

Something New Under the Sun: Visionary Community at Burning Man

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“This is like a psychedelic refugee camp,” I exclaimed, looking out over the domes, tents and flags of Black Rock City. Many of them shimmered with bright colors in the afternoon sun. People wandered the open spaces, clad in fantastic costumes, or done up like Bedouins against the alkaline wind. Some wore nothing at all. It was wonderful and weird—and it was really there!

The Burning Man festival in Nevada’s Black Rock Desert is an explosion of creativity and dynamic community, which after fourteen years is pushing an attendance level of 20,000. Each year freaks, artists, and other visionaries from around the country and world make the long trek to the desert, with food, water, art and shelter in tow. Burning Man has already appeared as a blip on the radar of mainstream culture, with coverage from the *Whole Earth Review* to ABC News *Nightline*. This level of coverage is notable, because the event bears the indelible mark of psychedelic inspiration, at the level of individual artistic expression and in the guiding vision of participatory community.

Now, it’s easy to paint drug use at Burning Man as the event’s “naughty secret,” as an overindulgence of the bored and the affluent when left unsupervised. Each year Burning Man struggles with the stigma of being just a big party in the desert. But each year it proves itself to be something far greater. In a way the ongoing success and evolution of this festival lends the stamp of legitimacy to the psychedelic intuition that helps fuel it. It demonstrates—for those who might not otherwise understand—that people with a relationship to mind-altering agents can work extremely hard to realize their dreams, both collectively and as individuals.

So what is the “psychedelic intuition?” For me, it is the understanding that life is a mystery and an opportunity, too easy to squander. It is an appreciation of the immense suffering of history, and the possibility of redeeming this suffering through intelligence, action, and love. It understands that, as conscious beings, our personal experience of the world is completely unprecedented in nature. The psychedelic intuition suggests that if we can conquer our fears of this novelty, we can break free of our habits to become a force of positive change in the world. The best encounters with psychedelics reveal the epic dimension of life, where the stakes are high and the possibilities are limitless. The challenge is to integrate these visions into the dirtier realities of living.

Burning Man is both a response to this challenge and an embodiment of it. On the one hand, it is a chance to put into practice the insights gained from looking deep within ourselves. But in a way, it is also a mirror of the larger

struggle: life in the desert, spirit striving upwards against the inertia of matter, a spark of hope in the disaster of history.

From the mind’s moist abysses to the cracked lake bed on which the Man burns—it’s a strange translation, but not surprising. The desert here is a place of geometric perfection: flat right up to the hills which rise miles away, featureless aside from what is put there by people. There is no barrier here to the expansion of a mind willing to go the distance. With proper planning, an idea can be allowed to unfold into 3-D space regardless of how grandiose or abstract. There is plenty of room for everyone.

At the same time, the harshness of the environment simplifies the usual distractions of biology. Comfort here is a chair in a patch of shade, a spritz of cooling mist. Appetites subside in the heat; water is the drink of choice. There is no television; there is no shopping. Everything is covered in dust. The requirements of the body form a clear, communal backdrop against which the Imagination claims its proper place at the center of community.

I have always maintained that if nothing else, psychedelics impel us outside of our habits of thought and behavior. From this vantage, we can look back at our lives. We can see which parts of our identity are solid, and which fade with a change of scenery. Sometimes we can even find new elements of identity, deeper ones, which our patterned response to the world have kept hidden from us. Pleasant or not, these experiences teach us about ourselves by removing the crutches on which our personality has come to rely.

So it is in the desert, where our usual experience of civilization is fragmented, caricatured, remote. Food, shelter, and daily routines are all changed. Many of us camped with people we had only met online. Our personal history was wiped; we were free of the assumptions and associations of our past, of our geography. The obligations of work and money were temporarily suspended. We were free to reinvent ourselves—and many of us did. We took the insights of our psychedelic voyaging and applied them to this community in a setting of considerable freedom. Then, if we chose, we shared psychedelics to cement newfound bonds, to amplify the novelty of the environment, and to find within ourselves the personalities which we wanted to show the world.

Burning Man is not “about” drugs, any more than it is about losing your tan lines. But the social space created there accepts that, if used respectfully, psychedelics can catalyze community and imagination, which are central to the event’s success. This is one reason it HAS to be held in the middle of nowhere, because the civilization that spawned it has not yet made this leap of acceptance. Perhaps it never will. But for now, this fountain of novelty will continue to sluice over into the surrounding culture, as more and more people return to the “real world” changed by their experience in the desert. •

BURNING MAN

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