Performance, Posthumanism and Playa Magic

Though technology was by no means the only way that humans expressed or inculcated their experience of standing apart from nature, it certainly became the Western way. The modern West could be said to have made a pact with machines – those systematic assemblages of working parts and potentials which by definition lack vital spirit, a soul grounded in the metaphysical order of things. And so today, now that we have technologized our environment and isolated the self within a scientific frame of mind, we no longer turn to nature to echo our state. Now we catch our reflections, even our spirits, in the movements and mentations of machines.

Erik Davis

For all of my investors.

Yes. Ok, I said it. *Yes*.

Whilst attending Burning Man 2010[1] for the first and perhaps only time in my life, I made an effort to always keep mechanical pencils tucked into my dust-matted hair in order to scribble down my impressions of the event. Undoubtedly, I was not alone among some 50 000 Burners to find that, on return to the default world, as many questions stuck out of my mind as spent glowsticks poked out of the spokes of my playa-bike. So, was that it? Was it meant to be that hard? Why do I seek challenges? What is charisma? Who is Gadamer? Was that really consensual? Where did all my buttons go? Do I need a short-term memory? How did this happen?

Now, as a fledgling academic and fair-weathered performance artist, I could sketch a map that connects this essay to the barren alkali surface of ancient Lake Lahontan and back again through the furled corners of my old notebook. Luckily for you, Burning Man's carnival of babbling tongues mocks first person narratives and tritely resists claims to authoritative knowledge. Burning Man says, 'Hey! We all consented to hallucinate our multiple and impossible reality – who said you know what's what?' With confrontational multiplicity, our favourite experimental arts festival, intentional community and global cultural movement is characterized as impermanent, transcendent and full of loving rage. This essay hopes to perpetuate those characteristics and the spirit of the playa by tripping lightly over the authority of knowledge, rushing up against the history of what we might know and gushing a rapid account for the benefit a time to come. My editor tells me by email that this book will be out there for a good long time; well hello there, Future, how are you doing?

With the long-tail shadows of the temporal threshold licking at my heels, I declare this study limited in some ways by my solitary attendance to the 2010 event, while adding that my physical attendance has been crucially and critically extended through my engagement with the technologies and online materials that the Burner community generates, invites, supports or attracts. Like plenty of academics writing on Burning Man, I have cruised the web for weeks, even years, in order to stay connected to the latest developments and discussions relating to my research.

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[1] Burning Man 2010 began on Monday 30th August and officially ended on the evening of Sunday 4th September. I arrived with the first convoys in the early hours of Monday morning, and remained in Black Rock City until the afternoon of Wednesday 7th September.

My trail of communication with the Black Rock Desert began in Tehran, Iran, where, in a daydream from studying Persian Language and Literature at the Dehkhodah Institute, I replied to a post on the San Francisco division of the online free-ads network, craigslist.com. One well-intentioned digital soul, who I later learned was a part-time music journalist and bohemian-radical activist called David, was selling his honestly acquired low-income Burning Man ticket at face value; all he wanted to know was how a recipient might be qualified to deserve the gift of his open-hearted exchange. I felt, from the bottom of my empty pockets, that I was indeed qualified. So I spun this soon-to-be David a yarn that entwined my recent employment among the theatre cartels of San Francisco to the tragic personal details that had hitherto prevented me from attending the desert bacchanal with which I had become so familiar during my time in the Bay area. I shrewdly embroidered the account with my determined plan to begin postgraduate study of festival cultures at the University of Leeds, UK. It was early June 2010, and David liked my story. From those first honest digital gifts of communication, to the trinkets of insight I gathered at Black Rock City, to the ongoing rewards of passage that mark these key-strokes, technology enabled my participation in the magic of the playa.

In Black Rock City and the default world, I am tethered willingly to the tribe of interdisciplinary performance studies. Burning Man scholar and performance artist, Rachel Bowditch, reminds us in her evocation of the late Dwight Conquergood that performance studies is 'grounded in active, intimate, hands-on-participation and personal connection', and yet radically turned and returned towards the crossroad of theory and praxis[2]. Performing a boundlessly specific multiple voice that weaves my conscious reckonings of that week to the research that I have conducted because of it, I am going to try to metonymically conscript the lexicons, dialects, patois and slangs of the digital metaverse and specialized languages of scientific disciplines in order to write about what is possible and multiple, as an alternative to what is valid and singular. They say that metonymically performative writing dramatizes the limits of philosophical and scientific language[3]; I'll be hanging my writing from Burning Man's very own technologies for crafting reality like a feather boa in the desert wind hanging from the struts of a geodesic dome. My words fly in line with the venerable Deleuze and Guattari's anti-claim for their concepts: this study is not a science. I

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[2] Bowditch, 2010: [online]

[3] Pollock in Phelan and Lane, 1998: 82

write from the plane of possibility, performing 'a self-consciously partial or incomplete rendering that takes its pulse from *difference* rather than *identity* between the linguistic symbol and the thing it is meant to represent'[4]. Rather, I admit to knowing, or enacting through praxis, only assemblages that poetically make do[5].

Making do, all manner of schwag cramps up against digital audio recordings, electronic bookmarks, links, pathways, constellations of dusty memories. As the cooled somatic numinous of my week in the desert settles over an assemblage of auto-ethnographic texts, crystals of insight cluster around one certain and enduring grain of revelation: *consciousness* was different out there, and *technology* had something to do with it.

There are as many ways to think about consciousness as there are gods to worship. There are just a few less people who believe and report that the experience of human and transcendent consciousness is significantly different on the playa. Those uninitiated to Burner lore may blanch at the suggestion that consciousness can differ at all, and presume that Burners must lose their sense of reality out in the desert. The truth, I argue, is infinitely more subtle. Reality is not lost, but shifts to a deeper and more complex model that is facilitated by the specific environmental conditions of Black Rock City.

Robert Pepperell, a British artist, posthumanist and educator, argues masterfully for a 'posthuman conception of consciousness' that collapses boundaries between the experiential world and our mindful cognition of it by debunking the conscious fragmentation, division and separation of reality that comes with language[6]. He unpacks the cardboard arguments for an old fashioned understanding of consciousness to reveal a light from beneath the bushel of Humanism. From the many different scientific, religious and popular approximations of consciousness that are out there I selectively promote Pepperell's as an appropriate sieve through which to pan for insight into Burning Man as he provides an explanation of consciousness that presumes to metonymically integrate and analogize technology. As my argument comes to fruition in this study, I will look more closely at post- or trans-humanism,

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4 ibid.

5 Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 8.

6 Pepperell, 2000: [online].

which is at its core the progressive study and advocacy of human enhancement through the use of technology. For now, I offer up Pepperell's analogy of water boiling in a kettle to understand the emergence of consciousness from specific conditions.

In a seminal 10-point guide to posthuman consciousness, published in 2000 as part of Roy Ascott's annual series of Consciousness Reframed conferences, Pepperell muses that the effect known as 'boiling' cannot be specified, isolated or confined to any part of the system of the kettle that produces it, which includes a vessel, heating element, some electrical energy, atmospheric pressure, gravity and water itself; boiling is a property that emerges from a specific set of conditions. The right conditions for the water and the kettle are physical, material, and active; for humans, the right combination of genes, tissues, nutrients, chemicals and environmental conditions produce the emergence of consciousness. Pepperell believes that the removal of any of the constituent conditions causes the emergent quality, be it boiling or consciousness, to evaporate. This seems sensible, so in addition I propose that a change to the comparative rates of the constituent conditions would influence the effect of the emergent quality. In the case of the kettle the size of the vessel, the volume of water, strength of the electrical energy and specific atmospheric conditions will influence the quality of the boiling. In the case of consciousness, changes to genetic and tissue make-up, and to nutrients, chemicals and environmental conditions acting on the conscious subject will alter the quality of consciousness that the subject experiences. In many ways, the environment of Black Rock City is like no other in the world, and plenty of Burners feed themselves unusual nutrients and chemicals to survive and to maximise the potential of that different environment. As the specific conditions change, it is possible for different qualities of consciousness to emerge.

To categorise Black Rock City as a set of 'environmental conditions' heroically underplays the effect that Burning Man has on its participants. However, this moniker will do as a starting point to move on to the other twinned peak of my hypothesis. The 'environmental conditions' of Burning Man are fundamentally connected, concocted and conducted through technology.

There are as many ways to understand technology as there are ways to grind an axe. In the abstracted sublime of the vast playa, and in the chiselled crevices of the educational establishment, I have pondered the relevant ambivalences of this term.

Although I left my Oxford English Dictionary back in the default world on my trip in 2010, my Dictionary.com iPhone app could have linked up to the onsite wifi network and told me that 'technology' is 'the branch of knowledge that deals with the creation and use of technical means and their interrelation with life, society, and the environment', that it refers to 'a technological process, invention, method or the like', and that it is 'the sum of the ways in which social groups provide themselves with the material objects of their civilization'. Etymologically, the word is derived from the Greek *techno*, meaning 'craftsmanship', 'craft' or 'art' and *-logy*, meaning 'a speaking, discourse, doctrine, theory, science'. When combined, the two parts exceed the notion of a discourse on or about an art or craftsmanship and become instead *technologia*, the systematic treatment of craft and technique. Historically, the term has been applied to tools, techniques, machines and systems from ancient hand axes to spinning wheels to mobile phones to knowledge applied for the advancement of social systems. Social technology, or social engineering, or applied social sciences, are ways that a local, national, or global communities apply scientific knowledge to realise ideals or cure ills.

Elsewhere, Subrata Dasgupta, an engineer turned computer-scientist turned cognitive-scientist, territorializes the notions of originality and creativity in his impassioned call for recognition of the inherent creativity of technological thinking[7]. Dasgupta argues that in conceiving of artefactual forms, the technologist is not just mastering or harnessing scientific information for practical ends, but that he or she is undertaking a conscious cognitive activity, an activity which 'involves the use of knowledge and the faculties of reasoning, remembering, and understanding'[8]. Dasgutpa applies his conception of technological creativity anachronistically to say that humans have been conceiving of, shaping, and using artefacts as far back as the early Stone Ages (ibid) and that, historically, technology is older than *Homo sapiens*' (ibid: vii). By returning to basic definitions and etymologies and stripping the term to its creative nominal bones, I hope to connote a primal authenticity in my usage of technology in this essay, to metonymically enact its aesthetic and scientific associations. In effect, I am making the concept of 'technology' playa-ready: it runs smooth enough, resiliently balances glitz and grime with indeterminate symbolism, and stands strong, senseless and striking with an ancient beating heart.

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[7] (1996)

[8] (ibid: 3)

On the playa, and in the wider environment of Burning Man, the experience of technology is ubiquitous. From art-cars to Burning Man Information Radio, solar powered foam-parties to Burners Without Borders, to pumping techno sound systems, the increased used of mobile phones and computers at Black Rock City, and the Burning Man website that acts as an official online directory and authorised encyclopaedia of information about the community and event, the phenomenon is bursting with the application of scientific knowledge for practical purposes. While Black Rock City may be ideologically estranged from its cousin Las Vegas, BRC would likewise be utterly uninhabitable without technology. With respect and occasional deference to the influence and effect of mechanical and vegetal technologies present for Burning Man, my research has focussed on 'cyber' technologies, those that relate to computers, to cyberspace and the Internet, and to the computational control and regulation of communication and community. The Burning Man community is currently and originally in close geographic and demographic proximity to Silicon Valley and the advances in cyber technologies that are cultivated there. 'Cyber' seems like a good starting point from which to pick apart my nuggets of insight concerning the relationship between technology and consciousness out on the playa. Do cyber technologies significantly change and influence the specific conditions for the emergence of consciousness at Burning Man? In turn, how do those changes affect the quality of that consciousness?

So, what happened to me at Burning Man? Why am I stuck on this idea? Despite my preparations to be as 'radically self-reliant' as the Ten Principles proscribe, and despite the insistent repetition of the adage 'Welcome Home!' by my fellow participants, I realised upon my admission that I felt distinctly and oppressively alone. A freewheeling frontier of pragmatic experience, Burning Man is an undeniably American place. Deleuze and Guattari write that 'everything important that has happened or is happening takes the route of the American rhizome: the beatniks, the underground, bands and gangs, successive lateral offshoots in connection with an outside'[9]. The grimy residue of gun-toting automobilophilia that charges the Department of Public Works parade, pickletinis served by cock-eared cowboys, kazoo carrying psychedelic priests kissing under statues of cartoon heroes, the array of Black Rock City's man-made spectacle mostly served to alienate me from my own

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9 (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 21).

outsidered imagination. More than just spectacle, Burning Man is a manifestation of the fullest range of countercultures of spirituality, performance, art and technology interrelating, 'as if it were precisely in America that the earth came full circle; its West is the edge of the East'[10]. The juxtapositions of converging cultures, ruptured iconographies and substrates of consciousness presents the (un)barren playascape as a paradoxically lush field of rumination, one on which my hot-footed objectivity wanted to get a toehold.

During my months working in theatre in San Francisco, I had rubbed shoulders, picked blueberries and Skype-chatted with all manner of psychedelic-investor proto-yuppie, and considered my greens already drooping from the hypocrisies and cultural ambivalences of what media ecologists Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron call the Californean Ideology, a 'heterogeneous orthodoxy for the coming information age' defined by 'a loose alliance of writers, hackers, capitalists and artists'. Barbrook and Cameron criticize the West Coast ideologues of Wired magazine, the 'monthly bible of the "virtual class"', for pedalling DIY, retro-futurist myths that are a 'bizarre mish-mash of hippie anarchism and economic liberalism' with 'a profound faith in the emancipatory potential of the new information technologies'.

Giving an interview in 1999, the almighty Larry Harvey says that he gradually realized that the environment that he had created was a 'physical analog of the Internet. The Internet is a populist medium which has a unique way of empowering every individual… it's an interactive medium… which allows people to connect with other people and out of that precipitate new forms of community. And that's what we are.'[11] While this optimistic view of the democratic potential of the Internet reflects the feeling of cyber utopianism prevalent during the dot com boom of the late 1990s, a view which Barbrook and Cameron harshly criticize, Harvey's description matches my own instincts on the physical resemblance of Burning Man to the inner workings of cyberspace. More on that to come.

As an explorer of expanded consciousness, historian of American West Coast countercultural spirituality and Burner-scholar Erik Davis hails the technologically and ideologically driven 'cult of flicker' that emerged from the expanded cinema of the

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[10] (ibid)

[11] (Harvey in Turner, 2009: 83

1960s. Characterized by psychedelic light shows, installations and projections, and more contemporary digital cocktails of abstract graphics and mystic iconography from the 1990s rave culture, technological and spiritual elements interact to 'manifest the spectral machinery in the world before our eyes'[12]. In the hypnotic abstraction of the techno-pagan two-step, Davis is swift to point out which partner is leading the waltz:

> As a Pagan dressed only in a chainmail loincloth told me, "I love the [Rainbow] Gathering, but the Burning Man is more clued in with where our culture is at. Now is not the time to listen to Natives and the trees."… Which is to say that now is the time to project lasers, blast jungle beats, and blow shit up… the earth-mother stuff doesn't cut it in this desert void - the more techno-industrial the aesthetic, the more it works.'[13]

Why is that? Why does the techno-industrial aesthetic work out on the playa? For many participants escaping the 'default world' of normative drudgery and heading out to the desert in search of the Burner-specific magic moments and inexplicable connectivity, these elements of Western capitalist post-modernity are the last things to be thought about. In contrast to the erotic immediatism of similar carnivalesque festive events, however, a significant portion of the population of Black Rock city have just such technologies on their horizons. This is not so surprising considering that the 'bonfire of the techies'[14] has had an online presence via Stewart Brand's Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link, or WeLL since 1994[15] and there have been dedicated technical teams working on the event since 1997.[16]

Through a detailed study of Brand's pioneering *Whole Earth Network* that spawned the WeLL, cultural historian and software engineering Burner Fred Turner details the inextricability of two fronds of the American rhizome of the 1960s. These were the new rhetoric of cybernetic systems and information generated by the ideas of Norbert Wiener, Buckminster Fuller and Marshall McLuhan, and the countercultural movements that swept through San Francisco's Haight Ashbury and other American

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[12] (Davis, 2001: [online])

[13] Davis, 1995: [online]

[14] (*Time* Magazine, 1997

[15] (Timeline, Burning Man website),

[16] (AfterBurn Report 2001, Burning Man website

cultural centres[17]. Turner collapses the sloganeered opposition between the purportedly rigid, bureaucratic and oppressive American military-industrial research culture of the Cold War era that developed the first computer network systems, and the authentically revolutionary desire for social change of the 1960s that crystallized around the transformation of consciousness through technology and spirituality. Young Americans from both coasts were encountering a vision of the world where material reality was imagined as an information system; the cybernetic ideas of late 1950s and early 1960s presented a set of social and rhetorical resources for entrepreneurship, radical self-reliance and communal responsibility[18]. In 1968, Brand's undeniable sense of entrepreneurship led to the publication of the *Whole Earth Catalog*. Distributing to the New Communalists, the tens of thousands of young people who had established communes in distant and deserted corners of the country, items such as buckskins, geodesic domes, early model Hewlett-Packard calculators and the cybernetic musings of Norbert Weiner himself became necessary for any back-to-the-lander worth their prana. The hippies were deploying small-scale technologies on their own flickering cults, technologies 'ranging from axes and hoes to amplifiers, strobe lights, slide projectors, and LSD – to bring people together and allow them to experience their common humanity.'

The Californian Ideology and Burning Man share in the legacy of the New Communalists by using mechanical, social, vegetal and digital technologies to bring about the collective transformation of human consciousness. Geodesic domes are among the most ubiquitous small- to mid-scale structures on the playa, referencing Fuller's ongoing influence on the counterculture of participants. The radial architecture of the city carves an ideal hemispherical model for a cybernetic ecology of consciousness with the Man at the centre. A history of machine and organism have intertwined to produce the contemporary technopagan countercultures of Burning Man in the image of the irreverent and unfaithful cyborg, a hybrid that is both fictional and material, that is, in radical socialist-feminist-technologist Donna Haraway's terms, the 'illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism'.[19]

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[17] (Turner, 2006: 4)

[18] (Turner, 2006: 4-5),

[19] (Haraway, 1991: [online])

The Burning Man Technology Teams, consisting of Engineering, Systems Administration and Web Teams, build and maintain technology solutions for the Burning Man staff, project and extended community. Comprised of highly skilled volunteers from a variety of backgrounds, the technology team describe themselves as 'a study in healthy workgroups… a volunteer environment that is collaborative, respectful, sometimes strenuous, fun and exciting'[20]. In another study, Fred Turner notices similarities between Burning Man's volunteer organizational infrastructure and experience of workers in post-industrial information firms, specifically Google, where they 'find themselves inhabiting a velvet goldmine: a workplace in which the pursuit of self-fulfilment, reputation and community identity, of interpersonal relationships and intellectual pleasure, help to drive the production of new media goods'[21]. In his landmark study, Turner charts the intersections of Burning Man's culture with San Francisco Bay area technoculture to demonstrate that 'the collaborative habits of the art world and the material conditions of contemporary technical production sustain Black Rock City.'[22]

The Burning Man Organization declares that its intention 'is to generate society that connects each individual to his or her creative powers, to participation in community, to the larger realm of civic life, and to the even greater world of nature that exists beyond society'[23]. Today, Google and the computer-related industries of Silicon Valley are providing the tools to generate 'information society' and connect individuals to a greater world. Turner emphasizes several shared features in the reciprocal relationship between Burning Man and the 'San Francisco Bay Area programmers, marketers and technical executives' that attend the event every year to 'set up geodesic domes and tent cities, pirate radio stations, elaborate computer networks and huge, if temporary, dance clubs' as a key to understanding emerging modes of new media production and digital manufacturing.[24]

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[20] (AfterBurn Report 2001, Burning Man website)

[21] (Turner, 2009: 80).

[22] (ibid: 85)

[23] (Mission Statement, Burning Man website)

[24] (ibid: 73-75)

Firstly, Turner highlights the prevalence of commons-based peer production in teams creating artworks and theme camps. At Google, these manifest as databases of ideas accessible by anyone in the firm, and various open spaces in the company's headquarters in which teams can meet and collaborate[25]. The economic value of these commons is exemplified by the manner in which engineer, Krishna Bharat, inadvertently developed the prototype for Google News by sharing a script that he had written to cluster news reports according to his interests, and sending it out on an internal email list to his co-workers[26]. On the playa, 'the desert floor of Burning Man renders participants highly visible', and collaborative social actions charismatically engender social currency. One participant, a senior Google programmer and accomplished firespinner, explains, ' programming things tends to be very subtle and hard to see... it can be very beautiful, but only for a few... At Burning Man just about everybody can see what you're doing... If you do something cool you'll be known for that.'[27]

The promise of 'vocational ecstasy' links the nature of the work of Burners and information technologists. Many participants come to the playa to be part of 'a social unit devoted to doing work or creating a project'[28]. Victor Turner notes that in metropolitan, industrial societies the concept of 'work' denotes labor, employment or otherwise meritorious acts that resound with the profane, secular or pragmatic.[29] The work undertaken by Burners, however, more closely resembles the way that smaller scale tribal cultures conceive of work in ritual and myth, as 'divine labor' (ibid: 31). The Durkheimian sense of 'effervescence', the almost electric current of communion with the gods running between individuals during ritual (Turner, 2009: 86), translates via the work ethic of participation at Burning Man to represent 'idealized forms of the intense focus and camaraderie of professional project engineering.' (ibid: 87) An example of this 'silicon pentecostalism', as Turner dubs it (ibid: 85) comes from a computer animator turned Black Rock City pyrotechnic developer who describes the 'extended, ecstatic feeling of interpersonal unity and timelessness' he felt while

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[25] (ibid: 78)

[26] (Turner, 2009: 80)

[27] (Waldemar Horwat in ibid: 88)

[28] (ibid: 85)

[29] (Turner, 1982: 31)

constructing an event for Black Rock City, where 'seeing it work is just the real high' (ibid: 87). The expressive, creative works of individuals from the Bay area's technoculture here become the work of gods.

In other ways, the expected autonomy of individuals at Black Rock City echoes the need of technical workers during the late 1990s dot com boom to be radically self-reliant in the face of job insecurity. Also, Turner writes, 'as early as the 1980s, gift-giving had come to be a key principle' behind emerging acentered systems of manufacturing and social networking (ibid: 85). While the reciprocity of cultural and physical infrastructures drove Internet technologists out to the playa in droves (ibid: 83), the relationship between counterculture and cyberculture reaches far further back, past Larry Harvey's off-hand artistic gesture on a beach in 1986 that catalysed the Burning Man phenomenon.

To this outsider, Burning Man seemed an open stage for the American tendency to imagine, enact and disseminate opportunities for democratic, consumable and meritorious happiness and meaning for all; an interactive medium that encouraged uniquely American pioneering individuality. During my first full day at the event, it was suggested to me quite forcefully by a new acquaintance that I should lose my clothes, stick on some pasties and climb astride a giant seesaw penis, to liberate myself from my default preconceptions of decency. Having been raised on a bewildering combination of Islam and Catholicism, and as a regular participant of the transgressive cynicism that pervades British festivals, it took me a few days to loosen my morals. Later in the week I arrived back to my camp from a costume camp, having been kitted out with some bunny ears, a polka-dot tutu, red gingham hillbilly style crop-top replete with denim shoulders, suede tassels and two shining gold stars suggesting their double beneath. My campmate, a self-styled heyoka and acro-yoga shaman called Shayan aka Dreamsicle, told me in no uncertain terms that this outfit was a million times better than the stock of tested festival wear I had brought with me from England, that it was probably the best outfit I owned. On the night of the burn, I stalked toward the Man, playing harmonica and sashaying to myself, only to realise that packs of Burners were using my tootling as a guide out into the desert night. I constantly wondered if I was truly welcome home, or gate-crashing 'the New American Holiday'[30].

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[30] (Sterling, 2006: [online]).

Among the many tribes of Burning Man I was a nomad, a cultural vagrant, unanimously welcomed to make this place my home along with every other unique and identical individual, but without a local account to deposit the shares of my selfhood. At moments, however, even I was drawn in by the economy of communitas and attentive bonhomie. By plonking my tent on the doorstep of their Rainbow Womb shade structure, I had befriended a troupe of contemporary electro-circus and fire-dancing enthusiasts from Austin, TX. Gratefully, I nestled in to be their pet for the week, their 'Brit' as they would call me. As the event progressed I was overwhelmed by the homespun generosity and persistent cohesion displayed by my circus hippies. One afternoon, sheltering from a dust storm with one of the firebird nymphs in her peace-pod trailer, I asked what held their assemblage together so fiercely. Firebird informed me of their mantra, an simple maxim that held truth, and seemed to me to fractally express the astral-glue that held the whole event together: 'we love us'. Not 'I love you', or 'we love each other', but an unadorned vow of collectivity adoring itself in unconditional unity. 'We Love Us.'

In terms of consciousness, this unconditional unity might be understood as recognition of the continuity between mind, body and world that Pepperell holds as central to his posthuman conception of consciousness. Such continuity is commonly accepted in systems of thought that have evolved outside of Western Europe, such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism[31]. Nurturing environmental conditions such as physical contact, emotional interaction and palpable care, Firebird and her tribe used their maxim and the energy of their love to recognise and strengthen the channel through which consciousness flows, to dispel the fragmentation that their individual bodies and resist the individuality of their minds. In becoming-collective they shared the invented city-space, the environmental and interpersonal conditions of Burning Man, and in turn shared consciousness as they might share communication.

Before surrendering my anomie to the 'we' that was loved by 'us', I spent a lot of time riding around by myself in the dust, clumsily misfiring attention and intention out into the colonized void, taking notes to keep myself company. In the daytime, the parched and barren panorama of the playa evoked the surface of some other-worldly celestial body, the vast white curvature of the horizon curtailed by mirage-like mountains

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[31] (Pepperell, 2000: [online])

skirting an endless, merciless sky. Mark Pesce, long time Burner and programming pioneer who standardized the online experience of virtual reality agrees: 'I get to the playa in 1995, and I see an endless plane with pointy mountains impossibly far off – that's a virtual world. If you'd been to a computer role-playing environment, that's what you'd see, everything built on it a human construction.'[32]

At night the heavens ebonized, and this curvature would become illuminated by neon tubing, electroluminescent wire, floodlights, flashlights, bike-lights, glowsticks and all magnitudes of inferno to reveal in the techno-industrial aesthetic a reticular phantasmagorium of the post-modern imagination. 'We find ourselves navigating through the after-images of a friendly arms race of lighting designers… Myriad lines, dots, and blinky lights dance before your eyes, many forming specific icons like dice or Mayan pyramids or mobile jellyfish.'[33] Perhaps I am just a child of the digital telecommunications age, seeing my reflection and even my spirit in the World Wide Web that has extended my universe. Forcefully, these ferocious associations of imagery and networked spatial arrangement seemed to me to be a manifestation of the telematic sensorium of cyberspace, the greater chaos that Mesce's vision of 'virtual worlds' are contained within. Insomuch as the concept of heaven has been decorated in the Western popular imagination with more than its fair share of fluffy clouds and flowing white robes, it is not contentious to presume that a shared envisaging of cyberspace might feature infinite spherical blackness structured by neon lines and blips of nodal information. Cyberpunk writer William Gibson's classic description reads:

> '…a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators… A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system… Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding…[34]

Cyberpunk fiction, its motifs and those of its adherents, are evident in the aesthetic and terminology of the event. Participants are costumed and head-dressed in

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[32] (Pesce in Doherty, 2004: 99)

[33] (Davis, 2005: 12)

[34] Gibson, 1984: 67.

futuristic techno-couture and adapt to the harsh alkali dust storms of the playa by wearing goggles inspired by the genre's futuro-mechanical predecessor, steampunk. Philip Linden, or Philip Rosedale as he is known in the 'default world', founder of Massively Multiplayer Online game Second Life describes his attendance at the 1999 event as inspirational to creating Linden Labs' principal virtual metaverse. Neal Stephenson coined the term 'metaverse', used by players of MMO games such as Second Life to refer to the user-defined virtual worlds in which their digital avatars interact, play and engage in commerce, in his cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash* (1992). Linden saw 'Burning Man as a template for an online world'[35], and notes on the website dedicated to the SL event BURN2, 'a mirror of the Real Life event', that 'humans abhor a blank canvas, and will compulsively create form to fill void'[36]. David Best, a San Francisco-based artist who designs the temples that burn on the final night of the event, echoes this sentiment when he states that his inspiration for the temple structures comes from an innate need in human beings to construct and decorate. 'You get a bunch of people out here with a cup of water, and a little bit of that water spilled, the rest is divided up to drink, someone would get a little bit of mud and put it on their face. We have decoration within us'[37].

Pioneering cybernetic theorist and artist Roy Ascott unites art, technology and consciousness by defining the telematic system as 'computer-mediated communications networking… the technology of interaction among human beings and between the human mind and artificial systems of intelligence and perception.'[38] The telematic system by which the nodes of the participant-operators of Burning Man connect drives my hypothesis. Through the cult of flicker, flamboyant cyberpunkery, the unclipped interaction of consciousness, techno-sculptures and installations, variously powered art-cars and parades and radio channels, and many other forms of output that use technology, every participant of Burning Man generates Gibson's abstracted data. The Burning Man diktat of No Spectators means that, in a very real sense, all participants become artists engaged in using technology to creatively mediate the interaction between their conscious mind and environmental conditions, creating a telematic system in which all participants are 'always potentially involved

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[35] (Maney, USA Today, 2/5/2007

[36] ('BURN2 and Burning Man', BURN2 website)

[37] (Best in Bowditch, 2010: 240)

[38] (Ascott, 1990: 241)

in a global net, and the world is always potentially in a state of interaction'[39]. One symbol of this interaction are the playa bikes that Burners festoon in lights at night time. Groups or individuals of blinking, flashing cyclists are carriers of energy and consciousness, roaming the radial streets of Black Rock City, criss-crossing the open playa, and stopping to engage with other brightly lit components of the system. An interactive system of networked, operational, theatrical, artistic, psychedelic and archaic technologies collaborate to create culture on the blank slate of the playa. The consciousness of Burners flows freely and continuously between body and environment; by the blurring of boundaries, participants are able to transcend every day reality and live collaboratively.[40] By enacting and embodying a telematic system, Burners are able to 'transcend linear thought by reaching for the free-flowing consciousness of associative structures'[41] and affecting what Ascott dubs the 'participatory universe'[42].

Without wishing to whine, my own loneliness, or alone-ness, may have been bearable had it not been for this deep need for connection and limitless potential for connectivity that Burning Man engenders. To quote Victor Turner's ever-useful principle, the event provides a theoretical space for *communitas*, for the flowing of verbal and non-verbal communication in a group, for 'direct, unmediated communion with one another'[43]. As a committed professional and recreational participant of international contemporary festival culture, I have regularly observed the relationship between altered social relations and enhanced states of consciousness, irruptions of communitas that, while unsustainable, leave an indelible mark on the utopic memories of participants and attendees[44]. Whether these altered states are brought about by the giddy utilization of chemical or vegetal technologies, or consensually realised as the flow of energy of new and unique rituals, a sense of spiritual communion and increased frequency of serendipitous occurrences characterizes the appeal and experience of attending any festival. At Black Rock City, the experience

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39 (Ascott, 1990: 241)

40 (Clupper, 2005: 232)

41 (Ascott, 1997: [online])

42 (Ascott, 1990: 242

43 (Turner, 1982: 58)

44 (ibid: 47-50)

of unbound communion when individuals 'obtain a flash of lucid mutual understanding on the existential level'[45] is fundamentally necessary in order to authentically experience Burning Man. Out there it is known as *playa magic*, and if you do not know that, you do not know Burning Man.

Experiential, attentive, erotic, conscious, the economy of Burning Man is minted in the emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual exchanges of participants. In this economy, stories of playa magic become 'the coin of the realm, fetishes traded over fire, always pointing back to the *mysterium tremendum* of consciousness itself'[46]. I have shared a few of my own tales throughout this study, and in keeping with my metaversal engagement, here is a rough anthology of playa magic stories from in and around the Burning Man website. Broadly, the stories can be categorised around the following overlapping themes: sudden fortune; random but meaningful acts of kindness; lost but found; unexpected friendship; connective creativity; self-connectedness. For example, Rhino[47] tells us that he was at Center Camp with a new Australian friend with the name Flower when a stranger walks up and spontaneously gifts her a large, beautiful furry flower. 'They discover that they are both Aussies and the flower indeed came from there! She was presented an amazingly personal gift by a complete stranger from her long missed home country'. Center Camp seems a particularly charged locus for spontaneous acts of serendipity, or 'Synchrondipity' as Burning Man volunteer, Karen Tracy, terms it[48]. Zdeaconblue was at Center Camp explaining the concept of playa magic to a newly befriended Burning Man virgin, boldly wagering that the novice could stand up and ask for anything he wanted and expect to receive it.

> He'd been craving fresh baked chocolate chip cookies… so he stood up and loudly declared, "I want a freshly baked chocolate chip cookie." He repeated this twice and sat down with a very satisfied look on his face and said, "well?" I told him to be patient and truly thought I'd been proven wrong when a woman leaned around the wooden bench we were on and said, "here you go, sorry, we ran out of milk," and then scurried

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[45] (ibid: 48)

[46] (Davis, 2005: [online])

[47] Zdeaconblue blog, 27/09/2010

[48] (Tracy, Burning Man website: 11/03/2005)

off.   My new-found friend just sat there staring at the cookie, "playa magic," was all I said.[49]

Whereas stories of this type could be discarded as mere coincidence due to the sheer numbers of people and goods brought out to the playa, other stories defy skeptical disposal. Responding to Zdeaconblue, a blogger called Jake shares a more inexplicable tale:

> A couple of years ago two friends were walking along esplanade and I guess they were playing doctor or something. One of them puts out her hand and says "**scalpel**" a random person two or three feet away pulls out a real scalpel and puts it in her hand.[50]

The improbability of these circumstances converging demonstrates the magical crux of playa magic stories. Participant James Hogan articulates his feelings about the extraordinary frequency of these 'synchrondipitous' moments. 'The playa has a way of giving you what you need, if you're open to receiving it. It doesn't seem to matter if it's the meaning of life or a roll of toilet paper. This effect is so profound and so intuitive that if I were not passionately scientific, it would seem like magic.[51]

Hogan's division of science and magic can be forgiven. Attacked by monotheism first and secular scientific humanism second, belief in pagan energies and mystical intuition is more likely to bring you into custody than before a sympathetic audience of rational academics. And yet, Burning Man's radical and irreverent culture of cyborgian ritual is a productive play-date for scientific theory and the incantation of ancient forces. As illegitimate offspring of technological capitalism and the emancipationist pioneers, the participants of the future primitive flicker cult perform as connective telematic nodes in a localised consciousness enhancing technology. Humanism's struggle to contain consciousness in the cerebral pot of the individual may very well have been superseded by the technologically advanced kettle of a posthuman conception of consciousness. Postmodern literary critic, Katherine Hayles, writes that in allowing the body to act as a prosthesis that is manipulated by informational processes, by submitting to the utility and ecstatic vocation of metaversal participation, we became posthuman.[52] Nowhere at Burning Man are

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[49] (Zdeaconblue - 27/09/2010)

[50] (Jake, Zdeaconblue blog, 27/09/2010)

[51] (Burning Man Website: 30/11/2006)

[52] hayles

informational patterns privileged more over material instantiation than in the central figure of the Man. Evading prescribed meanings, the Man makes ironic the traditional concept of a monument. As participants project a multitude of possible interpretations onto the figure – a process of hermeneutic liquefaction that destabilizes notions of 'the man', 'that man', 'my old man', 'mankind' – they further rupture normative, material relationships with the default world. Sharing an unstable identity of values and interpretations, participants become defined by their collective operations at any given moment. Collectivisation peaks at the ritual burning of the Man, and is also enacted through unexpected equanimity with strangers, the synchrondipitous provision of much needed tools, the passing of prescient parades… In the blankness of the desert, the communication of each individual participant in Burning Man is free to run from one neighbour to another while the topographical, infrastructural and anti-monumental body of the Man centralizes the plane on which they roam… the system by which they are processed… The ideational and philosophical body without organs of the Man acts as a central automata… an accomplice and martyr to the technoetic interventions that enhance existential interaction at the event… synchronizing the collective consciousness of the whole… connecting the finite network of automaton participants…

'*Incompossible!*', you cry. Or, maybe you don't. Maybe, somewhere between the liminal landscape of the playa and the trembling significance of the metaverse you can see a crack of pure potentiality in my excessive, performative and schizophrenic yarn. The question remains as to whether by collaborating telematically with my materials I have indeed continuously participated in the cyborg Burning Man. My performance of possibility, of becoming-participation, comes into being though its own disappearance[53] and, with devotion to the first principle of emerging Burner spirituality, leaves no trace.

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[53] (Phelan, 1993: 147)