Wurst Storm Rising: The Dadaist Legacy of Burning Man

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ABSTRACT

Our subject is the legacy of Dada implicit to the Burning Man phenomenon. Animate in the provocative output of fin-de-siècle French Symbolist writer and puppeteer Alfred Jarry, and filtered through the antics of the San Francisco Cacophony Society, Dada is foundational to the cultural aesthetic of Burning Man, by which we mean the event in Nevada's Black Rock Desert playa (Black Rock City) and a global network of "burn" events. We address the significance of the Cacophony Society expedition that inaugurated the desert phase of Burning Man in 1990, "Zone Trip # 4: Bad Day at Black Rock." Integral to the surreal tourism ventured by Cacophonists prior to the inception of Burning Man, and pivotal to its desert phase, the Zone Trip kindled "Burner" culture on the Black Rock playa and abroad. Exploring the Dadaist impulse affecting Black Rock City and woven into a worldwide network, informed by interpretative and applied methods, the article addresses art projects (including those designed and implemented by Vitos) at three regional events—Israel's Midburn and Germany's Burning Bär and Kiez Burn—visited in 2018 and 2019 as part of a multisited ethnography of the Burning Man movement. As these projects illustrate, the ghost of Jarry haunts, as the spirit of Dada animates, the transnational "burnscape."

1. Graham St John, "Dramatic Heterotopia: The Participatory Spectacle of Burning Man," in *Interrupting Globalisation: Heterotopia in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Simon Ferdinand, Irina Souch, and Daan Wesselman (New York: Routledge, 2020), 178–94.

2. Graham St John, "Ephemeropolis: Burning Man, Transformation and Heterotopia," *Journal of Festive Studies* 2, no. 1 (2020): 289–322, <https://doi.org/10.33823/jfs.2020.2.148>.

3. Jerry James, "In the Beginning," in *Playa Dust: Collected Stories from Burning Man*, ed. Samantha Krukowski (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2014).

4. Graham St John, "At Home in the Big Empty: Burning Man and the Playa Sublime," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 13 no. 3 (2019): 286–313, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.36778>.

5. As stated in the 2019 Survival Guide: <https://survival.burningman.org/leave-no-trace/>.

6. 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>). These principles are sometimes reworded, amended, or modified in regional events. In this article, all principles are capitalized and italicized.

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Introduction

The research presented here derives from a comparative ethnography of the Burning Man movement, and is complementary to a larger effort to understand the complex history of this event-culture. Exploring the tussle between surreal and civic imperatives at Burning Man¹ and undertaking a detailed engagement with its heterotopic quality,² current and forthcoming research demonstrates that the world of Burning Man—the “burnerverse”—is characteristically open-ended, heterogeneous, and contested. As an accompaniment to this effort, the present article focuses on the Dadaist impulse animating “Burner” culture from its inception. This impulse had a direct bearing on Black Rock City, the event dis/assembled annually in Nevada’s Black Rock Desert playa since 1990. Despite the movement toward event governance and bureaucracy consistent with organizational management practices, risk avoidance strategies, and cultural compliance frameworks, this worldwide network is suffused with the sensibilities of Dada.

Burning Man commenced as a summer solstice bonfire on Baker Beach, San Francisco, in 1986 when Larry Harvey and his carpenter pal Jerry James burned an eight-foot wooden effigy. Drawing a small crowd, the beach burn was repeated annually until 1990, when the event relocated to the desert with the support of the San Francisco Cacophony Society.³ The blank canvas of the “Big Empty”⁴ proved fertile for experimental art projects and communities from the early 1990s. In subsequent decades, Burning Man morphed into a “city” that, by 2017, featured a total population of eighty thousand. Black Rock City (BRC), “the largest leave no trace event in the world,”⁵ is enabled by the nonprofit Burning Man Project (BMP). Today, BRC is the prototype for a transnational Burner movement with more than ninety official regional events worldwide. Integral to these events is their adaptation of the Burner ethos, codified in the Ten Principles, among which are *Immediacy* (a strong valuation of direct experience as a primary source of knowledge), *Participation* (a rejection of consumer roles through co-creation), and *Decommodification* (a desire to nurture social relationships independent from the alienating sphere of the market).⁶

Although the Ten Principles of Burning Man were proposed by Harvey in 2004, many principles are rooted in precedent movements. Notable here are the Dada-inspired urban surrealists of the Cacophony Society, who drew inspiration from their San Francisco forerunner, the Suicide Club, whose event repertoire included urban exploration, costumed street pranks and games, radical interventionist art, and infiltration of religious cults and extremist organizations.⁷ Common to these underground fraternities and radical event-cultures was the pursuit of “shared experiences beyond the pale of mainstream society”⁸ and a desire to reanimate forgotten urban spaces.

Subterranean urbanism fueled the early esprit de corps of Burning Man and has been replicated in its mutant offspring. While the influence on Burning Man of a Dadaist/Surrealist aesthetic—by way of the Cacophonists—is manifold, the impact of fin-de-siècle Symbolist writer and puppeteer Alfred Jarry holds special interest. Jarry’s most renowned work is the stage drama *King Ubu*. As BMP education director Stuart Mangrum recalls, King Ubu was held in high esteem among Cacophonists, notably those “ardent Dadaists” who vehemently rejected the idea that they were practicing “art.” Mangrum, whose first Cacophony event was Burning Man 1993—when he

7. Kevin Evans, Carrie Galbraith, and John Law, *Tales of the San Francisco Cacophony Society* (San Francisco: Last Gasp Publishing, 2013), 2–3.
 8. Ibid., xi.
 9. Stuart Mangrum, interview, September 30, 2019, The Homestead, Folsom St, San Francisco. All subsequent quotes are from this interview.
 10. Sidney Shrager, *Scatology in Modern Drama* (New York: Irvington Publishers, 1982), 39.
 11. Ibid., 1–7.
 12. Alastair Brotchie, *Alfred Jarry: A Pataphysical Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 233.
 13. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968), 175–76.
 14. Shrager, *Scatology in Modern Drama*, 43–46.
 15. Brotchie, *Alfred Jarry*, 163.
 16. Erin Williams Hyman, “Theatrical Terror: Attentats and Symbolist Spectacle,” *The Comparatist*, no. 29 (2005): 113.
 17. Based in the Department of Social Science at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, from January 2016 to December 2019, and supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation, the collaborative project Burning Progeny involved mixed methods ethnography of events in Denmark, France, Germany, Israel, Spain, Switzerland and the US: <https://www.burningprogeny.org/>.
- helped Michael Mikel (a.k.a. Danger Ranger, founder of the Black Rock Rangers) set up BRC’s first newspaper, the *Black Rock Gazette*—recalls how Jarry’s work fit perfectly with “our way of thinking, which was rather nonsensical and without limits.”⁹
- Centered on the rampage of a tyrant king, *King Ubu* is laden with scatological references, such as the repetition of its hallmark opening phrase, “*Merdre!*” (“Pshit!”), throughout the play and the use of a toilet brush as the king’s scepter. Jarry turned to scatology toward the end of the Victorian era when dramatic taboos concerning bodily functions were still in full force.¹⁰ While the Hebraic–Christian tradition linked such functions with original sin and pollution, feces and urine had been used for a variety of purposes in pre-Christian times and in premodern societies, including fertilizing, cleaning, healing, and other ritual uses.¹¹ Tied to the degradation of the holy order and to regeneration, scatology prevailed in the grotesque realism of the folk humor that informed the work of François Rabelais—among Jarry’s key literary influences.¹² In his late sixteenth-century works *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*, Rabelais conceived excrement as “joyous and sobering matter, at the same time debasing and tender; it combined the grave and birth in their lightest, most comic, least terrifying form.”¹³
- Rebelling against the hypocritical conventions and moral controversies of bourgeois society, Jarry exploited the shocking effect of scatology amidst a novel range of absurdist dramatic elements, forging the way for the avant-garde and modernist theater and art of the twentieth century.¹⁴ His efforts were crowned with scandalous success in 1896, when the Théâtre de l’Œuvre premiere of *Ubu* could barely reach its conclusion. Not only were the reactions of the audience sharply divided, leading to several interruptions, but Jarry also intended to incite physical violence among the crowd by mobilizing the clientele of Chez Ernest, a cheap café he frequented.¹⁵ Decorations, props, and language were overly simplified, and elements of puppet theater were incorporated into the play to dehumanize the actors and generate uncanny sentiments in the audience as part of the “theatrical terror” deployed by Jarry.¹⁶
- Discussing the legacy of Jarry and scatological art, among other surreal evocations within Black Rock City and regional events in Israel and Germany, we shed light on the strange career of the *other* space known as “the playa.” That is, the article contributes to the story of the Black Rock Desert playa, a “blank canvas” for absurdist and principled experiments. The discussion has significance not only because this recurrent metaliminal space is a frontier for experimental arts and civics, but because the playa has inspired an efflorescence of worldwide “burns”—with the spaces of many of these temporary events identified as “playas.”
- Born from a multisited comparative ethnography,¹⁷ the case studies in this article are drawn from three distinctly themed regional “burns” visited in 2018 and 2019: a small winter event of the German Burner community held in a repurposed nineteenth-century castle (Burning Bär, themed “Extrawurst”); a large-scale desert burn in Israel (Midburn, themed “Brainstorm”); and a recently established regional burn near Berlin (Kiez Burn, themed “Wild at Heart”). While the Israeli case study employs conventional ethnographic methodology, the German material focuses on three art projects created during fieldwork, retaining the interpretive lens adopted in the discussion of Midburn and illustrating the Dadaist/Surrealist legacy of the Burning Man movement. Far from being arbitrary, the creative process was ethnographically grounded, responding to a call for art projects commemorating the centenary of Berlin Dada and reflecting on prior field encounters

18. Jimmie Manning and Tony E. Adams, "Popular Culture Studies and Autoethnography: An Essay on Method," *The Popular Culture Journal* 3, nos. 1&2 (2015): 193–94.
 19. Jean Jamin, "Anxious Science: Ethnography as a Devil's Dictionary," *Visual Anthropology Review* 7, no. 1 (1991): 84–85.
 20. Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1965), 12.
 21. Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1988).
 22. Cornelius Partsch, "The Mysterious Moment: Early Dada Performance as Ritual," in *Dada Culture: Critical Texts on the Avant-garde*, ed. Dafydd Jones (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 41.
 23. Marcel Janco, "Dada at Two Speeds," in *Dadas on Art: Tzara, Arp, Duchamp and Others*, ed. Lucy R. Lippard (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1971), 36–37.
 24. David Hopkins, "Introduction," in *A Companion to Dada and Surrealism*, ed. David Hopkins (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 3–5.
 25. Elizabeth Legge, "Nothing, Ventured: Paris Dada into Surrealism," in *A Companion to Dada and Surrealism*, 101.
 26. André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism," in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (French, 1924; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 1–42. Breton describes his half-asleep vision of Midburn's scatological art projects. The applied approach drew on a blend of "interpretive-humanistic" and "creative-artistic" autoethnographic perspectives¹⁸ informed by Burner principles. The study thus attempts to reconcile the methods of surrealists and ethnologists, characterized in at least one account as odd travel partners habituated to talking past each other, with the former discipline "listening for the echo of repressed and buried voices" in the *other*, and the latter "committed to explicating it through concepts and an interpretative grid."¹⁹
- Through listening *and* interpretation, we recognize the formative role of San Francisco Dadaist dis/organizations whose surrealist odysseys were protean to Burning Man and to the (il)logic of its progeny events. As we will see, the most notable contrivance in this adventure was the Cacophony Zone Trip, that vacation from the American Dream that took root in an unforgiving space and spawned a multitude of mutant replicas. Attention to the Cacophony Society and its interactive events in the following sections forms the background to a discussion of the regional case material.

Event Cacophony

The San Francisco Cacophony Society was heavily influenced by Dada, the avant-garde movement that emerged in 1916 as a discordant conglomeration of immigrant artists united by the "highly concentrated atmosphere" of neutral Zurich amidst the horrors of WWI.²⁰ These disaffected artists channeled their disillusionment with the Enlightenment project of modernity into the early performances of the Cabaret Voltaire. Cacophonous improvisatory pieces, experimentation with noise and distortions, and nonsensical sonic montages ruptured performer/spectator boundaries. Drawing on Victor Turner's concept of social drama,²¹ Cornelius Partsch suggests that the Cabaret provided a "dynamic and liminal site of cultural contestation ... where, potentially, the assumptions and embodiments of a culture could be undermined and resisted."²² After this initial outburst aimed at demolishing the bourgeois idea of art, "attacking common sense, public opinion ... in short, the whole prevailing order," some members of the group started to experience Dada as "pure, childlike, direct, primal" and experiment with new means of artistic expression such as chance, automatist, and collage techniques.²³ Later in Paris, Dada morphed into Surrealism, a movement that, sharing the antibourgeois sentiment of the former, was also preoccupied with the irrational and the unconscious in the wake of WWI.²⁴ Defined in André Breton's 1924 *Manifesto* and influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis, the movement relied on the conviction that "the surrealist state of waking dream might solve the most fundamental problems of life,"²⁵ and propagated automatist techniques for tapping the unconscious mind.²⁶

According to one of its primary founders, John Law, the Cacophony Society was among the last Dadaist movements before an Ubu-embodiment Donald Trump took the US presidency in November 2016, sweeping the world into a new phase of absurd realism.²⁷ The absurdist eventalism of Cacophony also expanded the legacy of the San Francisco Suicide Club, a secretive society of sublegal exploits whose founder, Gary Warne, has been dubbed "the spiritual grandfather of Black Rock City."²⁸ Together with Adrienne Burk, David Warren, and Nancy Prussia, Warne started the Suicide Club in 1977. It was apparently inspired by Warne's Practical Jokes 101 class at Communiversity,²⁹ a San Francisco State University (SFSU) nonprofit that had evolved out of the 1960s free-school movement. After the Practical Jokes

of a "walking man cut in half by a window perpendicular to the axis of his body," suggesting a mobility at the shattering confluence of two worlds (unconscious and conscious; dream and waking life) (21–22).

27. Sean McGuire, "John Law: DADA, Burning Man, Cacophony Society & Suicide Club!" October 24, 2017, in *Share a Slice with Sean*, podcast, 49:22, <http://shareaslicepodcast.com/2017/10/24/dada/>.

28. Mitchell Mignano, "Burning into the Planetary Consciousness: An Insurrection of the Imagination through Black Rock City" (master's thesis, The Barfield School of Sunbridge College, 2009), 37.

29. Jayson O. Wechter, "Suicide Just For the Fun of it," *Berkeley Barb*, July 1–7, 1977.

30. Evans, Galbraith, and Law, *Tales*, 2.

31. Wechter, "Suicide."

32. John Law, "Chronology and History of the Suicide Club's 'Free University' at San Francisco State," *Bad Subjects*, no. 88 (2015).

33. Evans, Galbraith, and Law, *Tales*, xi.

class and later, "Pie-of-the-Month Club" antics met with the opprobrium of SFSU administrators, Warne formed an independent nonprofit educational organization instilled with the open-ended spirit of experimentation.³⁰ Often starting and ending at his used bookstore, Circus of the Soul, the Suicide Club co-created a succession of explorations, stunts, parodies, and put-ons, like infiltrating the Moonies and the American Nazi Party, impersonating psychiatric patients, nocturnal adventures in the Oakland sewers, and elevator makeovers (e.g., creating an authentic shower scene in the Union Square parking garage elevators).³¹ Risk-taking—physical, social, psychological, artistic—was the *modus operandi*. According to Law, the SFSC was committed to education in ways that the university system had failed to achieve.

It championed exploration and adventure in a culture increasingly subdued by media. Its basic intention, to confront the fears that limit human action, was an antidote to the anxieties perpetrated through politics and television news. While students in traditional universities might forget the facts learned in required academic classes, the lessons learned in The Suicide Club empowered participants for life.³²

With a torrent of jokes purposive and practical, albeit frequently unpredictable and crude, the open-source syllabus of the Suicide Club spawned a subterranean ecology of intentional events.

Figure 1. *Tales of the San Francisco Cacophony Society* by Kevin Evans, Carrie Galbraith, and John Law (San Francisco, Last Gasp Publishing, 2013).

After Warne died suddenly from a heart attack at the age of thirty-five in 1983, the SF Cacophony Society was founded in 1986 as an events-oriented community self-identified as a "Chautauqua of kooky non-conformists" (fig. 1).³³ In the wake of the Suicide Club, Cacophony pursued its urban romance with the risqué in increasingly public and inclusive adventures. Proliferating from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s, and with other chapters forming in Los Angeles, Portland, Seattle,

34. Ibid., xv.

35. Piero Scaruffi, "John Law Interview: Part 2 Cacophony Society," YouTube video, 39:16, November 6, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CacdrOMUkVU>. For further background on the Cacophony Society and its influence on Burning Man, see Rachel Bowditch, *On the Edge of Utopia: Performance and Ritual at Burning Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 32–42.

36. Hakim Bey, *TAZ: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1991).

37. Evans, Galbraith, and Law, *Tales*, 38.

38. Bart Cammaerts, "Jamming the Political: Beyond Counter-hegemonic Practices," *Continuum* 21, no. 1 (2007): 75–76.

and Austin, the Cacophony Society actively subverted rules governing the social uses of space. For the most part before the advent of the World Wide Web, members were encouraged to design interactive events and urban adventures, tapping into a network of collaborators. Drawing inspiration from the eventful life of Jarry, as well as nineteenth-century San Francisco eccentric Emperor Norton, their co-created pranks subverted consumerist culture, defied corporate dominance, and exposed the soul-destroying impact of the mass media.³⁴ While scaling the spans of the Golden Gate Bridge was among the more spectacularly sublime of these sublegal explorations of urban space, subsequent ventures included roller skating on the Embarcadero Freeway, formalwear sewer walks, urban spelunking in subterranean causeways, and partying in abandoned bunkers, as occurred with the Atomic Café events. When embarking on these nonpermitted sojourns into urban terra incognita, Cacophonists were passing across thresholds marking limits as social as they were physical. These surrealist rites of passage into zones where conventional rules of etiquette were inverted and confounded are what Law has called "surreal tourism."³⁵

The zone exploits were clandestine "leave no trace" adventures in which participants were exhorted to leave no evidence of their occupation upon departure. The intellectual apologist for this guerrilla praxis was Hakim Bey (a.k.a. Peter Lamborn Wilson), whose poetic terrorism, as detailed in *The Temporary Autonomous Zone*,³⁶ was highly influential.³⁷ While these were essentially vanishing acts characterized by stealth and anonymity, another loose category of events was devised to make an impression on the public. Resonating with the Situationist tactic of *détournement* and other manifestations of the "serious parody,"³⁸ events designed to expose absurdities in the commodification of life came to be identified as "flash mobs" (e.g., Santacon [fig. 2], Zombie mobs, and Clown Nights), billboard "improvements" (e.g., by the Billboard Liberation Front [BLF]), and other "culture jams" and street theater rippling across the urban landscape—some, like the Urban Iditarod and Brides of March, becoming unconventional conventions.

Figure 2. Santacon, San Francisco, 1995. Photo by Scott Beale.

39. "There were few less hippy folks around than Gary Warne."

(Law, quoted in Summer Burkes, "'Carnival Cosmology' by Gary Warne," *Burning Man Journal*, September 22, 2015, <https://journal.burningman.org/2015/09/philosophical-center/tenprinciples/carnival-cosmology-by-gary-warne/>.)

40. Evans, Galbraith, and Law, *Tales*, 40.

41. Rev. Ivan Stang, in J. Christian Greer, "Religion Can't be a Joke, Right?" in *Hermes Explains: Thirty Questions about Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter Hanegraaff, Peter Forshaw, and Marco Pasi (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 136.

42. The significance of Jarry's pataphysics at Burning Man is to be addressed in a future publication.

43. Arkady Strugatsky and Boris Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, trans. Antonina W. Bouis (Russian, 1972; London: Gollancz, 1978).

44. Evans, Galbraith, and Law, *Tales*, 59.

Into the Zone

Well before many of the projects mentioned above, Cacophony Society excursions in terra incognita—and specifically adventures beyond San Francisco's Bay Area—were dubbed "Zone Trips." Cacophony events were zonal departures in which spatio-temporal social norms were subverted and burlesqued in passage made across (and beyond) territorial and temporal conventions. Crystallizing this approach, Zone Trips seemed to exemplify an experimental liminality in which the scope of inner travail mirrored the depth of exploration in the outer world. This form of tripping appears to have inverted the inner–outer transit customary to psychedelic experimentation—an abstention that appears to have its provenance in the exploits of the Suicide Club, whose founder, Warne, was no hippy.³⁹ As Cacophony events were "like the experiences you'd have while taking drugs, but without the drugs,"⁴⁰ unlike predecessor developments, notably the Merry Pranksters, the Cacophony Zone was not predicated on an acid ontology. While heir to the guerrilla ontology of the Discordians, and the Church of the SubGenius—notably in the activities of the BLF and other "crimes against normality"⁴¹—Zone Trips were no Acid Tests.

Figure 3. *Stalker* (1979). Directed by Andrei Tarkovsky.

Initiated by Carrie Galbraith, with formative expeditions undertaken to the Los Angeles region in 1988 and 1989, Zone Trips pushed the envelope on performative experiments in the style of "pataphysics," Jarry's poetic antiscience that defied and subverted the laws of physics and metaphysics.⁴² Galbraith was inspired by the "Zone," as depicted by Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky in his 1979 science fiction art film, *Stalker*, an adaption of the novel *Roadside Picnic*⁴³ by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky (fig. 3).⁴⁴ *Stalker* is noted for its resonance with Cacophonists in the "official organ" of the Cacophony Society, *Rough Draft* (issue #88, January 1994). The film depicts "outlaw guides known as stalkers [who] penetrate a forbidden Bermuda Triangle-like region" called the Zone, "an eerie hybrid of industrial wasteland and primeval forest where

45. Daniel McFadden, "Memory and Being: The Uncanny in the Films of Andrei Tarkovsky," *Verges: Germanic & Slavic Studies in Review* 1, no. 1 (2012): 44–45.

46. Johnson and Petrie, 1994, in Evans, Galbraith, and Law, *Tales*, 61.

47. Galbraith, *ibid.*, 59.

48. *Ibid.*, *Tales*, 61.

49. David Hopkins, *Dada and Surrealism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): 59–60.

mirages and mind-bending traps await the unwary traveler." A central motif in Andrei Tarkovsky's works is the journey, in the course of which the physical environment is gradually effaced by fragmented, ambiguous, dreamlike memories that are the landscape of the subconscious, signaling the internal voyage of the protagonist toward their repressed and hidden desires.⁴⁵ Cacophonists are implicated as Stalker-like characters destined to access these hidden and forbidden regions: of society, culture, the mind. "The Zone is the 'Secret' that any society needs in order to exist and maintain its authority, it is the taboo area of memory and the past that is closed off for investigation and has constantly to be entered or 'probed' by misfits if the moral health of society is to survive."⁴⁶ According to Galbraith: "One had to learn how to navigate The Zone. One needed to become a Stalker to lead others through the terrain, riddled with the potential for calamity and misplaced or misunderstood dreams."⁴⁷ Faithful to Tarkovsky's message, the Zone "is a place we reach inside ourselves, we bring it with us, we carry that constantly shifting, tricky, dangerous and rewarding topography in our psyches. We are Stalkers of our own forbidden terrain."⁴⁸ As physical travails beyond the known and into the uncanny, Zone Trips furnished the exploration of one's internal geography, not unlike surrealist literary explorations of Paris as "an alternative city . . . ruled by the logic of unconscious desire."⁴⁹

Figure 4. Croquet X Machina, 1987. Photo by Richard Misrach. Courtesy of *The California Sunday Magazine*.

The most noted Cacophonist Zone Trip inaugurated the now three-decade desert odyssey of Burning Man. In 1990, police forbade the torching of "the Man" effigy on San Francisco's Baker Beach—an event that had evolved into a popular burn tradition over the previous four years. At the invitation of the Cacophony Society, a 40-foot effigy was soon transported to the vast expanse of the Black Rock Desert where it would be raised (and razed) as a defining feature of Zone Trip #4, dubbed "Bad Day at Black Rock" in the September 1990 edition (issue #48) of *Rough Draft*. Cacophonists P. Segal and Kevin Evans were freshly returned from the region's playa—a lifeless,

50. Anon., "P Segal, Cacophonist and Influencer," *Trippingly.net*, June 2, 2017, <https://www.trippingly.net/burning-man-musings/p-segal>.

51. Brian Doherty, *This Is Burning Man: The Rise of a New American Underground* (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2006), 48–49.

52. Merriam-Webster Inc., *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. 11th ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc, 2003), 951.

53. Louis M. Brill, "The First Year in the Desert," *Burning Man Historical Archives* (n.d.), <https://burningman.org/culture/history/brc-history/event-archives/1986-1991/firstyears/>.

54. From text posted outside Small After All World: http://la.cacophony.org/CS_smallafterall-txt.html.

55. Rev. Al, in Doherty, *This Is Burning Man*, 93.

400-square-mile lakebed that desiccates each summer—over Labor Day weekend 1989, where the creative collective Planet X Pottery organized a land-sailing event. The region had previously (1988) been host to an enormous, motorized, six-way croquet match called Croquet X Machina (fig. 4).⁵⁰ Given these experiments, the playa was reported to hold great potential for objects to become divorced from their original purpose—among the goals of Dadaism/Surrealism—on a large scale.⁵¹ A geographic term referring to "the flat-floored bottom of an undrained desert basin that becomes at times a shallow lake,"⁵² "playa" also means "beach" (in Spanish), fitting since a beach is a most liminal zone—i.e., between land and sea (therefore neither land nor sea)—and thus replete with potential.

Attracting several dozen intrepids, the Labor Day weekend Zone Trip of September 1–3, 1990, transformed Burning Man from an overcrowded urban–coastal effigy burn into a desert-arts gathering. As the event was promoted in *Rough Draft #48*: "On this particular expedition, we shall travel to a vast, desolate white expanse stretching onward to the horizon in all directions.... This excursion is an opportunity to leave your old self and be reborn through the cleansing fires of the trackless, pure desert." For misfits, outcasts, and nonconformists tumbling onto this remote apron, the playa provided the perfect liminal context to act "as if the world had already ended." Obtaining the edge of the desert out past the town of Gerlach, these "urbanites, children of the city used to running water, TV, buying groceries at our convenience," exited their vehicles, joined hands, and stepped across a long line drawn on the playa surface by Mikel Michael (Danger Ranger).⁵³ Making passage into this sublime expression of nature's austerity, travelers were cast, and annually recast, in an epic of near-biblical proportions. But not only did the trek into this unforgiving space inspire metaphysical speculation; the playa also became a blank canvas for Dada-esque inscriptions, distortions, and perversions. A Zone where the surreal played chicken with the real, the playa became a natural stage for an event that permitted participants to travel from the sublime to the ridiculous in no time at all.

From the outset, fire became pivotal to an aesthetic of creative destruction. Notable was a series of installations designed and obliterated from the mid- to late 1990s by Reverend Al Ridenour and members of the L.A. Cacophony Society. These projects made a mockery of American cultural icons, which were appropriated and destroyed in incendiary guerrilla theater. Their final project was Small After All World (1999), a perfectly scaled distortion of the Disneyland attraction "It's a Small World." A childlike façade of global unity ruled by Chairman Mouse and patrolled by Small World Order stormtroopers, using an incessant "It's a Small World After All" sound collage and with a clock tower tolling the arrival of Death (in a "mouseketeer" hat), Small After All World was designed to be destroyed (i.e., blown up). The sinister diorama offered a brutal dissection of corporate America. "Walt [Disney] accurately predicted a future in which national flags would be lowered before corporate icons like his own Mickey, a figure now as omnipresent and as inescapable as Death."⁵⁴ Such projects may have potentiated catharsis for those defying commodification, celebrity idolization, and other pathologies ravaging the American psyche, but Rev. Al was concerned less with redeeming moralism than playing with fire. Recalling the "wonderful atmosphere" of the early years, he remarked that "there was a good chance lots of people would be killed in the most colorful possible way."⁵⁵

The original desert events were, in Law's recollections, "extremely Dada." With no rules or expectations, "people could bring out whatever they wanted and do whatever they wanted. This

56. Law, in McGuire, "John Law."
57. Doherty, *This Is Burning Man*, 63.
58. Evans, Galbraith, and Law, *Tales*, 46–47.
59. Law, in McGuire, "John Law."
60. Neil Shister, *Radical Ritual: How Burning Man Changed the World* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2019).
61. Graham St John, "Civilised Tribalism: Burning Man, Event-Tribes and Maker Culture," *Cultural Sociology* 12, no. 1 (2018): 3–21, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975517733162>.
62. Doherty, *This Is Burning Man*, 111–18.
63. Law, in Jeremy Hockett, "Reckoning Ritual and Counterculture in the Burning Man Community: Communication, Ethnography, and the Self in Reflexive Modernism" (PhD diss., Department of Philosophy, University of New Mexico, 2004), 35.

open palette allowed for a lot of creative thought."⁵⁶ Such license gave life to elaborate "theme camps," with Christmas Camp, founded in 1993 by Cacophonists Lisa Archer and Peter Doty, being formative.⁵⁷ Materializing on a remote canvas of fine white dust, upon whose stage there appeared a debauched Santa armed with a shotgun and a bottle of bourbon, the camp was an abrasive retort to the White Christmas fantasy. As noted by Mangrum, Cacophonists "had a kind of weird and complicated relationships with Christmas," to the point of "hatred."

As an affront to the festive acme in the capitalist calendar, Christmas Camp foreshadowed Santacon, the annual trans-city rampage inaugurated in 1994 in which throngs of rampant Santas ravaged urban Christmas festivities and subverted the consumer frenzy of Christmas Eve.⁵⁸ But while originally invested with a rebellious spirit in defiance of the commercial art world, Burning Man, as it is argued by some, became a spectacular commodity, and, what's more, according to Law's lore, "a party for rich tech kids." For a favorable comparison, Law has invoked Marcel Duchamp's 1917 "Fountain," the inverted public urinal that had been converted from proto-Dadaist art into an expensive art commodity.⁵⁹ Santacon itself suffered a not-dissimilar fate, as the annual event became domesticated into large-scale pub crawls around the globe as an accomplice to the operations of capital. Reflecting on the fading of the Cacophony Society in the shadow of Burning Man's growth by the end of the nineties, Mangrum laments: "If Burning Man was the child that devoured its parents, then Santacon was the child that took a shit on its parents' couch, emptied its parents' bank account, burned down its parents' house," and "broke its parents' heart."

This is no simple story. In the first years on-playa, the population doubled each year, reaching eight thousand in 1996. Organizational challenges and serious accidents (one fatal) that year necessitated tighter organizational control and compliance with regulatory standards—circumstances leading to irresolvable conflict between some of the organizers. With the aim of establishing legitimacy in the face of hostile authorities, in the early 1990s, Burning Man primary founder Larry Harvey started naming the event an "arts festival," a source of antinomy among critics of art institutions and permanence. As Neil Shister indicates in *Radical Ritual: How Burning Man Changed the World*, Harvey's ploy had a "trojan horse"-like effect instrumental to the survival of an event that, while promoted as an "arts festival," continued to harbor elements resistant to the institutions of art and its commodification. Perhaps most notably, as an experimental community for interactive art projects, Burning Man would celebrate the collective "scenius" in which all participate, rather than the revered individual "genius" who is a spectacle to the many. While the Burner community affords accolades to "lead artists" for their role as prime movers in collaborative projects, typically, as Shister imparts, "the whole cadre responsible for bringing installations to life gets the fame."⁶⁰ First as an event in Nevada, and today as an international community, Burning Man is a vast network of such participatory collectives or tribes.⁶¹ Indeed, "Burner" is a designation that would come to mean a collectively engaged participant.

Despite these developments, by the mid-1990s, discontent with the way Burning Man had strayed from its punk, anarchistic, and outlaw roots, Law left the project, with operational control subsequently transferred to a LLC.⁶² As it developed into a civic-minded phenomenon with a total population of nearly eighty thousand, BRC would degrade, in the eyes of detractors, into a "law enforcement party"⁶³ and a predictable haven of convenience for tech engineers, ravers,

64. Graham St John, "Charms War: Dance Camps and Sound Cars at Burning Man," in *Weekend Societies: Electronic Dance Music Festivals and Event-Cultures*, ed. Graham St John (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 234–36.

65. Amie Knights, "How the World's Wildest Party Became a Parody of Itself: The Rise & Fall of Burning Man," *Huck*, August 21, 2018, <https://www.huckmag.com/art-and-culture/music-2/how-the-worlds-wildest-party-became-a-parody-of-itself/>.

66. Adrian Roberts, "VIP in BRC. The Inside Story of How One Upscale Camp Does the Burning Man VIP Package Right," *BRC Weekly*, August 29–September 4, 2011, 1.

67. Two surveys aimed at European burners were conducted in 2014 and 2017 with nonrepresentative samples of 283 and 102 respondents.

68. Iris Ronly Riklis, interview, April 14, 2019, European Leadership Summit, Aarhus, Denmark.

69. Rei Dishon, Skype interview, November 21, 2016.

and unacculturated eventgoers.⁶⁴ According to art photographer William Binzen, whose Desert Siteworks events had a formative influence on BRC, Burning Man would devolve from neo-Dadaist experiment to "a nouveau-riche, celebrity-studded neo-morph of Disneyland for techies and internet-knitters, with more cops per capita than any city."⁶⁵ The growing prevalence of service providers in the experience industry and other "burnerpreneurs"⁶⁶ facilitating pay-to-play (or "Plug-n-Play") camps for high-end clients, and the advancing costs of participation, sounded the alarm among those desiring more authentic interactions located in the smaller-scale regional events in the global network.

The prevalence of this perspective is underpinned by our research findings. Within the regional network, Europe has the largest concentration of burns outside North America. The quantitative results of our mixed-methods EuroBurner surveys⁶⁷ suggest that similar to BRC's citizens, European Burners are highly educated and tend to situate themselves on the left of the political spectrum, yet their median income is lower, and the wealthy are less represented compared with BRC. Our qualitative survey responses and ethnographic observations indicate that the spectacularization of Burner culture is less apparent in Europe than in BRC, as reflected in the smaller scale of events and their relatively muted expressions of promiscuous consumer affluence. The next section of this article focuses on Israel's Midburn, the second-largest regional, which underwent a rapid growth from three thousand (the inaugural event in 2014) to twelve thousand (during our 2018 fieldwork); this surge reached only a fraction of BRC's population while considered culturally unsustainable by the event's core organizers.⁶⁸ Other events, such as the German burns addressed in the concluding part of the article, are even smaller, with attendances below one thousand.

Israel: Storms in the Wilderness

A portmanteau of "midbar" (Hebrew for "desert" and "wilderness") and "Midburn," the six-day event in the Negev desert closely approximates the BRC model. Replication is overt, notably in the clockface design of Midburn City (with its radial and concentric streets), in the barren landscape of the "Midburn Playa," which accommodates large-scale artworks (some destroyed by fire during the event's final two nights), and in ever-recurring dust storms. Consistent with Burning Man orthodoxy, the event features a central effigy as well as a Temple. At variance with the prototype, a "double effigy" located in the center of the "playa" is composed of a male and female figure, which in 2018 was modeled after the half-legged tin soldier and the paper ballerina from Hans Christian Andersen's literary fairy tale *The Steadfast Tin Soldier* (1838). The 2018 annual theme was Brainstorm; accordingly, Midburn City street names were inspired by brain anatomy.

The event is operated by a nonprofit organization founded in 2012. Besides Midburn, the organization supports year-round events and community activities promoting social awareness and change, and offers art funding through programs such as the Art Accelerator.⁶⁹ Project funding at Midburn is partially covered by a crowdsourcing platform dubbed Dreams, which was originally developed by the Nordic Burner community and subsequently adopted in Israel, Germany, and elsewhere. As a participatory event, Midburn is composed of camps designed, constructed, and disassembled by its citizens. While all participants are encouraged to adopt volunteer roles, the event's rapid growth triggered an influx of "virgins" often receiving Cliff's Notes versions of the Ten Principles (including *Participation*) from seasoned campmates.

70. For a discussion of gifting and gratitude at Burning Man, see Graham St John, "Blazing Grace: The Gifted Culture of Burning Man," *NANO: New American Notes Online*, no. 11 (2017): <https://nanocrit.com/issues/issue11/Blazing-Grace-The-Gifted-Culture-of-Burning-Man>.

71. Vitos was approached by one of the camp's core organizers after subscribing to an online list provided for international participants seeking camps at Midburn.

72. Michael Heyman, "The Decline and Rise of Literary Nonsense in the Twentieth Century," in *Children's Literature and the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Roderick McGillis (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 17.

73. Catriona McAra, "Surrealism's Curiosity: Lewis Carroll and the Femme-Enfant," *Papers of Surrealism*, no. 9 (2011): 2–3.

Most camps are inspired by a central theme giving shape to their ambience; they typically feature a guest area and a bar, where visitors are welcomed during operating hours. Aligned with the principle of *Gifting*, monetary transactions are prohibited, and public camp services are offered as gifts to the community.⁷⁰ In 2018, Vitos joined and performed volunteer shifts with the Unbirthday Camp; this was his second field visit, three months after attending the indoor event Burning Bär (discussed later). Among the oldest camps of Midburn and accommodating approximately seventy campers, the Unbirthday Camp was purposefully recruiting foreigners and virgins,⁷¹ consistent with the principle of *Radical Inclusion*. According to the camp's origin myth, a cohort of friends who attended an early Israeli burn (Midburnerot in 2013) discovered that their birthdays were proximate. Instead of celebrating their own birthday, the group decided to build a camp dedicated to the "unbirthday" of everyone else. Unsettling the calendar date that celebrates the individual within the context of consumerist gifting, and extending that celebration over the event's duration, Unbirthday Camp is something of a distant cousin to Christmas Camp.

The concept of the unbirthday—all days of the year except one's birthday—derives from Lewis Carroll's novel *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871), the sequel to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). The Alice books are seminal works of literary nonsense, a genre that, due to its potential for subverting bourgeois rationality, filtered into Jarry's *King Ubu*, and later into Surrealism,⁷² with Carroll becoming a key point of reference among Surrealists.⁷³ The theme and wider symbolism of the Alice books were reflected in Unbirthday Camp decorations and backdrops, such as a giant (un)birthday cake serving as a shade structure situated behind a wall composed of oversized playing cards. During bar opening hours, the "unbirthday" of visitors was celebrated with drinking games in the guest area, as actual birthday celebrants were redirected to the "Shithole" camp (discussed later). As surrealist inversions of the birthday celebration, these daily performances effectively diverted the inbound gift outwards to the community.

Figure 5. The Flying Camel. Photo by Botond Vitos.

74. Stewart Harvey, "Black Rock Dawn," in *Playa Dust: Collected Stories from Burning Man*, ed. Samantha Krukowski (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2014), 30.

75. Doherty, *This Is Burning Man*, 62.

76. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*.

77. Ibid., 6.

Venturing beyond Unbirthday Camp, Vitos witnessed the hazy contours of a desert dream filtering through yellow-tinted dust goggles. The experience was like boarding a research submarine shaken by dust storms rising from multiple directions. Gazing out of his goggle portholes, he proceeded with the descent into deep playa (i.e., the far-off desert regions of the event). The playscape featured improbable "mutant vehicles" such as a pirate ship, a giant metal dragon, and a steam engine locomotive; a boxing ring staging a perpetual pillow fight; a UFO-shaped DJ booth; the Rabbits in the Sand sound stage featuring a giant bunny totem pole and an oversized white rabbit marionette; and the large-scale combustible statue, "The Flying Camel" (fig. 5).

Resurfacing later that night, the adventure was washed down with a mojito in a lively cocktail bar with the glamour of Prohibition hidden in a desert shack of Midburn City. This random cavalcade of absurd invitations was accompanied by a dress-to-impress imperative, which is traceable to the early history of Burning Man. At Zone Trip #4, arriving in "faux-formal" outfits,⁷⁴ Cacophonists set a ludicrous trend in cultivated attire. The style was perfected by Vivian Perry, known for her impeccable outfits, like the spotless silk blouse with black velvet riding pants (of which she had multiple copies in order to maintain the performance), and for her over-the-top taste in champagne, oysters, and caviar served on china and silverware. According to Mangrum, conspicuous within an extreme "survival situation," Perry's Elegant Camp was a sumptuous oasis. For Doherty the aesthetic was "extraneous and superfluous and completely inappropriate, and that was what was so wonderful about it."⁷⁵

Perry graced an unforgiving *no-place* years before there were "principles" guiding how one should comport oneself in it. More than twenty-five years later, as an exercise in sophisticated defilement and mocking the Burner concept of MOOP ("Matter Out of Place"), Principles Out of Place (POOP) was a fusion of dark altar, public toilet, and provocative interpolation of the Ten Principles. The Midburn 2018 installation consisted of a wooden structure with upper (private) and lower (public) compartments. In the upper part, a functional, if austere, toilet booth was accessible by ladder. Down below, the accumulating excreta was displayed within a transparent plexiglass container. The Ten Principles were inscribed on the plexiglass, the layout resembling Moses' Tables of the Law (fig. 6). Candles and Burner paraphernalia (dust goggles and a hat) were placed before the container, and Jewish Canadian songwriter Leonard Cohen's farewell song "You Want It Darker" (a track addressing sacrifice and submission to a dark lord) played softly on repeat. Vitos encountered the project while wandering the playa on the event's third night, by which time the container was half-full. A Midburner awaiting his turn mentioned that his friend upstairs would soon "shit on the principles."

The POOP installation offered a malodorous subversion of Burner culture while at the same time conforming to its principles. As a participatory artwork, it crudely ridiculed the Ten Principles while (quite literally) observing them. The evolution of its repulsive content was enabled by the collaborative "gifts" of Burners. Resonant with the cultural logic of medieval and Renaissance grotesque realism that derided and renewed the prevailing social and ecclesiastic order in the earthly-bodily folk humor of the carnival,⁷⁶ the installation offered a scatological inversion of Burner principles—as reflected in a spatial arrangement subordinating the Commandment-like representation of the Ten Principles to the toilet above. However, while carnivalesque festivities and spectacles "built a second world and a second life outside officialdom,"⁷⁷ the POOP installation received the seal of approval from Midburn core organizers as an "official" artwork.

Figure 6. Principles Out of Place (POOP) at Midburn 2018. Photo by Botond Vitos.

In its defiance of principles—e.g., *Participation*, *Communal Effort*, *Immediacy*, and *Leaving No Trace*—that were at the same time essential to its implementation, POOP seemed to capture a confluence of scatological and civilizing impulses while echoing a defining theme in Jarry's pataphysics: the “plus-minus,” or the equivalence of the opposites.⁷⁸

POOP was not the only scatological, taboo-breaking, and provocative project at Midburn 2018. Such were leitmotifs in the repertoire of the Shithole camp, whose members occasionally engaged in subversive on-playa performances. A pivotal camp from Midburn's inception, the Shithole was created, according to one of its originators, Midburn co-founder Monkey, to establish distance from the “hippie festivals” of Israel while retaining the “grungy behavior” characteristic of many BRC communities. In 2015, the camp organized a “Hippie Hate March” combining a Ku Klux Klan dress code with hippie batik colors. At the time of fieldwork, Shithole dwellers roamed campsites ridiculing passersby with bullhorn commentaries and exhorting Midburners to “drink Bloody Mary from a little boy's penis” (referring to a statue serving as a Bloody Mary dispenser). In 2014, Bloody Marys had been poured from the Virgin Mary's vagina. As Monkey explains:

A burn is about being radical. You need to take it to the next step. You don't wanna be comfortable.... The idea is: you're being uncomfortable. So just being exposed to that kind of thing, and just having people freak out from those, and we like the aggravation as well, when you aggravate people to get a reaction. Because that reaction is sincere. Everything else is your social boundaries and stuff like that, but that anger reaction is very sincere.⁷⁹

78. Andrew Hugill, *Pataphysics: A Useless Guide* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 9–12. In the historical context of toilet art, POOP arrives a century after Duchamp's readymade “Fountain.” Duchamp signed his urinal with “R. Mutt,” where the “R” recalls Jarry's double *r* from *King Ubu's* opening phrase: “*Merdre!*” Hugill notes that references to Jarry pervaded Duchamp's oeuvre and discusses such additions of the letter *r* as part of “a Jarry-derived formula to which Duchamp returned frequently, not least in the name of his alter ego Rose Selavy” (158).

79. Skype interview, March 15, 2019.

80. Shrager, *Scatology in Modern Drama*, 46–47.

81. Email correspondence with author, March 24, 2019.

82. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979), 116–17.

83. A smaller and more intimate third event, Burning Burg, is also organized during the summer, with approximately one hundred participants.

84. Due to organizational difficulties, Burning Bär 2019 operated under a different name.

85. Interview, July 9, 2018, Friedrichstraße, Berlin.

86. As stated in The 10 Principles of Burning Man: <https://burningman.org/culture/philosophical-center/10-principles/>.

87. "Burning Bär," Burning Bär, accessed December 17, 2019, <https://www.burningbaer.de/>.

88. Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, 102.

89. Skype interview, July 10, 2018.

90. "Burning Bär."

Monkey would prefer to extend the Ten Principles with "Radical Honesty." He contends that for many Burners, *Radical Self-expression* (defined as a genuine mode of expression that is offered as a gift to the community) is far from being an authentic practice, as it is restricted to the adaptation of preexisting fashion elements and behavioral codes. In the spirit of "Radical Honesty," the "shock treatment" of the Shithole camp is designed to demolish cultural conventions in its pursuit of authentic social interactions, resonating with Jarry's artistic offensive during the scandalous premiere of *King Ubu*.⁸⁰ For Monkey, each event edition offers a new opportunity to find out "how far [the Shithole] can go"⁸¹ in appropriating cultural elements for their shock value and testing the limits of participatory art. This justification is reminiscent of Dick Hebdige's reading of the provocative use of the swastika in the stylistic repertoire of 1970s punk,⁸² a popular music movement incorporating Dadaist aesthetics.

Germany: A Wurst-Case Scenario

The two largest burns in Germany are Burning Bär, a weekend indoor event organized during the winter, and Kiez Burn, the Berlin Burner community's five-day outdoor summer event.⁸³ Burning Bär 2018⁸⁴ took place in Schloss Beesenstedt, a nineteenth-century castle located 125 miles from Berlin with a capacity nearing 250 people. The castle featured multiple rooms distributed across several levels that hosted various art projects and workshops, reminiscent of theme camps at an outdoor event. Meals, alcoholic drinks, and accommodation were included in the entrance fee of 185 euros. The theme was Extrawurst, a German idiom literally meaning "special sausage," and figuratively, "special treatment." As formulated by event co-lead Oliver: "Burning Bär compared to the other events is always a little bit special because ... you get everything, you just need yourself and your creativity, and everything else is provided. So that's an Extrawurst for everybody."⁸⁵ Although *Radical Self-reliance* (the principle encouraging "the individual to discover, exercise and rely on his or her inner resources"⁸⁶) appeared less pronounced compared with outdoor burns, *Radical Self-expression* was strongly encouraged. With Extrawurst defined "as an emblematic Dadaistic expression" shaping the 2018 theme,⁸⁷ organizers celebrated the centenary of Berlin Dada⁸⁸ while at the same time paying homage to the roots of Burning Man. Tracing a genealogy that included Cacophony, Suicide Club, and Alfred Jarry, co-lead Johannes acknowledged the "philosophical roots" of Burner culture: "Dada is a great principle, and of course, it goes back to the origins of Burning Man."⁸⁹

Art funding was awarded through a central committee rewarding "installations, performance, paintings, and workshops, that take a Dadaist approach."⁹⁰ The event marked the start of fieldwork for Vitos, who, as a virgin Burner, applied for the funding of a "mutant disco ball" (an allusion to the art cars or "mutant vehicles" of BRC) without disclosing his role as a researcher to the committee. This strategy, consistent with the Burner principle of *Participation*, was preferred to soliciting a directed ticket for research purposes. The project was allocated 150 euros, and we were given the option to buy a ticket from the quota reserved for co-creators; the burn then sold out quickly in the general sale. The granting process provided the first impression of a welcoming community, while also signaling the interfaced adaptation of principles such as *Radical Inclusion*, *Participation*, and *Radical Self-expression*. Furthermore, the preparations kept Vitos engaged (and his apartment jumbled) in the days leading up to Burning Bär, while also offering access to the day zero (build day) of the event.

Figure 7. Burning Bär project. DaDiDa (Dadaistic Disco Daisy). Photo by Botond Vitos.

With her “dadazzling” disco lights, “DaDiDa” (Dadaistic Disco Daisy) caressed the dance floor of the Alchemist Bar, a small venue in the castle’s basement. The installation consisted of mirror shards glued to a mannequin; wigs; a skirt and hood made from black trash bags (a loose reference to 1970s UK punk clothing adopted in the fashion world); plastic sausage links forming Extrawurst arm extensions; a rotating platform; and color spotlights (fig. 7). The aim was to create an uncanny fusion of humanoid and nonhuman components that was functional and celebratory. It was also important to connect with junk art and the Extrawurst concept in a cheeky way, and to fashion a work that radiated beauty and danger. Furthermore, the project was intended to disturb beauty conventions and gender norms (as prescribed by the figure of the mannequin), turning the performance of the disco diva into a sausage fest. Reactions to DaDiDa ranged from “nice if a bit disturbing” (an accolade received during the build of the project in the castle basement) to compliments on her glamorous sparkle during a party in the Alchemist Bar.

The project offered a shattered assemblage that altered the function of a readymade object: the mannequin (itself a symbol of the commodity fetish), referencing neo-Dadaist techniques. While Duchamp's Dadaist readymades were conceived as anti-art, with their artistic value diminishing after the initial shock effect, 1960s neo-Dadaist assemblages could be criticized as “an attempt to establish such a shock as a value in itself.”⁹¹ Yet, as art historian Anna Dezeuze suggests, such assemblages were not just repetitions of museified forms that had lost their subversive edge.⁹² Through its obsession with junk, garbage, and other found objects, coupled with an emphasis on spectator participation and mobility, neo-Dada enabled critical engagement with consumer culture and an exploration of the interstices and passages between commodification and subjectivity.

91. Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, 208.

92. Anna Dezeuze, “‘Neo-Dada,’ ‘Junk Aesthetic’ and Spectator Participation,” in *Neo-avant-garde*, ed. David Hopkins (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006).

93. Parallel Toilets: two mirrors (30 x 40 cm) placed within the toilet booth for an infinity effect; one fixed to the door interior (with the inscription "Today"), and another to the back wall ("Tomorrow").

At Kiez Burn 2019 (approximate population: nine hundred), two installations were devised for a group project (Parallel Poopiverses) targeting the improvement of portable toilet booths. A short background is necessary. Upon his first visit to BRC (in 2003), St John had discovered that venturing to the toilets was something of a minor Zone Trip. His curiosity was piqued by the practice in which portable public toilet stalls—which typically suffer the ravages of use—were adopted and revived by anonymous curators. Participants unknown to users have long customized and domesticated the interiors of these plastic “porta-loos,” which are sometimes decorated with wallpaper, curtains, and other domiciliary affects. On other occasions, objects and images were arranged to create exotic atmospheres, such as a Balinese shrine, an alien city, or absurdly blended scenarios. These strategies complemented widespread efforts to educate participants about waste disposal practices. In this way, the repulsive badlands of event stalls were converted into cozy, educational, and amusing temporary excretory zones. Though stalls remained dedicated to their original purpose, modifications held something in common with the billboard “improvements” of the Billboard Liberation Front. In this tradition, the art of stall transformation may be enhanced through interior sound design.

Downstream from these developments, Parallel Poopiverses received funding through Kiez Burn’s Dreams crowd-granting system, enabling ticket holders to vote for preferred project proposals. The initial proposal involved the improvement of five toilets by a team of three Toileteers. Only three projects were completed (and 116 euros out of the allocated 187 were used), as Dream realization was hindered by operational challenges: one team member deserted the Toileteers, while another peer completed a single project only.⁹³ The two projects proposed and designed by Vitos (an audiovisual assemblage and a sound installation) were delivered, despite further communicational and technical struggles. These difficulties were compensated by a happy accident: instead of the conventional plastic portable toilets used in the previous year, Kiez Burn 2019 featured wooden “eco-toilets” that extended the sound range in the vicinity of the toilets.

Figures 8 and 9. Kiez Burn Projects. Photos by Botond Vitos.

94. The expression offered homage to an earlier Shithole Camp project mentioned by Monkey during our interview.

95. No personal details were collected. All participants consented to be recorded for the scope of a toilet exhibition; their voices were post-processed to further protect their anonymity.

96. The project subsequently migrated to an urban exhibition and to Black Rock City 2019. In BRC, the loudspeaker was secured with a chain to the interior of a portable toilet, only to be stolen on the second night of operation.

97. Stuart Mangrum, "Burning Man 2020: The Multiverse," *Burning Man Journal*, October 15, 2019, <https://journal.burningman.org/2019/10/news/brc-news/burning-man-2020-the-multiverse/>.

98. "Burning Man in the Multiverse," <https://burningman.org/timeline/>.

Loosely alluding to the "Wild at Heart" theme, the first installation was titled "Bad Ass (There Is Always an Ass Above)." The project used a fake plastic butt positioned within a toilet seat fitted to the booth's ceiling (fig. 8) and a hidden overhead loudspeaker playing soundscapes themed "Bad Ass" and "Holy Fart" (<http://cacophony.eu/badass64.mp3>). The former included audio of dripping water in a cave and the latter Tibetan bells; both were occasionally disrupted by an assortment of farts and toilets flushing. Inspired by Bakhtin's exploration of grotesque realism and Midburn's scatological projects, the project was defined (in an explanation taped to the outside of the toilet door) as a "Shitholistic meditation."⁹⁴ As the note explained: "the participatory artwork worships the Ass Above, an idea that can be vertically extended into infinity." Although the project received cheerful reactions, the sound came to an abrupt end on the third day of the event. Becoming unfixed, the speaker plunged into the toilet—approximating a Worst-case scenario.

Dubbed "Club Toilet," the second project was a sound installation opening up the acoustic environment of this Poopiversal outpost to an audio collage of conversations, from four to seven minutes in length, recorded in the toilets of seminal Berlin techno clubs. Toilet booths typically serve as mini staging areas enabling social interaction and chemically induced preparation for the dance floors of Berlin's internationally renowned techno clubs. During the recording of the Club Toilet material, most conversations emerged after random encounters.⁹⁵ This Dadaist emphasis by chance opened the tap for a bubbly flow of narratives touching on drug consumption, sexual activities in and outside the toilet, romantic relationships, club tourism, Berlin art gallery walks, and other themes. The sound installation was intended to offer an imaginary extension and transformation of the portable toilet environment, dissolving the boundaries between public and private space and provoking reflection on the transformative potential of club bathrooms and events. An explanation of the project with a photo taken in one of the Berlin club toilets (fig. 9) was taped to the toilet door. As with Bad Ass, the sound was audible in the vicinity of the booth (albeit only at night, during club opening hours), with Burners occasionally eavesdropping on the conversations. Regular clubbers reported an instant feeling of coziness and familiarity when hearing the sounds and conversations emanating from the toilet.⁹⁶

Conclusion

Animate in the work of Alfred Jarry and filtered through the San Francisco Cacophony Society, Dada is foundational to the cultural (il)logic of Burning Man. This influence has received growing recognition from the Burning Man Project in recent years, with the homage to Jarry and the Cacophony Society in the 2020 BRC art theme "The Multiverse"⁹⁷ offering transparent acknowledgement of the movement's Dadaist/Surrealist impulse. And true to its surreal affect, "The Multiverse" was retained in the wake of the global pandemic as the theme for the 2020 virtual Burning Man Multiverse comprised of eight virtual "universes."⁹⁸ As we have ventured here, integral to the surreal tourism percolating in (and beyond) the San Francisco Bay Area prior to the advent of Burning Man, and pivotal to its manifestation in Nevada's Black Rock Desert, the Zone Trip kindled Burner culture in Black Rock City and its worldwide progeny. As Burning Man's surrealistic and civilizing co-creators made recurrent passage into the Black Rock Desert, they cultivated an event space—the playa—that became an augmented realm of principled absurdity, an experimental Zone City, a transposable evental culture. Over thirty years of event installation, the Zone Trip has evolved (some argue devolved) into a principled culture motivated not only to self-reproduction in an absolute desert in Nevada but to its replication in surreal event enclaves.

This article has demonstrated how Dada/Surrealist provocations integral to the emergence of Burning Man are mirrored and mutated in its spawn. In regional burns in Israel and Germany in 2018, the Dadaist pulse was felt at Midburn's formative Shithole camp, in its POOP project, and in Burning Bär's "Extrawurst" theme. Through appropriate emic field artifice, creative efforts evoked the historical context of junk and readymade art (DaDiDa at Burning Bär). Additional endeavors plugged into scatology and BRC's toilet "improvements" (Bad Ass and Club Toilet at Kiez Burn 2019). These scatological projects were partly inspired by the field encounter of POOP, an on-playa artwork reflecting the paradoxical synthesis of absurdist and civilizing practices endemic to burn culture. It is hoped that this journey through the heights and the bowels of this Dadaist diaspora prompts further studies of the Cacophonous roots of Burning Man and the Zone Trip's *longue durée*.

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