How to invest energies in less temporary communities is a problem I throw into the ring. The self-reliance notion is patently misleading. You are about as self-reliant at Burning Man as everyone else is who brings a backpack full of furniture and avocados with them into the wilderness, and the fact it is in a desert makes the claim even more suspect.

Trading art for art seems a viable economic route for exchanging those goods. On the other hand, it seems like a number of mediums would not be able to trade in this manner. What counts as being able to watch a movie in this kind of culture? There might be a pushback on what mediums count as worthy of the kind of society we would want to establish economically, or how we would acknowledge an exchange. Still, it all seems more of a matter of charades than a legitimate way to run our society. I will trade you my painting in an exchange for a massage only in the knowledge that when I get out of here, I will need a source of income that does not simply get me body rubs in return.

Or suppose artists simply should be giving their art away for free. And hell, the way we consume artwork today resembles people embodying this principle, anyway. I download an album by Prince and sure do not think that the royalties produced from a purchase would go to relevant creative forces. Again, the issue is not that people should not be allowed to make their art and do whatever they want with it, but rather if art is done as something to be transacted between people only in the communities where it is made available, we should be conscious of that limitation in light of who has been left out of the exchange. Mourning the end of time on the Playa and waiting for next years trip is missing a crucial piece; the time in between.

If nothing else, I hope this sends a ripple in a reader Burner who is considering the repercussions for choosing a Burning Man trip over other options. Nothing I have written is meant to abandon the project of Burning Man-type collaborations. I still think there is room for individuals to gather and create art, and speak to their self-expression. But please, I plead with you, do not abandon the rest of us who have never been the Playa. We are not worthy of hearing about your experiences, but would love for you to share the culture in our less-temporary community.