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2008

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Kaiser, Susan and Green, Denise Nicole, "Textiles, Masculinities and Spontaneous Communities in the Burning Man Project" (2008). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 95.

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Textiles, Masculinities and Spontaneous Communities in the Burning Man Project

Susan Kaiser and Denise Nicole Green

What is Burning Man?

Burning Man organizers assert that “trying to explain what Burning Man is to someone who has never been to the event is a bit like trying to explain what a particular color looks like to someone who is blind.”¹ Such enigmatic and authenticating discourse permeates the Burning Man website, as it seeks to affirm itself as a mythical, enchanted, and fantastical Bohemian space. Quite simply, the Burning Man Project is an annual festal gathering in the desert, where people come together from across the globe to form a community known as Black Rock City. The annual eight-day gathering has been described by Burning Man Organizers as “dedicated to self-expression, self-reliance and art as the center of community.” As a participant in the Burning Man Project, individuals are encouraged to step out of their “comfort zones” and to reject the passivity of the “default world”² by fully expressing themselves through artistic media and face-to-face interactions with strangers. Thus, the formation of communities at Burning Man through non-normative interactions with strangers allows individuals to “practice” new ways of engaging with their social worlds.³

Burning Man as it is known today spawned from a spontaneous event on Baker Beach in San Francisco, California in 1985, where a wooden effigy of “the man” was set afire. With attendance increasing substantially each passing year, the event relocated from Baker Beach to its current location in the Black Rock Desert in Northwestern Nevada in 1990. Since 1990, the event has grown both in population (from a few hundred to nearly 50,000 individuals this past August), and in duration (from one night to eight days). According to the last tabulated Black Rock City census report in 2004, the population comprised of fifty-seven per cent men, forty-one per cent women, one per cent transgender, and one per cent not reporting, with almost sixty per cent of the population between twenty-one and forty years of age.⁴

The physical location of Burning Man is significant in that it has a profound effect on the individuals attending. As for myself, I had never been in a place so devoid of life. Larry Harvey, one of the founders of Burning Man, has described the location as a “clean slate.” This metaphor carries over into the concept of the project itself, as an experiment in spontaneous community where people come together and build community atop a blank canvas. Thus, people arrive to the image of the “clean slate,” and participants are encouraged to embrace this metaphor for their own identities, as well. The idea is to reject all social rules, parameters, and expectations that have limited self-expression. This is in accordance with Elizabeth Wilson’s analysis of Bohemia’s of the past, which “despite the exaggerated individualism of its citizens...

¹ “What is Burning Man?” Black Rock City, LLC. <http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/>

² The “default world” is a term that Burners use to describe the everyday world outside of Burning Man.

³ See Kozinets, Robert V. “Can consumers escape the market? Emancipatory illuminations from Burning Man.” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29 (2002): 20-38.

⁴ AfterBurn Report, 2004. <http://afterburn.burningman.com/04/>

was a collective enterprise... *against* dominant culture.”⁵ Through this rejection, individuals at Burning Man not only engage in radical self-expression, but simultaneously support community formation, returning to a structure of feeling⁶ characterized by the *Gemeinschaft*.⁷ Thus, the expectations and rules indoctrinated within society are done away with, and in their place, a new community and culture emerge under the principles of participation, radical self-expression and self-reliance. In a lecture given at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Burning Man founder, Larry Harvey, describes the physical space of the event:

Imagine you are put upon a desert plain, a space which is so vast and blank that only your initiative can make of it a place. Imagine it is swept by fearsome winds and scorching temperatures, and only by your effort can you make of it a home. Imagine you're surrounded by thousands of other people that together you form a city, and that within this teeming city there is nothing that is for sale.⁸

The principle of “nothing that’s for sale” is an important component of the Burning Man Project. In this space, capitalism and commodified forms of consumption are rejected, and replaced with what is known as a “gift economy.” A gift economy is both a social and economic system wherein individuals subsist through the gifting of goods and services via face to face interactions.

Burning Man is a space simultaneously within and outside of contemporary U.S. society. It seeks to distance itself from isolating, passive, commodified culture by returning to a sense of pre-industrial, *Gemeinschaft* communities. It becomes a Bohemia in the sense that it is a mythical space and an “alternative world within Western society” (Wilson, 2000, p. 2).

From Commodified to Communified Material Culture

A primary discussion and argument of this paper is that the Burning Man Project seeks to replace *commodified* material culture with what we are calling *communified* material culture. The latter works to move beyond the capitalist “disconnect” between production and consumption, toward a model that bridges the two.

In this paper we will explore three forms of communified material culture that exemplify the reconciliation of textile production and consumption. These will include adornments created at the festival, those altered and changed during the festival, and those gifted during the festival. Each of these three examples embodies diverse engagements with materials, community members, and those narratives from which the culture comes to reflexively know itself. Furthermore, we will examine two different types of narratives: firstly, those that are actively *created* during the making process, such as narratives that work to transgress normative ideas

⁵ Wilson, Elizabeth. *Bohemians: The galmorous outcasts*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000, p. 2-3.

⁶ See Williams, Raymond. *The long revolution*. London: Hogarth Press, 1992.

⁷ *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* are two ways of thinking about groups of people. Ferdinand Tönnies characterized pre-industrial communities as *Gemeinschaft*, and post-industrial societies as *Gesellschaft*. See Tönnies, Ferdinand. *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*. Translated by Charles P. Loomis. East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1957. Also see Kaiser, Susan B. *The Social Psychology of Clothing: Symbolic Appearances in Context*. 2nd ed. New York: Fairchild Publications, 1997. p 324.

⁸ Harvey, Larry. “La Vie Bohème—A History of Burning Man.”

http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/lectures/la_vie.html

about gendered appearances and sexuality; and secondly, narratives that are *affirmed* through the making/gifting process. These more general narratives, such as the community and its members embodying radical self-expression and self-reliance, are often more formally institutionalized by the Burning Man Organization through media such as the website, survival guide, first-timers guide, and the bi-weekly BManUpdate. Despite the fact that Burning Man is a temporary, isolated, and relatively small community, we will see how very strong, transgressive stories about a community are created and/or affirmed through the making and gifting of textile-related materials.

Making Clothing

In her discussion of punk styles in the late 1970s, Elizabeth Wilson astutely remarks that the subculture's style functions in opposition to "mainstream fashion which always attempts to naturalize the strange rather than the other way about."⁹ Similarly, participants of the Burning Man Project attempt to make strange what is taken for granted as natural. Making clothing from scratch at the festival allows participants to visually point to the strangeness of the natural by challenging these norms through what Jonathan Dollimore calls a "transgressive aesthetic." While this transgressive aesthetic may at first appear to invert a binary, such as that of gendered apparel, Dollimore argues that in fact the "transgressive aesthetic which [inversion] fashions, reacts against, disrupts, and displaces from within."¹⁰ Keeping these ideas in mind, we will specifically examine the making of two adornments at Burning Man: fairy wings and tutus. How does a transgressive aesthetic materialize from the creative process? What narratives emerge from this process and the subsequent aesthetic that is created?

Fairyland, a Burning Man theme camp created by a group of self-proclaimed "bears,"¹¹ (Figure 1) provides a space each year for daytime sewing and clothes-making projects. On Tuesday and Thursday of the Burning Man week, Fairyland provides fairy-wing and tutu-making workshops, respectively. The organizer explained the fairy-wing process to us:

We basically wanted to create a daytime activity that people could come by and get out of the sun and sit down and have a little camaraderie... We take a wood block and we drill four holes in [the side] for the arm bands and then four holes in the side for the coat hanger wings to go through. And then they make their wing shape and they cover it with either paper or fabric and stick the wings through the holes, and then stick elastic through the holes of the block to go around the arm. And the wood block gives it some stability on the back so they don't flop around too much.

He explained the tutu-making process as follows:

[For t]he tutus we just got tulle and we take it off the roll and we sew a sleeve along the side that's about three inches [wide]. And so we just bring elastic and people thread the tulle through that slit, as much tulle as they want to make a fluffy tutu. And then we have some stuff that they can augment and decorate around the outside of the tutu with.

⁹ Wilson, Elizabeth. *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*. 2nd ed. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2003, p. 196.

¹⁰ Dollimore, Jonathan. *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 14.

¹¹ "Bear" is a colloquism in the gay/bisexual community which refers to gay or bisexual man whom tend to present a hyper-masculine appearances, often including muscular builds, and excessive facial and body hair.

In these examples, the projects rely upon linearity to the making process (as most start-to-finish apparel projects do), yet notice that this does not hinder creative freedom. While there are directions and certain parameters, these still permit diversity in the final product. This is especially so with the making of fairy wings, in which shape, size, material, and color vary greatly from piece to piece. In this diversity we see the Burning Man premise of radical self-expression affirmed through the making process. While a sense of camaraderie is present, as the event organizer suggests, this camaraderie fuels individual expression. One of the stories that the Burning Man community tells about itself is that it is a judgment-free space where individuals are free to express themselves in whatever way resonates with them. The Burning Man space is one that facilitates this endeavor, and hindrances found in the real world, such as ridicule, social scorn, or violence in extreme cases, is not present in this community. Through the making of fairy wings, these institutionalized narratives are affirmed through material forms.

Furthermore, a transgressive aesthetic and practice comes into being (particularly for men) in the making and ultimately, wearing, of the tutus and fairy wings. In this example, I found equal numbers of men and women partaking in these activities. Sewing and crafts, often associated with femininity, are taken up and wholeheartedly embraced by men. In my observation of the event, men appeared to me to be even more excited than women to make and wear these two garments.

Interestingly, the first activity men partake in once they have completed their tutu is to twirl. This movement, well known to women who twirled freely as little girls, is finally accessible to men. Perhaps more obviously this aesthetic transgresses gendered expectations of apparel, as seen in the incongruous juxtaposition of rather rugged, brawny, bearded men donning tutus and intricately designed and decorated fairy wings, which they made themselves (Fig. 1). Through the collaborative making process, these men engage in a reconsideration of masculinity, and the ensuing garments tell the story of their renegotiation. This story is one wrought with ambivalence—a complicated process of “making strange” what society has deemed as normal, made visible by conflicting combinations that prod the viewer to reconsider such taken-for-granted normalitys.



*Figure 1. Organizers of Burning Man theme camp, Fairyland. August 2008.
Photograph by Denise Nicole Green.*

Altering Clothing

Walter Benjamin (1999) writes that, “Image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation” (p. 462). Likewise, the texts and adornments fashioned in the Burning Man community reference the past and combine with the spontaneous moment, creating a constellation of community and culture. This is best exemplified through the alteration of existing clothing at Burning Man, where individuals bring clothing from their past to the present moment and let the resources available and spontaneous ideas combine to inform the new material adornment.

Pandora’s Lounge and Fix-It Shop is a theme camp which provides the basics: a shaded structure with tables; alteration necessities such as needles, thread, scissors, safety pins, staplers, knives, grommets, and sewing machines; and an action-oriented group whose design philosophy is “five minutes, an idea, and some scissors.” They typify the dialectical “flash” that Benjamin so eloquently describes.

In the alteration of existing clothing, the Burning Man premise of “radical self-reliance” is affirmed. Self-reliance is a story of sorts that the community tells about itself, from surviving 107 degree Fahrenheit heat and white-out dust storms with 45 mile-per-hour winds to building elaborate theme camps and art structures from whatever can fit into the back of a pick-up truck. Self-reliance is a narrative that permeates existence at the event. In clothing, this quality is much appreciated, and groups within the larger community provide space and tools to promote costume self-reliance.



Figure 2. Trash, also known as MOOP, adhered to the waistband of a handmade faux fur garment. September 2007. Photograph by Denise Nicole Green.

A second narrative, that Burning Man is a “leave no trace” event (perhaps the largest in the world), is often articulated through altered costume. “Matter Out Of Place” (perhaps a term borrowed from anthropologist, Mary Douglas), more commonly known as MOOP to participants, is trash that is found on what is called “the playa,” or desert floor. For many, costume alteration is simply adhering trash to the body (Fig. 2), a visible code that signals loyalty to the “leave-no-trace” story that Burning Man tells about itself.

Gifting Clothing

The gift is an important component of the Burning Man experience, and symbolizes a redressing of an economically driven society. However, it is easy to criticize such attempts, as Elizabeth Wilson reminds us that like other oppositional groups throughout history, “their attempt to subvert the dominant ideologies... [use] the very mass consumption means that constitute or contribute to these ideologies.”¹² Similarly, Burning Man participants embrace consumerism in order to make gifts that allow them to subvert consumerism in the ephemeral moment of the festival. Nonetheless, the spontaneous and temporal act of gifting affirms the community’s counter-capitalist narrative.



Figure 3 (left). Collage of gifted necklaces with the Burning Man Logo. August 2007.

Photographs by Denise Nicole Green

Figure 4 (center). Free garments gifted at the festival. August 2008. Photograph by Denise Nicole Green.

Figure 5 (right). A gifted scarf. August 2008. Photograph by Denise Nicole Green.

On a more intimate scale, the gift allows strangers to interact and collaboratively construct daily appearances at the festival. Many gifts given are adornments: necklaces (Fig. 3), garments (Fig. 4), scarves (Fig.5), goggles (Fig. 6), or forms of body painting (Fig. 7). This two-person collaboration is unique in that the story of the gift (how it was made, what it is made of, what it might mean, where it is from, and the story of the maker) combines with the story of the recipient. The Burning Man experience is thus materialized and memorialized through gifts given and received, and these eventually become mnemonic devices to the wearer once they are re-introduced into what “Burners” call the default world and everyday appearances.

¹²Wilson, Elizabeth. *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*. 2nd ed. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2003. p. 204.



*Figure 6 (left). Gifted goggles. August 2008. Photograph by Denise Nicole Green.
Figure 7 (center). Body painting. August 2008. Photograph by Denise Nicole Green.*

In some cases, the gift is intended to be transformative. When discussed in interviews, “transformative adornments” are almost always spoken of in reference to men. Large-scale theme camps, such as the Black Rock Boutique and Costume Kult, provide primarily women’s clothing to Burners. In interviews with members of both camps, they discussed the importance of getting men out of their khakis and t-shirts and into more exciting clothing. Furthermore, there was an indication that men tended to be more reserved, especially if it was their first year or first day to the festival. While the clothing is the material gift, there was a feeling that the real gift was the freedom that accompanies that initial transgression of gender norms.



*Figure 8. Mertz wears and displays the “furkini” at Camp Furkini. August of 2008.
Photograph by Denise Nicole Green.*

Another theme camp called Camp Furkini--on a much smaller scale--frames its mission as one of transforming men's experience of dress at the festival. Each year, Camp Furkini, headed by costume designer James Hayes, makes 50 garments ("furkinis") to give out to predominantly straight men (Fig. 8). The furkini is described as a "faux fur speedo." It was designed out of disillusionment with existing bikini bottoms, which were felt to be unflattering to the male body. Instead, the furkini has been, "designed, engineered and manufactured with something called C.E.T.... C.E.T. stands for 'Crotch Enhancement Technology.' If you just want to look at the crotch portion of the furkini, it has been manufactured to exacting specifications to produce the maximum amount of crotch enhancement that anyone would want to have while wearing the fabulous furkini."

The furkini is certainly a fascinating garment for a number of reasons. Perhaps because it is a contemporary codpiece? Or maybe because it harkens to a primitive, caveman-like aesthetic? Or is it because its shape is incredibly masculine, yet it is so revealing of the male body (which is more often concealed by clothing)? The colors, often in bright pinks, blues, and reds tend to be those classified as feminine in western culture. Furthermore, it is interesting how sexuality is complicated by the furkini. Made, designed, and manufactured by gay men, it tends to be most popular with straight men. As James's partner and co-furkini-maker, Mertz, explained to me, "It's the straight guys that really love the furkini," hypothesizing that this is because of their fashion repression in the everyday world. The furkini problematizes, like many other Burning Man outfits, the complex relationships among masculinity, sexuality, and appearance. The story the furkini tells is that it's ok for men to feel sexy in their clothes, no matter what their sexual orientation, outward appearance, or relative manliness. Furthermore, it carries with it a narrative of democratization. As one furkini wearer explained to me, "It doesn't matter how the person wearing the furkini is endowed, or how much he thinks he's endowed or not endowed. Whatever, that's not the point." Thus, the furkini is democratizing in that all men may appear manly, well endowed, and look fabulous at the same time.

These narratives are both intimately constituted through the giving and receiving of the garment. James and his partner, Mertz, develop close relationships with the men (and often their girlfriends, too), who receive the furkini. Recipients keep in touch and send photographs of themselves in the furkini, both in public and private spaces. As one recipient wrote to them later in the year, "I can't take it off; I wear it all the time. Please send washing instructions."

Conclusion

As we have seen in the Burning Man space, the shift towards communified forms of consumption and production of textiles informs strong narratives about the community and its ideologies. In this integrated, rapid referential system of production and consumption, participants develop transgressive aesthetics that facilitate a questioning of what is taken for granted as normal in the everyday world, particularly in the regard to expectations of masculinity and gendered clothing. Also informing cultural narratives, this transgressive aesthetic continues to linger in the materials themselves as they travel across borders back into the "default world" of everyday life. Furthermore, this reconciliation of production and consumption promotes the very emergence of cultural narratives. Walter Benjamin explains that, "Just as the industrial labor process separates off from handicraft, so the form of communication corresponding to this

labor process—information—separates off from the form of communication corresponding to the artisanal process of labor, which is storytelling.”¹³

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¹³ Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press, 1999, p. 804.