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Identity Construction and the Post-Museum of Burning Man: Exploring David Best's 2012 Temple of Juno

Christopher R. Langley

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IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND THE POST-MUSEUM OF BURNING MAN: 
EXPLORING DAVID BEST’S 2012 *TEMPLE OF JUNO*

by

CHRISTOPHER RYAN LANGLEY

Under the Direction of Dr. Susan Richmond

ABSTRACT

Since 2000, artists have built elaborate temple structures in the Black Rock Desert during the annual Burning Man festival, the purpose of which is to act as ritualized spaces to experience catharsis by way of contemporary death rites. The temple is destroyed on the last day of the week-long event. The method by which both the space of Burning Man in the desert and the temple structure operate is by facilitating a negotiation in participant identity through liminality and self-enacted identity negotiation, both of which, as well as the event and the art, are ephemeral. The purpose of this thesis is to explore the 2012 Burning Man Festival (themed “Fertility 2.0”) with a specific focus on the *Temple of Juno* by artist David Best. This thesis will examine how this artifact is activated through a multiplicity of audience participation while simultaneously allowing the participants to further explore their negotiated identity.

INDEX WORDS: Burning Man, *Temple of Juno*, David Best, Liminality
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CHRISTOPHER RYAN LANGLEY

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
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College of Arts and Sciences
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DEDICATION

I am dedicating this work to my partner, Nick Chaivarlis. I am grateful for his constant support, and for being a sounding board while experimenting with new ideas. It is also Nick who I must thank for pushing me into my first meeting with my advisor when I was worried about going back to school. And I certainly cannot leave out how thankful I am that he drove me around the first semester when my leg was broken. So Nick, thank you so much for your support, your love, and your constant willingness to work through all of life’s challenges and joys with me.
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I am grateful to my parents, Barbara and Claude Langley, who have supported me through the many ups and downs of graduate study. They are true testament to parents who raise children to think for themselves and become who they want to be.

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And finally, I want to thank several wonderful friends to whom I am grateful. To Carissa Landis, whose fateful meeting in our Women in Art course, and poking fun at a Dan Brown novel spurred a lifelong friendship and countless meaningful conversations (of which helped us both understand Julia Kristeva, Walter Benjamin, and the overuse of literary cliffhangers). I would also like to thank Jessica Gillespie, who was my sidekick for my entire program at Georgia State University, and whose constant support and re-hashing of course material was much appreciated, as well as the often necessary Irish Car Bombs. And last but not least, I want to thank Tony Lewis (Snotto) and Devon Desautels (Feather), who both are great friends and wonderful connections to have been made at Burning Man, and without whom I would not have gotten the knowledge and experiences that were paramount to this process. Tony, thank you for placing me in the Inner Circle and for always being patient. Devon, thank you for the wonderful chats on Victor Turner and the laughs when conversations got too serious.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Introduction: Creating a “Placemyth”

The Burning Man Project (henceforth titled either “Burning Man” or the “Burn”) is a week-long project/festival in self-sustainability, self-expression, self-exploration, mass participation, and community creation (to simply name a few of its more colorful descriptions). However, as so many participants (or “burners”) have continually expressed over the many years of my involvement with the project, trying to narrow the scope of Burning Man down to a simple sentence does violence to it. Much of the mass media enjoys isolating small components to display as the hallmark for the event, such as drug use or nudity. Indeed, any attempt to give it a cursory explanation is difficult, as it cannot be done without omitting necessary details. That notwithstanding, it is often described as, “A hippie festival in the desert,” or “It’s an arts and music festival,” or my personal favorite, “It’s where a bunch of folks get together to do drugs and dance in the desert” as if drugs and dancing require a desert to operate. To really get a sense of what Burning Man is all about, one ought to ask herself, “Could 60,000 people be wrong?”

I use the word *wrong* only to suggest the derisive manner in which so much of the media has portrayed, and hence why so much convoluted misinformation has circulated regarding the Burn. But 60,000 people voluntarily taking an expensive pilgrimage to the middle of the Black Rock Desert in Nevada, having to bring all they need to survive (and have fun) with them, having to follow the respectful rules of “leaving no trace behind,” wandering around in the arid, stiflingly hot geography, suffering through alkali dust storms known aptly as “white outs,” and camping with total strangers for a week surely deserves closer attention. To get a better under-
standing of the scope of the Burn, we need to take a quick step back and look at the event’s origins and its growth.

The originating event was a simple gathering by a pair of friends on a San Francisco beach with no intention of creating an internationally attended project. According to sociologist and Burning Man scholar, Lee Gilmore:

> On summer solstice eve in 1986, a man named Larry Harvey and his friend Jerry James decided, for no premeditated reason, to host an impromptu gathering on San Francisco’s Baker Beach, where they constructed a primitive wooded effigy and burned it. Having invited just a handful of friends to join the event they were delighted to discover that as they set flame to the eight-foot-high sculpture, the spectacle attracted onlookers from up and down the beach. As Harvey tells the often-repeated tale, someone began to strum a guitar, others began to dance and interact with the figure, and a spontaneous feeling of community and connectedness came up on those gathered – friends and strangers alike. Flushed with unanticipated success of the gathering, Harvey and James soon decided to hold it again the next year; with each subsequent iteration, both the crowd and the sculpture grew substantially.¹

As the event grew, there were spontaneous additions of both individuals and groups who took note of the rowdy yet playful event and wished to join. One such group was San Francisco based Cacophony Society, which also shared the 1986 originating year with Burning Man. The society was a troupe of men and women who were part culture jammers (individuals/groups who maneuver to subvert consumerist and media-driven culture), and part performance artists. They understood the events on Baker Beach as another opportunity to ally themselves with likeminded people who wanted an artistic and emotional release outside of culturally normative tropes. According to cultural sociologist and organizational scholar, Katherine K. Chen:

Government officials finally caught up with the event in 1990; their intervention catalyzed the event’s transformation and relocation. Citing safety concerns about burning large items on the beach, a Golden Gate National Recreation Area ranger stopped organizers from igniting the event’s signature sculpture. Organizers negotiated with officials to allow the 800 disappointed revelers to enjoy the forty-foot sculpture without the bonfire. To avoid disputes with authorities, a few attendees suggested relocating the event to the isolated Nevada Black Rock Desert, where they had previously participated in small events like a 1989 wind sculpture festival. With the event’s move to Nevada, the summer solstice beach bonfire transformed into a Labor Day weekend desert camping trip. At the first event, participants joined hands and stepped over a line drawn in the desert’s surface, signifying their collective entry into another zone of experience. With this ceremonial crossing, ninety members ushered in a new era, one that significantly expanded the span and scope of organizing behind the event.²

A little over a decade later, I learned of the event in my freshman year in college in 2001, by way of a now defunct blogging site. My first flicker of interest came in the form of curiosity as to why so many people seemed so happy in the desert, covered in dust and grime, and all wearing bizarre clothes. At that point, attendance was already in the 30,000+ range, and the website was dense with information on the event.

After another decade passed, I was able to attend my first festival thanks to the reward of a low-income ticket. Upon my arrival, I was approached by several jovial people who wanted me to be “baptized by dust.” I jumped out of the car and rolled around on the ground, soiling my clean clothes as instructed. That was the first step in eschewing the cultural norms that governed so much of my life, and opening up my mind to the many possibilities that lay ahead for me in that space. Despite having read everything available to me, I was astounded at how absolutely foreign the festival was. Most of all, I was awestruck by how beautiful, large, intricate, and

meaningful so much of the art and architecture was. This was my first encounter with the human effigy as well as my first interaction with the 2010 Temple structure. I understood why those thousands of people making the pilgrimage were not in the wrong.

By 2010, when I first experienced the Burn, the geography of the festival had long been established, with its iconic crescent moon shape, large avenues arranged alphabetically and connecting laterally, and smaller streets cutting vertically, marked in fifteen-minute increments, indicated by time (e.g. 7:30 and Esplanade). [Figures 1 and 2]. The Man effigy is positioned in the center of the crescent moon, while the Temple is the outermost structure before entering empty space called the “deep playa.” [Figure 3]. The Nevada Bureau of Land Management allows the event to occupy a large portion of the Black Rock Desert that is fenced off and monitored by the Rangers, whose voluntary contribution to the Burn is to patrol the space and perimeter, checking that no one is in danger, and that no one is entering illegally. Major theme camps can request to be included in the initial mapping, however, the remainder of the city is constructed as individuals and groups select their own locations. Much of the artwork and architecture revolves around the theme of that particular year (e.g., “Fertility 2.0” for the 2012 Burn and the Temple being titled the Temple of Juno). The vast majority of the artwork and theme camps change every year, however a select few have remained constant, including the Man and the Temple, to name a few. While the structures themselves are present each year, the artist(s), styles, materials, and sizes will be different. The coordinates of the exact location of Burning Man within the Black Rock Desert varies predicated on weather patterns and access points. It is within this desert landscape that I will explore how this festival is a unique event and space that allows for people to experience art and architecture in completely new and compelling ways.
After the “baptism by dust,” it is understood that what is beyond the gates is a space with new rules and new (and perhaps even fewer) socially constructed expectations for behavior. In other words, it can be both liminal and liminiod (liminal in that it is a space with lessened cultural rules that can lend a permanent change, and liminiod in that the same space may only lend a temporary change). According to Religious Studies scholar Sarah M. Pike, “Black Rock City comes to be a place of the powerful and transformative experiences that cannot be had elsewhere. What is it about this festival that produces such powerful impressions in participants? How does Burning Man come to be imagined and experienced as such a different place from the outside?” In this thesis I intend to explore the reasons why Burning Man is such a compelling and unique experience where both the participants’ relationships with themselves and others is equally as augmented to those which they have with the architecture and works of art at the Burn. Indeed, this essay will explore how festival participants create what cultural theorist Rob Shields calls “‘placemyths,’ composites of rumors, images, and experiences that make particular place fascinating.” As an event that gives rise to “placemyths,” Burning Man is unique in its ability to coalesce identity negotiation with the reception and experience of art and architecture. Its desert locale further contributes the “placemyths” by its divergence from the everyday norm, and, as such, lends itself to experiencing art differently.

For the purposes of this thesis I will focus on David Best’s 2012, Temple of Juno, and clarify how the structure is received and understood through the experiences of both liminality and identity negotiation. [Figure 4]. It is through much research, two pilgrimages to the Burn, 

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many conversations and formal interviews with participants and staff, and questionnaires returned that I have come to the conclusion that the Temple of Juno is a sophisticated and compelling structure that allows the engaged participants a unique way to explore and experience contemporary death rights.

In the first chapter I will discuss how the site of Burning Man acts as a liminal space and so-called “post-museum.” This chapter will explore the trajectory of the art museum as it responds to changing technologies and cultural ideologies, and even as art itself is changing in how consumers respond to it, and therefore the space in which it is displayed changes also. The second chapter will explore how the construction and negotiation of identity occur. The cultural program in which most of Western culture participates can be changed in spaces such as Burning Man, and therefore individuals become more aware of their freedom to explore aspects of their personality that are often muted or hidden (e.g., nudity, spirituality, eye contact with stranger, and being queer). This negotiated identity will inherently lead the individuals to experience their surroundings in new and often compelling ways. This chapter will explore how that identity corresponds to the artwork at the Burn. The third chapter will explore contemporary death rights at the Temple of Juno and show the previous two sections are necessary for the structure to operate. I want to show how the space, in the words of geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, moves from being “open and undefined to become a secure and familiar place for festivalgoers.”

5 Ibid., 158.
Figure 1 - Aerial view of the playa and layout of Burning Man campsites and architectural structures

6 Ibid., 158.
Figure 2 - Digital map indicating navigational tools
Figure 3 - Augmented aerial view of Burning Man to indicate specific structures
Figure 4 - David Best, *Temple of Juno*, 2012
2. BURNING MAN AS AN IMPERFECT POST-MUSEUM

Burning Man takes place every summer in the unwelcoming, expansive, alkali-dusted playa of the Black Rock Desert in northwest Nevada. In spite of the hostile desert, in 2012 (the themed year of “Fertility 2.0”), at the height of the event, 56,149 people were participating, and over 360 art installations were placed (44 of which were funded from the $700k pool of grant funding from ticket sales). In effect, Burning Man is a museum. Indeed, it is a museum with an entirely different physical structure and an entirely different set of rules of engagement than typical art museums. As such, Burning Man falls into the category of what Museum Studies scholar Eileen Hooper-Greenhill describes as the “post-museum.” This category of post-museum is a byproduct of changing technologies, particularly those for the production of knowledge such as the Internet, as well as evolving sentiment from both artists and publics about what a museum should be and what it should do. It is my sense that the context of the Burning Man museum located in the desert is an appropriate response to some of the aforementioned changes and concerns. It is important to this project to interrogate Burning Man and understand it as both a center for learning and a phenomenological space unique unto itself. It shares several crucial and fundamental aspects with the 19th century modernist concepts of museums (such as having an overarching group of authority figures who make major curatorial decisions), but it simultaneously offers up one (of many) possibilities for a new or “post-museum.”

“The great collecting phase of the museum is over,” wrote historian Eileen Hooper-Greenhill in 2000. There is no longer any need for governments and interested parties to traverse the globe searching for artifacts to bring back to their home countries, where once installed and

protected in the museums, they serve to educate patrons. This historical process established what Hooper-Greenhill calls the “transmission approach” whereby objects in a museum are stationary and meant to be meditated upon. That is, they are “transmitting” information to the audience that is consumed by their eyes. The particular moment when the modernist museum’s omnipresent authority and style was challenged came not from a need for epistemological change, but rather from the smart phone. According to art historian Michael Sanchez, “What distinguishes this particular historical moment is not the emergence of the Internet, but the confluence of two more specific developments: the radically increasing accessibility of the network, and the permeation of portable devices on which dramatically higher levels of visual information are at hand.”

Sanchez claims that technologies have made any necessary visits to the museum and gallery moot, as now nearly anyone in industrialized countries can access the Internet to investigate and visualize other cultures in both art and artifacts, and the processes can be often done simply in the palm of the hand. While the two experiences certainly do not maintain the same level of agency, Sanchez is clear that if a consumer simply wants to view an image, it is much easier by way of the Internet.

For Sanchez, visitors to both the museum and the Internet receive information transmitted by the act of hands-off looking. In the case of the museum, there exists an attached program of behavior that suggests the items housed are to some degree sacrosanct. Patrons are to walk quietly and absorb information methodically. This transmission approach operates well within the framework of the museum, and is especially useful when trying to understand bold and complex visual works of art. But as Hooper-Greenhill has written, “Knowledge is no longer unified and

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monolithic; it becomes fragmented and multi-vocal. There is no necessary unified perspective – rather a cacophony of voices may be heard that present a range of views, experiences, and values. The voice of the museum is one among many.\textsuperscript{10} This is to say there is nothing inherently wrong with transmission approaches, but rather that we must look at the path of the museum as not being linear and progressing in a fashion that the buildings get grander and acquire more objects, but rather as a path with many branches all operating in tandem as institutions, situations, and experiences designed to help people understand the world and to gain knowledge. “Where the modernist museum was (and is) imagined as a building, the museum of the future might be imagined as a process or an experience. The post-museum will take, and is already beginning to take, many architectural forms.”\textsuperscript{11} Burning Man is one of a multiplicity of iterations of what a new museum may look like.

This particular iteration has become ensnared with one particular facet of contemporary culture: the smartphone, or rather the eschewing of the device, is central to the conception and success of Burning Man. As Sanchez has astutely pointed out, there is a moment of particular technological advancement in that of the smart phone that has simultaneously connected everyone to everything while also isolating everyone and removing much of the awe of the world by keeping people engaged with devices instead of the world around them. In 2014 many people no longer actively engage with one another, they do not look at each other’s eyes while walking on the sidewalks to work, and they do not stop to experience the extraordinary achievements of the world around them. If we can understand the museum as offering the transmission approach where one observes the work of art or artifact first-hand, albeit disembodied from its original

\textsuperscript{10} Hooper-Greenhill, 152.
context, and the individual meditates upon it and experiences a visceral or internal sensation, then we can understand the smart phone as a muted or sub-transmission approach. This would be an approach where the compelling nature of the so-called authentic is removed and the audience is left with only an index pointing to where the authentic once existed. And while this is nevertheless still transmission in effect, it is (speaking to quality if I might) below that of typical museum transmission. That is, while the image can be seen, the image has no agency. It has little to no ability to move or viscerally trigger the viewer. It is in response to the absence of visceral reception and the general banality of people in response to art and artifacts experienced online that has spurred and strengthened the development and successes of post-museums, of which Burning Man is one. The primary method by which Burning Man achieves its goal is the presence of kinetic art, or art that requires audience participation to operate, and thus subverting any documentation that could be housed in a museum.

Western Museums as institutions have a rich yet problematic history of both educating and controlling information through their hegemonic authority. They have largely been institutions that display art and objects from other cultures while largely telling a story of progress and development within their own countries and cultures. They are institutions where the educated and powerful could invite the everyman to come and see how one ought to behave in so-called civilized society. Museums removed the voice of the viewer and supplanted it with that of the curator who wanted to tell a narrative of some kind. Historically, museums were institutions of power. In time they moved from a method of educating the masses to becoming ways of expe-

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11 Ibid. 152.
12 Information about museum hegemony, history, and trajectory are largely from Tony Bennett’s *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, (New York: Routledge, 1995), and Donald Preziosi’s *Brain of the Earth’s Body: Museums & the Fabrication of Modernity*, (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1999).
riencing the past, such as a memory museum or a community museum. These mark the first branches of on the path of the museum toward its multiplicity of post-museums.

Burning Man as a post-museum still houses works of art, and there still exists infrastructure and moderate curating (in terms of the installation of the works), and the space does intend to educate, but by experience and active engagement, not transmission alone. Furthermore, the locale in the desert renders most technologies useless, thereby alleviating some of Sanchez’s concerns that the actual experience of visiting a museum will be exchanged for the simpler experience of viewing images on the Internet. The tools for constant connectivity that paradoxically disconnect us from others as well as most of the physical world around us cannot be used. Burning Man continues to be unique as a post-museum due to its location in the desert, and the methods by which burners are welcomed to interact with the artwork. And finally, at an ontological level, the ephemeral nature of Burning Man lends itself to a sense of urgency where one must escape the normal flow of life and make the pilgrimage before it is gone. According to sociologist Lee Gilmore, “Among the qualities of Burning Man that are shared by all (or nearly all) the festival participants – the heat, the dust, the climactic rite of the Burn – there is one that is of necessity universal: the journey.”

Notwithstanding those who reside in the small outlying towns of the Black Rock Desert, for most burners the trip to the festival is the first stage in self-reflexivity and preparing to experience life and art in a wholly separate way, eschewing much of the cultural tropes and standards that they abide by in their day-to-day programs. “Opportunities for personal or social transformation are often cited as among the definitive qualities of pilgrimages, and in this regard Burning Man does not disappoint,” wrote Gilmore.

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14 Ibid., 103.
The initiation process of “baptism by dust” is a feature of the pilgrimage that helps to derail burners from their clean Western program of tidy behavior. It prepares them to experience things in a different way, and most importantly through a different lens. Although this so-called baptism is one method to springboard participants into the new zone of this post-museum experience, it should be noted that the experience is largely subjective and bolstered by the intent of the participant. The growing fascination with the project has attracted any number of personalities with equally as many varying intentions. Some are there for the nuanced experience of this new space and post-museum; others are there simply to photograph people who appear to be somehow unique and otherwise interesting.

In her sociological research on the event, Lee Gilmer explains that there exists a tenuous relationship between the pilgrimage (traditionally considered sacred quests) and tourism (typically associated with the profane.) Indeed, in effect Burning Man has the ability to act as a post-museum space where the artwork epistemologies are fresh and unique, but the experience is largely up to the participant in how much he/she wants to engage. However, at Burning Man it is expected that participates will actively participate and not simply spectate, therefore it falls within the realm of pilgrimage and not that of tourism. All things being equal, and for the sake of this examination, I presume that the average participant at Burning Man is on a pilgrimage and is not acting as a tourist.

The infrastructure within the city is basic: avenues move from east to west in a half-moon shape and are labeled alphabetically, often with a theme (e.g., countries – Afghanistan, Bahrain, China, etc.), and streets streaking the avenues going north and south by time (e.g., 12:00, 12:15, 12:30, etc.). The outer most avenue is the esplanade that opens into a delineated pathway lit by

15 Ibid., 106.
the kerosene lanterns placed by the Lamplighter Camp to illuminate the path to both the Man and the Temple. The basic cardinal structures provide a modicum of information for navigation, and participants are encouraged to wander all around without particular care or concern for where they end up, but rather as a method by which to get back to their camp when they are ready.

The layout of the city encourages participants to mingle and move freely through the space. My personal experience is such that wandering around leads to a heightened awareness of things that might not have been seen had there been a specific destination or schedule. Participants are encouraged to engage with others, try new things, accept gifts, give gifts, and otherwise refrain from the cultural programs that constantly compel people to go-go-go.

The stand-alone artworks, interactive artworks, theme camps, and kinetic events all become activated by human interaction. Unlike the repository style of the traditional museum that simply transmits, art at Burning Man often (if not always) allows for audience participation at various levels, from construction, interaction, and the possibly destruction of the art. In the often esoteric language of the Burning Man founder, Larry Harvey, “One test of a good piece of art is whether it can invoke so complete an experience that it seems to exist entirely on its own terms. The Black Rock Desert tends to do that to any object whether it’s art or not.”

Much of the day-to-day activity on the playa involves human collaboration to function, and, as such, a significant problem of disconnectedness plaguing Twenty-First Century individuals is subverted for a brief time during this collaboration. Some interactions come in the form of an impromptu gift of a

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16 The Lamplighters originated in 1993 and are one of several theme camps that provide a service to the Burning Man community. The Lamplighters store, maintain, and ignite the kerosene lanterns that illuminate the central pathways throughout the city. The Lamplighter motto is: “Illumination. Navigation. Celebration.”
physical item or talisman, or an offering of an individual’s skills such as a massage, both of which play a part in the dismantling or slowing down of the cultural momentum of the West.

Burning Man insists on social and civic engagement by all participants to function at its optimum. And finally, some of the artwork are of such sheer magnitude of human skill and collaboration, they broach the sublime. The Sublime often imbues a sense of fear mixed with wonder in viewers, and fragments one’s sense of mortality, but it also spurs a sincere curiosity of how this could be. It is the latter effect to which I am referring. That awe of observing a sight so beautiful, so large, built so quickly, and present only for seven days inspires feelings that can be difficult to grapple with, particularly if you have experienced a personal attachment to the work(s).

David Best’s temples, which he has designed for nine of the Burning Man events, are integral to the interactive, civic experience. His monumental structures have taken many forms over the years, but they all tend to borrow from and appear like different types of religious architecture. The temples are the sites where burners are invited to enact rituals of confession, to meditate, and to leave ephemeral objects in memorial to the dead. While I discuss the specific details of the Temple of Juno in chapter 4, here I want to briefly mention how Best contributes to, but also resists the “post-museum” concept by re-incorporating the method of receiving a transmitted idea from the work of art. According to Larry Harvey, “We integrated David’s work into our city plan, placing it along the ceremonial pathway lined with lampposts, which gave people the experience of going on a pilgrimage to reach it, as with the Man itself. David single-handedly cast a

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18 The Sublime often imbues a sense of fear mixed with wonder, or even fragments one’s sense of immortality, but it also spurs a sincere curiosity of how things could be. The latter of which is to what I am referring - that awe of observing a sight so beautiful, so large, built so quickly, and present only for seven days. At times it can be difficult to grapple with those feelings, particularly if one has experienced a personal attachment to the work(s). For more information on the Sublime, please see Immanuel Kant’s “The Critique of Judgment.”
spell over the entire city.”19 The description is rife with a sentimentality that pervades the event as a whole, and rightfully so. In this post-museum space, participants are permitted an emotional experience often denied by the transmission method of the traditional museum space. That is not to imagine emotional responses are precluded altogether from traditional museums or even churches (e.g. the phenomenon of crying in front of images in churches), but rather this is a unique emotional experience in that is deals with the recency of participants life events. In this particular aspect, Best has offered a space within this post-museum that incorporates both the transmission approach and the interactive quality necessary for the post-museum.

Nonetheless, there are (at least) two inherent problems with this subjective appreciation of this post-museum space and pilgrimage. The first is that of necessary and active self-denial of the work that goes into the infrastructure itself. The second is that of its inherently exclusionary design that privileges only those who are “committed” enough to make the journey. The site of the event takes thousands of volunteers, millions of dollars, thousands of production hours, hundreds of varying permits from the Bureau of Land Management of Nevada, and over six months of preparation and construction. In several conversations I have had with Tony Lewis (AKA: Snotto), the Lamplighter Camp Project Coordinator, he has explained his opinion of the bizarre-ness of the situation when the vast majority of participants arrive, experience the event, then leave without ever considering the immense efforts required to operate the event. Acting as a potential post-museum, the participants can wander and engage with the art and environment, but to some degree it requires a denial of the necessary planning to continue the suspension of reality and alternately experience the space liminally. Sociologist Katherine Chen has engaged in substantial research exploring the omnipresent yet surreptitious organization that runs, oversees, and

19 Dryer, 85.
protects the event. “How can members establish sufficient structure and coordination that support but do not constrain their activities? Without adequately specified organizing practices, underorganizing can result, hampering members’ efforts.” 20 In this sense, the process of construction and organization mirrors those of the traditional museum where the voices and presence of the curators and organizers are hidden.

The second quality that mirrors the traditional museum is the inherent exclusionary practices of the Burn. While the Burning Man is certainly available for anyone to attend, one still has to concede the considerable sum of $350+, a week off work, travel to the site, and supplies for survival. Further evidence that this post-museum comes at a steep cost lies in the comments of the event’s founder when asked how he felt about the growing population through the years. Harvey replied, “I think it can work with more people but there are natural filters. It requires a huge commitment to go out into a wilderness and struggle to survive: it’s a physical, life-challenging ordeal. So that filters out the uncommitted.” 21 While the experiences at Burning Man can be profound and compelling, unfortunately they are reserved for those privileged enough to afford to make the journey.

As Hooper-Greenhill has duly noted, there are going to be considerable challenges for the post-museum. There will be challenges with changing technologies as well as museum sentimentalities entrenched in a rich hegemonic history. Understanding art and artifacts as technologies of power and knowledge creation, we must now examine for the sake of the post-museum how that power will be used. According to Hooper-Greenhill, “This power can be used to further democratic possibilities, or it can be used to uphold exclusionary values. Once this is acknowledged,

21 Dryer, 82.
and the museum is understood as a form of cultural politics, the post-museum will develop its
identity.” 22 As a post-museum example, the Burning Man is imperfect, but it does sustain itself
as one possibility for a viable option for a method by which to experience art and culture. I do
not champion Burning Man as a solution to pre-existing museum problems, but it certainly pro-
vides scholars and laity alike the opportunity to move beyond purposeful curated narratives and
hegemonic ideals. While some have castigated the event for being a blithe and raucous party that
happens to have artworks present, I would caution such a cursory assumption under the simple
premise that 60,000 people do not often converge in one place simply to dance nude and do
drugs. These people are coming for an experience, and specifically one they cannot receive else-
where.

3. THE LIMINAL/EPHEMERAL IDENTITY AT BURNING MAN

Within the post-museum space of Burning Man, there is a crucial and compelling per-
formance that occurs that continues to bolster the reception of the space itself and the artworks
therein: the negotiation of one’s identity. The event organizers have established the “Ten Princi-
ples” of participation during Burning Man that include: radical inclusion, gifting,
decommodification, radical self-reliance, radical self-expression, communal effort, civic respon-
sibility, leave no trace, participation, and immediacy.23 Within this limited matrix of rule sets, it
is the notion of radical self-expression and its intersection with identity in which I am most inter-

22 Hooper-Greenhill, 162.
23 “Ten Principles of Burning Man,” Burning Man website, accessed February 2, 2014,
http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/principles.html
ested. The Principles do not restrict the performance of a radical identity, but rather set the stage for a transformative, liminal experience.

Indeed, it is with this radically self-expressed and ephemeral identity that the participants can experience and activate works of art such as the Temple in a meaningful and reciprocal way. The ephemeral identity allows for participants to behave differently and to experience the work in a new and engaging way while simultaneously altering much of the artwork itself, including the Temple. That is, they are activating aspects of their new identity when they are engaging with the Temple in a multiplicity of behaviors ranging from leaving a message to request forgiveness, admissions of guilt publicly, and transitory appreciation of a bygone memory. Individuals approach the Temple of Juno and write messages on the walls, thus externally performing for the anonymous audience aspects of their internalized emotions. Burners will often leave images or indexes of passed loved ones, a great number of which are byproducts of our ongoing wars in the Middle East, and our even longer war with HIV/AIDS. Other burners will extol the virtues of those in their lives (e.g., “Dad, you never understood my being gay, but you also never judged me or let anyone harm me. You’re my hero.”). And there are also admissions of guilt performed (in this case quite riskily) where people will tell the story of a wrongdoing, witnessed by the audience. In doing so within this post-museum of Burning Man, they are operating within a new rule set that allows for active engagement with artworks. In this process, the participants have reciprocally engaged in the activation and continual altering of the Temple space by way of the addition of new materials and indexes. That is to say, the Temple of Juno is activated and given agency when the participants take an empty, black space and inscribe it with their love and loss, while simultaneously exploring themselves further in the process, and thus a cycle of activation is initiated. It is with this new and temporary identity that participants are able to engage so com-
pellingly with the Temple. Cuing the event’s end, the Temple is burned on the last day. This action also literally and metaphorically destroys the personal ephemera, confessions, emotions, and memories brought to it by the participants, but does not, I would argue, destroy the impact that the Temple interaction has on participants.

The liminality of Burning Man as a whole is central to the negotiation of identity that happens therein. In colloquial practice, people understand a space as being liminal if the rules of engagement with others, or even perceptions of themselves and normalcy have been altered temporarily. Under those loose terms it can quickly be established that being in a bar is a liminal space, visiting your family is a liminal space, or the work environment is a liminal space, etc. But the research regarding liminality originated by cultural anthropologists (Arnold van Gennep and adopted and worked over more thoroughly by Victor Turner) defines liminality as a complicated ritual where a participant cleanses him/herself of some feature of the dominant and original culture (and identity) in order to enter a state where they will be “betwixt and between” before ultimately returning back to society.24 The term liminal itself means “threshold” and provides an immediate understanding that it is the space between two spaces. Turner makes the point that people must “distinguish between ‘authentic’ liminality, and playful artifices such as the theater which are named ‘liminiod,’ or ‘liminal-like.’”25 It is critical to acknowledge the fact that being in a liminal space is an option. Participants in this ritual can return to their social structure at any time, which differentiates them from outcasts or minority groups, regardless of how members of such communities might regard their circumstances. Liminality also promises its own end resulting in some form of a relevant change for its participants. So rather than saying people who en-

gage in counterculture behavior, mob mentality, culture jamming, or other rule-breaking behavior have behaved liminally, we absolutely must recognize that liminality is a rigidly defined ritual system that encapsulates three phases: the freedom to exit the ritual at any point; that there will ultimately be an end; and that the end will be a significant change in the participant. Participants in this ritual must engage in a ritual separation from their dominant culture. They must experience what Turner called the “liminal period,” then they must ultimately re-enter their dominant culture again. Avoiding the ritual and identity aspects of liminality is doing violence to the term, and thus dumbing it down to such a pedestrian term that it becomes unusable to achieve any gravity for the subjects of which it speaks. Therefore, when I use the term “liminality” in this thesis, it is couched in the more ritualistic and outcome-oriented results of its anthropologic roots.

Another pertinent aspect of identity negotiation is the nature of its impetus. What spurs members of a culture to explore themselves in such extraordinary and dramatic way at Burning Man? It is my belief that the form of liminality at work at the Burn is a form of escapism. The geosopher (a neologism coined to describe someone who explores academic geography through any other perspective or lens, particularly that of philosophy) Yi-Fu Tuan explores the concept of escapism in his book titled Escapism where he explains that:

Escapism has a somewhat negative meaning our society and perhaps in all societies. It suggests an inability to face facts – the real world. We speak of escapist literature, for instance, and we tend to judge as escapist places such as mega-shopping malls, fancy resorts, theme parks, or even picture-perfect suburbs. They all lack – in a single word – weight. Yet suspicion of escapism notwithstanding it is in the cultural nature of human beings to imagine and re-imagine our world around us. Humans not only submit and adapt, as all animals do; they transform in accordance with preconceived plan. That is, before transforming, they do something extraordi-

Ibid. 212.
nary; namely, “see” what is not there. Seeing what is not there is the foundation of all human culture.  

It is an important feature of humanity to observe and understand the surrounding world, and to respond accordingly and continuously (even to the point of having the ability to imagine different realities, or to imagine the outcome of behaviors prior to any action). For Tuan, that ability itself is what defines humans as having a culture, and what removes them from the realm of other animals. Tuan speaks of several modalities of escapism; namely the “escape from nature,” and the other method by which escapism is enacted, which he describes as “escape to nature.” Therefore, it is worth noting that the particular mode of escapism is to the Black Rock Desert, and thus, back to nature. According to Performance Studies scholar, Rachel Bowdich:

In *America*, Jean Baudrillard names the desert as the quintessentially postmodern space and a metaphor for America itself. Baudrillard’s postmodern desert is not an endpoint, but a beginning space where a new narrative can begin. The desert allows for a playful space of freedom on the margins of everyday life, creating a constantly shifting boundary between the marginal and the mainstream. Burning Man is literally situated in Baudrillard’s idea postmodern desert, offering a space of possibility for the creating of new modes of expression, new or ‘alternative’ lifestyles, as well as for recycling and reassembling culture.  

Escapism to the Black Rock Desert itself offers an inherent understanding of the duality that there is both a place where one exists that is somehow unacceptable or in disrepair, and simultaneously that there is an alternative to which one can relocate. It must also be understood that single-serving relocations to places such as movie theaters or vacations are not what I am concerned with as they are little more than superficial reprieves from more perplexing issues that compel

people to escape in the first place. The escapism to which I refer, and that Burning Man is an established example of, is far richer in its ability to offer separate and compelling aspects of culture as well as to lend itself to a sustained outcome of being “something better” than the previous space that was escaped from. Escaping, so to speak, to a movie theater or beach offers little more than a sustained distraction. Cultural norms are still observed, availability to constant communication (a continuing paradoxical problem of people being more digitally connected but increasingly more isolated from one another), creature comforts, and a visually similar world still pervades the environment in which these single-serving escapist zones are experienced. Burning Man, by contrast, uses its “Ten Principles” as a method by which to eschew many aspects and tropes of the dominant (default) culture in exchange for a new ethos of self-expression, inclusion, and immediacy – the three I find to be most compelling in this chapter’s exploration of identity.

Complicating this further, we cannot ignore other aspects of human nature such as togetherness with our surroundings/environment and our mutually shared desire to be connected to one another. Although it seems an easy jump to understand identity negotiation in this liminal environment as a method by which to become anonymous and settle into a crowd of strangers, it goes against much of our human nature. Furthermore, in the “Ten Principles” it is outlined for people to be inclusive and in the spirit of the communal effort. That is not to say there are requirements for access to this space, but rather an understood set of suggestions necessary to create, maintain, and eventually destroy and rebuild this space. The unconstrained freedom of behavior is indescribably important to one’s identity negotiation and experience at Burning Man, so it is here that I would like to make it clear that the “Ten Principles” do not in any way interfere with one’s un-
constrained freedom. In her thorough research on the sociological aspects of Burning Man, Lee Gilmore observed that, “Participants today often speak of being ‘on the playa’ in a way that references this sense of environmental and cognitive otherness, helping to set the stage for transformative experiences.” In this transformative space the natural inclination to cling to one another can be often experienced in a far more visceral way without the cultural tropes of hands-off politeness.

The impetus to escape opens up the possibility to explore one’s identity in this new environment while never eliminating fundamental aspects of culture and humanity, namely those of human closeness and to build, sustain, and be a part of a collective. Interesting to understand, however, is the often-held Western conception and appreciation of individuality. As Tuan has eloquently explained, “An isolated individual is vulnerable, and we can understand why one seeks strength of the group. A human individual, however, is also highly distinctive, even unique. Is not uniqueness a quality all humans take pride in? The answer is, yes and no.” Tu-an’s argument is that humans long for the flexibility to experience uniqueness and exceptionalism (which inherently requires a hierarchical system to be in place, and for the unique individual to be at the top, therefore assuming others are in a lesser position) and also to fade into the background and simply be an average member of the collective. With uniqueness and

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28 I use the phrase “unconstrained freedom” intentionally and insert that it is not redundant. Freedom, of course, is a thorny term as it is akin to an abolation of personal desire, but freedom as most people experience it has many constraints and rules. For example, one is free to quit their job, but the cost will likely be financial woes, so while freedom fundamentally exists, it is constrained by inherent consequences. The notion is of unconstrained freedom is not without rules altogether, but it implies the constraints are significantly looser. For example, constrained freedom would dictate that one can touch a work of art in a gallery, but the consequence will be getting in trouble, whereas unconstrained freedom would be touching the gallery work and it being acceptable, if not altogether desired.

exceptionalism also comes the inevitable scrutiny and brutal criticism that most experience in a highly negative way. Of course, simultaneously, with a continual sense of only being average one can become mired in a sense of the mundane that leads to anxiety and depression. The truly unique aspect of our strata in humanity is that we can all experience different and fluctuating degrees of desire of our own uniqueness. Burning Man tends to be a zone where individuals can explore and experience their own concepts of uniqueness outwardly (e.g. wild or provocative clothing, queering of their otherwise heteronormative ethos, etc.) yet in a collective group without an understood hierarchy, thereby further reifying the liminality of the space and the agency of the individual undergoing a negotiated identity.

In 2012, after my second Burning Man experience I created a significantly open-ended questionnaire concerned with identity and how others’ experienced their identities during the event, as well as what others’ experiences were with the individual destruction of artworks, including the Man and the Temple. My aim was to gather a broader sense of how people from different backgrounds perceived the burn, but I was clear with intentions in trying to focus specifically on perceptions of identity (i.e. playa name) and the personal experiences of the destruction of ephemeral art with a focus on the Temple. In the responses I received there was an overwhelming sense of a perceived authenticity in their identities and lifestyle behaviors while at Burning Man that I found compelling. My own experience was that it was a space to experience the self differently and come out on the other side with new perspectives to better negotiate the world and life in general; however, nearly all the responses I received claimed Burning Man was a space where they could be themselves, and consequently the default world was the space where they were inauthentic, or somehow subverted and muted. For example, there was a member of Tuan, 82.
our camp who lives an openly queer lifestyle (in fact, overtly promiscuous) at the Burn, but in his everyday life is a heteronormative male. A less extreme example would be myself – in the everyday life I am somewhat conservative, non-confrontational (I even view eye-contact as a type of stressful conflict), and modest; however, at the Burn I always feel less restricted by cultural rules, so I say what I mean, I make eye contact, I have dressed in drag, and in general I do not concern myself with the opinions of others. Simultaneously, in the questionnaire I wanted to know what others’ experienced from the burning of the Temple, and the overwhelming response was that of viscerally cathartic emotions. It was that overwhelming response from others interpreting their identities and experiences with the Temple that led me to this project’s trajectory. Indeed, there is something profound about both the space and the negotiated identities that lead them to experience art differently, and consequently to augment the artwork itself.

Burning Man is a compelling liminal space where participants not only negotiate their identities, but they are also able to leave the experience in a changed way. This liminality and ephemerality is also what uniquely situates Burning Man away from being a metaphorical release-valve for internal anxiety or desires in the way that perhaps a carnival might be (or that of Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque.) Participants are welcomed to a space where they can access parts of their identity and act them out and subsequently they are able to return home with that knowledge and that experience to parse pieces of it into their default identity. In essence, participants can use this ephemeral experience in this liminal zone to return home with a permanent change.
The temple structures at Burning Man date to 2000 when David Best designed his first, significantly smaller and somewhat anonymous temple (*Temple of the Mind*). Weeks prior to the event’s opening, one of Best’s closest friends committed suicide, so he used the opportunity to personally memorialize his friend by dedicating *Temple of the Mind* not only to his specific friend, but also to those at the Burn who had suffered the loss of loved ones under the same circumstances. Spontaneously, participants at the event joined Best in memorializing passed loved ones and visibly managed their grief by using writing instruments to leave messages on the walls of the temple. Once the *Temple of the Mind* burned at the event’s end, Best was invited to design a larger and more elaborate structure the following year by the Burning Man founder, Larry Harvey. Since 2000, Best has designed nine of the temple structures operating at Burning Man, though all of the subsequent structures followed the spontaneous ideas lead by the original: to offer a memorializing space for participants as well as a so-called sacred space amidst the dust. According to Best:

> When we finish the Temple and turn it over to the community, it’s an empty building. And then the community comes and fills it. They bring their mothers, and they bring their bothers, and they bring their best friends, and they bring their weddings, and they bring their celebrations. Then it becomes something. It has no life in it until the community brings that life to it. My job is to build a temple in the desert for our community to try to solve some of that grief and some of the mourning in some of those things.  

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31 David Best, interview with Kickstarter.
For the purposes of this chapter I would like to narrow the scope to my most recent visit to the playa in 2012 and explore the ritual, death rites, and the reciprocal activation of both participants and the structure itself in the Temple of Juno. The Temple opened to the Burning Man public on Monday, August 27, 2012 as a blank yet beautiful structure positioned in the outskirts of the, now, third largest city (albeit temporary) in the state of Nevada waiting to be activated by the participants.

4.1. Ritual and Death Rites

My initial sojourn to Black Rock City was in 2010. After nearly a decade of listening to stories and reading about the project, my curiosity reached its threshold. After my arrival I was awestruck at how expansive the space was, and how disjunctive it actually was from my cultural norm despite having made myself thoroughly aware of what was to come. Prior to 2010 I did not have any personal connection to the temple structures at Burning Man, but my near instantaneous response to the temple that year was nothing short of visceral. I traversed the space repeatedly, reading the messages and consuming the images and indexes as if I were in a museum. I made repeated visits to the temple that year until its ultimate destruction on the final day, cuing the event’s end and time for the aptly titled “exodus” to begin.

After coming home I needed to understand more about the temple structures. I spent significant time researching and discussing the ideas, materials, and experiences with several other participants. It became obvious that the space acted in multiplicity as a space to ritualize contemporary death rights, a space to explain grief, a space to confess crimes, and even a space to house celebrations at times. According to journalist Steven T. Jones, “In 2000, shortly before the event, a close friend of David’s died and the temple was transformed into a memorial site, a concept
that resonated with gathered during the week and wrote messages to departed loved ones. At week’s end, the community watched the temple burn, said their goodbyes, and released their pain."³² When I arrived again in 2012 I knew I would spend the majority of my time at the temple that year, exploring the various methods by which participants codify death and grief to sustain catharsis. In 2012, I arrived at the Temple of Juno eager to experience the structure from beginning to end.

David Best committed to design and build a structure for the 2012 burn, and he admitted that this particular year would be the most elaborate to date. The cost to design, prepare, transport, and construct the Temple was in excess of $30,000, and the majority of the funds were produced from crowdsourcing by way of Kickstarter, which raised over $4,439 in excess of the $30,000 sought. ³³ The Temple of Juno was named thematically after the Roman goddess of fertility, paying tribute to that particular year’s theme of “Fertility 2.0.” After previous years of experiencing a collision of raucous playa life with the ubiquitously respected quiet space of the Temple, Best opted to construct a 200 x 200 foot walled entrance reminiscent of a Shinto shrine with the walled structure having four gates for entrance with a main structure central in the interior. This allowed for a larger space for the growing number of participants (reaching near 60,000 that particular year), but it also helped to eliminate the noise and disturbances of everyday Burning Man life. The soaring 30-foot structure (purposefully designed to be slightly smaller than the 40-foot height of the Man) was comprised of routed plywood designed off-site, then

³² Steven T. Jones, Tribes of Burning Man: How an Experimental City in the Desert is Shaping the New American Counterculture (San Francisco: Consortium of Collective Consciousness, 2011), 262.

[Figure 4.1] Once completed, the Temple of Juno allowed four entrances on each of the fours sides, known as its gates. Best used metal cables and connectors to keep the structure in place, and then wired it for lighting and eventual immolation.

Several characteristics were unique to this particular Temple, including benches lining the perimeter wall, four two-foot-high square structures near each corner acting as gathering spaces within the main structure, and a warmly lit inverse triangle acting as a center point to the structure’s interior. [Figure 3.2] A Burning Man blogger who goes by the pseudonym “Moze” explains of the interior, it felt “like a cone coming down into our world, cleaved by the chandelier in the main structure, the place reserved for suicides, as if the Temple were a lifting entity, powered by those who built it and who filled up with their pain and hope.”\footnote{Moze, “A Sacred Place Amidst the Dust,” in The Burning Blog, accessed February 2, 2014, http://blog.burningman.com/2012/09/building-brc/a-sacred-place-amidst-the-dust/.

The Temple of Juno offered a delineated space where participants were welcome to negotiate their own grief in a manner often denied or muted by the more overt Western culture that so often insists that death is a private matter, that grief ought be shared only with immediate family and loved ones, and that it needs to be quickly placed into the background of our consciousness. According to Religious Studies scholar, Sarah M. Pike, “There is a dissatisfaction with the available religious options for mourning one’s beloved dead. Losses that could not be named in other religious and social contexts – suicides, estranged parents, parents who sexually abused their children – were inscribed on the walls.”\footnote{Pike, 195.} The inscriptions on the walls are a byproduct of Best installing boxes of markers and pencils around the site for visitors to quickly use. It is these in-
scriptions that begin the process of taking the matter of death, grief, and hurting and begin to ritualize it in an effort to achieve catharsis.

The participants who tell their story on the walls of the Temple do so publicly. Indeed, a participant is performing his or her grief where others can observe them. They are taking their private information and making it public for anyone to read and consume throughout the week. Admissions of guilt or wrongdoing also appear in this context. In admitting to such wrongdoings, participants are taking what was once a guarded secret and placing it within a public space, understanding the information will be viewed by countless individuals. A prime example of this was a message I observed that read, “I raped a girl when I was young and no one knows. I’ve never forgiven myself.” Statements like this line the walls of the Temple, and many just as horrifying. The relevance of writing these messages publicly cannot be understated, particularly in situations such as the one mentioned above. Not only did an individual confess to a heinous crime, but the confession was also performed in a fashion that was immediately observable and traceable. That is, that individual risked the possible, if not hopeful, chance of being discovered. Therefore, individuals such as this who are utilizing this space as a conduit by which to externalize their guarded confessions are participating in a program that involves many people. Messages of confession would not function if others were not available to share the experience. Within this program, confessing individuals are taking what is private and making it public to share with others in the ritual of knowledge transmission and eventual destruction of the space.

Of course, most of the ritualized behavior within the Temple is not that extreme, but rather a method by which to experience death and to mourn, and to do so publicly, activating a program of communal mourning. According to Pike:

The temple became a site for speaking out loud, describing the dead and their stories, sharing photos of them, and bringing out si-
lenced memories and suppressed grief. Letting go was possible because of Burning Man’s emphasis on self-expression within community. Just as costumes and body art allowed Burning Man participants to externalize repressed aspects of the self and play with alternate ways of presenting and expressing themselves, so rituals at the temple encouraged the expression of pent-up grief and the healing of untended wounds.37

Participants engage with the space by leaving not only messages and writing stories, but also images and indexes, which become additional ways of sharing their losses with the anonymous public. [Figure 3.3] It is this sharing and story-telling that activates transmitted emotions whereby others can understand an individual’s specific experience by allying it to one of their own, then creating a larger group that participates in this program of taking the private and ritualistically making it public. However, it is not simply the act of stating something publicly that activates these experiences, but rather that they are stated in a space where it is known that others will read and potentially relate to them as well. The individuals leaving messages and indexes can understand they are now engaging with a community in this process of grief facilitated by the temple. According to anthropologists Robert V. Kozinets and John F. Sherry, Jr. regarding the temple structures: “They act as an alterative memorial ritual, a way of remembering the dead in a way that is deeply personal, and yet co-constructed by the community. It is both auto (or personalized) and collective, and therein lies much of its semiotic strength. It invites empathic, cathartic, therapeutic response in dwellers.”38 Indeed, it is important to note the semiotic relationship participants have with the religio-moral architectural structure of the Temple of Juno, which looks quite similar to Japanese Shinto shrines. The annexing, or rather, re-purposing of

37 Ibid., 199.
culturally understood spiritual/ritual space facilitates the experiences and spurs an immediate re-
response upon ones first sight of the Temple. However, Best is not aiming to transmit ideology of
any specific spiritual practice, but rather he designed the Temple of Juno to be quickly recog-
nizable as a space that ought to be aptly titled the Temple.

An important fact to note is the ephemerality of the structure and what kind of agency it
lends to both the structure itself and the participants engaging with and within it (that is, with the
structure itself, and with others who are doing the same codified engagements). Notwithstanding
the post-museum space and the negotiated identity necessary to experience the Temple in this
specific manner, the two components operating in tandem that allow the site to inspire catharsis
are its ephemerality and its extraordinary and blatant immolation. That the space is, in effect, on
a timeline for its own destruction means the admissions of guilt and feelings of grief are also lim-
ited. That is, the exposure one sustains is controlled and concealed within this liminal zone. It is
not a difficult leap to assume if the site was permanent, or in any way under long-term protec-
tion, people would not actively engage in the same manner. It is the ephemerality of the Temple of Juno that limits the time where the public is exposed to so many shared and hurtful experienc-
es, as well as its ritual burning that lends itself to a catharsis. The second component is its de-
stuction. Whereas most of the cultural behavior around death and remembrance is such that it is
kept private and sustained only by the closest loved ones, the Temple is burned to the ground
publicly. This weeklong experience of grief in a public manner is ultimately burned to the
ground just as publicly. The burning of the Temple not only engages with its participants by of-
fering communally shared catharsis, but it also signals the end of the event, and the beginning of
the exodus into ordinary life (the so-called “default world”). While there is no evidence to sug-
gest it was intentional, I believe it is worth nothing that the Temple of Juno, as space dedicated to
foregrounding and celebrating the life and death of individuals is burned and sustains its own destruction (death) while signaling the end (death) of the event. Perhaps it is this multiplicity of synchronistic parts that so aptly culminates the week.

4.2. Reciprocal Activation

I have noted already that the Temple of Juno behaves differently in the post-museum of Burning Man because it deftly moves away the transmission style of many other artworks. This structure requires the participation of the audience to transform it from its blank slate, and to offer the opportunity for its participants to fully explore aspects of their negotiated identity by virtue of their public performance of interaction with it. As Best has noted, the Temple of Juno was built in the desert as a blank, yet beautiful structure designed to come alive and obtain agency once participants engage with it. That agency is strengthened by each message, story, image, and index placed. Simultaneously, there is a cycle of activation of agency occurring. The participants are engaged in their own negotiated identity in this space, one that permits them to experience and express themselves differently. However, allowance is not tantamount to active. Once participants actively engage with the structure they are boldly expressing outwardly something they had previously experienced inwardly. This agency is powerful and compelling enough to likely remain with the individual after the return home. And thus, the Temple of Juno only becomes activated once it sustains audience participation, and the audiences only sustains total fruition of their experience with the Temple of Juno once they engage in some part of the ritualized communal mourning. This particular idea of reciprocal activation is not necessarily unique to the Temple of Juno. Performance art, Happenings, and other art that requires audience participation in the program to operate successfully boast similarities. However, this is part of what must be understood as a limited body of artwork that aims to challenge normative Western
ideas of responses to death while simultaneously offering a temporary solution. Indeed, while discussing this project I asked many people to explain what their responses were to the Temple. One particularly compelling informant said:

[I experienced] tremendous sadness realizing that my time is limited. I saw the Temple as a metaphor for life and death. Here today, wonderful and beautiful, and gone in a flash tomorrow. It makes one realize the time they have left and perhaps encourage one to live life more fully; forget the past and live with no regrets. I am reminded that many still live the ‘4Imns’ … Infallible, Immune, Infertile, and Immortal. Not so. We are very mortal and should keep that in mind every day. The Temple burn consumed many past regrets and sins. It’s a good place to leave them. 

This relationship to death and communal grief and learned lessons so many individuals mentioned in my interviews and email questionnaire made it clear that the Temple of Juno compelled people to explore themselves introspectively then express it outwardly and publicly. The reciprocal activation of all the participating individuals is the method by which the Temple of Juno operates and, in its explosive end, sends everyone back home with the added baggage of a visceral response to themselves, to others around them, and to their place in this life on a broader scale.

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39 Email questionnaire response from an informant who asked to be left anonymous. Oct 10, 2012.
Figure 5 - David Best, *Temple of Juno*, 2012. Under construction in Black Rock City, NV

Source: Image belongs to the author
Figure 6 - David Best, *Temple of Juno*, 2012. Interior close-up to the central lantern
Source: Image belongs to the author
Figure 7 - David Best, Temple of Juno, 2012. Example of messages, images, and indexes

Source: Image belongs to the author
5. CONCLUSIONS

Unlike many other works of art, mausoleums, spaces for death rites, and grieving zones, the Temple of Juno was a delineated space constructed by Best to help heal the pain many have endured through love and loss. The Temple of Juno was a space that actively foregrounded oft-muted tragedies such as suicides, rapes, and abuses. Consequently, the Temple of Juno set the stage for participants to actively move away from culturally learned ways of handling grief, most of which was learned vis-à-vis indoctrination in religious programs that often do not accept suicides, rape, and abuses as matters to discuss, or even to go so far as to disallow an individual from entering into their believed heavenly afterlife. The Temple of Juno allowed the participants to actively engage in new contemporary death rites that takes the private and turns it into the public, whereby transition it from the singular into the communal. Those who engage with the Temple of Juno were performing the various rituals of the site, including writing on the walls, telling stories of passed loved ones, offering admissions of guilt and hurt, and leaving photographs and indexes. Even those who pass through and read are sharing in the experiences; they are consuming by offering their sympathy and empathy.

While some aspects of the Temple of Juno are certainly available in the default world, particularly for those who are not earnest and active believers in religious programs that narrow the methods by which one can engage with life and death, it is my belief that the site-specificity of the desert location as a liminal space and locus of opportunities to negotiate one's own identity while engaging with this ephemeral structure that make it pointedly unique. Judeo-Catholic institutions certainly offer grief zones, death rites, and opportunities to convene with others, but it is entirely wrapped in the rigid rule sets outlined by the faith. Indeed as a Temple at
Burning Man, the *Temple of Juno* was able to transcend the rule sets so many are accustomed to and offer a space to experience love and loss on their own terms.

Just as the *Temple of Juno* offered the specific structure upon and within which participants engaged in new ways, the site of Burning Man and the pilgrimage there offer the individual a place where they can choose to negotiate their own identities. Individuals are encouraged to actively participate (No Spectators!) and to disengage with cultural norms that would dictate avoiding eye contact, silence in close spaces with strangers, limited conversation outside of familiar people, etc. As a liminal space, participants are able to navigate through any of the multiplicity of identities they may contain, as well as simply creating a new one.

My personal experiences at Burning Man and my interaction with the *Temple of Juno* affirmed the final stage of liminality. That is, in essence, one will come out differently on the other side. I am not staking any claim that I am a wholly new person, but I certainly claim that I have a broader understanding of the world, of people, of how completely flexible we can be, and how constantly in flux we all are. I recall speaking with my friend and colleague, Devon Desautels (AKA: Feather) about how our individual and collective interactions with the *Temple of Juno* left us with a greater sense and understanding of mortality. In fact, the running joke during the 2012 Burn was “If you can come and go from the Temple without crying and feeling small, you are probably a sociopath and ought to seek help.” The joke aside, the notion is the same: that what was once singular and anonymous had then become public and communal – a shared experience that viscerally touched those who engaged with the structure, and by extension the other participants.

Burning Man has provided a profound confluence of art, culture, and freedom to its participants for several decades. With increasing visibility and interest from new people, as
well as changing technologies bringing people closer and closer to their electronic devices, the future of the Burn is unknown. Will individuals begin to be turned away from the event, making it so elite as to actively deny individuals? Will technology become so integral and so omnipresent that participants will maintain their program of engagement in their cultural multi-tasking by constantly taking images of themselves and checking into places? Who knows? What I do know, however, is that in this case, 60,000 people cannot be the ones who are wrong.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


