Connections: Silicon Man and Burning Valley

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Once a year, the entrepreneurs of Silicon Valley drive out to the desert and set a 50-foot man-shaped bundle of sticks on fire. Burning Man, the annual arts festival in the Black Rock City, Nevada, is a week-long spectacle of creative madness: enormous glass flowers mounted on custom built cars, dance-based video game parody with flame throwers, and over 30,000 naked, dancing, intoxicated people wearing accessories made of blinking lights and electroluminescent wire. The bacchanalia surrounding the burning of the man is as interesting an expression of the values of Silicon Valley culture as the Google fondness for red, yellow, and green bouncing balls or the flip-flops of Facebook's CEO. These similarities are not coincidences: Burning Man and Silicon Valley arise from the same geographic milieu, involve many of the same participants, and share important cultural values.

Burning Man began as a Bay Area phenomenon. Started on San Francisco's Baker Beach by Jerry James and Larry Harvey in 1986, it was expanded by an "urban revolutionist" named John Law (on whom the character of Tyler Durden of the hit movie *Fight Club* was based). In 1991, Burning Man moved to a desolate salt flat 350 miles away in Nevada (Doherty, 2004). From there, the attendees grew from 60 people on the beach in 1986 to over 26,000 in 1999 (Kozinets, 2002).

The connection between Burning Man and Silicon Valley did not go unnoticed during the late 1990s technology boom. In a 1997 article in *Time*, Kevin Kelly, co-founder *Wired*, wrote about his experiences at Burning Man, and *Business Week* in 1999 featured a story on technology leaders at Burning Man, including Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon.com and the art director of the newly-public Yahoo! Burning Man was then described as "cyber-culture's de rigueur power-networking retreat of the year."(McHugh, 1999, para. 2). In addition to frequenting country clubs and golf courses, Silicon Valley's elite met at a counterculture festival in the Nevada desert.

In his exhaustive history of Silicon Valley in the 1960s, journalist John Markoff (2005) of the *New York Times* traces the origins of the personal computer industry not primarily to military contracts or to university funding, but to 1960s Bay Area counterculture. In his view, counterculture was not only integral but indispensable to the rise of many

great companies in the Bay Area, such as Apple Computer. In effect, he views the history of technology in the San Francisco Bay Area as a case history of the confluence of bohemian values (such as those represented by Burning Man) and bourgeois values (such as those represented by profit-driven businesses). Sociologist Richard Florida also believes that there was something special about the Bay Area that exemplified this confluence:

> What set Silicon Valley apart was…that the place was open to and supportive of the creative, the different, and the downright weird…the same pattern can be found in almost every other high-growth technology region. Before these regions were high-tech hotspots, they were places where creativity could be accepted and celebrated. (2004, p. 206)

Is this convergence merely an artifact of a booming economy and geographic convenience? Or does Burning Man have something more substantial in common with Silicon Valley? Some observers in the mid-1990s thought the connection was purely the result of the huge influx of money into the San Francisco Bay Area. In fact, one of the early founders of the Burning Man said quite cynically that any connection between technology and Burning Man was "just a sales pitch" to get newly rich techno-hipsters from San Francisco to trek out to the desert (Doherty, 2004, p. 99).

While it is true that the technology boom increased Burning Man attendance, there is a deeper and more enduring connection between Silicon Valley and Burning Man. Some observers in the mid-1990s made an explicit connection between the structure of cyberspace and the culture of Burning Man: the sense of accelerating possibility, the ability to experience any subculture or idea in the world at the same time, and the ability to create an entirely new persona. As one participant said:

> I get to the playa in 1995, and I see an endless plain with pointy mountains impossibly far off—that's a virtual world. If you've been in a computer role-playing game environment, that's what you'd see, everything built on it a human construction. It's cyberspace." (Doherty, 2004, p. 99).

The sense of freedom and possibility that attracts technologists to their chosen field may also attract them to Burning Man.

Shared Values

The success of the Burning Man festival has brought thousands of new participants, diluting the original concentration of Silicon Valley and San Francisco residents and broadening its appeal to people from other parts of the United States and the rest of the world. Nevertheless, Burning Man's official values (and the expression of them in the culture of the participants) speak of a more than geographic connection to the Bay Area.

The Burning Man website (*What is burning man? 10 principles*, n.d.) lists 10 principles that epitomize its philosophy, including values of

creative expression (radical self-expression, immediacy), social structure (radical inclusiveness, radical self-reliance, participation), and economic philosophy (gifting, decommodification, communal effort, civic responsibility, and leaving no trace). Many of these values are similar to the elements of the Silicon Valley habitat as described in *The Silicon Valley Edge*, a manifesto edited by venture capitalist Chong-Moon Lee. The similarities between these lists are striking: 7 out of 10 traits are nearly identical. The following sections of this article explore these similarities and what their implications might be for these two unique cultural milieus.

Respect for Creativity and Merit

Respect at Burning Man is granted for the most creative and eye-catching artwork, costuming, or engineering, rather than for the social status of the artist. New camps that show up with art cars shaped like pirate ships or cannons that shoot pants gain immediate currency. It is an attention-oriented meritocracy; similarly, at its best, Silicon Valley is a "results-oriented meritocracy."(Lee, Miller, Hancock, & Rown, 2000, p. 1) While a society based on merit is necessarily exclusive, it is exclusive in accordance with *chosen* values and actions. According to researcher Annalee Saxenian:

> Successful entrepreneurs in the Valley vary widely in age and style, but they share a common feature of raw ability. The region's merit-based system removes obstacles for immigrant entrepreneurs, as demonstrated by the founding members of Intel, Sun, Yahoo!, and many other pillar Valley firms. (Lee et al., 2000, p. 8)

Burning Man culture values radical inclusiveness: "Anyone may be a part of Burning Man. We welcome and respect the stranger. No prerequisites exist for participation in our community" (*What is burning man? 10 principles*, n.d., Radical Inclusion, para. 1). It also explicitly states a preference for radical self-expression: "Radical self-expression arises from the unique gifts of the individual. No one other than the individual or a collaborating group can determine its content. It is offered as a gift to others. In this spirit, the giver should respect the rights and liberties of the recipient" (*What is burning man? 10 principles*, n.d., Radical Self-expression, para. 5). These values echo Silicon Valley's meritocratic ethos, in which anyone with sufficient technical merit can be accepted.

Respect for Risk-Taking

Burning Man stunts represent risk-taking in the extreme: 100-foot flamethrowers, huge towers scaling up to the sky, and pianos being dropped from industrial cranes (Doherty, 2004). While such dramatic and life-threatening risk-taking is not commonly found on the streets of Silicon Valley, there is a high respect for risk-takers in the business realm. The successful company founded in a garage is a founding myth of the area.

Silicon Valley entrepreneurs view failure as a learning experience and are rarely punished for it in subsequent ventures (Lee et al., 2000). In fact, according to sociologist Annalee Saxenian (1994), this tolerance for ambiguity and respect for risk-taking is one of the major factors that differentiates Silicon Valley from its less successful East Coast counterpart, Massachusetts' Route 128.

Starting a company in a garage with the intention of changing the world may well be the business equivalent of dropping a piano from 100 feet in the air. Companies are not rewarded for taking small risks and the cultural ideal is not the prudent professional who does so—it's the 22-year-old who skateboards to work and creates a world-changing business. Mythology is an expression of what a culture reveres or reviles, and what Silicon Valley reveres are the smashingly successful risk-takers, like Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook or Sergey Brin and Larry Page of Google, who dropped out of school to start companies that changed the world.

Respect for Participation over "Spectation"

Burning Man's guiding principles explicitly specify participation as a value: **"**We believe that transformative change, whether in the individual or in society, can occur only through the medium of deeply personal participation. We achieve being through doing" (*What is burning man? 10 principles*, n.d., Participation, para. 9). Some examples of this principle in action include the famous Hackers' Convention (where the inventors of many of Silicon Valley's most famous products gather each year), and impromptu, participant-only "mash-up camps" (such as BarCamp and BIL), exemplify the value of participation (Terdiman, 2005). Everyone who attends must present on some topic of interest, and no one is allowed to merely watch.

Similarly, the value of participation is evident in the choice of leisure activities by venture capitalists, entrepreneurs, and other prominent citizens of Silicon Valley. "You'll see some of the most influential people in the valley out there on bikes on the weekends," says Randy Komisar, a partner in Kleiner Perkins, one of the Valley's most famous venture capital firms. "Cycling," he adds, "is the new golf," (Williams, 2005, para. 5-6) along with snowboarding, open-sea distance swimming, kite surfing, and abalone diving.

Silicon Valley values participation not only in leisure activities but also in business as well, which may be one of the reasons that failure is tolerated. If one is failing, one is participating. This echoes another Burning Man value: "Immediate experience is, in many ways, the most important touchstone of value in our culture. We seek to overcome barriers that stand between us and a recognition of our inner selves, the reality of those around us, participation in society, and contact with a natural world exceeding human powers. No idea can substitute for this experience" (*What is burning man? 10 principles*, n.d., Immediacy, para.

10). Thus, failure is equally tolerated at Burning Man. If one's blinky sculpture does not light up, there is no social penalty.

Tolerance of Diversity and Absurdity

One of the immediately apparent characteristics of upon arrival at Burning Man is a positive insistence on diversity and absurdity—the more absurd, ridiculous, and ambitious the project, the better (Doherty, 2004). For its part, Silicon Valley encourages both ethnic and personal diversity: the first, by encouraging immigrants from a variety of cultures; and the second, by allowing freedom of personal expression in physical appearance and dress. Silicon Valley's foreign-born population in 1990 was 25 percent (Saxenian, 2000). Fifty-two percent of immigrant scientists and engineers surveyed by Saxenian have been involved in either founding or running a start-up company (Public Policy Institute of California, 2002). Tolerance for personal diversity has been documented in books like Po Bronson's *Nudist on the Late Shift* and Jerry Kaplan's *Start-up: a Silicon Valley Adventure*. This two-pronged acceptance of difference is shown in the San Francisco Bay Area's number one rankings on both the Diversity Index and Tolerance Index of Florida (2004).

Aversion to Middle-Class Values, Commercialism, and Conformity

Middle-class values such as conspicuous consumption, mass culture, and consumerism are reviled at Burning Man. "In order to preserve the spirit of gifting, our community seeks to create social environments that are unmediated by commercial sponsorships, transactions, or advertising. We stand ready to protect our culture from such exploitation. We resist the substitution of consumption for participatory experience," the website states (*What is burning man? 10 principles*, n.d., Decommodification, para. 3). Members of what Florida terms the creative class have similar values:

> [Creative class members] tend to shun the heavily packaged commercial venues that they call 'generica'—the chain restaurants and nightclubs, the stadiums with bells and whistles, and the like…They prefer more authentic, indigenous, or organic venues that offer a wide range of options and where they can have a hand in creating the options. (2004, p. 187)

Turning Veblen's conspicuous consumption on its head, "Status and identity for these people come not from the goods they have, but from the experiences they have" (Florida, 2004, p. 169). Silicon Valley's well-known icons of anti-status, such as Mark Zuckerberg's flip-flops or billionaires in t-shirts are also examples of this value system.

An Attention Economy

The term "attention economy" was coined by Herbert Simon to refer to the scarcity of attention that is created by the wealth of information:

> ...in an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it. (1971, pp. 40-41)

Since the "economy" of Burning Man is almost entirely gift-based (there are only two items that can be purchased with money during the week-long festival: coffee and ice), the *only* medium of exchange is attention: how much a project fascinates others indicates how much respect the project receives and how much "press" in the form of word of mouth at the event. Similarly, in the fast-changing world of Silicon Valley, the attraction of attention, at least in the initial stages of a company, is more important than sales or revenue. Google, for example, had no revenue for years—but it was a viable company because of its huge amounts of traffic. Thus, the information economy is an attention-based economy as well.

An Open Environment

Silicon Valley's business infrastructure has been called as an ecosystem in which employees frequently change companies and move seamlessly between academia and industry:

> Although companies in Silicon Valley fiercely compete, there is also an attitude that all can gain from sharing knowledge that is not company-secret…Whether in formal or informal settings, interactions among people with overlapping networks of relations are continuous and intense. (*Stanford University Press: The Silicon Valley Edge*, n.d., Open business environment, para. 9)

This attitude also echoes the communal aspect of Burning Man culture: "Our community values creative cooperation and collaboration. We strive to produce, promote and protect social networks, public spaces, works of art, and methods of communication that support such interaction" (*What is burning man? 10 principles*, n.d., Communal Effort, para. 6). This valuing of an open and supportive environment creates an infrastructure that encourages the other values, notably participation and tolerance.

Some Differences

There are three stated values of Burning Man that are not well represented in Silicon Valley culture: leaving no trace, civic responsibility, and gifting. Leaving no trace implies that campers at Burning Man clean up after themselves. While there may be some analogy to the strength of the environmental movement in the Bay Area, it is more likely that this value

of Burning Man culture emerges from the practical necessities of running a huge annual festival on government land.

Civic responsibility may be more important in an all-volunteer environment, in which participants take responsibility for "public welfare and endeavor to communicate civic responsibilities" (*What is burning man? 10 principles*, n.d., Civic Responsibility, para. 7). Like the early and influential commune called Drop City, Burning Man's politics are, in the words of Fred Turner, "anarchic and collaborative; where the straight world depended on leaders, this world depended on underlying environmental principles" (2005, p. 494). Instead of following a hierarchical structure as in the outside world, Burning Man's political structure evolves from first principles.

Finally, gifting is far more important at Burning Man, a temporary event at which the use of money is prohibited, than in dollar-dominated Silicon Valley culture.

Another difference between the values of Burning Man and Silicon Valley is the contrast between the money-driven Valley culture and the anti-capitalist, urban-primitive ethos of Burning Man. It is certainly true that there are fundamental and ineradicable differences between for-profit businesses and non-profit art festivals. In his field study of Burning Man, Robert Kozinets states that "Burning Man should be read as a communal rite symbolizing an important power struggle seeking to reclaim genuine (i.e., spontaneously, intrinsically motivated) creative energy from the industrialized corporate marketplace" (2002, p. 13). However, Burning Man could also be viewed as collaboration between these two elements, rather than as a battle between them. Sometimes the only difference between a fight and a sport is in the context: while anti- and pro-capitalist forces battle at Burning Man, they may also cooperate to create a stronger synthesis.

Although the tensions between capitalist and anti-capitalist values exist, these tensions are not as profound as the similarities. Silicon Valley culture is certainly less purely capitalist than 1950s IBM culture, just as Burning Man attendees are less purely anti-capitalist than those at Woodstock in the 1960s. Start-up companies are often founded with utopian visions of "changing the world" or "making a difference." Guy Kawasaki, venture capitalist and former Chief Evangelist for Apple Computer, urges new companies to focus on creating an organization that "makes meaning" rather than maximizing profits (2004). In addition, Burning Man, despite its rhetoric, is not a celebration of the renunciation of worldly possessions—instead of camping simply and watching the stars, participants of Burning Man bring hundreds if not thousands of dollars worth of purchased possessions with them.

This fusion of bohemian and bourgeois values has implications in other contexts. Fred Turner's commentaries on early online community the WELL can apply to either Silicon Valley or Burning Man: "[Burning Man] represents the establishment of a countercultural ideal, a non-

hierarchically organized social form…yet at another level [it] marks the failure of the New Communalist movement to escapee the pull of America's technological and economic centers of gravity" (2005, p. 511). In conclusion, Silicon Valley, enclave of the technological elite, and Burning Man, radical arts festival, are intimately interconnected. Before the mansions of Atherton and beyond the towers of flaming art is the creative spirit that unites them.

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