

# authenticity at burning man

by katherine k. chen



**Burning Man**  
Black Rock City, Nevada

In the days leading up to Labor Day Weekend, more than 47,000 people travel to Nevada's Black Rock Desert. Each year, these people gather at this isolated site for Burning Man, an event named after its signature bonfire of a 40-foot tall wooden and neon sculpture. For a week, these adventurers form Black Rock City, a temporary desert metropolis with an expansive outdoor gallery of art.

The Black Rock City Limited Liability Company, more commonly known as the BOrg (the Burning Man Organization), or simply the Project, relies on a \$10 million budget generated by ticket sales and an estimated 2,000 volunteers to produce this annual event.

During my years studying the organizing activities behind Burning Man, I've noticed that attendees, or Burners, struggle with a conundrum.

At one sunset during the 2008 event, while I strolled back to my camp along a temporary street pressed into the desert's dusty surface, a banner caught my attention. Large, hand-written letters proclaimed the camp's theme: "The Museum of It Was Better Last Year." It captured the simultaneous joy and angst evident in Burners' accounts of their event experiences.

When Burners long for the wonder

and novelty of their first year participating in the festival, they may embark on a trip down memory lane. Their experiences every year after their first pose invidious and revealing comparisons about authenticity.

To validate worth or confer esteem, people seek out what sociologists call authenticity—that sense of meaning and dignity, or a connection with other people and experiences. People pursue authenticity in their workplaces and neighborhoods, or through consumption and relationships, and as their experiences change, so too do their perceptions of authenticity.

As Burning Man enters its third decade, several changes to the event have challenged hard-core Burners' conceptions of its authenticity. Some believe the event's longevity, exponential population growth, and increasingly complex rules and regulations have eroded its authenticity. In contrast, more supportive attendees uphold a dynamic conceptualization of authenticity: they view change as a creative process crucial to the event's rejuvenation.

Burning Man first debuted in 1986 as an evening bonfire at a San Francisco beach. Led by co-founders Larry Harvey and Jerry James, a small group of friends and family celebrated the summer solstice and mourned the end of Harvey's romantic relationship. In 1990, the eponymous bonfire relocated to the Nevada Black Rock Desert. The weekend desert camping trip of 90 people has since expanded in size and duration.

James described 1996 as a pivotal year for the event, an "exhilarating but very dangerous," "muted riot." Attendees could shoot guns, drive their vehicles at high speeds, and engage in other dangerous activities. After a death and a car accident that severely injured several bystanders, some organizers decided the event should end. These people quit while those that remained regrouped, and their decision to change the event and formalize their organizing efforts irrevocably altered its trajectory.

Over the years, organizers formed and disseminated guidelines for the event that emphasized creativity and community. "Participants," as attendees are called, are exhorted to take active



Photo by Katherine K. Chen

"The Museum of It Was Better Last Year" captured the simultaneous joy and angst in Burners' accounts of their experiences.

roles in producing the event. The principle of radical self-expression encourages laypeople to produce art and other experiences alongside professionals. Participants undertake both small and large art projects that invite involvement and interaction with others.

For example, using electroluminescent wire, also known as EL wire or cool neon, Molly Ditmore and her boyfriend fashioned a jellyfish and a manta ray. Each night, they and their creations drifted across the desert. By chance, they joined a school of EL wire fish. The glowing sea creatures evoked the days when the desert, or *playa*, was a prehistoric lakebed bottom.

At the 2008 event, large-scale art projects included Jen Lewin's "Pool," an installation where the inquisitive could jump en masse upon concentric circles of discs, thereby illuminating patterns of colors. Art cars (modified and decorated vehicles) also promote audience engagement—a yellow rubber duck art car spews flames from its mohawk, rotates its green laser eyes, and plays techno music for the passengers dancing on its deck.

Flâneurs can also visit theme camps that line the city streets. While walking on stilts, Eric Waterman discovered a theme camp devoted to this activity. The camp "had made a stilt bar, a 10-foot-tall bar, with, like, the seats, and they had extra stilts for people to wear ... All of the stilts are, like, walking around

surveys or enduring absurd questioning, visitors could get information about their soulmates, a prized stamp in their passport, or mail postmarked and delivered.

Reminiscing about earlier events, a few fondly recall a brief period when participants could purchase burgers from "McSatan's" and beer, fireworks, and trinkets from small entrepreneurs. Today, though, Burning Man prohibits vending and corporate sponsorship, thus discouraging commerce and advertising (however, participants can purchase ice for their food and drinks, the sales of which benefit the near-by town's schools and other programs. At the Center Camp Café, which is run at cost, they can also purchase tea or coffee, the latter of which is considered a necessity for desert survival).

A gift economy encourages sharing hugs, conversations, art, and other experiences with participants without expecting reciprocity. Mary Ellen Burdwood, a.k.a. Dirtwitch, described to me a gift



Photo by Katherine K. Chen

Admirers gather around and climb inside a large-scale, interactive artwork built from two 18-wheeler tanker trucks. The Big Rig Jig sculpture, by artist Mike Ross, comments on American dependency on oil.

Some consider Burning Man's counter-cultural principles and activities a de-commodified haven from conventional society. For a week, participants can live in a space that prohibits corporate sponsorship and advertising. Burners "want to be a part of what makes the event work because the event ... inspires all of the dirty, rotten cool underground things that are not part of the corporate world that they have to live in every day," John Rinaldi, a.k.a. Chicken John, told me. "It's not about advertising or selling shoes; it gets them closer to [the] real ... something that everybody has been looking for."

In sociological terms, then, people seek authenticity. However, the pursuit of the "real" or authentic can elevate expectations.

Some participants want to recreate the anarchy that characterized Burning Man during the mid-1990s. Joegh Bullock observed that attendees "want to

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and drinking cocktails and stuff. It was just so fun," he exclaimed. Other camps offered body painting, disco roller-skating, games, or respite in a "chill space." A few camps specialized in satirizing bureaucratic banality through performance art. Back in 1998, by answering

that serendipitously replaced a forgotten necessity. "The first day I was there, this man came over, and he was covered with this suit, and every inch of the suit was covered with toothbrushes in boxes, and he plucked one off from himself and gave it to me."

see something go out of control because they want to feel like they're part of something dangerous." Flaming projectiles, conflagrations, and machinery cater to this desire. For example, one theme camp built a mini roller-coaster. Screaming passengers spun 360 degrees as their metal cage rattled up and down a U-shaped track through shooting flames.

Critics, though, deride contemporary Burning Man activities as meek substitutes for what happened at past events. For those invested in the countercultural history, the influx of newcomers and coverage by mainstream media outlets suggest Burning Man no longer rides the cutting edge of cool.

Self-reflective Burners poke fun at such yearnings for authenticity. In 2002, for example, email discussion lists forwarded a link to a news report that played on participants' fears about the event's future. Under the headline "MTV Gets Burning with the Man," the story announced the cable network had signed "an exclusive five-year broadcasting and merchandising deal" with the Burning Man organization. While stunned and outraged Burners railed that Burning Man had sold out, more astute readers noted the story's date—April 1, or April Fool's Day—and an unusual web address that redirected users to a personal web page (rather than the real CNN website), and they applauded the prank.

Unlike adherents to the past, volunteers I spoke to accept the event's continual changes. Jim Graham, who started attending in 1996, described how he made different realizations over successive years.

"The first year is this standard first year thing: 'Oh my god, why can't the rest of my life be like Burning Man?' And then the second year was, 'Oh my god, this isn't what it was like last year! It's gone completely corporate!' And then by year three, it was, 'Okay, this event changes every single year, and it's something different every year, but it can be

equally good," he said. "It's not like a staid thing that's always going to be the same. It's always changing and they're experimenting with it to see if they can make it better."

Participant Susan Strahan looks forward to making discoveries at each event. "One of the exciting things about Burning Man is: what is going to happen next year?" she said.

At first glance, a longing for the authentic seems harmless. However,

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some wield authenticity as a basis for making distinctions or scapegoating others. Some have blamed assorted problems, including littering and voyeurism, on an influx of Burning Man "virgins," "newbies," or "yahoos" unfamiliar with Burning Man norms. Critics have also accused various groups of promoting incompatible values, engaging in activities that could detract from the event, or being oblivious to the event's mission. On such grounds, critics have suggested excluding or harassing a variety of stereotyped bogeymen: the media, frat boys, hippies, rednecks, ravers, dot-commers, MTV viewers, and SUV drivers, among others. By denigrating such groups for lacking the desired authenticity, their provocations promote exclusion.

In contrast, others uphold the principle of "radical inclusion," which states that any interested individual can join Burning Man. When educated on the event's purpose and principles, newcomers often become active contributors. Enthusiastic newcomers have launched recycling efforts and a message service that are now part of the event's infrastructure. Organizer Michael Mikel thinks Burning Man's survival hinges on its inclusiveness and openness to such new ideas. In envisioning the

event's future, Mikel admits, "my greatest fear is that it [Burning Man] would not continue to be organic and open and evolving. We need to continue to ... be open to more ideas. More input is very important."

The desire to preserve or expand authenticity isn't limited to Burning Man. Gentrifying neighborhoods reveal similar tensions about whether newcomers displace longtime residents and thus erode

the area's authenticity. Church congregations divide over introducing new practices that may attract and retain new members at the cost of driving away existing members. Artists face constraints when creating innovative work—if their work doesn't adhere to cultural conventions, they may alienate clientele who prefer more familiar music, painting, or sculpture. These tensions tend to devolve into a zero-sum game of irreparable loss and corrosive disenchantment.

How people handle change at Burning Man shows one way of moving beyond a restrictive and divisive conception of authenticity. People can simultaneously acknowledge the importance of the past and redirect activities toward growth and flexibility. Instead of lamenting the loss of a past that may never have existed, the evolution of Burning Man suggests it's possible for us to both celebrate the present and look forward to future possibilities.

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