

The Cultural Heroes of Do-ocracy: Burning Man, Catharsis on the Mall and Caps of Liberty

Graham St. John

“Are they red Smurf hats?” I queried my neighbor, as we spy three cats in weird hats taking the stage. These unassuming pied pipers are about to incite the Burniverse. I’m inside The Marriott’s sprawling Davis Hall, at the 2017 Burning Man Global Leadership Conference, Oakland, California. Over six-hundred participants — “community leaders” from regions near and far in Burning Man’s global movement — have assembled. Crowned by red felt caps with their conical tops pulled forward, the trio are Roman Haferd, Adam Eiding, and Josh Carroll, co-founders of Catharsis on the Mall.

While Burning Man¹ is an epic community arts event mounted annually in Nevada’s Black Rock Desert, it is much more than the raising and destroying of its eponymous effigy. The event, known as Black Rock City, is built by an organizing body — a nonprofit today known as the Burning Man Project — that is motivated by an imperative to propagate a uniquely civic culture well outside the boundaries of its prototype event. Addressing a proliferation of the social uses of art in a period of political turmoil, and paying attention to a uniquely agentive

Graham St. John, PhD, is a cultural anthropologist specialising in event-cultures. Among his eight books are *Mystery School in Hyperspace: A Cultural History of DMT* (North Atlantic Books 2015), *Global Tribe: Technology, Spirituality and Psytrance* (Equinox 2012), *Technomad: Global Raving Countercultures* (Equinox, 2009), and the edited collections *Weekend Societies: Electronic Dance Music Festivals and Event-Cultures* (Bloomsbury 2017), *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance* (Berghahn 2008) and *Rave Culture and Religion* (Routledge 2004). He is a Research Fellow in the Dept of Social Science, University of Fribourg, Switzerland, working on the project *Burning Progeny: The European Efflorescence of Burning Man* (<https://www.burningprogeny.com>). He is Executive Editor of *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture*. His website is: www.edgecentral.net.

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¹ <https://burningman.org>

citizenship informed by what Burning Man participants call “do-ocracy” (Caveat Magister 2017a), this article addresses an exemplary case of performative pedagogy that has migrated from the margins of the United States to the nation’s symbolic center.



Fig. 1: Catharsis on the Mall logo.

Many in Davis Hall had caught wind of Catharsis, a demonstration-vigil-dance party that, from its inception in November 2015, and as a vehicle for healing traumas associated with the disastrous five-decade War on Drugs, had transposed the culture of Burning Man to the lawns of the National Mall, Washington D.C. I was myself getting a download on how Catharsis was championing the *Zeitgeist*. What’s more, I was being schooled on those red hats, dubbed “liberty caps.”

In the follow-up event held on November 11–13, 2016 — i.e. three days after the Presidential Election — Catharsis rapidly evolved into a broad platform for a cornucopia of grievances. The evening of November 9 saw the country plunge into a prolonged period of political grotesquery — a prolapsed carnival, no less. While in *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin (1968) had recognized how medieval carnival gave its occupants *temporary* liberation from “all that is humdrum and universally accepted,” with the Trump victory, observes Robert Zaretsky:

... the carnival that has been catapulted into power promises a lasting, and not passing, liberation from established truths that, until now, guided our world. Alternative fact, once the nonsense spouted by fools who were crowned for a day as kings, now informs the worldview of a man, long dismissed as a fool, crowned for four years as president (Zaretsky 2017).

The stunning electoral results saw a wave of protests in the capital, around the country, and worldwide. The afflicted took to the streets numb and in shock in the wake of November 9, many later assembling for mass organized protestivals,

such as the Women’s March on January 21, 2017, widely held to be the largest single day of protest in US history. As a First Amendment protected demonstration-cum-carnival in view of the White House in the immediate aftermath of the election, Catharsis on the Mall became an intentional vehicle of liberation — and *catharsis* — for the electorally traumatized.



Fig. 2: Phrygian cap.



Fig. 3: *Psilocybe semilanceata*.

As the event's co-founders reported to base, and gave voice to their dedication to *healing* with a mix of compassion, humor, and insurgency, their hats radiated with meaning. Insinuating freedom and the pursuit of independence, the headgear has a storied legacy. It's current usage among drug prohibition reformists, harm minimization proponents and cognitive liberty crusaders is an iteration on the modern evolution of the Phrygian cap — red conical felt hats with the tops pulled forward dating back to ancient Eurasia (Fig 2). During the revolutions in America and France (perhaps as far back as the 1675 Revolt of the Bonnets Rouges in Brittany), Phrygian-style headwear had received a makeover. Conflated with the *pileus*, the brimless felt cap that in ancient Rome was emblematic of emancipation from slavery, a style not unlike that to which I was exposed at the GLC came to be identified with antimonarchical sentiment, the republican form of government, and libertarianism in general (Korshak 1987).



Fig. 4: John Wilkes with Cap & Pole.

It makes sense that a cap of such style would spore like mushrooms from the heads of D.C.-based activists. It's a choice analogy, given that "Liberty Cap" is common parlance for *Psilocybe semilanceata* (Fig. 3), a potent species of "magic" mushroom growing in temperate areas of the Northern Hemisphere, especially Europe. With a conical shaped cap, *P. semilanceata* does bear some resemblance to a cap set high on a pole. In the 18th century, a cap hung upon a tall pole, often carried by Liberty herself, became the quintessential symbol of rebellion, liberty

and the Republic. The symbolism was common to festivals and parades of the nascent American Republic (Newman 1997), and was depicted on coins, table-wear, coat of arms and in cartoons printed in the period (Fig 4), with the latter a possible trigger for Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s popularization of *P semilanceata* as the “Cap of Liberty” in 1812 (Omissi 2016: 277). From the second half of the 20th century, mushrooms became an overt symbol for the liberation of consciousness in the wake of Albert Hofmann’s 1959 discovery that *psilocybin*, the main active compound of *P semilanceata*, among 200 other species, is psychoactive.

But this story does not travel far enough down the rabbit hole – or at least account for the color of the caps (red — *P semilanceata* is typically yellow to brown). The perception among Coleridge and his contemporaries of a semblance between a revolutionary symbol and the shape of what would now be called an “entheogenic” (and thus ostensibly liberating) species of psilocybin mushroom cannot be divorced from the ancient pedigree of the symbol: the Phrygians and, more to the point, their religion (Mithraism). While the Phrygians were enslaved by the Greeks and their religion subject to repression and persecution by early Christians, Mithraic-inspired Roman mystery cults and initiatory rites are reckoned to have had a profound influence on Western civilization, where its undercurrents thrive even today. In *Mushrooms, Myth and Mithras: The Drug Cult that Civilized Europe*, Carl Ruck, Mark Hoffman and González Celdran uncover a secret society with sacramental “meal” and levels of initiation practiced throughout ancient Rome. Nero is noted to be the first, and not the last, Emperor to have undergone the “entheogenic Eucharist” (Ruck et al 2011: 27). These scholars identify an “uncanny correspondence” between Roman Mithraic and revolutionary esoteric symbolism, notably a red Phrygian cap set atop a spear (as in illuminated versions of France’s Declaration of the Rights of Man²), thought homologous to the “fly-agaric” mushroom, *Amanita muscaria*, itself integral to the Mysteries of Mithra appropriated by the Romans. With roots in Mithraism, initiatory symbols are further known to have been transposed into movements for independence by way of Freemasons, not least of all The Society of the Cincinnati of which George Washington was the first President General (Hoffman and Ruck 2002; Ruck et al. 2011).

Lending symbolic depth to his own endeavors, this complex weave inspires Adam Richard Eiding, among other Catharsis co-founders. It’s easy to share their enthusiasm. Co-created interventions and inspired revisionism appeals as a “radical syncretism” perhaps not unlike that associated with Mithraism (Hoffman and Ruck 2002). I kept bumping into Eiding at the GLC — on one occasion he was en route to a “4.20” street level appointment — and later we chatted on Skype.

Eiding is a D.C. native and activist who, in September 2005, staged Operation Ceasefire, an antiwar concert attracting over 100,000 people to the National

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Declaration_of_the_Rights_of_Man_and_of_the_Citizen

Mall. He recalls how the event impressed Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS) founder Rick Doblin, who came backstage and invited him to Black Rock City. “He wanted me to come to Burning Man, because he wanted to bring Burning Man to the National Mall.”³ As an activist, Eidinger quite unenthusiastically accepted the invitation in 2006. He was prepared to be soundly unimpressed. But his first sortie “shocked” him into returning ten times, forming his own camp Stop, Drop and Roll now part of the infamous foam village, that in 2017 was dubbed TransFoamation.

Over this time, he connected with a network of D.C. Burners. Through his organization, DCMJ, Eidinger proposed Initiative 71, a November 2014 ballot campaign that succeeded in legalizing marijuana in Washington D.C. In a direct action on the National Mall at 3rd Street in front of the Capitol on April 20 2015, activists locked themselves on to a huge “liberty pole” they erected on the lawns. With consultation from a “libertarian friend,” what they’d “planted” was a 45-foot liberty pole, with a cap on top and a stage at the base. When members of Congress consulted their history books they discovered that the red caps assembling near the White House had been common symbols of independence 300 years ago. After switching out the wooden pole with aluminum, Eidinger was eventually issued a permit to say on the lawns for a week. What’s more, marijuana is now legal for D.C. users 21+ years of age. While it cannot be sold, the herb is permitted to be grown and, he laughed, “gifted” to others in the city — an outcome deemed appropriate to many Burner activists.

It’s unsurprising that politicians and law enforcement had to do their homework. Despite its visibility and significance in the revolutionary era, due to sensitivities over enslavement and abolition threatening the nascent union in the 19th century, the liberty cap had “almost totally passed out of the national consciousness” (Korshak 1987: 60). Almost. “We were the ones who built the liberty pole and brought the hat back,” says Eidinger, referring to the symbolism subsequently planted and worn at Catharsis and other locations in D.C. since 2015. While initially reluctant to adopt these symbols, he was incited by the challenge of installing a 140-pound tree on the National Mall, without damaging its surface. It was a challenge that he and his Burner comrades couldn’t back away from. But soon enough, the symbols began resonating, and Eidinger started drawing connections with the Phrygians. Mithraism was a “very freedom loving religion,” he says. The Phrygians “ate mushrooms and had orgies.” And for nearly 1,000 years they were living in exile. “Like Jews, they were exiled and enslaved people.” Romanticizing the original cap wearers lends well to its imagined adoption by ecstatic diasporics at the time of American Revolution. He speaks enthusiastically about “the ceremony of staying up all night, drinking beer, firing canons, burning barrels of tar

³ Quotes from Adam Richard Eidinger are from an interview with the author, 24 May 2017.

and hay ... up on big poles” where “burn barrels” could be seen for miles around. And at the center there would be “a huge liberty pole with an exaggerated liberty cap on top. And they would party all night, stay up until sunrise. Why did they do this? It brought the community together. It was part of the free American spirit that was not found anywhere else on the planet at the time.”

Joining with Roman Haferd and others to plan Catharsis, Eidinger and friends have been making these caps vested with multiple layers of significance since 2015. Eidinger has overseen the production of over 1,000 caps in his D.C. home. “We show up at a party with three or more people wearing a liberty cap.” Interest is piqued among the ranks of the disenchanting, with some among them deemed to have earned one. Intoning those who desire enlistment in this raggedy vanguard disarmy forming in the midst of Trump America: “Its symbolism is relevant again.”



Fig. 5: GLC 2017 - Catharsis R-Evolution.

Back in Davis Hall, there were no caps riding aloft spears — although I wouldn't have been surprised if someone appeared in Libertas drag. But as I glanced around, I noticed others in the audience beaming under their very own red caps with flipped tips — headwear typically pimped out with crew buttons, merit badges and other insignia. Over the coming days, as I navigated the receptions, plenaries and parties of the 11th Burning Man GLC, it was with growing frequency that I observed the infectious rouge headgear springing in the halls and foyers of the Marriott.

Burning Beyond the Trash Fence

Commencing as an eight-foot effigy burn on San Francisco’s Baker Beach in 1986, before migrating to the Black Rock Desert, Nevada, Burning Man evolved into an annual metropolis — the seasonally re-installed Black Rock City — before scaling to a global movement. Fostered by the Burning Man Project, this movement has sired an ethos called the Ten Principles⁴ that are now practiced in satellite events mounted in over thirty countries worldwide.⁵ Burners are those who practice these (sometimes conflicting) principles.

Burning Man has come under heavy fire from critics in recent times. The position popular among detractors is that the event has “jumped the shark.” Depending on who you’re listening to, Burning Man has been overrun by predatory tourists and their service providers, colonized by elite tech-moguls and venture capitalists, trashed by marauding bands of ravers jonesing to fulfill their bucket list dreams, or run by a theocratic class of zealots, exploiters and brain washers.

And yet, while Burning Man attracts such dissent, there is another story that does not get as much attention as it warrants. This story is rooted in a phenomenon whose movement status has mushroomed over decades. It is a story that has likely seen over 100,000 self-identifying Burners mobilizing beyond the “playa” (as the surreal flat alkaline desert landscape is warmly regarded) to actively leave a trace in the world.

Here, I’m inverting the principle of *Leaving No Trace* (LNT), in which Burners are “committed to leaving no physical trace of our activities wherever we gather.” LNT exists among a thick braided ethos integral to a movement that has, over the past decades, become a global phenomenon with a robust civic ethos. This principle has a curious legacy. It was born as a requirement of the Bureau of Land Management, which holds jurisdiction over the Black Rock Desert wilderness area. Compliance with restoration measures is an important way Burners give expression to their duties as citizens of Black Rock City. Such dutifulness invokes another principle first inscribed in the dust and now reporting off the walls of cities around the world, including those temporary cities that have formed as mirror images and mutant offspring of the mother event: *Civic Responsibility*. This principle is integral to the citizenship that had its inception in Burning Man’s mid-1990s transition from festival to metropolis. While *Radical Self-expression* and *Immediacy* are among the more popularly evoked principles in the ethical lexicon of Black Rock City — and are celebrated among legions who gravitate to Nevada every Labor Day week in August — it is the civic imperatives of this outlying ephemeropolis and its cultural progeny that are today growing louder.

⁴ The Ten Principles are: *Radical Inclusion*, *Gifting*, *Decommodification*, *Radical Self-reliance*, *Radical Self-expression*, *Communal Effort*, *Civic Responsibility*, *Leaving No Trace*, *Participation* and *Immediacy*. For an explanation of each, see <https://burningman.org/culture/philosophical-center/10-principles>. In this article, all principles are capitalized and italicized.

⁵ Burning Man Regionals: <http://regionals.burningman.org/>.

Maker spaces, community activation, trash mobs, social change platform, etc.... These were just a few of the catchphrases echoing throughout the Oakland Marriott, the venue for the 2017 Burning Man GLC, which attracted some 630 invitees from around the world. If the GLC is like an annual coming-out party for the Burning Man movement, in the 11th year of the conference, the momentum seemed to have ratcheted up a notch.

Burning Man has been “coming out” for some time now. So much so that the annual Art Theme of Black Rock City, has grown decidedly self-reflexive. In its affirmation of the roots of the event, the 2017 theme, Radical Ritual, was no exception. The theme, as described in promotions penned by principle founder Larry Harvey who died from a stroke in 2018, self-consciously celebrated the rituals integral to the event and its networked communities, and quite specifically the ritual of the Golden Spike.⁶ This is a simple ceremony that at the inception of the annual build and weeks before the gate opens, sees members of the Department of Public Works (DPW) hammering-in a spike that will form the “axis mundi” of Burning Man; that point in the Black Rock Desert that marks the placement of an effigy (“The Man”) around which a city will be built, and eventually dismantled. While the Golden Spike could be likened to Burning Man’s cosmic naval, which in 2017 has inspired The Man design, the theme for the 2017 GLC, “Sparking a New Citizenship,” was far from naval gazing. For out in the world, Burning Man is mobilizing, extending its tendrils far and wide.

This cultural mobilization reflects an intention of the Burning Man Project, whose directors are at pains to convey that the event is no longer simply a “festival.” This has been the case for at least two decades. After fifteen years of event-making, Harvey announced in 2000 that “we are no longer staging an event; we’re coordinating a global community” (Harvey 2000). As the first CEO (Chief Engagement Officer) of the BMP newly formed as a non-profit in 2014, Marion Goodell looks to “expanding the values born of the playa,” in the world beyond, dubbed “The Grand Playa” (Burning Man 2014).

Today, community leaders are proactively engaged worldwide in a growing spectrum of Burning Man-inspired initiatives. What motivates the principled ambassadors of Burner sensibility, these principled advocates and heroes of culture? Perhaps we can turn to the monomyth of the “hero’s journey,” as popularized by Joseph Campbell. As outlined in the opening pages of Campbell’s *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949), in the hero’s journey, the wayfarer is “called to adventure,” faces great tests and challenges, endures ordeals, joins with allies and mentors, acquires vital life skills, and returns with wisdom to the benefit of the everyday world, transforming the returnee and his/her (for Campbell, typically *his*) world. Trekking into one of the most inhospitable physical environments in the

⁶ 2017 Art Theme: Radical Ritual. <https://burningman.org/event/brc/2017-art-theme-radical-ritual/>

US, which is at the same time one of the most socially hospitable (St John 2018), the typical Burner experience is resonant. Burning Man “calls” those who are dissatisfied with the “default” world. A tangle of obstacles and complications are confronted, and often resolved, both in singular innovations and collaborative ingenuity, esteem-affording practices Burners have dubbed “do-ocratic.” Mentors transmit solutions. “Principles” are acquired. *Culture* is shared. Ordeals become storied legends. The principled champions of culture return annually to the Black Rock City underworld to enact their heroics which embolden these burn-ed (think learn-ed) ones upon their return to the outside world, whereupon they actively apply their acquisitions (leadership, citizenship, co-creativity), typically through projects, initiatives and networks endorsed by the BMP, and in accord with the principles.

Burner scribe and member of the BMP’s Philosophical Center, Caveat Magister (2017b), would seem to agree with this assessment. Among his many missives published in the *Burning Man Journal*, Caveat has explained that travel to Burning Man is like “a ritual trip” involving “no small amount of hardship and inconvenience . . . to a strange underworld in which our experience of ourselves and the world around us changes, and we return to the communities from when we came bearing new kinds of experiences.”

A multitude of initiatives showcased at the 2017 Global Leadership Conference are recognizable here. To refer to the post-Burn world, or life between events, as a “default” state endured until the next journey down Nevada’s Highway 447 to the scene of the sublime, may be inaccurate for GLC participants. For these propagators of Burner culture, the post-Burn state seems more like a *preemptive* condition for life as a Burner led, more and more, beyond the event’s “trash fence.”

The shining lights of this cultural efflorescence are its regional events. According to the 2017 GLC program guide there were 286 Regional Contacts in 123 regions in 35 countries. Subsequently, it has been announced that the “Global Network Team and Official Events Team helped support over 90 unique Official Regional Events around the world” (2018 AfterBurn). While each of these events is officially endorsed through their commitment to the Ten Principles, each offers a mutant variation on the prototype. Events like The Borderland, held in late July 2017 at Boesedal Kalkbrud, Denmark, an event of some 2,000 participants whose mostly Swedish enablers promote de-centralization. Since 2007, the GLC has been the networking hub of this movement, with other gatherings like the South-eastern Leadership Burning Man Roundtable, the Mid-Atlantic Leadership Conference, and the European Leadership Summit, gathering apace. In recent years, community leaders have met at Esalen Institute at Big Sur California. Organized by the Philosophical Center, a three-day event at Esalen in October 2016, Sustainable Creative Communities: a Burning Man Symposium proposed to establish alliances with partnering organisations “to create a more inclusive, more

equitable, and more creative society” (Burning Man 2017). This cultural efflorescence inspired the symposium *Burning Man and Transformational Event Cultures*⁷ hosted at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, Nov 29–30 2018.⁸

The 2017 GLC’s “Sparkling a New Citizenship” theme seemed to capture the pulse of this movement. According to Jane Lyons, reporting in the *Burning Man Journal*, the conference theme tested “a tension between Burning Man’s resistance to becoming politicized and what some see as a clarion call to put our principles into action and rise to the challenges of these uncertain times.” Recognizing how “politics is inherently divisive,” BMP Education Director Stuart Mangrum (in Lyons 2017) invoked the hackles that are typically raised among those defending Burning Man’s preeminent stranger-embracing principle of *Radical Inclusion*: the desire to change the world means making judgments, taking sides, and potentially alienating one’s allies.

The argument that Burning Man should stay out of politics has a deep background. But the apprehension seems disingenuous, given how dissent appears to conflate formal agonistic campaigning (i.e. party politics) with subjective agency (the political). Many political theorists have addressed this distinction, notably Chantal Mouffe (1999). While Burning Man won’t likely become a party platform any time soon, it is unquestionably a cultural movement whose members are being hailed by civic imperatives that are rooted in the seasonal practice of remaking a city in the Nevada wilderness and mutating it abroad. The annual reassemblage of this frontier settlement clearly necessitates antagonism, but given that the Burning Man Project must enter into relationships with a variety of government and regulatory agencies so as to secure its continuing survival, the event unquestionably requires engagements, and lobbying, within the field of politics.

On that score, this ain’t no Temporary Autonomous Zone (Bey 1991). And yet, the event continues to be fertile grounds for growing “minor compositions,” including thousands of “theme camps” annually afforded placement on the playa. What’s more, it is the progenitor of a network of events proliferating in regions worldwide, events that are annually re-made by a network of regional leaders, many of whom are participants in the GLC, a platform hosting panels, debates and discussions that appear to have one thing in common: improving and optimizing the model. Burning Man is not a *polis* that represents the end state of one’s democratic participation so much as an *event* where merit and status accumulates through voluntarism (the event relies on the efforts of thousands of volunteers) and artistic collaborations.

It is pertinent here to discuss the principle of *Civic Participation*. Since at least the mid-1990s, from which time Black Rock City developed as a fully-fledged

⁷ <https://www.burningprogeny.org/2018-symposium>

⁸ *Burning Man and Transformational Event Cultures*: <https://www.burningprogeny.org/2018-symposium>

municipality (see Harvey 2013), Burners have been encouraged, by necessity, to be *civically* engaged. Embracing one's "civic duty" seemed a natural progression for an *arts event* that resists measuring or celebrating artists, artistry and art itself (as if art possesses intrinsic value beyond its social worth). At Burning Man, art has long been valued as a context for social interaction and community; for its role in the co-creative reproduction of Black Rock City. The making of art is then infused with an ethical responsibility. As a unique context in which people are *showing up for each other*, Burning Man might exemplify what "artistic citizenship" looks like. For the editors of *Artistic Citizenship*, this concept encapsulates the view that "artistry involves civic-social-humanistic-emancipatory responsibilities," and "obligations to engage in art making that advances social goods." This perspective, which embraces people of all ages, skills, and media, as artists, is opposed to the reification of the exclusive art work and its producer/s, as typically celebrated in art galleries, museums and art schools. Burning Man is a prolific illustration of how artistic value is determined by its social usefulness. In Black Rock City and its experimental satellites, artistic practice is inherently ethical, in that citizens are encouraged to observe a hive of inter-woven principles, in the making of specific projects and in the realization of the city itself. An "ethically guided citizenship" (Elliot et al. 2016: 6) and the idea of "care-full" artistic practice responsive to social, cultural, and political conditions was, according to Elliot et al. (2016: 6), embodied in Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia*: human thriving. The authors convey how the arts teach us things about our common humanity that are worth knowing, and render us "less vulnerable to forces that subvert or compromise human well-being" (Elliot et al. 2016: 7). And since Burning Man also illustrates how artistic practice is continuous with, and not separated from, everyday human experience, such practices are inherently meaningful.

Acts of artistic citizenship tend to leap like flames in a dry cane field. One might look to any of the multitude of on-playa art projects to witness this ignition. The Temples built by teams led by David Best and others in Black Rock City since 2000 (and subsequently replicated in Regional Events) are exemplary. Enabling participants to leave burnable messages, photos and offerings communicating with the dead, these elaborate structures, sites of remembrance, mourning and inspiration (Edwards 2014) are designed to be destroyed by fire on the final night of the event. The building of the 2016 incarnation is portrayed in Laurent Le Gall's superb *The Temple of Burning Man — A Long Journey*⁹ (Le Gall 2017). In 2013, Best took this acclaimed tradition to Londonderry, Northern Ireland, where it won-over 300,000 people before embracing its fiery destiny. In 2019, Best is leading a Temple build in Coral Springs Florida the year after that community suffered a mass shooting at nearby Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School (Allen 2019).

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0Vn0I5fxj4>

In Black Rock City, produced in civic compliance with the Ten Principles, cathartic works like this are demonstrative of the power of the gift to compel gratitude and a return in kind, but not in measure. Despite recent threats to Burning Man's gift culture wrought by unprincipled behavior associated with a sudden increase in the number of inexperienced participants (i.e. "virgins") linked to ticket scarcity, the community counters through a fiery artistic lingua franca that remains true to Lewis Hyde's (2007) idea that a genuine gift is that which remains in circulation. With Burning Man, the cathartic artifice of putting large-scale social sculptures to the torch permits "the gift" to remain in circulation, as it inspires artistic citizenship in others (see St John 2017).

Over the course of the history of the event prototype and its many satellites, those who wholly participate within this realm build renown as community leaders. "Leadership" is a phrase integral to this movement, which holds the pretense that anyone can be a leader simply by participating in the event — i.e. by *being* a Burner. *Being* is a term favored by Harvey, which he used in relation to one's experimental embodiment of the principles, an empirical, and decidedly ritualized, mode of being. There are no "supreme beings" on the playa, Harvey stated at the GLC. Out there, "being is supreme." With more and more possibilities for transposing that mode of being (supreme) outside Black Rock City, and greater motivations for *doing being* in the world, not least of all the domestic post-election crisis, are we seeing the coming of age of a Burner "movement of movements"? If that is the case, we may well need a new language to explain it. Whatever the case, it appears that with the passing years, Burning Man is occupying more and more space beyond the time-space framework of the event.

Among the highlights of these endeavors is the 3,800 acre Fly Ranch property north of Gerlach, Washoe County, Nevada. Purchased with the assistance of donations in 2016, Fly Ranch is the next frontier of Burning Man. With the aid of the short film *This is Fly Ranch*¹⁰ (Henretig and Cirivello 2016) in her plenary talk on the current state of the BMP, CEO (Chief Engagement Officer) Marian Goodell introduced the acquisition as the BMP's *pièce de résistance* in their efforts at change making. Characterized in the 2016 annual report as "the next leap forward in the grand experiment that is Burning Man," the property represents a significant development for a community that for thirty years has been mounting temporary events on someone else's (i.e. the Government's) land.

Among the catch phrases buzzing around the opening day of the GLC was "radical hope." This is philosopher Jonathan Lear's concept adopted amid inquiry about how a community can persist in the face of catastrophe: like that facing the Crow in the early twentieth century, through the eyes of chief Plenty Coups. In Lear's *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, "radical hope" is stated to be a hope that "is directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JdWIN6QwahA>

ability to understand what it is. Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it” (Lear 2006: 103). Trump’s ascendancy has given this idea legs. Those struggling for meaning in a climate of escalating horrors could even imagine such an abominable anomaly as Trump as proof that we’re living inside a computer simulation (Gil 2016).

Regardless of whether humans are dwelling inside a Matrix designed by an advanced alien civilization, or in one of our own making, there remains a powerful narrative common among those who achieve awareness of their tragic entanglements: hope. Drawing on Lear after the 2016 Presidential election, Junot Diaz in *The New Yorker* wrote:

Radical hope is not so much something you have but something you practice. . . . Radical hope is our best weapon against despair, even when despair seems justifiable; it makes the survival of the end of your world possible. Only radical hope could have imagined people like us into existence. And I believe that it will help us create a better, more loving future (Diaz 2016).

Far from a story of despair and despondence, Burning Man is an intentional commitment towards cultural transformation. Demonstrating abundant evidence of hope in dark times, besides Fly Ranch, the GLC offered manifold examples of how Burning Man is manifestly, in Goodell’s terms, a “platform for social change.”

A chief example is Burners Without Borders (BWB), the volunteer organization that emerged in 2005 in the wake of Hurricane Katrina to become a global vehicle for *Civic Responsibility*. BWB Program Manager, Christopher Breedlove, delivered a GLC update. Over the previous year, volunteer efforts had been coordinated and supported in Louisiana (floods), Nepal (earthquake), North Dakota (Standing Rock), and other locations. As an international disaster relief network with 28 chapters, thousands of volunteers and integrated with the BMP’s Department of Arts and Civic Engagement, by 2017, BWB was operating civic grant programs that support grassroots initiatives sustaining a global “culture of ongoing engagement.”¹¹ As a testament to the maker city from which this organization has emerged, among the innovations announced by Breedlove was a mobile makerspace called the Mobile Resource Unit (MRU), a 20-foot refurbished shipping container “filled with tools, advanced manufacturing equipment, and supplies for making prototypes and art that can be easily shipped into areas of need, such as disaster relief zones, impoverished neighborhoods, or refugee camps” (Burners Without Borders 2016). The MRU made an appearance at the BWB camp in Black Rock City 2016, before tools were sent to Kathmandu, Nepal, for the world’s first Humanitarian Maker Faire, purposed to community recovery

¹¹ Burners Without Borders: <https://www.burnerswithoutborders.org>.

from earthquake devastation in the region, and donated to Maker Space operated by Communitere.

At a time when Burning Man forges a path from leaving no trace to initiating lasting change, another practical evocation of *Civic Responsibility* and engagement is provided by the Permaculture Action Network (PAN), whose founder Ryan Rising wants to know: “How can we create the liberatory world we experience at the burn all the time?” PAN, like BWB, is committed to mobilizing the spirit of Burning Man and other events to take action in their communities, and specifically to build “urban farms, community gardens, public food forests, indigenous culture centers, art spaces, and seed farms.” Burning Man would seem to be a native ally to these objectives, given the development of communities and initiatives through its Regional Network for over two decades, propagating Burner culture beyond the temporary limits of Black Rock City. Permaculture Action Days are the outreach activities of PAN, with Rising announcing that there had been 62 Permaculture Action Days in 51 different cities via 80 local projects and organizations. In 2016, PAN launched the first Permaculture Action Day on the Road to Burning Man. On that day 200 Burners participated in LA’s Kiss The Ground, a community garden demonstration focused on the power of soil to sequester carbon.¹²

While these developments are lauded within the community as evidence of an intentional commitment towards cultural transformation, at the 2017 GLC, the loudest cheers seemed reserved for D.C.’s Catharsis on the Mall.

Bonfires and Bonnets: Catharsis on the Mall

The inaugural Catharsis was a 48-hour vigil held in November 2015 on the National Mall which took as its theme, “Healing from the Drug War.” Attracting several hundred people, that event featured large-scale artworks, a *Leaving No Trace* ethos, and culminated in the torching of the Temple of Essence — which the media called a “bonfire” — followed by a dance party until dawn. The twelve-foot structure designed by Michael Verdon had been scrawled with personal inscriptions of loss and pain. Igniting the outer wooden structure revealed a bar-encased prison cell, complete with wooden cot and toilet (Fig 6).

The “cell” was packed with booking documents, probation papers, and other flammable items participants had been encouraged to stow inside — all eventually succumbing to the flames. The installation had dozens of color LEDs that blinked off every nineteen seconds — the apparent arrest rate for a drug offense in the United States. Speaking on the concept, Verdon was reported to state: “We lock away millions of people for essentially nonviolent pseudo-victimless

¹² Permaculture Action Network: <http://www.permacultureaction.org/>.

crimes. We shame them, we isolate them, we make the problem worse, and it disproportionately affects people that have pigment in their skin" (in Sadon 2015).¹³



Fig. 6: Temple of Essence. (Photo by Cherry Savoy).

With the support of MAPS, the follow-up event beginning on Veteran's Day, November 11, 2016 ("Our Journey Home") continued the struggle to end the prohibition of cannabis and other substances found useful as therapeutic solutions to PTSD among veterans, sexual assault survivors and others living with trauma. Staged just days after Trump's victory, the event became a cathartic release of tensions and assuagement of grievances for those awakening to the nightmare of Trump: a toxic mix of xenophobia, greed and environmental despoliation. With its dedication to *Radical Inclusion*, Catharsis demonstrated that there is an alternative to that of fear, dreamed into existence over three decades in the Black Rock Desert. Interactive art installations, random acts of kindness, mutant vehicles, workshops, geodesic domes, a meditation tent: the Burner way. Evoking the cross-country Prankster cavalcade fifty years earlier, driven from California, the

¹³ See more in *Catharsis on the Mall 2015* recap video by Luca Silveira (2015): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YLV8lhgRbg8>.

school bus turned golden dragon Abraxas provided the sound system and stage (Fig 7).



Fig. 7: Abraxas at the Capital, 2016 (Photo by Ben Droz)

Then there was the planned torching of the Temple of Rebirth, a fifteen-foot structure with a spire reaching to over 30-feet — and again designed by Verdon (Fig 8). “Our stories are woven into the work,” stated Verdon in a press release, “and then released in the structure’s transformation. We rise from those ashes” (Catharsis on the Mall 2016). All around this Phoenix, red capped crusaders were amassing under the Washington Monument.

As Temple burns have become a signature imprint of the Burner ethos, it stands to reason that the faithful were upset when, in the month before the Nov 2016 Catharsis, the National Park Service forbade the igniting of the Temple of Rebirth, citing a new regional regulation limiting fires to five square-foot burns (the Temple was fifteen feet with a tall spire extending the installation to over thirty feet). This ruling was stayed by a District Judge the day before the event, after co-organizer, civil rights lawyer Roman Haferd, filed a federal lawsuit claiming the NPS was violating their First Amendment rights. As reported in a *Washington Post* story entitled “No, you cannot have a giant bonfire on the Mall to mourn Trump’s victory,” Haferd was granted last minute permission for organizers to burn three 5 x 5 foot structures symbolizing the sun, the moon and a phoenix egg. “We raved all night and marched in the morning,” said Eidinger, referring

to a “mutant stage” parade around the Mall in which 300–400 people participated.¹⁴



Fig. 8: Temple of Rebirth. (Photo by Kris).

Though the Temple was hosed by bureaucracy pre-ignition, Trump’s election effectively illuminated the profile of the fledgling event. Under the 2017 GLC plenary title “Activism on Fire in our Nation’s Capital,” and under their liberty caps, Catharsis co-founders roused the faithful. Under the theme “Nurturing the Heart,” Catharsis would, they announced, return to the National Mall over November 10–12, 2017. The revelation that they intended to bring R-Evolution — Marco Cochrane’s 45-foot sculpture that debuted at Burning Man in 2015 — to the Mall in 2017, brought the house down. A projected mock-up image of the sculpture under lights facing the National Monument was spellbinding (see Fig. 9) for many in the audience. R-Evolution had been the final piece in Cochrane’s monumental on-playa series celebrating the power of the feminine

¹⁴ The Temple of Rebirth was eventually burned at an event in Delaware in late May 2017.

form. At a time when the pink Pussy Hat circulated in the popular imagination, the visage of R-Evolution calmly facing the Capital's 554-foot obelisk was provocative. While that did not come to pass,¹⁵ one year later the 2018 midterms marked the highest voter turnout¹⁶ seen in midterm elections since 1914, with significant electoral firsts for women.¹⁷



Fig. 9: Catharsis on the Mall 2017 promo.

Capital “C” Catharsis

Among the curious features of Catharsis is the way it combines performance modes. It has been described as “equal parts vigil, symposium, occupation, fire conclave, effigy burn, and party-until-dawn-under-the-stars” (Buttar 2015). At one extreme, then, it is a vigil (perhaps best signified by the Temple), while at

¹⁵ While that feat was not achieved, Cochrane's 18-foot-tall series piece *Truth is Beauty* did appear in DC as part of the exhibition *No Spectators: The Art of Burning Man* that, for a year beginning March 30 2018, took over the Renwick Gallery of Smithsonian American Art Museum and parts of the surrounding neighborhood. The exhibition will be moved to the Cincinnati Art Museum and the Oakland Museum of California in 2019/2020.

¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voter_turnout

¹⁷ Catharsis returned to the Mall in November 2018, and in 2019 the event (themed “The Mothership”) is planned for May 3–5: see <https://www.catharsisonthemall.com/art-theme-2019/>.

another it is as a dance party, with these extremes combining in a parade around the Mall after dawn. This is no frivolous mobilization. Taking the intentional dance party to the streets has a serious legacy in decentralized movements like Reclaim the Streets, Critical Mass, flash-mobbing and, more recently, the Decentralized Dance Party (DDP). An “open source” dance movement conceived in Vancouver in 2000, the DDP adopts mobile FM transmitters, boomboxes and pop hits to incite eruptions of pleasure in public spaces. For founder Gary Lachance who proclaims Burning Man to be “the world’s preeminent Open-Source community” and a “radically Open and Decentralized social experiment at the vanguard of modern cultural evolution” (Lachance 2014), the significance of “open source partying” is that “hundreds of total strangers [are] sharing an authentic, immediate and intimate moment of fearless connection.” The latter comment is expressed by Lachance in the video *DDP Patreon Campaign*¹⁸ (Lachance 2017) where he identifies the DDP philosophy of “Capital P Partying” in which it appears that *the cause* is to mobilize an unsuspecting consumer orientated populace in dance — nothing more or less. Inspiring events in dozens of cities worldwide, the DDP have even taken their “Capital P Partying” to the Capital (on May 25 2012).

The DDP and its predecessors are rooted in the urban *derives* of the Situationists and others who have sought to subvert the capitalist uses of public space. While there is much resonance, the difference with Capital C Catharsis is that the sounds, and the dancing, are mobilized in the capital city under the steam of a counter-carnavalesque logic. As Catharsis have stated in a media release: “We seek political, cultural AND spiritual transmutation for our city and our nation.” But while Catharsis has been fired by social justice causes since its inception, it is important to recognize the principled culture that has enabled its flame to take hold in the capital. The position is announced on the Catharsis website: “We sought a local experience that integrated the best of our Burner values with the immediate desire for political and cultural change that brings people to DC.”¹⁹

With political transformation as a primary objective, Catharsis has travelled a great distance from the Black Rock Desert. At the same time, it carries the torch of the urban event-culture which had enticed Burning Man out into the desert. That is, Catharsis fans the glowing embers of the San Francisco Cacophony Society, the Dada-inspired movement pivotal to the emergence of Burning Man, among many other temporary subversions and proto flash-mobilizations like the events of the Santa Rampage (e.g. Santacon and Santarchy), and surrealist processions such as the Church of the Last Laugh’s annual St Stupid’s Day Parade (Evans, Galbraith and Law 2013). Rising from the ashes of its more secretive

¹⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hSTrEPH0_F8

¹⁹ Catharsis on the Mall: <https://www.catharsisonthemall.com/who-are-we>.

predecessor, the Suicide Club, Cacophony was a surreal mobilization of misfits and outsiders committed to crafting hundreds of open-ended events governed by the spirit of play. Over twenty years, and through a network of groups operating in various North American cities, pranks, urban exploration, literary events, costumed parties, and urban games were among a rich repertoire of evental experiments in which risks were taken, fears were confronted, and limits were surpassed. The members of this formative event-culture were committed to creating little “worlds apart . . . where our most obscure desires could be explored and acted out, either symbolically or in fact” (Evans et al 2013: 22).

Storied among this event repertoire were the “Zone Trips” that Cacophonist and estranged Burning Man co-founder John Law has described as Dadaesque exploits in “pataphysical tourism” (Scaruffi 2015). The now infamous “Zone Trip #4” saw the migration of Burning Man from San Francisco’s Baker Beach (where authorities prevented the fifth annual burning of a wooden Man in 1990) to the Black Rock Desert on Labor Day weekend that year. In the fallout from a well-documented dispute between Law and Harvey over the direction of Burning Man (Doherty 2006; Bonin 2010), Law departed the organization in the mid-1990s, and an ethos (the Ten Principles) was fashioned to facilitate scaling and mobilization, both on and beyond the *playa*.

While it is downwind from these developments, it remains to be seen whether these principles could be deployed to effect social change in the context of Catharsis. But taking an ethos that has evolved over decades in one of the harshest and remote environments in the country to the national center is an inflection of a symbolic strategy (from the margins to the center) that has been deployed by activists across a range of social justice and environmental movements. In 1970, raising opposition to the Vietnam War, carnival was launched on the lawns of the White House (Kershaw 1997: 261-264), an event notable in the history of the *protestival*, i.e. popular multi-vocal and polyphonic projects that deploy carnivalesque strategies to expose power and corruption (St John 2008). The history of these mutant events whose occupants are committed to demonstrating that “another world is possible,” includes the CND marches on Trafalgar Square (from 1961) (McKay 2000: 88–89), Levitate the Pentagon (1967), Carnivals Against Capitalism (1998), Occupy (2011–2012) and Extinction Rebellion (2018–).

Despite the commonalities, considerable differences are apparent. Catharsis is an officially sanctioned demonstration, and not an unlawful direct action. And as a sanctioned protest it is also at some remove from the unpermitted disruptions of the Cacophony Society. As a protest, Catharsis must comply with the various codes and regulations of the NPS, including ordinance regulating fire. This prompts attention to the aesthetic that distinguishes Catharsis as a unique form of protest — its deployment of fire-arts. The inaugural Catharsis is said to have been “the first time since World War II that a major bonfire has been permitted on the National Mall” (Buttar 2015). Transposing its combustible artifice from an

absolute desert to the nation's center of power, this mutant insurgent shares affinity with the *dreampolitik* conjured by Stephen Duncombe in *Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* (2007). The commitment of Catharsis to dramatize injustice (as seen in the Temple of Essence) echoes what Duncombe calls the "ethical spectacles" of progressive politics — spectacles that, by contrast with those challenged by Guy Debord, are participatory.

Our spectacles will be participatory: dreams the public can mold and shape themselves. They will be active: spectacles that work only if people help create them. They will be open-ended: setting stages to ask questions and leaving silences to formulate answers. And they will be transparent: dreams that one knows are dreams but which still have power to attract and inspire. And, finally, the spectacles we create will not cover over or replace reality and truth but perform and amplify it (Duncombe 2007: 17).

As demonstrated by the successes of George W. Bush, Republicans grew adept at speaking directly to the fantasies and desires of the populace — a politics that understands desire, embraces spectacle and, moreover, tells good stories. Under that regime, Duncombe observed that, having "become the lingua franca of our time," fantasy and spectacle were integral to gaining power and shaping reality (ibid. 9). But if "*transforming* the techniques of spectacular capitalism into tools for social change" (Duncombe 2007: 16) was considered pivotal to opposing the fantastic accomplishments of Bush, what might dissent look like in Trump's "post-truth" *Fox and Friend's* Twitterverse? Given that Black Rock City — a collaborative dreamlike cornucopia of pop-cult situations, rites of détournement and storytelling — is among the world's largest participatory spectacles, we might have an answer.

Neo-Phrygian movement or not, a new carnival is in town in which democratic leaders and capped crusaders have responded to an ecstatic call to liberty.

"To have a burn for a cause seems more important culturally and politically significant than a burn for a ticketed audience," Adam Eiding announced in 2015. "Our proximity to the White House and Capitol Building allowed powerful art to speak truth to policy makers" (Buttar 2015). And so, the participatory spectacle gathers momentum at the symbolic center of power where big art projects and tiny caps are deployed to get down and expose tyranny.



Back at the 2017 Global Leadership Conference, an overt symbol of transformation multiplies throughout the days and nights of the conference, as I see more and more heads under Liberty's cap. It's a good place to conclude this story — at a party. But let there be no mistake, among this crowd, a party is not simply a gathering where one "end's up." On the contrary, it's a place where sparks catch

and culture ignites. After all, in the Burning Man tradition, setting works of art aflame is an act of destruction *and* a rite of renewal. A fiery standard at once ludicrous and asseverate, the liberty cap holds loaded appeal in this community. It is died in the hue of an art form that has evolved with unparalleled distinction on playa and among satellite communities actively igniting a transformational spirit around the globe. In the red glow of this cultural proliferation at the Saturday night GLC party at Oakland's DiY space NIMBY, Papa Smurf appears resplendent in a fine red-sequined cap. Of Catharsis, Eidinger envisions "a free burn that the whole nation feels they can come to."

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