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The Discursive Site of Burning Man Art: Fluidity and Authority of Place, Institution, and Audience

“When we cross this line, everything will be different.”
- Danger Ranger aka Michael Mikel¹

Legend has it that in 1990, Burning Man co-founder Michael Mikel drew a line in the playa upon the arrival of the Cacophony Society and the founders of Burning Man. With their intentional mental shift, a new paradigm of cultural production began.

Burning Man features “art that should not exist. Art that is too big, too absurd, too breathtaking, too defiant to follow the laws of reason, or gravity, or expectation,” according to Jennifer Raiser, author of *Art on Fire* and erstwhile Burning Man board member.² And the category is catching fire: works are “being re-exhibited at an exponential rate,” notes Burning Man artist Kate Raudenbush.³ According to the organization’s website, over 140 Burning Man artworks have been placed in public spaces worldwide. Clearly such works are compelling to commissioners and public audiences alike. So how are we to make sense of the proliferation of Raiser’s impossible art?

In the essay that follows, I will draw upon the example of two Burning Man artworks, *Futures Past* by Kate Raudenbush and *Rockspinner* by Zachary Coffin, to explore how the unique location of the event influences the meaning of the artworks installed there. These two works are particularly instructive, because they have crossed a different sort of line: in addition to being installed in the Black Rock Desert, they have also been installed in an urban landscape. By examining how the works function as sculpture in both locations, I clarify the site’s role in crafting meaning for Burning Man art.

Like most artists who create work for the event, Zachary Coffin is drawn to the unique conditions of the Black Rock Desert. “It’s the drama of the environment. The openness, the blank slate of it,” he says.⁴ With such weight to location, perhaps then the most appropriate (natural, if you’ll

¹ Chase, Will. “Foreword.” in Raiser, Jennifer. *Art on Fire*. (Race Point Publishing, 2014): 9

² Raiser 23

³ Raudenbush, Kate. Email to author. 10 May 2015.

⁴ Coffin, Zachary. Interview with the author. 25 April 2015.

pardon the pun) model for understanding the art of Burning Man is to examine the practices of site-specific art.

Site-specific art emerged in the 1960s initially under Robert Smithson's pioneering Land Art movement. As minimalism began to move farther and farther away from the confines of the canvas, artists began to use the landscape as a sculptural material. Landscape architecture scholar Marc Treib explains how "whether an attempt to escape consumerism or the dimensional confines of the gallery, whether to engage the broad landscape or simply to use the stuff of the desert, [Land Art] works thoroughly conflated landscape and sculpture."⁵

When such work proved too costly, resource-intensive, and remote for widespread success, practically (or market) minded artists shifted toward creating transportable and accessible work that referenced a site's visual language. Robert Irwin, an early scholar of site-specific art, developed a framework to classify sculptural works that rely in some way upon site for meaning. Irwin uses the classifications site-dominant (the artwork dominates the site), site-adjusted (accommodations are made in the artwork for particulars of the site), site-specific (the artwork's form is partially informed by aspects of the specific site), and site-determined (the site fully subsumes the artwork deterministically).⁶ While there are occasionally site-determined Land Art works at Burning Man, the most characteristic works of the Burning Man movement exist in continuous dialogue with their desert location, falling into the site-adjusted or site-specific on Irwin's spectrum.

With this historic reference in mind, I'll now introduce the two artworks under consideration in this essay.

⁵ Treib, Marc. "Sculpture's Nature." in Ryan, Raymond, ed. *White Cube, Green Maze: New Art Landscapes*. (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2012): 20-23.

⁶ See Irwin, Robert. *Being and Circumstance: Notes toward a Conditional Art*. (Berkeley CA: Lapis Press, 1985)



Above: *Futures Past* by Kate Raudenbush at Burning Man (2010). Photo: Becky Neil.

Below: *Futures Past* at Octavia Green, San Francisco CA (2011). Photo: George Post



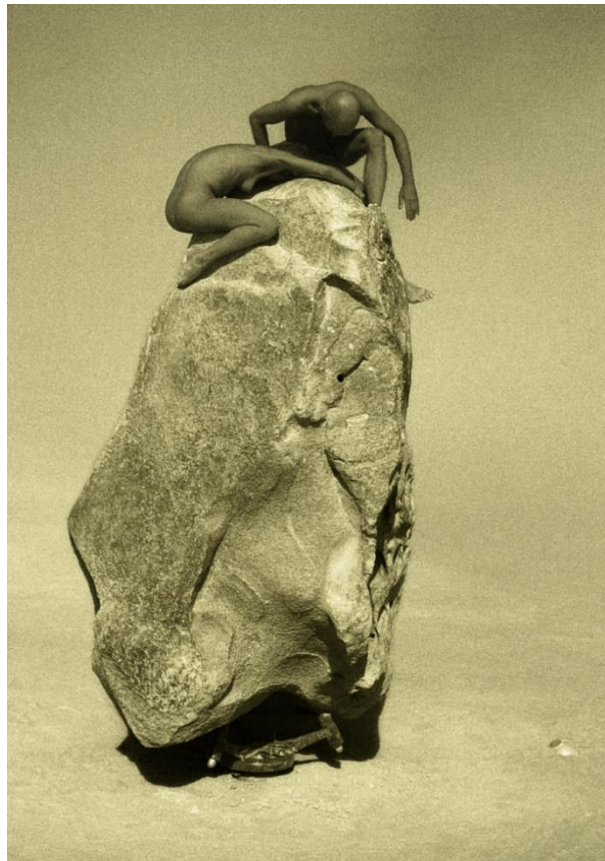
George Post Photo

KATE RAUDENBUSH'S *FUTURES PAST*

How does *Futures Past* respond to its surroundings - except to appear to be of another world? The sculpture does not so much emerge from the desert landscape, a predetermined and consequential outgrowth, as cleave a rift for its own autonomous existence, filling the blankness with its own aesthetic logic. It is the very definition of otherworldly: it has come from another place, an alien land somewhere distant in time and space. In the desert, its presence is surprising, the sculpture out of place. But such contrast prompts a fertile conversation between the landscape, the work, and the audience. The land wants to know about the land the work traveled from; the work wants to know why this land is empty. The audience wonders which place is more like home. Though Raudenbush describes the base structure as a temple, I've always considered it to be more of a portal, functioning in much the same way as Dr. Who's telephone booth. Raudenbush leaves us clues as to the work's origin; tree roots and circuit boards, familiar symbols that we can relate to our own experience. So we wonder, who has mutated from whom? Is this our forgotten past, here to gape awestruck at its own 'progress,' or our abandoned future, returning in a desperate attempt to reset the course?

The action of *Futures Past* as portal, or alien intervention on site, takes on new dimensions when the work relocates to Hayes Valley in San Francisco. There, we suddenly notice that the tree on top of this human-made structure is in dialogue with the dozens of other trees surrounding it. Similarly, the cuboid beneath recognizes its own in the blocky houses around it. Here, the houses look at the trees next to them, and wonder what forces intervened to merge this mini-home with a tree. The difference is not so much Alien versus Earth, but rather a relationship of the same species from different homes: locals and tourists, they are still cut from the same cloth. Somewhere way back in time, perhaps they shared the same history.

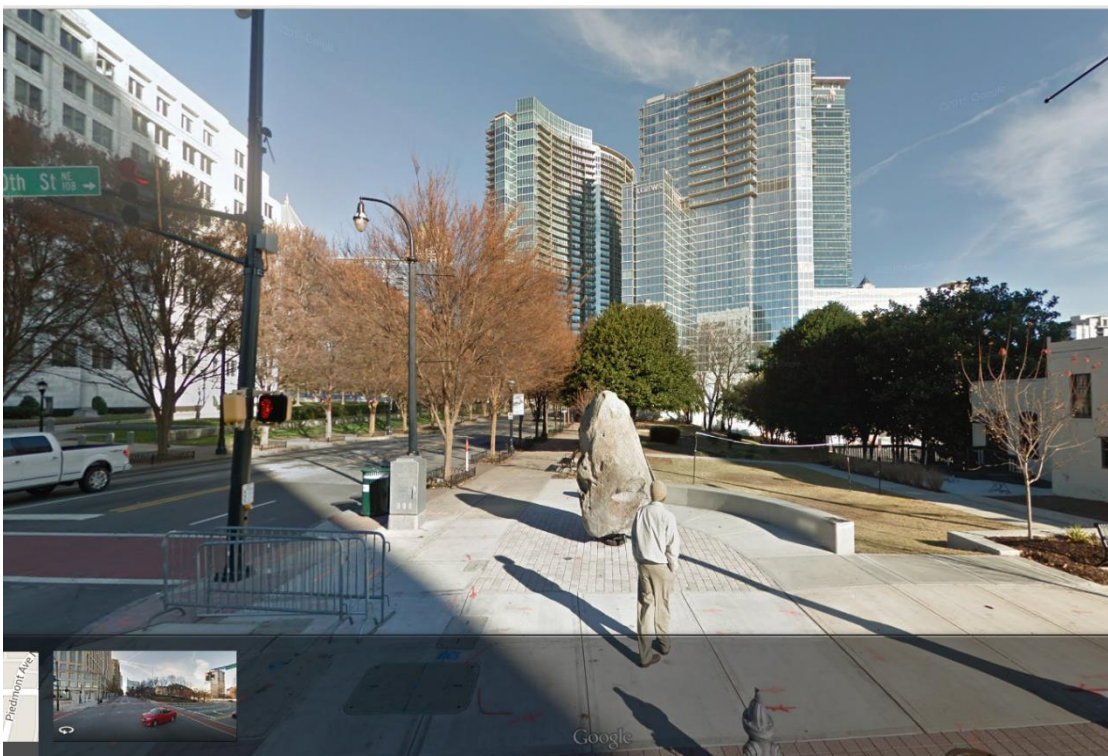
Raudenbush's work challenges two characteristics of site-specific sculpture: first, how the work engages with its surroundings; second, how the audience engages with the work given context. The urban site emphasizes similarity; while the playa emphasizes difference. In either place, the meaning of the work is constructed via its contextualized conversation with its surroundings. The audience is a critical observer. On playa, *Futures Past* is a homing beacon gathering travelers from distant lands, an alien outpost that enables discourses of mutation, heritage, and belonging. Strongly "other," strange and unrecognizable, the work stimulates the curiosity that encourages audience intimacy and interaction when on playa. In San Francisco, we suddenly recognize *Futures Past* as a cousin to our own modern homes and gardens. The installation speaks powerfully to issues of sustainability in the built environment. But under different cultural norms, this sculpture is to be respected and given space, discouraging direct engagement with it.



Top Left: *Rockspinner 6* by Zachary Coffin, Atlanta Botanical Gardens (2008). Photo: Zachary Coffin.

Top Right: *Rockspinner* at Burning Man (2001). Photo: Zachary Coffin.

Below: *Rockspinner* at 10th & Peachtree, Atlanta GA (2014). Photo: Google Street View.



ZACHARY COFFIN'S *ROCKSPINNERS*

The visual language of the *Rockspinners* series is straightforward. Coffin selects enormous boulders, and mounts them on a ball-bearing base with minimal to zero artistic alterations such as carving or polishing. He claims this is a practical necessity in a market-driven arts economy, to reduce the cost and effort (and skillset) required to install his works. But the true effect of this deliberate artistic decision is to magnify both the rock's inherent natural beauty, and focus attention on the dramatic effect of the kinetic action, a world-expanding "aha!" moment for all watching and doing. Coffin applies engineering and physical principles to enable the minute force of a human to move an immovable object. In other words, his works make the impossible, possible. In this mind-boggling accomplishment, the audience realizes that perhaps their world is not as limited or fixed as other people tell them. In shifting the rock, the audience enacts a paradigm shift of their individual agency.

A corollary of Coffin's strong focus on the conceptual experience is that the site itself has limited effect on the work. Unlike Raudenbush whose works are a platform to facilitate a site-based dialogue, Coffin can uproot his works from site without affecting the meaning or experience of the work. His works assert a different kind of autonomy for sculpture. Raudenbush's *Futures Past* imposes its own visual authority and identity on its installation site, but the work's meaning is in dynamic construction with the location. In contrast, Coffin's *Rockspinners* have a fixed meaning regardless of their site, and only enter into limited visual dialogue with their site. As he puts it, "the dramatic visuals are really what get me excited about Burning Man. The scale of the event, the scale of the environment are so big, you have to go way big or go home. In Atlanta, *Rockspinner* is 23,000 lbs and 11' tall, and it holds its own really well in that environment, surrounded by skyscrapers. When you take it out to playa, it disappears."⁷ The relative scale of *Rockspinner* to its surroundings only dictates the degree to which the audience notices its presence. Rather than dynamic defined as morphing, a tension between two distinct identities, Coffin operates with the musician's dynamic spectrum of quiet or loud.

SITE...OR SITES?

Burning Man installations like *Futures Past* and *Rockspinner* mandate a new characterization of the relationship between sculpture and site. Irwin's definition is too literal to explain how the transfer or alteration of meaning is possible in the relocation of *Futures Past* and *Rockspinner*. Instead, we will find Miwon Kwon's contemporary concept of the "discursive" site more applicable. To

⁷ Coffin, Zach. Interview with author. 25 April 2015.

explain site-oriented sculpture, Kwon outlines three types of site that are at play and their relationships to each other: “The distinguishing characteristic of today’s site-oriented art is the way in which both the art work’s relationship to the actuality of a location (as site) and the social conditions of the institutional frame (as site) are subordinate to a discursively determined site that is delineated as a field of knowledge, intellectual exchange, or cultural debate.”⁸ In contemporary sculpture, the site expands beyond a literal location defined by physical qualities such as dimension, surfaces, materials, and light, and enters a metaphysical conceptual space. As Kwon notes, “the operative definition of the site has been transformed from a physical location - grounded, fixed, actual - to a discursive vector - ungrounded, fluid, virtual.” Her expanded conception of site accounts for meaning that is grounded in the viewer’s experience of the work, encompassing physical and conceptual realms that are “overlapping with one another and operating simultaneously in various cultural practices.”⁹

Kwon’s approach is the best suited to explain how Burning Man artworks like *Futures Past* and *Rockspinner* alter in meaning as they transition from the emptiness of the playa to the built environment of urban landscapes. Though Kwon was considering a broad category of site-oriented sculpture, her statement so easily extends to Burning Man art: they “operate with multiple definitions of the site, [and] in the end find their ‘locational’ anchor in the discursive realm.”¹⁰ In order to grasp at how Burning Man artists including Raudenbush and Coffin conceive of the role of site, I will consider in sequence Kwon’s three types of site: the physical location of the Black Rock Desert, the institutional setting of the Burning Man organization, and the discursive site that lands on the shoulders of the participatory audience. The physical location of Burning Man is a distant, hard to reach, desolate expanse of alkaline dust, which is actually a geological phenomenon known as “playa.” This literal description hardly does the spectacular setting justice; all who attend will wax poetic about the play of sunrise light across the majestic rose-colored mountain range enveloping the playa. Then there is the institutional Burning Man: a week-long experience by 70,000 people and all the infrastructure and organizing that goes into producing such an arts festival. Which finally brings us to the discursive anchor of Burning Man, where a participatory culture becomes the subject of interrogation by the public audience.

These multiple, layered sites engage in a dynamic way with Burning Man artworks like Kate Raudenbush’s *Futures Past* and Zachary Coffin’s *Rockspinner*. Burning Man art requires a fluidity of artwork identity and confronts the tension between artist and audience authority. In comparing the

⁸ Kwon, Miwon. *One Place After Another*. (Boston MA: MIT Press, 2002): 92

⁹ Kwon 95

¹⁰ Kwon 93

works in their playa installations to their urban installations, I juxtapose two vastly different types of site. By co-locating two distinct concepts, the rhetoric of the juxtaposition argues both ideas should inhabit a conceptual space jointly. The comparison accents both difference and similarity, and in doing so defines a new, inclusive space within and an exclusive space without. When thinking about site-specific art, we consider the context of art and its communication of meaning *in situ*. The nature of an artwork's relationship to its site, how it conforms to the original aesthetic, or deliberately conflicts, establishes a new landscape on which new meaning is jointly constructed and conveyed.

So then, what kind of site is Burning Man?

THE PLAYA IS A WHITE CUBE?

The most apparent distinctions of the Burning Man site are initially superficial. It goes almost without saying that installing work outdoors “admits far more variables than the static light levels and climatic management” of an institutionalized setting, Treib notes.¹¹ But more importantly, it's the extremity of the environmental conditions. It is not just raindrops; it is torrential downpour. It is not just dust; it is dust blasted 90 miles per hour for several hours nonstop. Artist Kate Raudenbush compares her experience creating for the desert thusly: “In the boxed art world you can risk showing fragile work and smaller work because of the nature of its controlled environment. Artists can make things that are precious, that only work indoors, that must not be touched or if they are, they are guarded by security. However, at Burning Man the artwork must have incredible resiliency and strength. The artist needs to ‘let go of’ the urge to protect the art from the dangers of personal interaction. On the playa the artwork WILL get damaged. There is incredible risk involved. Believe me, sometimes I wonder why I make art for Burning Man and this is a main reason.”¹²

When displayed in an institutional setting, Treib notes that “sculpture enjoys a managed setting and a controlled manner by which the work will be approached and scrutinized. Sculpture outdoors experiences far different conditions. Changing rather than constant light vivifies form, surface, and readings...heterogenous surroundings can diminish - or at times enhance - the effect of the work, which, freed from the physical limits of the gallery may assume as scale approaching the colossal.”¹³ Raiser corroborates Treib's theory for the Burning Man case: “The combination of engagement and punishing conditions demands a certain accessibility and heft, although the piece only needs to last a short time. This is the opposite of museum art, which can be fragile but should remain intact for years.

¹¹ Treib 21

¹² Raudenbush, Kate. Email to author. 10 May 2015.

¹³ Treib 22

Burning Man art uses its temporal urgency to invite participation. Explore it now, or it will be gone. Touch it. Photograph it. Appreciate it. Don't miss it."¹⁴

Will Chase, a Burning Man staffer responsible for communications, describes how everything is different when you cross the line: "Something happens to you when you first set foot on the impossibly flat expanse of absofreakinglutely nothing that is the Black Rock Desert—especially when you're the only ones out there...There's nothing to break your line of sight, no visual punctuation to get hung up on, nothing to take in."¹⁵ Burning Man chronicler Brian Doherty describes co-founder John Law's reaction: "The endless space and solitude on the Black Rock Playa, John Law explains, supplied a particularly weightless and surreal sort of freedom. In this alien environment, you could almost imagine yourself born afresh into another *planet*, released from any old boundaries of behavior or thought."¹⁶

The playa is nature's white cube.

This characterization seems at once perfectly apt, and entirely problematic. If we are to understand the playa as a multivalent site under Kwon's discursive model, the white cube is its exact antithesis: an exhibition model that aims for *zero* external influence on the autonomous voice and authority of the artwork. Hal Foster puts it most aptly: "As modern art became more abstract and more autonomous, it called out for a space that mirrored its homeless condition, a space that came to be known as the white cube."¹⁷ The white cube does not have room for a site-oriented discourse, nor does it desire or seek for works to exist in dialogue with their display settings. Brian O'Doherty, who first coined the term, explains how this model forcefully eliminates context from the experience of art: "If the white cube stands for anything, it is...emblematic of the separation of art from common discourse, from the street, from life as lived amid dirt, cars, trucks, noise, and a quite perilous social contract."¹⁸

Yet *Futures Past* and *Rockspinner* showed artworks exhibited on the white expanse of desert are experienced deeply within their surrounding context, necessarily in productive discourse with the blankness of the setting. Perhaps the difference that enables multiple sites given the playa's neutrality is the institutional framing. The white cube is a built environment, a form "optimized" for the contemplation of artworks. As Foster and O'Doherty noted, the model assumes a specific role for artwork and a specific role for viewer, whereby the viewer is entirely focused on visually and

¹⁴ Raiser, Jennifer. "Preface." in Raiser, Jennifer. *Burning Man: Art on Fire*. (Race Point Publishing, 2014): 15

¹⁵ Chase 9

¹⁶ Doherty, Brian. *This is Burning Man: The Rise of a New American Underground* (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2004): 63

¹⁷ Foster, Hal. "After the White Cube." *London Review of Books*. Vol. 37, No. 6. (19 March 2015): 25-26

¹⁸ O'Doherty, Brian. "A New Museum Ecology?" in Ryan, Raymund, ed. *White Cube, Green Maze: New Art Landscapes*. (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2012): 8 - 11.

intellectually consuming the artwork. The only parts of the body that are activated in the purest white cube are the eyes and the brain. Therefore, the neutralness of the settings serves to minimize distractions that take your eye and brain away from the artwork. But museum educators Danielle Rice and Philip Yenawine argue that “in contemporary critical thinking, the museum can no longer claim to be a neutral backdrop for the display of art, because it is understood instead to be a highly complex institution that participates in the social construction of culture.”¹⁹

CURATED BY THE TEN PRINCIPLES?

As Rice and Yenawine suggest, the institutional framing of artwork at Burning Man operates under a wholly different notion of the proper roles of audience and artwork. The institutional force that Burning Man exerts on its commissioned work is the ideological framework under which the entire event operates, the Ten Principles.²⁰ These principles situate an audience as highly participatory, never passively consuming an artwork but instead using the artwork as a platform for radical self-expression through a mutually informed and spontaneous interaction grounded in the immediate moment. In a pedagogical bent, Burning Man primes its attendees via the Ten Principles to engage with the artworks as fully as possible, utilizing every aspect of their being to generate their own authentic art experience.

At Burning Man, the participant is king. As much as the site or artist may desire to imprint the artwork with their will, the organizers are adamant that the only authentic and true perspective is the participant's. Drawing on Burning Man's principle of participation, Bettie June Scarborough, the associate curator for art, explains that “in museums, there is a defined separation between art and the viewer, physically, mentally, emotionally. Here there is no wall around it, we want you to get in there and experience it. Only through that interaction is the piece fully realized.”²¹ Raiser directly asserts Burning Man's counter-institutional approach: “It repudiates the notion that art should be curated, protected, and observed at a distance. This art is valued according to the perception of each observer, not by a critic, gallerist, or collector.”²²

The unequivocal power of the audience is the foundation of Burning Man's curatorial approach. When it comes to how the Burning Man institution “curates” its artwork, the conceptual influence and

¹⁹ Rice, Danielle, and Philip Yenawine. “A Conversation on Object-Centered Learning in Art Museums.” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 45, no. 4 (2002): 289-301.

²⁰ The Ten Principles are: Radical Inclusion, Gifting, Decommodification, Radical Self-Reliance, Radical Self Expression, Communal Effort, Civic Responsibility, Leave No Trace, Participation, Immediacy. <http://burningman.org/culture/philosophical-center/10-principles/>

²¹ Raiser 17

²² Raiser 15

interpretation of any organizer is negligible. Commissioned artwork is expected to have some interpretation of the annual theme, but these artist-written narratives are not shared with the public by Burning Man; there is no catalogue, signage, or labels. In fact, Raudenbush explains that at Burning Man, “to have something formal explaining the meaning, artist background or materials is just seen as too commercial, or indicative of the default white box way of experiencing art. It is actually seen as a gauche intrusion of fact upon a surreal dali-esque landscape of the desert.”²³ The only official place that lists a work’s title or artist is the printed map of placed artwork, which is prone to confusion and inaccuracies. Burning Man gives the artist agency to direct how their works are interpreted and engaged with by the public; many choose to simply offer the work up to the audience without further dressing.

THE AUDIENCE IN CHARGE?

When I asked her about her artistic relationship to the playa, Raudenbush serenely replied, “When artists make art here, there is a quality of surrendering to the environment.” On the flip side, David Rockwell explains how audiences surrender to a grand spectacle: “participating shuts off a lot of automatic sensors about logic and reality. It becomes bigger than you. You’re swept in.”²⁴ These sentiments are common among artists and audience, and they imply shifting power dynamics between the art, the audience, the artist, the institution, and the site. In this section, I consider the nature of these unequal relationships in the context of the mandate to participate.

Raudenbush argues that the participant-powered experience is the most authentic meaning of the work. In installing work at Burning Man, “you realize that art can be more about the immediacy of the challenge of making the art in such a harsh environment, and later the emotional intimacy and physical engagement that your art creates amongst people, *than the art itself*,” she says.²⁵ Providing an institutional perspective to supplement Raudenbush’s artist perspective on audience, Raiser further observes that while “immersed inside an unfamiliar environment, confronted with the forces of nature, participants often question their own assumptions and abilities. They have to summon ingenuity, adjust ingrained routines, form new affiliations and trust. And in the midst of this upheaval, they discover inclusion, whimsy, generosity, and their own creativity.”²⁶ This is a phenomenon that Rockwell notes occurs at many spectacles. “They are impressive in scale, visually exuberant, and ephemeral. They also function in similar ways: they bring people together and transform space and,

²³ Raudenbush, Kate. Email to author. 10 May 2015.

²⁴ Rockwell, David and Bruce Mau. *Spectacle*. (Phaidon Press, 2006): 20.

²⁵ Raudenbush, Kate. Email to author. 10 May 2015.

²⁶ Raiser 21

arguably, individuals themselves. A viewer becomes a participant with all of his or her senses engaged.”²⁷

Coffin’s work is the epitome of an audience-centered approach. While Coffin does create works with specific effects in mind, he sees his artworks as the process or platform that generates new possibilities in the minds of the audiences - a non-deterministic result. “I’m really interested in creating situations where people’s fundamental understanding about the world around them is altered, by changing the dynamics of the physical space,” he says.

On the other hand, Raudenbush locates the authority to generate meaning close to the artist. In her own words, Raudenbush explains her role as an artist: “How can I help humanity see and understand itself better?” Rather than Coffin’s model where the audience is virtually the sole originator of meaning, Raudenbush begins with an explicit artist intention that the audience interprets to their own context. “Each sculpture I’ve made has an allegorical message, a specific intention,” she says. “I know exactly what it means, and people’s experience of it brings it to life, and gives it more meaning.”²⁸ In *Futures Past*, Raudenbush “tried to imagine how our modern civilization might be perceived as a future ruin if we continued to worship the man-made realities of technology without acknowledging the sustainability of that created world.”²⁹ *Futures Past* generates a social dialogue that revolves around humanity’s role in constructing the built environment. The mechanism of Raudenbush’s sculpture is an adaptation of artist meaning, rather than Coffin’s approach which generates audience meaning.

If participation is the crucial element to construct meaning, the follow-up question is: how does the audience specifically interact with the work? Coffin’s *Rockspinner* series are kinetic, and sit blandly still unless a person activates them to spin them. This is the most privileged, yet basic, model of interaction. The audience makes an action, and the piece responds to it. The audience literally transforms the artwork – a powerful form of agency. On playa, participants are inclined to explore additional unexpected ways of interacting with the work; climbing and resting are favorite ways to experience a piece. Collaboration or collective action also come into play - perhaps one person climbs up the rock, and asks another person to spin it once he’s on it. Coordinated effort adds a new voice to our wonderfully multivalent discursive space. While not kinetic, Raudenbush’s work is designed to be climbable. At the top of *Futures Past* on playa, someone was always re-enacting the Buddha sitting beneath the Bodhi tree. In an urban setting, people conform to the cultural expectation, and give wide berth to the sculpture, reluctant to even enter it much less climb it. The uniqueness of

²⁷ Rockwell 20

²⁸ Raiser 26

²⁹ Raiser 28

the playa as a site is Burning Man's institutional Ten Principles, which turn the playa into a "platform of permission," to use a term coined by Burning Man artist Jessica Hobbs. On playa, participants have permission from Burning Man and the Ten Principles to generate their own experience-based meaning; off-playa, the cultural framework is different.

Unfortunately, this dynamic physical relationship between the artwork and the audience usually deteriorates in the transition from on playa to off playa, primarily due to bureaucratic regulations and codes for public spaces or structures. But the powerful cultural tenet that mandates that art cannot be touched is also in play. While Coffin's makes the transition to Atlanta without loss of meaning, Raudenbush's work loses a dimension of interaction. In her case, altering how the audience interacts with the work shifts the discursive space of the work and enables new meaning to be produced by the audience.

Burning Man has a clear preference to privilege the audience's perspective over any meaning determined by the site, inherent in the work, imposed by the institution, or explained by the artist - but not to exclusion. Just as the location is in active discourse with the work, so too does Burning Man expect the audience to be in active discourse with the work and its whole context. The polyphonous discourse allows for individual perspectives to be quieter or louder, dependent on shifting context. In fact, this algorithm for meaning-making generates infinite possibilities for a single artwork's meaning. The contextualized, audience-focused approach to generating meaning resonates with Treib, who says that such sculpture "derives completely from the specifics of the site, and the idea, materials, and configurations come - and can only come - in response to that particular place, at that time, under those conditions."³⁰ In other words, the meaningful of an experience is defined by an imprecise, unique vector of context.

Therefore, despite the physical parallels between exhibiting work in a gallery and exhibiting work in the Black Rock Desert, the viewer experience is wholly different due to the institution's specific discourse. Burning Man's exhibition approach blends the display preferences of the white cube model with the discursive space of a multivalent site. The playa provides as neutral a backdrop for art as possible, while Burning Man frames the site according to its institutional mission. The result is an expansive art platform that gives maximum authority to the audience, while enabling the work to be in dynamic aesthetic and conceptual conversation with the site, the institution, and the audience. Thus multiple meanings are co-produced that incorporate the voices of the audience, the work, and the sites at play. Thereby, Burning Man directly confronts Foster's critique of the institution: "Such museums make such a strong claim on our visual interest that they stand as the dominant work on

³⁰ Treib 21

display, and upstage the art they are meant to present.”³¹ Burning Man shows how it is possible for an institution to fundamentally shape an art experience while remaining fundamentally invisible.

THE FOREST FOR THE TREES?

The two works presented here represent the smallest slice of a broad spectrum of thousands of works that have been realized in Black Rock City. Relatively few - but a growing number of - works have survived the transition from playa to urban, and not only because a large number of works incorporate immolation as a metaphor for radical transformation. Not all works accept a fluid and dynamic relationship with site, or subsume the voice of the artist to the authority of site or audience. I have not explored the nature of works that intersect the planes of the playa surface with the object of art (The Pier, The Dreamer, No Swimming, HMS Love). A significant aesthetic theme is actually scaled realism, where everyday items such as animals (Coyote, Disco Duck, Dusty Rhino, Serpent Twins, Pink Flamingo Crane), busses (Purple Palace, Walter the Giant VW Bus), boats (Narwhal, La Contessa, A Cavallo), words (Believe, Ego, Mom), and bodies (The Dreamer, Bliss Dance) are rendered monstrously large, ten or hundred times bigger than life. This algorithm simply and reliably turns the familiar into the bizarre. Raiser accounts for this by granting agency to the site, arguing that “the vast desert playa offers an unlimited size canvas which encourages escalation of dimension.”³² However, it would be difficult to claim that such works enter into significant dialogue with the site, or rely on the authority of an artist or audience for meaning. It is a spectacular absurdity of vision: a rubber ducky the size of King Kong is ridiculous regardless of where you encounter it.³³ Critics consider such work unsophisticated or not even art, but a thorough analysis of this market-entrenched judgment and the social impact of Burning Man’s alternative art ethos deserves a separate analysis. It is a fundamental tenet of the Burning Man Art Department to work with any artist who wants to share their piece, without vetting or judgment. Like the blind men examining the elephant, the prior discussion will only prove helpful in understanding one dimension of a complex, multi-faceted art experience.

Burning Man art’s relationship with its time and place is a dynamic one. The works of Raudenbush and Coffin show that the playa as a site resists a diachronic framing of culture. *Futures Past* and *Rockspinner* function as ruptures, expanding the discursive site that generates the meaning of the work. Rather than the interstice between before and after, these works occupy simultaneously

³¹ Foster 25

³² Raiser 16

³³ Claes Oldenberg comes to mind as successfully operating under this paradigm, though not without criticism. And somehow, works that involve the human body seem to transcend the result.

around, within, and through the present moment.³⁴ While the physical location is influential, most of a work's meaning is negotiated in a virtual discursive site by the voices of the artist, the institution, the audiences, and the artwork. These agents have fluid and shifting levels of authority depending on the unique installation context, but always respect the authenticity of lived experience. Burning Man art begins to breathe life into the wasteland of our urban public lives. As co-founder Larry Harvey says, "In a world where people gather at shopping malls while they ignore city hall, and the public square is disappearing, anything that can take values and interject them into the realm of civics is terribly needed; by putting art at the center of our city, we are doing that. We are saying that art influences and elevates our civic enterprise into meaning."³⁵

³⁴ Harvey recognizes the play's tendency to simultaneously collapse and extend time in his principle of Immediacy.

³⁵ Quoted in Raiser 17

SUPPLEMENTAL IMAGES



Top: *Coyote*, Brian Tedrick at Burning Man (2013).

Below: *Coyote* at Geyserville CA (2013-).





Top: *Bliss Dance*, by Marco Cochrane, at Burning Man (2010).
Below: *Bliss Dance* at Treasure Island, San Francisco (2011-).





Top: *The Dreamer*, by Pepe Ozan, at Burning Man (2005).
Below: *The Dreamer* at Golden Gate Park, San Francisco (2006).





The Pier 2 by Matthew Schulz and the Pier Crew (2012)



Disco Duck, 2014



The Raft by Peter Kinney (2002)