Burning Man - A Case For Interdisciplinary Investigation
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The following offers a potential subject for a cross-disciplinary case study that could bring different schools together through research. A potential team might incorporate humanists from visual and environmental design, media studies, cultural studies, performance studies, divinity and philosophy, as well as researchers from technology, business, and the social and health sciences.

Burning Man is an annual event in the United States at Black Rock City – a temporary city erected in the Black Rock Desert of northwest Nevada, approximately 100 miles (160 km) north-northeast of Reno. The late summer event is described as an experiment in community and art, influenced by ten main principles: radical inclusion, radical self-reliance, radical self-expression, communal effort, civic responsibility, gifting, decommodification, participation, immediacy and leave no trace. The event takes its name from its culmination, the symbolic ritual burning of a large wooden effigy ("The Man") that traditionally occurs on the Saturday evening of the event. Every attendee is encouraged to bring everything they need to survive for the duration of the event (food, water, shelter, costumes, dust masks, sunblock, etc.) and carry it away again, leaving the desert as they found it.

First held 32 years ago in 1986 on Baker Beach in San Francisco as a small function organized by Larry Harvey and Jerry James who built the first "Man". The arts gathering has since been held annually, spanning from the last Sunday in August to the first Monday in September (Labor Day). Since 1986, Burning Man has grown exponentially. In 2010, 51,515 people attended the festival. Attendance in 2011 was capped at 50,000 participants and the event sold out in a single day; the attendance rose to 70,000 in 2015. Last summer (2017), 69,493 people went out into the desert to build one of the largest pop-up cities in the world. They brought with them supplies not only for erecting a temporary infrastructure (tents and RVs, roads, signage, bathrooms), but also for
printing newspapers, issuing vehicle licenses, making art, throwing parties, eating and staying hydrated for nine days in a place where coffee and ice are two of the only items for sale, and the nearest convenience store is about 22 miles away. [1]

At Burning Man, the community explores various forms of artistic self-expression, which are created to be enjoyed by all participants. Participation is a key precept for the community – selfless giving of one's unique talents for the enjoyment of all is encouraged and actively reinforced. Some of these generous outpourings of creativity include experimental and interactive sculptures, buildings, performances and art cars, among other media. These contributions are inspired by the yearly theme, which is chosen by the organizers.

Burning Man is now a nonprofit, whose net assets in 2016 amounted to $19.9 million (the organization spent roughly 1.2 million for 58 installations on the playa in 2016, according to the annual report).

What does Burning Man offer people that is seemingly unique and which they don’t seem to be able to get elsewhere?

Burning Man offers its participants an unique experience that doesn’t fit into existing categories by providing a potent mix of pleasure, play, struggle, surprise, wonder, delight, creative expression, permission, liberation, effort, risk, sociability, transformation, learning, release, participation and reflection. Participants set out to create, in other words, an alternative society—one removed from the mainstream in both its location and its norms. “Uniting every divergent tendency, spirituality, and attitude at Burning Man,” Brian Doherty writes in his 2004 book, This Is Burning Man “is a sense that every life is missing something: a spark of creativity, a chance for self-expression, some freedom from judgment and cold personal relations that one must travel far off the grid to find.” For just over a week, the festival and its attendees aspire to that freedom. Then they clean up and pack up their things and return the desert to its state of vast emptiness, as if Black Rock City and all it contained had been a mirage. It is, according to Doherty, both a “true experiment in intentional creative community.” Art is a part of the festival’s DNA, to an extent that many people may not realize. There’s a kind of wager of madness required to make art at Burning Man, because you must do it in the blazingly hot and bitterly cold desert, where it will remain on view for only a week.
Each of the ten main principals that form the heart of the Burning Man are experienced by participants as felt phenomenon that impact both individual behavior and the collective social environment. How might the dynamics and the impacts of these principals be studied?

Example: Gift Giving. The value of a gift is unconditional. Gifting does not contemplate a return or an exchange for something of equal value.

Burning Man is presented as an exemplar of gratitude implementation by crafting the expression of unconditional gifting and gratitude into an elevated organizational phenomenon. How might gifting and gratitude expression at Burning Man be examined as a culturally-derived principle that could be carried into the outside world?

Example: Radical Inclusion: Anyone may be a part of Burning Man. We welcome and respect the stranger. No prerequisites exist for participation in our community.

The idea of access and equalization has been a principal of Burning Man since the festival’s beginnings and is summed up in the notion of “radical inclusion”. As the festival has grown (organizers confusingly insist is not a festival but a “global cultural movement”), it has suffered from a perception that it’s a utopian playground for privileged white people. How sustainable is the principal of “radical inclusion”? The sustainability of this high-minded principal has been tested in recent years as greater and greater numbers of powerful, high-net-worth individuals and celebrities, many of them from Silicon Valley and Hollywood, are in attendance. It has become a networking event for them, with Tesla Motors CEO Elon Musk once stating that Burning Man "is Silicon Valley". These wealthy individuals have paid for more luxurious camps to
be set up in recent years. Derisively nicknamed "plug-n-play" camps, they in general consist of lavish RV's and luxury restroom trailers that are driven into the city and connected together to form de facto gated areas.

Despite allowing the rich to participate in Burning Man per the "radical inclusion" principle, many traditional Burners have spoken out against their exclusive practices. Larry Harvey wrote that they also conflict with the "radical self-reliance" and other principles, but has also stated that permitting the wealthy to attend is still beneficial for Burning Man. Vandalism that occurred at the White Ocean sound camp in 2016 was said to have been a "revolution" against these attendees, describing them as being a "parasite class" or "rich parasites".

Regular admission price has increased over the years. In addition, Nevada lawmakers have modified the state's entertainment and sales tax code to include such nonprofit organizations like Burning Man that sell more than 15,000 tickets. As a result, an individual ticket (including taxes) cost $424 in 2016. Even tickets sold under Burning Man's low-income program are subject to these taxes. Including transportation, food, camp fees, clothing and costumes, and gifts, estimated in 2016 that the total cost of attending could range from $1,300 up to $20,000. And because people are paying more and more to get in (ticket prices now range from $190 up to $1,200), it has become, perhaps, the consummate capitalistic countercultural happening of our time.

According to the racial makeup of Burning Man attendees in 2014, about 87 percent of them identified themselves as white, 6 percent as Hispanic/Latino, 6 percent as Asian, and 1 percent as black. When interviewed by The Guardian about these figures, Harvey replied, "I don't think black folks like to camp as much as white folks ... We're not going to set racial quotas ... This has never been, imagined by us, as a utopian society".

Burning Man continues to grow. How should this expansion be managed? What are the goals, opportunities, and risks? Does this expansion risk dramatically dissolving what was appealing about it to begin with? Should Burning Man become a global cultural brand or, at least, grow into a global cultural phenomenon?

The popularity of Burning Man has encouraged other groups and organizations to create smaller regional events modeled on Burning Man, such as Burning Flipside in Texas; Apagaea in Colorado; Playa Del Fuego in Delaware; Firefly in New England; KiwiBurn in New Zealand; Burning Seed in Australia; Transformus in North Carolina; AfrikaBurn in South Africa; NoWhere in Spain; MidBurn in Israel. Some of these events are officially affiliated with the Burning Man
organization via the Burning Man Regional Network. This official affiliation usually requires the event to conform to the 10 principles and certain standards outlined by the Burning Man organization and to be accompanied by a “Burning Man Regional Contact,” a volunteer with an official relationship to the Burning Man Project via a legal Letter of Agreement. In exchange for conforming to these standards, the event is granted permission to officially communicate itself as a Burning Man Regional Event. Also, the regional event organizers are enabled to exchange best practices with each other on a global level via online platforms and in-person conferences, which are partly sponsored by the Burning Man Project.

What is the effect of the festival on the environment and how might it be improved?
Burning Man’s carbon footprint is primarily from transportation to the remote area. It has been estimated that in 2006 Burning Man was responsible for the generation of 27,000 tons of carbon dioxide, with 87% being from transportation to and from the remote location. The Sierra Club has criticized Burning Man for the "hundreds of thousands" of plastic water bottles that end up in landfills, as well as ostentatious displays of flames and explosions.

In an attempt to offset some of the event's carbon footprint, 30- and 50 kilowatt solar arrays were constructed in 2007, providing an estimated annual carbon offset of 559 tons. The Burn Clean project is a volunteer organization that has helped replace the use of fossil fuel with biodiesel.
Artists head to the desert to build a utopia. But does their work hold up in the real world?

At the heart of Burning Man—not just the artworks but the entire festival—is its ability to inspire in attendees a combination of awe and pride: *We made it. Look what we did. Look at what we’re capable of.* There’s an earnestness to this sentiment that’s both admirably pure and grossly myopic, as if Burners were the only ones ever to have built a city, experimented with alternative models of living, or spent time in the Black Rock Desert. This is the root of so much of the self-congratulatory language that can make the festival seem insufferable to those who’ve never been. “You are the hope of the human race,” reads an “award of excellence” given out by a pair of Burners to other attendees in 2007. “Who would do this? We could let our imaginations run wild—who had ever done it in the history of mankind? It felt like glory,” Larry Harvey says in Doherty’s book.