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Blazing Grace: The Gifted Culture of Burning Man

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Abstract:
The thirty-year experiment, Burning Man, is mounted annually in the Black Rock Desert, Nevada. Today attracting 70,000 participants and otherwise known as Black Rock City, Burning Man is typically identified as an arts-based "gift culture," with *gifting* holding privileged place in its principled ethos. Lewis Hyde's classic *The Gift* is shown to be among the most evocative literary endorsements for Burning Man, notably in the way it invokes the transformative power that affects recipients to identify with the gift itself (in this case, Burning Man). This article demonstrates how this unique culture of gifting and gratitude has been challenged by a recent crisis impugning the ethos of Burning Man as enshrined in event principles like *Participation*, *Gifting* and *Decommodification.* With the growing influx of wealthy "tourists" and their service providers, the so-called "sherpagate" crisis prompted redressive responses from the Burning Man community—in particular through the 2016 art theme, *Da Vinci's Workshop.* While such cultural reflexivity has reaffirmed Burning Man as a gifting (and gifted) culture, it also offers an ambitious attempt to reconcile those spheres where art circulates (as gift) and accumulates (as commodity). Such efforts are consistent with the propensity of the recently formed Burning Man Project to propagate Burning Man culture in a transnational movement context.

Keywords: gifting, Burning Man, festivals, reciprocity, makers

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I first set eyes upon her from my position aft in the art car Narwhal. She loomed out of the twilight haze like a wide-open page of a Dr. Seuss pop-up book: an organic cluster of lighthouses, the tallest at sixty-five feet. Installed on the flat expanse of Nevada's Black Rock Desert, these half-dozen wooden structures had been engineered towards their own fiery demise several mornings hence.

[Fig. 1: *Storm at the Castle*. Photo by Marek Musil, 2016]

Through those days and nights, the improbable beacon was magnetizing to the tens-of-thousands who'd arrived in the deep of this dusty wilderness, disembarking from their bicycles, marveling in silence, gathering in groups, queuing to explore the structures, each named after goddesses, with interiors impeccably decorated like shrines. They'd ascended stairs and ladders on the interiors and negotiated rope bridges connecting them. Populating this contrivance, explorers revised the standard view of the remote lighthouse as a lonely haunt. Finally, reassembling early Sunday morning, encircling the installation, thousands of Burners bore witness to her blazing desolation.

A product of the collaborative efforts of dozens of carpenters, metalworkers, glass artists, sculptors, and many other skilled artists, the Black Rock Lighthouse Service was an exemplary gift. Conceived by father and son lead artists Jonny and Max Poynton, the project expanded to include dozens of makers who, like project architect Elizabeth Marley, are humble ambassadors of Black Rock City. Destined for the flame, this social sculpture was bestowed in 2016 upon the community of Burning Man, an artistic event-culture that has, over thirty years, evolved into an

optimal platform for such benefaction. A unique culture of the gift, Burning Man encourages volunteerism, generosity, noble largesse, and creative beneficence on an epic scale. The event and its cultural progeny embody the spirit of the gift as creative labor, which in its consumption, provides the conditions for abundance. In the arts culture of Burning Man, I find an ethical framework for gifting that, in the perspective of Lewis Hyde in *The Gift*, revitalizes the soul, so long as the gifts are not kept—which is to say, so long as they remain in motion (or, in other words, so long as they are *consumed*). As we'll see, recent challenges to the principles of this culture have triggered dramatic processes that have affirmed the central (albeit complex) role of gifting at Burning Man, self-reflexively reinforcing the event's "principled" culture. At the same time, official commitment from the Burning Man Project (BMP) to address the perennial dilemma of the struggling artist at a time when the BMP has scaled transnationally, opens the way for the interdependence of gifting and commerce in guild-like "maker" practices that shatter the myth of the irreconcilability of gift and market spheres.

An annual weeklong cultural experiment in the Black Rock Desert, Burning Man commenced as a summer solstice festival (on Baker Beach, San Francisco, 1986), evolving into a temporary city (Black Rock City, Nevada), before scaling to a global movement fostered by the Burning Man Project (St John and Gauthier). What became known as Black Rock City (BRC) by the mid-1990s is today a vast temporary municipality with dozens of departments, surveyed roads, a hospital, a media center, and an airport, all completely dismantled and removed following the event. Burning Man has evolved distinct features, including signature large-scale art builds, fire ceremonies, event subcultures, and an ethos called the Ten Principles. Formulated by Larry Harvey in 2004, the Ten Principles are*Radical Inclusion*, *Gifting*, *Decommodification*, *Radical Self-Reliance*, *Radical Self-Expression*, *Communal Effort*,*Civic Responsibility*, *Leave No Trace*, *Participation,* and *Immediacy* (in this article, all principles are capitalized and italicized).

In the spirit of the principle of *Decommodification*, for example, with the exception of ice and coffee, nothing is for sale at the event; there is no corporate sponsorship, no advertising, and Burners are even encouraged to disguise, or détourn, brand logos (e.g. on rental trucks), although fewer participants appear to comply with this practice today. Under the principle of *Leave No Trace*, participants must pack in all their supplies and pack out all their waste—i.e. they must leave no ecological footprint on the vast flat expanse of the desert ("playa"), a restoration procedure monitored by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the government body that issues a Special Recreation Permit. Another key principle is *Participation,* the hallmark of being a "Burner" whose activities are characterized by "being through doing," which includes gifting practices integral to an organic ethos that has proliferated among a worldwide network of regional contacts, communities, and events. By 2017, there were approximately 65 Regional Events worldwide.

Burning Man has long been responsive to crises, perhaps none more pressing than the growing population of non-participants, including "virgins" (i.e. first timers) jonesing for entertainment, becoming an audience to an event produced by others. What happens when the spectacle of the creative work—and its blazing destruction—takes precedence over participation? And what happens when service providers in the experience industry cater to those seeking, and willing to

pay handsomely for, the attractions? Such are the concerns notable throughout the history of an event that relies on thousands of volunteers. As seen in the following commentary from *BRC Weekly: Black Rock City's Independent Newsweekly*, an influx of wealthy and inexperienced eventgoers has presented a challenge to Burning Man's participatory culture and specifically to its culture of the gift:

> The old idea of "no spectators" means just that—everyone here has brought something to share with others. But since the sell-out, we've had more of an influx of people who come here to experience and consume the party, but forget that they're supposed to bring something other than their tan gymtoned bodies and fake-fur boots. The people who make us a tourist destination seemed to have missed the memo that without them creating something, eventually Burning Man will become Stagnant Man with a bonfire at the end of the week, or, worse, just another stop on the EDM party circuit. (Shutterslut)

Gifting is provided a definitive breakdown among Burning Man's Ten Principles: "Burning Man is devoted to acts of gift giving. The value of a gift is unconditional. Gifting does not contemplate a return or an exchange for something of equal value." As this essay demonstrates, gifting has a weathered pedigree at Burning Man, which is sometimes referred to as a "gift economy," a reference to the common practice of trinket or swag exchange in Black Rock City—a form of direct exchange of some equivalence (e.g. bracelets, stickers, badges), resembling Marshall Sahlins's "balanced" or "symmetrical" reciprocity (194–95). But as member of the BMP's Philosophical Center, the pseudonymous Caveat Magister, has affirmed, Burning Man is not a gift, barter, or exchange "economy," but a *gift culture* ("The 'Gift Economy' Isn't an Economy at All"). For Caveat, gifting is "a legitimate way of reaching out to our fellow human beings that is non-exploitive and establishes a connection between people who have no other reason to talk to each other" ("Does Your Gift Make the Playa Less Lonely?"). This perspective on gifting at Burning Man is consistent with the views of Media Relations Coordinator, Zac Cirivello, who states that gifting in Black Rock City "acts as social lubricant. It gives you an excuse to walk up to a stranger and strike up a conversation when you otherwise wouldn't. Walking through the streets of Black Rock City, it's common to be pulled aside and invited to partake in a cold adult beverage, a game, a tarot card reading, a meal, or a hug." Cirivello continues, "the underlying fear of rejection that most of us unconsciously harbor isn't a factor at Burning Man because it's unlikely that anyone would reject a heartfelt gift. Burners feel safe and confident interacting and building connections with others through this system that serves to further strengthen the sense of community" (qtd. in Jaenike). Such views lend insight into ways *Gifting* is integral to Burning Man culture, the intentional commitment to which serves to distinguish Burning Man from the non-Burner world.

While gifting has many faces at Burning Man, "theme camps" are exemplary. In 2016, there were well over 1,000 such camps (and the larger villages) issued placement in Black Rock City—with names like Twilight Spaghetti Theatre, Spank Bank, and ReFOAMation. Whether dispersing blueberry pancakes, convening masquerade processions, or providing an oasis with shaded hammocks, camps are collaborative projects inciting interactions between strangers and

potentiating community. Stewart Harvey, brother of co-founder Larry Harvey, traces the practice back to at least 1991 when Janet Lohr and her friends built a kiva-style oven in which they:

> baked loaves of rotund female shaped bread with the same wood fire that would soon consume the Man. Though the bread distribution never reappeared, impractical in the face of a burgeoning population, many camps exist today solely to give food or drink to the multitudes. I like to imagine these long ago loaves of bread helped to shape the principle of *gifting* at Burning Man (S. Harvey 36).

Whether loaves of bread, massages, or incinerated art installations, the bestowers of the gift do not contemplate a return, with the overall effect holding a likeness to the "generalized reciprocity" that Sahlins (193) understood to be typical to household-kinship relationships. While there is an absence of an obligation on the part of the recipient to reciprocate, such "distributions"—putatively altruistic transactions, or "true gifts"—nevertheless inspire gratitude and thus a response that keeps the gift in motion.

If gifting has been integral to Burning Man, the practice is typically misunderstood by outside observers. Inaccurate stories call attention to Black Rock City's irrational "pagan" sensitivities, its lascivious underbelly, its opportunities for indulgence and self-gratification. Such narratives appeal to eventgoers committed to consumer excesses, customers committed to bowdlerized versions of event practices like *Gifting*. With a penchant for gratifying expenditures and hyped adventures to be struck from one's "bucket list," the predatory tourist has been a controversial figure at Burning Man, whose founders have sought to distinguish BRC from commercial music festivals and other commoditized spectacles typically converted into experience capital.

The Gift

A loquacious proponent of the culture of gifting in BRC, and identifying as the Burning Man Project's Chief Philosophical Officer, Larry Harvey, was influenced by the idea of the unconditional gift in Hyde's "economy of the creative spirit" (xxiii). Harvey stated in a 2013 public discussion that Hyde's book, first published in 1979 under the title *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, "personally inspired me and helped all of us think about the power of the gift and what that can do and how that can condition your relationship with others" (Burning Man). Offering a meditation on the spiritual commerce of the gift, Hyde excavates the "commerce" that must be protected if a culture is to retain its own soul. His starting assumption is that "where there is no gift there is no art" (xviii), and where there is no art there is no community. Hyde prefers "eros" over "logos," assuming, somewhat troublingly, that the commodification of art—dictated by the logic of calculative exchange—destroys the "erotic" potential of the gift(xx). This distinction drives an analysis that offers a unique statement on the role of art that builds upon the gift as an expression of non-rational economic exchange found in Marcel Mauss's seminal *Essai sur Ie don*. To speak of the economy of the creative spirit, is, for Hyde, "to speak of the inner gift that we accept as the object of our labor, and the outer gift that has become a vehicle of culture" (xxiii). While not all of them can be addressed here, there are limitations to Hyde's approach. Not only does it pass over the "negative side" of gift exchange—

i.e. Hyde admitted he was unconcerned with gifts “given in spite or fear, nor those gifts we accept out of servility or obligation” (xxiii)—but, as we’ll also discover, the implicit creativity/market segregation is problematic.

Hyde’s focus on creative labors in the modern world, and ultimately on practices that nourish the creative spirit, appealed to the subjects of his study: artists. Seemingly casting light on the inner workings of Burning Man a few years before the inaugural clambake on Baker Beach, Hyde stated that the gift, in contrast to the commodity, compels the “labor of gratitude.” Hyde makes a crucial distinction between work and labor, where in the former one commits to a market exchange relationship, while the latter is an act of goodwill and generosity: “A gift that has the power to change us awakens a part of the soul. But we cannot receive the gift until we can meet it as an equal. We therefore submit ourselves to the labor of becoming like the gift. Giving a return gift is the final act in the labor of gratitude, and it is also, therefore, the true acceptance of the original gift” (65). Such passionate labors are redolent in large-scale BRC art designed to go up in smoke; efforts like the Black Rock Lighthouse Service and signature builds—the effigy (aka “the Man”) and the Temple—all of which offer visceral proof for Hyde’s estimation that the “*gift is property that perishes*” (italics in original, 10). In other words, a gift is that which is consumed in practices that ensure that its spirit remains in circulation. The logic of this paradox is implicit to Burning Man and pivotal to its community. Not all art at Burning Man has a date with the flame, but the unique aspect of large-scale artworks destined to be razed is that they are gifts in the rawest of terms. That is, they are not to be possessed. Created for destruction, such endowments enter into cosmic circulation. The artwork’s obliteration affects a permanent trace in the memories of those who are witness to its demise. The gifts that are literally consumed by fire instill gratitude, effectively enabling a cyclical abundance of goodwill that is the wellspring of community. Burning Man encourages, indeed patronizes (or better, as we’ll see, matronizes) giftedness, enabling art projects by which a population may, in Hyde’s terms, “suffer gratitude” (60).

Interviewed by Renea Roberts in the 2002 documentary *Gifting It: A Burning Embrace of Gift Economy*, Hyde himself passes comment on Burning Man and the mobility of the “true gift.” In this ethnographic film, among dozens produced on the event, founding board member Michael Mikel states that volunteerism—the practice in which one gives freely without any thought of compensation—represents the pinnacle achievement of “giving” at Burning Man. Among the now celebrated artists whose creations are infused with gratitude, and thus whose labors “give back” to a community that had transformed their lives, visual artist Peter Hudson relates a story about an art gallery curator who requested to retain a piece from his 2001 installation The Swimmers. While offered the incentive to build “recognition,” Hudson responded that he already had all the exposure he needed among his community. As the film conveys, the installation was set aflame at the conclusion of the event.

In the powerful affliction that compels Hudson and others to put forward, and indeed destroy, their endowments, we find a charm that deviates dramatically from the laws of indebtednesss collected by Mauss. Noting the association (in German etymology) between gift and poison, Mauss offers the example of beer or other libations that link the partakers by obligation.

If simply speaking, a “shouted” beer is “liable to turn against one of them if he would fail to honor the law” (“Gift, Gift” 30), this is a dire scenario from which one seeks “to be cured or expiated only by ensuring its constant circulation” (Moore 6). While one can observe such relationships at Burning Man, Hyde offers an approach that resonates with a culture that has thrived on the frontiers of art production and consumption, a culture whose reproduction is fated, not through the “poison” that lingers from the untreated bite, but from the confrontational affect of random acts of kindness among strangers in a physically harsh environment.

As Hyde continues, “the labor of gratitude accomplishes the transformation that a gift promises. And the end of gratitude is similarity with the gift or with its donor. The gifted become one with their gifts” (71). Gifting is then integral to the formation of community identity, an idea that speaks to the process of becoming a Burner, a citizen of BRC who expresses through countless labors in subsequent events a gratitude for untold gifts bestowed unto them. Among build teams, art collectives, civic departments, theme camps, one witnesses gratitude without weight or measure. Such labors effect a transformation of being described by the burn-ed (think learned) ones, a modification that sees the transformed identifying with the gift itself—i.e. with Burning Man, as a festival, a city, a movement, ultimately as a culture. This identity is reaffirmed in response to boundary testing challenges.

Sherpagate

Tourists and their service providers have presented a challenge to the thick braid of principles in Burning Man’s ethos. Black Rock City’s status as a playground for the ultra-wealthy and a haven for service professionals in the experience industry vying for the patronage of privileged clientele gained exposure in 2014 when *The New York Times* ran an exposé describing an “annual getaway for a new crop of millionaire and billionaire technology moguls” (Bilton). The article exposed a landscape of gated RV compounds and high-end concierge services that appeared to be sanctioned by the BMP. One camp was reported to possess a $25K per head fee, featuring private return flights to BRC airport, luxury restroom trailers, female models flown in from New York, sushi chefs and “sherpas” (Bilton). The story sparked outrage across social media, fueled debate in the blogoverse, triggering fresh lamentation on the demise of Burning Man, the fate of which now appeared sealed by the regattas of rich tourists now populating the crowded waters off the Man, and specifically at anchorage in “Billionaires Row” (Waddell).

The controversy re-ignited long held grievances. In 1996, the first official art theme, The Inferno, dramatized a corporate takeover of Burning Man. For estranged co-founder John Law among others, The Inferno was intended to be Burning Man’s fiery apotheosis. Its subsequent history is therefore held to have compromised the original goal of dwelling beyond the spectacle of capital. Having subsequently scaled as a commercial operation relying on millions of dollars in ticket sales with a salaried year-round staff and, according to some, over-run by Silicon Valley corporate elites, the event has arguably fulfilled its own prophecy. “Sherpagate” triggered public grievances, resentment, and recriminations over the apparent outsourcing of event principles—like *Gifting*, *Participation,* and *Radical Self-Reliance*—not to mention the subversion of *Decommodification*.

The heat was felt down at Burning Man HQ, San Francisco. There was an elephant in the room, and its name was "Plug-n-Play," a phrase referencing non-participatory camps. The issue demanded attention when it was revealed that one of the chief culprits inspiring the exposé was a theme camp underwritten by James Tananbaum—billionaire founder and CEO of leading healthcare investment fund Foresite Capital—who was at that time on the Board of Directors of the BMP. Tananbaum became an unwitting attention-magnet when his 2014 BRC camp, Caravancicle, was lambasted as an elitist hotel for wristbanded VIPs flown in on private jets (and paying 15K per head) and issued popsicles to be distributed as gifts (Gillette). The incident gave considerable ammunition to critics long suspecting the event to be crumbling under the weight of its own contradictions. While the BMP has pushed for the "acculturation" of the Ten Principles in recent years, satirists have translated the public mood in parodies like the "10 Principles of Earning Man," inclusive of principles like "Radical Self Indulgence" and "Grifting" (Clooney).

As the burnerverse was confronted with a controversy possessing the hallmarks of "social drama"—i.e. with phases running from breach through crisis, redress, and resolution (Turner 38–42)—the meaning and purpose of gifting was expressed in a variety of performance media and reflexive cultural narratives. The controversy also triggered practical solutions, such as an interrogation of intentions, reform of theme camp registration criteria and placement policy, and a refocused attention on the role of entrepreneurs at Burning Man. In a redressive approach, the BMP undertook the difficult task of distinguishing "burnerprenuers"—who provide little more than services for privileged clients and lip service to event principles—from those actively catalyzing the co-creation of art on the playa. Committed to "serv[ing] as both the conscience and collective memory of Burning Man" (L. Harvey, "Introduction"), and "guid[ing] the interpretation and application of the Ten Principles," The Philosophical Center has forged interest around the role and significance of art patronage in BRC, a strategy enervating the art theme and animating Burning Man's eponymous icon.

Renaissance Man

Burning Man plays host to a signature festival in which "the Man" is destroyed in a staggering fire ritual performance at the city's epicenter. As a central part of the 2016 theme, Da Vinci's Workshop*,* the Man stood at the center of a city drunk on the memory of Renaissance Florence, known to be a watershed in the history of civilization, principally through the way it enabled an unprecedented flourishing of artistic excellence. That is, in a grand gesture literally geared to ends both pragmatic and symbolic, the Man was commanded to turn the philanthropic wheel of the BMP, which in 2016 was committed to bridging arenas long reckoned irreconcilable: creativity and commerce. Elaborating on the theme and playing down the ruthless realities of mercantilism in the city's history, Harvey embarked on a selective tour of the Florence of late fifteenth-century Italy, transporting readers into the world of Lorenzo de Medici, its de facto ruler. Described as "a poet, a banker and a politician," de Medici was said to be "famous for befriending artists and advancing their careers" (L. Harvey, "Following the Money"). In adopting the young Michelangelo, whom he sponsored among other geniuses, de Medici's acts of patronage are hailed as integral to the Renaissance and the dissemination of humanist ideals.

The perceived parallels with BRC were emphasized in a text introducing the art theme, in which it was acknowledged that philanthropists have played a significant role in BRC, which is said to have attracted a population of "private donors," who, "with a remarkable lack of fanfare, have quietly funded some of the most beloved artworks that have honored our city" (Burning Man, "Burning Man 2016: Da Vinci's Workshop").

Given the BMP's 2016 distribution of $1.2 million to artists in the form of honoraria, Harvey imagined the BRC Arts Department to be "like the Wool Guild, the *Arte della lana*, the premier trade guild of Florence." The point of Harvey's essay is that money does not flow through "quasi-governmental" and private patronage alone. Burning Man projects are subsidized through community fundraising events and crowdfunding campaigns held throughout the year. And furthermore, much of the art in the gifting culture of BRC is self-funded. This combination describes the multiple funding streams of many BRC art projects, including the Black Rock Lighthouse Service, funded by a Black Rock Arts Foundation honorarium, crowdfunding, and private donations (which, not unlike many BRC art projects, ran at a loss): "In a society devoted to the giving of gifts, anyone at any time can be both artist and philanthropist" (L. Harvey, "Following the Money").

Da Vinci's Workshop was a cultural program exemplifying how the arts are intentionally deployed to redress crisis. The theme's concept was discussed in a series of articles published throughout 2016 in the *Burning Man Journal,*addressing the weave of money and creativity both in and beyond Burning Man. In opposition to an arts culture in which museums, elite art schools, and galleries oversee the separation of art from life, Da Vinci's Workshop was imagined as a vehicle through which the BMP sought to connect artists (and their art) to the wider culture and civil society, thereby enhancing the value of Burning Man arts (and artists). Here was an opportunity to expand the gifted culture of Burning Man to include philanthropic practices potentially advantageous to those gifted citizens who are integral to the perpetuity of Burning Man, but who are typically trapped in conditions of economic uncertainty and a vicious cycle of debt: artists. Such opportunity echoes the status of figures who throughout history have been fated to dwell in "spiritual poverty," a non-acquisitive state Hyde explains is a form of stewardship, in which the "gifted man" must "become the steward of wealth which appears from beyond his realm of influence and which, once it has come to him, he must constantly disburse" (Hyde 364). But, as Hyde eventually recognizes, such disbursal does not mean the steward must dwell in actual poverty.

How can art retain its gift-bearing soul in a market economy? This was the central inquiry for Hyde, whose starting assumption was the existence of two essentially irreconcilable economic spheres: that of gift exchange (*eros*) and that of the market (*logos*), separated by a chasm, with the consequence that artists must inhabit a world of extreme anxiety if they are to resolve the problem of their livelihood. While maintaining the view that a gift is destroyed by commodification, Hyde eventually conceded the interdependence of these spheres, writing, "within certain limits, gift wealth may be rationalized and market wealth may be eroticized" (Hyde 358). While the strategies Hyde outlines for converting market-born wealth into gift

wealth, and vice-versa, are reminiscent of those transpiring within the Burner community, this culture has fomented distinct gift institutions.

The "Virtuous Circle"

With Harvey calling for the replacement of the "vicious cycle" with a "virtuous circle," the BMP endorsed entrepreneurial initiatives like Fundiversify—initiatives through which investments enable Burning Man artworks to gain value through a long circuit of post-Burn community events, with benefits to the artist and investor alike. According to Caveat Magister, the ultimate effect of this is "the commissioning of art for the community's sake rather than just as an investment" ("Making Patronage Work for Us"). Such ideas bely a process that effectively enables the bridge between art and revenue making that Hyde considered pivotal, a reconciliation reliant on building relationships (and thus communities) in which art and artists are central, not marginal. Designating the virtuous process of building relationships that enables gift-making while making a living, Caveat (agreeing with fellow Burner Felicity Graham's previous argument in "Art, Gender, and the Renaissance: Where My Matrons At?") concludes that it is *matronage*, rather than patronage, that Burning Man seeks to cultivate. In a view that resonates with the work of Hélène Cixous, who builds a case for "the economy of femininity" (Cixous and Clément 91) that by contrast to calculated returns, seeks relationship building, Caveat states that "far from simply adjusting the flow of money, we want to establish and strengthen relationships between artists, their communities, and funding sources" ("What Have We Learned So Far").

The Burning Man community has been forging cultural solutions for years. Many artists, for example, tour works through the "transformational festival" circuit, illustrating the already interwoven nature of the market and gifting. The gratuities received from projects originally gifted within BRC—perhaps partly supported by crowdfunding, honorariums, and private funding—allow funding for subsequent projects. And, as social organizations dedicated to gifting, theme camps have provided the basic model for propagating the gift's spirit. Such is possibly best illustrated by Burning Man dance camps, like Space Cowboys, which, typically without funding from Burning Man, have for well over a decade thrown their gifts upon the populace of the playa on the back of community fundraising events mounted throughout the year in San Francisco and further afield. At the same time, through these events, Space Cowboys have taken their playa-born project out into the world, organizing collaborative dance events that have helped support a network of Bay Area artists.

Caveat in fact recognizes the significance of theme camps as gifting communities that hold the power to become "our best ambassadors" beyond the event. As he states, while diverse in structure, membership, and purpose, theme camps hold a basic premise in common: "We are organizing a community around a shared vision of art and whimsy that we can give to the community." But the real potential of these organizations is in the way that they are poised to impact the wider culture through practices that both ignite the spirit of the gift and facilitate material prosperity for their networks: "Artists prosper when they are part of communities, and communities prosper when active networks are engaged in a spirit of giving and art" (Caveat

Magister, “Are Theme Camps the New Renaissance Guilds?”). And if these social organizations are the vanguard of Burning Man arts in the world, it is through the way they mobilize gifting and gratitude. Caveat turns to *The Gift* to make his point:

> Hyde talks about the way that gifts are at their most powerful when they are in motion: when they move from community to community, person to person, never stopping for long—or when they inspire other gifts so that there is a cascade of activity. Gifts are at their weakest when they are simply stored on a shelf or hoarded. The greatest potential global impact Burning Man Theme Camps and regionals could have on the world would be to interact directly with their communities, with each other, and with Black Rock City, to keep a constant flow of art and gifts moving around the world (Caveat Magister, “Are Theme Camps the New Renaissance Guilds?”).

In light of successful off-playa theme camp projects bringing their now “branded” gifts back to Burning Man (see St John), a caution is sounded. There is naught wrong with making a profit or being self-sustaining, “but if Theme Camps become just one more viable business strategy, then in the big picture they accomplish nothing” (Caveat Magister, “Are Theme Camps the New Renaissance Guilds?”). Such is the challenge ahead for Burning Man as the spirits of the gift and capitalism collide.

In his afterword to the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *The Gift*, Hyde paints a grim post-cold war portrait of the US National Endowments for the Arts, where market triumphalism overshadowed public patronage of the arts. Meditating upon the emergence of “gift institutions” that could empower the gifted in a world dominated by market exchange, Hyde speculates that “if we want our institutions to have the longevity they deserve, then the commercial side of our culture needs to be met with an indigenous counterforce” (Hyde 378). Shining like a beacon in dark times—i.e., in an era in which the Trump Administration plans to scrap the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities—Black Rock City appears to be a bearer of such a counterforce, which, through the auspices of the Burning Man Project, is being exported and cultivated beyond the city gates.

Unlike Trump’s proposed 10% increase in U.S. military spending to $54 billion in 2018 (Cohen), Burning Man is a transformational event. Both are, in Bataille’s terms from *The Accursed Share*, expenditures of surplus energy. But, where Trump’s expenditures participate in aggression and death, Burning Man offers unproductive expenditures of “fire lust.” In a fire-arts culture of co-created destruction, Burning Man expresses principle of *Gifting* through matronage, fire-arts, and large-scale burnable art, and, more generally, by way of the festive excesses that enable interaction and community. Further, the fiery desolation of big art on-playa casts light on the politics of prestige. As artists and their “minions” compete for that scarce resource—attention—integral to the acquisition of status and the maintenance of reputation, one finds in Burning Man the rivalry that Bataille attributed to the potlatch. While the nature of these expenditures, at Burning Man and its progeny events, remain largely under-researched, a study in which I am currently engaged will address these issues (see details on the SNFS supported project Burning Progeny: The European Efflorescence of Burning Man).

While satellite developments are of great interest, what of the city that has inspired this movement? When Renaissance Man—an ambitious paean to creative philanthropy—was finally erected in Black Rock City, 2016, it met with a hitch. Andrew Johnstone's design—based on Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* design—failed to rotate. Resulting from "a failure of the U-joint in the transmission system" (Terdiman), the effigy would not be animated by way of an elaborate system of human-powered gears and pulleys. The interactive sculpture envisioned was not realized. In the wake of the Fire Conclave on Burn Night, these blackened gears smoldered in the ruins as a stark reminder of nature's contempt for grandiose human experiments.

[Fig. 2: The Smoldering Ruins. Photo by Graham St John, 2016]

[Fig. 3: Temple Burn. Photo by Rand Larson, 2016]

What can be read from such an epic fail? A sign that BRC would not be “the epicenter of a new renaissance,” as promised? Did the impairment embody failure on the part of The Philosophical Centre to adequately dramatize the relationship between commerce and creativity? Perhaps it’s too early to speculate, but the opening of a position titled Major Gifts Officer in October 2016 for which the BMP sought to hire an individual to “develop an inspiring strategy to engage the community in philanthropy,” seemed to mark a turning of the wheel, despite the symbolic snag.

Impaired, but not disgraced. If anything, for the engineers of Burning Man, the adversities of the 2016 effigy build were symptomatic of the struggle to forge an experimental gift culture in one of the most remote desert regions in the United States. Despite the “Man Problems”—according to a headline in the *Black Rock Beacon* August 31, 2016 (Breger)—the effigy performed the role in which it has been cast since its prototype was mounted on Baker Beach in 1986: it *burned*. As found in its signature rite, and in other conflagrations blazing within an event ecology of maker-tribes, Burning Man aims to nurture endowments that can, in terms with which we are now familiar, reproduce “the gifted state” in the receiving community—receptions occasioning “a moment of grace, a communion, a period during which we too know the hidden coherence of our being and feel the fullness of our lives” (Hyde 195, 196).

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Figures

Fig. 1. Musil, Marek. *Storm at the Castle*. 2016, *Marek Musil Photographer*, www.burningman.marekmusil.com.

Fig. 2. St John, Graham. *The Smoldering Ruins*. 2016.

Fig. 3. Larson, Rand. *Temple Burn*. 2016.