*Center Camp Beams (2002). Photograph by Steven Fritz.*
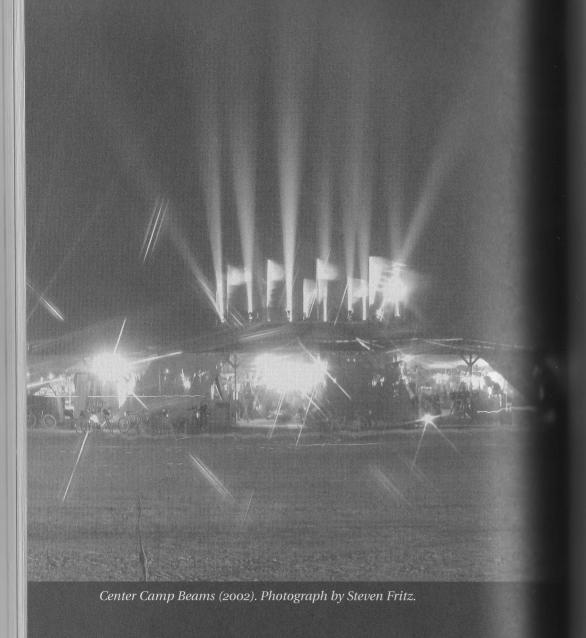
# Welcome to the Black Rock Café

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When we first heard about Burning Man, it was like being informed about the discovery of extraterrestrial life; our own bona fide b-school version of the Roswell incident. We are applied anthropologists who toil in the marketing departments of business schools. During the day we teach bright MBAs how to build brands that people will fall in love with and for which they will pay dearly. In our remaining time—call it the witching hours if you will—we investigate research questions about what our marketing culture is doing to other cultures, to the planet, to people, their communities, and their lives. In our research we like to stick with things we know—the media, movies, sports, TV, shopping, themed retail destinations, flea markets—the usual stuff. We speculated about the possible existence of life outside the marketplace— an interesting theoretical question—but no one expected it to come crashing into our everyday reality.[1]

But crash it did, right into our worlds of business and marketing. When we spotted Burning Man on the cover of *Wired* magazine in fall of 1996, it was like hearing that the saucer had landed. We read voraciously about it. We bought the giant HardWired book, which—like Burning Man's ideas—was so

big it refused to fit into any bookshelf. In that book, Burning Man's founder Larry Harvey is quoted as calling the event "Disneyland in Reverse,"[2] while the volume's editor professes that ". . . unlike a convention or Superbowl, Burning Man has been stripped of commercial motives."[3] That was what we had wanted to hear. In our field, researchers speculate about the relationship between consumers, markets, and communities. Could we envision a space where people consumed outside conventional marketing forces? This was key in the hunt for the unified field theory of marketing: a place outside the gravitational pull of the market.

Burning Man held a lot of promise in our quest. Billed as a Temporary Autonomous Zone, "a guerilla operation which liberates an area of land, time, and imagination,"[4] it had specific rules that were intended to lock out the market. No vending. No brand names. Participate. Finally, a place where we could investigate the absence of markets, the lack of marketing. We were, as our students put it, stoked.

We got ready to pack our bags and head out to the desert. We bought a lot of stuff. Purchasing tents, tickets, sleeping bags, camping gear, food, costumes, airfare, rental cars, we rapidly ran down our research accounts, but it was all in the service of antimarket research. By the time we got to Reno, then Gerlach, then Black Rock City, we had spent considerable sums just to evade the nefarious grip of marketing. How amazingly ironic it was, then, to walk through Burning Man for the first time, to walk through the vast neon-tubed, electroluminescent-wired, *über*-strip mall of the place, the signs competing for attention, the touristic cameras, the elevated RVs on prime real estate, the lowly K-Mart tent shanty-towns, to get to Center Camp, and see the sign.

In the distant zone of this autonomous land, where brands were supposed to be vanquished, we found a sign that mocked capitalism while also celebrating it—the familiar round sign of the Hard Rock Café, that retail eatertainment downtown essential of commercialized hipness. "Welcome to the Black Rock Café" it said. And, even more astounding, nearby was the sign for the official Burning Man coffee bar, offering espresso, cappuccino, lemonade, and a cornucopia of other warm and cold beverages for sale. We had gone a long way to penetrate the antimarketing zone, only to be once again confronted by popular brands and commodities for sale.

"How much for a tall chai?" We reached for our wallets.

Before we can understand these important paradoxes—the antibrand event that uses the language of brands, the anticommerce zone that looks like a strip mall, the antimarket event that sells coffee—we must explore the important relationship among markets, culture, and communities. Rich (sub)cultural events that exist on the margins of mainstream society—like other resistant grassroots festivals (e.g., Gay Pride day), fan-run Star Trek conventions, and New Age spiritual gatherings—tend to bring to the surface the uneasy-but-frequent contemporary interaction of communities and markets. In this essay, we explore that interaction in several ways. First, we describe and analyze the prevalent antimarket and anticonsumer discourses circulating at Burning Man. Then, we introduce a body of postmodern theory that shares some of the Burning Man organizers' (and participants') negative views of consumption, and seeks emancipated spaces for consumers. We conclude with some thoughts about how Burning Man increases our understanding of the unstable and important relationship among markets, communities, and individuals.

## Resisting Markets and Embracing Communities at Burning Man

Larry Harvey has often described the intent of the Burning Man "project" in terms of its community-building properties. For example, he has said that Burning Man is

> dedicated to discovering those optimal forms of community which will produce human culture in the conditions of our post-modern mass society. Within a desert wilderness we build a city, a model world composed of people who attend our event from all over the globe. . . . Living as we do, without sustaining traditions in time and ungrounded in a shared experience of place, it is yet possible to transcend these deficiencies.[5]

The chief expounder upon the significance (but never *the meaning*) of Burning Man then states that Burning Man is "a model world."[6] It is not stretching things too far to see that Burning Man is envisioned as a utopian project that seeks to rebuild community.

Theories and ideals of "community" are among the most important, complex, political, and dissent-filled discussions that circulate within Western

thinking and history.[7] Although the term *community* has been conceptualized in very diverse ways within these discourses, communal forms similar to those described by Harvey have often been raised as an ideal, which can be characterized as groups living together in close proximity, with social relations that are characterized by compassion, caring, and sharing of vital resources. In the late nineteenth century, Ferdinand Tönnies evoked this ideal in his notion of *Gemeinschaft*, which he posited as a form of social relationship characterized by its informality and emotional closeness.[8]

At Burning Man, this kind of community is almost self-evident. As soon as you arrive, you are met (some are hugged, the lucky are even groped) by official greeters. The hellos and hi's ring out as you begin walking around. Those who already have a history at the place are "welcomed home" by old friends. Food, drink, and stories are shared. The artistic, live-for-today, festal, bohemian culture encourages genuine expressions, the sharing of secrets, the giving away of smiles. Theme camps are like villages, and in fact larger groupings of theme camps are even called "villages." These villages are open to wanderers and strangers.

The original "sharing and caring" community arrangement is widely considered by anthropologists and sociologists to be the family or extended-family arrangement, the tribe, with its deep levels of interdependence and profound levels of trust. We can therefore think about idealized communities as being like large functional families. A return to idealized community is often spoken of in terms that echo of a return to family or, in Burning Man's case, a return home.

Community and family are experimented with and celebrated in a utopian fashion at Burning Man. But why do we need events like Burning Man? Why do we need to reform community? One of the main culprits blamed for the breakdown of community in contemporary society is the hegemony of capitalist markets, and the powers they give to large corporate interests. In Black Rock City, the mediating and socially distancing forces of the market are constantly on display. In signs, rules, and discourse, markets are consistently and constantly parodied, resisted, and, at least temporarily, shut out and suspended. One of the funniest and cleverest art displays we noted at Burning Man 2000 was a complete office cubicle set up in the middle of the desert. There was a desk, chair, filing cabinet, two lamps, a water cooler, shelves, books, magazines, a "Success" poster, a whiteboard, and a computer. On the white board was written messages like "Meeting, 12:30 P.M.,

lunch" and "Henry, your wife called—it's over." The computer was covered with Post-It notes with reminders such as "Reread p. 165 of The Gorilla Game" and "Research. Organize. Implement. Follow thru." In its completeness and its contextual evacuation, this artwork brilliantly spoofs the white-collar authority familiar to many Burning Man participants in their daily lives.

Another example was contained in the opening edition of the 1999 *Black Rock Gazette*, which stated the official rules against vending, and also included suggestions to "mask, hide or disguise" the brand logos that "get in our faces constantly and without our consent" outside of Burning Man.[9] The differentiation between inside–Burning Man–utopic–community, and outside–"real world"–dystopic–market is also present within the "signs of a community" published in the Burning Man organization's 2000 *Survival Guide*, stating that while communities such as Burning Man recognize the uniqueness and contribution of each member, the tendency of "commerce and the public sector" is to define its members "on the basis of deficiency and need."[10]

Mass markets are thus defined in official Burning Man ideology as passive and isolating. Markets are also defined by their use of persuasion and overt exploitation, indicated by the use of money, advertising, and hype. Given that barter was an important (although never explicitly promoted) part of the Burning Man experience for many years, the *Survival Guide*'s distinctions tend to reject large, impersonal markets, rather than trade, exchange, or commerce itself. This is clear when one considers the traditional presence of the coffee bar, and even the presence of parodic quick-serve restaurant McSatan's (a.k.a. Big Daddy Love's) that served hot dogs and hamburgers from 1995–1997. In 2000, the official guidelines began to encourage a gift economy. Emphasizing gift giving at Burning Man became the focus of several Burning Man newsletter editorials and official public relations efforts.

Central distinctions and attitudes toward the market are institutionalized through the application and enforcement of directives like "No Commerce" and "Mask the Brands." Their repeated incantation serves several important cultural purposes. First, they mark out a space of difference. This is not Disneyland, or Woodstock, but Disneyland in Reverse, Woodstock the way it was meant to be: primal, real, true. The second cultural purpose is the creation of bonds through the identification of a common adversary, which represents a key ideological move. Most importantly, these rules attempt to reveal the hidden power of the market so that it can be resisted.

They seek to make previously taken-for-granted and therefore largely invisible market relations salient, visible, open to discussion and debate.

Consider the way mainstream market relations are discussed by Harvey:

> We've created this world in which they [marketers and
> corporations] do these demographic [marketing research]
> studies and they find out what people think they want. And
> then in a kind of séance they summon up before you The
> Ghost of Your Own Desire and they sell it to you. And it
> doesn't connect you to anything. It connects you to your
> own individual desires. And then it turns out, as it so often
> does in life, that what you wanted wasn't what you needed.
> So we spend all our time now, consuming stuff, consuming
> these dream images that nourish us spiritually like styrofoam
> pellets. They don't do us any good.[11]

Leaders and visionaries, like anthropologists, often seek to make the familiar unfamiliar. Harvey takes commonplace concepts and terms like corporations, marketing, consuming, and consumer and gives them a defamiliarizing, negative emotional charge. He equates marketing with metaphysics, false desires with the fakery of the séance. Marketing is linked to a sophisticated industry of deception in which consumers are made dependent, socially isolated, and miserable. From this critical perspective, which is related to neo-Marxist approaches and classic texts such as Adorno and Horkheimer's "The Culture Industry,"[12] consumers are viewed as passive recipients, spiritually empty, exploited through advertising and mind-numbing entertainment by powerful business interests.

This stereotyped sense of consumer passivity is present not only in the discourse of Burning Man's leaders, but also in the discourse of many Burning Man participants. For example, "Earth Goddess,"[13] a friendly fellow anthropologist who had previously written about the event, explained:

> That's really the difference between participant and spectator,
> the difference between being passively fed and that's part of why
> consumerism is shunned out here. Because that's [the consumer
> lifestyle is] passively fed to you, you just sit there and passively
> consume the product. You sit there and consume whatever the
> marketer's brand is rather than expressing your own idea.

Earth Goddess—who shared many of the values of participants and organizers—suggests that the passivity of everyday consumption actually shuts out, or replaces creativity and self-expression. This suggests that consumers are submissive, acquiescent, weak, and uncreative—and that marketers gain from this state of affairs because consumers are dependent on them.

Burning Man's resistance to this creativity-demolishing tyranny of brands and marketing was expressed by many other participants. In a wonderful artwork created by "Jungle James," and dedicated to his daughter, a female torso hung on a tall red crucifix onto which was pasted the covers of many different teen girl-targeted fashion magazines like *Seventeen*, *Self*, and *Glamour*. James explained to us that his artwork was dedicated to resisting the unhealthy body images spread and enforced as beauty by the fashion media and their advertisers.

"Seth of the Voodoo Temple" also exhibited a keen resistance to the presence of corporations within Burning Man in his response:

> When you bring sponsorships and things like that in [into
> Burning Man], like, brand names and logos popping up
> everywhere, then it becomes less about the art and more
> about money and commercialism and everything like that....
> it's nice to get away from it and have more of a focus on creative
> energy. And I think that allowing vending in would kind of break
> that down and destroy it. So I think it's important that they keep
> the vending outside Burning Man.

Seth counterbalances art and creativity with money and commercialism, pointing to another dualism associated with the evils of the market—that it crushes creativity as well as community.[14] At Burning Man (and probably in much of the rest of the world) markets are considered to be very different types of systems than the family-oriented ideal community of Tönnies's Gemeinschaft. In fact, the ideally functioning market can be considered similar to the social phenomenon Tönnies termed a *Gesellschaft*.[15]

A Gesellschaft contains social relations that are significantly more formal, contractual, and socially distanced than the relations characterizing a caring and sharing community. Social relations in a market are supposed to occur not for the sake of interdependence and mutual support, but for the sake of transactions and exchanges. It is widely held that the objective of

market transactions is to increase one's advantage, to try and get as much as possible from the person or persons with whom one is interacting. In ideal communities, however, the object is to try to care and give. This basic opposition between markets and communities is at the center of many debates. Consider, for example, the problems that creep in when religious, governmental, or educational institutions mix their trusted community relations with business transactions. Although sociologists have convincingly argued that markets are always embedded in social relations,[16] and some have claimed that communities based on brands are genuine communities,[17] as citizens we are often drawn to regard these claims with skepticism. Can the self-interest of money making and relations of deep trust truly coexist?

This stance probably explains why, throughout human history, markets and communities have generally been kept apart. But with the rise of industrialization and, especially, a postindustrialized service- and information-based economy, markets have increasingly appeared within social forms, times, and systems that were previously more like communities. This evolution perhaps reached its apex in the strange phenomenon of multilevel marketing, where endless Tupperware Parties and Mary Kay cosmetics gatherings mingle the social with the economic, where families and friends become distribution channels.

The postindustrialized mixing of markets and communities seems to render "community" a much weaker construct. Harvey relates this to his view of Burning Man's intent to discover "optimal forms of community" and to produce a meaningful, authentic sense of human culture "in the conditions of our post-modern mass society."[18] What are the characteristics of this postmodern mass society, and how exactly do they relate to this tension between Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft? In the next section, we explore this question by drawing on the insights of postmodern scholarship.

## Postmoderns in Paradise

Postmodern authors have been simultaneously fascinated and horrified by the growing interdependence of Western civilization and contemporary Western capitalism. Arguably, much of postmodern thought can be simplified as forms of resistance to different authoritative narratives such as this one. Postmodernism as a literary arena tends to question the authority of

science, rationalism, and technology, and in turn the forms of economy, leadership, and bureaucracy built upon them. Many postmodern scholars view society as having undergone a fundamental shift since World War II, in which a rise in the predominance of markets has left people isolated from one another, from self-expression, and from their true selves. This sad state of affairs is often blamed on the intertwined rise of the mass media and mass consumerism.

As with the Burning Man participants cited above, Fuat Firat, Alladi Venkatesh, Nikhilesh Dholakia, and other postmodern consumption scholars assert that the trend of Western society is toward increasingly individualized, private, alienated, and passive forms of consumption, and for this they blame the contemporary marketplace.[19] However, Firat and Venkatesh's liberatory postmodern perspective challenges researchers to locate the consumer in spaces that are emancipated from the market, and that enable them to assume a wide range of unpredictable and creative roles and identities. Following John Sherry's rearticulation of consumption and consumers,[20] Firat and Venkatesh envision a space outside the market system in which consumers can produce their own meanings and identities. Although they wonder whether these goals are actually realizable, they hold that a central project of researchers should be to "identify a social space beyond the reach of the market."[21]

Can consumers actually get outside the grips of the market? What could this social space be like? Firat and Dholakia extend their ideas further in an important later book entitled *Consuming People*,[22] in which they urge that, since consumption (in its literal sense of using products and services) is inevitable, a solution may be found through the consumption of experiences that offer new social possibilities and new social identities besides those of the passive, marketing-driven, conformity-seeking, brand-hungry consumer. Striving for a concrete example of a place where this would happen, Firat and Dholakia describe these possible market-emancipated spaces as "theatres of consumption."[23] Theaters of consumption involve performances that dissipate the passivity of contemporary consumption. The key to overcoming the passivity that makes the consumer such a sorry character is in acting, doing, and being. So theaters of consumption are conceived of as lively, expressive, creative, and temporary places.

Fuat and Dholakia criticize more "permanent" and "totalizing" attempts to escape markets such as "communes or kibbutzim."[24] These attempts, they

*Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping, conducting a service at*
*Burning Man (2003). Photograph by Gabe Kirchheimer.*

argue, ossify, institutionalize, and become as bad as the repressive institutions that they were formed to resist. Instead, the utopian theaters would "avoid cooptation by the market" by developing "permeable but distinct enclaves that allow a free flow of people in and out, but maintain an autonomy from the mainstream market culture."[25] This portrayal of consumers, and the impetus for envisioning temporary social alternatives, is strikingly similar to that found at Burning Man.

Similar utopian social spaces have been found not only by those who envision escape from the market, but by those who travel along its margins. John Sherry found a sense of them in the temporary community of flea markets.[26] Eric Arnould and Linda Price discovered strong temporary connections blossoming in commercial river-rafting expeditions.[27] In the countercultural discourses of the Harley-Davidson subculture, John Schouten and Jim McAlexander observed that Harley culture could be thought of as "a sanctuary in which to experience temporary self-transformation."[28] In his ethnography of Star Trek fan culture, Henry Jenkins detailed how fan culture uses "the utopian dimensions within popular culture [as] a site for constructing an alternative culture."[29] Russ Belk and Janeen Costa explored the world of contemporary mountain men (historical reenactors) and found that their enclaves create "a sacred and fantastic time and place, providing escape, renewal, play, and a sense of community" in "an atmosphere set apart from everyday reality."[30]

It may seem strange that these studies present strong communities that exist within the market. Although they may be on the social fringe, Harley bikers and Star Trek fans are surely working in coordination with marketers and marketing forces. But they also form communities that are, in some sense, utopian and resistant. Fans create fan art, fan literature, fanzines, books, critiques, and then trade them in profitless harmony. Bikers customize their bikes and organize rides and clubs. Mountain men build costumes and equipment, stage reenactments, and live in temporary gatherings. Participants in each of these communities use products that have been produced, distributed, and bought commercially. They also, for a time, cohabit places that they transform and, in this sense, communalize and sanctify in (and with) their own images. Although they are still in the market, their styles of communal consumption do not seem based on a passive acceptance of homogenizing and disempowering images and roles created by large corporations. They have resisted not the market itself, but the Gesellschaft, the distanced, corrosive, exploitative social relations that people associate with the market.

This may be the core realization that makes these ironies, and the market's seemingly oppressive hegemony, tolerable. What may be important is not the actuality of total resistance to markets—which may be pragmatically impossible to achieve in an absolute way—but the appearance of it, its partial achievement. The act of resisting the role of the passive, uncreative consumer is instantly empowering. Following the influential work of post-modern writer Michel de Certeau, Yiannis Gabriel and Tim Lang conceive of some resistant forms of contemporary consumption as

> guerilla fighting in an occupied territory. The powerful define and construct 'places' like shopping streets and malls, houses, cars, schools and factories which they seek to control and rule, using strategies and plans. The weak, for their part, are forced to operate in these places, but are constantly seeking to convert them into their own 'spaces,' using ruse, guile and deception and relying on suddenness and surprise. To the strategies of the powerful, the weak proffer tactics, operating in isolated actions, forever discovering cracks in the system and opportunities for gain. The joy of consumption, then, comes not from the temporary sating of an addiction or from the fulfillment of greed, but from outwitting a more powerful opponent who has stacked the cards.[31]

This conception relates perfectly to Hakim Bey's idea of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (or "T.A.Z."). Bey, a utopian writer, envisions escape from the system in the Situationist's focus on the tactical and the everyday. All-encompassing social systems can be momentarily escaped, he holds, by embracing pluriform, often temporary, social forms. He sees this escape beginning communally and cunningly, in tight-knit social groups gathering to work and play outside of mediated structures and control systems (i.e., outside of work and the leisure marketplace). These autonomous groups may horizontally unite, becoming a tendency, then a movement, then a kinetic web of Temporary Autonomous Zones. A "T.A.Z." is "an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, *before* the State can crush it."[32]

These theories all relate escape from confining bounds—the State, rationality, bureaucracy, authority, hegemony, the Man, the market—to temporary acts of spontaneous theater and self-expression. They relate community to art,

to gifts, and to temporary cohabitation. Yet as we examine the resistance of contemporary consumption, we are left with a range of important paradoxes. How can marketed, mass-produced goods be used in antimarket communities? Do contemporary communities have to engage in production practices of their own (becoming, in essence, isolated communes) in order to distinguish their consumption from the anticommunal taint of markets? Would not abstinence and conservation mark resistance to the market, rather than abundant consumption of all manner of mass-marketed products? The study of consumption at Burning Man, which is filled with concealed and unconcealed brands and prodigious amounts of indulgent consumption, raises almost as many questions as it answers. In our interviews with participants, we often found people waxing enthusiastic about the no-vending rule, wearing new branded hiking shoes, and slugging down large bottles of Gatorade they bought from the Reno Wal-Mart.

In 2000, a survey question by the Ministry of Statistics (a theme camp that collected and tabulated information from participants, but which did not, we hasten to emphasize here, do so in a rigorous or scientifically sound manner) asked participants how much money they spent to prepare for and attend Burning Man.[33] The median response fell between $500 and $750, with considerable percentages spending thousands of dollars. Participants seem well aware of the irony inherent in their massive spending. Fresh off the boat as Burning Man newbies, we initially described our interest in Burning Man as an "anticonsumption" event. Many participants laughed at our naiveté, noting that they had never seen so many people consuming so much in their entire lives. The massive expenditures spurred by the event have, in fact, helped it gain local political support, as power follows the money trail leading from Reno right through Gerlach.

To understand the event we need to dig deeper and ask how Burning Man's participants can spend so much and yet feel that they are escaping the marketplace. Why are these otherwise highly intelligent and creative people ignoring the brands that are right in front of them? We might speculate that it is not because the items or products themselves are being rejected, but instead advertising, sponsorship, and the more overt forms of marketing. Yet even marketing MBA students can quickly tell you that marketing encompasses everything about a product or service—the product or service itself, its design and formulation, the package, the salesperson, the channel it is sold within, the price—not merely advertising. Unless a Burning Man participant

were to leave civilization entirely behind, and live with the wolves, marketing would be very hard to escape. With every swig of Gatorade our antimarketing participants are, in some sense, subsidizing athletic sponsorships, bankrolling the production of another season of *Survivor*, paying for advertising, voting for the marketing system that produced it.

The statement of "Teddy-Be-Air," a longtime Burning Man participant, tells us much about the way some participants conceive of the massive amounts of purchase required for Burning Man: "Even though we have to buy things and bring things out here, that is done not so much for status as it is for beauty and community." Teddy's comment demonstrates how Burning Man's ideology helps participants psychically transform commercial goods into sacred ones. In ritual consumption, and in the giving of the gift, goods are transformed from mass commodities to singular items. They move from the selfish, individual-centered realm of "status" to that of the utopian ideals of "beauty and community." Through these terms participants themselves mark off the important differences between communities and markets. And, despite their material origins, it is from these symbolic gestures that all meaning emerges.

Taking this analysis further, we also must wonder why so many people feel a need to block out commercial relations and marketing. Aren't there many places in contemporary society where people go to escape markets? Aren't families, friends, and other close social and communal relations places where people expect trust to prevail over economic drives? Or has our society dispensed with even these fragile shelters? With a constant barrage of telemarketing, junk mail, television advertising, print advertising, and E-mail spam hitting us in our homes, marketing and advertising have completely infiltrated our private spaces. Consumers likely feel the hegemony of the marketplace (as is theorized by the scholars above) as an unending advertising barrage. Might our informants' enthusiasm for Burning Man's antimarket ethos reflect a sense that, in postmodern society, there truly is no place to hide from the market?

Burning Man seems to offer these participants a purgation and/or purification of the commoditizing forces of Western capitalist economies. In its exclusions of sponsorship and overt marketing, it offers participants a welcome break from Western markets glutted with repugnant social values, waste, and greed. While much of the world is seeking to build an American-style market economy, Burning Man provides a temporary refuge for those who have already become weary of its many psychic and social intrusions.

## Markets versus Communities, or Markets and Communities?

The playfully ambivalent and cautious postmodern stance of a large group of Western consumers who cast modern markets and passive consumers as their ideological enemies is vividly revealed in Burning Man's rules, rites, art, and themes. Yet the symbols of "shopping," theme parks, strip malls, and especially of Las Vegas–themed entertainment spectacles abound. This cannot help but remind us just how deeply embedded we actually are in these phenomena. The urge for community may be utopian, but the presence of the market and its many spectacular manifestations is ubiquitous. We are locked into marketized social structures, existing as beings within a market culture that has a sure and steady grip. These social structures form not only our spaces, but also the structures of our discourses, the meanings of our sign systems, the rules of our sociality, the very foundations of our thoughts. Markets and exchanges date back to the dawn of human history. The ancient Greeks introduced single currencies, and economies bloomed. Exchange is in our nature now, and perhaps always has been. Commercialism and pop culture are inextricably tied up in our language. Why else would the Hard Rock Café morph into the Black Rock Café? Why else are brand signs, commercial parodies, pop culture and entertainment formats, and corporate references everywhere to be found on the playa?

So we can add to our list of awkward ironies yet another one. In its festal celebration of abundance and excess, Burning Man holds much in common with the mood and tenor of ancient marketplaces.[34] Marketplaces of old were located at the borderlands of civilized communities, where tricksters offered combinations of entertainment, danger, opportunity, and delight. Ancient marketplaces were remote, celebratory, and strange. People journeyed to them looking for excitement and even transformation. But while the demarcation of special times and spaces for social experimentation and personal metamorphosis may be ancient, it adopts a decidedly postmodern orientation at Burning Man.

Burning Man can be read as a demonstration of the powerful lengths to which consumers feel they must go in order to decommodify products, services, and even their own identities. But as even a first-time participant will be quick to point out, there is far more to the event than these recalibrations. Contrasted with a range of social forms that increasingly seek to graft markets onto communities,[35] Burning Man provides an alternate view on

this social construction, as it does on so many other social constructions, from gender and sexuality to art, governance, and religion. Poised at the precipice of consumer culture, teetering into post-postmodernism, Burning Man provides a sense of the tension behind the often exploitative social endeavors of late capitalism and the constant utopian yearning for a more communal world.

Although it is decidedly utopian, Burning Man is actually less like a unified utopia than it is like Michel Foucault's notion of a "heterotopia."[36] Foucault used the concept of heterotopia to refer to unsettling or nonordinary social space, asserting that every culture contains places "which are something like a counter-site, a kind of effectively enacted utopia" in which the world outside of that site is "simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted."[37] Heterotopias possess an aura of mystery or danger, and always contain multiple meanings for participants.[38] Graham St John developed this concept further in his work on the "alternative cultural heterotopias" at Australia's ConFest, a biannual alternative-life-style event hosted by a Melbourne cooperative. St John contends that these counter-sites contain not one single utopian vision, but many variant alternatives, multiple utopics.[39] Unlike the unanimity and conformity presupposed by many prior conceptions of utopias—which actually sound like the robotic consumer behaviors that people are resisting at events like Burning Man—heterotopias thrive on the social sparks created when diverse groups commingle.

We can give many examples of diversity and divergence at Burning Man. Conflicts over music volume levels are commonplace at the event, particularly late at night when some participants want to sleep and others want to party. In many cases, the Rangers step in to mediate disputes. Camps have even been organized into "louder" and "quieter" zones, in an attempt to ameliorate some of these conflicts. Other examples of communal division occur over the extremes to which self-expression can be taken. In 1999, a group calling itself "The Capitalist Pigs" was ejected by the Rangers, for bull-horning passersby with insults and obscenities. In 2001, there were divisions over the display of homoerotic art.[40] There are also constant and frequent debates about people's roles as spectators versus participants. With our omnipresent camcorders, we have frequently been verbally confronted by people who insist that we put our cameras down and start acting like participants (now!). E-mail bulletin boards and participant conversations are frequently filled with denigrating references to "yahoos" and "frat boys," referring to the incursion of the profane, passive,

spectatorial, touristic consumer stereotype into the sacred participative play-space of the festival.

Conflicts and divisions abound. Yet they are managed. The heterotopia requires adept, empathic, and nimble management and leadership, which Burning Man's organizers seem to possess in abundance. Simple rules and gentle volunteers who balance order and regulation with the anarchic mandate to radically self-express are amazingly effective, and even exemplary. The question remains whether this institutionalized regulation of diversity could work on a term longer than seven days. Burning Man organizers' aims are explicitly utopian. Postmodern scholars tend to see successful utopias as temporary and local. Can the two be counterbalanced? Can we find respite in conventional society through increasingly festal incursions that promote community and undermine distanced social relations? In our view, these are discussions and debates are well worth holding, though they will have to occur elsewhere.

In conclusion, when added to the insights in other studies on the interrelation of cultures, communities, and markets, Burning Man's communal construction, antimarket discourses, and many intriguing ironies are of considerable interest. Careful consideration of the types of community that people hunger for and seek to construct is an urgent imperative of our time.

A key to understanding Burning Man is to realize that while it is anticonsumption, with hefty admission prices and frothy cappuccinos for sale it is clearly not anticapitalism. It is, instead, an attempt to ameliorate some of the social deficiencies of markets. Burning Man is one attempt, among many others, to inject some much-needed emotional and social heat into social relations by causing people to question what they thought they knew, to reexamine ossified ways of living, and to see the flexibility that can exist within a social system that is ultimately propped up only by our consent to live within it. In so doing, it releases a tremendous amount of creative energy, forms strong communal bonds, and, temporarily and locally at least, seems to achieve much of what it sets out to do. The strip mall appearances, the brand parodies, and the coffee bars are no longer paradoxical when viewed in this light. They are now seen as necessary elements of a resistance that uses the language of oppression to subvert the social rules that are viewed as oppressive.

So it seems that our quest to find a place outside of the market was a fruitless one after all. There is no such thing. For there can be no such thing,

not in absolute terms. But perhaps that is as it should be. Can a gift economy exist outside of a market economy? Can a market economy exist without a gift economy? Can production occur without the relations of trust built through communities? Can contemporary communities thrive without the work ethic and productive values propagated by economic rationality? Can order exist without some chaos? We continue to wonder, and to enjoy our chai, at Burning Man.

## NOTES

1. We attended the event as participant-observers and videographers in 1999, 2000, 2002, and 2003. During that time, we videotaped and interviewed several hundred Burning Man participants. Our research is also based on virtual fieldwork, or netnography, of the Burning Man festival bulletin boards, which we hold to be its extended context. Other articles we have authored on the subject include: Robert V. Kozinets, "Can Consumers Escape the Market? Emancipatory Illuminations from Burning Man," *Journal of Consumer Research* 29 (June 2002): 20–38; John F. Sherry Jr. and Robert V. Kozinets, "Sacred Iconography in Secular Space: Altars, Alters and Alterity at the Burning Man Project," in *Contemporary Consumption Rituals: A Research Anthology*, eds. Cele Otnes and Tina Lowry (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004); Robert V. Kozinets, "The Moment of Infinite Fire," in *Time, Space, and the Market: Retroscapes Rising*, eds. Stephen Brown and John F. Sherry Jr. (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2003), 199–216.

2. Kevin Kelly, "The Next Burning Man," in *Burning Man*, eds. John Plunkett and Brad Wieners (San Francisco: HardWired, 1997).

3. Brad Wieners, "Untitled," in *Burning Man*.

4. Ibid. Also see Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Autonomedia, 1991).

5. Larry Harvey, Published Notes to January 1997 Talk at the 9th Annual Be-In: Burning Man and Cyberspace; available from http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/people/cyber.html (accessed July 11, 2003).

6. Ibid.

7. See for example, Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to the Present* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000).

8. Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Association (Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft)*, trans. Charles P. Loomis (London: Routledge & Paul, 1912 [1955]).

9. Fang, "First Time? Do It Right," *Black Rock Gazette* 8, 30 August 1999, 1.

10. Burning Man Organization (2000), *The 2000 Burning Man Survival Guide*.

11. Larry Harvey, Larry Harvey's Burning Man '98 Speech, September 5, 1998, Center Camp Stage, Black Rock City, Nevada. Available from http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/1998/98_speech_1.html (accessed July 11, 2003).

12. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry," in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans., J. Cummings (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

13. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the confidentiality of ethnographic informants. In this ethnography, pseudonyms were chosen that exemplify the colorful "nom de playa" adopted by many Burning Man participants.

14. For greater depth on this topic, please see Kozinets, "Can Consumers Escape the Market?"

15. Tönnies, *Community and Association*.

16. See, for example, Mark Granovetter, "Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness," *American Journal of Sociology* 91 (November 1985): 481–510.

17. See Albert Muniz Jr. and Thomas C. O'Guinn, "Brand Community," *Journal of Consumer Research* 27 (March 2001): 412–32.

18. Harvey, Published Notes to January 1997 Talk.

19. See A. Fuat Firat and Alladi Venkatesh, "Liberatory Postmodernism and the Reenchantment of Consumption," *Journal of Consumer Research* 22 (December 1995): 239–67; and A. Firat and Nikhilesh Dholakia, *Consuming People: From Political Economy to Theaters of Consumption* (London: Routledge, 1998).

20. John F. Sherry Jr., "Postmodern Alternatives: The Interpretive Turn in Consumer Research," in *Handbook of Consumer Research*, eds. Harold H. Kassarjian and Thomas Robertson (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1991), 548–91.

21. Firat and Venkatesh, "Liberatory Postmodernism," 247.

22. Firat and Dholakia, *Consuming People*.

23. Ibid., 157–59.

24. Ibid., 156.

25. Ibid., 157.

26. John F. Sherry Jr., "A Sociocultural Analysis of a Midwestern American Flea Market," *Journal of Consumer Research* 17 (June 1990): 13–30.

27. Eric J. Arnould and Linda L. Price, "River Magic: Hedonic Consumption and the Extended Service Encounter," *Journal of Consumer Research* 20 (June 1993): 24–45.

28. John W. Schouten and James H. McAlexander, "Subcultures of Consumption: An Ethnography of the New Bikers," *Journal of Consumer Research* 22 (June 1995): 50.

29. Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1992), 280–83.

30. Russell W. Belk and Janeen Arnold Costa, "The Mountain Man Myth: A Contemporary Consuming Fantasy," *Journal of Consumer Research* 25 (December 1998): 237.

31. Yiannis Gabriel and Tim Lang, *The Unmanageable Consumer: Contemporary Consumption and its Fragmentation* (London: Sage, 1995), 140.

32. Bey, *T.A.Z.*, 101.

33. See http://www.dcn.davis.ca.us/~mos/stats2000/stats2000.html (accessed July 11, 2003).

34. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

35. For example, the brand communities of Muniz and O'Guinn.

36. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16 (1986): 24.

37. Ibid., 24.

38. Ibid., 13.

39. Graham St John, "Alternative Cultural Heterotopia and the Liminoid Body: Beyond Turner at ConFest," *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 12, no. 1 (2001): 47–66.

40. The Jiffy Lube Camp mounted a gigantic, spotlighted mechanical billboard by California sculptor Mark Canepa, featuring two muscular men, about twelve feet tall, cut out of plywood, and hinged so as to portray the two men having anal intercourse. Citing complaints from families with children at Burning Man, Pershing County law enforcement officials decided that the art violated community standards and requested that it be removed. Burning Man organizers agreed. A noisy protest followed. Hundreds of participants expressed their opinion that, given the nudity and lascivious art already on display at Burning Man, this act of artistic censorship was homophobic and oppressive. Eventually, after more vocal debate, the billboard was moved to a less publicly visible location within the camp. For more in-depth coverage, see Deirdre Pike, "Burning Ban," *Reno News and Review*, September 13, 2001; available from http://www.newsreview.com/issues/reno/2001–09–13/cover.asp (accessed July 16, 2003).

# AfterBurn

## Reflections on Burning Man

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and

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*Man aflame (2003).*
*Photograph by Steven Fritz.*