

# **Folly and Fire:**

A Space of Play  
in the  
Black Rock Desert

by

Mark Jonathan Zupan

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## **Abstract**

In Nevada's Black Rock Desert, there is a city that appears for one week each year and then vanishes, leaving no trace of its existence except ruts in the dusty clay. The inhospitable, barren salt flat that the city is built upon is fraught with turbulent dust storms and scorching temperatures. But this does not stop participants from gathering there to build Black Rock City in order to host the Burning Man festival. Now in its twenty-eighth year, the festival is constructed and demolished by 70,000 people coming from around the globe to participate in this extraordinary ritual.

Burning Man is a space of play that defies the stifling mores of Western civilization, and acts as a catalyst for an outpouring of creative collaboration. I attended the festival and its affiliated local events as a participant observer to document the stories that are shaping the architecture of this festival tradition. Through my research I learned about the role of play in fostering innate, creative instincts, and discovered the cathartic value of building and burning for those who are suffering. Burning Man's creative rituals invite the redefinition of our modern myths, and embody new narratives in their architecture. This thesis tells the story of how I came to know a more compassionate, loving approach to making architecture through the festival and its community.



## **Acknowledgements**

We are only able to flourish with the love and support of our communities, a matter that underlies the heart of this thesis. I am humbled to reflect on the many individuals who have supported me throughout this journey.

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To Coathanger, Hoboe Clam, and Celestial Pearl of the Mollusk Nation, I thank you for the adventure of a lifetime that inspired this thesis. To David Best and the entire Temple Crew, I thank you for letting me share in building a humble, loving space with you. To GR8 Camp, thanks for being so GR8. And to all burners, everywhere (including Everywhere), I thank you for making a place to come out and play.





## **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis to the merry pranksters of all the ages, for making the world your oyster.



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Figure 1 - Puppet Sweatshop

## Foreword

After completing my undergraduate studies in architecture, I moved to the Pacific coast and began studying the art of puppetry. I became enchanted with how a skilled puppeteer was capable of suspending people's disbelief by imbuing life into inanimate objects. A marionette was not just a figure hanging from strings - it was a noble son, a nervous prince, a jester, or a harlot. The puppeteer garnered the collective permission of the audience to allow a story to play out between them. The gesture was acknowledged not just as a puppeteer puppeting, but as a story come to life, if only for that brief moment. No matter how serious the story, the ritual and its gestures were highly developed forms of play.

Our troupe's schedule far exceeded the productive capacities of us two puppeteers, and so we invited friends and strangers to join in our creative process. Our gatherings became fondly known as Puppet Sweatshop, and during each session my living room would explode with a crafting bonanza, fuelled by cheap wine and plentiful snacks. The results were chaotic, whimsical, and inspiring. Each guest of the workshop would choose a task they excelled at or enjoyed, and help us build our full cast of characters and sets. Someone might charge themselves with sculpting something, after which another person would paint it, and a last person would sew it a costume. Without a rigid vision for each of these tasks, we appeared to unleash a wellspring of creativity in the process. We were continually stunned, challenged, and amazed by the results. At the end of each night, everyone would help clean up, and we would sit back to play with our marvellous creations. Each puppet became a story to tell unto itself, invested with the creative vision of many individuals, and the whole of each show boasted the talent of our generous community.

One evening I found myself sitting in my living room, cluttered with puppets, and considered what was going on. The process we had stumbled upon had yielded a meaningful outpouring of creativity that drew on talents lying otherwise dormant in our community. I was fascinated by the catalytic power of our creative process for the results it produced. I was also challenged by Puppet Sweatshop's bearing on my own living room, and committed myself to investigating spaces of creative collaboration.

And then I stumbled upon the Burning Man festival, where I encountered a space of creative collaboration greater than I had ever dreamed. Every corner of the city was filled to the brim with countless inspiring gestures, spilling out into the streets and onto the open desert. Each individual moving through the city was charged with the opportunity to actively participating in an otherwise empty desert. There was a sense of possibility in the dusty air, and an invitation to witness, or better yet create, the many mysteries unfolding. With its outlandish, inspiring creations, and the sense of community that permeated the event, I became captivated by Burning Man.



Figure 2 - Fire Mask by Puppet Sweatshop



Figure 3 - The Road to Black Rock City

As I pack my life  
into these plastic cases,  
I wonder how I set myself  
these fervish paces

Where I move, I move,  
I move, I tear up my roots.  
Where I climb up to the sky  
and I'm free.

And I've suffered independence  
for this life I've got.  
I've found a new dependence,  
drinking booze all smoking hot.

I've wondered how I'll keep on running,  
Running till I'm free.

And we'll drive into the sand,  
finding faith in fellow man,  
and the feet on which we stand.

We'll rejoice fertility,  
all its natural beauty,  
And the love I've found,  
in you and me.

Road Song



Figure 4 - Open Playa



## **Introduction**

I am sitting in my squid. Its tentacles are wrapped tightly around me, and they feel like a warm hug. Above my head, twinkly lights dance amidst swoops of colourful fabrics, and I cannot help but smile. Sometimes I doubt why I hold this silly space so dear after eight years of an architectural education, and having worked in offices designing slick, fancy buildings, but when I consider everything that the space represents, my confidence returns. This is my fort. Most adults I know may not have built forts for themselves in a very long time, but I have now met a few grownups who take the business of play quite seriously. They call themselves 'Burners', and their common thread is that they have all attended the Burning Man festival. The stories they share are the stuff of legends, and the spaces that bind them are fleeting. This thesis endeavours to cast a glimmer of light on the great mystery of their ways, and how I came to live with a bit squishy squid.

In 2013 there was published the archival compendium Tales from the San Francisco Cacophony Society, which chronicles stories from the organization's infamous history, a history that includes the early workings of the Burning Man Festival. Anecdotes from members of the group, 'Cacophonists', describe the history of their 'Events' tracing back to the free school movement of the 1960s, when a school called Communiversity offered free classes to anyone wishing to attend. Communiversity operated under a small budget from San Francisco State University until 1975, when the project was deemed 'frivolous', and its funding was revoked. Organizers were committed to the principles of the open-source institution, and continued the work of Communiversity by operating from a bookstore, "Circus of the Soul". Under its new management, a class emerged called "The Suicide Club" (an homage to a tale by Robert Louis Stevenson). The class called for its members to live each day as if it were their last. The Suicide Club began operating through a newsletter, "Nooseletter", to organize Events for urban exploration and culture jamming, which ranged from kayak trips through the sewers of San Francisco, to gatherings atop the Golden Gate Bridge, and even to riding the San Francisco streetcars stark naked. The Suicide Club dissolved when principles of secrecy divided its members.

The SFCS emerged in the aftermath of the Suicide Club, as members grappled with the desire to continue their explorations. The group drafted its next publication, "Rough Draft", whose placeholder title became a permanent fixture. The name "Cacophony Society" was coined shortly thereafter, and their renewed pursuits embodied principles of inclusivity and participation that encouraged each of its members to host an Event as a rite of passage. The group defined itself as "a randomly gathered network of free spirits united in the pursuit of experiences beyond the pale of mainstream society. [They were] the Merry Pranksters of the 90's, traveling through the social landscape, dispensing a variety of mind challenging activities to everyone." Issues of "Rough Draft" included the invocation "You may already be a member!" to encourage new recruits. This period of reestablishment was accompanied by critical commentary amongst society members who were actively trying to define the nature and principles of their pursuits.

The SFCS experimented with creating new experiences and rituals that would challenge their and other perspectives of the world around them. This was markedly expressed in their concept of ‘The Zone’, which defined a principle of engagement more than it did a particular physical space or landscape. The Zone references Andrey Tarkovsky’s 1979 film *Stalker*, a story of two men (and their guide) who enter a post-apocalyptic landscape in search of a legendary room that grants wishes. This concept of an unknown territory where the unexpected may happen, where the rules may change, and where your wildest desires may come true, served as a founding tenet of what the SFCS dubbed its ‘Zone Trips’. The first Zone Trip took participants to an LA suburb, where members were invited to engage with the landscape as though it were entirely alien. The Zone Trips soon became a Cacophonist tradition.

While the SFCS pursued its tradition of Events and Zone Trips, the tradition of burning ‘The Man’ began in 1986 on the summer solstice, at Baker Beach in San Francisco. Two friends had built an eight-foot statue of a man, and they burned it before a small group of friends. The following year the ritual was repeated with an effigy of fifteen feet, and a crowd of eighty people. That tradition continued until its fifth year, when The Man reached forty feet, and the crowd was nearly five hundred. The precarious ritual roused the interest of local authorities, and the officer who arrived at the beach decided to prohibit the immolation of The Man. That year, The Man was disassembled to await its fiery fate.

After the Memorial Day bonfire was thwarted, it was suggested that The Man be brought elsewhere for its immolation. Several Cacophonists had attended a wind sculpture event in the desert the year before, and suggested the burn could take place out there. It was decided that “Zone Trip #4” would take the Cacophonists and The Man to the desert later that summer.

On the 1990 Labour Day weekend, nearly one-hundred Cacophonists travelled from San Francisco to the Black Rock Desert north of Reno, Nevada. The group arrived at the edge of a 200 square mile salt flat that lies between the Jericho and Calico mountains. The patch of level earth is commonly known as 'playa' and marks the dry lakebed of the ancient Lake Lahontan, which has lain empty for thousands of years. Upon arrival, a member of the group took a stick and drew a long line in the dust, so that they could cross into The Zone together. During that first trip to the desert, the Cacophonists would engage in the great expanse of the playa by building a camp, hosting cocktail parties, assembling and erecting The Man, and visiting a local hot spring. The excursion was challenged by scorching temperatures during the day, freezing cold nights, and windstorms that regularly flattened their camp, sending tents rolling like tumbleweed across the empty playa. On the final evening of the weekend, before a crowd of nearly one hundred Cacophonists, the effigy was ignited with fire breathing. The flames climbed the sculpture accompanied by the resounding beat of drums, and onlookers were delighted as fireworks shot up from the head of the sculpture.

Since the ad hoc event in 1990, the ritual has become an annual tradition. By 1996 the gathering had reached 8,000 participants, and Burning Man organizers created a Limited Liability Corporation to operate the festival. Over the years, the event has adopted various infrastructures that include a radial street grid, a perimeter fence, port-a-potties, emergency fire and medical services and even an airport. Security at the event is provided by volunteer Rangers (Burners trained in conflict mediation), but Burning Man is also policed by local county Sheriffs and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Rangers. The space of the event is called Black Rock City and hosted 68,000 participants in 2013, making it the tenth largest settlement in Nevada. When the festival is over, it leaves no trace on the playa except ruts in the dusty clay.

I first attended Burning Man in 2011, having little knowledge of the festival's nature or practices. I journeyed south from Canada with three friends, down the Pacific



Figure 5 - Raising the Man



Figure 6 - Western States Relief Map

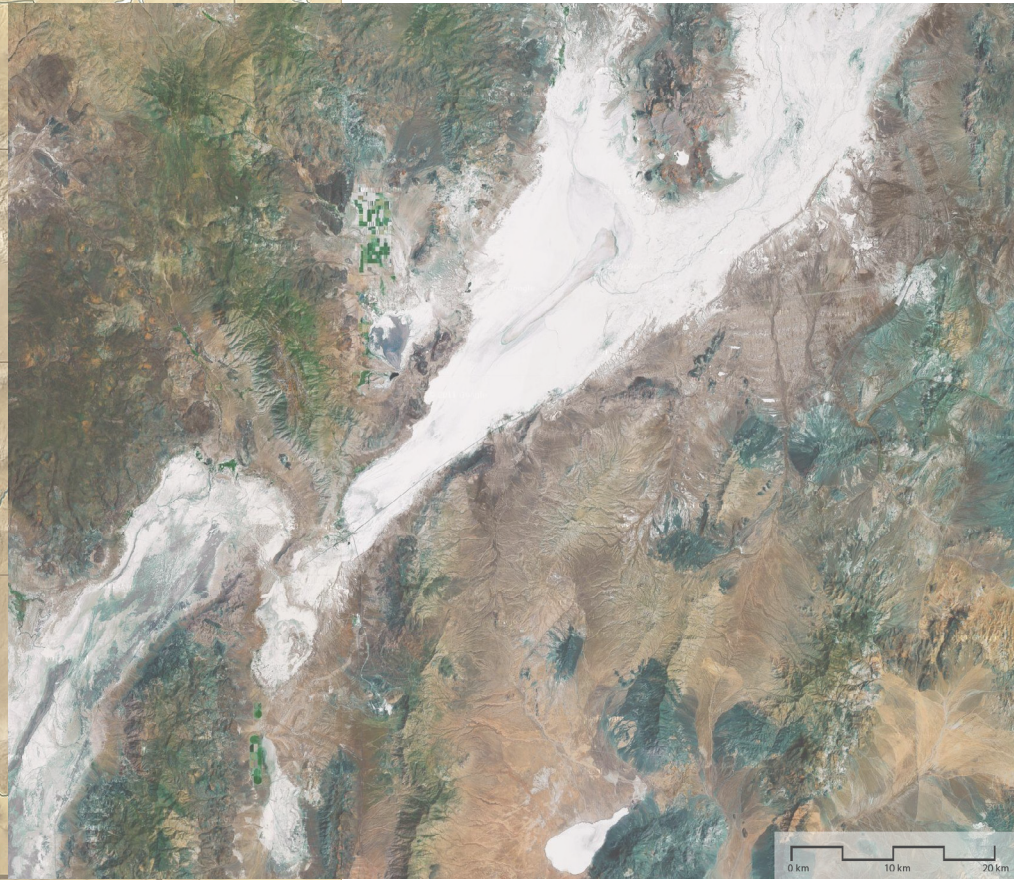


Figure 7 - Black Rock Desert Salt Flat Satellite Imagery



Figure 8 - Black Rock City Plans 2011 - 1998

Coast to San Francisco, and then east into the desert where Black Rock City greeted us with an effusive “Welcome Home!”. From our arrival, through to the raucous burning of The Man, and the humbling silence of the Temple burn, I was inspired by the richness of the art and culture in Black Rock City. During the week of the festival, I saw that that city contained an unprecedented architecture, that could become the study of my thesis research. While the nature of my investigation remained undetermined, the unique cultural productions of the city begged many questions as to how and why this event had rapidly evolved into a rich, meaningful tradition.

I began my investigation by examining the role of storytelling in the annual event, and the identity of cities. Stories play a critical role in the event’s production, because after the festival city is removed from the desert, stories of it are all that remain. During its long annual dormancy, the city is permitted to be reimagined by seasoned and virgin participants alike. Some elements of the festival are codified by the Burning Man Organization, but the majority of narratives come and go as dictated by the efforts and interests of participants.

During the Grand Tour of the 17th and 18th centuries the reputations of cities preceded them, through the stories and images in which they were portrayed. Piranesi’s drawings of Rome evoked the city’s grandeur, even for those who would never visit there. In our increasingly accessible, global world, there are few places that we cannot come to know if we should choose to. But with the annual rebuilding and demolition of Black Rock City, it is a challenge to understand all that the Burning Man festival contains. Like a physical expression of the internet, it is a game unfolding faster than anyone can take in, and that defines it as much as any of its unique moments.



In the book Homo Ludens by Johan Huizinga, it is argued that play is not just a part of culture, but that culture itself is a form of play. He goes on to suggest that the rituals are more elaborate forms of play, and express a collective imagination. Civilizations throughout history have gathered together in rituals of dance, music, and feasts in order to commune with one another - they have lifted their hearts, and bared their naked, same, souls, to affirm meaning in each other and the world. But now is a time in Western culture when the divine pantheon of myths is shifting as we enter an age of global consciousness. Joseph Campbell describes the loss of western mythology in “The Power of Myth”, a filmed interview with Bill Moyers, and proposes that works of art and literature become attempts to redefine that mythology. With the loss of that mythology comes also the loss of rituals that codify a mythology, and new generations are challenged to redefine the rites that will ground their understanding of this reality. The space of play at Burning Man is producing new narratives through its art and architecture, which may be understood as the expression of modern mythology.

From its earliest iterations, the Burning Man festival has challenged its participants to embrace the play as a place of limitless possibility. New narratives emerge that enrich the festival’s repertoire of art and architecture with each gathering, where personal and collaborative creative expressions are limited only by the artists’ imaginations and resourcefulness. As the Burning Man community continues its efforts to create gatherings that support its creative gestures, a mythology expressive of our modern sensibilities is emerging in the cannon of the festival’s rituals. This thesis documents my experiences at the Burning Man festival and other spaces of creative collaboration, in an attempt to understand how these stories might define our modern mythology.



Figure 9 - Black Rock City 2012

# Part I - The Mollusk Nation

The theoretician believes in logic and believes that he despises dreams, intuition, and poetry. He does not recognize that these three fairies have only disguised themselves in order to dazzle him....He does not know that he owes his greatest discoveries to them.

Wartime Writings 1939-1944  
Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

## **1 – Walmart's Pilgrims**

August 22, 2011

The Road to Burning Man is long, sweaty, and often derailed by bright, shiny things.

When you finally manage to slam, shove, or tie your trunk shut when packing for Black Rock City, you will likely have forgotten several items necessary to both your survival and comfort. Within minutes of pulling away from the curb, we had a running list of items that had been forgotten in the final push to depart on our journey. We had been anticipating this moment since January when we gathered around a makeshift ouija board and watched as the spirits spelled out our destination, but this would be our first Burn, and we were naïve to what we would encounter on the playa.

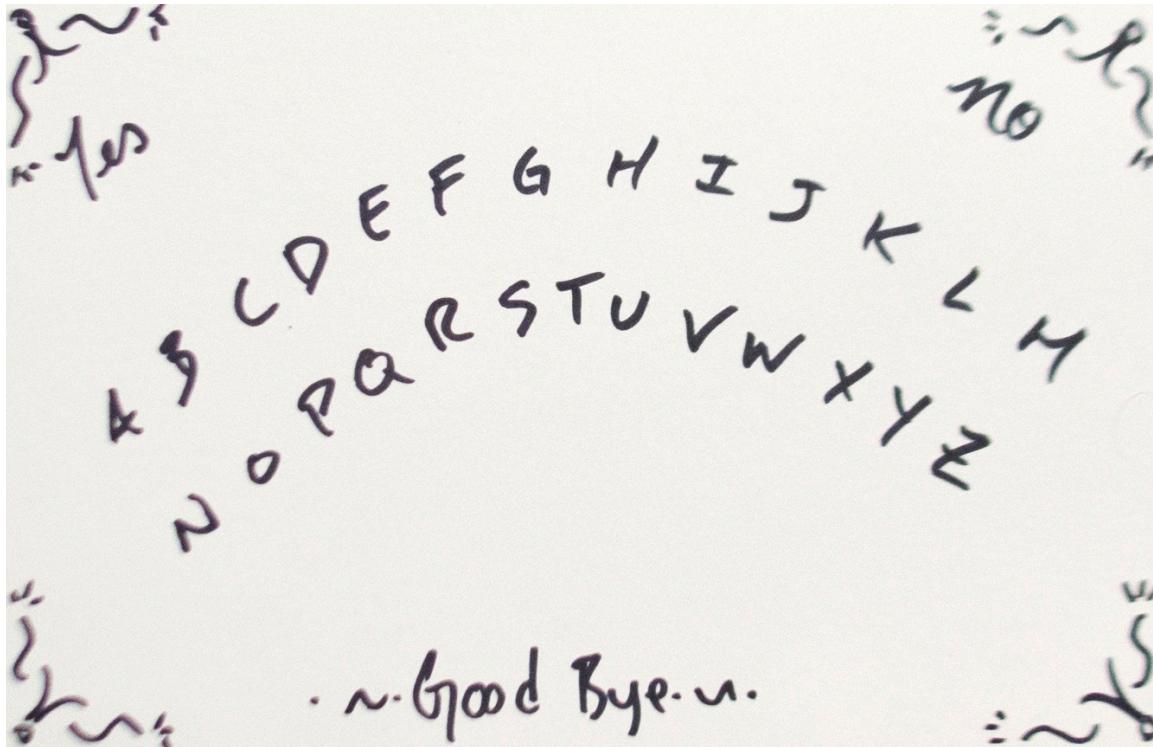


Figure 10 - Homemade Ouija Board



# THE 10 PRINCIPLES

Our community's ethos is built on the values reflected in the 10 Principles. "Burning Man" is understood not as an event, but as referring to a way of life lived consistently with these 10 Principles. They are meant to be taken as a whole, as a set of commonly-understood values that have arisen out of the history of the Burning Man experience.

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

**GIFTING:** Burning Man is devoted to acts of gift giving. The value of a gift is unconditional. Gifting does not contemplate a return or an exchange for something of equal value.

**DECOMMODIFICATION:** In order to preserve the spirit of gifting, our community seeks to create social environments that are unmediated by commercial sponsorships, transactions, or advertising. We stand ready to protect our culture from such exploitation. We resist the substitution of consumption for participatory experience.

**RADICAL SELF-RELIANCE:** Burning Man encourages the individual to discover, exercise and rely on his or her inner resources.

**RADICAL SELF-EXPRESSION:** Radical self-expression arises from the unique gifts of the individual. No one other than the individual or a collaborating group can determine its content. It is offered as a gift to others. In this spirit, the giver should respect the rights and liberties of the recipient.

**COMMUNAL EFFORT:** Our community values creative cooperation and collaboration. We strive to produce, promote, and protect social networks, public spaces, works of art, and methods of communication that support such interaction.

**CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY:** We value civil society. Community members who organize events should assume responsibility for public welfare and endeavor to communicate civic responsibilities to participants. They must also assume responsibility for conducting events in accordance with local, state and federal laws.

**LEAVING NO TRACE:** Our community respects the environment. We are committed to leaving no physical trace of our activities wherever we gather. We clean up after ourselves and endeavor, whenever possible, to leave such places in a better state than when we found them.

**PARTICIPATION:** Our community is committed to a radically participatory ethic. We believe that transformative change, whether in the individual or in society, can occur only through the medium of deeply personal participation. We achieve being through doing. Everyone is invited to work. Everyone is invited to play. We make the world real through actions that open the heart.

**IMMEDIACY:** Immediate experience is, in many ways, the most important touchstone of value in our culture. We seek to overcome barriers that stand between us and a recognition of our inner selves, the reality of those around us, participation in society, and contact with a natural world exceeding human powers. No idea can substitute for this experience.

Figure 11 - "The 10 Principles"

The months of preparations had presented a puzzle for us to piece together some idea of what the festival would be like. Several friends and coworkers had attended, and all had flattering, but intangible, descriptions. A few videos and images from the internet depicted wild costumes, ecstatic dance parties, and surreal artworks set on the barren landscape, although most descriptions included disclaimers that trying to describe the festival was like explaining colours to blind people. If we were to expect anything, it was the unexpected.

The Survival Guide from the Burning Man Organization did offer some solid advice as to what conditions we could anticipate. The guide outlined the do's and don'ts of the festival, covering basic survival, environmental and community considerations, safety protocols, city orientation, law enforcement and transportation. 'The 10 Principles' are used to communicate the ethos of Burning Man, and guide new Burners in understanding the culture of the community. With vague notions of what to expect at the event, we prepared our basic equipment and looked forward to discovering the festival culture when we arrived in the desert.

On a grey day in August, we embarked from Victoria's inner harbour and waved farewell to Canadian shores as the ferry chugged south towards Port Angeles. The sky was wet, so we sat quietly below deck, underslept and overexcited. When the ferry docked in America, we loaded back into our vehicle and approached the final border checkpoint. We were all, admittedly, a little nervous.

We had nothing in particular to be afraid of, but we had heard stories of Burners bound for the festival being turned away at the border for various reasons. The thought of our vehicle being emptied or searched gave us all headaches, and none of us wanted to be asked to explain the costumes, decorations, or multitude of tents we had stuffed into the trunk. In an attempt to appease some deity or border guard, we stuck a bobblehead Jesus on our dashboard to preside over our journey.

When it was our turn, we pulled up and an intimidating woman approached our window, demanded our documentation, and barked some questions at us. I was shaking behind the wheel. She grilled us about our journey ahead, and where I stumbled over details, my friends chimed in from the back seat. We avoided any mention of our plans to attend the festival, and soon found ourselves being shooed ahead, free and clear. We were on our way!

The winding Pacific coastal highway is a beautiful route that passes through hundreds of small communities perched along the edge of America. As we charged ahead in our sturdy truck, we began to speculate on all the adventures to come. We wove tales of what to see and do along the coast, explored the towns we stopped in, and gave liberal allowances to stop at nearly any thrift shop that caught our attention. It was an intuitive journey, and we all greatly enjoyed each others' company as we travelled along.





Figure 12 - "Dashboard Jesus"



Figure 13 - Mollusk Nation Crew  
Left to Right: Hobo Clam, Wastie Coathanger, Captain Goldstar, Celestial Pearl

My companions were three close friends I came to know while living in Victoria: Celestial Pearl, Hobo Clam, and Wastie Coathanger. Our matriarchs, Pearl and Clam, took their pseudonyms from memorable incidents on our journey, and the noble phylum of their namesake creatures became the inspiration for our theme camp, the Mollusk Nation. Wastie had his name from his schoolyard days, and I had recently taken the name Goldstar for a dance performance. We were a colourful crew, well-balanced with laughter, sass, and old-fashioned common sense. As we travelled, we learned how to cope with one another's neuroses and bad habits, and let the exciting discoveries of the journey become our focus. The journey was a part of what I came to understand as a pilgrimage.

When we arrived in San Francisco, it was time to get serious about our final preparations for the desert. My shopping list of critical items included closed-toed shoes, an air mattress, gold body paint, and colourful Chinese paper lanterns.

We were topping up our tickle trunks - and how! We were a spirited crew bouncing about the city, with nothing but time and shopping lists. We hit all the major districts - the Castro, Haight and Ashbury, Chinatown, Japantown - and wherever we went the city was buzzing with people getting primped and prepared for the festival. Burners stood out like sore thumbs with their rainbow dreadlocks, dayglo mohawks, and pubic faux-hawks (i.e. merkins) strutting along the street or crowding out stores hawking last-minute 'essentials' for the playa. The businesses in town were actively feeding into the frenzy ramping up to make the journey, and that made the sense of pilgrimage come alive.

We loaded up on masks, lanterns and fans for our oasis tea tent, and I satisfied my penchant for all things gold by purchasing a gold plaid bow-tie, and a pair of gold booty shorts. In a strike of luck, we discovered an 8-foot-tall painted plywood palmtree left on the street for disposal. We decided it was a good fit for our Oasis Tea Tent, and hauled it back to our truck, strapping it to the roof. On our last day in San Fran, we were a far cry from being ready for the dusty flats, but still had two days ahead to find our way onto the playa.

Groceries proved more challenging than the whimsy of costume shopping. Trader Joe's has a reputation amongst Burners as the best place to get your rations for the festival, and it truly is a Burner's paradise. The shelves are lined with an impressive collection of instant meals, exotic dried fruits, nut butters of all origins, and all the basics from broccoli to beer. We spent hours combing through the aisles, and picked out meals for the week to come. It was difficult to distill what would taste best, reduce waste, and be simple enough to prepare when our souls might be worn thin by exhaustion. After we rang through our carefully calculated stocks, we repacked our toys and rations into the truck and hit the road again. We made it a few miles down the highway before we spotted an IKEA. It felt like an obvious stop to make, but with a sense of urgency to reach our destination, we only took a twenty-minute stop before getting back on the road and committing to make a beeline for Carson City.

We rolled into town well after dark, and sent Pearl into a motel to haggle for a deal on a room. We planned to hit the road the next morning at first light, but still had an extensive list of supplies to acquire. We were at the end of the line and there would be no more stops after Carson City; any remaining supplies needed to be acquired that night before we could continue on towards our dusty destination.

At this juncture, we especially needed forty-eight gallons of water, some ice for the cooler, and one more flat of beer.

We hopped in the truck and peeled away from the motel. We were headed a mile down the road, to the place we had seen gleaming in the night when descended the foothills into Carson City. We knew where we were headed, and resented it, but it was our last resort.

The time was well after midnight, but the parking lot at Wal-Mart was scattered with RVs and Volkswagen vans. More Burners, no doubt. We slammed the doors on the vehicle, and walked dejectedly towards the ominous blue-grey building.

Wal-Mart had... everything. Forty-eight gallons of potable water? Check. Ice? Check. Beer, Beef Jerky, Baby Wipes? Check, check, and check. Since I still had not bought closed-toed shoes, it was now or never. The selection was impressive, and they had a pair of rugged calf-high boots in my size.

The shopping adventure was not not fun - in fact, there were tears. In the lonely, overstocked aisles, we bickered over which brands were better, whether to buy reusable water jugs or disposable ones, and how many walkie-talkies we needed. It was quite the gong show, and when our puffy-eyed, sleepy-eyed, stink-eyed souls made it back outside the twenty-four-hour Wal-Mart, we repacked our vehicle, yet again, to accommodate all the stuff we just acquired. We drove back to the motel, and passed out for a few hours until we roused with the breaking dawn and piled our groggy souls into the truck.



Figure 14 - Packed to the Brim



Figure 15 - Pilgrim's Trail



Figure 16 - Obvious Burners



## **2 – Welcome Home**

August 29, 2011

The road out of Carson City wound gently through the red-tan rocky hills. We rolled along in sleepy silence, joining a procession of vehicles packed to the brim, roof racks piled high with colourful arrangements of bicycles and furniture. The sense of mass movement towards our destination was palpable. We passed Pyramid Lake, a few green valleys, small towns, and nearly a dozen Indian Taco stands. In Empire, we stopped to fill up with gas and gawk at all the eclectic Burners. Nearly everyone we encountered now seemed to be heading where we were. With our tank topped up, we pushed onwards in a line-up of cars that moved steadily, mile after mile, without a gap in traffic as far as the eye could see. When we rounded the southern tip of the Black Rock Desert, we saw that the procession of cars stretched out until it disappeared into a cloud of dust on the horizon.

Eventually the ant-like trail of vehicles turned onto the playa, and we were filled with excitement. Small signs called out instructions and advice to arriving participants, especially our obligation to drive no more than 5 mph to avoid kicking up too much dust. The air was clear when we first entered 'Gate Road', but we soon found ourselves in a thick cloud, unable to see more than a few feet ahead or behind. The tail lights ahead of us flashed red, and we slowed to a halt in a line of parked cars that disappeared into the dust. We had no sense of how far we had yet to go, or how long we would wait, so we turned off our engine and stepped out onto the desert. The line of cars rolling in behind us continued to stir up more and more dust. Our eyes stung and our throats choked at the scratchy air. The cars in front of us began to inch along, and I hopped back behind the wheel to creep the van along a few

car lengths before stopping again. Clam and I offered to hold down the fort while Pearl and Wastie went off to explore the lineup.

It was not long before we realized the party had already started. People were strutting around in outrageous outfits, sipping beers, and passing out candy. Music blasted out of every vehicle, and groups of burners stood atop their RVs and buses, enjoying the dusty sunshine. I felt obligated to stay with the vehicle, although several strangers told us we were still a few hours from the gate. I decided to do some crafting, and grabbed my new brown boots and a gold permanent marker, and set to work. Clam worked alongside me, stitching a poem into a banner she would hang at our camp.

The novelty of the lineup party wore off quickly, and each time our friends returned to the vehicle to fetch more beer, I began to resent being stuck behind the wheel. But I channeled my frustrations into decorating my boots, and by the time we were nearing the gate I had one glammed-up set of dust kickers. Our half-drunk cohort piled into the steamy truck, and we rolled up to the security checkpoint. After opening our doors for them to look inside for stowaways, we were given the nod and crept forward. The next and final stop was the greeter station. When they took our tickets, we announced ourselves as 'Burgins' (virgin burners), and the greeter kindly asked us to step out of our vehicle. For our initiation, they requested we plop down and make dust angels, to which we happily obliged. When our flailing bodies were sufficiently coated in dust, they charged us to each smash a large bell with a pry bar, and shout "I'M NOT A VIRGIN ANYMORE!". Then we piled back in the truck and drove into Black Rock City, smiles plastered from ear to ear.



Figure 17 - Gate Road



Figure 18 - The Mollusk Nation

The sun hung low in the sky as we rolled along. We drove down the dusty streets in search of a free site to set up camp, and as we went people shouted "Welcome Home!" at us. We navigated easily, following the radial streets that were named like the hours on a clock, and the arcing streets connecting them named for that year's theme, 'Rites of Passage'. We stuck to the east end of the city, knowing there were a few friends from Canada who would be camped in that area, and soon found a gracious site around 3:00 on Initiation to accommodate our two large tents, shade canopy, vehicle, and croquet pitch. We parked the truck, hopped out, and set to work organizing our camp, racing against the sun as it dropped towards the horizon.

My campmates' drunken opinions on where and how the tents ought to go together grated on my nerves, and my architect's ego was disappointed that I was not asked to design our setup. I quietly brooded while I shoved poles into sleeves, and worked against the winds that routinely flattened our efforts. A neighbour was kind enough to offer their sledgehammer to drive in the rebar stakes that would prevent the playa's stiff winds from turning our tents into kites. When our shelters stood tall, and we were confident they would not blow down the street, we sat down around a pot of curry that Wastie had prepared, and quietly ate by the light of our headlamps. The warm food subdued my foul mood, and gave us the boost we needed for an evening walk. We grabbed some beers, dust masks and goggles, and started up 3:00 towards the city center. It wasn't long before some passing pedestrian shouted "dark wads!" at us, and realized we needed to make a habit of lighting ourselves up at night.

The first party we found was at the Booby Bar, which was a large geodesic dome decorated with bras and giant breasts. The crowd was lively and we must have looked like deer in the headlights taking in the scene. The party host checked our ID (being an all ages event, this remains a necessity), and we were urged us towards the bar where they offered us each a beer. The use of money is not permitted at the festival (except to purchase ice and beverages at the Centre Camp Cafe), and participants instead use a gifting economy. I had a beer in hand and, unaccustomed to gifting protocols, turned down the generous offer. It was pointed out that my beer was rather warm, and that I should learn to better accept gifts in Black Rock City - it was foolish to turn them down. With a beer in each hand, I began to enjoy the spoils of the city.

Before we could finish those cold beers, we heard a ruckus outside the tent and stepped out to find a tall, neon, sailboat parked outside the party. With dropped jaws, we found ourselves being pulled up the back stair into a gyrating throng of dancers. The ship took off up the street, and away we went, waving goodbye to the Booby Bar. The ship sailed along through the sea of tents and RVs towards The Man, which we could see glowing in the distance. When we hit the open playa, our eyes were stretched open like saucers, soaking in the sights. A rainbow mirage of LED lights in every colour littered the horizon, flashing and pulsing for as far as the eye could see, and blasts of fire sprung up from cars and sculptures scattered around the great open playa. We jumped down from the back of the ship and it sailed off into the night. The four of us stood, dumbfounded, in an empty patch of dust that was a hundred metres from the nearest sculpture or person. This place was enormous. We might have landed at a party on the moon and been none the wiser.

We began walking towards a long boardwalk that rose out of the dust to a vantage point where people stood with fishing rods casting glow sticks into the night, waiting for unsuspecting souls to try pick them up before being reeled in. We turned towards a sculpture that spewed fire from the tips of pendulums that were rocketing around in endless circles. Then we went over to climb a glowing metal tree, only to catch a glimpse of something shinier and brighter a short ways off.

The art crawl progressed until, one by one, we each disappeared on our own adventure as we found ourselves drawn to this or that party, sculpture, or camp. It was late when we made it back to camp that night, and settled down for some much needed rest. Tomorrow we would take on the business of adventuring after a good night's sleep.



Figure 19 - Black Rock City Sunrise



### **3 – The Grilled Cheese Incident**

August 30, 2012

The sun rises around 6:30 a.m. during the festival, and begins to cook the desert like an Easy Bake Oven. By 7:00 a.m. I found myself desperately clawing out of my sleeping bag, drenched in sweat. I unzipped the door and windows to air out the tent in hopes of getting back to sleep again, but soon gave up and crawled out, squinting, into the sun. My camp mates were soon to follow, all except Clam, who had not made it back to camp yet. We decided not to worry about her yet, having been warned that adventures in Black Rock City may separate friends for days at a time. I took a scan of our camp, hastily erected the previous night. It looked shabby, but then so did we... and the rest of the city, for that matter. Our neighbours on one side were asleep under a rough two-by-four structure with scarves pinned up to block the sun. It encompassed the trunk of their car, presumably to avoid unpacking. On the other side, our neighbours had constructed a six-sided yurt from foil-backed insulation. The design used a dozen 4' x 8' panels, rising from a four-foot perimeter wall to an 8-foot peak in the middle. All of the connections were taped, and the whole structure was staked down with guy-wires. I considered how comfortable the yurt might be in spite of the hot morning sun, and then looked back around our camp at our novice effort. Over the coming week I would learn a few tricks to stay comfortable in the desert.

Celestial Pearl fed us each a cocktail of vitamins while I put on a pot of coffee, only to remember my friends were tea drinkers. I decided to offer my first gift to the playa, and wandered next door to say hello to the neighbours. They were happy to see the fresh brew arrive, and welcomed me into their yurt. I crawled inside into an oasis of cool,

refreshing air. The hexayurt, a common construction in Black Rock City, does a fabulous job of remaining cool throughout the day. We sat in the cool, dark hut getting to know each other. Their crew was from Mendocino County in California, and had been attending Burning Man for six or seven years. They told me they normally camped with the Skinny Kitty Tea house (renowned for its collection of mummified cats and acrobatic shows) but were aiming for a 'quieter' burn this year, and had decided to camp on the outskirts like us. Our morning coffees and chats would become my daily ritual during the week of the festival. They were a constant source of advice, inspiration, and knowledge about what was happening each day, and their cool tent was a welcome reprieve from our heat trap next door.

I took each morning to slowly wrangle our camp into some semblance of order. Sharing facilities in the desert is not much different from living with roommates anywhere else, and the usual griping over dishes left undone and coolers or car doors left open became a prevalent dialogue. For as much amusement and distraction as the city had to offer, I found it difficult to escape the small dramas of camp life. But knowing that it would be difficult to release my OCD tendencies, I chose to take my morning ritual in stride and not begrudge the work. After all, I had no place in dictating rules for my camp mates. Radical inclusion and self-reliance. If I was going to enjoy the week, I would need to take charge of my own happiness, and not look to others for it. After feeding myself and tidying up, I would dive into the costume box and get ready for an adventure. With a kit bag containing snacks, water, goggles, a dust mask, and a cup, I would set out to explore the festival.



Figure 20 - Camp Life

The terrain in Black Rock City is flat, uninterrupted for miles until it reaches the base of the nearby mountain ranges. Looking down the block from most intersections, you could see The Man in one direction, and clear through to the mountains in the other. This radial street design made orienting myself rather simple in the labyrinth of RVs and tents. I spent my days wandering around the city eagerly observing the streets, joining dance parties, striking up conversations and making new friends or bumping into old friends I had not expected to encounter in the sea of 60,000 people. Some days I spent adventuring in tandem with my camp mates, but other days I went solo, taking in the endless sights and sounds. I gawked at the costumes and art cars, played with the whimsical art pieces that graced the open playa, and lounged in the comfortable spaces that were provided by various camps all over town. Hammock camps were always a treat, and the odd air-conditioned space could be found if the heat of the day was overwhelming. But mostly, I liked to keep moving, taking in more and more. There was so much to see, and no hope of seeing it all.

One sweltering afternoon, after a day exploring the city under the sun's relentless gaze, I found myself without food or water, far from home in the vicinity of 9:00 and Divorce. My energy was fading fast, and the walk back to camp seemed daunting. I shuffled my feet along, hoping to find an oasis of food or drink, or both. I was too timid to approach the many people passing me by for what I needed, and so I moved slowly through the streets, hoping for some miracle. But my hope faded with each step, until my deflated spirit wandered by a large white geodesic dome where a cheerful woman greeted me at the door. We exchanged pleasantries, and then she invited me in for something totally unexpected: oxygen. Inside the shady haven, I was seated in a reclining chair and given a personal nosepiece that connected to a system of hoses



Figure 21 - Balloon Rides

running around the tent. My chair was outfitted with lavender scent, and I soon found myself blissfully relaxed while the hostess spritzed me with cool water, and offered me iced tea. My weary brain was so tired that it could hardly process the scene unfolding, but within fifteen minutes I felt entirely rejuvenated. I could hardly express the depth of my gratitude in light of the long journey I faced to get back to camp. I exited the tent with a veritable spring in my step, and turned my boots homeward.

Back at the Mollusk Nation, our camp had lain quiet and empty through most of the week. Despite our ambition to offer a gift to the other participants, there was so much to explore that it was difficult to fathom (let alone execute) a plan to make a party of our own. We finally found resolve to host a tea party on Friday after a wreckless day biking around sculptures out on the playa, and a visit to the Costco soulmate match camp (where one can find two-for-one soulmate matchmaking). We spread word throughout the day that we would host a sunset tea party at the Mollusk Nation, and eagerly awaited our evening gathering. When we reconvened back at camp, we found our entire clan together for the first time since we arrived. We began sharing our adventures and stories, nibbled on dinner, and donned our costumes for the upcoming Apres-Ski party. No one else showed up to our tea party, but we did enjoy a rather delicious cup of tea ourselves, and then abandoned camp in search of the action.

Out on the town, we wandered like a litter of kittens, and it took all our focus to stick together for the short walk to the party. Our attention tugged at every passing whimsical fancy, but eventually we did find the crowd we were seeking, outfitted in ski-jackets and toques. The party was hosted by a crew from Vancouver that wowed us with



Figure 22 - Tea Party

beautiful costumes, ice-luge shots, and a mountain theme photo booth. The majority of the crowd were Canadians, dancing to talented beats under the sweeping expanse of a red and white tent. As if that were not enough, there was a snow machine. Black Rock city did not cease to impress me.

After our party, we wandered over to the Trojan Horse, one of my favourite sculptures on the playa. The towering statue was a novel structure to encounter in the desert, and I had admired its scale and beauty throughout the week. I can hardly recall the meandering that led us to attend the burning of the horse, but we found ourselves gathered there in the dark night while a nearby flame-throwing octopus art car shot out a symphony of fire from its tentacles. The horse had been hauled from the edge of the esplanade, deeper into the playa, and was now encompassed by a large, rowdy crowd. The ceremony began with an outrageous display of fireworks emerging from within the horse, which soon led to the statue catching fire and erupting in unruly flames. The crowd cheered wildly, eyes glowing in the light of the amber blaze. Chunks of ash and embers rained down on the crowd and the flames roared higher. We found ourselves growing increasingly uncomfortable, and soon dashed away to a safer distance. We watched for a while until the bulk of the structure had fallen amidst the chaos, and then we wandered into the night, perplexed by the uncomfortable madness we had just encountered. The magic and draw of the fiery ritual was terrific.

That evening was our first cold night on the desert, and when the temperature plunged from a balmy twenty degrees celsius down to five or ten, we were forced to rush back to camp for warm clothes. It was then that Wastie discovered he had failed to bring pants to the festival. In order to keep warm, he pulled out his one-of-a-kind Godzilla suit



that he purchased while visiting Japan. We headed back out for more adventures, and Wastie soon discovered that what he thought was one-of-a-kind Godzilla suit was being sported by two other burners in identical costume.

Around three in the morning, Wastie and I found ourselves at the Temple of Transition, and spent nearly an hour there. I wrote letters to lost loves, and affirmations for my future, on the temple's floor and walls, and then I had reflected on what I had accomplished in the past year since graduating from architecture school. I had discovered puppetry, found my place in an architectural practice, loved and lost (twice over), and forged countless new friendships. And I had found my way to Black Rock City, one of the strangest but most inspiring places I had ever encountered.

I stood pondering the question: What was really going on here? This festival, this 'city', this whimsical place that broke so many rules and invited you to do the same, was unlike anything I had ever encountered, and I could now understand why all of the reports I had read about Burning Man were so hesitant to explain or define it. After all, I was standing on the second storey of a temple, gazing out to at a desert full of colourful lights and bursts of fire, with stars twinkling overhead. Below me, people were scattered around in various manners of prayer, reflection, meditation, or passed out from exhaustion. And beside me, Wastie stood calmly in his Godzilla suit. It was all so surreal.

I turned to Wastie and said, "I could really go for a grilled cheese right about now." I salivated while he cursed me for such a decadent thought when I knew we had not brought any cheese to the festival.



Figure 23 - Centre Camp

I scanned the playa, but there were no signs of an all-night diner drifting through the desert, though I have been assured one does, in fact, exist.

We began our two-mile walk towards home but quickly gave up on our tired feet, abandoned moral rectitude, and picked up two stray bicycles (that is to say, we stole two stray bicycles). The bicycles were clearly lost, and we would take them home to centre camp, where their owners were more likely to find their lost transport, after abandoning them out on the playa. I rode a small pink princess cruiser, and we lolled and swaggered along towards centre camp in hopes of finding some tasty grub at that ungodly hour.

Centre camp cafe is a barrage of activity in the heat of the day, but at night it serves as a haven for lost and sleepless souls. Being one of the few places you can spend money on the playa, a visit to the café can be a grounding experience during a week without money. There was no lineup at that hour, and I grabbed a cup of chai and sat down to fill out the census. Wastie noticed a pillow fight unfolding nearby, which had co-opted hundreds of pillows from around Centre Camp and was sending clouds of dust billowing with every slug and whop. When the pillow fight finally collapsed into a dusty pile, we asked if anyone knew of any late night grub.

With no leads, we had lost hope for our grumbling tummies, and accepted that our cravings would go unmet. This was, after all, a desert, and we had to keep our lavish desires in perspective. We took to the streets, and began our journey home to the Mollusk Nation, this time on Yellow Bikes that belonged to the city's bike share network. The brisk night air was sobering.

I thought back on our adventure as we rode. It had been a brilliant day, complete with a sunset tea party and an evening out on the town. We had attended the Après Ski party, the Trojan Horse burn, and reflected at the temple...

My mind was pulled from my thoughts when Wastie asked, "do you smell that?" We were a few blocks from home, on a street we had not yet gone down before. Standing quietly at a propane griddle was a gentleman with long white hair tied back in a ponytail. Without looking up, he said "I'm serving up the last ones, gentlemen, would you like pepper-jack or american?"

"The Grilled Cheese Incident" (as it was aptly named) stupefied us when had lost all hope. As if only to amplify our joy, two ladies arrived bearing Belgian chocolate and Champagne. My brain and body reeled with the mixture of exhaustion and overwhelming satisfaction.

The relative abundance of the festival in an otherwise empty desert can produce surprising 'synchronicity'. In the course of my week, I came into the habit of practicing the act of voicing desires (no matter their vanity or unlikelihood of fulfillment), and was always delighted when such desires were fulfilled. While I will not suggest that it was my prayer for a grilledcheese sandwich that conjured up a camp with my hunger as its namesake, the experience epitomized the principles of gifting and synchronicity that are ubiquitous within the culture of Burning Man.

Early dawn was breaking over the eastern mountains when we finally reached home. Soon the sun would be up, and our tent would begin to roast. I wandered around the block in my state of fatigue and wonder,

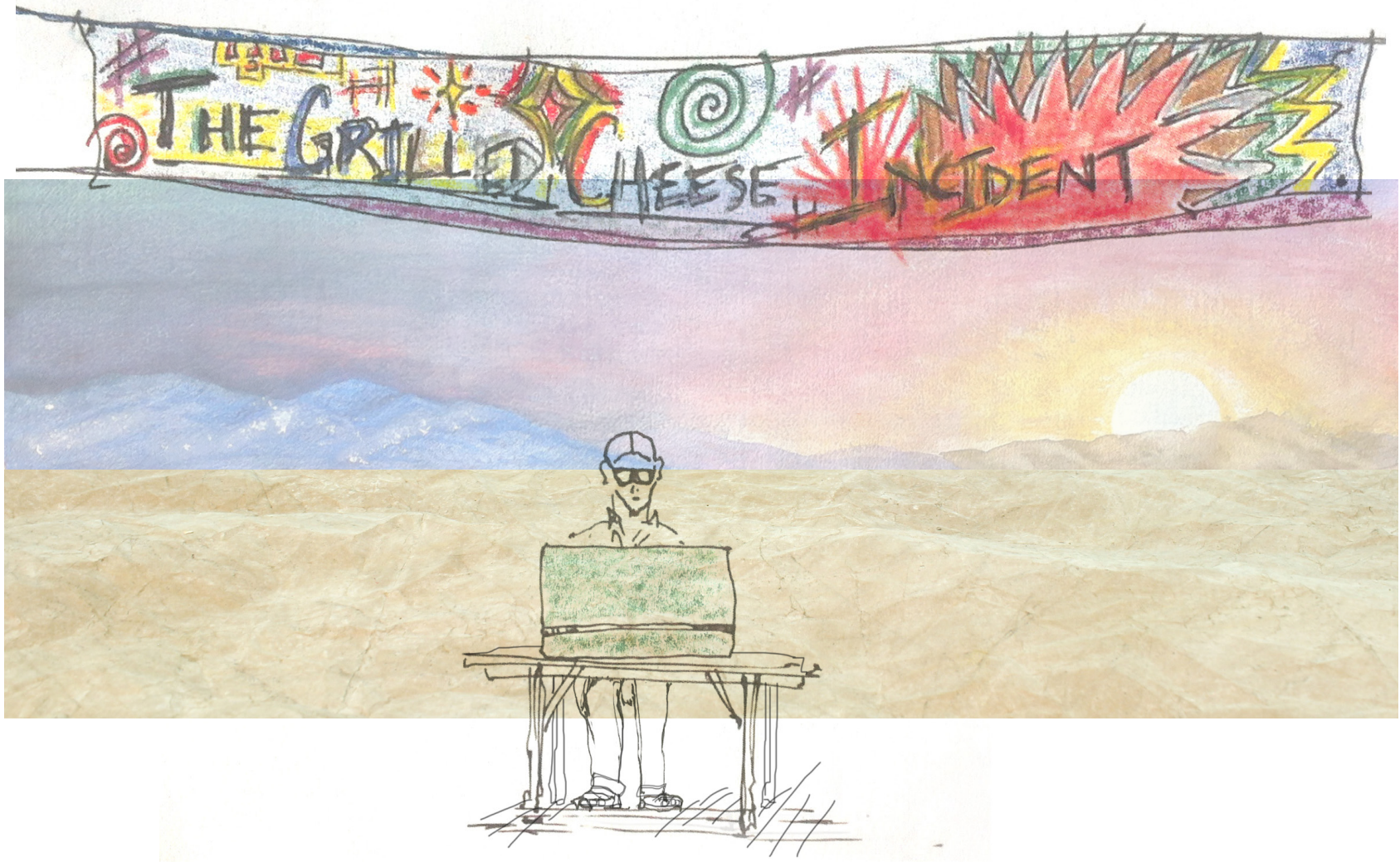


Figure 24 - The Grilled Cheese Incident

and climbed a tower to watch the sunrise. When I reached the peak, I looked out to survey the landscape. Before me stretched a tent-city, like a post-apocalyptic vision of some carnival. I chuckled to myself, "Welcome home."

Saturday arrived faster than anyone hoped, and I realized I had not yet painted my body gold. I had searched at great length to find the body paint, and happily set myself to covering myself head to toe in the shimmering oily paint. All around the city there was a palpable energy rising towards the burning of the Man. Mild pandemonium presented itself as hoards of inebriated Burners paraded through town for their one last hurrah. Street signs began disappearing (apparently they make good souvenirs), and it seemed as though participants were in a mad fervour to polish off the excess booze and drugs they had brought. Amidst the chaos, Wastie and I decided to host our first annual stickhorse croquet tournament, and began preparing the course. The whole of the city was pre-occupied with fuelling its debauchery, and so we were only able to recruit one participant for the tournament. The event was tricky, with the challenge of holding your drink, a stick horse, and a croquet mallet all in stride. After our games, I set out on a walkabout, and was not in the least surprised when I ran into a young woman who was also painted head to toe in gold paint, wearing matching booty-shorts. We smiled, hugged, and went our separate ways without a word spoken between the two of us.

I made my way to the Man burn that evening in search of my campmates who I told I would meet there. I approached the edge of the esplanade, and stood beside the pier looking at the scene in the distance. The Man stood tall with its arms raised in a victorious stance, glowing with blue neon tracing. Below it was a throng of costumed participants



Figure 25 - Golden Boy



Figure 26 - The Man Burn



witnessing the spectacle, ensconced in a wall of art cars that were strategically parked in a ring around the Man. I could hear the music blasting loudly, and the chaos kept me at bay. I had little chance of finding my friends in the crowd, and it was unlikely that I would find a good view, either. I decided to stay put and enjoy the burn from a distance, so I lay down in a hammock below the pier to wait until the first fireworks shot off. When the crowd erupted with a roar, and I strolled away from the pier to get a better view a little way out. The fireworks were beautiful, erupting long after I expected them to stop, and soon the man had caught fire and was consumed in flames. The cacophony resounding across the playa was exciting, but I was happy to watch it from a distance. When the man began to crumble below my line of sight, I grew curious to move in for a closer look. As I journeyed inward, the crowd began letting out, and I swam upstream between bodies and bicycles. The people within the ring of art cars were slowly circling the pile of coals where the man had stood. Despite the cold temperatures that evening, I broke into a sweat from the heat of the flames and the crowd, and soon felt intoxicated by the chaos that surrounded me. I let the motion of the crowd sweep me along and carry me around and around the fire before I was pushed out toward the perimeter, and stumbled off back towards camp.

On Sunday, the crescendo of madness came to a head with the waning stores of our bodily energy, and the dawning acknowledgement that there were jobs, families, and responsibilities to return to out in the default world. The realization was a somber reckoning, and starkly contrasted the few participants who appeared to have chosen to party straight past the end of the festival. Most camps had entered a mad rush to depart, but others opened their reserve coolers full of beer, and partied on.

Sunday was also the day reserved to burn the temple, and our crew decided to attend the ceremony together that evening. We approached the temple around sunset, and found a final performance was being played on the giant harp that was strung between the towers of the structure. The strings sounded in the golden dusk, and the gathering crowd settled into a quiet reverie. We sat quietly, and eventually saw flames creeping up the towers of the temple. I had not expected the ceremony would be so different from the other riotous burns we had watched, but it probed questions as to how and why this ritual was different from the rest. Art cars that approached with their music blasting were shushed or booed by the otherwise silent crowd. Despite the high regard for self-expression at the festival, I saw that this was a moment when you met resistance to blare your music as loud as you wanted. But the crowd had made it clear through its assertive jeers that the silence of the temple burn would be protected out of respect for what was being burned. This was a solemn moment, a moment that was markedly different from the rest of the action on the playa. I watched in silence as the temple burned long into the night.

Monday was a sad day. None of us wanted to leave, but the party had come to an end, and the city was rapidly disappearing. We begrudgingly folded our tents, repacked the truck, and made our goodbyes with the neighbours. We took the wooden palm tree we brought from the streets of San Francisco to the burn barrel along the esplanade, and tossed it to its fiery demise. Then we said goodbye to Black Rock City, and turned our tires towards the gate.

But our farewells were premature, as we soon found ourselves in the gate road lineup for the highway. Apparently the party refuses to quit until your tires hit asphalt, and we enjoyed a few more hours with the pleasant company of those dusty smiling souls.



Figure 27 - Farewell Black Rock City



Figure 28 - Burning Nerds

Left to Right: Captain Goldstar, Secret AJent, Bob Loblaw

## Part II - Burning Nerds

This is the foundation of the city: a net which serves as a passage and as support. All the rest, instead of rising up, is hung below: rope ladders, hammocks, houses made like sacks, clothes hangers, terraces like gondolas, skins of water, gas jets, spits, baskets on strings, dumb-waiters, showers, trapezes and rings for children's games, cable cars, chandeliers, pots with trailing plants.

Suspended over the abyss, the life of Octavia's inhabitants is less uncertain than in other cities. They know the net will last only so long.

Thin Cities – 5  
Invisible Cities by Italo Calvino

## **4 – The Golden Ticket**

January 10, 2013

I returned from Black Rock City exhausted, but refreshed. My spirit had been renewed by the adventures I had out on the playa, and I continued to take inspiration from them by sharing stories with friends and family. I surveyed the means by which I could study the festival for my masters thesis, beginning with festival architecture and the history of Burning Man. When I entered the masters program, I commenced my formal study of the festival and its history set against an historic background of a studio in Rome, the eternal city. Immersed in the mythology of the ancient capital, I became fascinated with how stories define cities, and the bearing those stories have upon a city's morphology. From the empty field that preserves the Circus Maximus, to the embrace of lovers at the Spanish Steps, or the ritual of throwing coins into the Trevi Fountain, the city's architecture could be understood through the stories and rituals that surrounded it.

And while Rome was not built in a day, Black Rock City was built in a month, and disappeared even more quickly. The home of Burning Man is an ephemeral city, and is reinvented through stories year after year. The recurring traditions that appear at the event reveal the stories that most markedly define the festival's culture. During the ten month window when the whole of the city is absent from its home in the desert, the festival continues to be reimagined year-round through storytelling. Its rich narratives inspire a sense that the Burning Man may contain any experience imaginable, and participants are invited to harness their own imaginations to build the new stories that will shape each year's event. To allow the city this annual re-imagining permits participants to become the authors of their own desires, and make the city exactly what

they desire it to be. Storytelling is at the heart of Black Rock City's architecture, and I hoped that by examining the stories that shape its architecture I might come to understand something of the festival's significance or meaning. And so I began experimenting with techniques for documenting events and stories on the playa, and determined that I would use the medium that seemed to best suit any given story.

I was engaged in weekly discussions on contemporaneity in architecture, and carefully considered the unschooled design that emerges on the playa. The whimsical but haphazard camps, sculptures, and vehicles were never subjected to the rigorous critique of an architectural education. The marvellous creations on the desert were more likely be the laughing stock of an architecture school than the revered genius I held them to be. With this in mind, I contemplated the future of the Mollusk Nation, and began to sketch out visions of giant oysters and clamshell sleeping pods. I sketched tutus and gold hairnets, circus tents and temples, electric eel bicycles and a venus-de-milo-inspired carriage pulled by seahorses. I allowed my imagination to run wild, untethered by rationale and governed by intuition, and was inspired by the sheer whimsy the festival encouraged. By the end of my semester I was committed to prototyping a few of my sketches, and so began my summer in preparation for my next Burn.

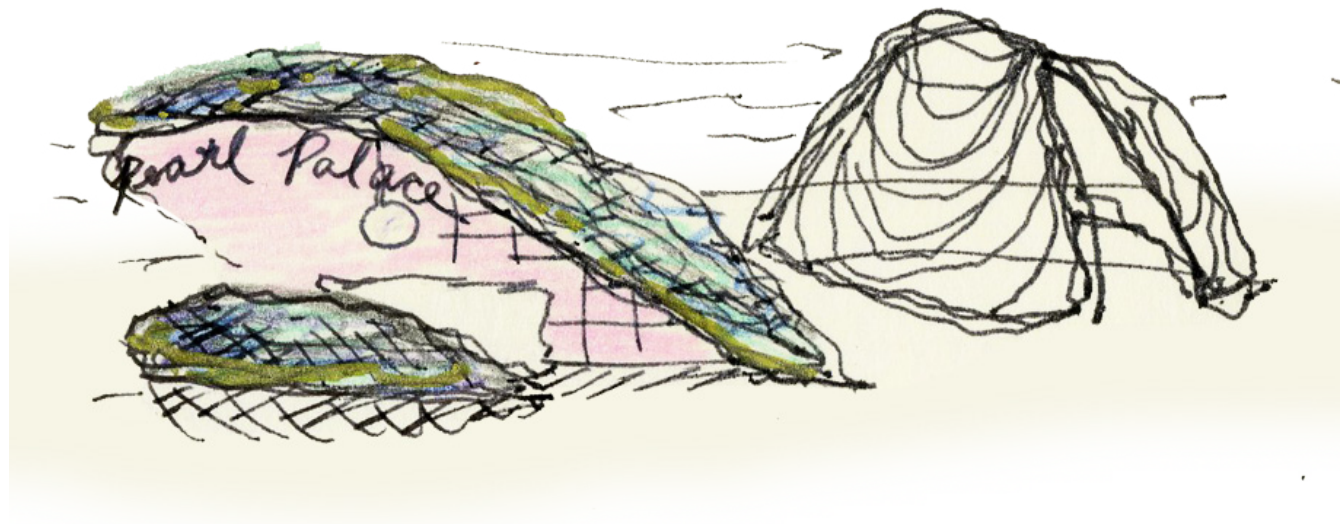


Figure 29 - The Pearl Palace



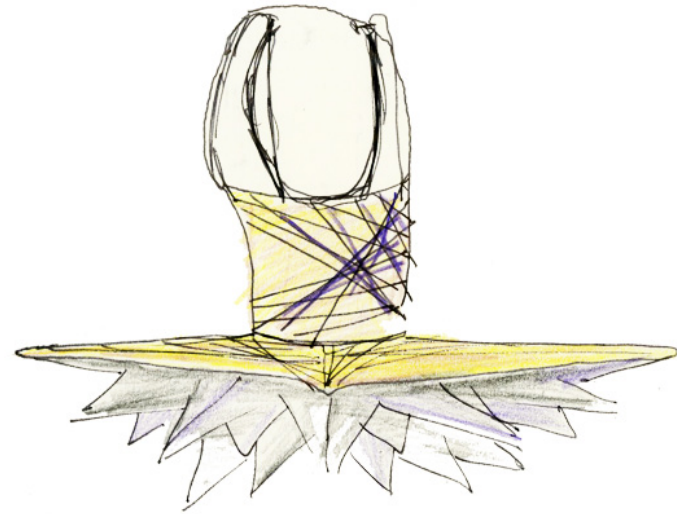
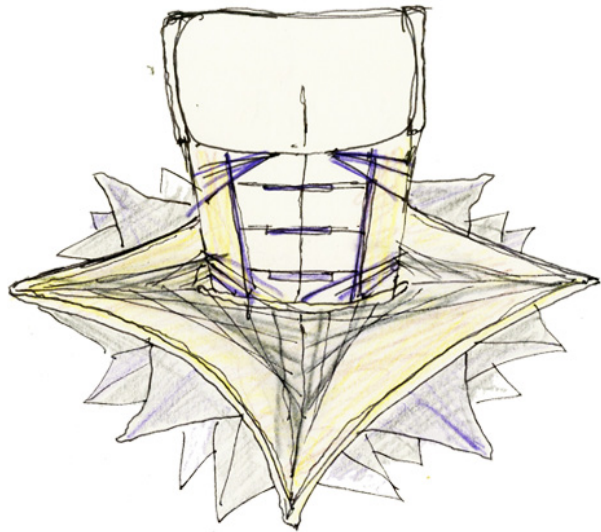


Figure 30 - The Starship Tutu

In addition to creating my whimsical imaginings for the festival, I was faced with more pragmatic challenges of securing funding for my research trip. I chose to run a crowd-source funding campaign, with a variety of rewards to exchange for financial support. The returns included various creations I was making for the festival, as well as thank you cards, photographs, and story books containing tales from the Black Rock Desert. The support I received for my campaign was overwhelming, and enabled me to begin sewing tutus, making masks, and preparing materials for the Pearl Palace. I attempted to extend the reach of my campaign for the Mollusk Nation beyond my circle of friends and family, by contacting the BMOrg to advertise my project on their list of crowd-source funding campaigns. Their response included a stipulation, that my project should offer more back to the participants and not just our own camp. I invented the Storybooth to offer a performance piece to other participants, and double as a way of framing my research efforts. I would use the booth to recite classic stories and perform puppet shows, in exchange for the stories that participants had to offer. The storybooth would be a dynamic research station, and hopefully encourage the stories at the festival to come to me. The storybooth was designed and sewn with a thick canvas that I planned to paint with scenes from the stories I would prepare.



Figure 31 -The Golden Ticket Campaign Image

My project list continued to snowball when I next reached out to the Burning Nerds, a group of academics that has convened on the Playa since 2007 for their meet-and-greet mixer. In addition to the mixer, the group would host an academic symposium that year, where scholarly Burners would present research efforts pertaining to the festival and otherwise. The two events gave rise to an idea that the group could build an effigy, the Ivory Tower, that would represent the academic community. At the time of the discussions, I was studying the work of Vladimir Shukhov in a course on the Russian Avant-Garde under Dr. Elizabeth English. I learned that Shukhov had designed hyperboloid diagrid towers that embodied advancements in mathematics (from the discovery of non-euclidian geometries), and I thought that such a structure might be a valuable symbol to propose for the Ivory Tower. The Burning Nerds were happy to adopt the design, and I went ahead planning the construction of the lightweight, collapsible tower. The design for the effigy would make it easy to move around the festival to different events, and eventually out to the playa to burn. It would also be a suitable canvas for any additional sculpting or intentions that the Burning Nerds might wish to invest in the tower. Upon reviewing the fire safety protocols for the project, it was decided it would be burned informally at a 'burn garden', avoiding the need for a sanctioned burn ritual.



Figure 32 - Ivory Tower Proposal



Figure 33 - Pearl Palace Model

The Pearl Palace began taking shape with a small model I built to explore a tensegrity roof structure shaped like a propped-open oyster shell. The structure would be skinned with a layer of ruffled fabric on the outside as well as interior drapes that were both functional (providing a double layer of shade) and sculptural. When I had satisfied my vision with a scale model, I proceeded to purchase as much fabric as my budget would permit, and sewed the seams through which I would run a drawstring to create elegant ruffles. I dyed the cotton fabric using lavender epsom salts as mordent, and dye baths of black tea and turmeric to create a mottled blend of yellows and browns.

I sewed two tutus inspired by sketches from my notebooks - a purple one with dramatic points and a layer of gold overtop, and a long, flowing, black tutu with a gold waistband.



Figure 34 - Dyed Fabric for the Pearl Palace



Alongside the preparation of my creations for the Mollusk Nation, I was pursuing approvals from the Office of Research Ethics (ORE) for my upcoming study. I prepared consent forms for the interviews, photographs and videos I intended to use to document participants' stories, and art projects, and wrote descriptions of my methodology (i.e. the storybooth). Hoping that they would approve my novel form of research, I submitted my proposal and left my fate to be decided by the ORE.

With a growing pile of of creations in my tiny apartment, I was quickly overwhelmed by the chaos of stuff I was accumulating, and decided to organize matters by erecting a tent in my living room. Inside the tent went anything that would go to the desert (except my kitchen table, which had no other place to fit). When my time of departure drew near, I transferred the contents of the tent into my van, and then packed up the tent itself and squeezed and said farewell to my apartment.

## 5 – The Temple

August 10, 2012

The tradition of building temples at Burning Man emerged as a solemn ritual amidst the whimsical mayhem that often sensationalizes the event. The Temples are a testament to the need for a place of refuge, reflection or contemplation, and a site for ceremonies or rituals to be witnessed in the presence of the community. The scale of the temples places them amongst the most resource-intensive projects built and burned on the desert. Each year, a selected temple design is sited outward of the Man, centred between the two radial arms of the city, where its remote but prominent placement distances it from more debaucherous activities, and offers it a degree of sanctity.

The lineage of temples at the festival traces back to the year 2000, when artists David Best, Jack Hays and their project team built the Temple of the Mind. The temple was an intricate pavilion constructed with CNC-cut plywood scraps from toy dinosaur kits. The scraps were used to produce a sculpture with a filigree of abstract ornamental details. The team intended for the installation to be “a place where pilgrims can confront the demons of their own mind and become one with the greater mind”. During the pre-fabrication of the temple, a team member was unexpectedly killed in a motorcycle crash. The team was devastated, but resolved to complete the project in remembrance of their friend. The installation was erected on the playa, where Burners who visited honoured the loss of the young man, and gave voice to their own loss or grieving. The installation amassed countless intentions throughout the week. As the phenomena of the memorial was observed, the project artists resolved to repeat a similar gesture at the next year’s festival. In 2001 Best and Hays built the Temple of Tears, and

dedicated it as a memorial to victims of suicide. That temple evoked an outpouring of grief, and the artists determined the next temple ought to be something lighter, a comedy club. In 2002 The Temple of Joy upheld the tradition of providing a space for grief and healing, but opened the temple to the other needs of the community. The temple began attracting all manners of ritual, including weddings and even divorces, in addition to the grieving and reflection it continued to evoke.

While preparing for my second year at the festival, I looked for an opportunity to arrive early in order to document the city rising. In order to obtain an early entry pass, I had to get involved with an art project, and decided to volunteer for that year's Temple Crew. The temple's scale dictates that it is one of the first projects to begin construction on the desert, almost three weeks before the start of the event, and so I contacted the project coordinator expressing my interest in volunteering. I was directed to telephone that year's temple designer, who happened to be David Best himself, to discuss my potential involvement. When I reached David by telephone, I briefly explained my research project and answered some questions regarding my previous construction experience. During our conversation, I was invited to join the build, and committed to arriving in the desert on August 10th to work on the temple. I would be joining the crew that was already hard at work pre fabricating the temple in Petaluma, CA.

The weeks leading up to my departure for the desert were chaotic as I worked feverishly to complete as many structures and ephemera as I could for the Mollusk Nation, secure funding for my travel, and purchase a vehicle to carry me and my entourage to and from the desert. I had few expectations for the Temple build, other than to arrive early and see the early workings of the festival. In my final days of preparation for

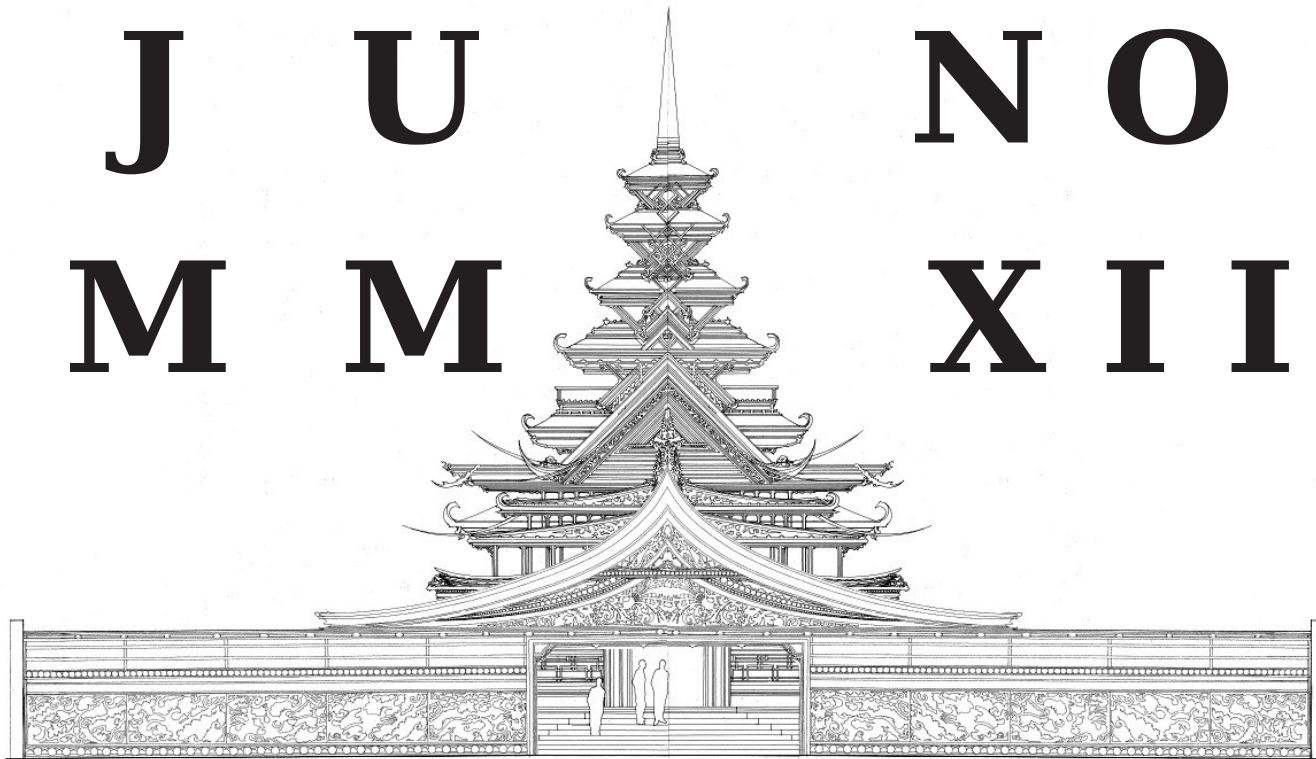


Figure 35 - Temple of Juno

the desert, I encountered the obstacle that I had no physical ticket. When I had purchased my ticket months before, I opted for a will-call pickup, not knowing that there would be no will-call window for my early arrival. After sending a pile of emails, making phone calls, and even having someone else's ticket mailed to Iowa for me to pick up en route (an option that also fell through), I still had no solution. I left one day late with the hope that something would pan out, and braved a fourteen-hour drive to reach a hotel reservation I'd booked in Iowa. After a short sleep I was up and on the road again. Somewhere along my journey, I received a phone call from David Best's wife, who told me an extra ticket had been found that could be donated to me. It would arrive with David, and I would sort out the details when I got to the playa. It was a large gift from the playa, one that I hoped to pay forward before the festival began.

I drove eight to ten hours per day until I reached the playa, taking breaks at coffee shops to use their internet and update my family on my journey. The drive was colourful, accompanied by audio books and long stretches of silence where I would contemplate the unknowns I was about to face. I was quite certain there would be unexpected hurdles, both physical and mental, and that I had somehow bitten off more than I could chew. In the evenings when I stopped at a campsite or hotel, I would set to work at stitching together pieces of my costumes or the story booth, and refine my design for the Pearl Palace. As I moved further west, the landscape of farms and fields along the I-80 slowly faded into scrubby, rocky hills. The highway dipped down towards Salt Lake City, Utah, and I descended into the scorching, breathtaking salt flats that stretch out to the horizon like calm white seas. I stocked up on building supplies for the Mollusk Nation, and then travelled further west into Nevada for the last stretch of my journey. As I sped across

the landscape, the outward motion of the pilgrimage brought me further and further from the comforts and safeties of home. The journey kneaded and pulled at my whole being, stretching me out to receive whatever experiences might come my way.

During my final stop in Fernley, Nevada, I set myself up in a motel and put my batteries to charge. I completed a last round of edits required for my research ethics clearance, and went down to the motel's casino for the free drink that came with my stay. It was my last night on the grid and I enjoyed the creature comforts that I could, for tomorrow would mark a new leg of my adventure (one without showers or a clean bed).

In the morning I stocked up on fresh fruits, vegetables, dry ice and water. I stopped at a coffee shop and found a pleasant e-mail confirming ethical clearance for my study. I had one last chat with my family, I ate one last greasy cheeseburger, and then steered my vehicle towards Black Rock City.

The drive into Black Rock City was much different than the year before, when the journey had been riddled with Burners making their way to the gate all at once. This time I followed a single water truck and saw barely any other vehicles on the road. The water truck eventually turned off the asphalt onto the dust, and I followed. We headed towards a lone trailer that sat in a remarkably empty desert. The last time I'd seen the playa was when the festival was in the full swing, and it was startling to see it quiet and calm, with neither hustle nor bustle. I drove up to the trailer that was serving as a temporary gate for the event, and shut off my van. I opened the door, stepped out onto the dust and felt a shiver go down my spine - I had arrived. I



Figure 36 - The Road to Black Rock City



Figure 37 - Open Playa



walked towards the gate keepers and asked, "is this the big beach party everyone's talking about?"

"Do you have a ticket?" came the curt response - apparently the gatekeepers weren't easily entertained.

"No," I said, "I'm Goldstar. I'm here to work on the Temple, and David Best has a ticket for me."

"Slow down there, Canada," one of the greeters interrupted, "you don't have a ticket?" He wasn't impressed.

I explained my will-call window conundrum, the phone calls, and the ticket I was promised that David Best would deliver. I asked if they could radio someone on the Temple Crew to investigate. It seemed as though they had lost me at 'will-call', but soon my situation was broadcast across the playa to temple camp, which was still a few miles away. The gatekeepers looked satisfied that I had been dealt with for the time being, and I gathered that it might take a while before I was let on site.

I went to my van to get sunscreen and water to ward off the hot sun. I remembered the burner adage "Piss Clear", the easiest way to keep track of your hydration, and began chugging water. I studied my surroundings while I sipped my water. The gatekeepers shelter was simple: a small, corrugated steel trailer with a simple awning stretching out to provide some shade. The motley gate crew sat below the canopy, conserving their energy. One of them sported dreadlocks, another a mohawk, and one girl wasn't wearing pants. They were all quite dusty.

Time passed, some food was shared, and then a rumbling van approached. It stopped at the gate, and from out of the van came a woman around my age, and a man who looked as though he had been attending the festival for twenty years. As it turned out, he had. In fact, he had been making a documentary for those twenty years about the festival, and would be filming parts of the temple-build that I was volunteering for. I introduced myself and sparked up a conversation with the couple. We began discussing our projects when another vehicle came speeding at a clip towards the gate. The filmmakers sprang to life, grabbing their equipment from the van. The vehicle approaching was a blue truck pulling a gleaming airstream trailer. The truck pulled in leaving a cloud of dust in its wake, and I recognized David Best in the passenger seat. I stepped up to get an introduction in, and see if he indeed had my ticket. The greeters spoke with him for a moment before I stepped up and introduced myself. "I'm Goldstar! You've got a ticket for me! Your wife Maggie told me she would leave it with you." David looked me up and down. I was eager. Too eager? Probably.

"My wife won't be here for a couple days, and I'm not sure about the ticket you're talking about..." My heart dropped. This could be more difficult than I had anticipated, and it did not look good in front of the greeters, who already seemed suspicious of me. David paused in thought, then said, "Oh wait, I might have something..." He began rooting around in his pocket and pulled out an envelope. Inside was a ticket, but its stub was missing. David's hand returned to his pocket and fished around until he pulled out a stub. "That should do it!" The greeters took the pieces over to the shade to study them.

David B. introduced me to David C. at the wheel, and then told me to meet them over at the temple site. The film crew stepped in for a few



Figure 38 - Porta-Potties in Waiting



Figure 39 - Man Base Under Construction

questions with the Davids and I moseyed over to the gate keepers who were scrutinizing the ticket pieces. Something seemed fishy, so I chose to stay quiet. After standing in the sun for a moment, I was told everything checked out and I was cleared to enter. I breathed a sigh of relief, bounced back to my van, started my engine, and slowly rolled into the empty city.

I say 'city', but in reality it was still just a field of tiny flags on the ground, marking out where the streets and theme camps went. I followed the radial street grid towards the esplanade, the innermost ring. I had never seen the desert so empty - all that stood there were some banks of trailers, tents, and port-a-potties. The base of The Man was under construction at the center of the city, and I steered my van towards it. I drove at 5 mph to avoid kicking up dust, and shook with excitement as my van bounced over the ruts in the desert. After circling the work site for The Man, I set my sights on a group of vehicles and trailers further out on the open playa. When I arrived there I found a scattered encampment, with building materials stacked all around in neat piles and boxes.

I spotted David Best with the airstream trailer and pulled my van near to where he was now standing. I got out with my eager grin and asked, "Where can I start?"

"Follow me," said David.

Here, I will spare myself the embarrassment of describing the details of my eager beaver attitude. When David asked if I would always have so many questions, I told him to let me know when to shut up, and he did so just that. He charged me to post up the safety regulations on a couple

of trailers, to read them carefully, and then to sign them. Afterwards, I could go set up my camp. Work would begin the next morning.

I was relieved that it would not be a work day. I was exhausted from my drive, and it would take enough energy just to set up my camp. I picked a spot along the long arching line of vehicles, tents and trailers. Looking out from the site in one direction was a city slowly rising, and on the other side there was a vast emptiness. Open playa stretched on, uninterrupted, to the base of the mountains beyond. I set to work assembling my tent and the shade structure that would encompass my car and tent to keep them cool. When I finished my setup, the stars were out. I grabbed a chair and my ukulele, and walked out onto the empty desert to sit down, watch the Perseids meteor shower and sing songs to the stars.

The next morning, I was quickly reminded of the sun's awesome power. After peeling off my sleeping bag, I rummaged through my kitchen supplies to find my coffee pot and stove. I set my espresso to brew and peered out at the vast stretch of desert before me - this view would be mine for the next two weeks. When the coffee was ready, I brought it over to my nearest neighbours. I was introduced to Big Cat and Julie, who offered me a breakfast burrito and asked for my back story. Big Cat and Julie were veteran burners who had been attending Burning Man since it was just a party on Baker Beach. I could barely contain my excitement for the fact that they had experienced so much of the festival's history.

At the sound of a foghorn, we were all rallied to the canteen and given an inaugural pep talk. Most of the volunteers had been working together for several months back in California, so there was less pomp



Figure 40 - Temple Camp Sunset



Figure 41 - Work Shelters



and circumstance than I had anticipated for welcoming our arrival on the desert. People would be trickling in and out all week long, with the need to maintain communication with families and businesses back home.

The first order of business for the crew would be to erect the build site's infrastructure, and leaders were delegated for assembling shade structures over the dining area and work stations. I floated around taking orders and offering assistance wherever a hand was needed. When my energy began to fade under the hot sun, I was sent to my tent to hydrate and rest. I collapsed in my tent, and found I was more exhausted than I had thought. I barely had the strength to stir up an electrolyte drink, and after chugging it down I lay down to rest. Twenty minutes later my head had stopped spinning, so I reapplied sunscreen, ate a small snack, and headed back to the worksite.

The sun beat down relentlessly, and I took regular glugs of water that grew warmer by the minute. Soon came our lunch break, and I was impressed to see a feast of tacos with a spread of delicious fixings. It was all served extra spicy, and the forced sweat was appreciated when the wind picked up and cooled my moist skin. Our breaks were scheduled like clockwork - morning tea, followed by lunch, then afternoon tea, and finally dinner. The worksite's power was turned off at each of those breaks, and the whole crew would come together to relax. It was during these times that David Best would jump up on the tables and parade back and forth touting prizes he'd "found on the playa" that day - stickers featuring the temple, and posters of hindu deities or buddhas. David kept morale high, and reminded us why we were there labouring in the heat and dust. The Temple of Juno would honour women, and women's rights - it was for women who had been abused, for women who lacked rights to make decisions about their own bodies, and their reproductive

rights. And the temple was for all people who needed to heal. It was for people who suffered from cancer and illness, or knew someone that had. It was for those who had lost loved ones, for those who suffered from addictions, or any manner of pain or trauma, and anyone seeking solace. There were people from all walks of life working on the temple. Some, like myself, were simply there to help where they could. But others were there to build for their own healing, too. By building a space for healing, they would embody some of their own grief into the space, and when it would then be burned, it would release that painful energy. David Best made these intentions for the temple crystal clear, and frequently reminded us just why we were there and working so hard. After those breaks and talks, it was back to building, refreshed with an intention set deep in our hearts to reflect upon while we worked.

During that first afternoon, I found myself without a clue as to where I could be of service, so I went to David for instruction. David was ceaselessly bombarded with people's problems, and he was expected to have an answer for all of them. David kept things moving, and I respected how he worked. There was no grand plan posted for all to see, so we relied upon the instruction of those who knew the construction process of the build. David set me to picking up scraps to keep the worksite clean. I thought on my vast skillset gleaned from all my years studying architecture and working in offices, and had to laugh at the task I was given. But the work was humbling and gave me a chance to acclimatize while meeting more of the crew, and it reminded me of the importance of each and every job required for the build to progress.

One aspect of the temple build that surprised me was the lack of structure in organizing the crew. While there were clear leaders with knowledge of how the temple would be built, none of them had titles or



Figure 42 - Heavy Machinery



Figure 43 - Temple Framing

expressed any authority over the volunteers. The crew was encouraged to work on tasks that interested them, and small teams organically assembled to tackle specific jobs. After a day of worksite clean-up, I was recruited to begin assembling box columns for the courtyard walls. The columns were made from plywood I-beams, and placed at regular intervals along the 200 foot length of each wall. The job required heavy lifting and an efficient team to make swift, consistent progress. The faster the structure went up, the sooner the next teams could get to work detailing the ornament on the walls. There would be around a hundred volunteers working on the temple, but their arrivals were staggered so that there would be able bodies when they were required, but no sooner. Our team was pleasantly optimistic, and the cheerful attitude helped overcome the torment of dust and heat that beleaguered us each day. After assembling all of the columns, we would erect them, anchor them to the earth with steel cables, and connect them with plywood beams that stretched from column to column.

Some crew members were busy framing the various tiers that would be stack up to create a towering inner sanctum, and others drifted between teams to find the work that best suited their skillsets or that needed their help the most. Some crew members were dedicated to keeping the tools and generators in order, which was a full-time job on account of all the dust. The fluidity of roles was reminiscent of the puppet sweatshops I used to run, and reminded me of the value added to processes when no one felt obligated to perform their job. Tensions would emerge and tempers would flare from time to time when someone felt their efforts were undervalued, but in those moments, the crew members would break from the work site until amends were made, or they found new work to do elsewhere. It appeared that no one was blindly following the vision for the temple at the expense of their own values or worth, and

that anyone who began to experience that sentiment was taken aside to mediate the conflict respectfully. We were not there building a fetish object to serve someone else's ego, and so no amount of disrespect for the volunteers' efforts was acceptable. We were building a temple so that others could come to it for their own healing and ritual, and that motivation gave each and every job a rich, selfless meaning.

Along with the value and respect shown for the work being accomplished, the crew's experience was enriched by the educational aspects of co-operative building. I was taught to use many new tools while building the temple, including pneumatic nailguns, saws, impact drivers, and generators. The safe and proper use of all these tools was the shared responsibility of the entire crew, and we were all encouraged to take responsibility for one another's well-being and education.

After work finished each day I was coated in a thick coat of dust, and I would clean myself up with a baby wipe bath and change of clothes before dinner. The meals served to us were impressive, with our dedicated kitchen crew preparing restaurant-quality food to nourish our bodies and soothe our souls in equal measure. A fire would be built after dinner, and we would gather around it to share stories and laugh long into the night. I would often spend my evenings cleaning out my tent, which accumulated a few inches of dust each day, and then wander over to the fire or take time to make notes on my experiences. A few evenings were spent working on the storybooth, but after long days labouring in the hot sun, I was usually too tired to make much progress. The temple build was far more engaging than I had anticipated, and it was difficult for me to stay back in my dimly lit tent when others invited me to take a ride on the temple bus.



Figure 44 - Gate Details Taking Shape



Figure 45 - Storm Approaching



A few days into the build, word came around that there was some 'weather' coming in, and I naively expected a sprinkle of rain. It had been another scorcher on the playa, but my spirits were high since I had managed to stay hydrated throughout the whole day. The thought of rain even brought a smile to my face.

I wore that broad grin as I hurried around site, sweeping up scraps and sawdust. By the time I rounded back to my tent, I could see a white wall of dust approaching at a clip. My only thought was to hammer in a few extra stakes for my tent, grab a handful of trail mix, a dust mask, and scurry on over to sip on a beer with Rawhide and Crow. The dusty wind howled fiercely as we ducked into a large tent and cracked open some cold drinks. The wind began to bash in the tent walls, while we commiserated about issues with that year's ticket lottery fiasco and discussed our journeys to the playa this year. After a beer or two, we peeked our heads out and found the dust and winds had abated.

I swung by my camp where I found a pole or two out of place, and started adjusting its rigging. It seemed that the tighter I pulled at the ropes, the stiffer the wind tugged back, and before I could get a handle on things, the fierce wind began to pop my poles out one after another. At a loss for saving my setup, I decided to wait out the whipping winds from the safety of my van. Poles bashed against the body of my vehicle, and my tarp flapped violently in the wind. I soon realized there was no telling when the winds would let up, so I grabbed a video camera and head out to capture some views of the storm.

I wandered around camp, taking in the overpowering glory of the storm. Lisa and Everywhere joined me in a welcome-home-dust-dance that lasted until Big Cat pulled up in a truck full of fresh ice from Gerlach. We



Figure 46 - Welcome Home Dust Dance



Figure 47 - Shade Structure in a Wind Storm

threw a bag of ice in my cooler, poured some drinks, and cozied up in the van to watch the storm. Soon we decided to brave the storm again and survey the damage. My camp was in shambles, like a yard sale in a sand lot, and I found a small sand dune inside my tent that triggered me to simply zip it back up and walk away. The release that occurred in that moment was essential to enjoying my time on the playa. And then, when I needed it most, I heard Big Cat and Julie call me over for a gin and tonic, and I graciously accepted.

It turned out that while my camp was falling to pieces, the kitchen crew had been desperately trying to save their shade tents from blowing into the deep playa. Worse yet, the first floor of the temple's framing had collapsed from the winds. We were all astounded to find that despite all the chaos, the kitchen crew had still pulled off a five-course spread of Tex-Mex delights, with bananas and ice cream bars for dessert. With a full belly and some calm returning to the playa, I headed back to begin cleaning up my camp. Just as I began shaking out the dust from my possessions, I heard Big Cat shouting "Goldstar, hurry up! The bus is heading out to deep playa!" There was no question of priorities. I grabbed my flask and made a sprint for the bus as it rolled out. Clean-up could wait. It was too difficult for me to pass up a ride on a double-decker art bus, complete with a spiral staircase to the second-storey bar and a slide for emergency exits. Later that night I arrived home to my camp, and smiled at the dust pile that was still in my tent. I pulled out my sleeping back, gave it a shake, and thought to myself I could always sleep in my van.

The next day we begrudgingly returned to the work site to resurrect the walls that had fallen during the storm. We laboured through the heat of the day, and progressed with remarkable efficiency. When all

the framing was back standing as it had the day before, we were lauded for our efforts and decided to take a trip out to a nearby hot spring. Thirty of us piled onto the ornately decorated, bright orange temple bus, and we travelled out to the edge of the playa where we could soothe our aching muscles and cracked skin in Trego hot spring. The luxurious waters were nothing short of dreamy. The sulphurous steam mixed with the smell of smoking herbs, and everywhere you looked there was someone wearing nothing but a broad grin, drink in hand, and naked as the day they were born. Life didn't suck at all.

We soaked in the steamy waters until our bodies and minds were rid of the stress of labouring under the hot sun. When our driver prodded us along to make it back in time for dinner, we reluctantly rounded up and walked back to the edge of the desert. We stood peacefully looking out from the precipice between the mountains dotted with scrubby brush and the plain of empty, cracked earth. The sun painted a pastel wash on the sky as it sunk behind the western mountains. We slowly trekked back to the bus, while someone played a Tibetan singing bowl that rang peacefully along the way.

I thought how strange it was that on this tract of earth that could only be described as inhospitable and barren, this place where no living creature otherwise dwelled, we chose to celebrate life itself. This was where we built our city, this was where we lit our sacred fires, this was where we chose to be.

We boarded the bus and looked out to the horizon, noticing the city was obscured by dust clouds. Our driver had navigated the bus through dust storms before, so we put our trust in him as he steered us into the storm. We had travelled a mere half a mile towards the city when

the winds grew so strong we were forced to veer off course in order to prevent the bus from tipping over. In 90 mile per hour winds, the double decker bus acted like the sail of a ship in the howling gusts, but we drove on, blindly cutting back and forth across the desert in the darkening twilight.

We knew the worst was over when we reached the trash fence and it was not long after that when the dust clouds dissipated. Back at camp, we were devastated to find the first floor of the temple had collapsed again. My tent had again filled with another sand dune, and I began to see I was paddling upstream. I would need to become one with the dust. Several of the Temple Crew had been sleeping without tents on the bare earth in their sleeping bags, and I could now understand why. The tent didn't matter - it was a sand trap, an oven, an illusion of home.

The build progressed, and the Temple Crew settled into its rhythms: the morning foghorn roused us from our groggy slumber, the daily news was announced over breakfast, then hours of steadfast labour with breaks for tea time, lunch, more tea and then dinner that filled the belly and soothed the soul. Throughout our days there was a loving spirit growing amongst the crew. The group of tradesmen and artists of all ages and abilities cared deeply for one another, and each day we would bolster one another as we faced the winds, the heat, or the range of emotions that arose out on the desert. We were building a space for healing, and as we built it, we too were challenged to heal. Time after time, the prospect of lifting another beam or swinging one more hammer became a monumental effort in the relentless heat when our spirits were low or emotions ran high. The labour was selfless - we weren't paid to be there - and no one was counting our hours; you could only give as much as the spirit and body would permit. Constant words of encouragement and the promise of our work's importance carried us along, day by day.



Figure 48 - Wall Construction



Figure 49 - Early Burn Effigies



After a week of working with the crew, I still had not found the time to explore the city being built across the playa. It felt inappropriate to abandon the crew for my other projects, so I remained faithful to labouring on the temple. The Early Burn takes place one week before the festival begins, and it would give me a chance to explore some of the projects being built. All over the playa, large-scale artworks had been under construction, and the Early Burn would bring together the various crews to unwind and burn small effigies representing each of the projects. On the day of the burn, the Temple Crew pieced together a sculpture out of scraps from the build site, and laced it with fireworks and accelerant for ignition. I ventured over to the event on the back of a truck with some of the crew, just in time to see the start of a dozen-or-so effigies being ignited. The burn was unruly and chaotic, with a lenient stance on safety as the crowd roamed freely around the fires.

After watching the structures burn down piles of glowing embers, I went off to tour some of the other projects around the desert. The nearest build site was that of the Man, and its base was guarded by some stern-looking crew from the Department of Public Works (DPW). Their gruffness demanded a wide berth from onlookers, citing safety concerns, so I did not linger there long. Their lack of welcome was surprising, as the temple site had such a relaxed and friendly atmosphere, especially towards visitors who showed interest in how the build progressed. I wandered over to the pier and sunken ship, whose crew was hosting an entertaining game of 'Mast-Hole'. The object of the game was to throw a wooden skittle into a hole on the deck of the large ship, which was built to look as though it had washed up on the playa decades ago. The pier crew was welcoming and friendly, encouraging us to explore the nearly completed boardwalk, while steering clear of stray skittles

from the raucous games underway. I joined for a game of Mast-Hole, and chatted with a few of the crew members. When I mentioned I was a volunteer on the Temple, I was surprised by their reaction. An effusive "Thank You!" came forth, and was echoed by people in the vicinity, while others were called over to meet me. I had not expected such warm reactions, but I took it as an indication of just how much the Burners valued their temples.

I wandered away from the ship into the city streets, which were still mostly empty. Rows upon rows of tiny flags awaited the various camps that would be arriving throughout the next week. Port-a-potties had been placed along the radial streets, and it felt as if the whole desert was just waiting, patiently ready for the onslaught of creative chaos that would soon descend upon the desert. I wandered back across the playa, meandering from project to project, admiring all the creations coming to fruition after months or even years in the making. Eventually I returned to the temple, and joined some of the Temple Crew who were watching the build site from a distance. With one week remaining, I could hardly wait to see how it would all come together.

Life was not all beer and skittles, though, and tensions mounted as our build progressed that repeatedly chased members of the crew off the construction site to wrestle with their emotions. New volunteers were arriving daily, and we had to teach new arrivals the rules and practices of the worksite. Learning how to share tools, respect the subtle hierarchy of tasks, and surrender to the menial tasks that supported the build was essential to smooth progress. Sometimes an entire day could be spent cleaning up the work site, when you wished you were piecing together some ornamental screen or crafting something beautiful. But every job was of equal importance, for without the menial tasks we could



Figure 50 - A Game of Masthole



Figure 51 - Temple Skin

never achieve the more glamorous ones. That ethos needed to be shared with all the incoming crew.

Looking back, it is difficult to say exactly when or how the crew all came together, but I soon felt as though I had found a new extended family. The great challenge of building the temple was also a great privilege, and the relationships I forged along the walls of the temple changed me. I bore witness to the stories of the Temple Crew, and comforted them when they shared their grief or pain. I heard stories that made my blood run cold or broke my heart, and stories that made me grin my toothiest grin. Through it all, we built up the walls of the temple, so that thousands more might come to share their stories too, and let go of what they needed to burn.

The aesthetics of the temple had fascinated me from the moment I saw the proposed drawings on the project's website. The design resembled a blend of traditional Asian temples, with pagoda-like tiers that diminished in scale as they rose. I recall being confused by the temple's dedication to the Roman goddess Juno, while embracing an orientalist aesthetic. The contrast of adopted mythologies and symbolism fought everything I had ever learned in my architectural education, but I chose to embrace it to see what could be learned from such a unique design.

When I joined the Temple Crew on the desert, I was astounded by the countless stacks of CNC-cut plywood that had been brought to ornament the temple. The designs cut into each sheet were organic but abstract, such that each sheet could be used as a whole, or cut down into smaller pieces and used to sculpt ornamental details. The process of ornamentation was largely intuitive, with David Best piecing together



Figure 52 - CNC-Cut Plywood Ornament



Figure 53 - Gate Detail

initial details, and crew members executing the patterns repeatedly around the structure. We were encouraged to become the authors of the ornament, and we worked solo or in teams to repeat details around the whole of the temple. I fell in love with the abstract ornament that graced the rough 'bones' of the now framed-out temple. The ornament was a physical expression of the care we had for the process, and the beauty we aspired to imbue in the space. Each detail had to be uniquely and attentively crafted, and it would perform no function but to enrich the appearance of the temple. In Antoine de St. Exupery's *The Little Prince*, he writes that a rose is a rose like a thousand other roses, but when you've taken the time to care for a rose, it is the time you have spent that makes your rose special. With over a hundred volunteers dedicated to ornamenting the temple, the walls became something more than just walls, because they made obvious the love and dedication that had gone into making that space.

I decided to ask David Best about his inspiration for the temple's form and aesthetics, and he told me about his travels through southeast Asia, where he found inspiration in the architecture he encountered there. His passion for the form and details of those temples may have contrasted the temple's dedication to Juno, but perhaps it could be equally argued that the two inspirations complimented one another. With this consideration, my critical judgement melted away until all I could see was how that space was shaped by love.





Figure 54 - Temple Scraps



Figure 55 - Temple Assembly on



Figure 56 - Temple Assembly 02



Figure 57 - Temple Assembly 03



Figure 58 - Temple Assembly 04



Figure 59 - Temple Courtyard

When Saturday arrived, I packed up my camp at the temple to move into the city. I chose a site near to where the Temple Camp would move to, anticipating that the friends joining me for the festival might not feel as comfortable joining the intimate Temple Crew as they would staying in the melange of camps a few blocks off. I set up my tent at 7:35 and Dandelion, and then turned my wheels towards the gate. I drove out to the edge of the desert, and let my thoughts drift to a warm shower at the hotel that night. The roads were clear and I made it to Reno in good time. My first stop in town was for a cafe with internet and so I could call my parents. I was thrilled to hear their voices, safe and sound, and I recounted my experiences with the Temple Crew for them. I spoke at times through heavy sobs, as I tried to describe the incredible effort I had been privileged to take part in: the healing, the labour, the sheer size and beauty of the temple itself, and the willpower to build that space in the heart of a desolate dustbin that did everything in its power to blow it all down. I repeated my stories for my brother and sister, and then headed downtown to check into the hotel. My car was a dusty mess, and I was even dustier. I barely noticed the strange looks I attracted, and could think only of the hot shower that awaited me in the room. When I'd rinsed off enough dust to feel presentable, I headed off in search of the airport and my friends.

## **6 – Burning Nerds**

August 26, 2012

I picked up Secret AJent and Bob Loblaw on Saturday night from the Reno airport. When I saw them standing in the pickup area, I could barely contain my excitement. After two and a half weeks building the temple in the desert, I was comforted to find myself in the company of old friends to share my experiences with. My two companions were excited to catch me up on everything I had missed out on back home, but they were even more interested to hear about my time on the playa. I drove us to our hotel, where I had checked in earlier that evening. Reno was surprisingly sleepy for a Saturday night. We explored the hotel's casino until we gave up hope on finding healthy food or respectable entertainment, and then retired to our room.

Sunday morning we slept in, and then set out to begin our errands. Our mission included laundry, groceries, and purchasing a new tent. My six-man tent had not fared well against the high winds on the playa. The fly was torn to shreds and though I had grown accustomed to the fine dust that sifted in through the tent's screens, I knew my friends would appreciate a less dusty nest. After visiting a few stores whose tents were outside our budget, we headed towards the place that had it all, the place that countless Burners commonly rely upon... Walmart. When we pulled into the parking lot, we attracted the attention of a dozen half-naked twenty-somethings sitting on top of an RV sipping beers in the sun. Their scarce clothing was all neon, and I quickly pegged them as burners. My vehicle still bore traces of my desert adventures with its thick layer of dust that was caked onto every square inch of it, and the group asked what I had been up to on the playa. They told us it was their first year, and asked about the conditions on the playa. I



told them the dunes on the desert were treacherous. They weren't, but I decided it was best to prepare them for the worst, so they could be pleasantly surprised.

Secret AJent, Bob Loblaw and I walked up to the behemoth store. I had done this the year before, I remembered the tears, and did not want to repeat that incident. How had it come to this again? We had been out all day searching for tents and tequila, but we still found ourselves out of options, out of time, and out of patience. We had a list, so we assigned ourselves items to find, and assured ourselves we could make it out with our heads held high. But five minutes into our mission, I found my cart trapped in an aisle gridlocked with tie-dyed tank tops and I panicked amidst the ravenous consumption. Anxiety overwhelmed me as I looked at my ominous list. Where was all this stuff hiding in this maze of aisles? People all around me were loading whole shelves of coconut water into their carts, topping them with flats of beer, and all the while looking generally disgruntled, disoriented, and disheartened.

It is ironic that for a festival that cherishes a week of 'decommodification', one should find a sea of burners crowding the aisles of the local Walmart shortly before the festival. It sounds like binge-eating before a hunger strike. Regardless, it produced a tightness in my chest, a lump in my throat, and a burning desire to forget the list and run for the hills.

But then, standing amidst the throngs of hippies, I surrendered. I looked around me at the beautiful faces that would soon be scampering about the vast playa and I smiled. In many senses the festival, or at least its pilgrimage, had begun; this gathering of our community was just one of many signs that we were coming together. We could get

through our little visit to the big box. We needed a tent, and I had my heart set on a luxury three-room vacation lodge. Luckily, Walmart carried those large enough to sleep ten, complete with partitioned rooms and an electrical port beside the front door. And it was affordable. We raced through the labyrinth of products towards the cash registers, grabbing body pillows en route. The challenge of Walmart was not so much to find what we needed, but to escape with only that, and little more.

We checked out, hastily repacked the van, and drove two blocks down the road to Trader Joe's for some groceries. Twenty minutes later, our commodified souls were spent. We would not buy more. We could not buy more. It was time.

Our excitement mounted as we drove towards the Black Rock Desert, joining the parade of vehicles strapped down with their absurd collections of bicycles and sofas. Bob Loblaw's and Secret AJent's burgin excitement reminded me of my arrival at the festival the previous year. As we rolled into Gerlach, my eye caught a sign held up by a young man on the side of the road, it read: "Miracle Ticket Needed". I immediately swerved off the road and rolled down the window. "What kind of miracle are you in need of?" I asked. He told me all he had was seventy-five dollars. I told him I'd take his money, and we cleared out a seat for him to pile in with his remarkably meager possessions. I am amazed by travellers who get by with such a minimal existence, trusting that their needs will be adequately met through the gifting economy at the festival. Legend has it that a person once showed up naked at Burning Man, and profited so well from the gift economy that he left with not just clothes on his back, but a car. In any case, the young gentleman we had picked up, proved to be entertaining company



Figure 60 - Miracle Ticket Needed

for the car ride, and the perfect candidate for the extra ticket I'd ended up with in the effort to solve my will-call conundrum three weeks before. Our traveller surprised us with another token of thanks when he pulled out some small paintings he had made as gifts for the festival and offered us each one. We were tickled that the magic of gifting had already begun.

When we stopped for gas in Gerlach, we also took a moment to survey the bikes for sale there. None of us had managed to secure bicycles for the event, but the ones for sale there were all too small or broken to be worth the cost. Back on the road, we only made it a hundred feet before the line of cars came to a complete halt. This was disconcerting, as we still had a long stretch of highway to travel before our tires hit the dust. Every couple minutes the cars ahead of us would creep forward a few lengths, and we contented ourselves to pass the time by conversing with Blue. The hours passed, and eventually we left the highway to join a four-lane parking-lot that called itself a lineup. Silhouettes passed by beaming headlights, weaving back and forth through the night, and our passengers took turns venturing out to survey the mystical scene. The energy in the line that night was far different from the year before, when it had been a sweaty and exciting prelude for the party. This year a few rowdy vehicles were blasting music and sipping beers, but most were as calm and quiet as the night sky. We inched along now at a quarter the pace we had moved on the highway, and impatiently anticipated reaching the gate. It was frustrating to have been in the city for two whole weeks, and find myself having to wait in the gruelling entry lineup again, something many seasoned Burners will actively avoid, but I focused on how happy I was to see my old friends and considered the magical week we were bound to share. An evening in line would be a small price to pay for their company at the festival, and well worth the wait.

We reached the will-call window at four in the morning, and huddled together in the cold night while we waited to pick up our tickets at long last. Piling back into the car one last time, we started our engine and rolled up to the gate. Security waved us through with few questions, and we approached the greeter station. Our tickets were scanned, and the two burgins in our car (Bob Loblaw and Secret AJent) were called out to get playafied. The greeter had them lay down and make some dust angels, and then ceremoniously hammer the gong while screaming their deflowerment into the night. They weren't burgins anymore.

The city was mostly asleep, and I made a beeline for our camp. My dilapidated tent stood thick with dust, inside and out, and I welcomed campmates to our home, sweet home. First light was slowly rising beyond the eastern mountains, and Secret AJent and I lay down for a spell of rest before the heat would arrive. Bob Loblaw went off to check out The Man and get his bearings.

After our short nap, we awoke to find a van parked in our front yard where I had planned to erect the Pearl Palace. Set on a milk crate beside the van was halved watermelon with a knife stuck in it. From the van's open door I could see someone asleep in the back, and I figured he wouldn't last long before the sun cooked him back there and woke him up. I guessed that he had been unable to find his campmates when he arrived in the wee hours, and parked here temporarily. We set to making our coffee and breakfast, and then started setting up our new tent. Bob Loblaw came strolling back after a tour out to the Man, and seemed out of sorts from having not slept. We finished setting up our new tent, and were delighted to step inside our 200 sq.ft. home, neatly divided into its three separate rooms. We staked the tent down with rebar, and tied some guy wires out to the car to keep the whole thing from flying off or flattening in a dust storm.

The man in the van woke up close to noon, and came stumbling out into the sunshine. I could hardly believe he lasted as long as he did in the van without getting heat stroke. He introduced himself as Igor. He had a shaved head, a thick Russian accent, and lived in San Francisco. Igor offered us some of his watermelon that had been sitting in the hot sun all morning, and I politely declined. I have had foodborne illness more than once in my life, and would not be taking my chances on the unrefrigerated fruit. I explained to Igor that he was parked in our front yard, and he asked if he could camp near us. Realizing he had come alone, we invited him to park in back beside our van.

Having settled our neighbourly arrangements, I wanted to return to the temple and see how things had turned out while I was away. Secret AJent and I packed our bags, and headed out for the long walk out to the temple. Bob Loblaw was having trouble adjusting to the heat and dust, and stayed back to rest and chat with Igor. On our walk, we stopped to admire the effigies that studded the playa - a lighthouse, a lattice diagrid egg, a replica of Tatlin's Monument to the Third International, a great big bull, and a crowned baby standing atop a large dome. The dust was kicking up something fierce, likely from all the traffic at the gate, and we walked on blindly, guided only by the colonnade of lampposts that led from the Man to the Temple.

We arrived at the temple to find that it was still fenced off for construction, and there was a flurry of activity going on. I realized things must not have progressed as smoothly as planned in the last two days, so I left Secret AJent to explore the festival and headed in. I sussed out where my efforts could be best spent, and was soon set to work at David Best's request to finish some details around the inner sanctum. The whole crew was rushing around madly to finish the job, with



Figure 61 - Temple in a Dust Storm



Figure 62 - Temple Home Stretch



half the team working on clean-up while the other half tried to affix as many details as they could to the temple before it would be opened to the crowd waiting patiently outside. The crew pushed on for a few more hours through the hot sun and relentless dust clouds, until the last nail had been nailed, and all the equipment was cleared out leaving the temple eerily quiet and empty.

I wandered around examining what we had accomplished. The temple was beautiful. Wide splaying gates welcomed visitors into the protective walls of the courtyard, the first threshold between the city and the reverent sanctum. The courtyard was pierced by small spires that marked four separate altars, each surrounded by benches for sitting and reflection. The walls of the courtyard were also lined with benches that provided seats in the shade beside the intricate latticework. Towering over the whole temple was the soaring spire of the inner sanctum, which spread out into a wide canopy at its base. The intricately detailed walls of the inner sanctum were canted inwards, and passing through one of its doorways revealed the dazzling display of ornament that graced the interior volume. Within the void of the tower was an enormous chandelier, suspended just above the central altar, as though the two were reaching out to one another. Every inch of the space was laden with ornament, evidencing the great care that had been taken to articulate a graceful canvas for visitors to come and make their mark upon.



Figure 63 - Finishing Touches

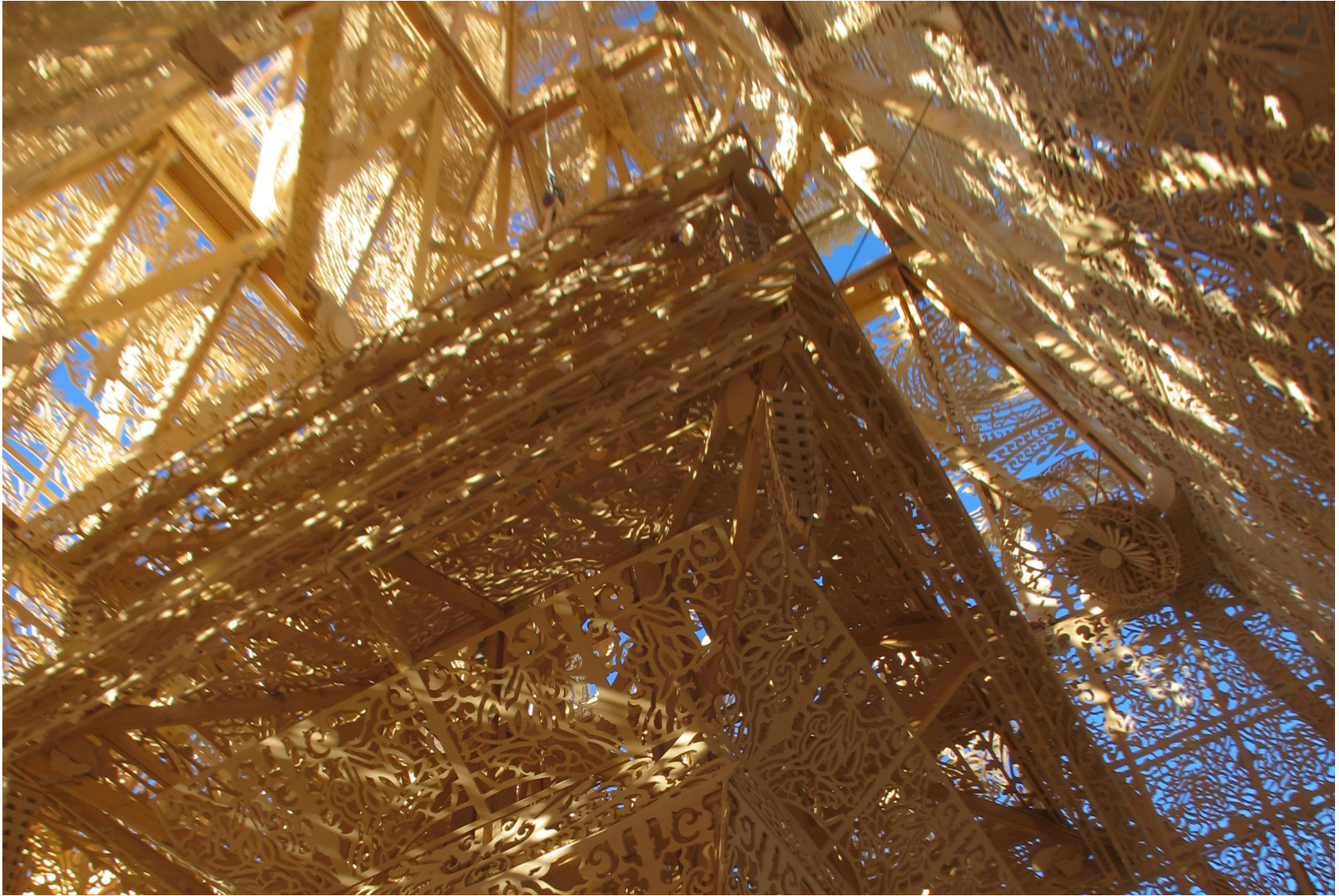


Figure 64 - Temple Chandelier Detail



Figure 65 - Resting Place

Out in the courtyard there sat one last piece of heavy machinery, a basket crane, and a woman from the temple crew was climbing inside with its operator. The crew watched from the courtyard as the basket extended up towards the uppermost tier of the temple's roof spire. In the woman's hands was a small urn containing her husband's ashes. We quietly watched as she placed the urn at the base of the spire, and took a few moments to herself. Then, the basket was lowered back down to the ground, and the crane was driven out of the courtyard.

The temple crew all gathered inside the inner sanctum nearly filling the whole space, where David Best and the project leads spoke to congratulate our efforts. Finally, we erupted in joyous cheers, with thunderous clapping, hooting and hollering.

The crew emptied out into the courtyard, where we assembled for a few photographs and one last round of hugs and congratulations. While the last few photos were taken with crew members on the steps of the temple, I wandered back into the empty inner sanctum one last time. It was now cleared of any evidence that it had been a construction site just hours before. The setting sun filtered in through the delicate lattice plywood screens, and I stood in awe of the space that had been made to accept people's grief, joys, and offerings. Never before had I understood a space to be shaped so entirely out of love.

I exited back out to the courtyard, where the large crowd that had patiently waited outside the temple was being invited in. The temple crew was dispersing, and I watched as the visitors wandered in, gazing around in awe of the ornate surroundings. The crowd filtered into the inner sanctum, where they seated themselves around the altar, and gazed up at the towering spire, and chandelier. As the visitors began to

meditate, pray, write on the walls, and leave offerings at the various altars, I saw that without a word of instruction, they transformed what I had known as a construction site into a sacred space. It was a profound moment, one that prompted me to look down at the Temple Crew lanyard around my neck. It read, "What is sacred? What is not? What makes something sacred?". I exited the temple, and started the long walk back towards camp, charged with the awesome inspiration of witnessing that precious moment.

That evening, the temple family gathered for a celebratory feast together. Bob Loblaw and Secret Agent joined me as guests, and I introduced them to all the smiling creatures I'd come to know. After dinner we found ourselves sitting with David Best, and we asked him to share with us his thoughts on architecture. He told us a story about a woman needing to go to a welfare office to pick up a cheque that would let her feed herself and her children. He suggested that if the building she needs to visit is intimidating, then the architecture has not done its job. He went on to propose that, "a building should not be better than the people it serves".

When I considered how David Best has used architecture to serve his community, I was struck by the humility in his work. The prospect of a humble architecture was an idea I rarely encountered in my education, but something I now believe can profoundly come to influence the spaces we make. I often share photos of Burning Man with friends and family, they always remark on the temple that it is a shame to burn something so beautiful, after all the work we put into it. But it is made beautifully in order to honour the sacred rituals that it houses, and burn alongside that which its visitors want to burn. Such an offer embodies the most selfless act of creation. The grief, the joy, the intentions, they all deserve to be honoured with grace and respect.



Figure 66 - Inaugural Visit



Figure 67 - Ivory Tower Sections



Tuesday morning we awoke to the sound of a brilliant aria blasting from a nearby camp, Clutch Pickle. I emerged from our tent wearing a tutu that I had finished sewing the night before, in time for Tutu Tuesday. That day we would build the Ivory Tower and present at the Burning Nerds Symposium, and I was looking forward to sharing the day with other scholars and geeks on the playa. After coffee and breakfast, I had a conversation with Igor about tutus (his concept of what would pass as a tutu was fuzzy), that ended in my gifting him the gold tutu I had sewn for my first Burn. He seemed pleased, and proceeded to adorn the tutu with additional materials. I set out with Bob Loblaw to find our event co-ordinator, near centre camp. We found her without much trouble, and made a plan to transport the Ivory Tower across the Playa to the venue, Automatic Subconscious. After picking up ice from Arctica, we headed back to camp and gathered our camp together to prepare the Ivory Tower. The tower consisted of two hyperboloid sections that would stack on top of each other, and while I had transported half the tower from Canada pre-assembled, the second half was yet to be prepared. As we arranged the stack of pre-drilled lumber to be tied at all its intersections, our construction attracted some passersby who volunteered a helping hand. There were 84 connections to be tied with twine, but with many hands helping the task was completed faster than I could have hoped. We lifted the second structure onto the first, and tied off the connections where the joints met, and then tied a few cross braces to keep the tower from splaying outwards. As we stood back to admire the tower, Rosalie arrived with the van, right on time. We quickly collapsed the tower, untied the two segments from one another, and packed the whole thing into the back of the vehicle.

We arrived at Automatic Subconscious and were excited to find our venue, a twenty-foot-tall egg-shaped dome. The tubular metal structure had a slide coming off the side, and a netting stretched around its crown for hammock-style lounging with a great view. We erected the tower outside, and secured its base to prevent it from blowing over in the wind. Inside the dome, there was an aerial silk workshop being held, so we quietly dropped off a cooler full of cold drinks that had been donated for our event. After reviewing some details with the camp's coordinator, we piled back into the van to be dropped off at the Mollusk Nation.

We took a quick lunch and a moment to prepare ourselves for the symposium, and then the Mollusk Nation started its journey back to Automatic Subconscious. We were on foot this time, and took the most direct route across the playa, arriving just after the first talks had begun. The Ivory Tower was still outside, so in between speakers we collapsed the full-height of it, and brought it inside the dome. In one swift motion, the tower was erected and opened like a flower beside the speakers' platform, and the lectures continued. The speakers came from many disciplines, including Philosophy, Psychiatry, Ethnomusicology, Sociology, Mathematics, and Architecture, and concluded with words from Caveat Magister, a writer for The Burning Blog. Guests were invited to linger and mingle, and write upon the Ivory Tower what they were learning about at the festival. Soon it was time to close up the Ivory Tower and haul it back to camp where it would stand until the next gathering of academics on Friday.



Figure 68 - Burning Nerds Symposium - Bob Loblaw



Figure 69 - Burning Nerds Symposium - Ivory Tower Dedication



Figure 70 - Burning Nerds Symposium - Lounge Overhead

The following morning I awoke to the sound of the same aria being blasted over loud speakers. It was a glorious, if unwelcome, awakening. I stumbled out of the tent to find our nearest neighbours sitting half-naked, painting each others' bodies. They were the Desperadoes, a group of beautiful, barely-legal burners from California. Two of them were wearing knit tubes that were only long enough to cover their tops or their bottoms, but not both. I complimented their tube, and one of them suddenly ran off, returning moments later with an olive green tube to call my own. I was thrilled, and put it on straight away, adding a pair of suspenders to keep it in place. It was now Wednesday, and the Mollusk Nation still had no signs of any Molluskan structures, so I rallied Secret AJent and Bob Loblaw to help me with the construction of the Pearl Palace. The structure was simple, but finicky, and it took all morning just to get our rebar stakes pounded in, and the PVC tubes cut to appropriate lengths. After lunch, Bob Loblaw and I wrestled with the ropes and PVC to fashion the structure I had designed. Meanwhile, Secret AJent plugged away on the tedious task that I had left to complete on the desert, but was unable to complete during the temple build. The reams of dyed fabric that I had seamed had to be threaded with ropes, so they could be bunched up to create the ruffled appearance I was aiming for. Soon we were all tired and frustrated, but my friends patiently helped me to figure out the design I had drawn. Nothing was going quite as I had hoped, and it was nearly sunset by the time the columns were standing plumb, with ample headroom below the roof.

It was dinner time, and in Temple Crew fashion I put a stop order on our work. We could finish threading the fabric and skinning the tent in the morning, and it was time to relax, enjoy some food, and explore the city in the cool of night. We adventured far and wide, around the endless stretches of artwork, camps, and empty playa, until we found ourselves back at camp and snuggled into our sleeping bags.



Figure 71 - Constructing the Pearl Palace



Figure 72 - Pearl Palace and Ivory Tower Structures



On Thursday I awoke with the confidence that we would finish the Pearl Palace that day. We set to work bright and early, and continued threading ropes through the fabric. Since it was only a two-person job, Bob Loblaw excused himself to go explore until his efforts were needed. With our tedious work in hand, we sat in a small patch of shade beside my ratty old tent, and watched the traffic roll by.

While we worked, curious strangers and neighbours dropped in to inquire about our unique structures. The Ivory Tower stood near the road overtop a black wig that Igor had put there, as a nest. Inside the nest were a few eggs that he had spray-painted black in the back of his van. He had left the black eggs in the sun the day before, presumably to cook them. After they had sat in the sun all day, he cracked one open and it was raw. But he proceeded to eat it anyways, and now the nest of black eggs sat below the tower, with a small sign he had posted that read 'Free Hosting for Blackbirds'. Beside the tower was our unusual PVC structure, which we sat working under. The whole scene suggested that something interesting was happening, but it was impossible to discern what that might be.

When you sit still at Burning Man, the festival will often come to you. But from time to time you need to coax it in by walking onto the street with a spray bottle and offering cooling spritzes to passersby. In my star-spangled speedo I was quickly dubbed 'Mister America', and soon met 'Mister Mister', one of our neighbours from down the block who had a spray bottle of his own. Mister Mister picked our brains about the Ivory Tower and the Pearl Palace, and then showed us the geodesic dome he had made.

We returned to threading rope, and when one ream of fabric was complete I began to dress the Pearl Palace with its ruffled skin. I tried to drape the fabric in elegant swoops that overlapped like the model I had made, but found the material did not have the same sculptural quality at this scale. These results were rather disappointing, but with only so much time and patience left we would take whatever shade we could make, even if that meant a somewhat limp and droopy shell. When the Pearl Palace was fully dressed, I smiled at its shabbiness, and congratulated our dedicated clam nation with a round of Bloody Clams. Again, it was time to relax, explore, and adventure until our bodies gave out.



Figure 73 - Pearl Palace in Black Rock City



Figure 74 - In the Shade of the Pearl Palace



Figure 75 - Pearl Palace Interior



Figure 76 - Ivory Tower at Burning NERDS Mixer

On Friday I travelled with the Ivory Tower to Ashram Galactica for the Mixer, and set up the Effigy for the event. The scholarly mixer was hosted in a sweaty Moroccan tent, and a few speeches covered the latest news from the academic realms of Burning Man. The census efforts were chronicled, along with recent publications, and then formal talks dissolved into casual conversations and mingling. Bob Loblaw showed up, and I ran into Everywhere from the Temple Crew. When the event wound down, we marked the end of the academic proceedings by burning the Ivory Tower. We hauled it down the block to a Burn Garden, and tossed the structure into the coals with a great heave-ho. I whooped and hollered, and stood back to watch the flames roar. And then it was gone. After dreaming it up back in Canada, building and transporting to the playa, erecting it and investing it with stories, intentions and lessons, it was now gone. I felt lightness in my chest - not only had the object itself gone away, but so too went all the ideas and emotions I had attached to it, and my responsibility to the object itself. It felt great.

The Ivory Tower was my first piece that I had built and burned of my own volition, and the catharsis of the whole process was satisfying and surprising. I could only imagine what release the temple burn would bring in a few days.



Figure 77 - Ivory Tower at the Burning Nerds Mixer





Figure 78 - Ivory Tower Detail



Figure 79 - Ivory Tower Looking Up



Figure 8o - Ivory Tower in Burn Garden

Saturday was my last chance to capture more of the city before it started disappearing. The past week had passed with a flurry of efforts and distractions, and now that I found myself with time dedicated to documenting the camps, art, and stories that I came to capture, I realized I had little plan as to which stories were most important to tell. I was well prepared to document with my cameras, sketchbooks, and consent forms in hand, but I still found myself paralyzed by indecision. If I turned left, or right, I would end up with very different stories. I could try picking camps and artworks at random on a map, but that was no better as not all art pieces or camps are listed, and I might find myself trekking across the city to find an empty campsite, or a pile of ashes where artwork once stood. I considered approaching the camps that I was intuitively drawn to or those that welcomed an interview, but such an obvious bias would produce a slanted portrait of the art and architecture that the festival produced. I meandered down the street while I mulled over my problem, and soon reached the kissing booth at the intersection of 7:30 and Dandelion. I asked the couple working the booth if I could join them, and they gladly welcomed me in. The booth stood eight feet tall, a simple opening cut from a giant set of lips painted on a sheet of plywood. The couple had not brought the booth to the festival, but were happily working it with their baby napping in the shade nearby. Standing in the hot sun, we began to hawk our services.

Get your Kisses! Free Kisses! Peppermint, Spearmint, Pick Your Flavour! Tasty Fresh Kisses! Get 'Em While They're Hot & Wet! 3 For 1 Kisses on Sale Now!

We shouted ceaselessly at passersby, until we lured them in with our cat calls, whistles and kissy faces. We offered an array of kissing options between our three sets of lips, servicing all consenting adults



Figure 81 - Street Life

with kisses in locations of their choosing. Locking lips with strangers conjured up images of all sorts of communicable disease, but I smooched on, committed to my duty. It was indeed pleasurable, sharing carefully placed pecks and salacious smooches in the heat of the day. Some kisses lacked the grace and tempo I appreciate when locking lips, but others blew me right out of the water.

Amidst the piecemeal lot that strayed our way was a young woman in her early twenties who brazenly asked to snap our photo and get our signatures on release forms for a study she was conducting. I looked her up and down and saw everything I did not want my thesis research to be. It was a drive-by shooting of the festival, a cursory portrait of what was otherwise a novel, rich and meaningful cultural landscape. As she pulled consent forms from her bag I interjected, "Excuse me, but I won't let you off so easy. What's the point in photographing a kissing booth you've never used? I think you need to earn your signatures from each of us." The girl seemed shocked, and looked up at us sheepishly. It's natural to make Burning Man a spectator sport, to just watch the parade go by. But the festival is a chance to be in the parade, or at least pick up some candy, so you better give out some sugar. A few smooches later, the young lady took our photo and signatures and we went back to peddling lip service.

My throat was hoarse from shouting after an hour, so I said my goodbyes and wandered off. I found a lineup for snow cones and served myself a an icy red and blue delight that was a whimsical treat on the hot playa.

The camp owners told me the story of their coming to the festival, and explained the logistics of making icy treats in the desert. I thought back to the consent forms in my bag, and wondered whether it was appropriate to pull out my video camera and capture this story in articulate detail, but decided against it. After my encounter with the drive-by photographer, I needed to carefully reconsider the methodology of my research.

Three weeks prior, I had arrived on the playa with clearance for my proposed cultural study from the university's office of research ethics, and I thought I was prepared to collect data. Through the course of the temple build, and the week of the festival, I had not acted as the researcher I thought I would be. But in a place where the rules of engagement include immediacy, self expression and inclusion, this shift was no surprise. The camera and consent forms were an attempt to reduce the individuals and experiences at the festival to objective truths, and the fact was that personal experiences of the festival are entirely subjective. When I burned the Ivory Tower, I learned what it felt like to burn an effigy for myself, but knew that someone else may have an entirely different experience of the same ritual. When I built an object with my own hands, shared its story, and then burnt it, I experienced the cathartic release that relinquished all the ideas I had attached to it. I could only share that lived understanding from my own perspective, and any attempts to reduce these experiences to a survey of responses would produce a shallow understanding of the festival.

I looked around at the snow cone camp, and I thought to myself that next year there might not be any snow cones. Or maybe everyone would bring snow cones. Or maybe it would snow. In any case, I wasn't about to start running around trying to capture these snippets in interviews. It was time I stopped worrying about the stories I had missed, and started considering the stories I had already experienced.

I took a walk out to the edge of the city, to the outermost street known as 'The Beach'. It was on the edge of a vast stretch of empty playa. There were a few kiteboards lying around, but no wind. I walked a ways out onto the playa and looked back. It seemed like a nice place to camp, on the furthest edge, away from the hustle and bustle of the interior streets. I did not linger there, but turned back to move towards the heart of the city. On my way I found a phone booth and stopped to talk to God. His drunken slur was suspicious, and so I hung up and wandered into Sacred Spaces Village, where I found people in meditation, practicing shamanic journeying, and wandering around with pupils that betrayed an altered state of consciousness. I imagined what realms of consciousness they were contending with, or what such a statement might mean, and considered what a peaceful, quiet space was being held in the village. It was a gentle reprieve amidst the pounding excitement of the city. But I was unable to find my place there, and moved on.





Figure 82 - The Beach



Figure 83 - Temple of Juno

I looked for a yellow bike to quicken my pace, but was unable to spot one that was in working order. After a week in the dusty heat, most bike chains had seized up and tires were bursting in the hot sun. I walked past dense encampments towards the large sound stages at the 10:00 end of the city. In the light of day, I was surprised to find no thrashing crowd or dancing fervour. The DJ stages stood on the edge of the city, waiting for the evening when art cars would park there to form walls that demarcated dance floors in front of the stages. I continued walking out across the desert, and on towards the temple.

When I reached the temple, I paused to marvel at the scene. Bicycles were piled all around, with a few art cars parked in the distance. The soaring spire of the temple stood quietly beckoning the countless pilgrims to the sanctum. The perimeter wall marked the threshold to the sacred space, and was heavily adorned with words and images left to burn.

I passed through the southwest gate into the courtyard, where people were respectfully engaged with the temple. Since there is no prescribed ways to use the temple, individuals are charged to author their own rituals, and the results take various forms. Some participants choose to find a quiet space to reflect, or write on the temple walls, while others bring photographs, letters, and various mementos to leave behind, pinning them to the walls or placing them on the altars. Visitors at the temple will use the space to speak, sing or chant something they feel moved to express in that sacred space. I studied the writing and images on the walls, finding all manners of grief, joy, anger, and promise. There were things left unsaid, affirmations, desires or questions, and they all embodied the hearts of people who had poured out their inner world onto the temple. It was all waiting to be burned. Many of the messages brought tears to my eyes, while others made my blood boil, and some just made me smile.



Figure 84 - Temple Courtyard



Figure 85 - Temple of Juno Altar



Figure 86 - Temple of Juno Offerings



Figure 87 - Temple Gathering



I moved through the courtyard into the inner sanctum, which was packed full of people seated, quietly witnessing and participating in the unscripted rituals. One at a time, participants would raise their voices or stand to speak, and tell some story they felt compelled to share. One man had been an alcoholic, now sober for three years, and his voice poured out the remorse he still felt for the pain he had caused. A couple stood together to share the painful loss of their mother, who had died in a vehicle collision when a drunk driver hit her and she was impaled by a wooden post. They told her story, and then placed on the altar the wooden post that had impaled her.

The stories were patiently witnessed by the crowd of burners, costumed in their neon furs, skimpy loincloths, and long robes with their dreadlocked hair. Despite its strange appearances, the space being held in the temple was nothing but respectful. Considering the lack of rules or protocol, it was impressive to see how mannered and gracious the space remained, especially while the city outside the temple walls continued its comparatively unruly chaos.

When the weight of the suffering being shared grew too strong, I excused myself from the inner sanctum and moved back into the courtyard. Tears streamed down my cheeks as I realized the impact of the space that we had built. It was allowing people to release the pain and suffering that they needed to let go of to heal, and when it burned the next night, it would burn all the pain that must be released to return to love.

The temple was not limited to pain and suffering, and I knew two couples who were married on its sacred ground. While I was unable to attend their ceremonies, I know that the temple provided space for their celebration and joy, and it was a beautiful place for that too.

Thinking back on my day, and my reflections on gathering stories from participants in order to explain the theme camps, sculptures, art cars, or whatever else they had brought to the festival, I reached into my bag and pulled out the copies of my research ethics forms. I had arrived with what I decided was an inappropriate study to document the phenomena that is Burning Man. I could not possibly tell the story of this place from behind a video camera or microphone, picking the brains of participants as though their efforts could be understood with a cursory glance. I tucked the forms into a nook of one of the altars, and exited the temple.

Back at the Mollusk Nation, I found Bob Loblaw and Secret AJent. We prepared dinner and dressed ourselves to go out for the evening. Tonight, the Man would burn. The Temple Bus had been parked with a prime view of the Man since early in the morning, and when we arrived late that evening, I could not imagine trying to find such a good view if you were not on an art car. We ascended the spiral staircase to find a spectacular view, front and center, from which we could watch the event. Last year I had watched the Man burn from the edge of the Playa near the Pier, so this would be a new experience altogether. From our vantage point we had a clear view to the man and its base, which was surrounded by a wide berth in which only fire marshals were permitted in their heat-resistant suits. They were stationed to ward off any attempts to approach the effigy through the course of the burn. The inner circle is an important element in safety protocols for any effigies burned on



Figure 88 - Temple Bus



Figure 89 - Ecstatic Crowd

the playa, and the man burn demands one of the widest berths. Within that empty zone, the only individuals permitted aside from the fire marshals are the participants who helped build the effigy. In the case of the Man, that group also includes other DPW members whose efforts are essential to the festival's success. The group was seated inward of the circle's perimeter, and required to remain in position for the duration of the burn. The perimeter itself was held by the Fire Conclave, a group that performs choreographed fire spinning to honour the Man before it is burned. The circle of artists were performing an hypnotic display of their flow art with a range of equipment including staff, poi, fans and hoops, with performers swapping out to keep a continual spectacle before the crowd.

The fire dancing came to a close, and the fire safety team that would hold the perimeter went into position to keep the crowd at its distance from the Man. They would not witness the burn, despite their proximity to it, but they would provide a critical safety measure required for safe spectating at such an event. From the perimeter outward, the costumed crowd was packed in as tightly as could be within the ring of art cars that offered a stadium-like higher tier of seating. I appreciated our view from the second storey of the bus, above the thick of the crowd below, but noted there were some art cars elevated higher still, with scissor lifts and basket cranes that were packed with burners. In yet another, more ephemeral, layer there were quadcopters buzzing overhead filming the event from the air.

Music was blasting over the whooping and hollering crowd, and the chaos seemed to only grow louder and rowdier. Then with a loud crack and whistle, the first firework shot up high above the Man, and exploded in the night sky. The crowd erupted with a deafening roar, which grew

louder as more fireworks began jetting up into the sky to fill the air with a rainbow of glittering light. The pyrotechnics grew louder and brighter, higher and wider, until the sky was bright as day. The din of the crowd grew greater still, and shouts like "BURN THE MOTHER-@#\*%er DOWN!" came from all around. Louder and brighter still, the fireworks erupted in the most brilliant display of explosive art I had ever witnessed. The sky filled with the smoky ghosts of each blast, as new colours, shapes and sounds erupted in a symphony overhead. Then, with a boom that shook the crowd like a thousand-cannon salute, the the man base exploded in an enormous wave of fire that mushroomed up into the sky. The heat of the great blast hit us even on the bus, and a cloud of black smoke rolled upwards amidst the continuing rain of fireworks.

I was giddy and terrified with excitement, and thrilled by the obscenities being hurled at the Man to burn faster. The effigy finally caught fire, to the sheer and utter delight of the crowd, whose cheers encouraged it to burn faster. Soon the base of the statue had caught fire, and roaring flames mixed with more explosions that erupted from within the base. Finally the Man's limbs gave way, and he toppled into the fire below. With the Man down, the crowd abated slightly, still charged with an electricity but hurling fewer curses now. The flames roared larger than any fire I had ever witnessed, sending small tornadoes spinning outward from thermal dynamics I had not known were possible. The crowd in the inner circle was scrambling outward, chased by the overwhelming heat of the fire. I was sweating from the heat reaching the bus, and I wondered just how warm the crowd further in must be.



Figure 90 - The Man Burns



Figure 91 - Blazing Inferno



On and on the fire burned brightly, and I looked around studying the crowd's ecstatic grins and occasional shouts. The heavy timbers that comprised the Man's base stood long after the Man itself had fallen, and it was nearly an hour from start to finish before the last column came tumbling down. With the consent of the fire marshals, the perimeter hold was released, and the crowd went rushing in towards the edge of the receding flames. The Man had burned, once again feeding the crowd its primal energy.



Figure 92 - Ashes to Ashes

I ran to the desert  
I jumped o'er the mark  
With my body broken  
I stood in the dark

And shone to you,  
Lonely Moon.

We Came here together,  
To build up our souls,  
And offer devotions  
Then seal them in the coals,

That glow unto,  
Lonely Moon.

My family they nourish  
The bones and the soul  
Their pride rests unbroken  
It soars with the goal

To call to you,  
Lonely Moon.

I found you with pretense,  
The push of the loins  
But heart strings were plucking  
And saddled we rode.

To find in the night,  
a Lonely moon.

Now waiting for spirits  
The riddle in the rhyme  
What next dream you dreamt then  
Will haunt you all the time

Go grow into  
A Lonely Moon.

The bat flies in the nighttime,  
The sparrow, in the sun,  
Those narrow streets you walk on,  
Are leading towards the gun.

That fires on you,  
Lonely moon.

- Moon Time  
by Author



Figure 93 - Burn Preparations on

## **7– Stardust**

September 2, 2012

I awoke early on Sunday morning, having barely slept after the celebrations that followed the burning of The Man. I dressed myself in work clothes, donned my hard hat and leather gloves, and headed down the street to Temple Camp. There were a few groggy faces loafing about but it was otherwise quiet, and I helped myself to some coffee and breakfast. With fuel in my belly, I departed across the playa towards the temple. There was already a crowd on site, working to prepare the temple to burn that evening. The temple guardians were standing watch at the gates, turning away visitors who had come to spend more time at the sacred site. The closure of the temple upset many who came, but they were all offered a chance to leave any offerings they had for the temple. There was a great deal of preparation required to burn the temple. Large-scale burns on the playa must abide by extensive regulations to ensure both the safety of participants, and to prevent damaging the playa. The intense heat of past burns has scarred the desert by baking the alkaline clay under the extreme temperatures, so the Bureau of Land Management now requires all fires on the desert to provide varying degrees of protection. In the case of the temple, we were to lay down a few inches of decomposed granite around the structure to prevent any scarring.

Bulldozers were busy dumping piles of gravel around the temple, while members of the temple crew spread it around and under the structure with shovels. We worked in shifts, as there were not enough shovels to go around, and between shifts we would pile additional wood scraps around the structure to ensure that there was adequate fuel to burn the entirety of the temple. We worked through the hot sun, taking a short break for lunch, while burners looked on from beyond the temple walls. On one of my breaks from shovelling and piling up wood, I spent time bringing in offerings from people who had come to leave their words and mementos at the temple. We carefully placed each offering in and around the inner sanctum, honouring the countless intentions that were brought to be burned and released in that evening's fire. When the preparations were nearly completed, I trekked back to the Mollusk Nation and changed into a white outfit before heading back out to the temple.



Figure 94 - Burn Preparations 02

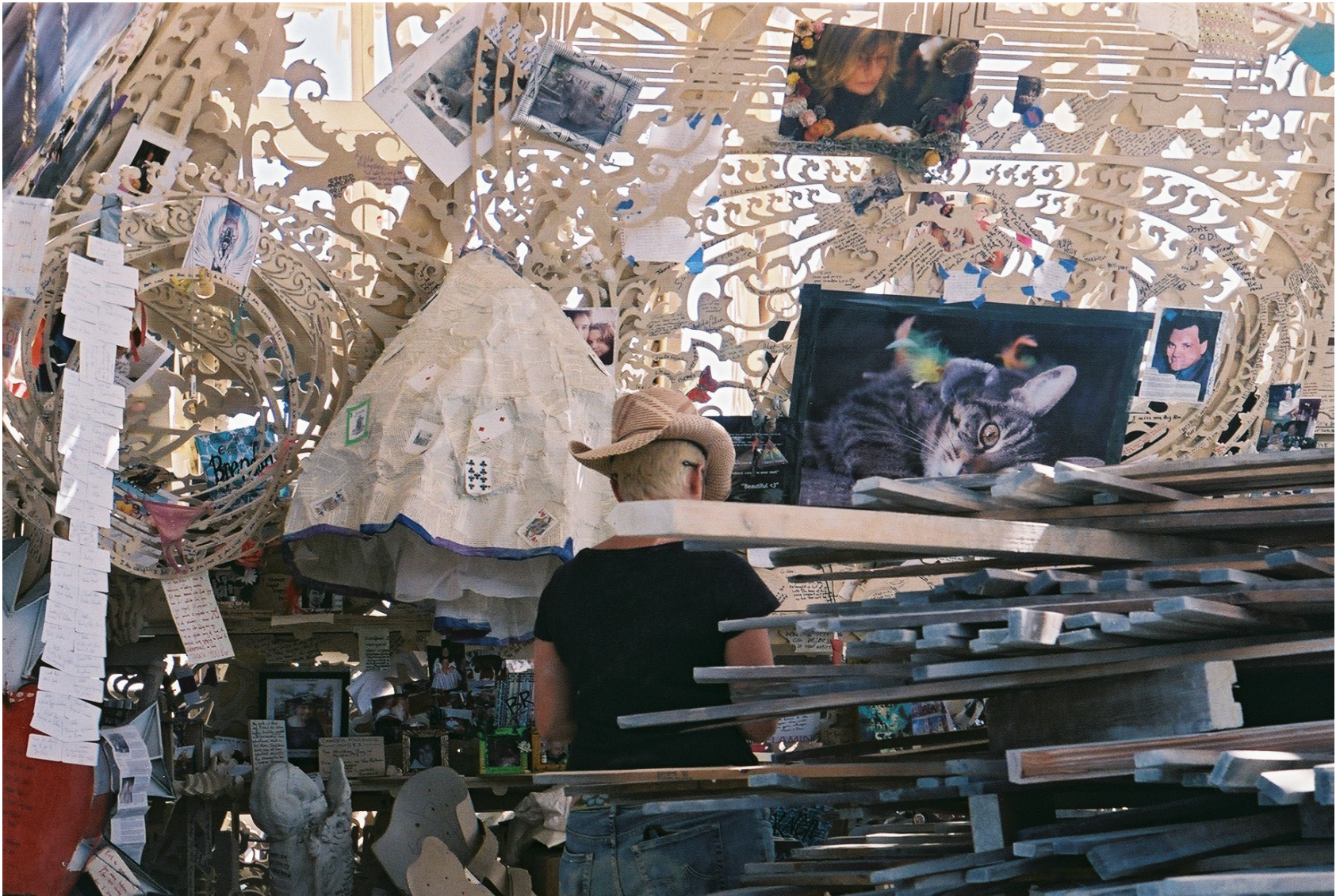


Figure 95 - Burn Preparations 03





Figure 96 - Lighting the Temple



Figure 97 - Moon over Temple Burn

When I arrived back at the site, a large perimeter had been established to keep participants' distance from the structure, which was nearly ready to burn. I spent a few more moments shovelling the last piles of gravel around, and then retired to wander around and observe the site. The hallowed grounds were overflowing with offerings that had been brought throughout the week. The tens of thousands of people who had come there had made this place sacred during the festival, and soon we would honour their intentions by releasing them in flames. I said goodbye to the space we had laboured on so diligently for weeks, and joined the other temple crew members outside. Our crew was offered the chance to sit in the inner circle to watch the burn front and centre. We set down blankets and were instructed to remain seated for the duration of the event. With a perimeter established, the fire marshals and temple guardians were now responsible for keeping people from rushing at the fire. We sat quietly, patiently awaiting the start of the ritual.

When the temple burned, the city went silent. Several thousand burners looked on while the temple we had laboured on was lit by a dozen torchbearers. The last vestiges of daylight faded beyond the mountains, while the moon quietly ascended. Reverend Billy's gospel choir from New York City began a striking rendition of Ave Maria, that lasted for what seemed like twenty minutes. Then the silence returned, and we quietly watched the fire creep around the base of the massive structure. When an art car started blasting psychedelic trance music from the peanut gallery, the crowd responded with booing and shouting until the music was silenced. For many in the audience, this burn was a memorial service, and that sacred ritual was protected. It is rare that the participants of Burning Man will define what one can and cannot do out on the playa, but this was a moment when the community was moved to define

something it stood for. The sacred silence was to be honoured by all who wished to witness it.

We watched as flames flickered inside the temple, and could see the torch bearers rushing around with their blazing torches in hand. They gathered in the centre as the spire looming above them began to glow like a lantern from within. The kindling was lit, and flames began to lick their way up the lace-like skin of the structure; the figures silhouetted against the dancing flames rushed around hurriedly. The flames were travelling more quickly than they had anticipated, and the torchbearers were forced to make an emergency exit before they could finish lighting the whole temple as planned.

The flames climbed halfway up the inner sanctum by the time the crowd of figures spilled out the front gate, and moved out to a safe distance. They could be seen embracing each other, set against the roaring pillars of fire beyond. The temple burned beautifully.

Throughout my experience of working on the temple, I had worked almost exclusively on the the courtyard wall. It was those walls that I watched intently as the structure came crashing down piece by piece. I knew each stretch of that wall intimately. Within the courtyard, the central chamber was a roaring blaze, and it soon came crashing down with a thunderous noise. The walls endured long after the great mass had fallen away, standing tall until the flames had licked them down to a neat pile of embers.



Figure 98 - Temple Blaze





Figure 99 - Purifying Flames



Figure 100 - Garden of Embers and Coals



When the last column had fallen, the control of the outer circle was released, and I joined the crowd moving in towards the embers to meander through the glowing trails that traced out the footprint of the temple. Hundreds of people gathered there to meditate, jump over the coals, and watch the spontaneous rituals unfold. I paid my respects and felt the heat of the purifying fires around me. The fire had done its job well. I walked the perimeter of the site in search of Temple Crew members that might be heading back to camp. Finding no one, I started my long walk home.

The city around me was fast disappearing, and few of my familiar landmarks remained. Most of the artwork was gone, including the Man and now the temple, having been burned or dismantled. I pointed myself a few degrees west of Centre Camp, with its tall flags still marking 6 o'clock on the street grid. When I reached the esplanade I spotted the temple bus parked back at camp, and the familiar crew crowded around the dinner tables. It was precisely then that Secret AJent and Everywhere came riding by on Luma's bar car.

"Goldstar!" they shouted, and I hustled over and up the back steps of the bar. They were headed out on a playa cruise, and offered me an invitation to join them. My social instincts begged me to join them, but at that moment my stomach grumbled loudly enough to make me reconsider. Everywhere offered me some water, and I gratefully accepted. For a man who spent most of his time away from camp (often days at a time), this was a generous gift. I was thirsty, and his kindness did not go unnoticed. I promised to meet them again soon, and off they went into the night.

I would later discover that searching for a man named Everywhere is not an easy thing to do. Asking anyone "Have you seen Everywhere?" is a confusing thing to do. It pains me to write the words now knowing you, dear reader, may struggle with the name Everywhere just as I did.

Dinner was being served when I arrived to temple camp - green curry with shrimp and vegetables on a bed of rice. I was always impressed by the quality of food that the temple crew served up, and tonight was no exception. With full bellies, some headed back to the playa while others went to bed or to pack up their camps. It had been a long day for me preparing the temple for burning, and I decided I would sit by the campfire. That routine never gets old.

I fell into a quiet trance as Bungee Boy jammed away on his electric guitar. I sat with the weight of my trip coming to a close. It had all happened. I had driven to the desert, helped to build a temple, and spent a week in the magical chaos of the festival. I had attended the Burning Nerds Symposium, built the Ivory Tower, and the Pearl Palace for the Mollusk Nation. Only the Story Booth had not come to fruition, and I had made peace with that fact, and committed to its completion in the future. I could not do it all, but we had done a lot. A city of nearly 70,000 had assembled in the desert, and was now dissolving before my eyes; that was nothing to scoff at.

And then, it got cold. This often happens around midnight in the Black Rock desert, when the cool winds blow down from the mountains, and temperatures can plummet to near freezing. And so I left the warm fireside in search of warmer clothes, and turned down the block towards home. The city was melting away rapidly, and the streets had a melancholy tone with the constant drone of dubstep music echoing from all reaches of the city. By the time I reached camp I was disoriented, because my mental map of the city clearly did not

match my surroundings. To further the confusion, most of the street signs were going missing (apparently they make nice souvenirs), and the chaos that resulted was frustrating.

The Mollusk Nation greeted me with contented silence, and I crawled into the tent where I found Bob Loblaw sleeping soundly in his bed. I climbed into my own sleeping bag to warm up, and slipped into the ether. My bed, my womb, felt somehow familiar in these uncharted waters. My house had changed more than once throughout my weeks in the desert, but this place stayed the same, save for the added dust. Visions danced before my eyes and rolled through my weary body, as I fell into lucid dreams that made my body feel like a thousand blossoming flowers.

When my cold toes had warmed up, I shouted to Bob Loblaw to wake up. He stirred, but was slumbering deeply, and had no interest in joining me on an adventure that evening. I left him to grumble at me for bothering him, and decided I ought to get dressed for one last adventure. Tomorrow would be exodus - a dusty, desolate day when we would strike camp - a task was loath to take on. I needed to soak up the city for the precious hours that remained. I put on my long underwear, white jeans, leather coat, bowler hat, and my dusty boots. I felt like a million bucks. I grabbed some blinky lights to 'see and be seen' in the night, and went off in search of Everywhere and Secret AJent. They could be anywhere by now, or everywhere.

Trying to find someone in Black Rock City is a bit like trying to find the North Star on a cloudy night in the southern hemisphere. I knew the spots where I thought my friends might be, but they were probably off riding a purple fuzzy art car across the playa. I decided my best bet was to start back at temple camp. There I found Gandalf, sitting by the fire. I asked him if he had seen Everywhere, but he had not. He did, however, agree to

join me on a walk in search of them, and we pointed ourselves towards the pier. On our walk, Gandalf shared with me what Burning Man had offered him as a community, what he had learned building the temple, and the healing that came by his experiences in the desert. While I sometimes struggle to define exactly how the festival had benefited my own life, the positive benefits of the festival in his life were tangible. We also discussed the obscurity of using adverbs for names.

Arriving at the pier, we strolled down its impressive length, and I noted the cleverness of its details. The planks were crooked and warped, and there were hearts with arrows and initials carved into them. Pappy's Master Bait Shop stood halfway down its length, and featured various bait and tackle. There were glow-sticks to lure in hippies, day-glo sunglasses to lure the LA party kids, and a myriad of tutus, scarves, and plush, furry hats. But there was no time for fishing, and I walked on onto the ship that was lodged halfway into the desert at the end of the dock. The ship was busier than I liked, and with Secret AJent and Everywhere nowhere to be found, I decided I had best move on.

At some point in the few minutes I had spent at the pier, I lost track of Gandalf. I knew that the wise old wizard would find me again if he needed to (wizards are good at that sort of thing), and I meandered towards Centre Camp to make my rounds there in search of companions. I stopped and asked several strangers if they'd seen Everywhere, but I had no luck. It was a haggard lot hanging around there. We were the final few who remained, resisting the city's disintegration. Perhaps it is a form of denial, but the return to the 'default world' is rarely seamless. We were determined to embrace the magic of the city while its hours were numbered, and packing up that much magic and whimsy is no easy task. I knew that by morning, I would have to pack up camp, and I needed some time to come to terms with that.

I set out, yet again, in search of my friends. They were out there, somewhere, though at this point my chances of finding them were slim. I began to walk the streets in a methodic fervour, and decided to check more of the familiar spots. I walked to the beach, at the outer edge of the city, and then throughout the myriad of dance parties that blazed on through the night. I could not find a single soul I knew, and was not in much of a mood to make new friends. Occasionally I would stop at a dance party, bust a move out for a few glorious minutes, and then continue on my hunt. I wandered the open playa, checking this and that art installation, and eventually became furious with my fruitless search. Where had everyone gone? They were bound to be somewhere, and Everywhere was more than conspicuous at the worst of times. Refusing to acknowledge the vastness of the city and its inhabitants, I decided they must be at the far edge of the city. I needed to visit the trash fence.

Burning Man is a 'leave-no-trace' event, and so the trash fence has both a practical and symbolic value. It keeps others out, and our junk in. I ran at a clip past art installations glowing in the night, shouting out in search of anyone I might know. I was beginning to feel lonely, and company was sure to be found somewhere. "I know you're out there!" I shouted with excitement for my game, and careened on towards the trash fence. I had not visited the fence in my time on the desert, and it was now or never. But as I approached the fence, my pace did not slow and, like a gazelle, I jumped clear over the orange plastic mesh and ran straight on into the open desert.

Now, to be clear, such actions are not exactly permitted during the week of the festival. Security from trespassers is taken very seriously, though I have never heard of anyone trying to leave without using the main gate. It is unlikely that I am the first to have done this and, in fact, I was suspicious that I would find Secret AJent and Everywhere, or anyone for that

matter, somewhere out there. Perhaps I was slightly delirious from weeks without proper sleep, and having run and danced about the city for the past hour or so, but I continued to run at full tilt. It now appeared to me that there might be a light in the distance, across the desert, and I was determined to reach it.

I ran, and I ran, and I ran. As I moved, I scanned the desert for any signs of my friends, but could only catch the glimpse of a bright light in the distance. In some way, it didn't matter what I would find, and I simply surrendered myself to the chase. It was then that something struck me as odd. How was I doing this? After nearly a month of little sleep, hard labour, and the stress of bringing to fruition projects of several months that had ramped up since the start of summer, I had somehow found the energy to be sprinting along. My body carried me with strength across the cracked earth. I marvelled at my own endurance, and reflected on what that meant. How had I come to be here? Well, I had certainly not done it alone. I had the support of my family, my friends and peers who sponsored my trip and my projects, and my professors who guided me before towards this journey. I had made it with the loving family that was the temple crew, who had taken me in and shared their collective experiences of the festival as we built the temple. All these people and more had taken me under their wings, and given me the strength and resources for my journey.

I slowed to a halt and turned to look back at the city. It glowed in the night as though it were on a strange planet - like a colony on the moon or Mars, surrounded by rugged mountains, devoid of any other living creatures but us. So much had gone into building this place, and all of it was beautiful. I decided to bless the moment with a prayer, a song I had written some years ago at a music festival on British Columbia's Gulf Islands.

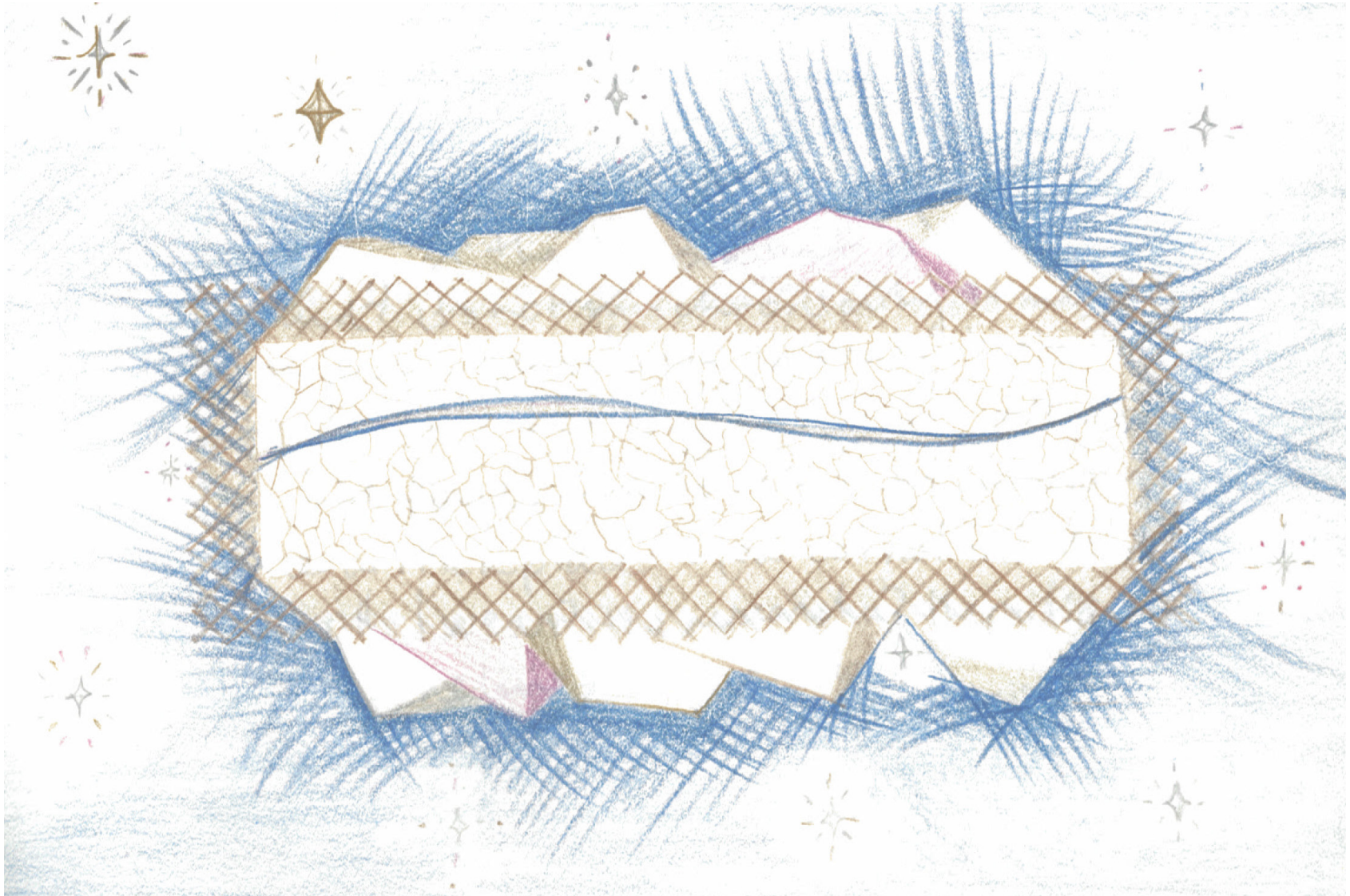


Figure 101 - Desert Run

Far away across the shore,  
Winding down from times before,  
I left my things and slipped into the ocean.

Numbing spreads between my toes,  
And up the thigh the feeling goes,  
It halts, to steal my breath before I dive.

And into the current I will flow,  
With angels' voices, clocks begin to slow.  
Who are you, where am I? It is not certain.

And high above, the eagles soar on winds of love.  
While down below, the tidal pools will swell and grow.  
To wait upon tomorrow's shores.

Back at camp we stoke the fires,  
Glowing embers, funeral pyres,  
The Roman gods are proud as they look on.

Dancing figures grace the stage,  
Fluid figures, free of age,  
They channel genius blind of their own doing.

So into the night in blindness go,  
And spill your wasted fractals as you know,  
You celebrate your tenuous existence.

And high above, the eagles soar on winds of love.  
While down below, the tidal pools will swell and grow.  
To wait upon tomorrow's shores...

Ocean Prayer  
by Author



Then, I turned back towards the light across the desert, and continued to sprint away from the city.

The stars were shining like gemstones above me, and they seemed as if they were ringing, very quietly. Occasionally I would stop dead in my tracks to strain my ears towards the sky and listen. It was hard to tell what might be star songs, and what might be hearing damage from the incessant music from the festival. I could still hear the dull throb of the city - it was miles away by now, but I had not escaped it yet.

There was still that light I was aiming for on the horizon; it appeared to be near the foot of the mountains. My senses began to overwhelm me, with thick sulphurous notes in the air, and a feeling of stillness that sat on my skin. I pushed on. I was set markedly on that light, but as I paced towards it I couldn't tell if it was getting closer or not. Then it seemed nestled a little ways up into the foothills, or was that the same light? Now I could see two lights, and I wasn't so sure which one I had been following in the first place. My pace began to slow, but I kept on. How far would I need to go? I was breathing heavily, and would have been sweating were it not so dry. Slower, and slower, my run slowed to a jog, then a brisk walk, and then I paused. The night air was warm and calming. Instinctively, I slipped off my boots and socks. The earth felt good on my aching, calloused feet. I took off my hat and my coat, and then stripped down till I was nude. That felt more appropriate. Somehow the jazzed up outfit I had been wearing was not right for this journey into the desert. I walked on. All was silent now, and even the pulsing city behind me was out of earshot. All I could hear was my own footsteps. I tried to conserve my strength by focusing on my breath, and walked on until I could no longer see my belongings where I had dropped them in a pile. And then I kept walking.

I closed my eyes and walked on with my hands folded in prayer. My lungs were tight from the dry air. I pushed on with all the remaining strength I could drum up, my moving meditation pushing me forward beyond reason or understanding. The crusted dry earth crunched underfoot, and it reminded me of the enormous lake that once filled the desert. Tears began to stream down my cheeks as I rallied my body onwards against its waning reserves. How far could I go? Where was I going? What was this idea I was chasing across an empty desert? Clearly I was alone.

Finally, I stopped.

I opened my eyes to stare at the heavens twinkling above me. I drew a breath and screamed, "What more can I give you?!"

Silence.

I felt my feet on the earth. My toes gripped into the dust, I stretched my arms up to the night sky, and I let go. A rush of loud silence filled my head and my body melted away. I felt myself slowly pulsing, radiating, as I pulled the cosmos in and out with my breath. I floated in space and time, one amongst the stars, filled with peace, and stillness.

When I found my way back down into my body, I was glad to find it was still there. I crouched down and hugged my knees, and let my bladder release on the desert floor. I slowly rose and stretched into a series of yoga postures, grounding myself in my body. With each breath, the acrid dust tickled my lungs. When I returned to stillness, I took another look at the empty plain of earth that surrounded me. I focused my gaze back on the city, now a twinkling light itself on the horizon. It was time to go home.



Figure 102 - Desert Meditation

Some distance later, I found my pile of clothing, and sheepishly dressed myself. A few hours later I was within throwing distance of the trash fence. The sun had risen, and my dehydration was painfully becoming my greatest burden. Surprisingly, no security awaited me at the fence, and I simply hopped over and kept on towards home. I had been gone some eight hours by the time I reached camp. Water had never seemed so precious to me as in that moment. I drank nearly two liters before I felt at all quenched.

The City was hot and lazy, and Bob Loblaw soon emerged from the tent. I smiled to myself. "It's a good thing you didn't come out last night," I chuckled, "I ended up on the wrong side of the trash fence". We both laughed, and sat down to watch the morning go by.

Thinking back on that wild run into the desert, I considered the moment when I was first told about Burning Man. I had not suspected that it would become the topic of my thesis. Nor had I pictured myself running naked into the desert, beneath a starry night sky. But that was about when things began to make sense.



Figure 103 - Exodus



Figure 104 - City View

### Part III - BurntO

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.  
Through the unknown, remembered gate  
When the last of earth left to discover  
Is that which was the beginning;  
At the source of the longest river  
The voice of the hidden waterfall  
And the children in the apple-tree  
Not known, because not looked for  
But heard, half heard, in the stillness  
Between the two waves of the sea.  
Quick now, here, now, always--  
A condition of complete simplicity  
(Costing not less than everything)  
And all shall be well and  
All manner of things shall be well  
When the tongues of flame are in-folded  
Into the crowned knot of fire  
And the fire and the rose are one.

Little Gidding V,  
Four Quartets.  
-- T.S. Eliot (1943)

## **8 – Decompression**

February 16, 2013

We returned from Burning Man with a thick coat of dust on everything we owned - it would take weeks for the dust to settle. I opened my apartment and found my empty living room, stripped bare of its contents five weeks prior, from when I had left for the festival. I unloaded the contents of my van up the stairs into a disorderly pile, and then stepped into a hot shower. Finally, I slipped into my bed, and fell fast asleep.

Life began as scheduled the next morning, and I settled back into the routine of school, groceries, and laundry. Day by day, I tackled the pile in my living room until all that was left was a small dish of dust that had accumulated while I unpacked. Over time, the sparkle and energy of my desert memories slowly faded from my consciousness, only to re-emerge when I was asked to recount my stories to my friends, family, and colleagues.

The culture shock that I experienced upon returning to my daily routine and schedule evidenced many of the great lessons I had taken from the desert. Passing strangers on the street left me with a feeling of rejection when eye contact was not met, or a friendly greeting was not returned. The flashes of billboards and advertising that permeated the city and internet felt abrasive, as did the rumble of engines on the street outside my apartment. Starry nights paled in comparison with the bejewelled sky I had stared up at for the last month, and the muggy city air was thick with exhaust.



The transition brought many lessons, both for what the Burning Man festival had cultivated, but also for the seeds it has planted in me. It quickly became part of my conscious will to greet strangers with an attentive gaze, to detach myself from the wash of advertising, and to exercise the principles by which Burning Man had shaped my behaviours. Willful acts of 'radical inclusion' began to expand my social circle. The spontaneity of 'immediacy' ripped me from my schedules and permitted me to carve out room for new experiences in my routine. Above all, I felt empowered to make changes to my own actions and behaviours that I was dissatisfied with. This feeling, along with my memories, would slowly fade, but the impact and ripple that the festival had sparked was palpable.

Burning Man communities from around the world celebrate this transition from one's home on the playa back to the 'default world', with events called 'decompression parties' or decomps. These events occur several months after returning from the festival, and offer participants an opportunity to crack open their tickle trunks once again, and come out to play. Decomps offer a glimpse of the action lived out on the playa, in a setting that bridges local burners, along with local friends and strangers alike.

During my experience with the Temple Crew, I had sparked a friendship with Rawhide, who would be the catalyst for my involvement in the Toronto Burning Man community. The Toronto decompression happened in the heart of winter 2013, at a club called Moskito Bite. I volunteered some of my efforts to help Rawhide set up the 'plounge' for the event. Always the chauffeur, I filled my van with piles of supplies that had been collected to make an intimate lounge. We arrived at the venue and unloaded our supplies into a corner of the first floor. Rawhide

had brought a papercut mural to cover the windows facing the street - something she told me helped to keep peering eyes out, and help guests feel more comfortable in their costumes, and keep onlookers from 'crashing the party'. As the decorations went up, Mmmike (pr. muh-muh-muh-mike) arrived, and I was introduced to one of his genius creations. His 'gator plounge' is large enough to necessitate a cube van for its transport, consisting of 200 sq.ft. of foam floor mats and a 28 ft. alligator made from upholstery foam. The gator acts as a sort of sofa, with guests nestled cozily on either side of its massive body. We set it up to run through the center of the plounge, with sofas and chairs arranged around the perimeter.

The plounge is a staple element of the Burning Man festival, and so it should be no surprise that a pillow-lounge should surface at the decompression event. The cozy, comfortable, cushion-dominated lounge provides participants with relief from the intensity of the rest of the event. Mingling with strangers and friends in bizarre costumes while dancing the night away can be exhausting, but the plounge provided a space to relax, get horizontal, stretch, nap, and giggle. The quiet space within the party, fostered more intimate conversations, permitting a moment to relax and let your guard down.

The remainder of the venue had been transformed with other unique and playful interventions. The front door was encompassed by a large tent that served as the 'greeter station', a cross between security, ticketing, and the Welcome Wagon. It created a threshold between the busy Toronto streets, and the mad party unfolding discretely behind covered windows. A playafication/gifting station had also been created to allow guests to swap out parts of their outfits, and experience some of the magic of receiving gifts from strangers. On the upstairs level,

stretches of fabric were artfully hung to catch video projections over the dancefloor, and each one glowed with a psychedelic montage.

As the night progressed, I quietly witnessed the space that had been created. It was an ad hoc pastiche that was difficult to appreciate at first glance. But as I became entranced in the details, the lack of aesthetic refinement faded from my judgement, and I began to embrace the beauty of every single gesture. The event was the makings of a community, and embodied each participant's unique sensibility. I marvelled at the social space that had been created in the heart of Toronto, where veteran burners were partying alongside guests that had wandered in off the streets. Old friends partied and danced while newcomers cycled through emotions of trepidation and elation. This space was a pollinator for the Burning Man community. It allowed its longstanding participants an opportunity to share their culture with others, and to give them a taste of the glorious madness of Burning Man.

I found the event intense, exhausting, and draining. By the end of the night I had only one thought on my mind: "Where was the Playa?". An empty stretch of earth provided relief in the otherwise maddening environs of Burning Man. Here amidst city streets, it was more intimidating to head out from the party in costume, and wander around town. So I made my goodbyes and skipped out on the after party for a good night's sleep.



Figure 105 - Pearl Palace Rehash

## **The Farm**

July 12, 2013

Bob Loblaw began a tradition in 2010 of hosting an annual gathering at his family farm during the final term of our undergraduate studies. During the first annual farm weekend, we had enjoyed the typical leisure activities: building fires, cooking meals, enjoying libations, and dancing. But we also took on the unique ritual of building something together. With so many free hands on site, Bob Loblaw had decided to resurrect a pavilion that had been fabricated for a studio course, 3 years prior.

The tradition of visiting the family farm continued in subsequent years, and I decided to seize the opportunity to use the event as an experiment. I wanted to test out the principles of Burning Man, at some small scale, amongst our friends. The invitation was loosely scripted, but outlined the facilities provided, and encouraged guests to offer something up to the weekend. It could be a meal, a creative project, clean-up efforts, or whatever they were moved to offer. I chose to rebuild the Pearl Palace, and improve upon the form it had taken out on the playa.

With my van stuffed full of PVC pipes, boxes of fabrics, tools, costumes, food and camping equipment, I arrived for the weekend with a grand pile of expectations. The weekend would be glorious, in any case, and I hoped that by promoting gifting and participation in Burner fashion, we might spark some more creative action. After taking stock of the house and grounds, I went straight to the task of siting the Pearl Palace. A brief tour around the meadow led me back near the barn, where an open stretch of grass appeared most inviting.

I decided the process of building the Pearl Palace had to be turned on its head. My former attempt had left me anxious and dissatisfied, as my design had

proved far more finicky and much less sculptural than I had hoped. This was an opportunity to improve upon its design, so I decided to open Pandora's box and just dump my stash of materials on the lawn. I invited some friends over to help me brain storm with the kit of parts, and before long we had woven together something that vaguely resembled a shell. The dinner bell rang and we herded in with an inkling that we might be on to something. Before sunset, I returned to the site and picked up a rebar stake and a sledgehammer. THWACK! THWACK! THWACK! I smashed a stake until it was halfway into the ground. I stuck a ten-foot PVC pipe onto the stake and let it sway in the air. I stuck another stake beside it, then another, and continued until I had a fan of 5 stakes emerging from the earth. I topped each one with a pole, and then went back to join the fire and drinking.

When morning arrived, I returned to sculpting the oyster. I found that by working outside my original design, I allowed the shape and structure to emerge intuitively, responding with the flexibility of the materials articulating the nuance of an organic shell form. Connections were taped together on the spot, and the tubes were woven together to create a strong, flexible shape. The whole of the shell cantilevered out of the earth, propped up on one tall column and laterally stabilized with guy wires.

The sturdy bones of the Pearl Palace still needed their skin, and I rallied some helpers to make the job move quickly. Pulling the fabric from its bin sent clouds of dust billowing into the air, filling my lungs with the familiar sting of playa dust. Each helper was given a handful of safety pins, and charged to artfully arrange the folds of the hand-dyed fabric to resemble the texture of a molluscan shell. The job moved quickly, and before long we stood before an elegant pavilion, draped to resemble an oyster shell propped up in the sand. The final touches included the oyster's pearls - balloons inflated inside macrame nets - and a thin sheet of mosquito netting to keep the bugs out.



Figure 106 - Pearl Palace Structure



Figure 107 - Happy Clams



Friends gathered under the canopy of the Pearl Palace to pass the evening hours. The shell seemed almost alive as the wind breathed through the pinned folds of the fabric. The result was supremely satisfying - something I had not achieved on the playa, and a success I attributed to forsaking my design drawings for the productive chaos that surfaced when we relied on the intuitive sensibilities of our entire team. I recalled the ways in which the temple crew had fostered such creative collaboration to achieve its intricate ornament, and how my former attempt to build the palace was stifled by my strict reliance upon a design that did not best utilize the materials on hand. I was again seeing something valuable emerge from the realms of playful collaboration, and of loosely scripted creation.

My intentions for the remainder of the weekend were unimportant. I had hoped that guests would bring creative projects, lavish meals, and script some exciting games or events that would spark our imaginations. But that was not what they needed, or else my invitation was not effective enough. I was, however, pleased to see the Pearl Palace being enjoyed by the guests that lazed about under its shade all through the next day. The pavilion had done its job to provide a whimsical space for gathering. I documented the success of the process, and thanked my invaluable helpers who had made its success possible. At the day's end, we spent a brief hour unpinning the skirt of the palace, and slicing open the taped joints so we could pile the whole thing back into the van. The Pearl Palace had been transformed through a process of collaborative creation, and I could now proudly put it forth to the world time and time again.



Figure 108 - The Pearl Palace at Rest



Figure 109 - The Pearl Palace - Coming Undone



Figure 110 - Fabulous Mooseman

## **Mooseman**

July 31, 2013

The regional Burning Man networks have been extending the reach of creative chaos around the globe with a range of events including not just decompression parties, but also regional burns. The local events allow the Burning Man community to reach beyond its home on the Playa, and make the experience available to those who cannot make it to Black Rock City. Regional burns vary in size and setting, but the largest, Afrikaburn, has reached 7,000 participants with grandiose artworks built and burned in much the same fashion as those on the Black Rock Desert. Toronto's BurnTO community hosts its own regional burn called Moosmean in the countryside north of the city. Though the scope of my research did not initially include the local doings of regional groups, I found myself bound for Mooseman with my temple crew companion, Rawhide. In fact, neither of us had planned to attend the festival at all until the last minute when we found ourselves yearning for an escape on the long weekend.

With great haste, we packed my van to the brim with our supplies, including a whimsical assortment of festival 'essentials', which for my part meant a costume box and the Pearl Palace. Rawhide was wise to bring an assortment of large pillows, blankets, and other plounging essentials. We brought double of everything essential: tents, cooking equipment, and camping furniture.

With all of our potential needs and desires accounted for, we began our journey on a sunny Thursday afternoon. The drive through the countryside was relaxing, and with each passing mile our life's tensions melted away in anticipation of what excitement the festival would bring. I had no expectations save for the good-hearted nature of the participants.

When we arrived, it appeared that we had beat the rush, and we chose a campsite in the freshly mowed meadow beside the event organizer, Mmmmmike. He had been on site for two weeks preparing for the event by clearing paths in the forest and field, removing large rocks that were tripping hazards, and leveling patches of earth in the trees to make a dance floor. Participants could camp in the forest or meadow, and most of the theme camps were stationed along the path through the woods.

We set to work right away on our tents, and created comfortable nests for ourselves. I prepared a meal to enjoy together, and then went to work on the Pearl Palace. Referencing photographs from the farm weekend, I made short work of the PVC bones of the great oyster, finishing just before nightfall. The evening then proceeded to spiral into a dramatic frenzy when the keys became locked in the car. I spent the better part of the evening attempting to break into my own vehicle with a coathanger, unsuccessfully I should add. Our anxiety was high, but the other burners were generous to ensure any food and libations we might need would be provided. When I grew tired of our dilemma, I put myself to sleep, with hopes of reaching a locksmith in the morning.

My tent was pitched on a gentle slope, so as I dreamed sweet dreams I also slid from one end of my tent to the other, and woke up rather annoyed. I acknowledged that I was too lazy to move my tent, and that I would be sliding down my tent for the next few nights. I dressed myself and called the local automobile association to get a locksmith to come break into my car for me. Within the hour, a surly man in a large truck came rumbling through the meadow, and I guided him to my van. He gawked at the evidence of my own attempted break-in, which included a misshapen coathanger and a few pieces of weather stripping dangling from the door frame. He proceeded to work his magic, and I learned how to break into



Figure III - Home, Sweet Home



Figure 112 - Meadow Oyster



my car properly. I thanked him profusely, and he left without another word. I decided I would keep the keys in the tent after that.

It took all morning and most of the afternoon to finish pinning the fabric folds of the tent. In amidst sculpting the folds of the Pearl Palace, I was invited to lend a hand with a small temple being built near our camp. A tall wooden box with an open face had been set in the meadow, and with a stack of pre-cut plywood shapes we sculpted and attached the ornament to the frame. It was a simple structure, but one that would house some important sentiments, and grief work. I was glad to see that even at this small festival, there was space made to honour participants' sacred rituals.

I went back to work on the Pearl Palace, and when I had finally secured the last ruffle I made a beeline for the festivities. I set myself horizontal under the sunny, open sky in a pile of laughing friends. We basked under the glorious sun as it inched its way across the afternoon sky as we lay laughing the day away. As visitors dropped by and saw us giggling away, we coined the phrase "If you're not horizontal, you're not here" to sum up our contented state.

When the clouds eventually rolled in, our jolliness waned and we each went off to layer up. Rawhide and I found our way home and took to munching on chips and cheese dip. We lay down in the Pearl Palace surrounded by comfy pillows and blankets, and then along came our friends like stray cats. One by one, without a prompt and as though on cue, more friends began to arrive and settle in until the whole of the Pearl Palace was full of happy campers, each sipping a cocktail, an espresso or whatever would fuel their soul's party. I was overjoyed to find this scene around me. I had invested so much effort into erecting

the Pearl Palace at Mooseman, and this space was a large part of my gift to the festival. I offered my guests balloons to inflate into net cages and adorn the Pearl Palace with its pearls. Inflating those balloons is a surprisingly satisfying activity, and to see everyone enjoying themselves in my whimsical oyster shell was even more inspiring.

But it was this happy scene that I chose to part from when the flurry of merriment began to overwhelm me. Oftentimes I can find the pressures of 'hosting' may provoke some anxiety, and the slew of questions from my guests about the makings of the Pearl Palace were not helping. So I crawled into my sleep tent to meditate and probe the depths of my discomfort.

"Goldstar!" came shouts from out the tent as the happy campers tried to draw me back out.

"In a minute!" I replied, trying to add a hint of smile to my voice. I then figured I could try something new - instead of struggling through my own problems, I could ask my friends to help me. So I crawled back out and joined them in the Pearl Palace, where I told them how some solemn spirit had crept over me, and I was looking to lay low in the safe space of the Pearl Palace. My friends tucked me into a tight cocoon of blankets, and brought over a large pebble-shaped lamp that glowed in all the colours of the chakras. As I stared up at the folds of the Pearl Palace, billowing in the wind, I began to calm down. Hand-in-hand with my newfound friends, I returned to my breath and let my thoughts drift. My heart was warm with the magic of the tent I had created, whimsical in all its details, and inviting enough to draw in passers-by. Concurrently, a part of me cowered at the affection others openly showed to it. This place, my fort, a treehouse of sorts, a dreaming of

my unconscious, had invited in a crowd of merriment, and the intimacy flooding my nest had been a shock. And then it dawned on me in a wave of consciousness that drove deep into the tightness in my chest: just a week prior I had left a meaningful relationship, and through the mad fervour of making and celebrating the Pearl Palace, I had overlooked my rather sensitive state. Building something can surely be a cathartic release, and yet inhabiting that creation is another layer of the onion. And so I poured out my tears and let myself feel the grief welled up inside me. As I cried, my heart grew strong from the loving friends that engulfed me.

When my anxieties settled, my smile returned in the comfort of the Pearl Palace and I gathered my strength to cook a hearty meal to feed myself and my friends. The distracting shenanigans at the festival are difficult to turn away from in order to take care of such practical matters, but I take great joy in caring for others, and found it grounded me. With full bellies, it was time to get back out partying, and off we went in search of adventures. The art at Mooseman is as delightful as on the playa, and although the pieces are few, they can be equally meaningful and magical. As we strolled into the woods, we came upon the Toga Camp Tollbooth, where shots and various contests were administered to obtain free passage. The hosts were in the best of spirits, spreading merriment to all who passed.

A little further along the path was a seat before a large circular mirror, surrounded by a ring of colourful lights. I sat down and played with the set of knobs and dials provided that created a swirl of patterns and colours, which casted eerie shadows on my face. Staring at my reflection in the mirror, it appeared as though I was melting in and out of existence. The hypnotic experiment drew a small crowd to watch

the reactions unfold, and I soon passed off the hot seat to the next person patiently waiting for their turn.

Deeper in the woods was the hammock camp, whose lounging pleasure could only be bested by a tent that had been suspended in the trees above the dance floor with tensioned webbing. The dance floor itself was a spatial achievement. By levelling out several tiers of earth between the trees and clearing away the underbrush, the Vitruvian dance floor stood beneath a canopy of leaves that was lit with a wash of colour-changing lights. With DJs spinning beats all through the night, the whole scene could have belonged to a fairytale kingdom with nymphs or elves. The pathways through the forest were lit with glowing LEDs, and costumed partiers meandered between forest and field in search of the right vibe to tickle their fancy.

Out in the meadow, the communal bonfire was surrounded by a large crowd, mingling and conversing around the dancing flames. Fire dancers wove their hypnotic art through the night air, with quiet gazes admiring their grace. Above it all stood the Mooseman. The Mooseman was a figure built in the style of the Man from Burning Man tradition, but with a moose's head and an explicit set of female and male genitalia. It appeared like some pagan god(dess), surrounded by the colourful crowd at its feet. Stepping into the Port-a-potties, I discovered even more wonder and joy. Each facility had been decorated with a unique theme and included lighting as well as various accoutrements that helped you forget the otherwise unpleasant box you were sitting inside. My favourite was the portal-potty (for time travel). The party continued through day and night, in proper Burner fashion.



Figure 113 - The Temple and Mooseman

In the morning there were breakfast parties like the "Bacon-ade" and the "Kraft Dinner and Heavy Metal Breakfast". In the afternoon there were sing-along rock musicals at Big Rig Robin's Truck Stop, a semi-truck stage set deep in the woods.

Sunday evening arrived faster than I could have imagined. In amongst all the dancing, laughing, and dips in the pond, I made handfuls of new friends who would become regular fixtures in my life, appearing time and time again in the coming year at the many events hosted by the BurnTO community. We sat in the crowd that had gathered for the effigy and temple burn that evening, and watched with broad grins as we were treated to a beautiful show of fire dancing. With the hurling of a torch at the base of the Mooseman, the structures went up in flames, and burned brightly in the night. When the Mooseman finally fell, the crowd moved in to circle the coals, and then dispersed themselves into the forest to dance. I danced until the ecstatic fervour of creative movement under the technicolour canopy had sapped away all my bodily energy, and then decided to head back to meditate in the Pearl Palace.



Figure 114 - Mooseman and Temple Burn



Figure 115 - Dancefloor Canopy





Figure 116 - Thump Thump! / Vitruvian Dancefloor

As I approached our camp, I realized my sanctuary was hosting a rather inebriated trio that was huffing on laughing gas. Huh. It was not quite the meditative scene I had hoped for. I walked up and sat down near the crew to see what was going on. The three were rather oblivious to me at first between their fits of giggling, but I chose to remain and confront the scene that was challenging my peaceful vision. I was thinking to myself how rude they were, to sit in my tent and prevent me from my serene meditation. And then I laughed at my own thought. What did I expect? I had built a giant Oyster along a public path, and it was full of blankets and pillows. It was whimsical and inviting, and I somehow expected that they should leave it untouched? Now that was silly. I should feel honoured that they were eager to inhabit it, but the jarring feeling I experienced was telling of the nature of the Pearl Palace. It was a creation of my innermost musing, and the product of my hard work. It was my fort, my nest, and I had put it out for the world to share in. My creation was an act of innocent love, and that made it vulnerable. I had chosen that vulnerability and now I was being challenged to genuinely share my creation with others.

I remembered the words of the Dalai Lama, who says that the ones who we find hardest to love are the ones that need our love the most. And so there, under the billowing folds of the Pearl Palace, I introduced myself to some new friends. Before I knew it, they were showering the Pearl Palace with compliments, and I laughed at my own quick judgement of the friendly crew. It was a meditation that was far greater than anything I could have expected.

Early in the morning, I began to undress the Pearl Palace, and pack up my boxes. My body was sore from the wringer I had put it through that weekend on the dance floor, but my heart was smiling for all the love I had shared. When the van was packed back up to the brim, I grabbed my new friends in tight embraces, said farewell, and hit the road.



Figure 117 - Pearl Palace at Night



Figure 118 - Fugment Signage

## 11 – Figment

August 16, 2013

What happens at Burning Man does not always stay at Burning Man, and in 2007 a group of New York City burners decided to bring some of the interactive art from the playa back to the urban jungle. With the majority of burner gatherings being hosted as private parties, the Figment festival was started as a means of engaging the public in a space of play. Over its short history, Figment has spread to nine other cities in the USA, Canada, and Australia. The first Figment in Canada was held in August 2013 in Toronto, when the BurnTO community collaborated with Figment NYC organizers to start the festival in their city. I was encouraged to bring the Pearl Palace to the event, and I decided that I could use it to host a creative workshop. I reached back to when I first began to take play seriously, and decided it was time for a Puppet Sweatshop. With my crafting cupboards spilling over with old socks and egg cartons, I had plenty of resources for a puppet-making extravaganza.

The festival was set to take place on Toronto Islands, where you can go to escape the hustle and bustle of the city. With just a fifteen-minute ferry ride, you arrive at an expansive network of island parks with picturesque views back to the city's skyline. Whether sunbathing on the beach, lunching in the cafe that overlooks Lake Ontario, or indulging in the thrill of a carnival ride, the islands offer all manners of ways to unwind. Olympic Island would be the site of Figment, and I arrived there on a Friday morning to meet the truckload of art pieces that was arriving with the Pearl Palace. Bob Loblaw joined me to help set up, and together we chose a site where the Oyster could stand near the lake, framed by a view to the city skyline beyond. The PVC structure



Figure 119 - Pearl Palace on Olympic Island

went up with expert efficiency, and we biked over to break for lunch at the island cafe. With full bellies, we returned to the site and began pinning up the ruffled fabric of the tent and fussing over its folds until we were satisfied with its proud molluscan stature. Then we hopped on our bikes and ferried back to the city to enjoy an evening with friends. Early the next morning, I packed myself up like a mule with my craft supplies, food, tent and ukulele, and trekked over to the ferry terminal.

It was a beautifully sunny Saturday morning, and the lineup for the ferry was daunting. Giant neon letters spelling out 'FIGMENT' greeted passengers while they waited in line, and our greeters were on hand to invite island-goers to our event. I boarded a boat with some of the other artists, and enjoyed a breezy ride across the water. I headed straight for the Pearl Palace, where I found everything just as I'd left it the night before. I set to work preparing my workshop, and was soon joined by my first guest. He was the creator of a nearby art piece, a tubular-steel isododecahedron that was large enough to climb on with a few people. The structure was not tethered down, and rolled around in a dangerous fashion. Safety Third! The shape's creator was a mathematician who lived on a boat docked on the island, and we got to chatting while he babysat his deathtrap from a distance.

The park was graced with various art projects to visit, but for the moment I was most intrigued by the large inflatable gate that had appeared on the main path - it appeared to be the finish line for a race. As it turned out, the midsummer's night marathon was being held on the islands that day, and its costumed contestants would be ending their course right in the midst of our festival. This appeared to irk some of our festival organizers at first, who were unaware of this overlap

until the morning of the festival. I thought it was a rather fabulous coincidence that a hoard of costumed athletes and their supporters would be milling out the park, adding to the excitement.

I began crafting creatures out of socks and egg cartons to serve as inspiration for participants, and I was soon joined by passersby that caught wind of my crafting. A few parents tried to drop their children off with me as though I were a babysitter, and my anxiety grew as the little demons started throwing paints around the Pearl Palace. This was not at all acceptable, despite my relaxed, anything-goes attitude. Not only were they trashing my tent, but they were draining my paint supplies like they were water guns. I also found it alarming that some parents were comfortable leaving their children with a total stranger and walking off. I took away the paints and brushes, and went off in search of the parents. I brought them back to the Pearl Palace, and explained that I was not there for child-minding, and they would have to remain with their children. As they sat down to watch their kids, they asked what exactly I was doing there in the park running this puppet-making station. I explained to them the nature of the Figment festival, and they were surprised to hear I was not a paid employee from the City Parks Department. They were even more surprised that I had volunteered my time and donated craft supplies so that guests could enjoy the workshop free of charge. The conversation seemed to change a lot of things about the interaction, and the parents suddenly became actively involved in what their children were making. They helped them cut, glue, and staple, and ensured that no paints were being wasted. When new guests arrived, the parents were the first ones to explain the entire situation, and soon my puppet sweatshop was running like a well-oiled machine.





Figure 120 - Pearl Palace Puppet Sweatshop



Figure 121 - Playing at the Puppet Sweatshop

My friends who volunteered to help arrived midday with food and additional crafting supplies, and joined in the fun. By the day's end we were surrounded by colourful imaginative creations, and I was utterly exhausted. I hadn't even had a chance to check out any of the other art yet! We shut down the crafting extravaganza, and joined the other artists, organizers, and volunteers for a barbecue. Afterwards, we set up our tents to spend the night on the island, and gathered around a fire to relax and mingle. Artists had come from as far as New York, and we shared stories, drinks, and songs until the wee hours of the night, with the city skyline beaming colourfully at us from across the water.

The next day I decided to run puppet sweatshop at fifty-percent, having wore myself thin the day before. I took regular breaks to wander around and check out other art, and abandoned my goal of performing a show with the puppets. The other artworks were inspiring, and included a large wooden canoe-drum, a set of canvases for kissing, an elephant-head to shower under, live music, dance performances, and workshops for juggling and object manipulation. It was all free, and it was all fun.

My personal favourite was Aqua Attack! Run by the artists from New York, the installation featured four kiddie pools filled with water and stuffed animals (whose eyes and hard parts had been removed). Next to the pools was a clothesline filled with outfits that participants were invited to don as costumes for their superhero or supervillain personas. With professional showmanship, the contestants were introduced, and the battles would begin. Wet stuffies were flung wildly through the air, with wet splashes articulating every hit and miss. Rounds were declared over at appropriate junctures by the referees, and stuffed animals were redistributed for the next round (often in favour of the underdog). After a few rounds, a winner or a tie was declared and the next contestants were ushered in.



Figure 122 - Puppet Sweatshop Puppets



Figure 123 - Blind Pictionary



Figure 124 - Aqua Attack

I stepped into the ring to go head to head with two friends, and a few children were stationed to assault us peripherally with water guns and buckets of water. We used our best sound effects to play up every hit and miss, with maniacal laughs and painful groans accompanying our show. When the match was over, we moved out of the ring to degarb. The words of one of the hosts reached my ears, "Play! Play!" she sang with delight. And that was it, the heart of the matter. It did not take much, just a few kiddie-pools and a trip to a thrift shop. I asked myself when it was that adults stopped playing so readily, and why? Free of our self-conscious stupors, lost in the moment with our innate intelligences shining through, play can be purely creative and without judgement. And it feels good! Play puts smiles on our faces and in our hearts, melting away our tensions and fears, if only for a moment.

Soon the day was drawing to an end, and I rallied my volunteers to help clean up the puppet sweatshop. We disassembled the Pearl Palace and stuffed it back in its boxes, and readied it all to load on the truck. Then, we joined the other artists to head back to the mainland. On the ferry, we sang songs and watched the city skyline draw nearer until we had docked and disembarked. With warm hugs and beaming smiles, we said farewell and went our separate ways.

## **12 – Orphan Burn**

September 01, 2013

The noise of the city faded fast as our water taxi pattered across the inner harbour towards Hanlan's Point. I sat in the boat with Bob Loblaw, and two of my friends from Mooseman. It was a Saturday night, and in a few hours, far, far away, the Man would be burned out in Black Rock City. But we were making our way to Gibraltar Point on the Toronto Islands, where the BurnTO community would soon burn its own effigy on the beach. When the boat docked, we unloaded our bicycles onto the shore, and set off down a dark path through the park.

We knew we were near to Gibraltar point when the faint thump of drums could be heard through the trees, and we dismounted to lock up our bikes. We wandered off the path and over some dunes to find a lively collection of familiar faces and strangers gathered around a large fire. The crowd had gathered for the Orphan Burn where nostalgic Burners, who were unable to make the pilgrimage to Black Rock City, gathered to burn their own small effigy on the same evening. I joined my friends around the bonfire, and laid down a blanket to get cozy. The crowd was focused on the fire dancers who spun to the beat of the drums, tracing patterns of silky flame through the night air. People were indulging in various vices and fits of laughter, and I was glad to see that we had not late for the burn. Beside the fire, a small effigy stood awaiting its fate.

When the fire dancing came to an end, someone took charge and stood up to say a few words. The crowd would not quiet down, and attempts to shush the noisy culprits only inflated the din, making it harder and harder to hear those who were trying to speak. They were saying something about a member of the community that had passed away that





Figure 125 - Orphan Burn



Figure 126 - Beach Fire

week, and were attempting to honour his life in spite of the crowd's disrespectful chatter. With such a variety of Burners and Burgins, it was difficult to negotiate the attention they desired, and the speakers soon gave up to let the ceremony proceed. Without further adieu, the effigy was placed in the flames, and the crowd got riled up to cheer on its demise. Some particularly boisterous partiers even gotten naked to dance around the fire. It fascinated me to watch the scene unfold without the ceremonious ritual that takes place in Black Rock City and at Mooseman. The whole scene had a markedly different energy than the other events that inspired this small gathering.

Soon the effigy had crumbled into glowing coals, and more driftwood was piled onto the fire. People began to leave to catch the last ferry home, with some headed to watch the live webfeed of the burn in Black Rock City. My friends I arrived with decided to leave, but I found some familiar faces to stay with and enjoy the fire. I sat by the fire until dawn, making new friends and listening to the waves lap at the shore behind me. After sunrise, I boarded the first ferry home, with a tired smile on my face.

## **13 – Squid Life**

November 7, 2013

I watched with excitement as photographs and videos of the festival began to appear online throughout the month of September. The Burning Man festival appeared to have been a great success, and I looked forward to catching up with friends who had journeyed to the playa that year. In the months that followed, I was invited to take part in organizing BurnTO's decompression party, and I was happy to volunteer my efforts.

The event would be held in a large warehouse that was used for roller hockey and circus training. It would be large enough to house two separate dance floors, a plounge, two bars, a coat check, and various art installations. The theme 'Aurora Borealis' was chosen for the event, and a call-out for artwork was spread through the BurnTO community and online. It is the tradition of most Burner events that all participants, including artists and organizers, are required to purchase tickets, and those funds are put towards both the cost of running such events, with any profits being dedicated to art grants and community projects.

I was invited to take the lead on building the plounge, and I decided to rehash the PVC structure I had from the Pearl Palace, along with a box of fabric I had recently acquired. I wanted to create a canvas upon which swirling projections made a hypnotic canopy overtop a comfortable haven for guests at the party. The space I would need to fill was around 400 square feet, and since I would not have much access to the venue before the the event, I decided I would ask Bob Loblaw and some friends to help build it. The work I had to do before the event was mainly to collect a large assortment of plounge materials, such as

pillows, blankets and rugs. I hoped that MmmMike would be able to bring his Gator Plounge to the event, and I put out a request to the BurnTO community for any additional materials that would make the space more comfortable. In order to protect the pillows that would be borrowed for the event, I set to making large slipcovers that could be stuffed to form fun shapes throughout the space.

As I picked my brain to come up with shapes for the slipcovers, I stumbled upon the idea of making a squid, a giant eel, and a banana. I had no rationale behind the decision, but the idea sat well in my gut. I would use the navy-blue, seafoam-green, and gold fabrics I had previously used in the Pearl Palace. I borrowed a friend's sewing machine, and set myself to work in my studio. The green tube for the eel was rather uninspiring, but would suffice to line the plounge with a long stretch of comfortable seating. The golden banana was a difficult geometry to figure out and I was disappointed with the twisted mess I made. My last hope was for the navy-blue squid, and I sat for long hours running seams down its twelve and twenty-foot-long tentacles, and around its eight-foot body. The squid was promising, and when I had stuffed its first tentacle I was thrilled to wrap up in it. I pulled together a team of friends to stuff the eight remaining tentacles, and sew on buttons to make its suction cups. When all was said and done, the squid was supremely satisfying. We named it Seymour, and discovered that wrapping up in its tentacles had a similar effect as a being hugged. It was a cuddle monster capable of luring in anyone curious enough to check out its tentacles, and would make a fun element in the plounge.

On the day of the event, I drove to Toronto with a van full of pillows that were generously lent to me by friends and faculty, hoping the plounge would be a cushy success. We hauled our supplies into the venue, sculpted criss-crossed arches out of the PVC pipe, and draped them with fabrics, lights, and netted balloons. Then we filled the space with carpets, the eel, and the squid, creating a collage of colours and textures. As soon as we'd finished filling the space with our stock of materials, MmmMike arrived with his giant Gator and we pieced it together in the plounge. The finished space was an eclectic combination of elements, and I hoped it would satisfy guests when the party would reach its dizzying frenzy later that evening.

We broke for dinner and costume changes, and then returned to the party to enjoy a night of art, music, and performance art that filled the venue until some unfathomable hour of the night. The event was magical and inspiring, as burner events tend to be. Before we knew it, the harsh flourescent lights were flickering on overhead, meaning it was time to wrap up. Volunteers began the mad dash to clean up the venue, and many hands again made light work. Soon the warehouse was entirely empty, leaving no trace of our event. The plounge was packed into the back of my van, and we were on our way home.



Figure 127 - Decompression Plouge

Since that night, Seymour the Squid has become a regular fixture in my life. He lives in a nook of my house that has become a permanent fort, complete with draped fabrics, twinkling lights, and balloons. As a bachelor, I find wrapping up in the tentacles can calm my heart when I long for the company of family, and lying beneath the jumble of colourful fabrics encourages me to daydream much as I did when I was a child. It is a place that soothes my anxieties, and never fails to put a smile on my face. It is unassuming, it is humble, and it is a safe space that helps me to let my guard down.

I later discovered, upon reporting my creation to Coathanger, that squids are mollusks, and I had unwittingly birthed an appropriate addition for the Mollusk Nation. Seymour the Squid continues to make regular appearances at events, where his magical tentacles never fail to lure in curious souls, and cuddle their troubles away.





Figure 128 - Squid Life

## Conclusion

When I was a young boy, I had the habit of picking up small objects that caught my eye, usually sparkling rocks and snail shells. I would snatch them up like treasure and return home from school each day with pockets full of stones. My mother would politely request that I only add the most precious items to my collection. The world around me was a space of discovery and wonder, and I freely gave meaning to those ordinary rocks. It was nonsense, it was play.

Over the years, I stopped picking up rocks, and my collection returned to the yard. Each stone started to look much like the next, and I could hardly distinguish anymore the ones that were more important to me. I saw rocks, and saw a thousand other rocks just like them. Cars, trees, and street signs all seemed to be more like one another than they were like themselves. My world became riddled with assumptions about what things were, and my perception calcified until I no longer saw things unto themselves, but rather what they were 'supposed' to be. And with those assumptions, a banal predictability quietly took hold of my world.

When I came to university and began studying design, I had the realization that the world around me could be understood in terms of the decisions embodied in matter. Every little screw, eraser, and door

*No one is more dangerously insane than one who is sane all the time: he is like a steel bridge without flexibility, and the order of his life is rigid and brittle. The manners and mores of Western civilization force this perpetual sanity upon us to an extreme degree, for there is no accepted corner in our lives for the art of pure nonsense. Our play is never real play because it is almost invariably rationalized; we do it on the pretext that it is good for us, enabling us to go back to work refreshed. There is no protected situation in which we can really let ourselves go. Day in and day out we must tick obediently like clocks, and "strange thoughts" frighten us so much that we have perverted the Sabbath into a day for laying on rationality and listening to sermons instead of letting off steam.*

(Watts 86)

handle had been designed, with either scant or ample thought, and produced through some individual or collective creative endeavour. This epiphany brought a new narrative to a world that had become riddled with my expectations and ignorance. I had a renewed curiosity for the creative possibilities that the world held, and I embarked on an education in the process and significance of design.

Studying architecture challenged me to enrich my understanding of the built world, exploring the depths and complexity that a design narrative could reach. With each new project, I was encouraged to research, experiment, and test out ideas until I found some satisfying resolve, some semblance of order and meaning in the realms of possibility. But my sense of what was possible was still weighed down by an inability to readily access my creative intuitions.

When I discovered the creative collaboration of puppet sweatshops and the Burning Man festival, I became aware of the creative intuitions I had been denying myself. I began to access a world within me that was playful, and I had not known how to foster.

*We achieve being through doing. Everyone is invited to work. Everyone is invited to play. We make the world real through actions that open the heart.*

-The 10 Principles, Burning Man Survival Guide 2012

The playful rituals of Burning Man are so completely novel and unexpected that they can be unnerving, because they make you vulnerable to that which you might not anticipate while moving through the space of the festival. To engage with that environment requires a playful, even loving, curiosity, and a careful negotiation of boundaries. The playful permission of the burning man festival is so entirely creative that it invokes a heightened state of love in its participants.

There is something to be said for burning a creation you have laboured over with love. There is something to be said for loving something so much, you can let it go. Out there on the playa, life and love are gliterally expressed all over the place - it is the wildest celebration of human existence I have ever encountered. And when it is over, we clean it all up. Make Art. Burn Art. Leave no trace. Birth, life, death. Repeat as necessary. It is a raw, poetic ritual that both grounds in and detaches us from this reality. We have made a place where an individual can learn to love the world they live in. That space is vulnerable, and it is sacred - it is the space of love.

*And if this should come to be a universe in which man is neither thought nor felt to be a lonely subject confronted by alien and threatening objects, we shall have a cosmology not only unified but also joyous.*

(Watts 94)



Figure 129 - Author's Living Room

## **Glossary**

**Arctica** - an ice vendor in Black Rock City

**Bacon** - a savoury morsel that is a favourite snack amongst burners.

**Baconade** - a bacon brunch at the Mooseman festival

**The Beach** - a common name for the northwest stretch of the outermost ring road in Black Rock City

**Black Rock City** - the encampment that forms for the week of the Burning Man festival

**BLM** - the Bureau of Land Management; an active law enforcement agency at the Burning Man festival

**Bloody Clam** - a tequila caesar served at the Mollusk Nation

**BMOrg** - the Burning Man Organization; operators of the Burning Man LLC and the Burning Man Festival

**Burgin** - a virgin Burner; a person who has not yet lost their burginity

**Burginity** - the state of having never been to the Burning Man Festival

**Burn Barrel** - a large metal drum on legs that is used for safely containing fires

**Burn Gardens** - areas in Black Rock City featuring large Burn Barrels and used for public burning purposes

**Burner** - one who attends the Burning Man festival

**Burning Man** - an art festival in Nevada's Black Rock Desert that includes various burning rituals, and hosts an experimental community for one week each year

**Burner Nerds** - a group of academics and scholars at the Burning Man festival

**BurnTO** - Toronto's official Burning Man community

**Cacophony** - harsh sounds; the disruption and disturbance of harmony

**Cacophonist** - one who promotes or creates cacophony; a member of the SFCS

**Centre Camp Café** - a public gathering space in Black Rock City, sited at 6:00 and The Esplanade, containing a cafe, a performance stage, and plounge

**Decompression** - a regional Burning Man gathering that features playa-style fashions, interactive art, funky music and great dancing

**Esplanade** - the innermost ring road in Black Rock City

**Events** - activities or gatherings hosted by the SFCS

**Figment** - an interactive arts festival started by Burners in New York, operating with Burning-Man-inspired principles

**Grilled Cheese** - a sandwich made with bread and cheese, that is then toasted, grilled, or pan-fried; a common snack food at the Burning Man festival

**The Ivory Tower** - an effigy built for the Burning Nerds in 2012; a common name for academia's state of privileged seculsion from practical concerns

**Mooseman** - a regional Burning Man gathering hosted by BurnTO in the countryside north of Toronto, Ontario, that upholds the 10 principles of Burning Man

**The Man** - the name of the main effigy burnt at the annual Burning Man Festival and various regional Burns

**The Mollusk Nation** - a theme camp at the Burning Man festival, founded by Celestial Pearl, Hobo Clam, Captain Goldstar (author), and Wastie Coathanger

**The Moose** - the name of the effigy burnt at the annual BurnTO regional festival, Mooseman.

**Orphan Burn** - an effigy burn outside Black Rock City, held on the same night that the Man is burned in Black Rock City

**The Pier** - a large boardwalk at the 2011 and 2012 Burning Man festivals that ran from the Esplanade out onto the Playa

**The 10 Principles** - a set of guidelines pertaining to the cultural practices of Burning Man written by Burning Man founder Larry Harvey in 2004 that include: radical inclusion, gifting, decommodification, radical self-reliance, radical self-expression, communal effort, civic responsibility, leaving no trace, participation, and immediacy

**Play** - an act of nonsense or tomfoolery; not serious or having a purpose other than its own amusement

**Playa** - common name for a dusty salt flat; used to describe the setting of the burning man festival e.g. "We built an Oyster out on the Playa"; also used to describe the wide-open parts of Black Rock City, which contrast the dense encampments

**Playafication** - the process of being outfitted with costumes or accessories typical of the Burning Man festival



**Plounge** - Pillow Lounge; a soft or plush area used for comfortable lounging and horizontal activities like daydreaming or sleeping  
**Puppet Sweatshop** - a collaborative creative process used to produce puppets and sets by the puppetry company Entangled Puppetry

**Rangers** - volunteers at the Burning Man festival in service of the safety and well-being of the community

**SFCS (San Francisco Cacophony Society)** - established in 1986, an organization engaged in the creation of Events that take participants "beyond the pale of mainstream society"

**Squid** - a large molluscan sea creature with many tentacles, and a large squishy body; a stuffed animal the author created for a BurnTO decompression party

**Synchronicity** - an acausal connecting principle; an event that signifies meaning to an observer, although no causal relationship necessarily exists

**Temple** - an area designated as a sacred space, and used for ritual purposes

**Temple Guardians** - a group of volunteers at the Burning Man festival that provides counsel at the Temple

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