

# Journal of Consumer Culture

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**Book Review: Katherine Chen, *Enabling Chaos: The Organization Behind the Burning Man Event*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. 272pp ISBN 978022610238-2 (pbk) \$25.00/£17.50**

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*Journal of Consumer Culture* 2010 10: 407

DOI: 10.1177/14695405100100030502

The online version of this article can be found at:

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In sum, and as demonstrated by Dworkin and Wachs' considered and comprehensive analysis, it is evident that the cultures of physical activity within the contemporary moment significantly inform – indeed, they are indivisible from – the broader logics, processes, and inequities of consumer culture. As such, readers of the *Journal of Consumer Culture* would be well advised to engage *Body Panic* for two reasons. First, in and of itself it must be considered an important, insightful and multifaceted empirical study. Second, it represents an informed and fruitful point of entry into a body (pun intended) of research with which many of the readership may not be familiar, but which they are likely to find more than apropos to the study of consumer culture more generally.

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Katherine Chen, *Enabling Chaos: The Organization Behind the Burning Man Event*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. 272pp ISBN 978022610238-2 (pbk) \$25.00/£17.50

In this meticulous ethnographic account of the staging of a major American countercultural festival, sociologist Katherine Chen has given us a glimpse of a possible future of organizing, one in which corporations cater to rather than command their members. Her prolonged field immersion in the organization and deft sounding of the network of stakeholders continually negotiating the logistics of governance has enabled her to produce not only a thorough analysis of a local cultural phenomenon, but also the beginnings of a blueprint for proactive organizers seeking to harness the forces of corporations to humane ends.

At the end of every summer, in an isolated quarter of Nevada's Black Rock Desert, Burning Man LLC (a for-profit venture referred to hereafter as Burning Man, whose principal goal is the creation of an artistic community) orchestrates a week-long celebration of aesthetic creativity. A retro-futuristic Black Rock City of 50,000 citizens, comprising pilgrims of all ages from around the world, arises from

the alkali dust of a Pleistocene lake bed, and vanishes as quickly as a mirage. Pilgrims create a temporary autonomous zone of radical self expression and immediate presence, reveling in the evanescent process of creativity that culminates in the immolation of colossal art installations, most notably the eponymous Man, an elevated 40-foot effigy that has served as a lodestar for participants traversing the geomantic space that is Black Rock City. Conventional commerce is effectively suspended (although consumption thrives) in favor of a gift economy that, along with art, helps ritually forge a community that is able to transcend the rigors of an incredibly harsh physical climate in the service of both self- and world-renewal. While several recent volumes – in particular, Doherty's *This is Burning Man* (2004) and Gilmore and Van Proyen's *Afterburn* (2005) – have unpacked the ephemeral spectacle that is the public face of the Burning Man Project, Chen's is the first book to analyze the infrastructure of the event. And what a peek behind the curtain she provides.

The book begins with an overview of the merits of and drawbacks to various forms of organizing. The author then moves to an historical account (replete with revelatory incidents and ethnographic snapshots) of the evolution of Burning Man, from its under-organized origins as a spontaneous beach party, through its rise to a 'do-ocracy' both driven and hindered by personal initiative, to its current effort to transform its ethos of 'radical inclusion' and 'no spectators' into a mechanism not only for recruiting, motivating and managing experts, but also for routinizing decision processes. The ongoing attempt to meld best business practices both with passionate advocacy for the arts and an anarcho-populist ethics of individual agency lends a compelling dramatic tension to these chapters. The volume concludes with a most instructive commentary on the conduct of the author's research, which, while more clinical than reflexive, gives the reader a good sense of the rationale and rigor of qualitative methods.

The challenge faced by Burning Man's principals – provision of just enough structure to prevent disabling chaos, encourage stakeholder creativity and assure the ongoing vitality of the enterprise – is one that conventional organizations have not often had the foresight or the courage to address, but which will likely loom ever larger in an era of economic uncertainty, open sourcing, entrepreneurial presumption and bourgeois bohemianism. What might have once bedeviled advertising agencies or design firms, high tech ventures or universities will soon engage firms at large. Examining the interplay of structure and agency, Chen explores the quest for optimal outcomes that stakeholders undertake in the blending of bureaucratic and collectivist organizing practices.

How does one manage cultural creatives, who may demand transparency and accountability yet lack (or, worse, loathe) the business acumen to ensure such outcomes? How does one prevent an enterprise from devolving into a cult of personality, or fragmenting into cultures of personalities? How does one deal with the rapidly escalating event attendance that energizes some and enervates others, that promotes strident contrasts between an alleged utopian past and a

prospective dystopian future, and that encourages the formation of both regional and international autonomous satellites? How does one 'ensoul' a corporation? These are the questions that Chen addresses in her intrepid exploration of this cultural cynosure, and, at each step of the journey, the stresses are palpable.

In addition to the incisive interpretive summaries delivered after successive analyses, Chen offers a concise set of recommendations emerging from her fieldwork for fine-tuning other organizations. These suggestions include balancing expectations, facilitating participation, engaging in reflexive dialogue, encouraging experimentation, supplying sufficient resources, upholding inclusivity, advancing legitimacy and setting precedents. This advice seems to travel well across sectors and categories, and should provoke some tinkering by managers fortunate enough to discover this book.

Of particular interest to sociologists of consumer behavior is an appreciation of the enormous amount of labor (both paid and unpaid) that must be mobilized in order to create and sustain a consumption spectacle that presents itself largely as a Do-It-Yourself event.

Burning Man might be considered as an exemplar (or the epitome) of the production of consumption, as so much work, both creative and mundane, must be invested by anyone seeking to unlock the benefits, grasp the meaning or experience the aura of the festival. Further, to the extent that the event is countercultural and essentially non-commercial, its effective franchising around the world invites continued exploration of the interplay of sacred and profane in consumer culture. Finally, the rise of subcultures within the event portends tribal fission and fusion to be enacted through organizational structures, which makes a sequel to Chen's book a sure bet. Her volume is required reading for any researcher planning an expedition to Black Rock City.

*Enabling Creative Chaos* is well suited for courses at all levels in social organization, management and strategy, non-profit organization, culture and consumption, cultural studies, community studies, macro-marketing, and ethnographic methods. It is engaging enough to be used as an auxiliary text in introductory courses in sociology and anthropology as well. For those of us in academic units experiencing the creeping corporatization chronicled in such recent accounts as Gaye Tuchman's *Wannabe U* (2009), both the inspiration and tools for resistance may be sought in Chen's timely analysis.

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