

bodies at burning man

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Abstract: *I explore the nature of bodies and bodily encounters at the Burning Man Project in the context of art circulation and reception, from the perspective of an anthropologist who is also a poet. My poem probes the interplay of hexis and habit that informs this temporary artworld, focusing both on installed and enacted bodies. Finally, I incorporate complementary retouched field photos to create an enhanced, evocative account of my experience of the sensuous artgift.*

Keywords: *poetry; autoethnography; creativity; ritual; gift giving; vestaval; photography*

Introduction

Every summer, more than 50,000 revelers convene in the Black Rock desert to build, and then to raze, a city of art. The heart of Black Rock City (BRC) is “The Man,” a colossal effigy of lumber and neon erected over the course of a week, appreciated by vestalgoers, and burned to the ground in a blaze of pyrotechnical glory at week’s end. Satellite artworks installed on the playa enjoy comparable engagement and sacrificial unmaking. Revelers aestheticize their bodies in a host of ways, and relate to one another in an idiom of gift giving, offering performances of emergent and cognate selves to one another in tens of thousands of acts of artistic immediacy. The vestaval site is somaesthetics incarnate.

As an arts-based consumer researcher, I frequently represent my findings in the form of an ethnographic poem, which interweaves emic concepts and language with my own interpretations. Poetry is well suited to exploring corporeality. Poetry is also a powerful way of representing phenomena, as well as interpretations and understandings of empirical research. I consider instances of making/unmaking, adornment, engagement ritual, embodiment, and related dynamics to develop the poem.

Finally, I have altered some field photographs with PowerPoint filters in a way that translates my experience of radiance, of moving through a vibrant environment pulsating with a host of energies engendering a synesthetic resonance in me. The images – somagrams, if you will – complement the poems and are rendered in the idiom of techno-psychedelic electroluminescence to capture the unreal flickering sensation of auratic materiality.

bodies at burning man

i.

behold the man himself,
 flickering to life
 at the fusion of *kairos* and *chora*,
 effigy around which
 other bodies orbit.
 colossus of fir reclaimed
 and fragrant pine,
 limbs waxed and torso
 packed with fireworks,
 exoskeletal neon cladding
 humming to heaven,
 aglow in desert night.
 the head translucent lattice,
 part goalie mask, part shoji,
 lodestar by which
 pilgrims steer,
 until the blaze that razes him
 incites the crowd to dance,
 to fire walk,
 to rut on dusty ground,
 to pack cremains for home
 to use in healing rites,
 to slow descent of vestaval to spectacle,
 to coax his rise from ashes
 every year.
 i conjure ozymandias and xanadu
 transfused with transience,
 modesty and hope.

ii.

a grand projective vessel,
 stick figure signing touchdown,
hau tower energizing rough encampment,
 nomadic hermenauts transfigured,
 green man/wicker man/dionysus/christ,
 cosmic man/everman caroming
 from revelry to sacrifice, dogma to heresy.
 evanescent, perennial, incendiary.
 testament to aesthetic practice,
 artwork over artwork
 experience over object,
 making over having,
 giving over selling.
 nonument to immediacy.



Figure 1: Man Restaged

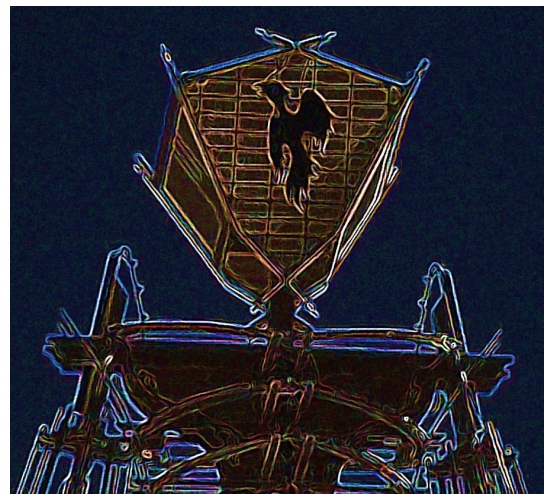


Figure 2: Phoenix Rising

and still,
tattooed on an ankle,
branded on a bicep,
shaved into back hair,
printed on garments,
mounted in jewelry,
captured in calendars,
the image of the man is borne
into the default world
as a talisman
protecting the bearer
from the banal
and the comfortable,
reminder to piss clear
and fuck your burn.

iii.

art is earned in wilderness
by laborers and lookers,
whose sweat evaporates
before it soaks,
where heat exhaustion
steals up unannounced
and clouts you to the ground.
kilned to cracking
by climate and creed,
light enters and escapes
each dusty voyager,
curing artist and aesthete alike.
freed from museums,
galleries and garrets,
staged in stark landscape,
privation whets aesthetic innovation,
happenings and installations
thrum the breath and pulse of art.
the man is art incarnate.
together with his satellites,
he draws pilgrims
like a charm of gorgeous humming birds
iridescence to floral nectar,
under his wing until ecstatic exodus.
and then he burns,
a sacrificial gift
that buys his acolytes
a brief reprieve
from capital.



Figure 3: Derrick

iv.

burners wear the desert
 in their hair,
 mucosa and skin;
 it is the foundation
 of makeup, make over,
 make believe.
 desert hitchhikes
 to the default world
 in wrinkles and creases,
 clothing and gear,
 a powdery fairy dust
 of ferity and flashbacks.
 desert grounds the man,
 the sojourners,
 the installations,
 prevents the tripping
 of gift circuits
 while galvanizing change.
 desert, vast and white,
 cupped in
 color-shifting mountains,
 empty after and before,
 is no mere stage
 or platform for the art –
 it is the very bones of ritual
 carrying all this effort,
 cheering revelers on an endless art crawl,
 dancing with dust devils,
 back to the source.



Figure 4: Dancer

v.

the desert floor is strewn
 with body parts.
 giant iron hearts glow red,
 fiery tears roll down metallic cheeks,
 enormous busts erupt from dusty ground,
 great hands grasp for the heavens,
 phalli and vulvae populate the playa
 as grand sentinels and mutant vehicles,
 as far as the eye can see.
 and not just parts,
 prodigious bodies, too.
 solitary studies in emotion,
 couples clasped in delicate embrace,



Figure 5: Mystic Misting

tableaux arrayed in modern miracle plays.
exquisite ferric scrollwork
casts each mammoth being
as an airy bearer of light,
vines and tendrils
porous in the morning,
ablaze at night.
my burgin year, brc was a body,
coordinates fixed anatomy and time.
that year i camped at
five o'clock and head,
just off the esplanade
where the procession never stops,
bodies in constant motion.
nomads aching to behold
and to bestow.

vi.

next, catch the carnal characters,
corporeal containers of creative code:
alters and avatars,
fetches and clones,
doppelgängers dancing
in playa pixel dust,
all being and becoming,
enacting selves without script.
transfiguration is a game:
defeat the factory preset.
some struggle to shed
the iron chrysalis of hexis,
some celebrate its summit,
most seek to smuggle
their new bodies
into real life
but most get smothered
in the crossing.
here on the playa, though,
they soar.
they shine.
they proffer selves
to one another,
improv art effects
of incandescent presence,
unboxed, immediate,
a grand homecoming gift
that keeps on giving
even after we depart.

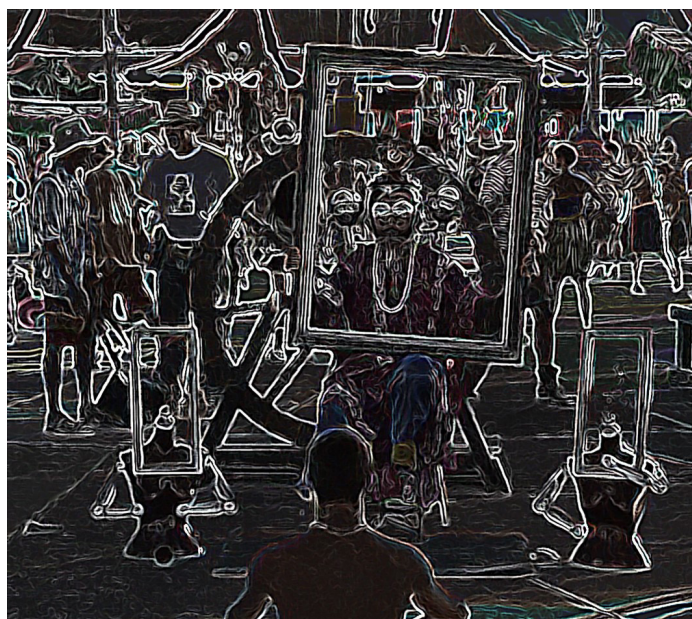


Figure 6: Art Frame

vii.

passeggiata alternates with masque
 along the esplanade,
 resplendent strollers pausing
 to enact identities for each other,
 full twirls sometimes
 evolving into dance.
 reciprocal photography
 accelerates these gifts of self.
 bodies manifest in countless
 and confounding forms.
 the hue of nudity defines a spectrum
 our tactile vision hungers to embrace:
 a sheen of sunscreen coats
 taut curve and wrinkle of bare skin,
 tattoo and piercing,
 cicatrice and brand;
 body paint from dayglow to pastel
 trowled thick or subtly shimmering
 breathes life into rebirthday suits,
 a roy g biv of radiant delight.
 a spritz of body glitter catches eyes.
 the body often doubles as a canvas
 bearing messages and symbols
 and paintings,
 like a hennaed *tromp l'oeil* image
 on a gravid belly,
 caught in cross-section,
 the fetus nestled calmly
 on the mother's walkabout.



Figure 7: Raging Bull

viii.

conical straw hats, dust goggles,
 tie-dyed union suits,
 flame-print shirts and chasubles,
 and camelback hydration packs,
 the ante to play the game is low,
 but cosplayers are harsh critics –
 dress to please is *de rigueur*
 and improv ingenuity is prized.
 think pharaonic headdresses, bedouin robes,
 jewelry and parachute pants.
 witchdoctor faux leopard and feathers,
 tiaras and glow sticks and wings.
 there are costumes as easy
 as tutus and tits,



Figure 8: Witch Doctor

as lazy as shirt-cockin' codgers,
magnificent merkins and
free-swinging strap-ons,
hot pink fright wigs and
sheer lingerie,
sequins and boas and veils and stilts,
garlands and wrap skirts and chaps,
wedding dresses and business suits,
borat speedos,
hawaiian shirts and leis,
larry's trademark
stetson and guayabera,
storebought and bespoke,
some improvised on-site,
gifts of performance to us all.

ix.

on the playa, the body is fluid.
humans cavort costumed as animals:
rabbits and bears, cats and mice, elephants.
kermit, sponge bob, wonder woman,
the lorax, the grays,
even santa claus roam the playa,
lost shreds of nostalgic fantasy.
legions of angels and devils
question canons
of virtue and vice.
clowns gowned in bdsm gear,
randy pans with naked breasts,
and yahoos with traffic cone cans
remind the revelers of the randomness of mores,
the arbitrariness of anchors,
the porousness of boundaries.
cross-dressing and trans-gendering
pervade the playa.
some flirt with the border
of remaking and releasing,
most snuggle in the bosom
of uncomfortable rethinking.
by week's end,
the cavalcade of body types
and boundless conversation
rejigger norms of beauty:
rovers discover and create,
inhabit and embody
a vibrant kaloscape.



Figure 9: Fire Dance

x.

when bodies aren't performing,
 they whip across the playa
 on battered bikes
 to distant installations,
 the ratchet sound of dust-choked chains
 a *guiro* on the wind.
 the art of brc invites engagement,
 it calls out to be entered or inscribed,
 handled or climbed, played like an instrument,
 reconfigured or refined.
 immersive unto sensual inundation,
 the pilgrims wear art's aura as a many-colored coat,
 completing every *oeuvre* by encounter.
 at night, drum circles
 form around fire barrels,
 the pulse and flame
 lure dancers to the warmth,
 grammar school recorders
 are recalled to service
 for one last iron man riff,
 as drifting throngs freestyle their way
 to other venues.
 moonlight bright enough
 to cast dim silhouettes
 in deep playa
 sometimes conjures shadow-play
 from art-drunk sojourners



Figure 10: Climbers

xi.

default world names convey
 unmerited heritage,
 hope and false promise,
 a template few are able to discard.
 sojourners take a playa name
 they choose themselves
 or gain from fellow travelers
 as a gift.
 renaming seats
 the re-embodied self.
 i go by "komos" when i burn,
 a holy fool
 who couches truth in humor.
 i treasure "altered statesman,"
 a christening by my road dog.



Figure 11: Altered Statesman

so licensed, i have partied as cernunnos,
as a jester, as a cleric, as a flame.
my psychedelic jesus was a trip.
my luminous motherboard was so well met,
i felt i could have been *la gioconda*.
how unsettling it was to be admired.
bare-assed in the noonday sun was best.
i was born to playa like a champion.
i give away my poems on paste board cards.
out of body
into body,
present and immediate,
juried by the body playatic.
by their art shall we know them.

xii.

even the disclaimer on your ticket
foregrounds your mortality.
and, as with art
some bodies are unmade.
as if by art
despair might be dispelled,
translated so the quick
might feel deliverance from pain.
one body hung for hours,
departed,
mistaken for the bricolage
of installation.
another danced
a metamodern take
on natchez suttee,
rushing flames
and mingling with the man.
each sacrifice ornate austerity,
an awesome offering,
atavistic as the vestaval itself.
best temples,
sanctuaries of shared grief,
shared solemn contemplation,
shared outbursts of catharsis,
console survivors through
art's healing script.
remembrance plaques
of all deceased sojourners
burn with the man.

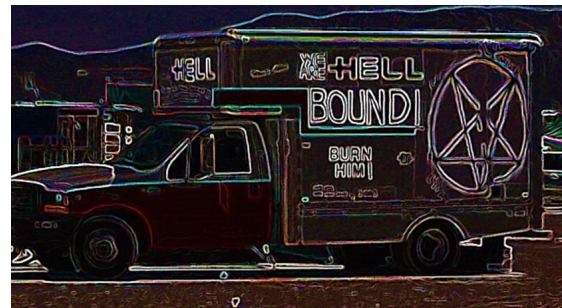


Figure 12: Hell Bound

xiii.

in this vast bewilderment
 of reactive choice,
 of shifting shapes
 and liquid understandings,
 of material and carnal reconfigured,
 where play rewards
 experiment and discovery,
 art is the compass sojourners engage.
 to be awake, observant,
 helping body forth
 this feast for the sensorium
 and ratify new pathways to wellbeing
 is an ecstatic moment.
 to make art you re-make the self.
 to grok art you re-make the self.
 to unmake art, to gift it to the universe,
 you introject all parties to the process,
 you become
 a body of art.
 you sacrifice yourself
 to this incorporation,
 redeem yourself
 with every gift received,
 and live
 as long as circulation lasts.
 turn off, tune out, drop in:
 the wisdom of the new age desert fathers.
 ashes to ashes, dust to dust:
 you're the man



Figure 13: Three Graces

Acknowledgements

I thank Robert V. Kozinets for permission to alter his original photograph and include it as Figure 11 (“Altered Statesman”). Also, for blazing the way with his evocative poem, “Desert Pilgrim.”

Further Reading on Burning Man Somaesthetics

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