

# Burning Man on its last legs

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On the dry lake bed in Nevada where the Burning Man festival is held every year, white-out conditions turn tunnel vision into a torus, wrapping the observable world around you in a tight feedback loop. The world is the color of a dead television channel if you are the electron, caught glowing somewhere between the gun and the glass. You are climbing a ladder in the wind, and you suddenly cannot see the ground. The fusion heat of the sun is stolen, diffused into the air around you, and replaced in the sky by a simple white disc, a blank sky sigil of NASA-ready interplanetary ruin porn. And then your vision suddenly sharpens again as you cut your leg open on exposed rebar, and you've never seen anything quite as clearly as your bright red blood mixing with alkaline dust in the dry, widened channels between your brittle receding skin cells.

So what is Burning Man like? It's not special. It's simply what happens when gearhead artists, new agers, and frat types get together to build resilience tech in the desert together. Badly. It is easy enough to describe in principle, but harder in practice.

The experience of going to Burning Man is summed in either the ease or the difficulty of figuring out how to talk about whatever the hell it was that happened to you there. It would be easiest to talk about if you died on the playa. Your Burner epitaph would tell the entire story: "Fell off an art car, broke spine." That narrative would be the easiest to read. Second easiest would be by those who claim a spiritual transformation. "I injected DMT into all my chakra points, and discovered an art car that vibrated at the same basic frequency as the entire Enochian Key." Gotcha. But for those of us unlucky enough to make it back to society without a punctured kidney or a journey via sky chariots have a harder time in finding the archetype that explains that week. You have been staring into the sun for over a week, and now you look down and try to explain to the purple splotches exactly why. Asceticism topped off by a cold cooler of PBR, and an entire rented box truck full of Schedule 40 metal pipe. There is little revelatory or concluding text to be found here.

The best way I can think to describe the experience is that people who went to Burning Man changed color. You can see them, crawling back over the nation's roadways on Labor Day  
By Adam Rothstein, The New Inquiry

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weekend. It is not the vehicles that they drive or the things strapped on the roof, but the univocal shade of muted grey. There are no real generalities that can be made about a group of 50,000 people that are not tautologies. To say that Burning Man is for the rich, or for the privileged, or for those with free time, is all about as meaningful as to say that 50,000 automobile owners can afford gasoline. But the one meaningful thing that we could really say about Burners is that they all come back grey. When we get into the shower, finally back at home, the water all runs the same opaque color into the drain. The other details of our bodies are told through the auto-writing of scars upon our frames, symbols inscribed at random in the flesh with washed out metal. You can't cut a person the same way twice, or cut two people at the same exact time.

We tore down our shade structure, for fear that if we didn't do it ourselves, the wind would do it for us, turning the recycled vinyl billboard covers that we were using as tarps into whirling jellyfish of lumber, rope, and swinging metal. Our design wasn't bad—the tarps were strong, the wood frame supporting them into a large peaked tent was sufficient for wind forces twice as strong as we were experiencing. The rope was 2000 pound test professional rigging rope. The weak point was the rebar we were using as ground anchors. The half-inch steel rods, cut into three feet lengths and driven almost entirely into the earth, had not been pulled up, but had cleanly bent in half at the point where the knots were tied. The flinging arm of the wind tugging on the vinyl had twisted the steel like paper clips in the hands of a bored cubicle occupant. And so we brought up our contorted anchors, and wrestled the tarps down in the darkness of a dusty afternoon.

We sat down for a quick consensus meeting as the wind tore at the structure around us. In less than three minutes we came to consensus that there was no choice but to take it all down immediately, and attempt to re-design it when conditions were calmer. Our neighbors were taking a different organizational route, as a bone-thin man in a black canvas kilt screamed profanity about the quality of his camp-mate's tie-downs from the pinnacle of a 42-foot diameter geodesic dome. Their structure stayed up. Later than night, we cut the remains of ours into pieces and rebuilt it as a fanciful vinyl carport with air bypasses. That one stayed up too. But the playa was strewn with wreckage and flying tarps after that afternoon. I have yet to see it myself, but I have heard that the ultimate wind calamity—a geodesic dome rolling across the lake bed like a massive steel tumbleweed destined to wrap itself around a SUV—is a hell of a sight.

Part of the temple blew down this year, in the weeks before we got there. The temple is one of the massive, perennial structures that, in addition to the Man, are always ritually burned down. The complete collapse of one of the temple's gates is something so heavy and traumatic that it was likely the reason for the rumors of especially high winds. Seeing something you built come crashing down is not an idle occurrence, even in a place where things that don't come crashing down are eventually lit on fire. But then again, the ominous warnings could easily have been because the long-timers were attempting to scare away the newbies, or prep them for the reality of the what could be. This is something that has probably gone on at Burning Man since it first came to Black Rock—the people who have been there before have to remind everyone that hasn't been there before of the place's realities.

Not that it stopped the virgin Burners; they were there in droves. Some of this was due to the rising mainstream knowledge about the event, but the ticket situation also played a role. If you haven't heard about the ticket fiasco, it basically boils down to this: In an attempt to circumvent

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the economics of supply and demand that create scalping, the Burning Man organization blundered right into the economics of supply and demand that create hoarding. Ticket sales were limited to two per credit card, leading anyone with any interest in tickets at all to get every known credit card in phone call's distance into the lottery system. With only a third of people applying receiving tickets, large theme camps whose on-site projects rely on the efforts of hundreds of people were thrown into disarray, causing huge projects to be cancelled, causing self-entitled long-time Burners to threaten further boycott, causing the Org to try and redistribute a number of tickets, causing a backlash against catering to entitlement. By the time the summer rolled around, the hoarders were realizing that demand had lapsed as many people made other plans, and tickets flowed back onto the market. Many a person who had never seriously considered going to Burning Man at the time of the lottery now found themselves with a ticket at half-price.

You could call it a total clusterfuck, or just call it growing pains. Or call it a sign of a coming cataclysm. Every year there are rumors that this will be the last year. The reasons I heard this year that sounded reasonable included: conflicts with the BLM over the costs of those coming early to set up (the BLM wants \$10 per person per day); the fact that the Org has burned through every porta-pottie company in existence as they each in turn decide that dealing with the plumbing problems from trash in the pots is simply not worth the contract; and that the influx of newbies not picking up their trash will finally reach a tipping point, and that will end the BLM's approval of the event.

We had some of these newbies camping next to us. "We're a major grow op," they confided to nearly anyone, which was either a pretty dumb thing to share, or a way try and cover for the impressive stuff their trust funds allowed them to drag to Burning Man. None of it blew away, but plenty of it turned into site-wrecking garbage. We watched as their greywater leaked onto the ground, as they ran their generator 24/7 to power the AC in their rented RV, and as the four kegs of beer they dragged into their carport got warm and went unfinished. If this is what the apocalypse looks like, it's a pretty unsurprising and unavoidable death. I, for one, would love to be on site the year that hurricane-force winds light the entire city on fire, and it's locked down to prevent flaming vehicles from running over pedestrians as they attempt to make it back to the highway. Unfortunately, the end will more likely occur in a top-level meeting between BLM and the Org, because our neighbors' discarded mardi gras beads ended up destroying the ecosystem.

I don't take this sort of thing personally, even at something I care about as much as Burning Man. Hell, I was at Occupy from the beginning to the end, so I've seen some things that I care about get torn to shit. Riding on an art car one night, talking with some folks on the bench opposite us on the second story of a dubstep-weaponized fuzzy pink mushroom or jellyfish (hard to tell which), or heads bobbing in unison with the bumps, like commuters riding the public transit of the weird, a topless woman said it best. "Just lock down your own drama." She then handed us a condom with that phrase printed on the package. Wish I had some of those at Occupy. Each camp, group of friends, affinity group, polyamorous meal crew, or whatever you want to call it, has enough of its own problems that can be re-engineered and improved, that it never need lecture others. If this was the last year, so be it. I know very well we'll do nearly the same thing, or maybe an entirely different thing, somewhere similar or maybe not at all alike next summer. This is the sort of thing we do, and not just for fun. This is what our lives are like.

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"Everything you love will be destroyed!" was a motto for our camp, and that is the long and short of it. Your car, your clothes, your body, whatever gear and tools you have, whether a lot or a little. I saw someone riding a bike with a leather saddle, and just laughed. Bikes get alkali dust inside their frames, and die an exceptionally quick death after visiting Burning Man. It's said that San Francisco bike dealers can tell, no matter how well they are cleaned, that a bike has been to the playa. I don't ride bikes on the playa, I walk. And you better believe it destroys my feet. But they heal. Everything we love will be destroyed, but everything that we love we built, and so this will just give us an excuse to give birth to it again. As long as we have water, coffee, and whiskey, we'll build that structure as many times as needed.

This sort of DIY zen is by no means natural to the playa, and while we might have our own drama more or less rigged well, we're pretty lucky in that regard. You hear stories on the playa, of grudges, of politicking by the Org and by artists and groups of artists, of threats made and carried out. The Burn Wall Street art piece, for example, had some pretty wild stories attached to it. I can't verify any of this, and so it is only rumor. But disputes about the construction quality and schedule allegedly caused the leader of the project (who as far as I can tell, had nothing to do with Occupy) to be fired from the task by the Org. This was the culmination of a longer dispute involving the previous year's temple crew, a project that apparently violated design parameters. Burn Wall Street still ended up built and burnt, but after hearing some wacky tales about the designer's love of guns and his habit of blowing up piles of propane tanks with rifle fire, there was speculation that the burn might not go off without a hitch. And yet, it did. You can never really tell about rumors. Drama on the playa, at Occupy, or at any intense build project is by definition just as real as it sounds. And yet, most drama, like the Burn Wall Street city, is really just an empty shell. So you never know.

Burn Wall Street ended up covered in graffiti of all kinds before it burned, and I couldn't help but wonder about that paint-soaked empty shell. It was only a few months ago that I watched police officers punch and club the heads of my friends in the streets of major US cities. Trauma feels different than drama. The banks built on the playa were hollow, and so was the gesture, and so was the anarchist graffiti on the outside. Burning Man is often called a Temporary Autonomous Zone, but the bureaucracy behind the building of a monument to an anarchist movement is altogether so far from anarchism that it mostly makes me confused. It's not that I can't take criticisms, parodies, or copycats, it's that it just seemed so obvious. A "Bank of Un-America," spraypainted with the phrase "Let's Burn the Real One." Like learning history through a shoebox diorama. Meanwhile, the anarchists on the playa were building their own shade structures, and the anarchists off the playa were doing everything from writing books to raising kids to running co-ops to building houses. I didn't watch Wall Street burn, though I hear the explosions were pretty intense.

We watched the Man burn several days later, from out in that avoided wilderness of deep playa, a vast vacant area out away from all the big structures and camping, populated only by distant art projects. There is a movie theater out there that shows midnight classic films to those adventurous enough to discover its existence. We watched the giant wooden structure of the Man explode with massive jets of burning accelerant from under a solitary disco ball, rigged to solar panels and a battery, spinning nearly silently in the desert night. Then we discovered a group of older folks that were having a picnic out by the outer boundary fence that is used to keep trash from blowing away across the playa. They offered us beer and freshly baked olive bread, baked that afternoon in a dutch oven in the city. We offered them chocolate. They eyed

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the pieces suspiciously. "Mom always said not to take chocolate from hippies by the trash fence." But then they ate them anyway.

Throughout the entire 12 days we were there, I was coated in dust. My beard and hair were grey, my skin, though darkly tanned, was ashen both from dryness and from the adherence of the terrain to my outsides. I ate dust, drank it in my coffee and whiskey, felt it come out of me via mucus, sweat, and all the other means. I was one of the grey people, and those just arriving at the city looked at me funny, as if they thought it was conceivable that they would not end up the same.

The only time I was clean was for a brief number of minutes midway through the week, when I went to the Human Carcass Wash. Run by a camp of nudists and sexually diverse proponents of experimentation, it was a declared safe space in which groups of people were guided in washing each other. After stripping down, and spraying and scrubbing others, each person had a chance to go through the line and be washed themselves. It was an experiment in boundaries, the communication of boundaries, and in the ability of everyone to be attempting the same experiment at the same time. As I went through the wash, I felt no cyborg appendages touching me, but tens of human hands. They sprayed me with cool water, and scrubbed with their palms, letting the dust run off my body, down around my feet. I could not tell whose hand was whose, or what any of them looked like. I only felt washed, and as I stepped out to dry in the sun, momentarily clean. I looked back at the grey bodies, washing each other, and a gust of wind blew a cloud of dust into my eyes, forcing them shut.