

Black Rock City Renaissance: **Burning Man 2008**



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THIS WAS ANOTHER EXCITING YEAR for MAPS at Burning Man—the annual week-long celebration of creativity, community, and consciousness in the Nevada desert—and I was thrilled to be able attend this extraordinary festival for the first time. The festival is an important opportunity for MAPS to network with colleagues and people doing affiliated work. Despite the celebratory atmosphere in Black Rock City, the Burning Man Festival is a busy time for everyone at MAPS. When MAPS staff aren't erecting tents, teepees, zendos, car ports, and other shade structures in the scorching desert sun, they're out racing around, attending meetings, giving lectures and workshops, and providing psychedelic emergency services. Some of the MAPS staff even served as Black Rock City Rangers this year.

MAPS Psychedelic Lecture Series in Entheon Village

Entheon Village—where MAPS was based and where I stayed—is one of the largest theme camps in Black Rock City. Campers at Entheon Village pay a registration fee that covers the camp's costs, and this includes water, access to a power grid, showers, and three meals a day. The showers didn't arrive until midweek, but the meals were quite delicious and the dining tent was a terrific place to socialize with other Entheon Village campers. The theme this year at Burning Man was "The American Dream," and, as with previous years, MAPS put together an exciting lecture series in Entheon Village.

Psychopharmacologist Dr. Matthew W. Johnson, Ph.D.—who worked with Dr. Roland Griffiths, Ph.D. on the groundbreaking Johns Hopkins Psilocybin Research Project—gave two fascinating talks about their studies with psilocybin that demonstrated the drug's capacity to help stimulate mystical experiences, and the long-term health benefits that accompanied these experiences. One talk was entitled "Hallucinogens in the Study of Mystical Consciousness: Findings from over 100 Psilocybin Sessions Conducted at Johns Hopkins," and the other was "The Johns Hopkins Study of Psilocybin Facilitated Treatment of Cancer-Related Anxiety and Depression."

Psycho-oncologist Dr. Sameet Kumar, Ph.D.—who is working with MAPS to develop a protocol that will utilize psilocybin to help manage anxiety in people with advanced stage melanoma—gave a compelling talk entitled "Psilocybin-Assisted Psychotherapy and Spirituality in Advanced Medical Illness." Dr. Kumar spoke about the therapeutic potential of psilocybin and spirituality in dealing with extreme anxiety that many people experience after being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness.

Alicia Danforth, Ph.D. candidate—who worked with psychiatric researcher Dr. Charles Grob, Ph.D. at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center, coordinating and co-facilitating treatment sessions for their cancer anxiety study with psilocybin—gave a stimulating talk entitled "It Feels Like Healing: Firsthand Inspiration for the Big Dreams of Psilocybin Research and Treatment," about her exciting research with Dr. Grob, which was completed in May 2008.

Legendary psychedelic chemist Dr. Alexander Shulgin, Ph.D., and his wife, psychotherapist Ann Shulgin, were also there. Although they didn't give a formal presentation this year, these two highly respected elders of the psychedelic community answered a barrage of thoughtful questions from a lively audience about the chemistry and therapeutic potential of psychedelics.

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Daniel Pinchbeck—editorial director of RealitySandwich.com, and author of *2012: The Return of Quetzalcoatl* and *Breaking Open the Head*—gave a provocative talk that addressed this year’s theme at Burning Man entitled “From American Nightmare to Universal Dream,” about how we can “change the direction of global civilization in a compressed timeframe, before crisis turns to cataclysm.”

Dr. Neal M. Goldsmith, Ph.D.—psychologist and contributor to *Psychedelic Medicine*—gave a thought-provoking talk entitled “Change & Psychedelics,” where he discussed how lasting psychological and social transformation occurs, and how these types of transformation may be influenced by the use of psychedelics.

Amanda Fielding—who founded The Beckley Foundation in England, a sister organization to MAPS, that also sponsors psychedelic medical research—gave a wonderful talk about her foundation and her work entitled “The Beckley Foundation Investigations into Consciousness: Psychedelics, Cannabis, Trepanation and Cerebral Circulation.”

MAPS President Rick Doblin Ph.D. gave an inspiring talk about the long-term goals of psychedelic drug research entitled “The American Dream Psychedelized.” Rick spoke about how to match ambitious visions of psychedelic drug research with effective political strategies and drug policy reform.

MAPS’ new Communications and Marketing Director Randolph Hencken, Marijuana Policy Project Senior Development Officer Troy Dayton, and Rick Doblin appeared together on a panel entitled “Toward a Sensible Drug Policy: The 21st Century American Dream.” The panelists talked about psychedelic drug research in the context of drug policy reform, and they discussed the role that MAPS is playing in the global psychedelic research renaissance.

Psychedelic Emergency Work

Valerie Mojeiko—MAPS’ Program Director and Clinical Research Associate—also gave a noteworthy talk in Enttheon Village entitled “Psychedelic Harm Reduction: Rethinking the ‘Bad Trip,’” about MAPS’ psychedelic harm reduction project. MAPS has been providing psychedelic emergency counseling services for a number of years at summer festivals like Burning Man, where many people often experiment with psychedelics and sometimes run into serious problems. Valerie spoke about how this program empowers psychedelic users and their peers with therapeutic techniques that can be used in assisting people through difficult psychedelic experiences. These techniques provide a new framework for looking at “bad trips” as opportunities for emotional and spiritual growth. After her talk, Valerie and

I discussed writing a book together on this important topic, which we’re now planning to do.

The model that MAPS developed at Burning Man in previous years, for helping people with difficult psychedelic experiences was officially adopted this year by the Black Rock City Rangers, who provide safety and security at Burning Man. A quiet peaceful space called Sanctuary—staffed with specially-trained psychedelic emergency service workers, counselors, therapists, psychologists, and psychiatrists—was created, so that, for the duration of the festival, emergency counseling services could be available for people having difficult experiences, 24 hours a day. However, due to changes in the official Burning Man policy, this year MAPS volunteers who were interested in working at Sanctuary had to first undergo training as Black Rock City Rangers—which is a fairly serious commitment, requiring several days of training in the desert.

Because of these new restrictions, a number of people (myself included) who wanted to help out in Sanctuary this year weren’t able to do so. Nonetheless, the following MAPS—affiliated people trained as Black Rock City Rangers in order to be able to serve as psychedelic emergency personnel: Horizons Conference organizer Kevin Balktick, psychologist Neal M. Goldsmith, Ph.D., psilocybin/cancer researcher Alicia Danforth, Ph.D. candidate, Sheelo Bohm, and others. This was quite a commitment, as—in an addition to the extra training—rangers also had to dedicate numerous hours of service to the community at large.

While almost everyone in Black Rock City was cheering and celebrating the burning of the Man on Saturday night, I watched as Valerie and the other rangers were out roaming the playa, helping to keep people safe, and preventing overly enthusiastic burners from getting too close to the flames.

A Personal Account

Since this was my first time at Burning Man, I spent a good deal of time just exploring the ephemeral city and taking it all in. This turned out to be one of the most incredible experiences of my life. The environment there was certainly a huge challenge for me, but it was also unusually rewarding—truly spectacular in so many ways—and I had a profound experience there that deeply renewed my sense of hope in the future evolution of the human species.

The Black Rock Desert is a flat, 400 square mile, pre-historic lake bed, that’s completely devoid of any vegetation or animal habitats, and the weather conditions there were pretty much the worst that I’ve ever experienced in my life. It felt like landing on Mars, or in the post-apocalyptic, globally-warmed remains of a dead biosphere. On

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the first day that I got there a wild and windy six hour dust storm hit. It was well over 100 degrees, and the alkaline dust was so thick in the air that I could barely see more than a few feet in front of me. The playa dust gets into—and permeates—everything, making it impossible to stay clean. It was not a terribly pleasant experience, lying in a domed tent or wandering about outside, wearing a pair of ski goggles and a wet bandana over my nose, in the midst of this blinding chaos.

Then, when the sun went down, the temperature dropped to around 40 degrees, but felt much colder when the strong dry winds blew across the playa. In addition to these less-than-ideal weather conditions, the whole week was an intensely socially-overloading, noisy, sleep-depriving experience. Burning Man is no pleasure cruise, that's for sure. At the same time—being in Enttheon Village with my good friends from MAPS—I couldn't possibly have been staying with better campmates and have better resources available to me while I was there.

Despite all these difficult challenges, Burning Man was also one of the most beautiful and enriching experiences of my life! Simply spending a week in Black Rock City can easily be as profoundly transformative as a psychedelic experience. Like an LSD journey, it's difficult to describe this enchanted place in words. Burning Man really has to be experienced to be understood. It's a magical place, where synchronicities and surprises abound. I went there primarily to see the artwork—which is truly beyond spectacular, absolutely incredible. Photographs simply can't capture the immensity and wonderfully animated, unearthly insanity of it all. It's the collective imagination materialized—where every cultural icon from your childhood, every strange interdimensional archetype, and every beyond-belief psychedelic vision is brought to life in a deliciously surreal circus. But what struck me most about Burning Man—what really inspired me—was the incredible sense of community, the enormous amount of generosity there, and the living fact that—at least for one week a year—a truly psychedelic civilization is possible on planet Earth.

Black Rock City is the modern world's first truly psychedelic society. The psychedelic imagination becomes tangible there, no money is allowed to be exchanged, and there is a feeling of almost complete freedom. Nothing is bought or sold; nor is there any bartering allowed. Everyone there simply shares their gifts, their visions, and their creativity

with everyone else—and it works! Almost everyone there is psychedelically-experienced and unusually creative. It's a whole city—almost 50,000 people—of psychedelic artists. A post-terrestrial, post-survival society, built upon the spirit of a simple aspiration—to delight and marvel the senses, to blow people's minds.

It feels as though a powerful morphic field is created in Black Rock City; gathering together so many electrified nervous systems in one place seems to accelerate and elevate everyone's consciousness. All the people that I spoke with reported feeling high there, whether they did psychedelics or not. And, I now realize, the very things that prevented me from going all these years—the expense, all the necessary preparations and time off from my work, the extremely harsh environmental conditions—are actually deterrents that weed out anyone who doesn't really want to be there. So the people that make it there are generally pretty special. Evolutionarily speaking, the citizens of Black Rock City are akin to the first fish who crawled out of the sea on to dry land—as, of course, Burning Man's geographic destiny lies in high orbit, in the Heavens, amongst the stars.

Attending Burning Man was one of the most spiritually transformative experiences of my life. I suspect that the playa dust in the Black Rock desert may also be psychoactive, as the whole experience there feels like a psychedelic trip. I met so many extraordinary people from all over the world, made strong new connections, and had a powerful mystical experience there, while watching the Temple burn on the final night. When the Man burns on Saturday night, it's the wildest party on Earth, but when the Temple burns on the following night, and burners ritualistically release their grief into the fire, almost everyone there is totally silent. It was truly a shamanic journey and I felt an overwhelming sense of love for everyone there. When I got back home, I wasn't able to tell people about my experience at Burning Man for the first few days without crying—I was so deeply moved by it all. In retrospect, it's hard to believe that it really happened, as the experience had such a dreamlike quality to it. I look forward to returning next year, and possibly going through the training necessary to become a Black Rock City Ranger, so that I can help with psychedelic emergency services there. See you out on the playa!

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