

Sacred Iconography in Secular Space: Altars, Alters, and Alterity at the Burning Man Project

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Historically and etymologically, altars harness and liberate some of the most potent forces of consumer behavior that late capitalism has struggled to marketize and commodify: sacred and profane, gift giving and sacrifice, utterance and ineffability, immanence and transcendence, public and private, self and other, material and ethereal, agency and community, order and chaos. As mediating vehicles between realms of experience, altars invite the exploration of antinomies, and encourage the probing of relationships. As metaphoric high places of supplication, altars comprise both a metaphysical fulcrum and catechetical crucible, on and within which materiality is transmuted into quintessence. Altars are the sites of creative destruction and destructive creation. Altars reify what people deify, and deify what people reify.

In this chapter, we describe and theorize altars at Burning Man. Burning Man, or the Burning Man Project, is a weeklong festal gathering that takes place every year in the desolate Black Rock Desert of central Nevada, which is one of the most lifeless places on earth. From the Black Rock Desert—a barren Pleistocene lake bed, engulfed in alkali dust—arises Black Rock City, a techno-shamanic city of art, Blake's Golgonooza. It is a place of imagination built to disappear in a blazing no-when of immediacy. It is a love offering to the world wherein process trumps product and evanescence proves essential. In Burning Man's temporary community, diversity is *de rigueur*, everyday life is an incessant series of celebratory moments, spectacle is continuously created in universal performance rather than passive observation, and otherness is the common bond among residents.

The event began in 1985 when two friends, accompanied that year by a group of friends and range of attracted onlookers, decided to burn an 8-foot wooden effigy of a man on San Francisco's Baker Beach. The psychic energy released by the burning of the man was an epiphany for its originators. Holding the event every

year, they found that it attracted more people and more attention, and so felt a need to elongate and elaborate the stature of the effigy in return. By 2001, the event attracted over 25,000 people to a gigantic celebration climaxing in the Hollywood-effects style torching of a 50-foot effigy. Our chapter is based upon our ethnographic fieldwork at Burning Man in 1999 and 2000. As we will describe, altars are central in many ways to Burning Man. Altars are perhaps best recognized as the ground of alterity, the celebratory loci of otherness (Taussig, 1993). Burning Man is an experiment in temporary community that celebrates the practice of radical self-expression. This practice is reflected on the individual level in the discovery and release of the alter (ego). Participants work actively to allow their second (and third and ...) selves to emerge, and perform this emergence for others to appreciate. As unfamiliar or unacknowledged aspects of the self unfold, and each participant individuates in the presence of a community of emergent selves, apostasy becomes the order of the day. Avatars meander on the playa, the demarcated desert surface that serves as Burning Man's central staging ground. Acolytes thus commune with their extended, multiphrenic selves, with each others' rapidly individuating selves, and with those geomantic and cosmological forces that all those many selves see fit to summon to the table. We can conceive of the altars at Burning Man as the staging grounds for the event's reenchantment of the worlds, both inner and outer, of its participants. The quotidian self is sacrificed on the altar, allowing more authentic, immediate selves to arise. *Communitas* emerges in turn, as alters mime and riff throughout the week.

In addition, because Burning Man's organizers tightly control the event, and forbid (through a local police force called the Rangers) any commerce or commercial activities, people must abandon the marketized consumer behaviors of their everyday lives (see Kozinets, 2002). Instead, they embrace apotheosis as their acknowledged goal. Acolytes offer their selves to each other upon a variety of natural, communal, and self-constructed altars. Alterity in this temporary autonomous zone (Bey, 1994) is the lived experience, enjoined and engendered by the community. It is manifest in gifts and offerings, sacred sacrifices emplaced within and on altars.

A NOTE ON RESEARCH AND REPRESENTATION

We alert the reader to our enterprise with some specific admonitions. While our account emerges from several years of ethnographic and netnographic inquiry, during which time we made extensive use of participant observation and interview, this chapter arises from the photographic and videographic records we made of our field experience. This chapter is essentially a photoessay, and the text may be regarded as an extended caption. Denser descriptive accounts of our fieldwork are

available elsewhere (Kozinets, 2002, 2003; Kozinets & Sherry, in press a, in press b; Sherry, 2003), and, in these sources, we provide more global and nuanced interpretations of the Burning Man Project. These works also provide the detailed emic perspectives, rich informant quotes, and reflective descriptive fieldnote passages and analysis that are hallmarks of ethnography. They are absent from this visual enterprise because they speak of a form of representation that is currently not our intent.

Here, hopefully, the images will bear the brunt of evocation, giving the reader a feel for the spiritual ethos that pervades Black Rock City. We offer our own interpretation of these images, an etic one informed by emic perspectives, but couched in language evocative enough to complement the images (Sherry, 2000; Sherry & Schouten, 2002). It is one of a "layering of seeings" (Schechner, 1985, p. 297) we are putting down to capture the complexity of the event, and we hope readers will be moved to consult our other works. Our present effort resembles the practice of ritual criticism (Grimes, 1990), and shapes not only our own ongoing engagement with the Burning Man Project, but also that of a host of other secular ritualists involved with the event, to whom our interpretations are widely disseminated over the Internet.

Our ephemeral fieldsite, whose closest ethnographic analog may be the biannual Australian ConFest (St. John, 2001), is created by people from all over the world, but has a distinctive West Coast presence. Residents of Black Rock City are predominantly White, relatively affluent and well educated, and range in age generally from their twenties through eighties. Gender is balanced, and often publicly negotiated in performance. Residents of this heterotopia truck everything necessary for creating and sustaining an enclave of radical self-expression—building materials, porta-potties, generators, electronics, art and craft components, groceries, and dwelling structures—into the middle of the desert. There they build a community that prohibits vending, encourages a gift economy, and demands that everyone participate in the creation of a temporary autonomous zone (Bey, 1994). Residents live in villages of theme camps, giving the city a sense of subcultural variation. Through thousands of local acts of individual performance and collectively orchestrated erections of mega-installations of art, a *communitas* emerges among residents that functions as a critique of their real-world everyday lives. This *communitas* is enhanced by altered consciousness borne of deprivation, ecstatic drumming and dancing, drug use, authentic interpersonal encounters, and countless other means. The event culminates in a postmodern potlatch of conflagration, the burning of a week's aesthetic production and the dismantling of the entire city, reminding each resident of the primacy of creativity over that which is created.

Much of the activity at Black Rock City is geared toward shifting residents' lived experience away from materialism *per se*, and toward materiality. Residents come to question their relationship with the material world, speculate on the essential essence of things, and explore the cybernetic self. Active production rather than passive consumption is the order of the week; participation is exalted,

whereas spectating is demonized. Because agency is inseparable from stuff, the strategic use of consumer behavior in a nonmarket setting—particularly the interplay of sacred and profane (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989)—is an attractive research opportunity. The numinous dimension of consumption is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the ubiquitous presence of altars throughout Black Rock City. We capture something of that presence in the images and words that follow.

ANALYZING ALTARS

Of the many ways of characterizing the altars of Black Rock City, we have chosen three interpenetrating aspects to organize the discussion: structure, process, and magnitude. Every altar partakes of these aspects, but none of these aspects is irreducibly nonproblematic in any of the altars. The altars are perversely polysemous, resisting any master reading in their local particularities. Charles Simic's poem "The Altar" (2001) might profitably be read in this regard. Altars harbor animal, mineral, plant, food, human, deity, demon, and technology icons. Often these icons share space on the same altars. Some altars have an archaic feel, others a retro feel, and still others a futuristic feel. Again the same altar may reference multiple temporal eras. Some altars are stationary, and others are mobile. Sometimes environmental affordances prompt the raising of an altar; sometimes the environment is made to conform to the demands of an altar. Where some altars resemble completed installations, others are being installed continuously. Some altars are attended, others self-serve. Devotional activity is organized at some altars and spontaneous at others. Altars sport attitude from reverent to blasphemous, from arcane to popular. Any of these dimensions might be unpacked at great length. For the purposes of our essay, we confine ourselves to just a few diagnostic aspects we find compelling.

Structure

The structure of our altars can be described along dimensions that appear in Fig. 13.1 to be continua, but that are best understood as dialectical relations. One dimension is represented by the poles of Ritual and Ceremony. Recall that these poles are simply representational conceits, and they actually exist compressed in intimate tension. Ritual carries primarily a religious valence, whereas ceremony is predominantly aesthetic in nature. The distinction is a traditional one, the former indicating some agentic orientation to a transcendent power, the latter more an attitude toward immanence shaped largely through secular performance. The second dimension unfolds along the line between the poles of Personal and Communal. Again, this unfolding occurs in the dynamic association of these conceits. The for-

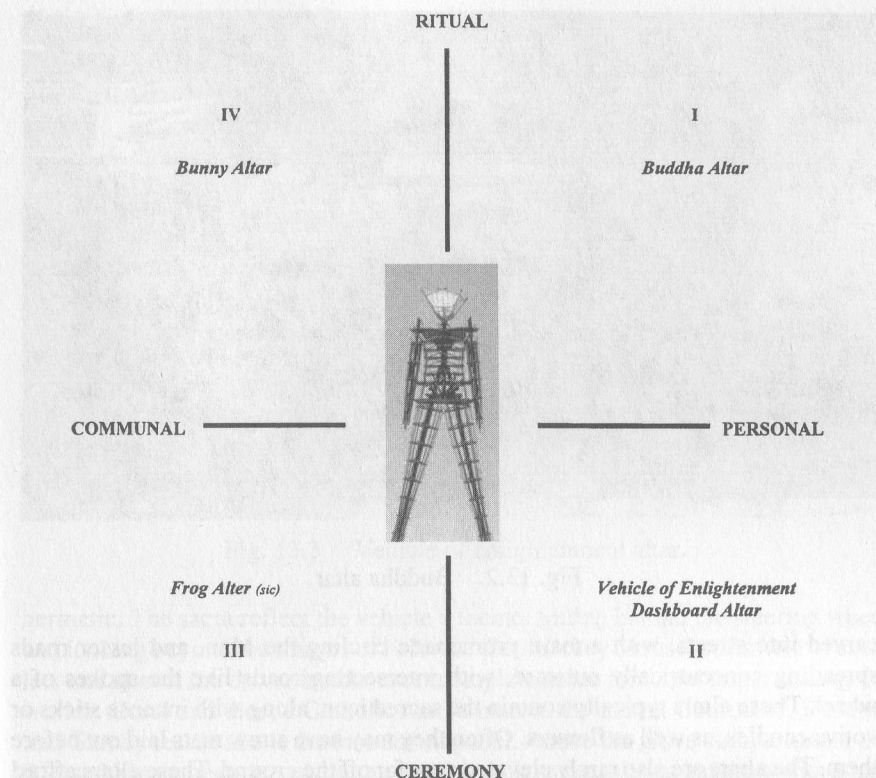


Fig. 13.1. Structure.

mer denotes a private experience, the latter a public one. The tension here exists between the harboring and the sharing of experience. By doing some representational violence to dialectical distinctions, we are able to characterize the altars of Black Rock City by quadrant, recognizing all the while that drift occurs across quadrants, and that the intersection of the axes exerts an irresistible pull on the altars toward the source of greatest semiotic intensity: the center. The center of alterity in Black Rock City is the Man, a 40- to 50-foot stylized effigy constructed of wood and neon, and placed on a raised platform at the very heart of Burning Man's city. Each altar is the physical manifestation of the metaphysical and symbolic force in play in its quadrant.

Of the types of altar characteristic of Quadrant I, simple shrines devoted to the Buddha are perhaps the most common (Fig. 13.2). Such shrines are most often located in relatively domestic space, in the interior of theme camps and off the heavily traveled circuits of the playa and esplanade. For the event, the desert is

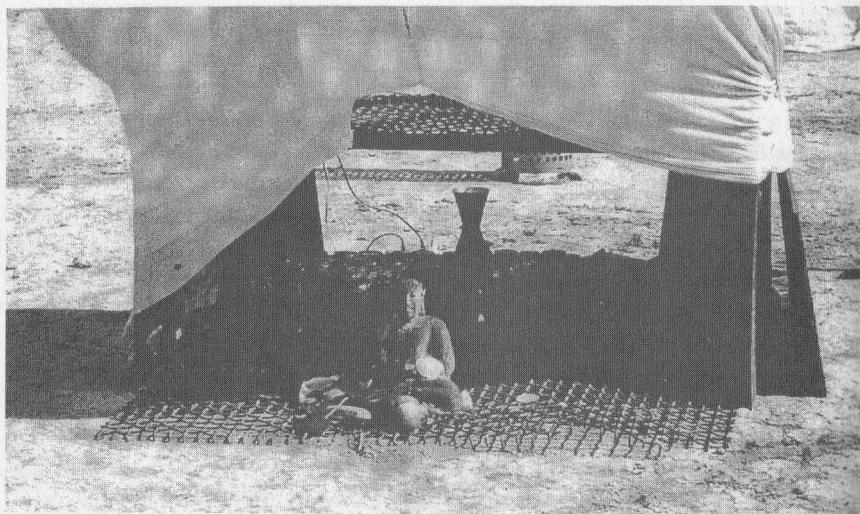


Fig. 13.2. Buddha altar.

carved into streets, with a main promenade circling the Man, and lesser roads spreading concentrically outward, with intersecting roads like the spokes of a wheel. These altars typically contain the sacred icon, along with incense sticks or votive candles, as well as flowers. Often they may have straw mats laid out before them. The altars are also rarely elevated very far off the ground. These altars afford the opportunity for meditation and introspection, usually conducted by solitary individuals. Occasionally, passersby too busy for an extended visit may *wai* or *namaste* the icon as they move through the area. Such walk-by ritual bowing becomes a species of gestural performance remarked on by observers. These altars appeal not only to the Eastern mysticism of their tenders, but also to the New Age sensibility of many unchurched seekers. The chthonic grounding of these altars suits the “tread lightly” ecophilosophy of Black Rock City residents.

Quadrant II—type altars are epitomized by the Vehicle of Enlightenment, an art-car whose dashboard contains an altar comprising an intriguing collage of sacred and profane icons. (Fig. 13.3). The outer body of the entire car is completely encrusted in tchotchkes, both sacral and kitsch. A veritable bibelot-mobile of multicultural detritus, the vehicle sports adhesions from talismans to toys, and CDs to seashells. Its riotous, cornucopic display of material culture draws onlookers close, to ponder the meanings of the montage. Inside the car, the dashboard provides a fortuitous affordance that invites the installation of an altar. This mobile altar effectively grounds the driver, providing connection and integration not only with here and there in a metaphysical sense, but also with home and away in political/domestic economy kind of sense. The driver is able to carry the hestial into the



Fig. 13.3. Vehicle of enlightenment altar.

hermetic. The sacra reflect the vehicle's theme. Sitting behind the steering wheel and looking beyond the images of Felix the Cat, Mickey Mouse, and a host of amulets and aliens, the driver is able to contemplate some principal icons uniting the worlds. Coral and dice, a Catholic nun, a man in the moon, Confucius, Buddha, and Gumby reside above the instrument panel. Above the glove compartment, the Blessed Virgin bears a rock guitar, and Lord Gautama, sitting zazen, works a laptop computer. A rubber duckie, a scale model of the Vehicle of Enlightenment, crystals, flowers, several Felix decals, and numerous medallions adorn this shelf. The visor is festooned with rosaries and amulets. Looking beyond this altar, through the windshield, the driver contemplates a kindred congeries on the hood. As a liminoid phenomenon itself, the car is a profoundly appropriate vehicle for altarcic mediation between worlds.

The Alter (sic) of the Mystical Frog of the Playa—the literal misspelling seeming to be an emic declaration of the function of altars—is an exemplar of the type of altar described in Quadrant III (Fig. 13.4). Erected to the Frog Goddess, the votive altar allows communicants to write projective fantasies on a piece of parchment to be publicly read and burned at 4:30 each afternoon. Acolytes stress the ceremonial nature of the devotional practice, and the apposite interplay of themes of permanence and impermanence in the ceremony. Projected dreams need not be religious in nature, merely expressive of self. The altar rests in a covered shrine fronted by an enormous frog head. The altar consists of a laptop writing desk ringed with frog figurines and stocked with writing implements. Leaf-shaped mats lay before the altar, parchment and bowls to the side, and a tall columnar frog idol to the rear. Offertory bowls abut this idol. The entire altar rests on a large carpet

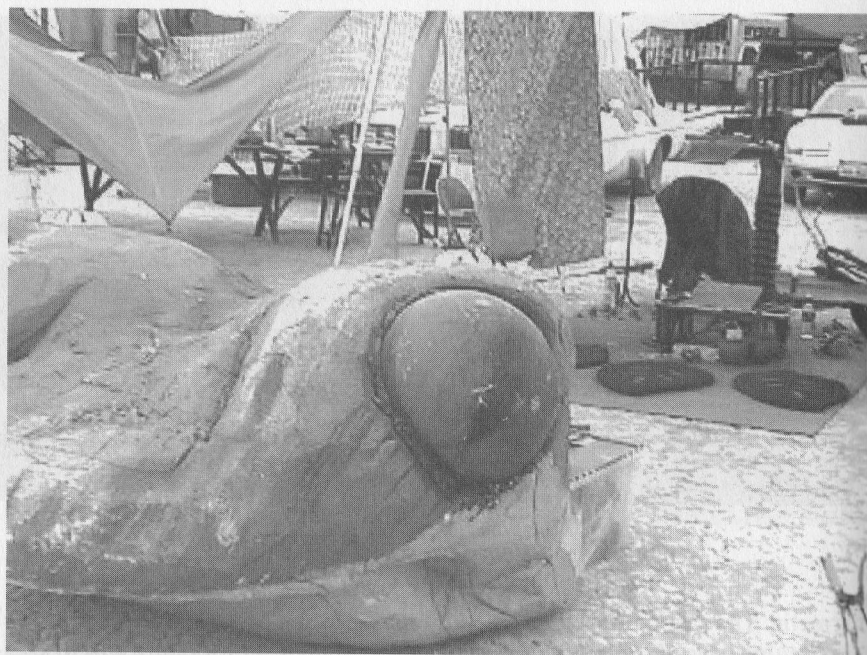


Fig. 13.4. Mystical frog altar.

whose back corners are arrayed with small frog figurines, as well as a lantern and drum. Although frogs abound here like a biblical plague, it is useful to recall that the frog symbolizes genesis and reproduction. The frog is a lunar symbol and a favorite of magicians. Its humanoid features make it an apt symbol of psychological transformation (Beidermann, 1992). A sign stands before the shrine, instructing the uninitiated in the rite. This altar permits both personal and communal expression, but serves primarily as a public vehicle of performance and display.

Altars in the provenance of Quadrant IV are perhaps best represented by the Bunny altar (Fig. 13.5). The rabbit is a common cross-cultural lunar symbol, whose polysemous accretions across time and space include vigilance, fertility, lust, purity, rebirth, and humanity; it figures in both Christian and Buddhist legend, in the latter instance as a salvific symbol of self-sacrifice. Rabbit is also a trickster figure in aboriginal American mythology (Biederman, 1992; Radin, 1987) and in American cartoon tradition. Occasionally in American advertising, all these meanings may coalesce in a single rabbit. The Bunny altar originated in the form of a childhood gift, a 2½-foot bronze-colored wooden figurine that remained precious enough to its owner to be retained by her well into her twenties. She brought the bunny to Black Rock City as a mere decoration, but the statue was sacralized on site. The bunny was elevated to the status of deity. Residents believe that an offering made at the Bunny altar results in the miraculous reception of drugs, and leg-



Fig. 13.5. Bunny altar.

end assigns a 100% effectiveness rating to the transaction. Publicity over Radio Free Burning Man stimulates pilgrimage to the site of the altar, much as broadcast sightings of the Blessed Virgin in oil stains or tree trunks accomplish back in the "real" world. Pilgrims from all over Black Rock City gather at this votive altar, making offerings, telling stories to one another, and creating a spectacle for the unbelievers to enjoy. Again, a synthetic New Age collage of sacra—Mexican votive candles, extraterrestrial head, marabou vestment, flowers—marks this altar as a hybrid gathering of ideologies.

The site of greatest semiotic intensity, the center of the diagram on which all quadrants of the figure converge, is the Man (Fig. 13.6). Semiotic center is both a nexus and a vortex. The Man personifies and objectifies, as well as synergizes, the other altars represented in the sample. The Man is a projective vehicle nonpareil at individual, social, and cultural levels of discourse. The Man is all things to all people: art and icon, beacon and lodestar, sin eater and Trojan horse, Christ and Lucifer, matter and essence, puppet and master, hestial fire and hermetic fire. The Man is the mystery of transubstantiation offered up for edification and debate. The Man is the Anti-"The Man," the apotheosis of radical self-expression couched in a nurturing community whose totalizing dictum (ablaze in postirony) is simply "perform, don't conform; produce, don't consume." Presiding over a short eternity of cultural hybridity and cultural transvestism, a frenzy of self-effacement and self-discovery, and a hope of transfusing the balance of the year's experience (whether lived online or in real life) with a numinous essence believed evacuated

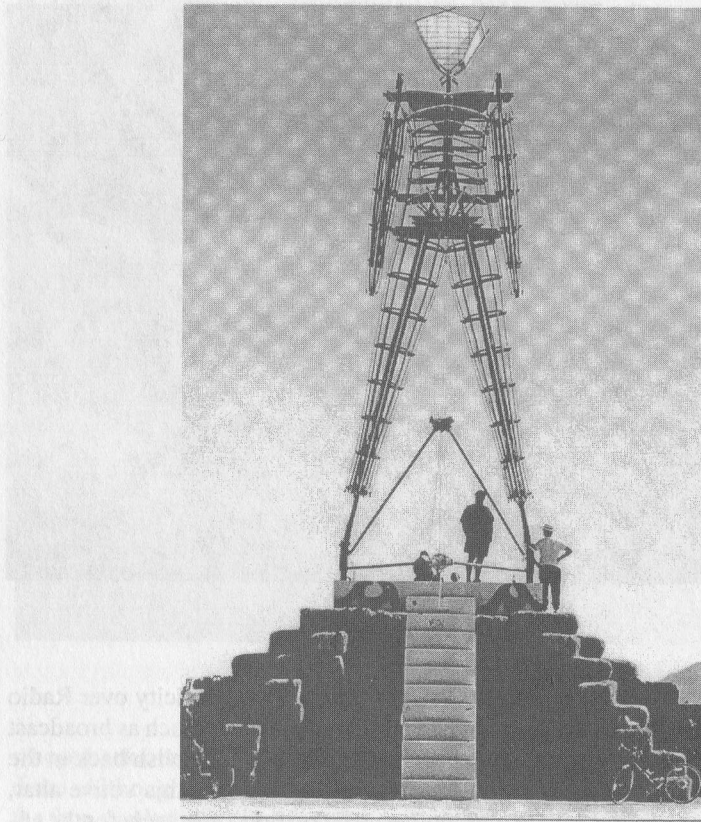


Fig. 13.6. The Man.

by late capitalism, the Man bestrides Black Rock City like a colossus of roads not often taken. This altar is a polysemous paradox. The Man's erection is supervised by firefighters. The man bears a memorial plaque dedicated to fallen firefighters. Firefighters have secreted a smoke alarm in the Man's crotch as an inside joke. Firefighters ignite and tend the burn. (Insofar as there may be a touch of arsony in all our souls, what better guardians of the flame can be imagined?) The Man is a paraprimitive, technoshamanic manifestation. The erection has grown over time from inches to stories, its devotees from tens to thousands.

Process

Altars represent both a physical and metaphysical construction project whose dynamics are endlessly fascinating. No matter what kind of projective field an altar

comprises (rejuvenation, personal identity, ancestor shrine, sanctuary, fetish focus, transmigration portal, eschatological challenge, etc.) the material altar requires manipulation. Altars must be tended. A gathering of things, of relics, of memories, of heirlooms and memorabilia, must occupy the acolyte. Acolytes are bricoleurs, culling, combing, and configuring sacra into appropriate presentations. This activity is both intentional and unconscious; sometimes the doing supercedes the thinking. The conversion of collections to heterotopias may well be more an organic than a technical process, and consequently may defy articulation. The Diderot unities that obtain between sacra on the altar are both strategic and emergent. The collectings and arrangements, the mantlings and dismantlings, the takings and leavings are all integral to the integration of sacred and profane realms of experience (Chester, 2000; McMann, 1998; Turner, 1999). Altars are animate and must be cultivated.

Many of these altaristic impulses are at play in Black Rock City. Bricolage, and its resulting collage or montage manifestation, is most readily apparent in the gift-giving and sacrifice behaviors associated with the simplest, most ubiquitous altars of the Burning Man Project (Fig. 13.7). These take-and-leave altars invite communicants to receive sacra from the altar and replace them with something of personal significance. Such altars range from nominal nourishment tables, a secular inversion of Thai spirit house etiquette that encourages the taking of food and

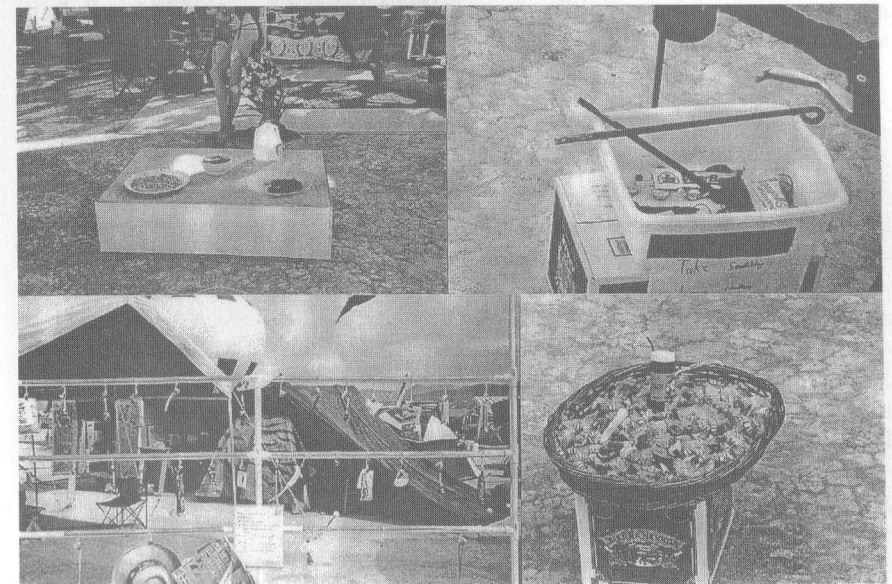


Fig. 13.7. Take-and-leave altars.

leaving of a benediction, to elaborate installations of public sacra offered in exchange for private sacra. The playa is dotted with makeshift altars holding mendicant bowls encouraging pilgrims to leave something as they take something. In sacralizing the circulation of gifts and marking the nobility of sacrifice, these altars also shape the processual dynamics of creation in the service of wildly varied and emergent works of art.

A wedding altar erected in Black Rock City is a striking example of the dynamism and centrality of some of the altars at Burning Man (Fig. 13.8). The wedding altar reposes in a self-described "chick camp" dominated by female touches. It is designed for use in a Burning Man wedding, a cognate ritual seen by its participants (devoted attendees over the last 4 years who had met at the event) as a more highly personalized accompaniment to the traditional wedding ritual they recently

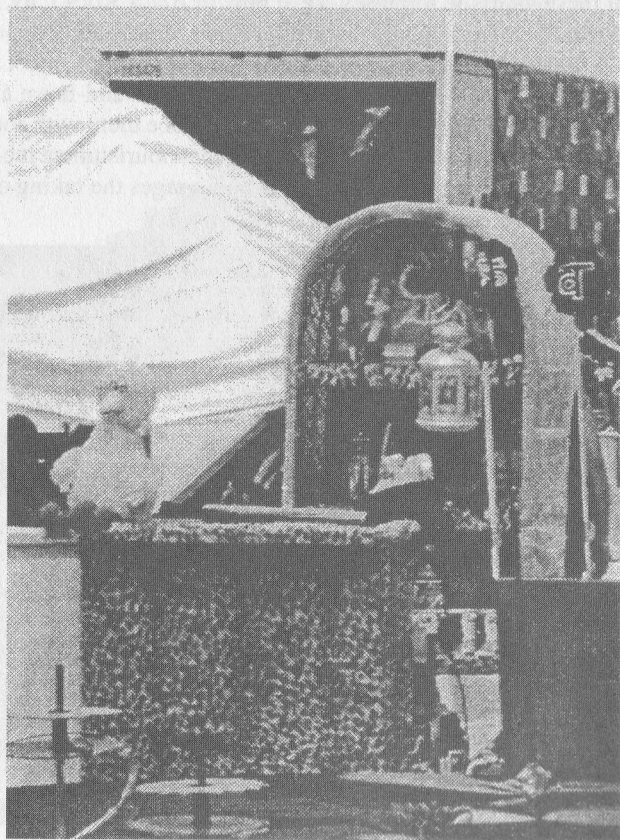


Fig. 13.8. Wedding altar.

performed in the "real world" outside Black Rock City. The alternate wedding, scripted by the partners themselves, involves what they call "a central altar." The altar is positioned on a thin, tall table covered with faux leopard spot-patterned fur on which is placed a variety of sacraments. A child's purple pail and a half-empty teddy bear-shaped jar of branded animal crackers (Low Fat!) suggests the import of childhood and playfulness to the event, and the unimportance of allegedly profane brands to the sacred practice. The crackers also serve as an offering to human passers-by. A long thin red candle is painted with gold Chinese swirls and characters and positioned upright in a matching red-painted metal container. Its presence suggests exoticism, Eastern mysticism, and also the temporariness and the delicate fires of passion. A matching leopard skin case joins the teddy bear and African motif table to invoke elements of animalism, primitivism, and wildness. The matching ensemble in soft leopard skin also gives a distinctly feminine touch to the altar, indicating that its decoration is ritually akin to the more elaborate and deliberate body decoration of female fashion and of domestic decorative sensibilities. Set next to the table is a tall arched shelf, covered in matching leopard fur. Nestled in one of the shelves is a large female doll, dressed in a flowing chartreuse dress, a twirling southern pixie caught and frozen in flight. The entire altar is intended to be suffused in different colors of cloth in order to evoke "the colors of the different chakras" as revealed to communicants through their New Age studies. Various small bowls are arrayed on the table. The bride's friends have created several "little staffs," each holding a candle, a bowl, and bearing "the symbols of the elements on them," again as revealed through their New Age studies. The staffs are set up in a circle around the altar table. During the ceremony, the participants traverse the circle, taking each of the elements from the bowls on the periphery and bringing them to the center to be burned. The ceremony is described as an elaborate ritual for "creating a sacred space" for the "central exchange" of more spiritually meaningful wedding vows.

As with the wedding altar's blend of African Art Deco primitivism, branded cookie kitch, childhood nostalgia, and New Age sophistry, some altars exist primarily as a kind of syncretic melange, with no intentionally unifying theme pursued by the builder, nor any necessary relationship obtaining between the sacra on display. Here, free rein is given to the projective impulses of creator and communicant. For example, on a folding camp stool, perched atop a profane work surface, arises an altar whose focal icon, a Buddha, sits under a bo tree fashioned from brain coral (Fig. 13.9). The icon is bracketed fore and aft by vegetation (branches and cactus leaf), and rests amidst an improvised alms bowl and offertory gifts of ointments, beer, and food. Lashed to a leg of the altar, bound (and bondage is an apt conceit) by red ribbon, a naked Barbie® doll, head cocked in rapt attention to the idol, gives every appearance of ascending the mountain toward enlightenment. The altar's creator has cobbled the tableau together from elements at hand. He refers to Barbie® as "the Goddess," and emphasizes the sexual nature of her aura. He burns incense and makes food offerings at the altar, and gives sacra away to com-



Fig. 13.9. Syncretic altar.

municants who admire particular pieces. He keeps an altar everywhere he goes (i.e., home, office, car, motel, etc.) because it “grounds” and “centers” him.

The Man epitomizes the kind of barn-raising, quilting bee ethos that encourages community to emerge from individual labor and private aspiration (Fig. 13.10). The icon is built in sections by teams of volunteers in off-site locations prior to the burn, and assembled, finished, and erected in the desert. Wood scraps from the construction are recycled into other art projects and edifices on the playa, such that the tangibilized aura of the Man is dispersed throughout Black Rock City. The altar’s base is erected on-site from hay bales whose form and function are integral to the burn. Over the course of the week, communicants visit the site of the rising altar, to check its progress, banter with its builders and each other, and ponder changes in themselves that are mirrored by the icon’s change of phase. The material construction is preceded by a year of contemplation, much of it brokered over

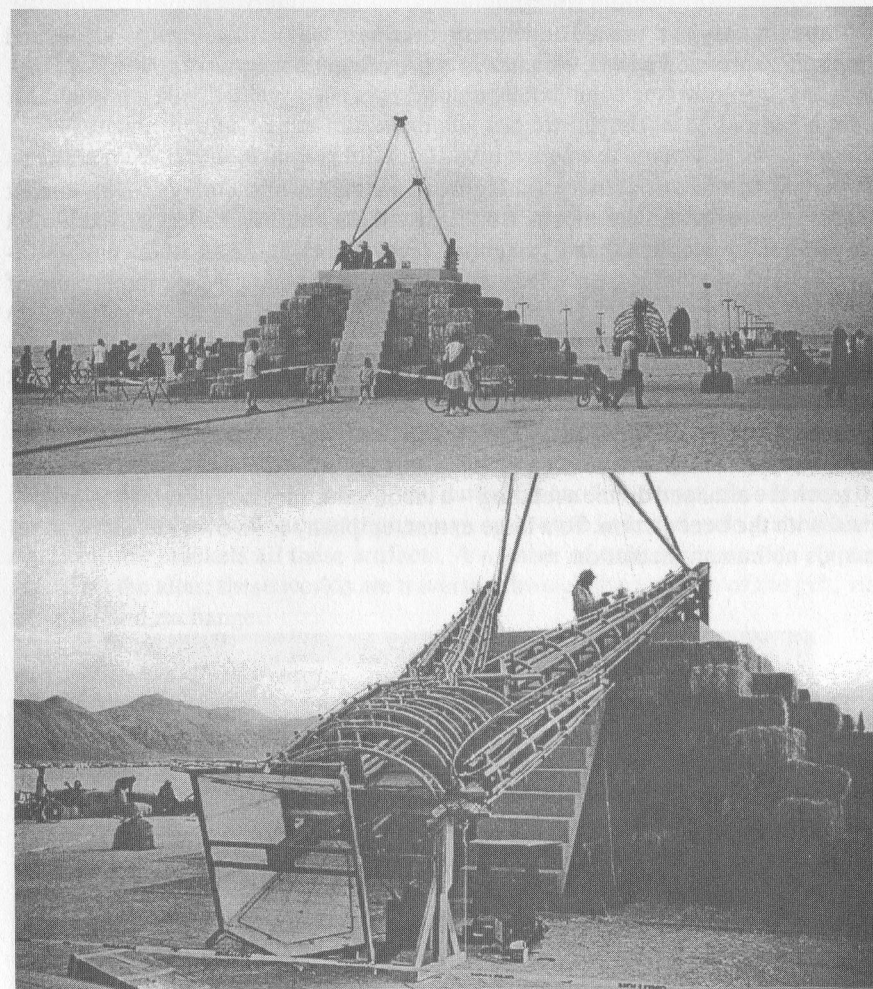


Fig. 13.10. Raising The Man.

the Internet in chat rooms devoted to harnessing the energy released in the previous year’s burn. In these contemplative conversations, veterans and novices alike plan not only for the personal transformation they hope will occur via their physical participation, but also for how they might sustain the spirit of the Burning Man Project in their everyday lives when they return to the world. The altar is the focus of a time- and space-binding experience. The sacrifices communicants make in attending the burn are offered in the hope that one day process will trump product,

that the urgency and immediacy of temporariness will suffuse the mundane, and that self-expression will be elevated to a life project.

Magnitude

Far from the buzz of activity arising from the center of the playa, in an almost empty quarter of the desert, sits a solitary simple altar, visited in all likelihood more often by accident than by intention (Fig. 13.11). It is a small lawn table encrusted with seashells, themselves adorned with eyes that give the impression of the mollusks being vigilant, as if watching approaching pilgrims. The altar bears the inscribed message "Be of Good Cheer," whose polysemous import the communicant is invited to ponder. Is it biblical reassurance or exhortation crying out in the desert? Is it evolutionary teleology winking from the former lake bed? A *memento mori* reminding people that isolation is both inescapable and ennobling? Is it all of these? Or, is it none of these? The effort exerted by the wanderer to reach the altar and divine a reading—a labor-value measure of sacrifice—is repaid with the benediction. To a large extent, epiphany is its own reward, and demands no human mediation.

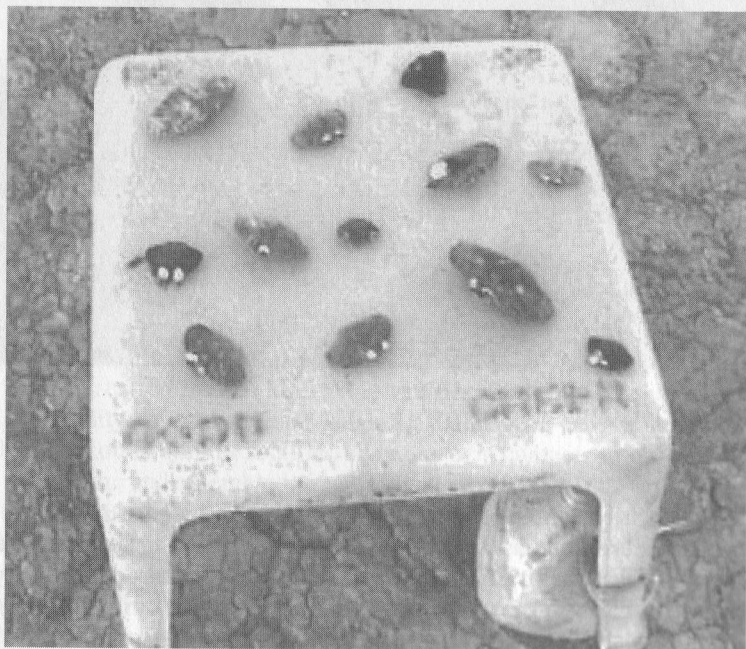


Fig. 13.11. Seashell altar.

The Secret Dakini Oracle altar is grander in design and execution (Fig. 13.12). Set deep in an encampment in Black Rock City, flanked by banners bearing Buddhist and Hindu images, the altar fronts a tented sanctuary, where pilgrims are able to escape the sun, rest awhile, meditate, and consult adepts of divination. The shrine is reminiscent of remote hill top Dakini temples of ancient India. A Dakini (literally a "Sky Dancer") is a spirit (as well as an archetype and embodiment) of feminine energy, wisdom, and intuition, a tantric agent of self-transformation. The altar exhibits a minimalist aesthetic of empty space and natural sacra, mediated by the augur's book. The table is set to invite gnostic exploration, which is undertaken either with a guide or as a solitary journey. At one corner of the altar, a recumbent cat, disarticulated and surrounded by shells and candles, appears to ponder the co-dex and divination deck. The cat is a prominent player in homeopathic magic and occult practice, a force to conjure with. Mythologically, the cat is perhaps identified most closely with the god Bast, a lunar symbol of fertility, sexuality, and joy. Its invisible midsection also recalls the Cheshire cat, reminding beholders of their having moved behind the looking glass, darkly. In another corner, tissues and gift packaging, aromatic oil and ersatz currency, and votive light and veils grace the altar. Plant life brackets all these artifacts. A number of experience worlds is integrated on the altar; these worlds are traversed through the medium of the gift, via sacrifice and exchange.



Fig. 13.12. Secret Dakini oracle altar.

The Man itself is grander still than either the seashell or Dakini altar. The effigy stands atop a 30-foot pedestal designed to resemble a Mayan altar, and that functions as a pyre to ensure the complete consummation of the holocaust the Man becomes. Not only is the 50-foot Man a fiery vessel in its own right—packed as it is with neon lights and pyrotechnic payloads—but also it is animated, engineered to raise its flaming arms as if in exultation, victory, or even ascension. The Man is communally built, assembled, attended, ignited, and celebrated. The entire altar site is encircled with boundary stones in the form of lights embedded in the ground. Further, the surrounding playa is staked out with pillars on which are mounted mirrors and lasers whose beams are directed to form the shape of the man (transecting communicants on the ground), such that the symbol is visible from the sky above. The Man is oriented to an avenue of mega-installations in such a way as to form the apex or pinnacle of artistic process. The entire population of Black Rock City—some 25,000 souls—turns out for the conflagration, cheering, chanting, singing, drumming, and praying as the Man is engulfed in flame. The alchemical mantra spoken so often in conversation at Black Rock City—“What did you bring to burn?”—achieves its transcendental purpose at this moment, as celebrants answer this question in their hearts.

The altar of greatest magnitude at “the burn” would have to be the desert itself. Baudrillard (1988, pp. 71, 121) referred to the desert as a “sublime form that banishes all sociality,” a “suspended eternity,” whose “definition is absolute” and whose frontier is “initiatory;” for him, the desert is “void of all meanings.” The residents of Black Rock City inscribe meaning into this liminoid surface through their offertory rites. As Crace (1998) made so poignantly evident in his mystical novel, the desert has long served as a sacred site of personal transfiguration and social transformation. The entire culture of Black Rock City, from artifact to ideology, is dedicated to immolation. The ordeal that must be suffered in arriving at and surviving in the desert, the shedding of former lives and forging of new personae, the constant circulation of gifts, the exaltation of artistic process in creation and destruction, and the ever-present consummation of fire all serve to keep the practice of sacrifice uppermost in resident’s lives. The very etymology of immolation—a sprinkling of holy grits—inscribes itself on the body of every participant, as the alkalai dust of the desert works itself deep into pores, scalps, membranes, and orifices, not to mention clothing and other possessions. The reverential “leave no trace” dwelling ethic enforced by residents protects against the burn scars and pollution the desert must inevitably suffer as a consequence of such commerce, and is often couched in ecotheistic language. The universal greeting, extended even to “newbies” (i.e., “Welcome Home”), paints the desert in religious tones, religion being etymologically a binding back to the source. Every aspect of everyday life, from walking to sitting, cooking to eating, and bathing to sleeping, reminds residents of their literal grounding in the desert. A technoaesthetic installation of revolving mirrors permits individuals to absorb a panoptic view of the desert that contains them, a kind of tethered spaceship

earth experience that fills participants with a sense of indwelling even as they inhabit the site.

CONCLUSIONS

Fire festivals are common across time and cultures, and are generally linked to a liturgical calendar grounded in nature. It is difficult not to read the Burning Man Project against its own ideological grain, and link its Labor Day week timing to the ethos of the event, a manifestation of synchronicity rather than coincidence. Four *Ps* seem to animate these festivals: purification, productivity, protection, and propitiation. Further, (giant) human effigies are often burned at these festivals. Whether interpreted as a ritual reenactment of a dying god, or as a sublimated survival of the days of human sacrifice (Frazer, 1974), some kind of exorcism appears to be at work. The holocaust features as a species of scapegoat. The sacrifice affords personal and communal (if not cosmological) renewal to those willing to participate in its consummation.

If an *axis mundi* can be said to exist in Black Rock City, it passes through the Man. This altar is cosmogonic in so far as it encodes symbolism of world creating and integration of time. As both the highest point and sacred center of the temporary community, it has geomantic properties as well. The Man is venerated by residents as an aspect of their “nostalgia for paradise” (Eliade, 1958, p. 385), a kind of prelapsarian, tribal vision of utopia returning humans to a sacred source. The Man is at once a sentinel and a portal, permitting communicants to cross over to the realm of exalted experience. The Man stands as a kind of cosmic koan, a public proposal whose resolution lies in the pondering of human sacrifice.

Even acknowledging explicitly the playful interpenetration of pastiche and parody occurring across the altars of Black Rock City, the sacralization of the secular in the celebration of alterity is unmistakable. Collectively, the altars are manifestations of what might be called the comedy of the commons, the essence of Burning Man. Comedic techniques of satire, irony, and caricature are everywhere at play in Black Rock City (Koestler, 1949). Authentic comic activity involves sacrifice and feast, debate and passion; it is a “triumph over mortality” via faith in “re-birth, restoration and salvation” (Sypher, 1956, p. 37). The essence of comedy is “religious and ribald, knowing and defiant, social and freakishly individual” (Langer, 1953, p. 331). The mythos of comedy involves reversal of social standards and a rebellion against the status quo; the disruption of order always recalls a utopia (Frye, 1957, p. 171). The carnivalesque ethos of the Burning Man Project is evident (Bahktin, 1988). Each of the residents of Black Rock City becomes a sacred clown.

In their workaday lives, back in the world, communicants largely employ an orientation to the cosmos Tambiah (1990) called “causality”: a principally cogni-

tive, distanced, neutral, and analytic posture. In Black Rock City, as sacred clowns, they display an orientation he called "participation": a principally affective, holistic, configurational grasp of a mythic landscape (Tambiah, 1990). Residents transform the desert into sacred geography through sympathetic immediacy, performative speech acts, and ritual, which are enacted to exorcise the enervating, entropic, alienating effects of mundane experience (Tambiah, 1990, p. 107). The altar is the foundational locus of relationships of contiguity, contact, existential immediacy, and shared affinities (Tambiah, 1990, p. 106) that characterize the Burning Man Project at large. The altar in its sheer physicality is an artifact possessed of reflexive power, allowing communicants to reconstitute experience, to offer their gifts of being and presence (Richardson, 2001). The altar is a microcosm of the event.

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